



Stimulating the Readers through Self-portraits in Biographies, Auto-biographies and Memoirs: Study of Hooks and Dillard's Narratives

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Abstract

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Biography and Auto-biography make an exposition of closely resembled memories, experiences, identities, embodiment, and agency-based ideas, views, and feelings of an individual. The idealistic explorations of life and lively experiences through narratives stimulate the shrinking nature of an individual with the self-help or the other narratives portrayed in Bell Hooks's "Talking Back" and "Straightening Our Hair." Annie Dillard in "The Fixed" narrates human-insects relationship subjects composing the self and stimulating the author's/narrator's views to reflect on their past memories to concretize views, ideas and feelings in the practical ground of the real world. Events/incidents exposed in Hooks and Dillard's narratives based on life, either own or others are examined in this article. Life writers collect information from agencies and self-help writings/materials that also might be in the shadow of identity marker and so it is questioned on the authenticity of life narratives and an autobiographical truth that is to be tested through theoretical applications. Identifying the narrative modes of self-inquiry in different forms of 'I' as autobiographical and biographical testimonies in the memoirs is the research objective of this article that helps to find out the gaps and reduce the confusion of readers. Thus, this article tries to study the causes and consequences of stimulating the readers through self-portrait inquisitions in biographies, auto-biographies, and memoirs to which Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's ideas are applicable.

Keywords

inquisition, stimulation, scripture, identity, self-Portraits

Background of the Study

Life narratives work as an agency to stimulate an inquisition in the readers to know about an individual's life. Narratives scripture the collected memories and experiences of an individual in the paper that includes "biography, autobiography, ethnography, auto-ethnography and day to day activities" (Smith 16). Life writing in its first phase started writing about British colonizers, European white males, gods, goddesses, religious places, people, and their power in the society mixing myth and mystery and in its second phase included the narratives of Christ, scientists, ambassadors, researchers, pirates, and captains as additional subjects in the narratives. Up to the mid-nineteenth century, life narrators focused on the writing of the rulers than the ruled about Westernized subjects advocating the activities of colonizers. Early, British writers dominated non-Europeans, especially Asian as others and their issues were questionable for the truth, and up to the second wave, they excluded women and blacks on the basis of geography, gender, and color. In the third phase, life writing turned to be more inclusive including the memory, history, and experience of indigenous, aboriginal, illiterate women and colored people as the stories of Annie Dillard and Bell Hooks in African-American literature/narratives.

Narratives of the Blacks

Individual identity-based rhetoric of Bell Hooks' "Straightening our Hair" and "Talking Back" make a reflection on the condition of colored people in White communities. Hooks also talks about the practices of African-American women who suffered from racial biasness. Financial difficulties of the colored people in the management of food, shelter, and extra expenditure are questionable to the intellectual social workers and the researchers as they fail to pursue the people with the awareness classes. Dreams and desires of the African-American people are in difficult modes to be fulfilled and they are seeking alternative ways as she writes :

On Saturday morning we would gather in the kitchen to get our hair fixed, that is straightened. Smells of burning grease and hair, mingled with the scent of our freshly washed bodies, with collard greens cooking on the stove, with fried fish. We did not

go to the hair dresser. Mama fixed our hair. Six daughters- there was no way we could have afforded hair-dressers. In those days, this process of straightening black women's hair with a hot comb (invented by Madame C. J. Walker) was not connected in my mind with the effort to look white, to live our standards of beauty set by white supremacy. ("Straightening our Hair" 1)

Hooks' 'Straightening our Hair' is about their struggle against the financial difficulties, and difficult journey of life practices of Black community people, and their dreams. And desires to maintain the standards as the White people practice. In Hooks' grown-up time, straight hair was taken as a symbol of beauty in African-American culture. They don't have a way out to get a job without their beautiful looks. Celebrating body politics, colored girls were devalued, burdened, and wounded like fish fry.

In "Talking Back" Hooks raises the issues of black women's oppression from the slavery practice periods. She challenges the penetrating and controversial views naming sexism, racism, and class conflict through her insightful and provocative speeches captured in her writing. She writes :

In the world of the southern black community, I grew up in, "back talk" and "talking back" meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion. In the "old school," children were meant to be seen and not heard. My great-grandparents, grandparents, and parents were all from the old school. To make yourself heard if you were a child, was to invite punishment, the back hand lick the slap across the face that would catch you unaware, or the feel of switches stinging your arms and legs. ("Talking Back" 1)

The Social assumption is that 'black' means back and so their history ideas, views, feelings, arts, and cultures are back warded and dominant representations of their day-to-day activities. Whites argue it is worthless to talk back in reflection of their performances from their grandparents' time up to now. Disagreements against white supremacy and resistance of the colored were criticized as lack of schooling, barbarism, and uncultured practices that the blacks run.

On the other hand, Annie Dillard's "The Fixed" exposes the issues of human-insect relationships. "The Fixed" narrates the stories of living in the hybrid zone where people observe and enjoy the animal-insect fighting, eating flesh, and drinking blood

that lessons Dillard to observe the human activities associated with their selfish nature and criminal practices occurring in the society. Symbolic fight and killing of mantis and mating represent the family war. The character's self-reflected identity is seen as a result of their struggle to break the barriers and cross the border in order to establish their identity.

Dillard juxtaposes the beauty of seeing the praying mantises hatch into the major jar with the horror of watching the polyphemus moth emerged from its cocoon. She observes the male-female mantis and mating struggles for existence. Moth and cocoon activities in the processes of existence and survival are narrated in this way :

Within the week I've seen thirty or so of these egg cases in a rose-grown field on Tinker Mountain, and another thirty in weeds along Carvin's Creek. One was on a twig of tiny dogwood on the mud lawn of a newly built house. I think the mail-order houses sell them to gardeners at a dollar apiece. It beats spraying because each case contains between one hundred twenty-five to three hundred fifty eggs. If the eggs survive ants, woodpeckers, and mice-and most do- then you get the fun of seeing the new mantises hatch, and the smug feeling of knowing, all summer long, that they're out there in your garden devouring gruesome numbers of fellow insects all nice and organically. When a mantis has crunched up the last shred of its victim, it cleans its smooth green face like a cat. ("The Fixed" 2)

Human interferences in the natural processes of insects, ecological and environmental things turned out to be disastrous. Beginning and/or birth-hatching process from eggs crack and dangers of ants, woodpeckers, and mice are shown as different layers of risk factors. She combines the risk factors of insects' life with the challenges of human, animal, and insect power exercises as one is happy about murdering others or getting certain benefits to fulfill certain dreams and desires. Dillard discusses the natural beauty by examining the world around her but here she talks about mystical truth juxtaposed with cruelty.

In "The Fixed" Dillard plays with dichotomies of life and death, beauty and ugliness, goodness and cruelty of life. Finally, she collects mantis and hangs them to save them from the neighbors' tractor. Dillard's narrative pattern is close to the Aristotelian principle on rhetoric that focuses on logical reasoning, ethical sense, and emotional

activities 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 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. 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)

Narratives in Hooks and Dillard's writing cover rhetorical forms of an inclusive subject with *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* in the expression of memory and history. Rhetoricians observe the narratives in journals, diaries, letters, essays, stories, memoirs, etc., and they try to apply the historical connection with the life writing that is applied in Hooks and Dillard's narratives.

Life writers experience themselves and/or they collect the experiences from social, socio-cultural, religious, political and communal activities of others and scripture the memory. Some of the communal practices are inspirational to the life writers to expose the social realities. Communal crimes and social violence bring bad impacts not only in an individual's life but also in animals and insects, too that can be indifferent writeable subjects to save the ecological environment and so Dillard and Hooks write for social awareness. While narrating the life stories based on different events they choose the subjects about people, animals, and insects who have faced the problems in different sectors. Personal memories that one experiences in his/her life are the primary archival sources for their writing.

Methods and Materials

Early life narratives about the life and works of Jesus, Duchesses, Dukes and lords are praiseworthy. Confessional narratives of pirates and ship loots are identity reflection markers. In the middle, writers prioritized writing about people who are good at art, culture and philosophy and in the present an individual's identities, feelings, experiences and memories. Biographers interlink the visible forms of ideas, views and feelings through

agencies. Confessional writings of Thomas DeQuincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, St. Augustine's *The Confession*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Confession* etc. develop the trends of writing confessional narratives. Francis Petrarch and Dante Alighieri in Italy started writing about people and places in the 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 narrative 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 a 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" (Frank 3). Her diaries preserved by her father provide a vivid portrait of her years and her family spent hiding in an Amsterdam warehouse. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou (1969) describes 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 into 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 reminiscences dictated for a glimpse into 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 oral narratives and experience about people in the cultural centers through travelling that become 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.

Self-experience of the people might be exciting or painful while collecting the experiences with reflected memory investigating as writes Thesiger, “I was sailing on this show because I wanted to have some experience of the Arab as a sailor” (“The Trucial Coast” 277). An individual (he/she) really experiences collecting the events and things that he/she explains or cannot explain in front of the community because of their identity and social criticism. Self-help narratives expose reality through the narrator’s questions on its authenticity of the evidence. In some cases, the victimizer of the society may hide the traumatic history and collective memory that he/she collects but does not expose from his/ her own mouth in front of the audience 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 “. . . a self-interrogatory understanding of the Delphic oracle’s injunction” (*Reading Autobiography*, 84). Erotic stories and confession narratives in Christian society bring religious ups and down of humanitarian subjects.

Narrators in the present time incorporate multiple reflections of life accessing multiple stories with personal dreams, family albums, photos, frames, objects, and family stories. Individual stories of the people access in some cases explored through society/agency or collective experiences and reflection of the societies. Some Aboriginal and indigenous people have complex stories in their memory and life experiences and they are represented differently in the self and other 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. (*Reading Autobiography*, 12)

Self-life writing or writing about others in this sense is a referential document that represents the different memories, experiences, and expectations of life. Personal memory might lose its originality of the due past in the changing situation of the

present if the condition and situations are changed and so life narratives are refreshing documents. Personal and communal understandings of the people help to verify the observing process as a subject of life writing.

Experiences and memory-making are authenticators of life narratives as they help to refresh past events and incidents. Life is not the same forever as it has a number of ups and down and the memory chips in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* place in the memory bank with an experience in which the people, place and culture are stored and they help individual readers to go back in the places with researchers to study and write about. Contextual memory might be politicized if the speaker is guided by an agency of an external force or the agencies are misguiding the speaker/narrator. The writer politicizes an authorized remembering who can use the biased authenticator in some cases so why it is the readers' responsibility to judge an individual narrative to provide validity to them.

World War memories of the victims, Indo-Pak war results, mass-massacre and the present condition of the people in war oppose of Ukraine against the attack of Russia may be a bitter experience to the family members and relatives. The collective remembering of pain and suffering through social sites and historical documents may bring the events close to the life narratives. However, "the memory of family tragedies brings fragments within the community and that may force towards the revenge and crimes of religious fatalisms and socio-cultural conflicts" (Everman 25). Holocaust experiences, war, family sufferings and the collected stories of sexual abuse in autobiographical narratives expose some complex plots. Discursive language reflects and circulates knowledge of individual and institutional guidance through agencies. Michel Foucault is aware about the way of discursive experiences with memories in life writing subjectivity and he 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. (Qtd.in Smith and Watson, 26)

Discursive experiences of the autobiographer in narrative transformation could affect an individual writer/narrator's mind through telling able stories of a particular time of life. The Writer's own experience is kept as a 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 perspectives.

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

There are models of identity culturally available to life narrators at particular historical moments 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. (Qtd. in Smith and Watson 34)

Life writers collect memories and experiences through agencies and reproduce narratives in distinct models. Their writings represent auto/biographical identities reflecting the varied modes of life. Childhood narratives are connected to old age experiences and memoirs of the writers/narrators are differently exposed in varied racial, cultural, geographical, and "cultural communities" (Appadurai 23).

Life narratives in the modern time are different than bourgeois subjects of the past as they try to capture the virtuous sentiments of complex connectivity in adventurous issues and epistemological self-searching. Fables and parables of the past bring ancient self-

portrays in representing the historical memoirs of the people in the subject of confidence and doubt waving the narrative strategies as Jean-Jacques Rousseau employs:

. . . 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. (Qtd. in *Reading Autobiography*, 96)

Confessional narratives bring the events of selfishness and self-egotism discourses to construct an ideal world that reflects society and mirrors the inner reality of an imaginary world. “Childhood memories of the narrator, youthful experiences of the sufferers and matured quests of them expose the life cycle raising questions on controversial modes of life” (Caruth 17). Illusive inscriptions of the marginal subjects in pre-modernity bring narrative quest in to the mainstream of allegorical form. Personal legacy and intellectual insights with enmity and ego might twist the autobiographical truth of narratives. Epistemological narratives of passionate observations seek the persuasive process in myth-making. The Growth of imaginary expectations and experiences of the society mirrors the socio-political, philosophical, erotic and self-surrendering views and issues of the society. 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 the 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. (Qtd. in *Reading Autobiography*, 101)

Agencies speaking from America and European nations have dual voices about women, children, working-class people and slave narratives as they deal differently with person's formative attachment to spiritual education. Social formations unfold the apprenticeship influencing the developmental mode of modern and postmodern encounters in social institutions. Self-conscious and community-exposed identities in American life narratives drive the nostalgic and migratory mobility intermingle the recent discourses of American subjectivity. The American trend of narratives is popular in Europe and Asia in the modern and postmodern times in the theme of generic inventions.

Dinesen wrote this letter living in Africa to her parents in Denmark where she writes about a painful moment, she experienced referencing a painful accident that occurred with her workers' child there who caught the handgun and fired. One of the children died in her arms and she wonders about their future within the terrific culture. She questions about the national authority and security :

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 exposes historical events from a humanistic perspective. She describes hunting, accidents, and death as an enemy of humanity. The event took place in Africa but it reflects today's American society. The stories are about the 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 to the physical actions and she demonstrates the event through writing to her friends who are concerned.

Conclusion:

To sum up, life writing practice and patterns changed with the passing of time. Writers address the readers/audiences reminding the autobiographical truth by their narratives. The person or persons who evoke the stories are the coaxers narrating the events with coaches. Readers as consumers have to read, understand and interpret the stories from different perspectives. The writers collect the numbers of experiences based on self-

experiences and the ideas of others as the stories of second-hand experiences or the primary memory that they can memorize from what they have experienced or seen. Victims of community crimes and social humiliation have difficulty accessing the truth in the stories in normal situations. They don't like to expose family crimes, socio-cultural wars and community-controlled subjects because of the identity problem. In Hooks and Dillard's narrative coercers compel the coaxers to evoke the stories but the question is on objective truth and authenticity. In the cases of oral narrators and historical truths who mix fact and fiction can't tell the stories in the exact form then the writer/narrator connects to the plots. In the translated versions of the self-help narratives, there might be some invisible gaps while provoking the stories and writing the texts that we can find in Hooks and Dillard's narratives.

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