

Telling Lives, Signifying Selves: Life Writing, Representation, and Identity

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Life piles up so fast that I have no time to write out the equally fast rising mound of reflections.
Virginia Woolf

Introduction

Since the last two decades life writing has emerged as an umbrella term for a host of self-referential forms that have expanded the traditional literary domains of biography and autobiography. Focusing on a range of life writing forms, the eclectic collection of essays in this special issue explore the multiple ways in which the production, circulation, and consumption of life writing has helped to reimagine and redefine individual and collective identities in a different cultural and geopolitical contexts. A comparative perspective illuminates the common concerns of life writing across linguistic and national boundaries, highlighting the compelling reasons for the resurgence of various modes of storytelling in contemporary times. The overwhelming response to the call for papers for the special issue and the wide ranging themes explored in the essays bears testimony to a growing academic interest in life writing forms globally. In the Indian context, there has been a veritable boom in the publication of Dalit life narratives, literary memoirs, illness narratives, celebrity narratives, testimonies of migration and exile, trans and queer narratives, blogs on social media, and much more. While the preoccupation with sharing stories remains a basic human impulse, in a multilingual society like India, translation has played a key role in the current and growing interest in life writing and its wider dissemination through English language translation. Besides life writing texts in Urdu, Hindi, Tamil, Bangla, Oriya, and Nepali, this special issue also includes life writing texts in Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, Chinese and of course English. The rich linguistic and cultural diversity is accompanied by an equally wide array of forms like working class autobiography, life stories on Subreddit, Tibetan autobiography, Dalit life narrative, bio fiction, trauma narrative, Partition memoir, testimonial novel, graphic narrative, fictionalized autobiography and historical fiction.

Defining Life Writing

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Writing*, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define life writing as “an overarching term used for a variety of non-fictional modes of writing that claim to engage the shaping of someone’s life” (17). Marlene Kadar’s influential book, *Essays on Life-writing: from genre to critical practice*, discusses life-writing in detail and describes it “as genre of documents or fragments of documents written out of life, or unabashedly out of personal experience of the writer” (29). An inclusive genre, it covers personal essays, testimony, diary, oral accounts, letters, journals, memoirs, travel writing, graphic memoirs, and digital storytelling on social media. In their expanded edition (2010) Smith and Watson propose sixty (to the former fifty two) subgenres of life

writing, which is likely to be expanded even further. While life writing is generally associated with non-fictional narratives or self-reflective modes of storytelling, it also includes fictional texts such as the auto fiction, bio fiction which are fictionalized accounts of individual lives but have a “a thematic concern of life or self.” (Kadar 29) Traversing different disciplinary terrains like journalism, anthropology, history, literature, and psychology, life writing blurs the generic boundaries between history, fiction, and documentary narrative. One of the significant aspect of life writing is that it has democratized the autobiographical discourse by expanding its generic boundaries and calls into question the “ideologically fraught category of autobiography ... in which masculinist ideology has often dictated formal and epistemological terms of the genres.” (Smith and Watson 18) Given the elastic nature of the genre, life writing has been defined widely by scholars, but as Kadar rightly observes, it’s not a fixed term, and functions both as a genre and critical practice, constantly evolving with changing literary and political movements. (1-3)

From Autobiography to Life Writing

The shift from autobiography studies to life writing studies since the 1990’s can be attributed the theoretical interventions and the interdisciplinary turn in literature and cultural studies that expanded the field of autobiography. Early scholars of like Georges Gusdorf established autobiography as the story of an unique individual and traced the rise of modern autobiography to Augustine, Rousseau, and Enlightenment individualism. As a literary genre, autobiography was seen as providing direct access to the author’s self and the intention of the author and his commitment ‘truth’ was often unquestioned. (Pascal 1960; Weintraub 1978) Phillippe Lejeune’s widely cited definition of autobiography, and his notion ‘autobiographical pact’ consolidated the widely held assumptions about the genre. “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality. (193) However, since this definition does not provide the necessary distinction with other related genres of biography and fiction, Lejeune calls for a complete identification between the “author, narrator and protagonist” and makes this condition necessary for autobiography. (193) Credited with coining the term ‘autobiographical pact’ or ‘contract,’ based on ‘an intention to honour the signature’, Lejeune consolidates the authorship question where the author of an autobiography declares that he is the same as the narrator and the protagonist. These formulations of autobiography that focussed on authenticity, autonomy, self-realization, and authority of the narrator valued the genre for foregrounding a universal subject whose life narration reflected universal human nature and values. For James Olney ‘it is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries’ that accounts for the special appeal of autobiography. (23) Thus, autobiography promoted an essentialist notion of selfhood, a self that could be realized and truthfully represented. The notion of a coherent and autonomous self, assumed a transparency of language and saw the formation of autobiographical subjectivity as an affirmation of individual identity. The exclusive focus on the individual, was one of the reasons why autobiography came to be identified as a ‘Western’ genre the ‘master’ narrative of the great ‘individual’, and privileged White man of property. (Smith and Watson)

Critical interventions by poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist inflections in autobiographical studies drew attention to ideological underpinnings of the autobiographical tradition and reframed the terms of debate. Poststructuralist theorisations of autobiography sounded a death knell for the unified and autonomous subject of the autobiography. Paul de Man’s, path breaking essay ‘Autobiography as De-Defacement’ (1979) proposed that autobiography is not a genre or a mode but “a figure of reading and understanding that occurs, to some degree, in all texts.” (70) For de Man, the importance

of autobiography is not that “it reveals reliable self-knowledge”(71) rather it produces an illusion of reference, and all knowledge, including self-knowledge depends on tropes or figurative language. By undermining the unified autobiographical subject, referentiality of language, and announcing the death of the author (Barthes 1968) poststructuralist formulations of autobiography questioned the ‘law of genre’, (Derrida 1980) that validated certain autobiographical writings and excluded others. In drawing attention to the limitations of cultural theory for its universalist paradigm of knowledge and Eurocentric bias, postcolonial critical interventions in autobiographical studies drew attention to the politics of representation as it excluded a whole range of peoples who were historically marginalised and also excluded from written modes of narrative. Addressing the cultural and social significance of these narratives and examining the various ways of reconfiguring the self in non-Western contexts, postcolonial interventions expanded field of self-representation into a variety of narrative forms that enabled the articulation of subjectivities that had hitherto been excluded from the realms of representation. Several influential studies in the field, notable among them by (Whitlock 2015; Moore 2009; Huddart 2014; and Majeed 2007) have examined postcolonial life writing as a distinct category with key features and the way it differs from and is analogous to its Western counterparts. There have been studies, though not too many, focusing exclusively on gender and self-making in South Asia (Malhotra and Lambert-Hurley 2015) analyses of biographical and life writing tradition in India (Arnold and Blackburn 2004) and more recently, Uday Kumar’s (2016) study on the relationship between literature, autobiography, and history in the context of Kerala. Postcolonial feminist scholars saw the deconstruction of the privileged, white masculine subject, as offering an opportunity for a more radical function of autobiography, as “now it has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness—women, black people, working class people have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography, via the assertion of a ‘personal’ voice, which speaks beyond itself. (Swindells 1995:7)

The expansion in the field of autobiography has led to a proliferation of genres that make the life narration possible to peoples whose lives and stories perhaps did not did not matter and were not considered worthy of engagement. Focusing on the everyday aspects of culture and modes of being, life writing marks a move away from individualism and affirmation of the subject to a more inclusive understanding where life narration is a process of identity formation, which does not attempt to objectify or subjectify the nature of a particular cultural truth. (Kadar 1992) Scholarly interest in life writing spawned owing to an interest in the issues of margins, intersections, crossings, and practices of subversion and resistance. The stories of survivors of exile, migration, refugee, trauma, violence, locate life writing in here in now, as an experiential narrative, located in particular social and political context. Advances in trauma studies, especially in relation to Partition, Holocaust survivors, immigrant and transcultural subjects has revitalized the autobiographical discourse and this fact is borne out by a virtual publishing boom in memoirs, diaries, witness narratives, graphic memoirs, testimonies, autoethnography, bio fiction and of course digital storytelling on social and multimedia platforms. The wide-ranging concerns of life writing have reframed the terms and understanding of autobiographical subjectivity and mark a shift away the individual to a more relational understanding of self. Foregrounding a ‘relational model of identity’, John Paul Eakin emphasizes social sources of identity arguing that the self is defined by and lives in relation to others. Life writing is not an exclusive genre but a process of identity formation, where the self and the story we narrate of the self are constantly evolving. (114). The broad concerns discussed above are reflected in the special issue. The articles engage with

reinscribing forgotten histories, memories of homeland and exile, marginalized identities, the essays also draw attention to the liminality of the subject and a complex formation of subjectivity, emphasizing life writing as a constantly evolving process. Life writing is also helpful in understanding history as individual lives are implicated in larger history and serve as a link between collective and personal accounts of cultural memory.

Memories of Migration, Exile and Home

Memories of exile and migration constitute a large corpus of life writing. A defining moment in South Asian history, memories of Partition still animate popular imagination in India and continue to shape contemporary debates about identity and ideas of nationhood. Moving beyond traditional narratives of exile and resettlement, Debjani Sengupta's essay on the Sunanda Shikdar's Partition memoir raises important questions about ideas of home and belonging and how identities are shaped by moving or staying in one place. Shikdar's memoir about her years spent in East Pakistan, as her family stayed back in India after 1947, recreates the warm pastoral world of village life, yet shines light on the issues of caste and religion, which continue to affect the new nation's formation. Kritika Chettri's essay on Teknath Rizal's Nepali memoir raises questions about recounting those lives that do not fit within the given 'frames' of nation and ethnicity and how they impact the experiences in one's life. Drawing on Judith Butler's formulation of 'frames' and Agamben's notion of 'bare life', Chettri's essay examines Rizal's precarious existence as he is stripped of his citizenship and exiled from his land of birth, Bhutan. Imprisoned for a decade on fabricated charges, the essay traces the trajectory of Rizal's life as he moves from Bhutan to India to Nepal and how these changes affect the framing of self. Vijaya Venkatraman's paper on Spanish Moroccan writer, Najat El Hachmi focuses on the liminality of identity as the narrator inhabits an in-between space because of migration from Morocco, her place of birth, to Spain. The paper argues that the narrator's fractured identity remains in a constant state of flux and by not confining herself to any of the identity and linguistic categories, the precarity of self makes Hachmi at once vulnerable and powerful.

Dalit life Writing and Translation

Any discussion of life writing in the Indian context is inextricably linked to the emergence of Dalit life writing and how it has given voice to marginalised and silenced communities. A powerful genre unto itself, Dalit autobiographies question the cultural, political, and social exclusion of Dalits from dominant discourse and links individual lives and struggles with their community. Translation has played a key role in disseminating Dalit autobiography, given recognition to the struggles of the people, helped in building solidarities, and appeals for a democratic and a just social order. B Mangalam's essay on Gunasekharan's *Vadu* examines the discriminatory social structure that shapes the narrator's life in the larger context of Tamil Dalit autobiography. A non-linear narrative, the use of stone inscriptions, photographs, songs, oral narratives create a polyphony of voices that offer a historical perspective and a powerful critique of caste hegemony. Rajkumar's essay on Odia autobiography focuses on caste and gender dynamics while juxtaposing the stories of two Gandhians who were committed to the social welfare and upliftment of the poor. Tracing the evolution of Nishankar Das, a Dalit, as a Gandhian long with Rama Devi, an upper caste woman, the paper examines how caste shapes an individual's life's journey and experiences despite sharing the common goal Gandhian gram swaraj. Caste based humiliation, agony, and betrayal informs Unnikrishnan's discussion of Bhanwar Meghwanshi, a Dalit, who joins the RSS in his efforts to assimilate and identify with the goals of dominant Hindu ideology, which has historically obfuscated and marginalized Dalit identity, and later suffers rejection and exclusion. The essay argues that Meghwanshi's

account of alienation in an organization, which he sought to serve, highlights how Dalit identity and labour is appropriated to serve the cause of Hindu nationalist ideology, while continuing to treat them as polluting untouchables.

Auto/Bio fiction

Auto/biographical fiction pushes the limits of storytelling by drawing attention to the fictionality of all stories, whether real or imagined. Interestingly, they also aspire to achieve verisimilitude by embedding in the texts and paratexts a lot of factual details to make the narrative appear closer to reality. Gitarani's *Lesiangtham* examines an experimental life writing text, Eastreine Kire's *Mari*, which memorializes the Battle of Kohima in North East India during the Second World War. While the text is a fictionalized account of Kire's aunt who witnessed war, it uses an auto diegetic narration and lets Mari tell the story in her own voice. The essay argues that Mari's 'memory work' makes the text a 'hetero-emotive site, which recounts memories not only of Mari, but collective memories of other people, and most significantly of Kohima and Naga historical past. Reinscribing memory and marginalized figures of history is also the concern of Snigdha Deka and Rohini M. Punekar's essay on Kenize Mourad's biographical fiction *In the City of Gold and Silver* (2013). Based on the life of Begum Hazrat Mahal, whose significant role is overshadowed by the figure of Rani Laxmibai in the Revolt of 1857, the paper relocates her in alternative and subaltern histories, as she has been marginalized from the nationalist narratives of the Indian nation. Interrogating the popular trope of the Virangana, a female warrior, which has been appropriated by different political ideologies, the paper retrieves the role and contribution of the brave Muslim courtesan that has been relegated to margins in the dominant narratives of the nation. A hybrid form, the testimonial novel also blurs the boundary between literature and history and aims to give voice to the disenfranchised. Written as a collaboration between a 'subject' and a writer/editor, it foregrounds the ethical and methodological challenges of collaboration. My paper examines the limits and contribution of collaboration in Elena Poniatwoska's testimonial novel and how the oral life story transforms into a rich social history of Mexico from the perspective of a poor Indian peasant woman.

Fragmented /Contingent Selves

Life writings by people who have been marginalized because of their sexual identity and experience of sexual trauma are important in restoring a sense of self which has been shattered. Kim Schoof analyses Édouard Louis' French autobiographical novel as a 'multi directional' testimony of sexual trauma rather than focusing on the convention of 'narrative coherence', which is perceived as central to establishing the ruptured self of the victim of personal and sexual trauma. The essays argues that rather than imposing the norm of narrative coherence, which is shaped in the text along sexual and racial lines, the multiple digressions and testimonies re-establish Edouard's self in solidarity with his perpetrators' sexual identity, thereby constructing a relational and fragmented self. Ipek Sahinler's insightful essay examines the 'Oriental' journeys of Cuban writer Severo Sarduy and French Pierre Loti, which are intimately linked to their self-making processes by appropriating the Ottoman practice of *tebdil-i kıyafet* (cross-dressing). The essay argues that while the journey to the East marks a move towards the self by way of negotiating sexual and national identity and formation of their neobaroque aesthetics, yet it is constructs the East as the exotic 'Orient'. The metaphor of journey demonstrates self and identity formation as a constantly evolving process, always in flux. The fluidity of self emerges even more clearly in digital storytelling. Michael Humphrey and Elias Gbadamosi's paper on life stories on SubReddit elaborates on constructing contingent selves on a digital

platform which promises anonymity and liberates individuals from the confines of identity markers. Using narratives-in-interaction research method, the paper examines the possibilities of developing intimacies amongst strangers through sharing of stories, which are fundamentally fuelled by affect. The authenticity and the authorship is no longer central to the stories narrated on such platform as it can be augmented by the commentators; what remains is the anonymized experience that is as contingent as the author.

Tibetan Autobiography

Lucia Galli and Rachael Griffiths exploration of Tibetan life writing moves beyond traditional approaches of examining Tibetan autobiography as historiography or hagiography and addresses the complex self-making processes when the text is located in cultural, social and political context. Lucia Galli's essay on the graphic memoir of an American Buddhist point to the difficulty of translating Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife to an American audience, that is deeply 'other'. Comparing the individualistic and self-reliant graphic account of Samuel Bercholz's near death experiences and vivid description of hell with the traditional Tibetan Buddhist delok's (das log) literature's affirmation of communal experience and didactic impulse, the essay observes how the familiarity with the graphic form opens up possibilities of cultural adaptation and engagement. Moving away from the literary conventions typical of Tibetan autobiography, Rachael Griffiths' contextualizes the autobiography of Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Penjor in the social, institutional, and political networks of Amdo (North Eastern Tibet) in the early eighteenth-century and analyses the author's self-making through his recollection of collective memories and stories that shape his subjectivity not as an individual but as a product of collective. Both the essays point to the difference between the communitarian construction of self in the non-Western context as opposed to a more individualistic assertion of self in the Western tradition.

Postcolonial Life Writing and Working Class Autobiography

Meenakshi Malhotra examines *My Experiments with Truth*, the autobiography of well-known Indian political and nationalist leader MK Gandhi, in a postcolonial framework, focusing on his corporeal politics and how his gender ambivalent constructions of the self challenges the colonial models of masculinity. While Gandhi's autobiography has largely been read as a liberal humanist project of self-realization and truth telling, Malhotra's essay complicates such a reading by analysing his body politics and how it reimagines and reshapes the contours of Indian identity and subjectivity. While the autobiography of great men had value since it served as an example of good conduct to others and posited an exemplary self, the working class life writing foregrounds a communitarian identity and collective memories. Federico Piercini's comparative study of working-class autobiography of Alberto Prunetti (Italy) and Fan Yusu (China) explores the issues concerning the identities of labour globally. Focusing on the narratives of Prunetti and Yusu as collective histories than just personal memories, the essay argues that while social realism and political commitment are central to both the autobiographies, the aesthetic strategies and formal techniques employed by the texts 'hybridize' the narratives as they incorporate both fictional and non-fictional elements. While one can trace comparisons with Dalit life writing which also foregrounds collective self, Schoof's analysis focuses on movement of labour and negotiation of working class identities in the context of globalisation.

Literary Selves / Fictional Lives

An interesting aspect of life writing is how it collapses the generic boundaries between fact and fiction by bending the genres to accommodate myriad ways of storytelling. The

fine line between fiction and fact becomes even more porous when we look at how creative writers use real life experiences to shape the content of their fiction just as literary techniques are used to write nonfiction. The connections between writing a life, writing fiction, and life writing are explored in the essays on creative writers. Addressing how personal experiences of creative writers flow into fiction and yet do not limit their poetic imagination, Fatima Rizvi and Chandana Dutta focus on the fictional writings of well-known Urdu writers, Qurratulain Hyder and Joginder Paul respectively and argue that their creative journey is inextricably linked to their life experiences and autobiographical elements are seamlessly woven into their fiction. Meditating on their lives through the landscape of fiction, the creative writers question the polarity between life and work, fiction and non-fiction, and representation and reality. Paul Deb's essay examines a similar concern with reference to acclaimed novelist Amit Chaudhuri, who has often been accused, that since his fiction contains people and events that are drawn from his own life, they are better thought of as memoirs, and not novels. Drawing on philosopher Stephen Mulhall's discussion of JM Coetzee, (in particular Elizabeth Costello), Deb's essay demonstrates how the commitment to the projects of literary modernism and realism which Mulhall sees in Coetzee's work helps to illuminate and understand Chaudhuri's fiction as simultaneously autobiographical and not autobiographical. Ruchi Sharma's paper on well-known Hindi writer Suryakant Tripathi Nirala draws attention to a text that occupies a liminal space between memoir/autobiography and biography. Nirala's biographical sketch of Chaturi, the shoemaker, and Kulli Bhat, a homosexual, both marginalized and underrepresented subjects in Hindi literature, provides an occasion to construct his own progressive politics and posit the author as a social reformer. Weaving their own lives into the narrative universe of their fiction and pushing fiction against its own fictionality, these writers unsettle the generic boundaries and reconfigure ways of narrating the self. Addressing the question of temporality in the works of Virginia Woolf and Jean Paul Sartre, Tais da Lacerda's essay examines how both writers saw life writing not as a product that showed a finished and ready self; rather they portrayed self as a process in the making, which revealed life as it was lived in the moment of creation. Fiction offers the possibility of presenting life in all its complexity and conveying to the reader those daily experiences that make us human.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the articles in the special issue draw attention towards the transformative possibilities of life writing as it engages with issues of representation, recuperation of identity, assertion of agency, reinscribing individual and collective memories and histories. Concomitantly, they also elaborate on the limits of life writing by focusing on the relationality of self, the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, the split between the one who writes and one who lives, and the irrecuperability of self. To understand life writing not as an exclusive literary genre but as a process of self-making and identity formation where one performs continuously through telling stories about oneself and others has been one of the key concerns of the essays in this collection. Moving beyond traditional territories and themes, this special issue adds to the existing scholarship and initiates a cross cultural and comparative perspective in life writing studies.

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