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The Problematics of Life Writing: Illustrations from Recent Indian Writing

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Abstract

Life Writing has evolved and become a major genre in the last few decades. Literary studies have also embraced this genre, finally, with open arms. In its new avatar, the genre poses unprecedented challenges. The paper lists out the nitty-gritty that complicates Life Writing as a genre especially in this evolving matrix. With recent examples, specifically from Indian writing of this genre, the paper cites these complexities and pleads for academic attention on this genre from the angles of the questions that have been raised.

Keywords: Life Writing, autobiography, biography, memoir

Life Writing (LW) as a genre is a flourishing area of intellectual pursuit today because humans never tire of listening to tales – tales on the lives of others. As a genre embraced by general readers, as well as by rigorous academicians, LW has become remarkably prolific in the twenty-first century. Cline and Angier claim:

There are many reasons for the enthusiastic pursuit of the autobiographies and biographies of the famous and infamous, the confessional outpourings or mysteriously withheld secrets of politicians, sports people, writers, or those who have lived through extraordinary times. People read them because they want to know about many real lives, not just their own. Some people read biography because it is a quest narrative, like a detective story or an engaging thriller. Who is this person? Will we ever understand him or her? What is going to happen next? Some read autobiography because they believe it will give them direct access to someone else's genuine experiences and feelings. It is not surprising that in our egocentric age of twitters and blogs, autobiography and memoir in particular – the

genres based on the self, on inwardness, revelation and intimacy – are increasingly written and read. (1)

Just as everything scientific develops, grows & expands- so has some aspects of literary studies. The whole business of LW originated when we knew it as autobiography or biography, in simpler terms. Now in its new avatar, as 'Life Writing', in the new parlance, it is an umbrella term that covers memoirs, testimonials, biographies, autobiographies, etc.

However, a general reading audience remembers more effortlessly the names of novelists or sportspersons than of biographers. At best, an avid reader might remember Walter Isaacson for *Steve Jobs*.

What could be the reasons LW is not as popular as other genres of literature?

LW is ubiquitous. It is all around; in everything we do. Whether we are lying around on the couch and dreaming, or in a mode of self-reflection, we are narrating to ourselves. When we are listening to others, we are hearing narrations; when we speak our stories to listeners, we are narrating. Even when journalism reports a news story or publishes a feature article, it is invariably about other lives! A simple thing like an introduction to a speaker in an assembly is also biographical in a certain sense! Hayden White reiterated this when he said how narrative and life cannot be dissociated. Life is narrative and narratives is life. So, something which is a domestic phenomenon does not so easily get academic attention.

LW is about re-creating, not creating. What is the essential difference between a fiction writer and a biographer? A novelist invents a story, while a biographer, in LW, recreates a story that has been. Literature creates, biographical literature recreates. And, the re-creation is a

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result of extensive research and verification of facts. What is real is encapsulated in creative apparel to give it the literary sheen. Literary compositions which are meant to be marked by originality and creativity tend to garner more value than LW which is in some sense 'stating the obvious. What sceptics of the literary quality of LW miss is the creativity involved in portraying what is/has been in the most readable manner can be more challenging than portraying a fictitious circumstance.

Life writers are considered 'immigrants into literature'. In the world of literature, life writers are relegated to the position of second-class citizens. Creativity or 'creation' gets first-grade preference. A life writer searches, researches, and recreates; does not invent or create. Just as immigrants bring in debasing work cultures, life writers are easily faulted with by the 'natives', the creative writers.

A gear shift has occurred in LW. In ancient Bharat, when Sage Valmiki or Sage Vyasa wrote *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha*, they were capturing the biography of not just their heroes, King Rama & Shree Krishna, but also of a whole dynasty, a whole clan, maybe of a whole yuga. In fact, these are two texts which are being recreated in multiple modes to this day - rechristened as mythological fiction, folklore, retellings, fantasy writings etc. When the poet Kalidasa wrote *Kumarasambhava*, it was in some sense a record of the birth of Lord Shiva's son, a biography. Eventually, in Modern India, we have had many works of LW of sages, of freedom fighters, of mathematicians, of social reformers. Today we live in an age of memoir boom. In highly individualised societies, anyone and everyone can write a biography or autobiography. From writing of clans and dynasties to writing of divine incarnations, from national figures well known for their sacrifice and contributions, today, any individual who wishes to make known parts or all of his or her life publishes some form of LW. Earlier LW simultaneously reflected the age, the society, the culture and even human progression in general, while actually doing the task of self-portrayal. Today it has had a seismic shift to individualised LWs. The scope and aspiration of LW has undergone a shrinkage, in some sense. Whether the microscopic scope of today's LW is for the better, is worth a debate.

This tendency at 'microscopicity' or 'shrinkage' as you may like to see it, has led to multiple mushrooming

sub-genres of LW. Reminiscences/ Memoirs being the most common, allow for fragment recollections. Life in parts is what they portray. This kind of LW does not labour to trace an entire life. A singular aspect of a single individual from a small part of his/her life through a single lens is what this new sub-genre seems to be advocating.

Ramachandra Guha's latest book *The Commonwealth of Cricket: A Lifelong Love Affair with the Most Subtle and Sophisticated Game Known to Humankind* is a case in point. Published in late 2020, this book explores and traces Guha's first-hand experiences and observations of the transformation of the Commonwealth game in India. Reviews claim that the book 'blends memoir, anecdote, reportage and political critique'. A versatile persona with multifarious interests, in this book, Guha talks only of his brush with Indian cricket right from the 60s.

Priyanka Chopra's *Unfinished* is yet another such piecemeal LW. Published in early 2021, it has been described as a "collection of personal essays, stories and observations", yet, it all revolves mostly around her foray into the world of acting and eventually producing. Someone with much happening to her still, the memoir is obviously 'unfinished'. Has LW indeed shrunk itself from a genre as mammoth as an epic to a self-reflective diary writing mode a few hundred pages long? Is there another way to view this problematicness of LW? Is contemporary LW pitching for depth versus breadth? A close-up view of a slice than a bird's eye view of the loaf (read life) under study?

While much LW earlier were written to the completion of the story, today autobiographies come in parts. The four-part autobiography of India's thirteenth President Pranab Mukherjee is an example. 'Pranab's 4-volume autobiography encapsulates India from 1970s to present...' is how a leading newspaper announced it. Well-organised into four parts as *The Dramatic Decade*, *The Turbulent Years*, *The Coalition Years* and *The Presidential Years*, this recent addition to the corpus of LW in India stands apart. It is more the life of the nation, narrated through the eyes of the man whose autobiography it is meant to be. Would the reader approach it to know about Pranab Mukherjee, or about India, for the individual's history or for the nation's history? Is it strictly life writing, historical narrative or political recollection? Once again,

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the problem of LW lies in deciding where its boundaries lie.

The fourth part of Pranab Mukherjee's auto/biography also brought to light other problems concerning LW. *Times of India* of Dec. 20, 2020 reported: 'Motivated excerpts': Son, daughter in Twitter spat over Pranab's memoir. Once the subject of the piece of LW is deceased, who is it that vets and authenticates the reports in the writing? In this case, the son Abhijit Mukherjee wanted to review the contents of the memoir, and insisted that the book be published only after his explicit written consent. The daughter tweeted back that since the manuscript of the fourth part was ready even before their father fell ill, and it was all what he had written in his handmade notes, nothing there should be censored for publication. They also squabbled about the name of the book: *The Presidential Years* vs. *The Presidential Memoirs* as the son referred to it. Censoring content of an autobiography which is unpublished at the time of the subject's demise, by the 'rightful heirs', is another threat that looms around LW of the sort discussed here.

Another problem of LW is the intrusion of new media and social media, and the consequences it brings to LW itself. Would a collation of WordPress blogs, Facebook posts, Instagram stories, etc., result in an autobiographical sketch? Is the time not too far away when we consolidate our posts and publish them as LW? The microblogging could be after all the new avatar of LW of the future? However, there seems an intertwined problem or (is it an advantage?) here. The autobiographical record one leaves behind in social media can come back to haunt one in later years, unlike in a traditional print page autobiography. The case in point is based firstly on the premise that all social media posts are bits of LW. Here is what News18 reported: *Jasprit Bumrah Trolled for 'Hypocrisy' After Netizens Spot Crackers in His Wedding Reception Pics*. An old tweet of 2017 where Jasprit Bumrah, a celebrity cricketer, as a conscientious citizen, urged everyone to celebrate Diwali without crackers came to be questioned when he posted his wedding reception pictures on social media in 2021. #Saynotocrackers very soon turned to #Celebrityhypocrisy. This brings me to the point of debate as concerns LW: Will social media posts as micro LW exercises, after all, make the LW stand to tough scrutiny, thereby ensure veracity in LW, and assure transparency of the subject?

Let us now consider the case of co-authored autobiographies. Sachin Tendulkar's *Playing It My Way* illustrates this partnered writing. Cricket historian and media personality Boria Mazumdar co-authored with Sachin. The question from the critical perspective in such ventures of LW is, how much is the contribution of the subject and how much is that of the co-author. Is it the style of writing, mere organisation and presentation of details, or the perspective and prime focus itself that is affected by the co-author? Why is it not an authorised biography in which the subject of the book participates in content generation? What exactly does the 'co-' in co-authoring reflect? Whose voice is it, finally?

What then of 'commissioned biographies'? Many times, self-aggrandizement becomes the motive for a commissioned biography. Ramachandra Guha, an established biographer-cum-historian makes some critical reflections of 'authorised'/ 'commissioned' biography writing in an article he wrote in 2020. He had an unsolicited commission to write the biography of Gautam Adani, based on his scholarly approach to LW itself. But the veteran writer had discovered what lies beneath a commissioned writing. Guha suspects, and truly so, that a commissioned biography can debilitate truth, frankness and freeness. There can be restrictions and constraints laid to comply with the 'commissioner'! After quoting many instances of being requested for commissioned writing and his refusals, he says this: "I had an aesthetic aversion to the idea of a "commissioned" or "authorised" biography. I would want to write a Life of an individual because of my own inner urges, my own interest in that person, not because someone with deep pockets had asked me to" (*Scroll.in*, Nov. 22, 2020).

A literary work can invent, but LW can only construct. *The Accidental Prime Minister* by Sanjay Baru was hailed by Jon P. Dorschner, a book reviewer. Talking of Baru's writing, she says: "He does not engage in hyperbole, but rather is dispassionate and coolly analytical. He provides lots of information without getting mired in specifics". And the Prime Minister's Office in 2014, officially dismissed the book as 'fiction' and 'coloured'. It is only LW which can be put under the test of fire to prove the truth, not any literary text. This adds to the complexity that surrounds LW. To make this problem of "What is the truth?" worse, we have the story of Lance Armstrong who published two autobiographies, and then after a decade, Juliet Macur's *Cycle of Lies* had to dismiss much of what

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Armstrong's books had claimed or may be hidden. Was it not truly said: "...if fiction cannot fail the truth test, it is almost impossible for life writing to pass it" (Cline and Angier 13).

What are the reader precautions that LW demands? Imagination is a thin line drawn between fiction and non-fiction. To make LW attractive enough, it might be a natural tendency with life writers to dramatise ordinary events of a simple life they are writing about. This could unintentionally lead to 'autobiografiction' - combining some fictional elements to autobiographical writing. The question is how much fictionalising is permissible in LW, to enable it to gain access to the literary world? Another problem of LW is the role of memory and recollection which has a huge impact on veracity which should be the touchstone of any LW. "Autobiographical writing ...[is] also subject to the narrator's imperfect and evolving memory and shifting perspective," states Stroińska. Distorted memory, fragmented memory, fading/faded memory can all lead to myth-making in the process of LW.

Legal and ethical concerns also plague LW. For a biographer, especially an unauthorised one, the invasion of privacy of the subject is a constant haunt. There is also the awkwardness of different biographers perceiving the same subject in different manners. Examples of LW by Primo Levi, Seymour or Holroyd raise the question of how others can be alluded to in one's LW. It raises, and maybe even answers, the question of how much freedom one can take to portray others who are part of one's life, while writing about one's life.

Our main problem, then, is moral. What we do is dangerous. The danger is especially acute in memoirs and autobiographies, where we take the lives of our families and friends into our hands. What did you think, for example, of Iris, John Bayley's memoir of Iris Murdoch's descent into Alzheimers Disease? There is no doubt that it was a beautifully written book, painfully accurate and sad. Did you think it was worth it - a work of art, about someone who could no longer be hurt by it? Or did you think it was a shameful betrayal? (Cline and Angier, 9)

LW is thus an exciting, yet a complex body of literature. The problematics of it is multi-pronged. No one theory of LW can address all of it. Each work of LW and its unique history of composition brings out an angle that the previous ones have not. Sally Cline and Carole Angier were summing up the problematics of LW when they wrote:

Is life writing art or craft, history or literature, objective or subjective? Can it ever be 'true', adequate to a lived life, even possible at all? Should life writers tell a story, or should they just tell the facts? How much interpretation is allowable, how much speculation, how much fictionalisation? What are the ethical and legal problems of writing about real people - even sometimes members of one's own family? What are the problems of memory, of evidence, of myth-making? What is the role of the life writer? (Cline "Preface" xiv)

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