

The Narrative of Self: Questioning the Authenticity of Self-praise or Self-criticism in Autobiographies.

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ABSTRACT

As a literary form of literature, autobiography has indeed become a popular genre amongst the common and critical readers for various reasons. The basic purpose of reading any prose form of literature is to view life and aspects of life in the story form. The stories elevate the reader's attention towards life and aspects of living. Autobiography satisfies the legitimate curiosity of the reader. While attempting an autobiography, psychological and cognitive faculty comes into play such as memory. Psychological memory is the process in which information is programmed, deposited, and retrieved. While attempting an autobiography, psychological and cognitive faculty comes into play such as memory. Psychological memory is the process in which information is programmed, deposited, and retrieved. Encoding allows information from the outside world to reach the five senses in the forms of chemical and physical stimuli. The conscious and subconscious past which is recollected in the present memory is rooted through and shaped by present consciousness. The 'past' was unconscious about the future which is now a 'present' and is ready for the presentation of the self in the present form and conditions. Autobiography is expected to sure the truth and nothing else. The reader naturally expects factual things in autobiography because the writing is expressed to share the "truth" of the narrator and his life. The title 'autobiography' over a particular book makes the correspondence with the reader about truthfulness of the story and real characters. The realization of the standpoint is paramount in 'autobiography'. The coherence that the writer takes a standpoint from where he looks back into his own history or past is the most crucial. The stand point may be the actual social position of the story, his realization of the success or achievement in life which becomes a focal point and compels him to unite the whole story into a unified whole. Narrator faces various problems while voicing out their own stories because it's going into society and would be evaluated from various angles. It puts author as omniscient in deciding the meaning of the text which is severely opposed by the post-modern critics.

Keywords

Autobiography, Memory, Genre, Self-narration, Truth, prose writing.

Introduction

As a literary form of literature, autobiography has indeed become a popular genre amongst the common and critical readers for various reasons. The basic purpose of reading any prose form of literature is to view life and aspects of life in the story form. The stories elevate the reader's attention towards life and aspects of living. Autobiography satisfies the legitimate curiosity of the reader. The fascination of peeping into the lives of other people is legitimately satisfied by literature in general. The private life, along with the person's emotions, conflicts, attitudes and opinions, passions and prejudices, love and wealth issues are normally kept as a secret but the same is openly discussed in an autobiography. The curiosity grows wider and deeper when the subject of an autobiography is from a distinguished and notable background. The personal events, motifs, drives and intentions hidden behind the lives of the auto biographers become a point of intense interest. Autobiographies offer unparalleled insights into the modes of consciousness of other men and women. In recent times autobiographies have become one of the most popular genres like fiction and imagination of the readers have been undermined by reality, facts and truth. Thus the personal stories have become more interesting, complex and subtle and the reader prefers to read them more than fiction. George May defines that autobiography is neither a genre, nor a form, nor a style, nor even a language but a literary attitude." (May, 1979:320)

Memory and its selection

While attempting an autobiography, psychological and cognitive faculty comes into play such as memory. Psychological memory is the process in which information is programmed, deposited, and retrieved. Encoding allows information from the outside world to reach the five senses in the forms of chemical and physical stimuli. The conscious and subconscious past which is recollected in the present memory is rooted through and shaped by present consciousness. The 'past' was unconscious about the future which is now a 'present' and is ready for the presentation of the self in the present form and conditions. The memory is unified one and gets along with the time needs to be separated and divided into incidents and events or turning points. Memory needs to be selected for the purpose of the writings. The memory stored in the retrievable form and its reproduction and expression after a gap of time is an area of questioning in the autobiographical discourse. Autobiographical memory in the literary expression is the aspect of memory that is concerned with the recollection of personally experienced past events and experiences.

The memory needs to be cultivated creatively for its expressions. The memory and the selection of the incident all depend upon the writer and his purpose. The story which has already formed a certain direction is supplemented with memory for expressions. The creative force needs to more prominently in writing an autobiography than memory and its implications. Autobiography is not just the use and utilization of memory but it is an aesthetic and an artistic representation and reproduction of the same. The writer after fulfilling his aim in life or reaching at vertical point in his life collects the memorable incidents and intertwines those with the main theme of his writing. The question of truth or scientific truth is a problematized area in the autobiographical discourse. There is no doubt, then, that autobiography as a work of literature can contain true statements and false ones. But it is not illogical to ask, what do they want to prove? Literature is not astronomy or geography or history or any branch of knowledge, particular or general which is based on truth. Though 'truth' in other literary form is less important than its aesthetic value but in autobiography truth is the most important factor. In an autobiography the story is believed to be true and the auto biographer has the responsibility to speak aesthetically but nothing except the truth. Truth is the foundation of the autobiography. Both the reader and the writer are in an agreement that they are sharing nothing less than hundred percent truth.

Truthfulness of the narratives

"The ideal autobiography describes a voyage of self-discovery, a life journey confused by frequent misdirections and even crises of identity but reaching at last a sense of perspective and integration. It traces through the alert awakened memory and continuity from early childhood to maturity or even to old age....and as a work of literature it achieves a satisfying wholeness." (Buckley, 1984: 921-922)

Autobiography is expected to sure the truth and nothing else. The reader naturally expects factual things in autobiography because the writing is expressed to share the "truth" of the narrator and his life. The title 'autobiography' over a particular book makes the correspondence with the reader about truthfulness of the story and real characters. A fiction can take artistic liberty and make use of imagination in deliberating the truth. In fiction greater the imagination lesser truth it expels.

The autobiographical truth or the truth expressed in the autobiography becomes a developing content in a complex process of self-discovery, self-portrayal and self-creation.

The argument can be traced further that autobiographical truth is not permanent but a moulding content in a process of self-evolution and self-discovery.

The self is at the centre of all autobiographies and necessarily fictive but it needs to be grounded in reality. The autobiographical force or expression is simply a unique form of spontaneous realization. From the developmental point of view, the autobiographical expression is a mode of self-invention and discovery always practiced first in life and eventually, and occasionally, in writing an autobiography.

Autobiography as a genre is referred with time and personal history because it is a self-history and self-created story. The purpose of the writing is to present the truth from subjective experiences which are surrounded by the history. This practice of self-discovery is undertaken by persons of words and self-indulgent among the literary persons. The truth presented in the form of expression cannot be one's personal truth but it may be the cultural truth or truth of that time. Self-evaluation with

microscopic insight is expected from the writer. Autobiography as a genre has been the dominant and most popular form in literature of the twenty first century. It has become so critical to attend to the questions created by the autobiographical expression. It has now become the most important concern of theorists across the entire critical world. The subjective perspective in the historical narrative may overlap the personal and historical self. The autobiographical history, which is the memory-narrative, must, as a narrative, have some sort of moral end in its plot. The memory narrative in the modern times may be religiously poignant in its moral stance but it is no less moralistic. Autobiographies like fiction tend to be more profound in creation of interest and curiosity and may include further events for its principal purpose. In a given autobiographical moment, a narrative presents a subject into a position within a moral order, and simultaneously arranges historical events as a movement towards a moral endpoint. The individualization of history is possible in the memory narrative but its claim of truth cannot be denied with this pretext. The empathizing with the feelings of someone can be considered as a subjective truth similarly as we sympathize with an old Lear. The artistic truth is more tactical. The cultural aspects of the historical time and place become irrelevant in another historical time and place. The truth can be proportionally variable in these dimensions. Still it seems impractical to judge autobiography on the basis of its story and its historical accuracy.

Autobiographical writings are not expected to mimic reality but to enhance its aesthetic value by playing upon the reality. Even the real incidents look more fascinating and exciting when the narrator adds his flair of comments and scripts.

Paul de Man in an article on autobiography says, "Any book with a readable title page, the author declares himself the subject of his own writings." (Man, 1955: 921-922)

The challenge in front of the narrator is to create a subjective truth, a personal version of the reality with a subjective eye and emerge a creator of Truth. The form autobiography requires the truthful accounting of point of view, truth of belief and truth of outlooks. The emphasis is on the auto biographer's creation of the past which is reactivated in the present through the structure of coherence. The end point of an autobiography in usual practice is only possible after a lifetime of experiences. But the end is not known which has the most hypothetical uncertainty. The end of living is not an absolute end to autobiography.

The readers hear, see, understand and think differently before and after he crosses the threshold of the subconscious, that moment in history when we harvest all our experiences into a single point of time, the autobiography. Past is the 'true experienced feelings,' and the present is 'sincerity of feeling' which is subjective, personal, emotional truth which may not have the bearing of historical truth but the reader of an autobiography is more concerned with greater effect than 'unfeeling the history'. An enquiry into the historical birth and growth of this genre is closely linked with the cultural history of the West. There is something distinctive in the form of autobiography and a convention which makes it different from other genres. The writer knows his role and responsibility what he is writing. But there are confusions and uncertainty about its distinctive features from other genre of literature. The more the genre autobiography gets written about, the less agreement there seems to be on what it should properly include and what should be avoided. But reconstruction of the life is an impossible task because a single and ordinary day experience has limitless in its radiation backward and forward. One needs to hurry to qualify the above assertions by saying that autobiography is a shaping of the past.

Standpoint in Autobiography

The realization of the standpoint is paramount in 'autobiography'. The coherence that the writer takes a standpoint from where he looks back into his own history or past is the most crucial. The stand point may be the actual social position of the story, his realization of the success or achievement in life which becomes a focal point and compels him to unite the whole story into a unified whole. The decisive moments in life and the test of the character is elaborated in the autobiography. The narrator likes to clarify the purpose of writing an autobiography in the story itself.

Sunil Gawaskar, the little Master of Indian cricket wrote his autobiography at the age of 28 though by that time he was a celebrity in people's eyes. The famous hotel chain owner Vitthal Kamat wrote an autobiography at later phase of his life to motivate the rural Maharastrian youths and guided them to be strong in all the difficulties of life.

Roy Pascal also admits that autobiographies of younger men are rarely satisfying. The maturity and experiences of life make autobiographies more interesting and entertaining. Sachin Tendulkar wrote his autobiography after his retirement from world of cricket. He must have felt it a right time to achieve his standpoint and to share his cricketing experiences with his

countrymen and the cricketing world. The autobiography of Marathi writer Avinash Dharmadhikari, *Vijaypath* (Road of Victory.1998) narrates his experiences of studying and achieving the IAS rank by succeeding in UPSC examination.

In the preface of that book he states, "A guide and map for IAS aspirants." Autobiography means therefore discriminating and organizing the essentially selected incidents, facts, turning points of life. The vital point is the standpoint. This is the reason, why the best autobiographies are by men and women of outstanding achievements in life. The struggle and the hardships are the most poignant points in the autobiographies. As a saying goes, "darker the belly, sweeter the juice." More interesting and breath taking incidents in autobiography make it stand out differently. If the subject in the autobiography is higher in social status the story becomes more interesting. As the proverb says, 'Greater the subject higher the interest' is true with this genre. The established people, their unfolding and growth, their philosophical stance and shaping up of life, the mould of life sometime becomes more interesting than the fiction because the autobiographical incidents are stamped as "truth". The journey from 'rags to riches' and the extraordinary flights of the character is always an amazing factor. The raw material of human existence remains same; the moulds by which it is given significance and recognizable shape are forever being recreated by the writer of empirical narrative or drama. The new empirical narrative depends upon an originality of vision, a creation of new types of actuality and not upon a flight of imagination away from the actual. The experiences appear symbolic and subtle. It is the description and inscription of the character and its inwardness which is consistent that we find in Mahatma Gandhi, Benjamin Franklin or Nelson Mandela's autobiographies. Their outward echoing consistencies are also invaluable as reader. The extraordinary personalities create extraordinary lives and stories. The autobiographer has his intentions hidden in the writing itself which is very evident from reader's point of view. The intentions may advance and oscillate and change according to situations. The autobiography speaks for itself and the writer may get dissolved into the story itself.

Narrator faces various problems while voicing out their own stories because it's going into society and would be evaluated from various angles. It puts author as omniscient in deciding the meaning of the text which is severely opposed by the post-modern critics.

Conclusion

The concept of author's presence behind the text and becoming the sole controller of the meaning and guarantor of 'the intentional meaning of the truth of the text' raises a critical enquiry and reader's space in the text. In the objective principle of authorship and its invariable intentions, it becomes a crucial link between the author, the narrator and the protagonist. The protagonist in the autobiography is unmasked writer unlike in fictional writer and who is the subject in the autobiography.

The writer may be a far truthful narrator and the presenter of the truth in fictional writings. Reading the autobiography is reading the personal history because the subject's knowledge is prevalent. The moment and the point of view needs to be revoked for a better understanding of the autobiographical expressions; so the objectives and goals of the author for writing autobiography is worth at all. This is a counter argument in verifying the proof and validity in the context of authorship and the claim of authors' omniscient view about his predominating intentions. The choice of the subject is significant in the form of autobiography. The selection of incidents and experiences also is a matter of subjective choice. That's why autobiography means discrimination and selection in the face of the endless complexities of life, selection of the facts, distribution of emphasis, choice of expression. Thus autobiographical work is always viewed against the claims made in the text.

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