

Family Matter: Telling True Stories

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Author's Note: This essay has developed from a panel reading which I moderated at the Kriti Festival of Literature and Arts at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I had the privilege of initiating the topic and also of talking to a group of published authors of fiction and nonfiction regarding this subject. My account has been shaped by both my individual journey as a reader and writer of creative nonfiction and also by the perspectives they had to offer.

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As a writer exploring the domain of creative or literary nonfiction, I came across a number of essayists, including Maxime Hong Kingston, whose essay 'No Name Woman' dealt with her search for her personal identity while documenting the story of the life of a dead aunt of hers. Ironically, in the opening of the essay, the readers meet the author's mother who warns her: "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born."

To my South Asian, traditional Bengali mindset, this would have resonated perfectly until a few years ago, this need to hide, to wipe out family truths or secrets. In the patriarchal setting that we found ourselves, keeping silent had been the norm. While embarking on the journey of reading and writing creative nonfiction, however, I categorically understood that the function of the memoirist/essayist, while writing, is subversive, in that he/she intends to explore how his/her cultural history can be reconciled with his/her own, emerging sense of self. The family is the nucleus of this greater cultural history, so the author uncovers his/her cultural history and presents its various ramifications by remembering old memories of the family, old tales of the family he/she had listened to, and sometimes also alters or reinterprets them and connects them with the family's history.

While reading personal essays by contemporary American writers and essayists like Scott Russell Sanders, N. Scott Momaday, Joan Didion, Alice Walker or even Maya Angelou, I

had the realization that the role of the family and its exploration in different ways lie at the heart of their writing. Scott Russell Sanders, in his essay, 'The Inheritance of Tools', reflects on the day of his father's death and how a simple hammer, a tool that has been passed to him by his father, becomes an ancestral belonging and also a metaphor for delving into his family's past and for revealing their shared interest in carpentry. Joan Didion's memoir 'A Year of Magical Thinking' reflects on the extremely personal, painful, and devastating phase in her own life after the trauma of the sudden death of Quintana, her adopted daughter and her husband (both of which happened in a row) and the year that followed, in which she experienced post-traumatic stress disorder in a very severe form.

In the essay 'Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self', Alice Walker steps forward to give a very personalized account of how her brothers hit her with the pellet of a gun that resulted in a permanent scar tissue in one of her eyes, and how she had suffered the onslaught of that childhood event by slipping into a kind of stigma and a low self-esteem. In the essay, we see how the family is instrumental in her silent suffering, and also how the family becomes a redeeming gift in the end, when Walker's three-year-old daughter gleefully says that she sees a world in her mother's blemished eye. And, Maya Angelou, in many of her writings, including the well-known 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings', recklessly, fearlessly writes about the various exploitations, devastations and traumas caused to her by the larger family she was with, including her mother's boyfriend who had raped her at the age of seven. All these memoirs are based on the authors' urge to tell a true story with honesty and passion, a story that not only exposes the lives of immediate others who have surrounded the authors, but also strives to bring forward some universal truths and human emotions. In all these works, the family is also a window to the consciousness of the greater world.

Being a forebearer of our family's cultural and personal past, I think it is important that I write about my life experiences where my family, actively or passively, has played a part and also about experiences that have shaped my personality in some way. One of the many pleasures of writing about my own life experiences has been that they have evoked a plethora of emotions in me, of wonder, anger, fear of being vulnerable and the insecurity that comes with it, and then the gradually emerging self-awareness that counters the fear and insecurity and enriches me from within. This is one aspect that gives memoirs/essays

a kind of sacred power. A memoirist is always striving, fighting to grab the memory of the past, preserve the fragile world from sinking into oblivion. Writing about the family in memoirs is also instrumental to my understanding in bridging the gap between generations. I believe that my writings about my family will give my daughters the chance to taste the world I had lived in. It is also important that through them, they will the essence of my family and my past and look at them with nostalgia and a sense of truth.

Memory is undisputedly the main trigger in writing the essays/memoirs about the family. However, a number of authors writing about their own lives have compared memory to a 'cliff-edge', as memory can often betray the writer. For example, Uma Girish, in her article 'Grab That Memory While It Slips Away', writes about a successful Indian-American author and a particular dilemma that she had faced when one day, through a long-distance phone call, she learnt that her grandfather had passed away. The problem started when she could not recall her grandfather's face, despite having spent several summers with him in the past. Her desperate yearning for a firmer grip over those forgotten details of the past constituted the struggles and challenges she had to work with and overcome as a writer. It is the mental process of maneuvering with the triggers of memories and associations, and here I strongly feel that the intuitiveness of a writer comes into play. A memory trigger can be an object, an image or an idea that has served you as a catalyst in the past, but it is the challenge of the writer to bring it back in the present state and see how it helps to anchor the memory, and also bring out the essences that surround the memory. For example:

One may revisit old train stations, the particular spot in the platform where he might have waited for the train in his childhood, accompanied by his parents. The station's name may have changed, but the surroundings remain same, triggering some forgotten stories about the journeying.

The memoirist may revisit an old grocery store in the neighborhood of his ancestral home, and look for the long-forgotten fragrance of a soap or talcum powder used in his childhood, or the aroma of the familiar spices inside the store that may trigger memories of a long forgotten kitchen.

During a trip back home, a visit to an old pond/creek in the old neighborhood where I had stayed as a child, triggered memories in an unexpected way. The pond brought back memories of one of the first, formative experiences of rain in my childhood. While roaming by the pond on a rainy day, some snippets of my grandfather's death came to me in a flash, and I remembered the downpour that had occurred then, the rainy holiday I was enjoying in my mother's maternal home, and how that day brought about my first brush with death. It wasn't a pleasant experience at all. I was nearly five years old, and the whole episode was shattering. To be honest, I do not remember every single detail of the day. So when I decided to write about it, I had to go return to that place and use some of my imagination and intuition while recreating that idyllic world of my five-year-old self.

In this context, a nonfiction writer would also have to answer another crucial question: the question of remaining honest, telling a true story, while he/she remains sensitive to the feelings of others relating to the particular story. While reading the works of the writers I have mentioned, I understood perfectly that if there is an urge to write about our own life and the people surrounding us in a sincere, potent, and honest way, it's possible to do so artistically. The mental process involved should question why it would be important or even therapeutic to share the story, and the craft of writing the piece that should make all the difference.

The writing can be in the third person, distancing the writer from the characters and the story, or the approach can be that of a researcher or a journalist (which is often adopted for literary journalism), accumulating facts about some incident, evaluating the facts and bringing forward the bigger picture and analyzing it. In case of crisis situations and their analysis, some very successful memoirs writers like Joan Didion, maintain the approach of a journal entry and then categorically fill in the gaps with bigger details, adequately researched, so that the story matters to the rest of the world and offers a new perspective. It is important to share the story, but not without offering the subtleties and nuances, the multiple layers of the mental world of the author. I sincerely believe the magic of literature can accomplish that.

While writing about any particular aspect of your life's journey, it is often the vividness of the scene, the description of the settings and the incidents, characters that would make the

readers question, is it all preserved in the author's memory? Or is it at all possible to describe the exact happenings of the past, details of a situation/conversation? These are some of the most commonly asked questions about the role of truth in a memoir, which leads to a whole lot of soul-searching. These questions also lead to the old debate of whether the writer has to stick to the chronological, objective truths of the story, and if they invent anything, whether it still deserves the title 'Nonfiction'.

Several authors of creative nonfiction have quoted famously in response to these questions, but here I will quote two of them that resonates with me the most.

The best that a would-be nonfiction writer can do is to use imperfect language to invoke imperfectly remembered events based on imperfect perceptions.

–David James Duncan

{A} memoir is not about what happened, but why you remembered it the way you did. That's where the story is. That's what we talk about.

–Kim Barnes

In exploring the answers to this question, we must first learn to identify a literal truth and an artistic truth, and then evaluate which truth would be essential to give our stories a new, unique purpose and meaning. The literal truth, the one that had chronologically happened, gleaned from our memory of the incident, versus the artistic, metaphorical truth, one that is recreated by the writer to enrich his artistic vision and poignancy of storytelling. Michael Steinberg, the essayist, says it is essential that the writer narrates the story, remembering the full particulars of the incident or situation so that his journey sounds true and compelling to the readers. But even the word 'Truth' can be evaluated in different ways. Some critics and authors admit that the question of lying and embellishment always comes up in creative nonfiction writing.

To my understanding, good essayists and memoirists strive to present the internal journey of their lives as they create a reconstructed version of the incidents not as they happened, but as they had seen/experienced them. The end is to arrive at an artistic/metaphorical truth

that helps in self-interrogation and speculation. Annie Dillard, the essayist, had explained in 'To Fashion a Text', that memory alone is not central to the function of an essay, and since writing about the incident means to recreate it in a way that wipes out or supersedes the actual chronological incident, we need to re-evaluate the role of memory in creative nonfiction writing.

Vivian Gornick, in this connection, says: "What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the larger sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. For that the power of imagination is required." In the final analysis, that is precisely what lies at the heart of a good memoir/nonfiction piece: discovering the emotional truth that would matter to both the author and the readers reading his story.

[While writing the piece, the author consulted the following books: Michael Steinberg's *Memory, Fact, Imagination, Research: Memoir's Hybrid Personality*, Annie Dillard's *To Fashion a Text & Creative Nonfiction: Essays, Memoirs, and the Personal Side of Writing* (www.writing-world.com)]