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FAST FORWARD:
AUTOBIOGRAPHY, AUTOFICTION AND LIFE WRITING

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***Abstract:** This paper provides a forum to the readers with a view to foreground the future of autobiography, autofiction and life writing. Further, it attempts to identify current trends in life writing and investigates the ongoing changes in life writing study and how it may impact the interdisciplinary fields of academia and research. In my contribution, I will comment on the broader concept of autobiography and autofiction in two sections, the first section deals with how autobiography studies has been neglected by literary critics for such a long time in which, I will try to revisit the critical currency autobiography generated (or not) in 1980s; in the next, general and specific observations about possible directions of research in life writing from an autofictional perspective with special reference to diary and autofiction.*

***Keywords:** Life writing, autobiography, autofiction, autofictional, future*

Making predictions, especially about the future, is a tough task. When you try to predict the future of a genre, it is even tougher. What will autobiography look like in 2030? To predict the future, one must understand the present. To get a sense of perspective about the present and the future of autobiography studies, I wrote to a number of leading scholars of autobiography asking them for their opinion. The electronic survey tried to bring together a group of leading scholars to reflect on the new ways in autobiography studies. The participants of the survey tried to address how the genre of autobiography studies may be shaped by the future. Most of them agreed that the field of autobiography studies has undergone enormous changes over the past few decades. In their words, the genre attracts a lot of attention as it bridges the public domain as well as the private one. (Kar)

It's a very complicated matter to be objective and dispassionate when you are writing about something which you feel so strongly about. Still, I will try my best to land somewhere in between. We are living in a time where multiple identities is a matter of reality. Though, fundamentally, identity is a personal construct; sometimes place, gender, sexuality and other factors which inform our sense of the self, create many identities. The politics and the polemics of the identity formation is evolving each day. The relationship between the self and self-representation is pushing the limits of identity. The debate between the self and the text has resurfaced. Our approach to the autobiography studies is not only changing with the social structure and communication mediums but also because of what we think about our own identity. Some speculate that there is a new breakdown of autobiographical identity. While autobiography is booming; digital life writing is giving the genre a new spin. Autobiography has withstood the assault of online medium. It has captured the imagination of the readers despite the internet. Hybridization and fragmentation are

the new order. I cannot predict the exact future of the genre which has navigated through its design and truth, its conditions and limits, its anatomy, its metaphors of self, its defacement and its lies, in last three decades but I should rest my case with you. (Smith xviii)

Every year at the book fair we find a hundred new autobiographies in the stalls. And yet the fact remains that autobiography as a literary form has not received the critical currency it deserves. Writing in 1985, Brian Finney lamented that not a single university in the UK included autobiographies in its literature courses. Fast forward to 2016; there are more than two dozen research centres throughout the world and quite a number of research journals dedicated to the genre (A/B Studies, Biography, Life Writing and Auto/Fiction). He tells us that America has created a space for the study of autobiographical writing. But one must recognize the fact that it will be quite a while before the research on autobiography strikes very deep roots in the academia. Though Europe is fast catching up, Asia is lagging behind. I recently went through five or six histories of English literature and they devote only a couple of pages to the discussion on autobiography as a genre. What explains our reluctance to accord a prolific branch of literature the status it should rightfully enjoy?

The suspicion which surrounds autobiography as a literary form may lie in other sources too. It is said that autobiography is the unwanted child of history and literature and both the parents neglect it, if not completely disown it. Historians are wary of taking autobiography seriously because they think facts dispensed by an autobiographical text are distorted by the bias of the individual author. Literary critics, for their part, find autobiographies deficient as works of imagination because their constant truth claim. The result is ambivalence towards this genre which complicates critical response to it.

I crave your indulgence to digress a little and bring in an anecdote to bring home to you the prejudice autobiography still arouses in literary circles. A few years ago, a prestigious Indian literary Award was conferred on an author, for her 600-page autobiography titled *Amruta Anubhav*. At this award ceremony an eminent writer felicitating her apologetically informed the audience that autobiographies are works of literature. The same book was later shortlisted for another literary award in India and a member of the jury aggressively dismissed it because he was convinced autobiographies are tissues of lies. I recount these telling anecdotes because I think they illuminate the culture of suspicion in which autobiographies must be studied. (Nayak Keynote)

May be, I have painted a rather bleak picture. Perhaps things are getting better and more sophisticated tools of researching autobiography are being fashioned through special issues like this. Autobiography can open new routes of access to history, suggest new ways of making sense of it. Now that historians have started interrogating their sources vigorously and facts do not appear unproblematic anymore, the profession of history has lost its old certainties. Researchers on autobiography can surely take advantage of the situation and strike out in new directions. When navigating the recent developments in autobiography studies, concepts like biopics, graphic narratives, digital life-writings, intersubjectivity, relationality, post memory, secondary witnessing and human geography comes to our mind. Scholarly debates on life-writing are stimulating a set of new debates. These days, people are connecting

medical research to autobiography studies as well; in the ever-changing landscape of autobiography studies new possibilities are looming large.

Honestly speaking, autofiction was supposed to be the subject of this essay, but I was carried away.

France is no longer the only ground for intensive practice of and interest in autofiction. The term has been in the academia in America, Britain, Spain, Brazil, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Serbia and India. Multiple conferences are being organized in different parts of the world. New scholarly journals and research centres are being set up. Recently, there was even a conference in India (2014) on autofiction. While autofiction has been fighting for legitimacy in the literary hierarchy, some critics believe there it's not yet the time to be committed to a critical investment in autofiction. Others are of the view that the question of genre or canon cannot and should not deprive an interesting new form of life-writing its share of glory it deserves. There will always be detractors of any form of literature but literature by nature is made to win hearts and mind of the new generation. (Gasparini)

Serge Doubrovsky once suggested that autofiction will disappear some day since no literary genre is everlasting. I think that, first, it will conquer the world and contest the supremacy of the pure fictional novel. But, later, the readers will be more and more rigorous about truth. They will want to know what happened exactly and how the author can assure it. Then, they will avoid combinations of reality and imagination. So, autofiction will be less attractive. A new kind of autobiographical (and biographical) literature will grow. The writers will be very cautious with narration, being always afraid of slipping into fiction. And they will wonder all the time why they remember this fact and if it is correct to recount it in that way. Falsification and designed lie is one of the biggest blemishes of the future autofictions. In France, many writers have opened this field, like Annie Ernaux, Emmanuel Carrère, Edouard Louis, Christine Angot, Colette, Catherine Cusset, Chloé Delaume, Marguerite Duras, Guillaume Dustan, Philippe Forest, Hervé Guibert, Camille Laurens, Paul Nizon, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philippe Vilain, Philippe Gasparini, Isabelle Grell and Arnaud Genon. In India, autofiction has been promoted by the works of Hainsia Olindi and Charu Nivedita.

Primarily these authors are associated with autofiction through their works. They are self-proclaimed auto-fictionists. In no particular order they are famous for their respective works in autofiction: Christine Angot for *Vu du ciel* (1990), *Léonore, toujours* (1994), *L'Usage de la vie* (1998); Nelly Arcan for *Putain* (2001) and *et Folle* (2004); Michel Butor, for *Portrait de l'artiste en jeune singe* (1967); Ulysse Caen for *Ma vie chez Maud* (2014); Sylvain Courtoux for *Still nox* (2011); Chloé Delaume for *Le Cri du sablier* (2001), *La Vanité des somnambules* (2002), *Dans ma maison sous terre* (2009) and *Une femme avec personne dedans* (2012); Serge Doubrovsky for *Fils* (1977), *Le Livre brisé* (1989), and *Un homme de passage* (2011); Marguerite Duras for *L'Amant* (1984), *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* (1991), and *Yann Andréa Steiner* (1992); Guillaume Dustan for her autofictional trilogy: *Dans ma chambre, Jesorscesoir, Plus fort que moi* (1996-1997-1998) and *Nicolas Pages* (1999); Léo Ferré for *Benoît Misère* (1970); Jacques Gojendans for *Le Maître de Céans* (2004); Hervé Guibert for *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas*

sauvé la vie, Le Protocole compassionnel, L'Homme au chapeau rouge (1990-1991/1992); Marie-Sissi Labrèche for *Borderline, La Brèche et La Lune dans un HLM* (2000, 2002 and 2006 respectively); Camille Laurens for *Dansces bras-là* (2000), *Romance nerveuse* (2009); Violette Leduc for *Thérèse et Isabelle* (1966); Pierre Mérot for *Mammifères* (2003); Emmanuelle Pagano for *L'Absence d'oiseaux d'eau* (2010); Alain Robbe-Grillet for *Romanesques* (1985-1994); Albertine Sarrazin for *La Cavale* (1965), *L'Astragale* (1965) and *La Traversière* (1966); and Tristan-Edern Vaquette for *Jegagnetoujours à la fin* (2003). Indian writer Charu Nivedita is associated with autofiction for his novel *Zero degree* and *Exile*; Rahman Abbas's *Nakhalistan Ki Talash* and *Khuda Ke Saaye Mein Ankh Micholi* are Indian connection to autofiction. Japanese author Hitomi Kanehara's novel *Autofiction* is also considered as a great work of autofiction by many critics.

I wonder if there is something like “autofiction studies”. In France, books, articles and conferences have been devoted to this literary category. But it remains ill-defined and ill-considered by most of the professors, book reviewers, and authors as well. It will take time before the concept really gets a legitimacy in the history of literature. The word is now used in Arabic world and Scandinavian countries. But English-speaking countries, which lead the research, display no interest in such a concept. Well, I'd like to know if they will evolve on this point. (Gasparini)

Leading researchers of this genre predict that soon there will be a new-found acceptance of the concept by different linguistic and literary environments throughout the world. Soon, there will be integration of more art forms with autofiction to give it a much-needed impetus. I'm always glad to hear of someone beating the drum for autofiction.

(Ferreira-Meyers)

Ricia Chansky and Emily Hipchen have suggested the future is full of possibilities:

.....any future at all is multitudinous, multifaceted, and boundless. Our future is a discursive space in which we will interweave multiple visions, versions, disciplines, languages, rhetorics, genres, and theoretical lenses to study narrated lives. (Hipchen&Chansky 154)

Craig Howes believes that the future of life writing discussions will once more centre around biography:

One trend is what some are calling “The Biographical Turn,” but which I see as a “Return” to a strong critical engagement with those traditional qualities of biography that have largely been elided or ignored by recent lifewriting scholars. Many Western European and North American critics and biographers are sharing an interest in the genre's historical, defining, and commercial aspects. Biography is properly studied as traditional history—the life narrative of a notable individual, usually drawn from the realms of politics and art, taking the form of a substantial, laboriously researched volume that nevertheless prides itself on its narrative dexterity and, ideally, its appeal to

non-specialist audiences. The appearance of the Biographers International Organization and of life-writing centers devoted to organizing lectures and conferences featuring such biographers is strong evidence for the ongoing energy of such a focus. Scholarship of this kind, which could profitably emulate Julie Rak's more politically probing approach in *Boom! Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market*, will therefore be a continuing trend. (Howes 195)

He is also cautiously optimistic about the future of the research since everything depends on funding from the universities:

Life sciences, online life writing, archive assembly, publication series, oral history projects—all have attracted significant external funding and institutional support. Of course, such entities often survive only as long as their funding lasts. (196)

By his own admission he predicts two prominent changes in the way the study of life writing will be done in future. One, there will be much more regional specific research in terms of life writing and two; non-fiction, biofiction or biopics will gain popularity. As we can see there is already a significant rise in biopic production in south-east Asia, to be more specific in India. (196)

Kylie Cardell in *The Future of Autobiography Studies: The Diary*, argues about the possibility of a digital diary and its possible advantages and what would be the possible future direction in the research of diary writing:

Thinking about the diary as an autobiographical genre of the future must partly be a process of positioning form in relation to technology. Evolving digital forms create innovative ways for producing, accessing, and understanding self-representative acts, and these have discursive implications too. On social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, on websites and blogs, serial, fragmented, present-tense narration is a recurring feature, and diary forms have proved particularly flexible and resilient in these contexts. (348)

As suggested by her research, it is evident that these modern-day avenues like Facebook, Twitter can help us produce a different kind of life narrative which is easy to create and easy to access. Though it can be called as fragmented diary but still it's a new form of diary which is not only interesting but entertaining as well. An amalgamation of technology and life narrative can pave way for a new era of research in diary writing, adds Cardell. Commenting about how the diary writing has evolved in last few years she writes:

Although the forms, conditions, and technology for diary keeping have changed, a motivation for recording, documenting, and accounting for the experience of the self over time has endured. This drive is being remediated amid a new capacity for access to increasingly vast amounts of and diversity in data and metadata, on new platforms and technologies for serial, temporal, first-person narration, and against a shifting attention to "citizen" experts, "authentic" voices, and "everyday" lives. (349)

I strongly believe that scholars working on diary in the modern times need to consider the new technologies that are contributing towards the affordability of diary writing and they also need to embrace the new changes in the field of technology as well as life narrative research.

G. Thomas Couser, another pioneer in the domain of life writing has written extensively about the future of life writing research. His focus is mainly on the new trends concerning illness narrative, disability narrative and graphic narrative. He predicts there will be less “life” in “LifeWriting” in future as these days we are more inclined to write or post in the new social media like – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Tumbler as opposed to write in traditional print media. Couser cautions us about the pitfalls of the online medium while praising the accessibility and ease of the same:

Of course, the same media that enable us to write and circulate our lives allow others to surveil and document them, as well. Electronic media greatly enhance the ability of others to locate us, pry into our lives, out us, or record our personal details—without our knowledge, much less permission, and contrary to our wishes and interests. Businesses track our web surfing; the government collects metadata of our communication with each other. More and more of our lives are exposed to others’ scrutiny. And outright misrepresentation in the form of impersonation—“identity theft”—is one of the new dangers of digital life. We are all caught in the web, willy-nilly, and we are all, as a result, vulnerable to harm. (379)

One tends to agree with Couser, when he assumes that the future of graphic narrative is bright, and the digital avatar of graphic narrative will continue to reach more and more scholars. Contrary to other opinions Couser believes the memoir will continue to be a significant force in the world of life writing. Illness narrative and disability narrative will continue to gain momentum with graphic medical narrative. New studies like autosomatography will continue to thrive and invite more critical scrutiny. As Couser rightly said “One thing I can confidently predict: as long as there is (human) life, there will be life writing”.

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