

CONFESSION OR CONSTRUCTION: A FOUCAULDIAN CRITIQUE OF THE SELF IN THE CONFESSIONAL POEMS

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A survey of Literature from a broader perspective will reveal that it has been classified into two categories: Subjective and Objective. They are defined as the writing which is related to the affective domain of human psyche and that which is affiliated to the intellectual dexterity or cognitive understanding respectively. They are commonsensically considered dichotomous binaries and this mutual opposition can be seen operative in branding the literary genres. These parallel streams which hardly meet and merge can be seen replicated in several analogous dyadic nomenclatures in Literature as Personal and Impersonal, Reflection and Construction, and Mimetic and Poetic. Poetry, as a major genre of Literature, is not free from this compartmental classification, and hence we have poetry that expresses personality and that escapes from personality. A sub-genre of poetry that is subjected to this alleged categorization is the confessional writing which originally has a long history since the *Confessions* of St. Augustine to the most recent writings in American, European and Post-colonial writings. A detailed reading will reveal that Confessional writing is the third rung in the evolutionary ladder of autobiographical writings, the other two being Apologia and Oration¹.

It may be on this ground that 'I' or the first person narrative voice in the confessional poetry is considered the poet himself/herself who confesses his/her unpardoned sins to the sympathising reader. A Freudian psycho-analytic reading will be that it is the unconscious, the abode of the suppressed desires, that is presented before the reader so that they are subsidised or sublimated. However, it is believed that the 'I' in the confessional writing is the coherent and personal self of the poet that craves for a sharing of true experiences. This perspective simultaneously holds the assumption that there certainly exists an identification between the poet and the persona in the poem. This assumption which emerged with the early flowering of the confessional writings has percolated down through the epochs and movements of literary history and got reinforced by the Confessional School of Poetry that flourished in America in 20th century with poetic articulations of Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, Theodore Roethke and Anne Sexton and the critical works of M.L.Rosenthal, who published the monumental essay, "Poetry as Confession". So, for Rosenthal and critics who affiliated themselves to Rosenthalian perspective of confessionalography the 'I' in the confessional poetry is the poet himself/herself. And the central reference to the poem and its implications is the personal life of the poet himself/herself. Rosenthal explains this concept in his review on Lowell's "Life Studies": "... Lowell removes the mask. His speaker is unequivocally himself, and it is hard not to think of Life Studies as series of personal confidences, rather shameful, that one is honor-bound not to reveal" (64). In this sense, the chief objective of the confessional poetry is to confide the reader

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with the poet's untold privacies like personal faults, psychological complexes, sexual desires, incestuous inhibitions, and physical privacies like intercourse, copulatory convulsions, orgasms, menstruation, abortion...etc which simultaneously solidifies the existence of the indivisible 'poetpersona'. But, with this concept of the indivisibility of the 'poetpersona' in confessional poetry has emerged the counter-argument that all kinds of 'I's in the poems are constructs or speaking stances which are skilfully fabricated by the poets, and that it will be misleading to extrapolate the implications of the poem from the poet's personal life. Instead of directing the reader to the personal identity of the poet for explaining the lacunae in the poem, this view will tell the reader that the 'I' is only a poetic trope that is dexterously constructed by the poet to deal an other than personal issue. Here the personal becomes political and the unique, the universal. This argument can be seen substantiated by using the theoretical assumptions proposed by the poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault in his monumental essay, "What is an Author?" Foucault's essay which served as a trailblazing work of Poststructuralism with Barthes' "The Death of the Author" can be seen problematizing the concept of 'the author' from the grass-root level. Foucault, even though titled his essay 'What is an Author?', he can be seen explaining what an author is not in the essay. He begins his essay by disclosing the problematic of the concept of the 'author' in the contemporary scenario. Foucault argues that the 'consolidated and privileged author' is the effect of the cultural/political ideologies which dominate in the modern age. Writing, as the Barthesian 'Text', is neither controlled by the personal author nor confined within the boundaries of a single-dimensional work. Rather, it is the field where the identity of the author is continuously effaced; it, in a sense, is the ground where the incessant murdering of the author is executed. In this respect, the poetic strategies used by the writer should be seen as attempts to depersonalise himself/herself. Foucault vividly explains this in his essay: "Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the dead man in the game or writing" (175). Applying this assumption on the confessional writings, the 'I' can be read as a means to distance and erase the poet's personal self from the persona. Foucault furthers his critique by analysing the complications of the 'name' of the 'author' in detail. The name of the author, if uncritiqued, will certainly solidify the personal author. Only a deeper reading will reveal that an author cannot be confined within the contours of his proper name, which is susceptible to several mediations as any other proper name. For Foucault, the 'author' is an oscillating space between the description and definition of. The better word for this operation, according to Foucault, is the 'author-function'. A reading from this foucauldian perspective will reveal that the confessional 'I' does not keep fidelity to the truth of the writer, rather it remains itself as the symbol of the disguised self of the poet. This critique of the identification between the poet and the persona can be seen extended by the later critics of Confessionalography. Jo Gill, a learned critic of confessionalography argues:

Confession...is not a means of expressing the irrepressible truth of prior lived experience, but a ritualised technique for producing truth. Confessional writing is poetic, not mimetic; it constructs rather than reflects some pre-textual truth. It is not the free expression of the self but an effect of an ordered regime by which the self begins to conceive of itself as individual, responsible, culpable, and thereby confessional (4).

The Challenge

In this respect, the infusion of the personal elements into the confessional 'I' should be read as an endeavour to consolidate the concept of the author which carries several literary and political agenda with it. The literary objective behind this consolidation of the 'author' is explained by Foucault as an attempt to resolve the unresolved issues in the text. Based on this objective, Foucault argues that, the 'author' is defined in the modern literary criticism under certain heads: (1) constant level of value (2) conceptual or theoretical coherence (3) stylistic unity (4) historical figure that function as a juncture of various events. Many of these objectives can be seen as functioning behind the attempts to 'individualise' the author and thus create an identification between the poet and the persona in the confessional writing. Considering these foucauldian theoretical assumptions, it can be argued that the generally celebrated self-referencing confessional 'I' of the poet is neither authentic nor real, rather it is only a literary artefact that designates the absence, not the presence, of the personal author in it; it is more related to the erasure, rather than the disclosure of the self.

1Apologia is an autobiographical writing that purports to be a self-justification rather than self-documentation, and Oration a kind of autobiography that is not of a public kind, but of a literary kind that could be read aloud in privacy.