

Reflective Narrative: Auto ethnography and the Discourse of the Self

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Abstract: *While much has been talked and discussed about the validity, reliability and the perceptibility of the writings that convey the conditions and epiphanic moments of life, the fascination with the life narratives has been increasing day by day. As the postcolonial era has brought the minority literature a very critical juncture to explore, it becomes important to understand variant platforms that articulate the lives of the self and the other. Bringing in an interdisciplinary mode to discourses and genres are the formation of new literatures that make way for new analyses and new meanings or perspectives. Autoethnography, being both a method of research as well as a genre brings in manifold semantics and broadens the scope. This paper attempts to read into the myriad facets of the genre, its origins, characteristics and its rising popularity amongst the readers and a brief glance into the Indian turn of the same.*

Key Words: *Self and other, Life writing, Postcolonial, Ethnography, Autoethnography, Autobiography.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

When I write I am trying to express my way of being in the world. This is primarily a process of elimination: once you have removed all the dead language, the second-hand dogma, the truths that are not your own but other people's, the mottos, the slogans, the out-and-out lies of your nation, the myths of your historical moment - once you have removed all that warps experience into a shape you do not recognize and do not believe in - what you are left with is something approximating the truth of your own conception. (Smith 64)

Culture, society and identity are three inextricably linked fluid constructs that have been for years extrapolated in relevant discourses. Culture is an assemblage of meanings, whether continuous, discontinuous, junctive or overlapping, the production of which is attributed to a social group or that particular society. The Self is entrenched in these meanings and constantly trying to cope up with the flux it encounters - political, social, cultural, and economic: all repeatedly affecting the psychological.

Repressions of the self, oppressions of the dominant structure and suppressions of the minority are characteristic strains in the post-colonial writings. These writings most often metamorphose into a voice for the voiceless, an agency of disrupting the linearity of the narratives of the colonialists. Autoethnography, in the literary course of things, is one such narrative which emerged from the postmodern crisis of representation and gained currency in that that it measured out to the turmoil-hit self a compelling channel to verbalize their emotions.

2. ANALYZING THE GENRE

Tracing the beginnings of autoethnography presents to us its anthropological history. While the hyphenated usage of the term: "auto-ethnography" by anthropologist Karl Heider in 1975 charts the initiation of the later autoethnography, the signification of the term 'auto/self' then is not one of the ethnographer but rather the informant. The term then underwent a number of subsequent significations and the signifier itself took on various forms until critical scholarship in the last decade of the twentieth century persisted using 'autoethnography'. Today, the term has still got its set of meanings and explanations attributed to it both from the anthropological and a literary narration of history. Foremost of the definitions of the generic label in anthropology has been summed up by Deborah Reed-Danahay in the seminal work *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*

...a form of self narrative that places the self within a social context It is both a method and a text...done by either an anthropologist who is doing 'home' or 'native' ethnography or by a non-anthropologist /ethnographer .It can also be done by an autobiographer who places the story of his or her life within a story of the social context in which it occurs. (9)

Danahay 's analysis stations autoethnography at the periphery of three disciplines: narrative anthropology, in which the informant sets out to elaborate on the experiences of his group, the ethnic autobiography of minority ethnic communities and the autobiographical ethnography wherein the anthropologists write ethnographically of their lived experience. While in anthropology the relation between the interviewer and the informant self takes centre stage, it is the subjectivity and the process of writing that is highlighted in literary analysis of life narratives.

Critics Françoise Lionnet and Mary Louise Pratt have been the definitive voices that instrumented the emergence of the theoretical term in autobiography studies and literary theory, with series of engagements with the postcolonial in terms of culture, language, representation and the self. Pratt describes these as counter narratives that occur in a “contact zone-geographic, linguistic and cultural”(5). A contact zone is a hybrid zone where cultures interact and assimilate elements from each other. Cultural entities like language, cuisine, myth, principles, folklore have been adopted and adapted and shared. Pratt points out that autoethnographies mostly employ multiple languages both because it is a contact zone and the conglomeration will allow for a wider readership from the variant cultures.

Much of the life writings of the post colonial generation is autoethnographic predominantly those from Africa besides African American, Canadian and Australian writings. Zora Neal Hurston's *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942), Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*(1988), J.M.Coetzee's *Boyhood*(1997) are few of the exemplar autoethnographic pieces. The term which has risen out of the anti-colonial enterprise to voice the grievances of the colonised, has today expanded its scope to a genre of writing representing layers of consciousness but mostly furnishing the dual sense either of an ethnographic study of one's own group or of autobiographical reflections that encompasses ethnographic observations and assessments. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, geniuses in the field of autoethnographical criticism, in their article “Autoethnography. Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject” (2000) cites the most documented exposition:

It is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness... Back and forth autoethnographers gaze: First they look through an ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (78).

Memoirs, autobiographies and other popular forms of self representation are adjudged autoethnographical provided these personal narratives have its soul in cultural analysis.

Within the generic label of autoethnography there are a number of different sub genres which various theorists have conceived upon analysis of the patterns emerging in autoethnographical writing. Scholars chart out the presence of two main approaches of autoethnography in literature - ‘analytic’ and ‘evocative’. Evocative autoethnography engages the reader in the understanding of the narrative and analytic autoethnography not only calls for a personal understanding of the text but also makes visible how the researcher's memories combine with social science theories to construct interpretations of certain events. Van Manen in his *Tales of the Field* (2011) has distinguished three forms of autoethnographic studies- realist; impressionist and confessionalist. While Carolyn Ellis and Richardson have talked about both the impressionist and the realist story, the terms of reference varied. Ellis's attributes of a realist autoethnography is that which is theoretical with a systematic involvement with concepts generated by a single voice. The impressionist method presents a framework that creatively indulges a transpersonal narrative; removing the reflections of the writer and leaving it open to interpretations. Finally a confessional approach enables a creation of bond with the reader who witnesses the author as an active agency of empathy. A blanket term of ‘personal narratives’ subsumes narration of self embedded in a cultural context, offering the readers a story to take lessons from as a means of coping mechanism.

In terms of a structural framework or form ,autoethnographic writing include personal essays, poetry, short stories, journals, stream of consciousness, detailed unstructured interview narratives, visual presentations, conversation stories, polyvocal texts and other forms of fragmented writing (Boyle and Parry,2007).The most popular and the commonest of the various forms according to scholars, is the ‘layered account’ which incorporates within the experiences, both autobiographical and ethnographic representations. A ‘Co-created account’ is one wherein a writer builds his narrative around an epiphany or a decisive moment and successively responds to an author in reply. ‘Dialogue’ is yet another effective medium in which dialogues or conversations form the narrative. There has also been the form of vignette which describes an event in daily life as a means of augmentation of intensity of the arguments. Coffey and Atkinson in their work of 1996 mention another form - ‘extreme case’ zeroing in on the contrasts and paradoxes, than definitive paradigms.

Autoethnography exhibits an amalgamation of features that comes down from autobiography and ethnography. The elementary term of difference is that the former ensures the reader a window to the life of the writer's self while the latter enlightens us on the culture of a community. Another intrinsic variance would have to be the reference to the self-the ethnographer need not belong to the narrative but the writer of an autobiography is the narrative. On close analysis more divergences crop up.

In the case of autobiography, the writer pens down selective reminiscences of the past without pre-planned intention of publishing the narrative. The decisive moments in his life that changed its very course and forced him to document his life, finds an outlet. He seeks the assistance for recall in photographs, diaries, journals, audio-visual recordings and other reliable documents. Ethnography encompasses an intense study of culture, an attempt to reveal the shared experiences, belief systems, the framework of values-ethical, social, religious, economic and political .The ethnographer undertakes an assignment to introduce or familiarize the practices of a culture to the outsiders or even to

its community members. His exertion calls for his constant engrossment as a participant member in the culture, collecting materials by means of interviews, analyzing the use of place and space, the language and its many variations, and examining the various cultural artifacts including clothes, architecture and texts.

Autoethnography as a synthesis of these two stands to draw from both anthropology and literature, from ethnography and autobiography and from research and writing. The autoethnographer embarks upon a journey to reflectively narrate the epiphanies that he has encountered, the crucial events which have transformed his life, all the while positioning himself with an identity that triggers these occurrences. He wears the garb of the guide who effectively leads one through the journey. However this act does not suffice. His reflections should be pooled with a patient dissection of those cultural installments.

Autobiographers tend to work towards an evocative narrative, one which reveals the vulnerable side of the self. This technique of “showing” as described by Carolyn Ellis attempts to hold the reader to the narrative roller coaster. Strategies to engage the consumer on the other side and to attain his sympathy or even empathy have taken myriad courses. As the reader consumes the text, a change in the narrative voices may attribute it as a agency of sensuous engagement. The strategy of “telling” as a mode of conveyance of meaning with respect to factual information also assists the expedition into oneself. The ethnographers on the other hand aim for a methodical description of culture laying emphasis on the avenues and commodities of culture. While both these disciplines can effectively be categorized under the umbrella term of “life writing”, the distinctions converge in the melting pot of the label of autoethnography. It simulates a framework of conjunction between the two wherein the autoethnographer strikes the chord with the reader by not only indulging in a revelation of the torturous turbulences that the self has had to deal with, but also levels as a first hand narrative agency elaborating the cultural practices and the identities which take shape or evolve to perform as entities of culture. The self’s ethnic identity takes the limelight and a deliberate effort is visible on behalf of the writer to foreground his experiences as part of the community than as an individual. He/She therefore proceeds with the process of autoethnography constructing a narrative that makes personal experience meaningful and cultural experience engaging.

Each text, an autoethnography, according to theorists varies depending upon the varying degrees of the elements of auto (self), ethno (culture) and graphy (writing). Critics like Francois Lionnet acknowledge that it is the autoethnographer who opens a “space of resistance” between the three axes of the individual(auto-), the collective(ethno-) and the writing(-graphy) (391). The relevance attributed to each of the segments relies on the objective of the narrator, but an effective autoethnography pursues a balance within which it is ethnographical in its methodical orientation, cultural in interpretative orientation and autobiographical in content orientation.

Enabling the ethnographic rendering of the text is the in depth analytical process of collecting data which improves the writer’s theoretical understanding of the community. Despite being a visible member in the group, he/she is committed to a studied accurate understanding of the space where the narrative unfolds. He/she takes the role of a researcher initiating a field study based on interviews, document analysis and further verifying and interpreting this to envisage the connotations within the cultural framework. The experiences of the self should also be taken into diagnostic consideration (rather than leaving it at its evocative facet) in terms of how and why it exposes the terms of identification and representation. That the writer observes his own behavioral patterns as well as those around him/her is mandatory. When he documents his thoughts as an observing participant, that can be referred to as “introspective self observation” and a recording of the reflections conceived in accordance with interactions with others, as “interactive introspection”(Chang 2008).

Writing auto ethnography is cumbersome task involving a steady affinity towards producing a text sans inaccurate rendering of details. According to Susanne Gannon in her article “The (im) possibilities of Writing the Self-writing: French Poststructural theory and Autoethnography”, series of textual strategies are put into use in order to elicit fragmented subjectivities and provoke discontinuity, displacement and estrangement. From using direct speech to simplicity in narration, the texts are often laden with agencies or signifiers that work towards an ease of comprehension. A number of stylistic techniques have been developed by the autoethnographers for this method and the text to be effective. These include a usage of the figurative language at times to elucidate the turmoil, presence of narrative voices other than the author as evidences of the narrative truth, use of foreshadowing techniques to bring to the mental framework of the reader the factors and emotions that the writer intends to primarily get across, narrating a number of experiences other than his to corroborate the paradigms of culture, different fonts to distinguish the distinctive voices and plot lines and often photographs are intrinsic part of the narrative that lends a graphic authentication to the experiences claimed. The autoethnographer’s style makes his memory, experience and language come alive.

However the genre has been subject to a set of questions on ethics in terms of a self as the authority in the analysis. Though self reflexivity is a prime constituent of autoethnography, scholars have questioned the recognition of the self as a data collection technique, particularly in a genre where the individual cites the experiences or encounters as a means of reinforcing the injustices of a system that they are part of. It has been attacked as narcissistic and critics like Shields and Coffey voice their concerns over the chances of the self completely being wrapped up in

himself/herself. Responses against these allegations have been laid down by the likes of Sandra Ragan, Philaretou and Allen who retaliate by stating the reasons of it as a new means of provocative thinking. Ragan has been particularly vocal in her defence: "Writers using an autoethnographic, narrative approach has given us some of the richest and most provocative reading ...in recent years"(230). Mitchell and Charmaz (1996) clarify that by writing themselves into the text, they have challenged the existing notions of silent authorship which satisfies the critical discourse by remaining in the fringes of the narrative.

The ethics of representation, relational ethics, reliability, validity, sincerity and resonance are also put into question. An autoethnographer not only is at stake in representing himself but also others who deliberately or otherwise, willingly or not find themselves woven into the narrative. There are chances of implication of others during the course of the life narrative. Also the strong interpersonal bond with subjects of the community complicates the study. The writer may be forced to keep sealed the recognition of the subjects mentioned for the sake of protection. The narrator's credibility, the truth element, creation of identification in the reader allows for a rich insightful narration.

All forms of life writing are faithfully dependent on the memory of the voices within the text. Exercises in recollection, these genres, particularly autoethnography deem memory as the strands of raw materials that evolve into the intense evocative images upon the working of the author. Selective memories find themselves the part of the structure and mostly epiphanies direct the flow of the text. However considered an unreliable agency by many because of the possibilities of the images obscuring over time, memory faces opposition from among critics. There are no means of analyzing this source using a touchstone for it is the personal experiences that pave way for interpretations. Nevertheless recollecting memories is often considered therapeutic for it imparts a cathartic effect on the writer as well as the reader. The narrative alternates between past and present simulating the non-linearity of the framework of memory. Cultural memory, the term coined by Jan Assman asserts the proposition that people do not remember alone but their narratives are stories of a place and time. The tangible and intangible modes of cultural memory, from rituals, artefacts, monuments, institutions and documents, enable new ways of investigating the individual and communal past.

Autoethnography can be employed as a beneficial and compelling political mechanism that fosters social change. The paradigms of culture and socio-political hierarchy are challenged when the ethnically relegated self takes to writing his story and rewriting history. Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner in their book firmly state: "Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning"(433). It deliberates upon issues of identity, representation, ideologies, typifying, marginalising, violation of human rights, dislocation, trauma, discrimination, among all the other seriously haunting anxieties man as a socio politico-ethnic being.

3. CONCLUSION: THE INDIAN TURN:

In a multiethnic fabric such as India, the ethnic minorities survive as part of history and that of the framework of the nation not only by means of geography but tireless attempts to overcome the threats of the majority communities in cleansing the minorities, depriving them of anything and everything that they hold close and lose themselves in the process. These writings which leveled a fight against the onslaught of the dominant are autoethnographic productions. Novels of Rohinton Mistry, Esther David, Farukh Dhondy, Ruskin Bond to name a few, are active means of asserting their ethnic identity. Autoethnographic writing, in fiction or non-fiction, have fascinated the reader as well, for it designates a pathway of resistance. Shyama Futehally's *Reaching Bombay Central*, Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*, Esther David's *The Walled City*, Suniti Namjoshi's *Goja* are texts which have persevered the dark depths of oppressive structural forces pertaining to the mainstream.

In the present scenario, when India is still succumbing to such aggressive perversity in depriving men, women, children of their constitutionally granted human rights, there has been an increasing set of writings on the ethnicity and the need for representation, voicing what they are in need of. Particularly the form has provided the writers a narrative medium that embodies transpersonal relevance, sensitive delineation of cultures, and demands an accurate description of their culture to revoke the tendencies that existed in their representation or the lack thereof. The inherent interest of humans in reading true stories of injustices and trauma sets the genre in popularity charts.

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