Narrative Selfhood and Cultural Memory Chains: Examining Autobiographical Narration through Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Dr. Sanghamitra Bhatt[1]*; Dr. Ashish K. Shukla[2] ; Dr. Archana B. Dubey[3]; Dr. Boni D Joshi[4]; Dr. Vashistha Patel[5]

[1, 2, 3.] Department of Humanities and Sciences, Government Engineering College, Rajkot, 360005, Gujarat, India

[4] .Assistant Professor, English, Department of Science and Humanities, L.D. College of Engineering, Navrangpura, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

[5]. Assistant Professor, English, Government Engineering College, Sector -28, Gandhinagar, Gujarat, India

E-mails: [1.] bhatt.sanghamitra@gmail.com; [2.] ashukla048@gmail.com; [3.] pandeyarchana35@gmail.com; [4.] bonnyijoshi@ldce.ac.in; 5. vashishthpatel1026@gmail.com

ORCID: Dr. Sanghamitra Bhatt - 0009-0000-1072-7666

Corresponding author: Dr. Sanghamitra Bhatt, Department of Humanities and Sciences, Government Engineering College, Rajkot, 360005, Gujarat, India

Corresponding author e-mail: bhatt.sanghamitra@gmail.com

HOW TO CITE:

Sanghamitra Bhatt, Ashish K. Shukla, Archana B. Dubey, Boni D Joshi, Vashistha Patel (2026). Narrative Selfhood and Cultural Memory Chains: Examining Autobiographical Narration through Class and Gender in Nineteenth-Century Bengal. International Journal of Special Education, 41(12s), 139-148.

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ABSTRACT:

Autobiography is often read as a private record of selfhood; however, life writing also takes shape within cultural systems that decide what can be remembered, narrated, justified, or silenced. This article studies autobiographical narration in nineteenth-century Bengal through gender, class, colonial modernity, and narrative authority. Drawing on cultural memory studies, cognitive narratology, autobiography theory, and postcolonial criticism, it proposes the concept of cultural memory chains: patterned sequences through which lived experience is selected, emotionally prioritized, morally framed, rhetorically positioned, and retrospectively turned into narrative selfhood. The framework is applied to Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban, Binodini Dasi's My Story, and Rabindranath Tagore's My Reminiscences. The analysis shows that Devi's narrative is shaped by devotional endurance and morally sanctioned literacy; Dasi's by stigma, trauma, artistic labour, and the search for dignity; and Tagore's by aesthetic formation and elite masculine autonomy. The comparison demonstrates that autobiographical memory is not a neutral archive but a culturally mediated architecture of self-representation shaped by respectability, class privilege, and colonial social hierarchy.

Keywords: Autobiographical narration; cultural memory chains; Bengali life writing; gender and class; postcolonial memory

1. Introduction

Autobiography occupies a complex space between personal recollection and collective history. It appears to speak in the first person, yet the "I" that speaks is never detached from the cultural, social, and linguistic worlds that make self-narration possible. Earlier approaches to autobiography often emphasized factual authenticity, chronological continuity, and the stable identity of the autobiographical subject. More recent scholarship understands life writing as a retrospective construction shaped by memory, interpretation, cultural codes, and rhetorical self-positioning.

Within memory studies, Halbwachs (1992) showed that remembrance is socially mediated, while Ricoeur (2004) argued that selfhood emerges through narrative reconstruction. Jan Assmann (2011), Aleida Assmann (2011), and Erll (2011) further demonstrated how societies transmit memory through symbolic, textual, ritual, and institutional forms. Cognitive narratology similarly treats narrative not merely as a literary form but as a cognitive framework through which experience is ordered and made intelligible (Herman, 2013). Together, these approaches establish that autobiographical memory is neither transparent nor solitary.

Despite these theoretical advances, an important gap remains. Scholarship frequently treats memory either as thematic content or as a psychological process, but less attention has been given to memory as a structural principle that organizes autobiographical narration. This gap becomes especially significant in non-Western literary contexts, where gender, caste, class, colonial modernity, and social respectability regulate the very conditions under which a self can be narrated. Nineteenth-century Bengali autobiography is a productive field for addressing this limitation because it emerged amid debates over women's education, domesticity, nationalism, theatre, reform, religion, and elite intellectual formation.

To address this gap, the present study develops and applies the concept of cultural memory chains. The term identifies culturally embedded sequences through which autobiographical memories are selected, connected, interpreted, morally framed, and narrated. A cultural memory chain is not simply a chronological sequence of events. It is an interpretive structure that links experience to culturally available meanings and converts remembered life into recognizable narrative selfhood. Such chains reveal how narrators negotiate legitimacy, suffering, aspiration, authority, silence, and social belonging.

The paper examines three influential autobiographies from colonial Bengal: Amar Jiban by Rashsundari Devi, My Story by Binodini Dasi, and My Reminiscences by Rabindranath Tagore. These texts represent three sharply different social locations: the respectable Hindu domestic woman struggling for literacy, the marginalized female performer seeking dignity within a morally ambivalent theatrical world, and the elite bhadralok male intellectual reflecting on aesthetic and intellectual formation. Their comparison makes visible the ways gender and class regulate mnemonic freedom, emotional disclosure, and narrative authority.

The study asks four interrelated research questions: (1) How does memory function as a structuring principle in nineteenth-century Bengali autobiographies? (2) How do gender and class influence autobiographical narration and narrative authority? (3) In what ways do autobiographical narratives reflect culturally conditioned systems of remembering? (4) How does the concept of cultural memory chains contribute to contemporary discussions in memory and autobiography studies? By answering these questions, the article positions Bengali autobiographical writing not merely as regional literary material but as a theoretically significant site for rethinking memory, culture, and selfhood.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Memory, Narrative, and Cultural Mediation

Foundational scholarship within memory studies has shifted the understanding of remembrance from a solitary psychological phenomenon to a socially embedded practice. Halbwachs (1992) argued that memory is framed by social groups and institutions; individuals remember through the categories made available to them by family, religion, community, class, and nation. This insight is crucial for autobiography because it suggests that the autobiographical subject recalls the past from within a socially organized field of meaning.

Ricoeur (2004) deepened this discussion by conceptualizing narrative identity as a temporal and interpretive process. Memory becomes coherent not through the mechanical preservation of facts but through the retrospective organization of experience into narrative form. Jan Assmann (2011) and Aleida Assmann (2011) further distinguished between everyday communicative memory and more durable forms of cultural memory transmitted through texts, rituals, symbols, and institutions. Erll (2011) expanded this field by emphasizing mediation, circulation, and the dynamic movement of cultural memory across contexts. These insights support the central claim of this study: autobiographical memory is structurally shaped by cultural forms.

2.2 Cognitive Narratology and the Structuring of Experience

Cognitive narratology offers an important bridge between textual analysis and the organization of remembered experience. Herman (2013) argues that narratives function as tools for ordering perception, temporality, causality, emotion, and agency. From this perspective, the sequencing of memory in autobiography is not random. It is a deliberate or semi-conscious process through which narrators select emotionally and culturally significant events and arrange them into an intelligible structure of selfhood.

Reconstructive theories of autobiographical memory reinforce this premise. Memories are not stored as fixed records; they are repeatedly reinterpreted in relation to present identity, available cultural scripts, and socially sanctioned forms of meaning. Fabry (2023) also helps clarify how autobiographical memory and self-narrative depend on distributed practices of recollection and narration. This framework is useful for the present study because it allows memory to be read not only for content but also for pattern: repetition, silence, emphasis, moral framing, and rhetorical positioning become evidence of how cultural memory chains operate.

2.3 Autobiography, Gender, and Narrative Selfhood

Autobiography studies has moved away from reading life writing as a transparent record of personal truth. Lejeune's (1989) influential formulation of the autobiographical pact opened questions of identity and textual authority, while feminist and poststructuralist approaches later complicated the idea of a unified autobiographical self. Smith and Watson (2010) emphasize that autobiographical narration is a situated act in which the self is constructed through available discourses of gender, ideology, embodiment, memory, and social location.

Postcolonial theory adds another layer to this discussion. Spivak's (1988) critique of subaltern representation draws attention to the unequal conditions under which marginalized subjects speak and are heard. Bhabha (1994) similarly demonstrates that colonial subjectivity is shaped through ambivalence, mimicry, and asymmetrical power relations. Nayar (2010) develops these insights in relation to postcolonial life writing, arguing that autobiography becomes a site where identity is negotiated under historically specific conditions of legitimacy and power.

2.4 Gender, Domesticity, and Colonial Bengali Selfhood

Colonial Bengal provides a historically dense context for studying the relation between autobiography and cultural memory. Chatterjee's (1993) distinction between the "inner" spiritual-domestic sphere and the "outer" material-political sphere of nationalism is especially relevant for understanding women's self-expression. Women were frequently positioned as custodians of moral and spiritual authenticity, which placed strict limits on how they could narrate desire, suffering, ambition, and dissent.

Tanika Sarkar (2001), Forbes (1996), Karlekar (1991), and Tharu and Lalita (1991) show that women's literacy and self-expression in colonial India were often sanctioned only when they could be aligned with domestic virtue, religious discipline, or moral improvement. Such scholarship illuminates the narrative restraint and devotional framing in Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban. In contrast, elite male selfhood in the bhadralok world was sustained by education, inherited cultural capital, and access to intellectual institutions. Sumit Sarkar (1975) and Chakrabarty (2000) help situate Tagore's autobiographical confidence within this classed context of colonial modernity.

2.5 Theatre, Marginality, and the Problem of Legitimacy

Binodini Dasi's autobiography requires attention to the cultural politics of nineteenth-century Bengali theatre. As Bharucha (1993) and Dharwadker (2005) have shown, modern Indian theatre was simultaneously a space of artistic innovation and social anxiety. Female performers occupied a contradictory position: they were celebrated publicly for artistic skill but frequently excluded from the moral respectability claimed by elite society.

This contradiction is central to Dasi's narrative structure. Her memory repeatedly returns to artistic labour, exploitation, betrayal, and the desire for recognition. Chaudhuri's (2010) work on Bengali intellectual history further helps situate the theatrical public sphere within broader debates over modernity, respectability, and literary selfhood. Dasi's autobiography therefore provides a crucial case for examining how marginality produces a fragmented and affectively charged cultural memory chain.

2.6 Research Gap and Intervention

Existing scholarship provides strong conceptual resources for studying memory, narrative, gender, and colonial subjectivity. However, four limitations remain. First, memory is often examined as content or theme rather than as an organizing architecture of life narration. Second, the influence of gender and class on the sequence, tone, and legitimacy of autobiographical memory remains insufficiently theorized. Third, mainstream cultural memory theory remains heavily shaped by European materials, which limits its explanatory reach in South Asian literary contexts. Fourth, autobiography theory, cognitive narratology, and postcolonial criticism are rarely brought together into a single operational framework for reading colonial Bengali life writing.

This study responds to these limitations by introducing cultural memory chains as an analytical tool. The concept allows the paper to identify how narrators transform remembered experience into culturally acceptable, contested, or resistant forms of self-narration. It also provides a method for comparing autobiographies across different social locations without reducing their differences to individual personality or biographical accident.

3. Theoretical Framework: The Concept of Cultural Memory Chains

This article defines a cultural memory chain as a patterned sequence through which autobiographical experience is selected, connected, affectively weighted, ethically interpreted, rhetorically positioned, and narrated within a particular cultural world. The concept is developed to explain how autobiographical memory becomes structurally organized rather than merely recalled. A cultural memory chain

links lived experience to socially available codes of meaning, thereby converting memory into a legible narrative of selfhood.

The term "chain" does not imply a simple linear chronology. Instead, it refers to an associative and interpretive linkage among mnemonic events, emotions, values, silences, and self-positioning strategies. In autobiography, remembered events rarely appear as neutral facts. They are attached to culturally meaningful categories such as devotion, shame, suffering, artistic labour, respectability, intellectual freedom, or moral discipline. These categories determine which memories become central, which remain peripheral, and which are suppressed or softened.

For analytical purposes, a cultural memory chain may be mapped through six interconnected components: (1) the experiential trigger or remembered event; (2) the cultural code through which the event becomes meaningful; (3) the affective priority assigned to the memory; (4) the narrative sequencing that links the event to other memories; (5) the rhetorical self-positioning through which the narrator claims authority, dignity, innocence, or autonomy; and (6) the silences or omissions that mark the limits of socially acceptable self-expression.

The usefulness of the concept lies in its ability to connect micro-level textual details with macro-level social structures. It makes visible how patriarchy, class hierarchy, colonial modernity, religious discourse, and public respectability enter the internal architecture of life writing. In the present study, the concept is applied not as a universal template but as a comparative method: each autobiography produces a distinct chain shaped by the narrator's social location and rhetorical needs.

[Insert Figure 1 here: Operational Model of a Cultural Memory Chain]

4. Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design grounded in close reading, comparative textual analysis, and hermeneutic interpretation. Since the objective is to examine how memory is culturally structured in autobiographical narration, a quantitative or positivist method would be unsuitable. The analysis treats autobiographical texts not as transparent historical records but as mediated narrative constructions in which remembered experience is organized through cultural codes and rhetorical strategies.

The corpus was selected through purposive sampling because the study focuses on the intersection of gender, class, and colonial modernity in Bengal. The three selected texts - Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban, Binodini Dasi's My Story, and Rabindranath Tagore's My Reminiscences - represent sharply different positions within nineteenth-century Bengali society. Their comparison makes it possible to examine how domestic patriarchy, theatrical marginality, and elite bhadralok privilege generate different mnemonic architectures.

The analytical procedure followed three stages. First, each autobiography was segmented into recurrent mnemonic units such as childhood, domesticity, literacy, spirituality, artistic labour, humiliation, suffering, paternal guidance, intellectual growth, and self-development. Second, these units were coded for patterns of emotional emphasis, moral framing, rhetorical self-assertion, social exclusion, class privilege, and selective silence. Third, the coded patterns were interpreted comparatively through the cultural memory chain framework to identify how gender and class shape narrative authority and mnemonic freedom.

The study follows an interpretive logic of validity. Rather than claiming exhaustive historical representation, it demonstrates textual consistency between social location, mnemonic pattern, and narrative mode. The argument is supported through close engagement with primary autobiographical passages and with established scholarship in memory studies, autobiography theory, postcolonial criticism, and Bengali cultural history.

5. Analysis and Discussion: Applying Cultural Memory Chains

5.1 Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban: Devotional Restraint and Moral Endurance

Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban provides one of the earliest and most powerful examples of women's autobiographical self-articulation in Bengali literature. The text emerges from within a restrictive domestic world in which female literacy was socially suspect and women's self-expression was regulated by patriarchal norms of obedience, modesty, and religious duty. Devi's narrative therefore does not present memory as open confession; it converts lived suffering into a morally authorized account of endurance, devotion, and spiritual aspiration.

Devi's recollection of domestic labour is structured through restraint. Her comparison of herself to a machine captures the dehumanizing repetition of household duty, yet the critique is moderated through devotional vocabulary. The narrative repeatedly redirects pain toward divine will and religious purpose. This strategy allows Devi to register gendered suffering without appearing rebellious in a socially unacceptable sense. Her memory is thus shaped by what may be called devotional self-surveillance: she remembers suffering, but she narrates it through a culturally sanctioned idiom of piety.

The acquisition of literacy becomes the central mnemonic axis of the autobiography. Devi's desire to read is not framed as secular self-assertion or intellectual rebellion; it is justified as the longing to access sacred texts. This rhetorical choice is crucial. Literacy becomes legitimate because it is attached to bhakti, moral discipline, and spiritual hunger. In this way, the autobiography transforms a socially prohibited desire into a religiously acceptable journey of self-awakening.

Devi's narrative authority therefore depends upon careful negotiation. She cannot claim autonomy in the language of modern individualism. Instead, she constructs a morally credible self whose desire for knowledge is purified through devotion. The result is an autobiographical voice that is both restrained and resistant. Its resistance lies not in open defiance but in the quiet reorganization of domestic suffering into a remembered history of spiritual agency.

Cultural Memory Chain Applied to Amar Jiban

The cultural memory chain in Amar Jiban may be mapped as follows: domestic confinement and repetitive labour generate the experiential trigger; patriarchal domesticity and bhakti provide the cultural code; suffering, fear, and longing for literacy become affectively prioritized; memories are sequenced through hardship, divine dependence, secret learning, and spiritual fulfilment; Devi positions herself as a morally disciplined seeker rather than a rebel; and open anger against patriarchy remains largely silenced. This chain produces a gendered autobiographical self whose authority is achieved through devotional legitimacy and disciplined endurance.

5.2 Binodini Dasi's My Story: Trauma, Stigma, and the Search for Dignity

Binodini Dasi's My Story is organized by a sharply different mnemonic structure. As a professional actress in nineteenth-century Calcutta, Dasi occupied a socially unstable position. She was celebrated as an artist but denied the respectability granted to elite bhadralok households. Her autobiography therefore emerges from a conflicted location: the public stage gives her visibility, but social morality denies her dignity.

Dasi's memory repeatedly returns to moments of displacement, exploitation, and betrayal. The movement from childhood into the theatrical world is not narrated simply as professional advancement; it is remembered as entry into a space where artistic talent is inseparable from vulnerability. The theatre becomes both a site of self-making and a site of social injury. Her recollections of labour, sacrifice, and humiliation

are not incidental episodes; they form the affective structure of the narrative.

Unlike Devi, whose suffering is moderated through devotional restraint, Dasi often speaks through wounded directness. Her narrative voice oscillates between vulnerability, accusation, and self-justification. This oscillation reflects the contradictory cultural position of the female performer: she must defend her artistic worth while confronting the social stigma attached to her profession. The autobiography is therefore less linear than recursive. It repeatedly circles back to betrayal because betrayal is the emotional principle around which selfhood is organized.

Dasi's text challenges the moral economy of colonial respectability. By narrating the pain of being admired on stage but despised in society, she exposes the hypocrisy of a culture that consumes women's artistic labour while refusing them social legitimacy. Her memory chain is therefore both traumatic and critical. It does not simply record personal injury; it converts injury into a claim for recognition.

Cultural Memory Chain Applied to My Story

The cultural memory chain in My Story may be mapped as follows: entry into the theatre and repeated exploitation provide the experiential trigger; the cultural code is shaped by the contradictory status of the actress as admired performer and stigmatized woman; humiliation, betrayal, and artistic sacrifice become affectively prioritized; memories are sequenced recursively around injury rather than chronologically around progress; Dasi positions herself as a wronged artist seeking dignity and moral recognition; and the deepest forms of personal vulnerability are often displaced into broader commentary on the theatre world. This chain produces a marginal autobiographical self whose authority is claimed through testimony, affect, and critique.

5.3 Rabindranath Tagore's My Reminiscences: Aesthetic Reflection and Elite Autonomy

Rabindranath Tagore's My Reminiscences presents a markedly different structure of autobiographical memory. Where Devi must justify literacy through devotion and Dasi must struggle for dignity against stigma, Tagore writes from within the security of elite bhadralok masculinity. His narrative is expansive, reflective, and aesthetically self-conscious. It reveals how class privilege grants mnemonic freedom: the right to wander, interpret, philosophize, and transform small experiences into symbols of intellectual growth.

Tagore's recollections repeatedly magnify childhood experiences into moments of aesthetic discovery. Paternal guidance, education, travel, household culture, and exposure to literature become signs of self-formation. The remembered child is not primarily a victim of social restriction but a developing consciousness shaped by sensory perception, freedom, and intellectual possibility. His memory is thus organized through cultivation rather than constraint.

The narrative also displays a high degree of metafictional awareness. Tagore openly acknowledges that imagination enlarges memory and gives significance to facts. Such self-reflexivity indicates a confident relationship to narrative authority. He does not need to defend the legitimacy of speaking. His social position already authorizes reflection, abstraction, and aesthetic expansion. This separates his autobiographical mode from the defensive and affective structures found in Devi and Dasi.

Tagore's memory chain therefore demonstrates the cultural privilege of unburdened self-development. The autobiography does not foreground the struggle to be heard; it assumes the value of the narrating self. Class and gender enable Tagore to transform memory into aesthetic philosophy, thereby revealing how social power shapes not only the content of

autobiography but also its tone, pace, and interpretive freedom.

Cultural Memory Chain Applied to My Reminiscences

The cultural memory chain in My Reminiscences may be mapped as follows: childhood experience within an elite literary household provides the experiential trigger; bhadralok culture, paternal cultivation, and intellectual privilege form the cultural code; curiosity, wonder, freedom, and aesthetic responsiveness become affectively prioritized; memories are sequenced as stages of artistic and intellectual formation; Tagore positions himself as a reflective, autonomous subject whose life possesses inherent cultural value; and the material conditions of privilege remain largely unexamined. This chain produces an elite autobiographical self whose authority is expressive, philosophical, and aesthetically expansive.

5.4 Comparative Synthesis: Gendered and Class-Based Mnemonic Architectures

The comparison of Devi, Dasi, and Tagore confirms that autobiographical memory is not shaped solely by personality or individual temperament. Each text displays a distinct mnemonic architecture that corresponds to the narrator's social location. Gender regulates expressive legitimacy and emotional disclosure, while class shapes the degree of narrative authority and interpretive freedom available to the autobiographical subject.

Devi's memory is governed by restraint because the respectable domestic woman must maintain moral credibility. Dasi's memory is governed by affective repetition because the stigmatized actress must struggle for recognition against social exclusion. Tagore's memory is governed by aesthetic reflection because elite masculine privilege permits expansive self-interpretation. These differences demonstrate that memory becomes autobiographical through culturally available forms of legitimacy.

[Insert Table 1 here: Comparative Cultural Memory Chains in Three Bengali Autobiographies]

5.5 Selective Forgetting, Silence, and Ideological Mediation

Cultural memory chains are shaped not only by what is remembered but also by what is muted, displaced, or omitted. Selective forgetting is therefore not a failure of memory; it is an active rhetorical strategy through which narrators preserve coherence, respectability, or dignity. In Devi's text, open anger against patriarchy is softened through devotional surrender. In Dasi's narrative, the most intimate vulnerabilities are often transformed into a larger critique of the theatre world. In Tagore's recollections, the inherited privileges that make aesthetic autonomy possible are rarely subjected to sustained critique.

These silences reveal the ideological mediation of autobiographical memory. Each narrator negotiates the boundary between disclosure and acceptability. The cultural memory chain framework therefore helps identify not only the sequence of remembered events but also the cultural pressures that determine the limits of narration. Silence becomes part of the architecture of selfhood.

5.6 Theoretical Contribution of the Cultural Memory Chain Framework

The concept of cultural memory chains contributes to memory studies and autobiography studies in three ways. First, it shifts attention from memory as content to memory as structure. It asks how recollections are linked, ordered, emotionally weighted, and rhetorically legitimized. Second, it connects cognitive processes of narrative reconstruction with social formations such as gender, class, colonial respectability, and public legitimacy. Third, it provides a South Asian intervention into cultural memory theory by demonstrating that autobiographical selfhood in colonial Bengal was shaped through culturally specific modes of remembering.

The framework also prevents reductive comparison. Devi, Dasi, and Tagore do not simply represent "female" and "male" autobiography, nor do they merely express individual temperament. They disclose different cultural conditions of narratability. The concept of cultural memory chains makes these conditions analytically visible by showing how each self is assembled through a different relation to suffering, legitimacy, authority, and silence.

6. Conclusion

This study has argued that autobiographical narration in nineteenth-century Bengali life writing operates as a culturally structured system of remembrance. Through a comparative analysis of Rashsundari Devi's Amar Jiban, Binodini Dasi's My Story, and Rabindranath Tagore's My Reminiscences, the paper has shown that memory in autobiography is not a neutral archive of the past. It is an interpretive architecture shaped by gender, class, colonial modernity, moral codes, and narrative authority.

The central theoretical contribution of the study is the concept of cultural memory chains. This framework explains how autobiographical memory becomes organized through selection, affective prioritization, moral framing, rhetorical self-positioning, sequential linkage, and selective silence. Devi's narrative produces a chain of devotional endurance through which literacy becomes morally legitimate; Dasi's narrative produces a chain of trauma and exclusion through which artistic labour becomes a claim for dignity; and Tagore's narrative produces a chain of aesthetic self-formation enabled by elite masculine autonomy.

By mapping these three distinct mnemonic architectures, the article extends existing memory theory into a South Asian context and challenges the Eurocentric orientation of much cultural memory scholarship. It also contributes to autobiography studies by showing that narrative selfhood is not merely represented in life writing but actively produced through culturally mediated processes of remembering.

The framework may be productively extended to other forms of subaltern life writing, women's memoirs, regional Indian autobiographies, theatre memoirs, testimonial narratives, and postcolonial memory texts. Future research may develop the model through multilingual comparative analysis, digital memory studies, affect theory, and archival work on unpublished or lesser-known autobiographical materials. Ultimately, cultural memory chains offer a method for understanding autobiography as a dynamic site where memory, identity, power, and cultural legitimacy are continuously negotiated.

Ethical Statement

This article is based on published autobiographical texts and secondary scholarly sources. It does not involve human participants, interviews, clinical data, or personal data collection; therefore, formal ethical approval was not required.

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