

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

**IJELLH**

**International Journal of English Language,  
Literature in Humanities**

Peer-Reviewed (Refereed/Scholarly), Indexed and Open Access Journal



**Volume 7, Issue 8, August 2019**

[www.ijellh.com](http://www.ijellh.com)

Ms. Ranisha R

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Acharya Institute of Graduate Studies

Bengaluru, India

rani68914@gmail.com, ranisha@acharya.ac.in

### Travelling Through The Memory Lanes: Exploration Of Self Or The Socio-Political Existence

Life writing has found its existence in memoirs, letters, eye-witness accounts and personal blogs on date unlike the bygone times which rooted its existence in biographies and autobiographies. The transition from a strenuous and scholarly task of writing an autobiography/biography to the utmost viable options such as writing blogs/memoirs has brought down an uphill task to the easiest of a mole hill. The shift in the written forms of life writing visibly demonstrates the transcending of the boundaries of the popular genres. However, the very notion of penning down an individual's life with uncompromising honesty sounds rather intriguing and abstract. The paper here attempts at highlighting the generic practice of life-writing that is mostly political in nature as against its definition of a faithful account of one's life in its rudiments. Any piece of writing intends on eliciting a reader response that he/she is looking forward to. Life writing being one, too, tries to solicit a particular response from the reader. The sought for reader response is exemplar of the subjectivity of the writing and a particular consciousness that the writer seeks to create in the reader. The solicited reader response mandates a necessary re-look into the faithfulness of a life writing that defines itself as a personal account far from any form of socio-political imperative.

## Life-writing

Life-writing includes autobiography, memoirs, letters, diaries, journals (written and documentary), anthropological data, oral testimony, eye-witness accounts etc. and thus blurring or rather extending the boundary of literature. Life writing is the conferring of an identity on ourselves; it is a controlling, ordering and possessing of one's life through the language of narrative. The scope of life-writing is one such that the individuals have increasingly taken to the inscription of the self in the most viable forms like creating personal blogs unlike the times where a few individuals took up the scholarly chore of penning down an autobiographical narrative.

Biographies and autobiographies were the popular genres that documented the life of an individual in a narrative. And the aforementioned genres were unquestionably assumed to be far from fiction and hence factual. They are believed to be the representation of life and self. The driving impulse behind life-writing is to record and revive the memories/experiences of the self by rendering them on a wall, be it on internet or on pages. Life-writing as understood, is seen as a task that encompasses embarking on a journey to the past through the memory lanes involving an empathy with the self, containing an inquiry into the experiences and facilitating an understanding of the self. It is an academic exercise that largely involves an engagement with the self. They encourage the readers to see their selves in relation to the self in the narrative. However, the persisting question is: are life-writings merely documenting the experiences or negotiating an understanding of the experiences? Are life-writings independent of socio-political imperative? Are every experiences of life documented? These questions foreground the limitations of representation, the slipperiness of memory and the positioning of being an observer and doer simultaneously in the narrative.

## Self and the Reflected Self

Lakshmi Holmstrom in her introduction to *Karukku* comments on Dalit writing, Dalit autobiographies being one,

*“Dalit writing – as the writers themselves have chosen to call it – has been seen in Tamil only in the past decade, and later than in Marathi and Kannada. It has gone hand in hand with political activism, and with critical and ideological debate, spurred on by such events as the Ambedkar centenary of 1994 and the furore following the Mandal commission report.”*

The above remarks of Lakshmi Holmstrom directs at the pervasive influence of movements and incidents that guides the writing of an individual. The self is narrated alongside the overarching view of the socio-political scenario that grants subjectivity to the narrative and transfers the narrative into a rendition with pre-determined perspective.

*“Karukku”*, an autobiographical work communicates the experience of a Dalit woman who braved the odds of her life to find the respectable position for herself. The narrative briefs Bama’s life which foregrounds women like her as the victims of three-pronged suppression in an economy-driven patriarchal casteist society. Born into Pariah community, Bama encounters the casteist oppression and feels humiliated. An individual comes into existence with labels of the caste. The narrative largely contains mention of incidents of ill-treatments on being born a Parayar not just Bama but the people born in the same community. The streets and names inadvertently implied at the caste through which an individual attains his/her identity. The narrative shows the plight of Dalit women, their sufferings and discrimination at the hands of their patriarch. The autobiographical narrative, however, appears to be communicating at large the experience of a Dalit community. Autobiography, by definition, is a self-written account of one’s own life. The reading of *Karukku* communicates less of self and more of others during the autobiographers’ review of

his/her life. The autobiographical narrative contained brief pages mentioning the violence that broke in the village between Parayar and Chaliyar boys. The mention of subjective element doesn't negate or falsify the incidents mentioned in the work but foregrounds the particular reader response sought in the reader. The casteism and practice of untouchability in the nation is not denied too. But, the reading of the narrative supposedly has incited the reader to prompt themselves against this practice. The writer's sharp criticism against a detrimental social evil is passed on to the reader. This solicited reader response in most of the life-writing is the concern of the paper.

The subjectivity in memoirs, eye-witness accounts, biographies and autobiographies are plausible. But the subjectivity is subtly felt or communicated in the life-writing genre for it defines itself as a faithful account of one's self. While novels and plays are perceived to be fictional, autobiographies/biographies/memoirs are not. Life-writing positions the reader in a different relationship unlike the novel. The fictional nature of the genres viz. novel, play and poems frees the reader by positing itself as works of imagination. This doesn't hold true of life-writing. So we can see life-writing as one of the frames the writers use to position the reader and engage in a relationship that encourages a particular reader response. Lives are not lived in isolation, but are entangled within the lives of others.

Susan Green in her essay *Genre: Life Writing* states thus, "The open and relational nature of life writing texts encourages an exploration of the extent to which inscriptions of the self and subjectivity are present and able to be analysed and interpreted along generic lines, as well as the effect of the interplay of genres in depicting such notions fundamental to life writing as identity and subjectivity, truth and reality. Life writing's deliberate crossing and blurring of generic boundaries enacts the genre's transgressive nature and life writing's embracing of life as a mystery and a complexity. Life and self are fragmented and shifting, and life writing engages with the different linguistic emphases placed on imagination and

experience, all derived from memory.” (Green, Susan pg.1) The reliance on memory in life-writing emphasizes the subjective element that the genre entails.

The difficulty in inscribing the self is the fact that the memory can only recount an incomplete life story, in the sense that our memory of our past cannot account for our origins – birth. Memories are neither linear nor provide a complete framework of one’s life. The fragmented fashioned memories don’t encapsulate an individual’s life in its entirety. The occluded ones may determine a different scenario unlike the ones reflected basing on the chosen or filtered memories. In many cases, many memories of life are dependent upon others’ narration of life from the beginning. The subjectivity in the life-writing corresponds with the role of memory as sufficient in itself to account for the entirety of one’s life. Memory stands the chance of offering a false perspective, and so in this way the element of subjectivity raised as a concern in life-writing is supposedly validated. The earlier argument of eliciting a particular reader response is thus justified as the memories inscribed on the pages are one such that it functions to offer a critique of the socio-political scenario that the writer believes in.

The memory solely doesn’t account for its subjectivity. There is lesser room for the accountability of memory in eye-witness accounts. The eye-witness accounts are fairly treated as the first hand evidence and faithful narration of the incident. However, the neutrality in the narrative is dubious and can be contested. The infidelity in the narration of eye-witness accounts is enunciated by Lata Mani in her seminal essay, “*The Female Subject and the Colonial Gaze: Reading Eye-witness accounts of Widow Burning*”. The essay is a critique of the role of imperial power in the abolition of Sati. The anti-imperial essay hints at the shrewd negotiation the imperial powers cherished with the liberals and the conservatives in the colonial India and the ways in which they appeased the aforementioned groups in dealing with Sati-a social evil. The prohibition of Sati occupies in the list of British

accomplishments. Notably, widow burning was permissible too as long as it was based on widow's willingness and not compulsion. The prohibition of Sati was welcomed by the liberals and the permission for voluntary Sati appeased the conservatives who viewed Sati practice a tradition. Subsequently, the voluntary Sati is evidenced through eye-witness account of colonial officer. An excerpt of eye-witness account from the above essay:

*“No intoxicating drugs were administered to stupefy her, so far as I could ascertain, and the determined heroic fortitude she displayed throughout the whole of the ceremony, till the moment of pain and trial, was worthy [of] a better cause, and would have done honour to a Christian Martyr”*

The eye-witness accounts that describe a human act as a voluntary one are accountably subjective in nature. The glorification of Sati practice in the cited one is exemplar of the pre-conceived notion of voluntariness of a suicidal act. The attempt to escape is viewed as the failure of the nerve and not a voluntary act of saving oneself. The accounts are documented to demonstrate the acts as voluntary in nature. Eye-witness accounts thus present themselves to describe the reality. The counter-reading of the same facilitates the reality as a construct and not necessarily conveying truth.

The life-writing, though identified as individual's account, communicates critique or appreciation of a particular social system. The inclusion of other's stories in one's documentation of personal life may be justified as individual's life doesn't exist in isolation and remains entangled with other's lives. However, the dedication for other's stories in autobiographies has created a readership that looks forward to companionship in any nature of suffering of the author. This attitude is evidently found, when Nalini Jameela, a social worker was asked, why doesn't her autobiography make a mention of the sufferings of her fellow workers.

The truth in life-writing is a factor that offers itself as a site of contestation. It is quite evident that the pieces of writing demand a particular reader response. So, the life-writing holds room for imaginative rendition.

## References

Holmstrom, Lakshmi, *Karukku* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012

Green, Susan, *Genre: Life Writing*. Retrieved from Wikipedia on 4 April 2018.

“*Memory, Alive and Clear: An Interview with Nalini Jameela*”, Prescribed Gender Studies Reader, Bangalore University

“*The Female Subject and the Colonial Gaze: Reading Eye-witness accounts of Widow Burning*”, Prescribed Gender Studies Reader, Bangalore University.

J. Winslow, Donald, *Life-Writing: A Glossary of Terms in Biography, Autobiography and Related Forms* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. , USA: University of Hawaii Press, 1995. e-book