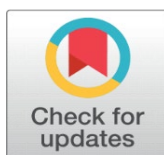


# A BRIEF STUDY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN PAINTINGS

Ashita Gupta <sup>1</sup>  

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of Painting, Faculty of Visual Arts, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, India



Received 15 May 2023  
Accepted 26 August 2023  
Published 02 September 2023

## Corresponding Author

Ashita Gupta, [ashitagpt10@gmail.com](mailto:ashitagpt10@gmail.com)

## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2SE.2023.492](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2SE.2023.492)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2023 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

This research paper investigate about the Autobiographical Art Practices in Indian Paintings. The study was undertaken with the purpose of exploring the concept of autobiography, its societal implications, and fostering an understanding of our own identity and humanity by delving into the lives of others from different times and locations. The main objective was to shed light on the nature of self-awareness and our interconnectedness with the human experience. Further, it discussed individuality, which encompasses our perceptions of our personality traits, physical attributes, skills, values, and duties as well as the understanding that we exist as unique beings. And has also shown that practice of autobiographical art can be found in a variety of Indian paintings, which are about protagonist's journey to share their experiences with the world. Moreover, the subjectivity of arts leads to autobiographical art practices, as subjectivity in Indian art arises from the artist's personal experience, belief, and values. The autobiography is used to express the artist's individual perspective on life, culture, and the world around them. Indian artists have continued to explore their subjectivity through their art, often using it to explore themes of identity, politics, and social issues. Further, autobiographical art in India can also be seen as a way for artists to explore their own personal struggles and triumphs, and to share their stories with the world. Furthermore, it also explored the complexities of the Indian diaspora, and to create a dialogue between the artist and a viewer and to create space for dialogue and understanding.

**Keywords:** Autobiography, Individuality, Self, Identity, Memory, Confessions

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Everything that we see around us is art. The point is that how we look at anything, only our psyche can corroborate this. There is no instrument or any theory to measure art; each attitude can decide whether this is art or not. As we all were very different from each other, everyone's emotions, likes and dislikes were all distinct, which would make art's division according to how everyone's imagination of art would different. Art enriches our life and our life will continue even if it is not there. But imagine a world without culture, art, music, movies, books, or poetry. It would be a terribly lifeless place. Art is a way through which we can express all kinds

of feelings without any hesitation. Based on all the events happening in the society with which we feel connected and conscious and aware of, and based on emotions like happiness, sadness, memories, personality, defeat-victory, fear, nervousness and every feeling inside us that we can't easily write or tell anyone, can create it directly or indirectly through art. Art gives artist the courage to bring their voice to society as a whole. It gives a chance to understand, become a medium to deal with many difficulties. In this sense, art is a sort of soft power and its value is incalculable since it has a subtle impact on the world rather than a macro one.

“Communication is facilitated by art, particularly when it uses images. It enables people to build a sense of community and solidarity that transcends geographical boundaries. It is the obligation of artists to elicit responses from viewers on an emotional and physical level in addition to intellectually introducing them to new ideas. Through these channels, art combats the deluge of information and encourages people to take action. Engaging with art is not a solitary activity; it provides a venue for people to share an experience in our culture, where such opportunities are rare, even if they have different opinions. The crucial aspect is not our consensus on the shared experience, but rather the recognition of the value in sharing an experience in itself. Within art and various cultural forms of expression, discord is welcomed and embraced as a necessary component. In this context, the community fostered by arts and culture has the potential to transcend the divisive populism and stigmatization prevalent in public conversations, as activists strive to do. Art also urges us to appreciate instinct, doubt, and innovation, and to perpetually explore novel concepts. Artists aspire to defy conventions and discover unconventional approaches to contemporary matters.” [Olafur \(2016\)](#)

If we talk about writing, we see, the functionality of language and art are of the same kind, but language has its own constraint because there is a breakdown in language and communication, everyone's has disparate language that cannot be understood. That's why visual is a wider way, to reach the society than the language. As language has to be learned but visuals not. Our relationship with visuals is centuries old and therefore understandable. It is already embedded in our conscience. Like, when we see a sharp object, we would understand that it is a stinging, hurting thing. We will understand the functions of a nail or a spear only through visualization, whether we have a common language or not.

When we talk about contemporary art, we mean art that was created in the 20th or 21st centuries. Modern artists use technology that is globally impacted, culturally diverse, and multifaceted to change the world. Their art is a dynamic fusion of materials, techniques, ideas, and themes that beckons to question easy description and engage tradition in a boundary line. The period after 1950s to now is called contemporary era. Artworks created in this period are difficult to comprehend. Contemporary art movements like body art, conceptual art, performance art, visual storytelling through paintings, land art, super-realistic painting, etc. were all prevalent during this time period.

As we have learned the effect of global art on society, which may be realistic art, conceptual art, minimalist art, etc, on this basis, here we discuss about the, '**A Brief study of Autobiographical Art Practices in Contemporary Indian Paintings**'.

Autobiographical Art Practices is the art, in which the artist himself/herself works based on their notion formed out of expressing emotions that is an outcome of their lived experience. The word “autobiography” is a combination of the Greek words “auto” for self, “bio” for life, and, “graph” for writing. [Autobiography \(n.d.\)](#) The

first person 'I' is the most tangled indicator of autobiographical artwork, in which the artist, the protagonist and the narrator are all the same.

The previous literature has proposed various criteria to define about several Art Practices. Different approaches stand out, major part of the previous literature have used to define the story behind their art narration in various context or say that in a holistic context. None of these approaches are able to properly define the Contemporary Autobiographical art practices in Indian context. In 'Modern Art in India', Ajit Mookerjee assert the concept of individuality, he stated a period of the signed picture, which meant a transition from collective to individual effort.

"An autobiography is a distinctive and captivating document that possesses enduring historical value as a firsthand account, while also presenting a distinct sense of self. Autobiographical works inherently carry a subjective nature. Nevertheless, the author's subjectivity is inseparable from the power of their personality within an autobiography. It offers a fresh perspective and deep understanding of how individuals shape their own identities and interpret their experiences. Memory, identity, and experience serve as the foundation for rationality within autobiographical subjectivity. The creator of an autobiography gathers the fragmented elements of their individual self and reconstructs them into a cohesive portrayal. The artist exists as both their self and something greater, simultaneously inhabiting and transcending social and historical contexts." [Jayaannapurna \(2017\)](#)

People tend to avoid recalling particular remembered and recognizable moments as chronological time passes and instead describe their life events in more broad and condensed terminology. Likewise, in the absence of any suggestion to the sensory and emotional aspect of a specific memory, individuals have the ability to analyze and present raw information, statistics, and explanations that define certain individuals, occurrences, or historical epochs. In autobiographical work of the artist, self refers, to their perspective of feelings in which he/she describes their detailed perception including sense of their conscience which sometimes can't be express. The importance of autobiographical art is to calm the curiosity of knowing all these mysteries.

The autobiographer frequently replicates particular events in their life, such as the people who shaped them or the causes they were most passionate about. A person's mirror of himself while going through specific exceptional and unmatched personal backdrops is a phenomenal episode. Based on these components, each person's likes, dislikes, ideas, and behaviors collectively make up their unique identity. [Jayaannapurna \(2017\)](#)

It has been viewed as a means of self-transcendence, self-expression, self-understanding, and self-construction. While confessions, journals, memoirs, reflections, and self-portraits are frequently recognized as diverse forms of autobiography, it is obviously difficult to determine the boundaries of the genre. Autobiography poses a number of intriguing issues regarding memory. Values are commonly seen as being essential to the formation of personality, societal morality, and the basis for leading an autobiographical artistic life. This kind of work can be done to fulfill some needs, like to express their freedom to live, to maintain their self-respect, earning social recognition, contributing towards national security, and for catharsis purpose (as a way of getting rid of anger, reducing suffering, etc).

**"Sometimes Reality is Too Complex. Stories Give it Form." (Jean-Luc Godard)**

The concept of individuality is discussed in autobiographies; it "includes our views about our physical characteristics, personality traits, values, abilities, roles

and goals, as well as the acquisition that we exist as individuals." [The Cognitive Self \(n.d.\)](#) Individualism is defined as a preference for self-expression and exploration above tradition or popular mass idea and behaviors. It is the ability for artists to accomplish anything they wish as self-employed individuals. Individuality, as opposed to individualism, "evokes the notion of one's own identity established both through introspective re-examination of the givens of life and through the ongoing integration of multiple traditions and influences into a cohesive whole". [Hinchman \(1990\)](#)

Autobiography can help a person better understand themselves, other people, and the world at large. By comprehending an alternate existence within a distinct temporal and spatial context, it heightens our consciousness regarding the essence of our individual identities and our part in the complexities of the human condition.

We can see and touch metaphors even when we cannot see or touch the self, which serve as a bridge between the internal and exterior, the experience of the artist and that of the audience, the past and the present selves, and the formed and unformed selves. An autobiography is a monument to the self as it is becoming as well as a chronicle of the past or a book/work of art that is currently in circulation. We read autobiographies to learn more about ourselves and the present, not about other people or the past. The most recognizable form of symbolic memory is autobiography. [Satchidanandan \(2001\)](#)

Autobiographical art has the power to help people understand the purpose of life and find answers to its difficulties, as well as to win acceptance and admiration. Life-writing in the Indian subcontinent is moving in a new direction when people who are socially and economically disadvantaged, marginalized, and represent the everyday aspects of life, known as "vulnerable subjects," use it as a potent tool to reclaim their identity and express their unique perspectives through a critical examination of prevailing societal norms.

We contend that the move from religious subjects to secular ones, from the lives of extraordinary persons to those of ordinary people, and from a predominately male-dominated field to a practice embraced by women, marks the evolution of autobiography. Additionally, autobiography has transformed from a narrow genre into one that is more inclusive, moving beyond its origins in the West to become a well-liked topic in the postcolonial era. Autobiography's chronological scope has also undergone considerable changes. [Sadhu \(2021\)](#)

The researcher has used the Descriptive, Analytical, Historical and Correlational methodology and Psychoanalysis method theory. The main purpose of psychoanalysis here is therefore to study underlying unconscious motive of the artist and out what it is that compels the artists to express himself in this manner.

Quantitative and Qualitative, both the data collection method is appropriate for this research as it deals with feelings, attitudes, opinions and thoughts of human beings.

Data types would be collected by both types. It would be Primary and Secondary. Such as Interviews, Observation, Case Study, Questionnaire, Articles and Books related to the topic, Comments and Theories of Art Critics/Historians/Philosophers on artist's work, life history, visiting of Modern Art Galleries, Museums etc.

## **1.1. HISTORY OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ART**

The beginning of the autobiography can be reckoned with literature. In the form of self-story, it came first in writing, then by writing, it became ingrained in the



visual arts. Whereby the artist was able to portray a description of his/her life, through visuals.

“Historians of Greek philosophy assert that Heraclitus was the pioneering advocating that all cosmology originates from self-awareness. He was the foremost to develop a physiology and a physics that projected a cosmology intentionally mirroring is own self, as the exceptional focal point.” Though, they frequently disagreed in their that consciously reflected himself, the unique man at its centre.” Though, they frequently disagreed in their interpretations of transcendence as well as the relationship between the self and the other, the world, and the Cosmic Self, the Upanishads, Buddhism, Tamil Shaivism, Bhakti and Sufi poetry, Ramayana, Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Mahatma Gandhi all made reference to the idea of self-knowledge (atma-jnana), which is a central concept in Indian metaphysics. Saint Augustine’s Confession was written in around 400 AD and served as a model for Christian authors throughout the Middle Ages. Along with this, the threat of several autobiographies persisted. The sculptor and goldsmith Benvenuto Cellini’s (1506–1571) autobiography, which he wrote between 1556 and 1558 and gave the simple title Vitam, is comparable to one of the first major autobiographies of the Renaissance (which began following the end of the Middle Ages in the 14th century) (Italian:Life). [Self-concept. \(2005\)](#)

**Figure 1**



**Figure 1** Javier, Truebamfs.(11,000), Cave of The Hands(Cave Paintings). Santa Cruz, Patagonia, Argentina

Further, if we focus on the Indian context, Autobiography seems to have blossomed properly only by the middle of nineteenth century. Though, there are older instances as well, such as Banarasi Das' Ardha Katha (1641), a Hindi poem in which the Jaina poet of Mughal India portrays his transformation from a rebellious teenager to a religious realization by the time the work was written. [Satchidanandan \(2001\)](#)

Now, we look at the autobiography in the context of art. It can only emerge when an artist could be free to express, it means art without patronage. We can trace the autobiographical art practice in Prehistoric era [Figure 1](#). They used to create their story on the walls of cave, specially we take example of 'Hand prints' image in which they were consciously or unconsciously marks their presence in history, to identify their dwelling place. Means personal identity was somewhere in them which can be seen in handprint work.

After this, Ghiberti of the Renaissance, the first artist autobiography, discusses the history of art in Italy, his personal life as it relates to his works, and his idea of

art. There are two extremes of autobiography in Cellini and Cardano: Cellini presents himself, and Cardano analyses himself.

The pietistic is autobiographers to the slightest shades of religious feeling, illustrate a trend to give a new importance to the details of personal life, and there is evidence of the same trend in the secular autobiography. Roy (1960) If we are discussing about identity, accordingly we have to know, since when did such awakening took place. When the emergence of awareness pertaining to their individuality and establishing her/himself in art started to get importance. So under this, we will link the autobiography (which identifies the personality of a specific person), with the signature in a work of art. The signature is the essence under which the artist marks himself/herself in history, and records their presence, in addition to the artwork as a personal identity, which originate in India from Molaram's signature, with his death in 1833 B.C.E. began the period of the signed picture which meant a transition from collective to individual effort. Mookerjee (1956). The Mughal kings also wanted the painting signed in order to identify the artist's name to reward them. From all these documents, we can find out the personal touches of the artists had started coming into the artworks. After this, if seen, every artist started working in their individual style from the colonial period and gradually when the patronage of colonial ended it became a general practice.

Subjectivity in Indian art by Indian artists has been present since ancient times. Indian art has always been a reflection of the culture and values of the society in which it was created. Indian artists have used their art to express their personal experiences, beliefs, and emotions. This subjectivity can be seen in the various forms of Indian art, such as painting, sculpture, and architecture. In modern times, Indian artists have continued to explore their subjectivity through their art, often using it to explore themes of identity, politics, and social issues. In India, the history of autobiographical art begins with the turn of the 20th century, when artists began to explore their own personal experiences and identities through their work. This trend was largely driven by Bengal school after the colonial period, individuality among artists reflected their inner self, not only composition-wise but also subject-wise, to which names of Amrita Sher-Gil and Rabindranath Tagore can be added Figure 2. Later on, after the independence different groups of artists came out, presented art in their style.

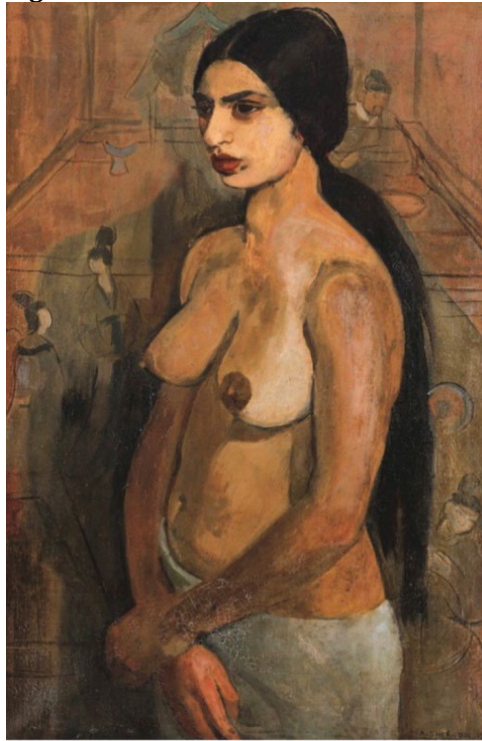
The rise of modernism, when "The best artists began their search of true art once more, understanding the essential ideas that underlie all great masterpieces rather than merely copying the surface of the past." ended the crisis that Indian art had experienced during colonial rule, according to German historian Herman Goetz. Mitter (2001)

As Amrita Sher-Gil is positioned for the subjectivity at the beginning of Indian modernism. She first emerged on the Indian screen in the middle of the 19th century, at a time when a group of notable artists (Nandlal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Ramkinkar Baij and Benode Bihari Mukherji) were making some fundamental decision about sovereignty in contemporary Indian culture. The artist in Santiniketan were promoting the virtues of cultural pedagogy and inspired vocation. In Calcutta, Yamini Roy was pursuing the market place. Raja Ravi Varma worked to build a professional exhibition circuit on an Indian basis around the turn of the century, and Amrita Sher-Gil followed in his footsteps by taking the first steps in that direction. She argued that her style choices needed to reflect the solution to the identity problem.

She expressed the right of women to deal with a sexually immanent self through both her character and her art. Her special responsibility is to bring to bear. The

aesthetic issues of Amrita Sher-Gil brought up at this point in the complex are very interesting. She established the foundational concepts for an existentially defined progressivism in her personal quest an aesthetic calibrated to register the European and Indian characteristics. The aesthetic issues of Amrita Sher-Gil brought up at this point in the complex are very interesting. She established the foundational concepts for an existentially defined progressivism in her personal quest an aesthetic calibrated to register the European and Indian characteristics. This was given special consideration in the years after her passing by the progressive artist collective founded in Bombay in 1947. Although Shergill's progressivism reflected the circumstances of her birth, by the time it emerged in the 1930s, the notions of (nationalist) sovereignty had inexorably been incorporated. Her life became a cultural exchange where she showed a fight for independence as part of a clash of civilizations. All civilizations fighting against colonialism displayed this identity-confusion. In the postcolonial battles that followed, an alternate form of cultural modernity emerged.

**Figure 2**



**Figure 2** Sher-Gil, Amrita.(1934), Self Portrait as Tahitian (Oil on canvas). Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi.

After independence PAG (Progressive Artist Group), forged a brave new world. With the rejection of academic art, in their firm belief in the autonomy of painterly image, in their quest for self-expression, the Group could be considered the first self-conscious modernists in the country, artists like FN Souza, [Figure 3](#), MF Hussain, SH Raza, SK Bakre etc. [Dalmia and Hashmi \(2007\)](#)

Expressionism finding the most direct means for the depiction of personal feelings and archetypal contents. By the 1980s, several artists had intervened in and transformed, for their specific purposes, the practice of equating objectivity with specific means of working, of finding subject matter in the immediate environment rather than in 'grand' themes.



Figure 3



Figure 3 Souza, Newton, Francis. (1964), Head (Acrylic on Board). Curtsey, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi. And Souza, Newton, Francis. (1964), Untitled(Oil on Board).Curtsey, Dhoomimal Art Gallery, New Delhi

Significant developments have occurred in the art since then, particularly with regard to the arrival at radical subjectivity positions. In 1981, Bhupen Khakhar figuratively inscribed in an unprecedented manner the statement about the self with the painting titled **'You can't please All'** Figure 4. By itself it would not have had much consequence, but he deliberately arrived at an upfronted problematization with the painting titled **'Two Men in Benaras'** Figure 4. The painting is rife with challenges directed towards the conventional societal norms of mortality. The theme itself is an unusual option in representation, particularly when seen within the Indian context of elite, and middle class consciousness. For that matter all of Bhupen's work has consistently challenged and embarrassed elitist pseudo-modesty, condescension and sense of decor. Bhupen in certain cases does bring into his art the minority gay community, in the sense of getting their subaltern/colonized status represented.

This subversion of the autobiographical enables reaching out towards an affiliational social space. At the same time these do not address the 'problem' of the social identity of gays and the issues related to this. In certain cases the subject revolves around ordinary workers-paanwalas, fisher folk, etc.

The autobiographical further leads on towards defining the psychological quintessence of experience, celebrative and angst-ridden at the same instance. In the early examples communion and inter subjectivity itself remain distanced, and whenever figures do come together in an alliance, the experience of the enigmatic and the bizarre takes over. Floating in innumerable combinations of communion, fantasizing and imagining, the subject confronts alienation and the fear of self-effacement which is brought in as an aspect of figuration itself. After all, apart from the option for an alternate lifestyle, the subject has to also deal with the deterministic issues of commodification and fetishization which go against positive life instincts.



Figure 4



Figure 4 Khakhar, B. (1981), *You can't please All* (Oil on Canvas). Tate, UK.  
 Khakhar, B. (1982), *Two men in Benaras* (Oil on Canvas). Tate, UK

Rekha Rodwittiya's paintings assert the right of the subject to be sensuous and vulnerable. The physicality, nudity and sexuality are treated self-consciously and precariously, since the uncertain aspects of sensuality itself could turn out to become an issue. Artist like Zarina Hashmi who deals with her autobiography of homelessness, in her work '**Travels with Rani I and II**' [Figure 5](#). Jehangir Jani and Balbir Krishna discourses around the phenomenology of gay experiences. [Panikkar et al. \(1997\)](#)

Figure 5

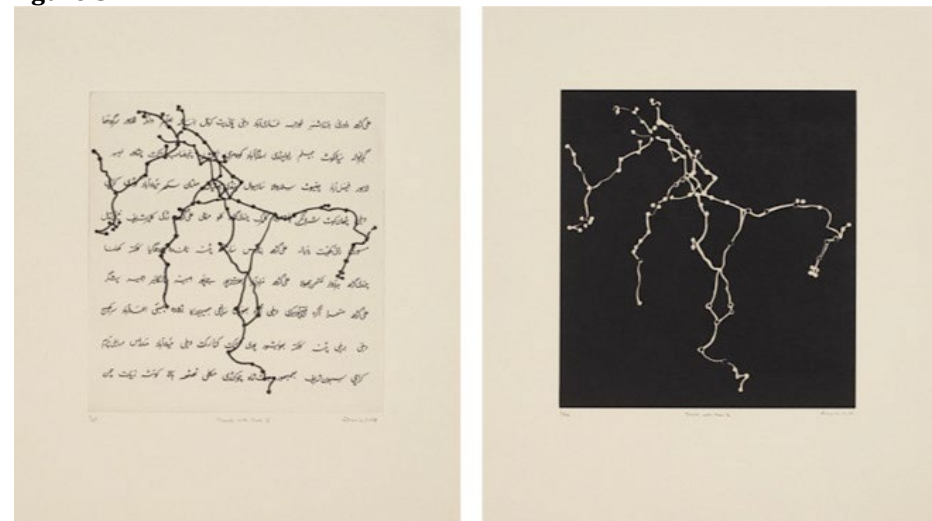


Figure 5 Hashmi, Zarina.(2008), *Travels with Rani I and II* (Intaglio on Arches Cover Buff Paper and Woodcut on Okawara Paper Mounted on Arches Cover Buff Paper). The Met Cloisters, New York

### 1.1.1. CONCLUSION

It can be assumed that the beginning of Identity is mainly done by women painters in India because women in India have always been mostly counted among a suppressed population. Whose desires, choices, personality, existence are

suppressed, so in this form, a female artist Amrita Sher-Gil in India has solved the problem of identity through her art. She articulates the privilege of woman equally through her personality through her art. Every artist has expressed themselves in a distinctive way at a particular moment, bringing to light a secret inner dimension and realizing it via their works of art. These artists have served as social capital, identifying members of the community by shared knowledge or access to their works of art. In India, autobiographical art is frequently utilized to foster communication and understanding.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

### **REFERENCES**

- Autobiography (n.d.). What is Autobiography? Definition, Usage and Literary Examples. Supersummary.
- Dalmia, Y., and Hashmi, S. (2007). Contemporary Art of India and Pakistan. Oxford University Press
- Hinchman, L. P. (1990). The Idea of Individuality: Origins, Meaning, and Political Significance. *The Journal of Politics*, 52(3), 759-81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2131826>
- Jayaannapura, A.V.S. (2017). A Study of Autobiographical Approach and Understanding. *Scholedge International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Allied Studies*, 4(4), 28-30.
- Jayaannapura, A.V.S. (2017). A Study of Autobiographical Approach and Understanding. *Scholedge International Journal of Multidisciplinary & Allied Studies*, 4(4), 28-30.
- Mitter, P. (2001). Indian Art. Oxford University Press
- Mookerjee, A. (1956). Modern Art in India. Oxford Book & Stationary Co.
- Olafur, E. (2016, January 18). Why Art has the Power to Change the World. World Economics Forum.
- Panikkar, K., Shivaji, N., Preetha, G., Das, A. (1997). Art, Subjectivity and Ideology: Colonial and Post Independent India. *Nandan an Annual on Art And Aesthetics*, 17, 1-94.
- Roy, P. (1960). Design And Truth in Autobiography.
- Sadhu, S. (2021). Resistance to Autobiography : The Indian Experiment with Life-Writing. *Rupkatha Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 13(3), 1-12.
- Satchidanandan, K. (2001). Reflections : Thinking of Autobiography. *Indian Literature*, 45(2), 5-12.
- Satchidanandan, K. (2001). Reflections : Thinking of Autobiography. *Indian Literature*, 45(2), 5-12.
- Self-concept. (2005, April 10). In Wikipedia.
- The Cognitive Self (n.d.): The Self-Concept.