UNIT 7 : MAHATMA GANDHI: "PLAYING THE ENGLISH GENTLEMAN" (Chapter 15 from *THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH*)

UNIT STRUCTURE

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7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through the unit, you will be able to :

- identity the genre of autobiographical writing
- gain an idea on the writings of Mahatma Gandhi
- explore the colonial discourse that shaped the identity of colonised natives.
- discuss the themes and style reflected in the selected text from Gandhi's autobiography

7.2 INTRODUCTION

Autobiography is a form of writing which records the life of an individual by himself or herself. The term appears to have been first used by Robert Southey in 1809. According to Dr Samuel Johnson no man is better qualified to write his life than himself, but this is debatable. This is because memory may be unreliable and few can recall clear details of their early life and most are therefore dependent on other people's impressions, of equally unreliable. Nearest to this form are the diary, journal, memoir and travelogue. Though these do not contain the full autobiographical elements, they contain many matters which reflect the life of their authors. It is to be distinguished from the memoir, in which the emphasis is not on the author's developing self but on the people and events that the author has known or witnessed, and also from the private diary or journal, which is a day-to-day record of the events in one's life, written for personal use and satisfaction, with little or no thought of publication. Formal autobiographies offer a special kind of biographical truth: a life, reshaped by recollection, with all of recollection's conscious and unconscious omissions and distortions.

One's personal matters become the subject of an autobiography. It is a biography written by the subject about himself or herself.The first autobiography of any note was St Augustine's *Confessions* of the 4th century and it is an intensely personal account of spiritual experience and an extraordinary instance of deep psychological self-analysis of a kind that has become commonplace only in modern times. The purpose of autobiographical writings has been largely to inspire and disseminate ideas that would lead to progressive society. The subject of an autobiography largely understands his or her role in doing so.

In his *Ecclesiastial History*, Bede (c. 673-735) gave a brief account of his own life. Thereafter, there was not much noteworthy autobiographical work in the West. It was in 15th century that an unusual kind of spiritual autobiography in the form of *The Booke of Margery Kempe* (1420) was produced by the mystic Margery Kempe. It was not until the 16th century

that autobiographies became common. Some of the best known examples of autobiography produced in the Western countries include Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin* Franklin, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom*, etc.

India is also known to have produced some of the most significant autobiographical writings that have influenced literature, thought and ideas universally. This include Mahatma Gandhi's *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Nirad C Choudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian,* Dr A.P.J.Kalam's *Wings of Fire* among others.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. What is an autobiography?

Q2. Who used the word autobiography for the first time?

Q3. Give a few examples of autobiographies written by renowned people.

7.3 MAHATMA GANDHI: THE AUTHOR

7.3.1 His Life and Works

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (or Mahatma Gandhi as he came to be respectfully addressed by all Indians) was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, India, a seacoast town in the Kathiawar Peninsula north of Bombay, India. His wealthy family was from one of the higher castes (Indian social classes). He was the fourth child of Karamchand Gandhi, prime minister to the raja (ruler) of three small city-states, and Purtlibai, his fourth wife. Gandhi described his mother as a deeply religious woman who attended temple (a place for religious worship) service daily. Mohandas was a small, quiet boy who disliked sports and was only an average student. At the age of thirteen he did not even know in advance that he was to marry Kasturbai, a girl his own age. The childhood ambition

of Mohandas Gandhi was to study medicine, but as this was considered beneath his caste, his father persuaded him to study law instead. After his marriage Mohandas finished high school and tutored his wife.

In September 1888 Gandhi went to England to study. Before leaving India, he promised his mother he would try not to eat meat. He was an even stricter vegetarian while away than he had been at home. In England he studied law but never completely adjusted to the English way of life. He became a lawyer in 1891 and sailed for Bombay. He attempted unsuccessfully to practice law in Rajkot and Bombay, then for a brief period served as lawyer for the prince of Porbandar.

In 1893 Gandhi accepted an offer from a firm of Muslims to represent them legally in Pretoria, the capital of Transvaal in the Union of South Africa. While traveling in a first-class train compartment in Natal, South Africa, a white man asked Gandhi to leave. He got off the train and spent the night in a train station meditating. He decided then to work to end racial prejudice. He had planned to stay in South Africa for only one year, but this new cause kept him in the country until 1914. Shortly after the train incident he called his first meeting of Indians in Pretoria and attacked racial discrimination (treating a certain group of people differently) by whites. This launched his campaign for improved legal status for Indians in South Africa, who at that time suffered the same discrimination as black people.

In 1896 Gandhi returned to India to take his family to Africa and to inform his countrymen of the poor treatment of Indians there. News of his speeches filtered back to Africa, and when Gandhi returned, an angry mob threw stones and attempted to lynch him. After his return to India in 1915, he set about organising peasants, farmers, and urban labourers to protest against excessive land-tax and discrimination. Assuming leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921, Gandhi introduced the concept of *Satyagraha*

and led nationwide campaigns for various social causes and for achieving *Swaraj* or self-rule. He strongly participated and spoke for the cause of religious unity, led masses to participate in non-cooperation movements as a way of protesting against British rule and favoured equality in all its forms.

His first achievement came in the form of the Champaran agitation in 1917 in which the local peasants raised their voice against the largely British landlords. This was followed by the Kheda Satyagraha which he actively participated with Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. The Dandi March was another important part of the Non-Cooperation Movement initiated by Gandhi.Throughout his life, Gandhi preferred passive form of protest over brute force and violence.Even on the day of India's Independence, Gandhi spent the day not celebrating the end of the British rule but appealing for peace among his countrymen by fasting and spinning in Calcutta on 15 August 1947. This was because the partition of India had gripped the Indian subcontinent with religious violence and the streets were filled with corpses. Gandhi, despairing because his nation was not responding to his plea for peace and brotherhood, refused to participate in the independence celebrations on August 15, 1947. On September 1, 1947, after an angry Hindu mob broke into the home where he was staying in Calcutta, Gandhi began to fast, "to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta." Both Hindu and Muslim leaders promised that there would be no more killings, and Gandhi ended his fast. On January 13, 1948, Gandhi began his last fast in Delhi, praying for Indian unity. On January 30, as he was attending prayers, he was shot and killed by Nathuram Godse, a thirty-five-year-old editor of a Hindu Mahasabha extremist newspaper in Poona.

Gandhi was a prolific writer and his works had both a social and spiritual aim to fulfil. His first work was *Hind Swaraj* which was first published in 1909. It was translated into English the next year. He also edited several newspapers such as *Indian Opinion* in South Africa, and *Young India*, *Navajivan*and *Harijan* after his return to

India. Gandhi's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* covered the period from his childhood to his time in 1921.

7.4 INTRODUCING *THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH*

The Story of My Experiments with Truth is the autobiography of Mohandas K. Gandhi, covering his life from early childhood through to 1921. It was written in weekly instalments and published in his journal *Navjivan* from 1925 to 1929. Its English translation also appeared in instalments in his other journal *Young India*. It was initiated at the insistence of Swami Anand and other close co-workers of Gandhi, who encouraged him to explain the nature of his philosophy and how his background has contributed a vital role in shaping him as the Mahatma.

The Introduction to his autobiography is written by Gandhi himself mentioning how he has resumed writing his autobiography at the insistence of Jeramdas, a fellow prisoner in Yerwada Central Jail with him. He ponders over the question a friend asked him about writing an autobiography, deeming it a Western practice, something "nobody does in the east".[1] Gandhi himself agrees that his thoughts might change later in life but the purpose of his story is just to narrate his experiments with truth in life. He also says that through this book he wishes to narrate his spiritual and moral experiments rather than political.

Autobiographers are motivated by different purposes - some have interest in telling their eventful lives, their ups and downs, their successes and failures, their struggles and frustrations and the complex human relations. Gandhi made an attempt in the autobiography to depict an image of simplicity and asceticism which are the essential qualities of a Mahatma. As a literary work the autobiography throws light on his interest in worldly affairs as much as his interest in spirituality. Gandhi's purpose in the autobiography was to tell the truth about himself and not to write history, even when he dwelt upon his reactions to the events of his time or shared some secrets which were of vital interest to historians

7.5 SUMMARY OF THE TEXT (CHAPTER 15)

The chapter titled “Playing an English Gentleman” narrates the dilemma faced by Gandhi during his time in London as a student.The chapter focuses on the “dietary experiments” of Gandhi in understanding the essence of life. In London, Gandhi’s convictions regarding vegetarianism became even stronger when he read books written by Western authors that proclaimed the benefits of vegetarian diet. From Howard Williams’ *The Ethics of* Diet, he came to know that almost all philosophers and prophets since the beginning of civilization, starting from Pythagoras to Jesus practised vegetarianism. Dr Allinson, a physician and an author, wrote books on dietary habits, health and hygiene. The writer prescribed a vegetarian diet to all his patients. Another writer’s book which he read was Dr Anna’s *The Perfect Way in Diet*. Gandhi, as a result of reading these books, began to take the role of health and food in life seriously. Later these readings enabled him to gain insight into religion as well.

In the meantime, Gandhi’s host was persistent in his attempt to convert Gandhi into an Englishman. The former kept insisting that Gandhi should try consuming meat as he his physical constitution would otherwise suffer. Further he would never feel at home in England and end up being treated as a duffer. However, Gandhi politely refused the advice given by his friend. The friend made one last effort in reforming Gandhi so that he fit his immediate environment. Gandhi was invited to theatre and before the play began, they were supposed to dine out. They entered a restaurant called Holborn Restaurant which seemed very posh to the narrator. Inside, the duo was to have food in the company of other diners. Gandhi’s companion believed the former would not dare to ask any question out of humility and have the food that was served. The first course comprised the soup and Gandhi wanted to ask what it was made of but his friend was separated from him by the large table between them and there were other diners sitting near him. So he decided to ask the waiter. This act, on Gandhi’s part, offended his friend as it wasn’t considered polite in Britain to question about the food that is served. He showed his annoyance by stating that Gandhi

should have his food elsewhere since he was too clumsy for a decent society. This delighted Gandhi as he found a vegetarian restaurant nearby but to his misfortune, it was closed and he had to remain without food that night. Though his friend was crossat Gandhi's display of awkward behaviour at Holborn, the two remained friendly to one another.

Therefore, Gandhi tried to appease his friend by absorbing those components of the British culture that didn't radically defy his principles and practices. He began by accepting the sartorial practices of the British and dressing himself in a suit. He purchased a hat that cost him nineteen shillings and a suit from Bond Street for ten pounds. Gandhi felt that it was a waste of money but he made up his mind to merge in the British society as much as possible. He also requested his elder brother to send a double-chained gold watch. This gradual adaptation of elements from British social culture made Gandhi realise about the distinctive differences between Indian culture and the culture of the land he moved into for education. For example, he developed the habit of keeping his hair in place with his hand everytime he removed his hat.

Gandhi's adaptation of British culture was not merely confined to the sartorial practices. He was told that in order to become a perfect English gentleman, the person should also acquire the skills of dancing and elocution, and learn the French language. He began to take lessons in dancing but was unable to cope with it as his ear was unused to Western music. As such, he had to take another class for violin lessons for which he had to purchase a violin and third, meant for developing. The teacher of the elocution class convinced him to buy a textbook called *Standard Elocutionist.* It was then, when Gandhi realised that he was not in England to spend his entire lifetime. He could learn violin even in India and he questioned himself how would dancing make a gentleman out of him. Realisation dawned upon him that he was in England to study law and it was his character which would shape him into a gentleman. Gandhi achieved more clarity about his ambition and discontinued his elocution and violin classes by explaining himself to the teachers. Nevertheless, his habit of remaining well dressed continued

for many years but he was humbled by his experience and chose to ever remain a student and learn by experimenting with life.

7.6 MAJOR THEMES

Abstinence: One of the primary tenets of Gandhian philosophy and practice is abstinence. This includes abstinence not just only from violence of any form but also from the consumption of certain food such as meat and alcohol. Gandhi believed that abstinence or self restraint led to spiritual growth and the ability to live a disciplined life. He knew how to connect to the masses and so the confessions that he make in his autobiography essentially shows his ability to recognise his weaknesses and rectify them to lead a better life. The autobiography of Gandhi shows the power of abstinence or resistance and the desire to lead a better life.

Conflict between Indian and Western Cultural Practices: In this chapter, the conflict that arises between Hindu cultural practices and the British way of life has been best represented in this chapter of *My Story: Experiments with Truth*. Gandhi's mind is in a state of conflict during his period of stay in London on account of the conflicting views between his own culture and British culture. However this does not arise out of Gandhi viewing his own cultural practices as being superior to the other.

Resistance Posed by the Native: The autobiography seems to build up an entire discourse on how a native who initially wishes to imitate the life style of those who colonised his land, later poses a challenge to the practices of the same. Gandhi's refusal to accept non-vegetarian food in spite of being coaxed by friend strongly comes from his unshakeable belief in his principles. While the friend attempts to condition Gandhi into thinking that consumption of non-vegetarian food is the norm in England, Gandhi maintains his resistance. He decides to prove himself correct by engaging in an experiment. He reads books supporting a vegetarian diet which written by authors from the same society that considered a vegetarian to be odd. Gandhi also attempted to appease his friend by attempting to learn elements from the British culture such as dancing, music and elocution. But far from

finding this learning process as fruitful and satisfying, he realises that he was in a way trying to imitate the British, perpetuating shallow materialism. As a young man, he would hardly develop his character by merely learning such skills sans any pleasure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4. What were the books read by Gandhi that increased his conviction regarding vegetarianism?

Q 5. Why did Gandhi's host/friend advised against maintaining vegetarianism in England?

Q 6. What classes did Gandhi take in England?

7.7 STYLE AND LANGUAGE

The language used by Mahatma Gandhi in this chapter from *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* is essentially simple and easy to comprehend. Like the other chapters in his autobiography, the chapter "Playing the English Gentleman" has also been written in a clear and concise manner, adding elements of humour too. For instance, his effort to blend with the British society and the blunders he commits has been described in a conversational tone. It humanises him and the reader sees Gandhi, not as the Mahatma, but as an everyman. He suffered the same kind of social awkwardness and commits the same social faux pas as any other Indian native who moved to a new land and tries to adjust with his surroundings. Gandhi maintains humility in his life narrative by frankly describing his flaws and the lessons he learnt by his experiments in life.

This was done to reach out to the common masses of India and to express his spiritual ideas for a good cause. In the first part of the chapter, Gandhi informs the readers about his dietary experiments that led him to read numerous dietary books by Western authors who wrote on the benefits of vegetarianism. One of the most important goals of Gandhi was to make the Indians conscious of the relevance of self-discipline and self-rule. Gandhi

believed that a person's habits affected not only his health but also his thought process and that in turn affected the society. As such, in his writings, Gandhi frankly writes about the problems he faced while attempting to remain a vegetarian in England and also his attempts to understand and blend with the British around him. The experiments enlightened him about his own identity, life path to be taken and the need to preserve his difference. He realises that is his character and principles that would make him a gentleman and not his attempts to imitate the British.

7.8 CRITICAL RECEPTION

When Gandhi began writing *The Story of My Experiments with Truth,* it took almost five years to be completed. He continued writing the time he was imprisoned at Yerwada Central Jail near Pune, Maharashtra. Then it first appeared as a series in the weekly Gujarati magazine *Navjivan* during 1925–1928, which was published from Ahmedabad, India. Later it was translated in the English language.*The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was first published in the United States in 1948 by Public Affairs Press of Washington. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography that the three most important modern influences in his life were Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, and the poet Shrimad Rajchandra. The work has been seen as an influential work in shaping global thought and ideas.



7.9 LET US SUM UP

To sum up, from this unit we come to know about the life and works of Mahatma Gandhi, his philosophy and the aim behind the experiments with truth. The learner will be familiarised to the personality of Mahatma Gandhi from the writings that he has left behind particularly his own autobiography which is certainly recommended for your reading as it is not only inspiring but also motivating owing to the significant messages that it carries.

7.10 FURTHER READING

1) Cuddon, J.A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory.* Penguin: London, 1999 (Rpt).

2) Gandhi, Mahatma. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth.* Penguin: London, 2001 (Rpt).

7.11 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q 1: Autobiography is a form of writing which records the life of an individual by himself or herself.

Ans to Q 2: Robert Southey in 1809

Ans to Q 3: Benjamin Franklin's *The Autobiography of Benjamin* Franklin, Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom,* Jawaharlal Nehru's *An Autobiography*, Nirad C Choudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian,* Dr A.P.J.Kalam's *Wings of Fire*.

Ans to Q 4: Howard Williams' *The Ethics of Diet*, Dr Anna's *The Perfect Way in Diet* and Dr Allinson's book on health and hygiene.

Ans to Q 5: Because Gandhi's physical constitution would be affected. Further he would never be at home in England and he would be considered a duffer by the people around in him.

Ans to Q 6: Classes in Dancing, Playing Violin and Elocution.

7.12 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q1. Write an essay on autobiography

Q2. In what ways did Gandhi attempt to become an English gentleman? Illustrate with examples from the text.

Q3. Discuss the themes present in "Playing the English Gentleman".

Q4. Write a short note on the language and style used by Gandhi in "Playing the English Gentleman".