

AGEING AND RECOGNIZING THE ESSENTIAL OF LIFE: A STUDY OF MAY SARTON'S JOURNAL OF A SOLITUDE

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to throw light on May Sarton's observations regarding life and old age as she wrote in 'Journal of a Solitude'. May Sarton wrote her journals to deal with her own depression, pain and loneliness and specifically to deal with the reality. Sarton makes it clear that ageing makes a man more open and able to love others. They come closer to nature and to god. They are now able to handle the essentials of life. With the growing years one achieves stability and harmony. Ageing opens up the human heart and hiding one's age makes the man unable to realize this process of growth.

Keywords: Ageing, Autobiography, Sensibility, Humanistic Vision, Self-portrait, Revelation, Memoir, Growth, Harmony, Maturity, Spirituality, Nature.

Introduction:

May Sarton, an American poet and a novelist started writing journals at her 50s. The literary world considers her to be a lesbian writer. Her first published book is Encounter in April (1937) containing a collection of poems. Readers loved this book and she continued to write and publish twelve volumes of poetry. Sarton wrote that she could better be understood by her poems and she felt an intense communion with her soul through this creative activity. Her novels are written on various themes and her private writings prove how consciously she lived her life. Among her sixteen novels The Single Hound (1938), Shadow of a Man (1950), Faithful Are the Wounds (1955), Mrs Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing (1956), A Reckoning (1962), Kinds of Love (1970) stand out remarkably as they deal with ageing, disease, death, man-woman relationship, woman-woman relationship differently.

Starting with *Plant Dreaming Deep* (Sarton, 1968) she continued writing her journals stretching one year and pausing for few years till her death at eighty three. She could not think that her journals may attract large group of readers of all ages. Later she got letters from her readers realizing that her journals have created a roar among the readers. Her journals contain the deeply felt emotions regarding the events of her life, her feelings regarding the universal matters that we all face in our lives and the intensity with which she lived is felt throughout all the journals. The most important aspect of these journals is that the writer and her feelings or emotions are much transparent leading to depth. It is better to know about the responses to some universal matters from a talent like May Sarton. It helps us to formulate our visions regarding those events. In her *Self-portrait* (Sarton et al., 1986) she revealed that she wrote poems from the same necessity of finding out what she was really feeling.

Journal is different from an autobiography or memoir not in terms of kind but degree and depth. What they share in common is that they are based on the writer's life. Autobiography and memoir are based on the writer's memory and the past is filtered through the sensibility of the writer and he is also conscious of the fact that the writing is going to be published. So unacceptable incidents or emotions are left out of the writing. William L. Howarth in his essay *Some Principles of Autobiography* (Howarth, 1974) wrote that the writer of an autobiography "artfully defines, restricts, or shapes that life into a self-portrait-one far different from his original model, resembling life but actually composed and framed as an artful invention". The writer's intention is not only revealing the truth but exposing a special aspect of his/her life when he/she realized the meaning of self/ the true face of life. There the reader has the opportunity to get matured with the revelation/ life lesson of the autobiographer. A memoir also exposes certain truths of the life of the writer. These kinds of writing are produced using the lens of the present and incidents may get changed according to the need of the present. James M. Cox in his essay *Autobiography and America* (Cox, 2021) mentioned that readers have started to be drawn towards autobiography and confessions recently and the term was used first by Robert Southey in a review of Portuguese literature in 1809.

Journal or diary is a kind of private writing and it has a therapeutic effect on the writer. Attention to this kind of writing is given importance from the second half of twentieth century. As Ira Progoff wrote in *At a Journal Workshop* (Ira Progoff, 1992) "...the observation of the extra increment of meaning that is added to an individual's awareness as the Intensive Journal procedures reopen the possibilities of life". The writer uses the language of the spirit. He/she can

clarify the confusions or the chaos in which he/she was before writing the journal. Talking to himself /herself in journal or diary brings the writer close to reality. Every present moment of the writer's life gets importance here. He/she writes about what he/she faces at present and what is his/her response to them. discussing things help the writer getting back to sanity or emotional equilibrium. Generally, journals are not published and any one can write it for his/her own emotional wellbeing. Sarton wrote them as she expressed in her self-portrait (Sarton et al., 1986) to find out "...where I really am".

Main Thrust:

May Sarton started her writing career with autobiographical writing, *I Knew a Phoenix* (Sarton, 2014) which was originally published in 1959. She started writing journals with *Plant Dreaming Deep* (Sarton, 1968) where she wrote about her personal life, the events with which she keeps herself engaged throughout the day, her close connection with nature and there she started to write about the solitude with which she lived as she lost her parents and she did not marry. In her second journal, *The Journal of a Solitude* (Sarton, 1973) she wrote that the cause of writing that journal is to expose the truth that she was unable to do in the previous journal leading to a false impression of herself in the mind of the readers. Here she exposed the real state of her mind containing anger, frustration, pain. Writing the journal was a process of coping with herself. It is a cathartic activity which brings peace and comfort to the writer's mind.

In course of writing the journal she recorded her views regarding various aspects of her personal life. Her home at Nelson of Hampshire where she moved after her parent' death was constantly present in her mind. It was like a companion to her. Though she felt lonely she found herself creative in her solitude. Pain and tension led her to the eternal world of art where she got back her peace of mind. Her several volumes of poems prove how enriching her solitude was. In *The Journal of a Solitude* her mind deals with different concerns of human life. She wrote about the pain of lonely life, 'fragmented' living of a married woman, the bliss of gardening and keeping pets. Human growth and ageing is an important issue on which she expressed her valuable observations in this journal and in her later journals.

Sarton noticed how people want to hide their real age when they are growing older. She wrote about one of her neighbors who was a woman was happy as she was successful to hide her age (Sarton, 1992, p.79). She considered the neighbor to be insensible and unfamiliar with the

advantages of being old. She wrote, “I am proud of being fifty-eight and still alive and kicking, in love, more creative, balanced, and potent than I have ever been”. She did not mind about the wrinkles and praised one old woman’s beauty of the face when she died. The quality of accepting and the joy of being matured are the reasons behind that beautiful face. Sarton in her novel, *The Poet and the Donkey* (Sarton & Martin, 1984) wrote “Do not deprive me of my age, I have earned it”. The maturity that man attains with age is important for a peaceful life. Sarton wrote that T. S. Eliot, Yeats et al reached a successful love life when they matured with age. She criticized the Americans as “...they are terrified of the very idea of passionate love going on past middle age”. She expressed her view that lovers need to grow leading to loss or gain. People will not lose their attractiveness with age but will be loved by his/her pals. So the anxiety that older women feel is meaningless.

Sarton comes back repeatedly to the theme of ageing and the consequent maturity. She did not believe that passionate love dies after forty as the Americans have created the myth. Her realization can rectify the puritanical idea about ageing and passionate love when her belief is “...we know so much more; we are so much better able to handle anxiety, frustration, or even our own romanticism; and deep down we have such a store of tenderness. These should be the Mozartian years.”

The puritanical way of dealing with life cannot lead to a complete or successful life and the Americans give much importance to the disciplines and restrictions that are hindrances to a fully humane life. Growth is attained with the help of stability and harmony. As man grows with years, he/she learns to feel the stability and harmony deep down. Stopping the age/ hiding it would not lead to this realization. Sarton gives an apt example of a woman who keeps artificial flowers at home and wash them twice in a year and they do not droop. That woman is not aware of the natural process of ageing and death. Sarton even becomes angry as the young misunderstands the ethos of the middle-aged.

Sarton noted in her journal that as man grows old his/her life expands with love where sex is the least important thing. This growth enlarges the sensibility and one is able to see things clearly. A new realization regarding love arises and one understands that loving another person makes one enlarge his/her consciousness so that he/she can understand the other heart and change himself/herself accordingly. Ageing helps to recognize the essentials of human life. She even refers to Rilke here, “Here there is nothing that does not see you. / You must change your life.”

Sarton continued her reflections on old age as she herself was the stimulator or one of her

familiar person's comments on getting old. On 3rd march she wrote about a seventy-year-old woman's deep feelings about old age, "We have now arrived at a stage in life so rich in new perceptions that cannot be transmitted to those at another stage- one feels at the same time full of so much gentleness and so much despair- the enigma of this life grows, grows, downs one and crushes one, then all of a sudden in a supreme moment of light one becomes aware of the 'sacred'". In her novel *As We Are Now* (Sarton, 1992) the protagonist, an old woman realizes that the world of the old would not be understood by the young unless they reach that age. That ripe age is also accompanied with a kind of revelation. Life gets illuminated with the bliss of spirituality. The 'sacred'-ness comes closer in the form of nature. Sarton considers the old age as a time to go back to nature. That state of the soul is pure and 'holy'. She gave the example of the Hindu religion under which old people leave home and start to lead a spiritual life in forests. This tradition is called 'banaprastha' (Sen Gupta, 1965). This tradition focuses on the need of purifying the soul and leaving back the material comforts of life. We can also interpret that this way of leading life makes a man rectify the negative attitudes of life like anger, jealousy, doubt, frustration etc. which pulled the man away from nature. Sarton thought that there are some household works that consume time and do not help man to grow. But gardening or simply a flower holds at its center the mystery of life cycle: youth-maturity-death. To internalize this lesson, we should keep ourselves close to nature and then only we will be able to understand the meaning of old age and Sarton's way of living it. A humanistic vision of life always has been in the making of the sensibility of May Sarton.

Conclusion:

May Sarton's 'Journal of a Solitude' was the beginning of her quest to find peace as she was struggling with her pain, depression and loneliness. Approaching old age brought her back to the basics of life. Earning the age is more important than hiding it. She explored a bright side of ageing that would surprise the youth loving Americans and similar people all around the world. Ageing comes with a sensibility leading to generosity and love for all. A balanced and spiritually enlightened being can see and understand things clearly and can contribute for the betterment of society. Realizing the essential of life makes old age worth living.

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