

Composing the Self and Reflecting the Others in Life Writing: Theories and Practices

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Abstract

Life writing is an art of scripting and concretizing his/her own or others images and audio-visual things with ideas, views, feelings etc. into written form. It subjectivisms on composing the self and stimulates scholars to concretize their views, ideas and feelings in the practical ground of the real world reflecting the others' lives from narratives of an imaginary world. Oral histories cannot be long lasting as it is said that the originality of the stories, events or incidents might be missing in shifting of time and so life writing theories help to bring the views into practice from the coaxers and coaches to the listeners. Life writers write about the self reflecting on the memory, experiences, identity and embodiment. Agencies play the roles from inner selves and outer impressions and question on the truth. Life writers seek the sites through coaxers, coaches, agencies and story tellers to expose the structuring modes of self-inquiry in different forms of 'I' as autobiographical, narrating and historical as addressee or the media in front of the consumers or audiences from one generation to the others. Academic debates in the Writing Departments are serious in its philosophical and theoretical terms and objective of this article is to find out the gaps and reduce the confusion about its tools and techniques. Thus, this article copes to the challenges of Life Writing.

Keywords: Memory, Experiences, Identity, Embodiment, Agency, Addressee

Among various genres of writing; life writing is an important branch that includes biography, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography and day to day activities. Early life writing started writing about power to speak of God, goddesses, religious places, people, Christ, scientists, ambassadors, researchers, pirates and captains. It was much westernized and advocating about the colonizers. Britishers dominated the others and their issues were questionable for the truth. In the middle, life writing changed its mode of writing making it much inclusive including the memories, experiences, identities and rhetoric of the middle class peoples, intellectuals, social workers and the researchers in Aristotelian forms of logos, pathos and ethos as William F. Woods writes:

Aristotle's Rhetoric assumes that there are three modes of appeal that can be used to reach an audience: the appeal to logic or reason (*logos*, in the Greek), the appeal to emotion (*pathos*), and the appeal to the moral or ethical sense (*ethos*). In themselves, these modes are only guidelines-ways of orienting the speaker to the task. However, each of the modes was also associated with certain kinds of discourse, as well as with the rhetorical devices proper to that sort of appeal.

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Perhaps the easiest way to give the flavor of Aristotle's rhetoric is to describe some of the devices he suggests for appealing to the mind, heart and moral character of an audience. ("The History of Rhetoric: An Overview" AIE 8)

Life writing covers rhetorical forms of inclusive subject from journals, diaries, letters, essays, stories and memoirs. With the passes of time writers started to write in different areas and themes specializing on various genres and now days life writing is making its space wide.

Writing trends and patterns in life writing in the present extends its horizon broadly associating along with fictionalizing and dramatizing the subjects from ballad, folk tales, love lyrics and oral narratives to keep the recorded history in written documents. Life writing particularly means the "self life writing and writing about others" (Smith and Watson 1). Life writers experience social, socio-cultural, religious, political and communal activities and scripture the memory. Some of the communal practices are inspirational to the scholars, academicians, writers and the freedom fighters in the society but some of the communal crimes and social violence bring bad impacts in an individual's life that can be a writeable subject for the social awareness. While writing about others the subject areas are chosen about great people and places who have earned the name and fame in different sectors. Personal memories are the primary archival sources for life writing.

Master narratives of the west centered first in the writing about Jesus, lords, Duchess, Dukes and also wrote about confessional narratives. In the middle, writers prioritized writing also about people who are good about art, culture and philosophy and in the present an individual's identities, feelings, experiences, memories interlinking the visible forms of ideas or feelings through agencies. Confessional writings like as Thomas DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, St. Augustine's *The Confession*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confession* etc. developed the trends of writing confessional narratives. Francis Petrarch and Dante Alighieri in Italy started writing about people and places in fourteenth century. Classical Antiquities are in 'know thyself' as Socratic knowledge of self-interrogatory understanding and Delphic Oracle's injunctions. George Gusdorf and Karl Joachim Weintraub reserved the position as master narratives writers of the West. Biographies of Lord Byron, Julius Caesar, Galileo, Michelangelo and multiple narratives of Edward Gibbon and Maya Angelou became guidelines and inspirational sources for the later life writers. Samuel Pepys in *Diary* writes about Bourgeois subjects and Augustine follows self-searching mode in *Confession*. Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl* is about her own life while she was in hiding for two years with her family during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands. She is a German-Dutch diarist of Jewish heritage and Jewish victim of the holocaust. Her diaries preserved by her father provide a vivid portrait of the years she and her family spent hiding in an Amsterdam warehouse. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969) describes about how the strength of character and a love of literature can help to overcome racism and trauma. South African President Nelson Mandela's *Long Walk to Freedom* (1994) is about his memory

of moving and exhilarating. Barack Obama's *Dreams from My Father* is a story of race and inheritance that memoir explores the events of his early years in Honolulu Chicago up until his entry in law school in 1988. It is also about his black African father and white American mother searching for meaningful work in life. *The Autobiography of Mark Twain* refers to the lengthy set of reminiscence dictated for glimpse into the life, mind, and soul with cherished icons. *Darkness Visible* is a memoir of madness by William Styron about his descent into depression and the triumph of recovery. Biographies and autobiographies are memoirs about people and of the people that immortalize them with their works even after the death. Non academicians also can collect the oral narratives and experience about people in the cultural centers through travelling that become the additional sources for life narratives. "Travelers learn lots of things and experience in the mountains, hills and jungles" (Pratt 15). Individual and group experiences of travels and tour memories are the additional subjects for life writing.

Biographical and auto-biographical forms of writing are the areas of life writing. According to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ". . . observing subject and object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation . . . understanding of the concept and the practice of self-referential writings" (*Reading Autobiography* 1) are the subjects for life writing. Life writing and autobiography cover up the similar types of subjects because they are about life and lives but they are different as auto signifies 'self', bios means 'life' and graphe means 'writing' so they are similar because they write about life and they are different as one is about his/her own life and the other is about others. Autobiography covers up of the subject of own existence when he/she puts the main accent upon his/her life. An individual's personality, name and fame related explanatory writing written by him/her is autobiography and it is also called 'self-biography'. Smith and Watson write:

Autobiography, now the most commonly used term for such life writing, thus described writing being produced at a particular historical juncture, the early modern period in the West with its concept of the self-interested individual intent on assessing the status of the soul or the meaning of public achievement. By the eighteenth century notions of self-interest, self-consciousness, and self-knowledge informed the figure of the 'Enlightened individual' described by philosophers and social and political theorists. And 'autobiographies' as studies in self interest were sought by a growing reading public with access to affordable printed books. (2)

In the present self-referenced speculations in writing about history, politics, culture, religion and scientific testimonies have some self-referential contexts. History of referential writing has some distinctions among life narratives, life writing and autobiographies. Novelistic, historical and biographical references include many kinds of components like memories, experiences, identities, embodiments and agencies. Biographies and narratives are the modes of narrating lives. In life narratives, some writers write about their own lives assuming themselves as second or third person of the community externalizing the internal world. Life writing is a kind of searching himself/herself beginning with their origin and understanding the causes and consequences of own lively ups and down experiences.

Self-experience might be exciting or painful while travelling studying and investigating as writes Thesiger, “I was sailing on this dhow because I wanted to have some experience of the Arab as a sailor” (“The Trucial Coast” 277). An individual (he/she) really experiences different things that he/she explains or cannot explain in front of others because of their identity and social criticism. Narratives expose reality through narrator’s questions on its authenticity of evidences. In some cases the victimizer may hide the traumatic history and painful memory that he/she collects but does not expose from his/ her own mouth in front of the audiences because of the social/ cultural bars and community interferences. Personally experienced activities and self collected memories are different than assumed narratives or twice or thrice removed stories from realities. Autobiographical subject in the ancient and classical periods was defined as acquiring self knowledge and Socrates notion was “. . . self-interrogatory understanding of the Delphic oracle’s injunction” (*Reading Autobiography* 84). Erotic stories and confession narratives in Christian sense bring religious ups and down of humanist subject.

Life narrators incorporate the multiple ways of accessing multiple stories from dreams, family albums, photos, objects and family stories. Individual stories in some cases are explored through agencies or collective experiences and references of the societies. Some Aboriginal Australians and Native Americans have complex stories in their lives and they are represented differently in the life narratives as Smith and Watson write:

A life narrator may narrate his history as a young person full of illusions subsequently lost by the adult narrator, as does the young American immigrant Edward William Bok in *The Americanization of Edward Bok: The Autobiography of a Dutch Boy Fifty Years After*. Life narrators may present inconsistent or shifting views of themselves. They may even perpetrate acts of deliberate deceit to taste the reader or to suggest the paradoxical “truth” of experience itself. (12)

Life writing in this sense is self-referential document that represents the different experiences and expectations of life. Natural memory might lose its originality of the due past in the changing situation of the present if the conditional situation is changed and so life narratives are immortal documents. Personal and communal understandings help to verify the observing process for life writing.

Memory is an authenticator subject of life narrative as it helps to refresh the past events and incidents. Life is not same for ever as it has numbers of ups and down and the memory chips in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Ceremony* and James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* place in the memory bank in which the place, people and culture are stored and they help the readers to go back to the places and people they want to study and write about. Contextual memory might be politicized if the speaker is guided by some external forces or the agencies are misguiding to the speaker/narrator. The writer can politicize an authorized remembering and can use the biased authenticator so why it is our/readers responsibility to judge the narratives to provide the validity to them.

World War memories, Indo-Pak war results, mass-massacre and the present war in oppose of Ukraine against the attack of Russia may be unforgettable to the family members and relatives. The collective remembering through social cites and historical documents may bring the events close to the life narratives. However the memory of trauma may bring fragments within community crimes, religious fatalisms and socio-cultural conflicts and their results turn to the wars and even murder cases. Holocaust experiences, family tortures and the stories of sexual abuses in autobiographical narratives create some complex plots. Discursive language reflects the circulate knowledge of an individual and institutional guidance through agencies. Michel Foucault about the way of discursive experiences in life writing subjectivity writes:

Every day we know ourselves, or experience ourselves, through multiple domains of discourse, domains that serve as cultural registers for what counts as experiences and who counts as an experiencing subject. But since discourses are historically specific, what counts as experience changes over time with broader cultural transformations of collective history.

At the same time that we say that experience is discursive; we recognize that there are human experiences outside discursive narratives- feelings of the body, feelings of spirituality, powerful sensory memories of events and images. (Smith and Watson 26)

Discursive experiences in narrative transformation might affect an individual writer/narrator's mind through tell able stories of the particular time of life. Writer's own experience is primary source and the stories narrated through the narrators are secondary and even tertiary materials for life writing so in the matter of life writing authenticity is a primary subject that questions from different angles.

Talking about truthfulness, implicit claims of the narrators must be verified matching with the historical and contextual situations whether it for popularizing or about authenticating. 'I' eye and 'you' eye are different things that they see the social and cultural things differently even in the same story of the single event. Identity politics is another factor known as autobiographical subject marked in terms of race, gender, class, sexuality and family status. Identities are exposed and measured differently in the societies with the measuring rods of caste, colour, ethnicity, socio-political position and economic statuses as argues Stuart Hall:

There are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at particular historical moment that influence what is included and what is excluded from an autobiographical narrative. Some models of identity culturally available in the United States over the last three hundred years have included the sinful Puritan seeking the signs of salvation, the self-made man, the struggling and suffering soul, the innocent quester, the "bad" girl or boy, the adventurer, and the trickster. (34)

Life writers collect different kinds of memories through experiences and reproduce narratives in distinct models. Their writings represent auto/biographical identities in varied

models. Childhood to old age experiences and memoirs of the writers/narrators are exposed differently in varied racial, geographical and cultural communities.

Modern life narratives are different than bourgeois subjects as they try to capture the pious sentiments of complex networks in adventurous issues' epistemological self-searching. Fables and parables bring ancient self-portrays representing the historical memoirs in the subject of confidence and doubt waves shaping narrative strategies as Jean-Jacques Rousseau employs in *Reading Autobiography*:

. . . autobiographical strategy, reviving the genre of the confession before the French Revolution for very different ends. In his *Confessions* he turns the lens of his analysis upon himself in all his licentious frailty, "confessing" not to some god in pursuit of conversion, but to a diverse "public" that rejects him and evokes his hostility. Rousseau's assertions about his project of self-representation are both well known and notorious: "I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent, and which will never find an imitator. . . I am not made like any of those I have seen; I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. (96)

Confessions bring the selfishness and self-egoism discourses to construct an ideal world that mirrors the inner reality of an imaginary world. Childhood memories, youthful experiences and matured quests expose the life cycle sensations raising questions on controversial modes of narrative writings. Illusive inscriptions of the marginal subjects in pre-modernity bring narrative quest in mainstream of allegorical pursuits.

Personal legacy, intellectual insights and individual/personal ego might twist the truth of narratives. Epistemological fictionalizing of the passionate observation seeks the persuasive process of myth making. Growth of an imaginary expectation of the society mirrors the political, philosophical, erotic and self-surrendering issues. In this regard, Dorothy Wordsworth's *Journals* sketches:

Different set of daily pre occupations, as do the spiritual narratives of such African American "sisters of the spirit" as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote, or the letters and autobiographical fragments of such German writers as Rachel Varnhagen and Karoline von Gunderode. By mid-century George sand (Aurore Dudevant Dupin) serializes a life narrative, *Story of My Life*, in a Parisian newspaper (1854-55) to raise money. Introducing the melodramatic structure of a popular novel into the telling of her life, and parodying the call to writing in Augustine's conversion in the *Confessions*, Sand's chatty text interpolates biographies of her parents, letters, sermons, stories of lovers and friends into the story of her early life and discovery of an inner voice. (*Reading Autobiography* 101)

European and American agencies speaking about women, children, working class people and slave-narratives deal with person's formative attachment in spiritual education. Social formations unfold the apprenticeship influence on developmental mode of modern and postmodern encounters in social institutions. Powerful rhetoric of slave and ex-slave's

repressive institutions bring the stories of American openness. Self-conscious posing of affirming identities in American life narratives drive the nostalgic and migratory mobility intermingle the discourses of American subjectivity. American trend of narratives is popular in Europe and Asia in the modern and postmodern time in the theme of generic inventions.

Dinesen wrote this letter from Africa to her parents in Denmark where she describes about a painful moment referencing about an accident that occurred with her workers' child who caught the handgun and fired. One died in her arms and she wonders about their future within the culture. Dinesen questions about the national authority and security that is included in *Life Writing: Theory and Practice* Course Packet for TU, M.A. Third Semester 574.1 Course in English :

We drove down to the police station at once to report it, and they kept us there for hours; we did not get back until three in the morning-the accident had probably happened about half past seven. Of course the police cannot say anything; it was obviously an accident, or caused by children playing. But Thaxton will probably get a fine for living his gun out loaded. The poor child who shot it off has disappeared; naturally he must be absolutely terrified. ("Letter from Africa" 114)

Dinesen shows the events in historical perspective. She describes the hunting, accidents and death. The accident took place in Africa but it reflects to today's American society. The stories are about hunter and injured both as the victims of incidents because the boy who held the gun is no less a victim than those to whom he shot. Dinesen's concern goes through physical actions and she demonstrates the event through writing to her friends who are concerned.

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) is an eloquent preacher and spokesman of the Civil Rights movement. In 1959, King visited India to learn about Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and afterwards he initiated to convince the protesters not to be violent against the authorities. He also suggested for children rights and campaigning for jail free nation. This letter is written from King's jail cell. Non violence is Luther King's principle and he writes that the injustice is threat to justice. "Letter from Birmingham Jail" is addressed to his fellow Clergyman of Birmingham City Jail to pay an attention to the constructive works. He serves as an honorable president of Atlanta, Georgia of the Southern Christian leader who has a responsibility of coordinating among eighty-five organizations across the South. He convinced his friends to work together for justice and then he was in Birmingham because there was injustice and he wanted to bring freedom into Greco-Roman world. The cause of demonstration in Birmingham is unfortunate that brought a clash because of the loss of faith towards White People.

Negroes seek to make them free from dominance of White but they didn't have concrete vision. Luther King collected the facts to know how the injustice exists and how the people make negotiation or purify the causes and consequences to the direction inaction. Luther King takes Birmingham as a segregated city in the United States. The city is well

known as an ugly and brutal because of the unjust treatment to the Negroes that is included in the *Life Writing: Theory and Practice* Course Packet for TU, M.A. Third Semester 574.1 Course in English. Luther King writes:

Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and Churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiation. ("Letter from Birmingham Jail" 125-26)

Promises of the concerned authorities and Human Rights agents are meaningless and the people take them as meaningless and broken promises. In the election for the post of Mayor in Birmingham, Luther King wants to create a brotherhood relationship by reducing the depth of racism prejudice. Luther King claims that Albert Boutwell, the Mayor of Birmingham and Mr. Connor both are segregationists. They do not provide the immediate Justice and Luther King claims that "Justice too delayed is justice denied" (127). The waiting lengthened more than 340 years and so that "an unjust law is no law at all" (128). Luther King focuses on constructive rather than destructive activities in the nation. He uses patience and speaks using logical language and terms fluently in persuasive language. King writes and rewrites about the things about his memories and the things he experienced.

In conclusion, life narrators address to the readers/audiences through their narratives. Person or persons who evoke the stories are the coaxers. Readers as consumers have to interpret the stories from different schemes in starting point. The writers have numbers of stories that they can memorize what they have experienced or seen. Victims of the community crimes and social humiliation cannot tell their stories in normal situation. They don't like to expose the family crimes, socio-cultural wars and the community controlled subjects but in such cases coercers compel the coaxers to evoke the stories. Slaves' narratives, narratives of the women and working class people's stories are not easy to publicize and it is doubtful whether they will get the justice or not. Narratives might be politicized or controlled by certain communities. The war literature, personal narratives, individual incidents etc. affect to the society in controlled forms of the state mechanism and social bars as the ghost stories, slaves narratives, social and religious conflicts take coaxing place prompting questions. In the cases of oral narrators who can't write may tell the stories differently than the writer/narrator connect to the plots. In the translated versions there might be some invisible gaps while provoking the stories and writing the texts. Ethnographers assemble the narratives from primary narratives and secondary sources.

Narrating 'I' may be exposing the voice and views from first or third person point of view. Narrator's split and fragmented views bring multiple provisional subjects in fragmentation politicizing the situations. Narrated 'I' distinguishes from narrating 'I' and childhood memories. Ghost stories and the stories about dead friends, close relatives and family tragedies might have left the root cause to create the childhood narratives giving

the younger one's imagination as experiencing of the remembrances and forgetting stories. Thus, this article analyzes the tools and techniques of life writing studying the patterns of composing the self and reflecting on the others.

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