

Autobiography as a Study of Self-Progression Through Shifting Focalization

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Abstract: The study seeks to understand the role of shifting focalization in autobiography to study self- progression of the autobiographer from experiencing self to narrating self. In "Black Boy" the autobiography of Richard Wright the first-person narrator assumes, whenever required, the authority of a third-person narrator to give an objective account of Wright's past, and to do so makes full use of the temporal landscape to present the same self from different angles and in different moments. Through this shifting of focalization, readers come to know different versions of one's self at different stages of life, and it is made possible for the readers to study self- progression in the backdrop of a given socio-political scene. The study is qualitative and the selected text is evaluated under the light of the theory of focalization presented by Mieke Bal.

Keywords: Autobiography, Self-Progression, Focalization

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1. Introduction

The opinion that “literature grows directly out of life” establishes a direct relation between life and literature. But this sort of statement can slightly be molded (to justify the thesis of the current study) to say that literature is all about life and it studies all the phenomena that life has to offer. The history of literature is as old as the history of life and the most perpetual phenomenon of human life is *life* itself. The very process of living a life (both in the figurative and literal sense) gives birth to all other schools of thought that eventually come back to explain the ontology of *life* and the ‘*self*’ living that life. If only one meaning of the word *life* is considered that explains it as “the existence of an individual human being or animal”, we can say that life is all about existence; and if we take another meaning into account that defines life as “the period between the birth and death of a living thing, especially a human being” then biographical literature

emerges as the most relevant form of literature. (Oxford Learner's Dictionary). "Autobiography possesses something specific that differentiates it from other writings" and that specificity lies in the fact that "Its subject is the individual self" Sharif [1]. The current study focuses on the progression of this individual 'self', and how these different stages in the evolution of self - or it would be better to say different versions of the same self are viewed by the narrating self by keeping the trace of change in perception about life and people. Multiple perceptions emerge because of ever-changing context and betray the evolution of the personality of the subject.

The researcher's goal is to prove that the writer of the selected autobiography conducts an ontological analysis of one's ever-changing self in response to ever-changing reality through external/internal focalization. When we consider external focalization, we talk about the so-called objective focalization of an anonymous third-person narration that does not sound compatible with the proposition just made about the working of focalization in an autobiography. As the writer of autobiography studies his past self, this description might lack objectivity - which is usually attached to external focalization- thus the idea of focalization is entirely dismissed in terms of autobiography where the narrator himself/herself is an actor. Since he cannot be neutral about his past self, external focalization cannot be performed with true objectivity. Mike Bal hushes such criticism by saying that "there is no such thing as objectivity" Bal [2]. And since a biography is based on the activity of recollection, Uri's statement sounds relevant as he includes "recollection under focalization. Though, that all acts of recollection of any kind are fallible, since memory is an active faculty, not a passive slate" (p.53). So, to study an autobiographical narrative in terms of external/internal focalization, it is not necessary to establish the fact that external focalization is entirely objective and flawless or vice versa, for every work, fiction or nonfiction, has underlying biases or choices made by the author, thus cannot be declared free of subjectivity.

This article has employed the method of close reading to explore the interplay of internal and external focalization in *Black Boy* written by Richard Wright, and to study the writer's changing views about religion, race, and family along with the corresponding versions of the '*self*'. Through the interplay of internal/external focalization, the autobiography emerges as a detailed study of self-progression among ever-changing realities.

2. Literature Review: First person Narration and Autobiography

Autobiography can be seen as complicity between literature and history in the construction of the 'self' (Tiffin, 37). If we replace the word history with facts about one's life or one's life's experiences, autobiographies -non-fictional ones- do exactly the opposite of what Shaklovsky and Jacobson say about poem and novel that they "variously integrate and transform the nonliterary registers of language and experience", whereas autobiographies use literary registers to document experiences offered by real life Bradford [3]. Despite all the reservations regarding the authenticity of life accounts in the backdrop of political conflicts and the possibility of personal biases in the narration of life events, autobiographies facilitate readers by giving them a lifelike account of the subject's life. But Bradford believes that the discourse between real authors and real readers is affected principally by one's knowledge of the biography of the other. If this is the case then the autobiographies might lose the reader's interest and their credibility as a faithful recording of life, any moment when readers manage to get hold of the writer's true biography. This is the point where the working of literary devices saves an autobiographical narrative and allows an author to study himself from different angles. Thus factual details require narrative techniques, and the current study's focus is the technique of focalization as a tool through which the author's real self comes into play and has an audience with the readers. He further acknowledges the working of focalization whenever the mediation of perception can be felt, he claims that "any state or event mentioned in the text which can be thought of as being perceived in any way can be considered to be the product of an act of focalization. Uri's comment can be related to the current study as the telling of the life story is certainly the work of the autobiographer's sole perception (or changing perceptions throughout a lifetime), and change in the perceptions can further be related to cognitive processes that owe a great deal to subjects emotional and material relation with social and personal environment. In the backdrop of the modern novel, Pierre Ouellet (1996) places great importance on the cognitive and perceptual experiences of subjects and considers the novel as an account of experiences. In the selected biography, by shifting the lens of focalization, the author shares feelings of his past experiencing self as a first-person narrator (FPN) and studies his past self as an omniscient narrator. By relying on First Person Narration as an authentic way of gaining knowledge of the subject, the study will let the subject perform person narration focusing on experiencing and narrating self alternatively.

Through external focalization, the authorial voice assumes an objective tone not to distance itself from the author's past self but to give a more enlightened account of the mental state at the given moment. This move is made on an autobiographer's part to keep himself alive as a well-formed character of the narrative who is observing and being observed at the same time.

William in his article talks about Genet's typology to the focal possibilities available to a personal narrator and he limits the authority of the first-person narrator because of the temporal distance between the moment of doing and the moment of telling:

When the FPN speaks about past events and characters from his present vantage point, he is temporally and spatially external to his story. He knows more now than he did then, and he is less involved now than he was then. He is perceptually limited nonetheless because he continues to be a part of the same world in which he lived as the hero. His position, in short, is that of the true autobiographer”.

If we apply the aforementioned schemata to non-fiction autobiography, the current study will agree with William when he says that "FPN knows more now" than he formerly did and disagree on the point that he is "perceptually limited" because a non-fiction autobiographer -regardless of being correct or incorrect in terms of historical facts- has full access to his past self and his perpetual connection with the given past happenings works hand in hand with the experience he acquires and allows him to do a deeper study of his past-self. His temporal distance just makes him more apt at internal focalization without falling prey to limited spatiality: a limitation which Genete explains "as a situation in which the narrator says only what the character knows, and an FPN usually says more than his younger self knew at the moment of the event" Edmiston [4]. An autobiographer presents himself in two roles: a narrating agent and an experiencing character; but the temporal distance between narrating agent and experiencing self both allows and prompts an autobiographer to entertain multiple versions of his/her personality corresponding to different phases of life. Tabur [5] says that “The multiple narrators and **shifting focalizations** also emphasize the **pluralism of perspectives**” while an autobiographer alone performs a dual role: he objectively looks at his past self as an outsider with complete access to his then mental state and for the plurality of the perspectives he keeps shifting the lens of focalization from external to internal to study different changing versions of personality concerning different past situations. In this way, biography is not only a documentation of a single person's life but offers us a detailed insight into different phases of life, and that's what the research intends to elaborate on -

by changing the lense of focalization from experiencing self to narrating self- that which changes one's self goes through throughout a lifetime.

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Un/limited Possession of knowledge and Ex/Internal Focalizer

The selected texts will be evaluated under the light of the theory of focalization presented by Mike Bal [2]. Both Genet Gerard and Mike Bal have talked about the difference "between the telling of a story and its point(s) of view" but Bal's work is more relevant to the current study as it has "developed an analytical tool which enables one to describe changes in focalization in any text fragment however small it may be Berendsen. For Bal "Focalization is, then, the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen.'" (p.145). Thus, we can say the vision of the focalizer comes into play and introduces the focalized object in a peculiar manner that might vary with the change in the vision of the focalizer or the finalizer itself. Ball introduces us to two types of focalization:

When focalization lies with one character that participates in the fabula as an actor, we could refer to internal focalization. We can then indicate using the term external focalization that an anonymous agent, situated outside the Fabula, is functioning as focalized Bal [2].

Bal calls the internal focalizer (CF) character bound as it does not have unlimited access to the character's feelings unlike external or anonymous focalizer (EF) who has unlimited knowledge. Here Readers might find the thesis of the study incompatible with Bal's clear classification of Internal and External focalization: where the internal focalizer is a character and the external focalizer is an anonymous narrator, but when Bal says that character-bound focalization shifts from character to character, her approach does sound perfectly compatible to current study. In an autobiography, the writer's self assumes different roles and experiences different mental and physical phenomena in different phases of life and thus gives birth to different versions of self that, once studied in sequence, document the progression of one's self The researcher proposes Bal's character to character move in character bound narration can be used to study the move of point of view from younger self to elder self - with each version acting like an individual character but capable to emerge as another one in different situations. That's why in an autobiography, the narrating self-distances itself from the experiencing self/selves and performs the role of external focalizer by giving commentary on the action of experiencing self: a commentary based on the knowledge that was not possessed by the experiencing self. The same

narrating self takes a back seat and internal focalization comes into play when a single version of the self is fully entertained along with its feelings and peculiar attitude towards a certain event or concept. By following Bal's technique, the research will investigate the narrative technique of selected autobiography where the narrator remains the same all the time yet the narrating self often holds its point of view back to entertain the points of view of the growing self /selves. The autobiography introduces its readers to the psychological development of the under consideration subject: a subject which is studied step by step during different phases of his life by his grown-up version.

3. Methodology

As the study is qualitative, the author has employed the method of close reading which is the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view of a deeper understanding of its meaning Brummett [6]. Both bottom-up and top-down reading strategies can be employed for close reading as the bottom-up method of reading allows the text to move freely Brummett [6]. I found the bottom-up strategy is emancipating as it frees the text from the imposition of foreign philosophical implications.

This bottom-up close reading first allows the author to look closely at the working of internal and external focalization at the level of the shortest possible sentence. In the second stage, the findings of this bottom-up close reading are further utilized to trace the changes in the personality of the autobiographer.

It is also important to mention at this stage that this article does not employ guiding principles of any philosophical theory rather the concept of focalization has been taken which has technical rather philosophical underpinning.

3.1 Data Analysis: Inspecting the Making of Richard Wright

Black Boy shares the events of Wright's life from (1912 to 1936). In 24 years, the autobiographer faces different situations and experiences his ever-changing surroundings with shifting emotions and floating feelings. As there are many facades of one's self and it is not possible to keep track of changes in all the aspects of one's personality, so I have selected to study different versions of Wright's self by focusing on his response to racial sentiments, his religious tendencies and his relation with his family.

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The biography starts with the author looking back at his younger self and sharing an account of the day when he was forbidden to play, but the adjectives used to describe the feeling of a younger self seem like a working of the brain of an older self. Wright summarizes his mother's mood in a given morning and also describes the effect of that mood on him: "All morning my mother had been scolding me, telling me to keep still, and warning me that I must make no noise. And I was angry, fretful, and impatient." Wright [7]. This sentence describes a moment of his childhood, and the source of the description is 4-year-old Wright but to qualify a child's emotions as "**angry, fretful, and impatient**" requires mature reflection. Thus, at the very start of the novel, we meet two versions of Richard Wright: one who was experiencing and the other who was reflecting.

At times narrating self explains on the part of experiencing self (selves) and at times -despite having full knowledge of their reality- he delays the process of explanation as explanation turns up as a part of the natural flow of narrative. When school Wright comes to know the types of obscenities he used to utter in a drunk state, narrating self lets experiences self freely shares the way adolescent Wright feels when he comes to know the reality of the words he used to utter, and the readers also come to know about the magnitude of pain Wright suffers with as the words were taught by rotten members of his people. In such situations, Narrator Wright prefers to stick to internal focalization to entertain any slight change in his experiencing self and to present different versions of the self. The phase of Wright's life that introduces him to obscene words starts with drunk people making Wright speak obscene words that he keeps yelling without knowing their meaning. At school, he came to know the meaning of those words and decided to write on neighborhood windows out of sheer sense of joy that now he has learned something. As a result, his mother punishes him and makes him clean his writing in front of the mocking crowd, and school-going young Wright makes a silent resolution: Never again did I write words like that; I kept them to myself" Wright [7]. Initial anger at the mother's reprimandation turns into a silent protest which later takes the shape of a learned critique of the degenerated behavior of black folk which led them to public humiliation.

The author's thirst for learning has been focused on entertaining the change in learning attitude of Wright which reflects a change in his personality when a childlike curiosity is replaced by an overt resolute desire to learn. By relating the questions of young Wright about every sort of happenings in his surroundings (neighborhood) to his demand to Ella that she must tell her the

stories written in books, the author paves the way for the emergence of the finished product: the narrating self who emerges as a novelist.

The naturally curious younger Wright becomes a resolute learner but self makes a journey in the opposite direction in terms of Wright's attitude towards traveling and it shows his loose binding with his immediate family. The narrator entertains thoughts of Wright at different moments: "I had grown used to moving suddenly and the prospects of another trip did not excite me. I had learned to leave old places without regret and to accept new ones for what they looked like. Naturally, a trip was agreeable to me" Wright [7]. In some places, internal focalization is relied on and narrating self obediently follows that experiencing self-or selves as we are dealing with changing version of one's personality, but there are few instances where narrating self-jumps in to interrupt internal focalization and overtly completes sentences with a mature commentary which shows the opinion of grown-up narrating self and makes an author stand right in front of the reader. Granny's first recrimination against listening to secular tales and young Wright's momentary belief in religion juxtaposes the younger self's naivety with the older self's experienced denial of the Supreme Being: "For a moment I believed her." The commentary of narrating self sounds again when Wright gives a name to the information held from him: "*Again* I was being shut out of the secret, the thing, the reality I felt somewhere beneath all the words and silences" Wright [7]. Grownup Wright not only tries to understand the reality lurking beneath the silence he faced in his childhood, but he is also able to decipher the fallacy of spoken words.

4. Conclusion

The aforementioned analysis of Richard Wright's biography offers a few glimpses of the selected text to strengthen the proposed thesis that shifting focalization in a biography is a tool to study changes one's personality goes through and the effect of these changes on one's attitude towards the immediate surroundings and society at large.

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