

Politics of Remembering: An Exploration of C D Narsimhaiah's *N for Nobody*

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Abstract

Autobiography is an archive of memory. It is not a simple act of narrating all events of life, however, a politics of remembering. The writer has a variety of experiences and memories, but he selects certain memories and reconstructs them according to desired aesthetics in Michel Foucault's words 'discursive regime' that is a political notion of the regime. It is a process of selective memory for the discursive formation of self. The self articulates not as a complete self but as a part of the whole. Each autobiography has a core motive, and the writer draws threads from the warehouse of memory which revolves around the desired self. To understand this conceptual underpinning, we do the contrapuntal reading of C D Narsimhaiah's *N for Nobody* (2005).

Keywords: Autobiography; Politics of remembering; Discursive formation of self

Introduction

Autobiography is an archive of memory. It is not a simple act of narrating all events of life, however, a politics of remembering. As Smith and Watson espouse, "Contexts are charged politically. What is remembered and what is forgotten, and why, change over time. Thus, remembering also has a politics. There are struggles over who authorized to remember and what they are authorized to remember, struggle over what is forgotten, both personally and collectively" (2001:18). The writer has a variety of experiences and memories, but he selects certain memories and reconstructs them according to desired aesthetics in Michel Foucault's words 'discursive regime' that is a political notion of the regime. It is a process of selective memory for the discursive formation of self. The self articulates not as a complete self but as a part of the whole. Each autobiography has a core motive, and the writer draws threads from the warehouse of memory which revolves around the desired self. To understand this conceptual underpinning, we do the contrapuntal reading of C D Narsimhaiah's *N for Nobody* (2005).

A Discursive Formation

C D Narsimhaiah (1921-2005) was one of the well-known Indian writers and critics. He had penned down many works and accolade many awards one among them was the Padma Bhushan in 1990 for his extraordinary contribution to literature. The autobiography is not a narration of complete self but the politics of remembering: what to remember and what to forget depends upon the objective of writing the autobiography. C D Narsimhaiah's *N for Nobody* (1991) shapes a formulation of English Professor. Therefore, it constructs the self from the perspective of English Studies and Teaching. The entire autobiography revolves around this conceptual aspect. The autobiography has seventeen vignettes and all

instrumental in the evolution of English studies and the birth and growth of English Teacher. It maps especially the social and educational milieu of his period with the major focus on places and people. It narrates the story of Mysore, Bangalore, Cambridge, Yale, Australia, Leeds, etc.

The idea of being an English Teacher was germinated in the dreams and desires of his father when he was five years old. His father thought that the only road which will take him to the promised land was English learning. The search for English learning started in the heat and vogue of Kannada medium schools. Those days it was very difficult for CDN to get an English education, especially, in a small village of some sixty houses – Ajjanahalli. There was no school in this village so he used to walk two miles for his school in the next village that too Kannada medium. However, CDN's father had the ambition to teach him English. Srikantiah, a village accountant, came to the village who knew English. With such ardent desire, CDN was soon put in his charge to teach English that too on the basis of barter, "My had to wash the cloths of the teacher's wife and their newborn babe!" (Narsimhaiah 6). This is a way the journey of English-learning initiated. The barter of English-learning and human labor was a very herculean task for the family members of CDN:

My sister, a pitiful witness, had to contend against it herself if my mother took ill or was overcome with fatigue which was not uncommon. They both learnt to swallow their pride for my sake, the same that gave strength to their arms later as they put themselves to unending toil to buy things for the school-going, English-learning, darling boy – privileges which only the affluent could afford. (7)

If we probe into the autobiography, we map underlined ideology that is politics of language. He said that many national leaders right from Gandhi and Nehru to Rajendra Prasad and Morarji Desai used to focus on the regional languages for emotional need whereas English for intellectual purposes, for example, writing books and letters. Having the influence of these people, CDN kept steady growth in English learning. He learnt letter drafting skills at the age of seven and started correspondence with his cousin one who stayed in Bangalore. He started framing many sentences and many times he faced a lot of difficulties; but, he didn't give up the learning process. Placed in this context, he introspected and posed a question that his learning process of English and the introduction of English in Kannada Medium compared to his grandchildren learning of English, "Why defer the teaching of English till after the IV primary when children can learn it through nursery rhymes and comic books effortlessly at the kindergarten along with their mother tongue and vocabulary, those kill joys have quietly withdrawn into the backyard...." (9). Later, in Middle School the foundation for a love of English developed by M. Venkobachar as well in High School J. M. Narsimhalu inculcated long-lasting love and passion for literature by which he joined the Arts domain, "The sciences were not for me; I scoffed at them as a lot of dry brains. Quite early, I had opted for the humbler Arts" (13). These are a few snapshots that provide a panoramic view of the role of English and how it contrived an English Teacher in CDN.

Autobiographical Mnemonic: Politics of Remembering

An English teacher had taken birth in CDN at the age of five in an extremely adverse situation and as a course of time, it evolved. It is very apt to consider James Olney's stance, 'some version of Bios'. This autobiography can be studied from three standpoints such as education, teaching, and scholarship for higher studies. The most seminal autographic mnemonic is a place that is inclusive of people, college, university, bookshops, and soon. The most happening and marks the most important place in the life of

CDN among many places was Mysore where he had his degree and university education as well started his career as a Professor. He had completed his degree education in Maharaja College which was bee-hive of activities. Many debates and scholarly talks by celebrities were delivered in this college. Many philosophers and scholars worked in Maharaja College name a few: a most outstanding scholar Sir Brajendranath Seal from Calcutta, the first president of India Dr. Radhakrishnan who taught philosophy. Some litterateurs added a new dimension to existing English scholarship such as Srinivas Char, M. Hiriyanna, and R Sama Sastry. After a generation, another important critic and writer A. K. Ramanujan joined the college. These are a few tips of the iceberg in the domain of teaching and writing.

Furthermore, the booksellers and publishers also reputed intellectuals in English such as M. V. Rajgopal, D. R. Krishnamurthy, Satyanarayana Rao, Chidambaram, and K.B. Ganapathi, and some of them won the best booksellers and publishers' awards. These people left indelible traces on the formulation of the personality of CDN.

CDN wanted to acknowledge and remember certain teachers who were mentors and contributed a lot to build his intellectual personality and drawn a proper road map for his destiny. For some time CDN wavered from his destination to choose the Honours degree in English, "I knew I must pursue an Honors degree. But which? I was warned by everyone I met that English had no 'future'." (25). In such a tumultuous situation, two Professors came to his rescue such as V.L.D'Souza and J.C. Rollo. These two guided and insisted him to elect English which had a very bright future. Rollo, a Professor of English and the Principal of Maharaja College "insisted on examining Intermediate General English year after year, taking upon himself the formidable task of setting, valuing and moderating the results" (25). Later, Rollo had announced his name in English Honours where he got a double scholarship – Subject and Backward. He started his undergraduate education with nuanced and well-versed teachers. The one who reads this autobiography can have a comprehensive picture of English literature in a mosaic pattern. Let us have a few snapshots:

I could hardly suspect, in spite of Goethe, that any European, a member of the ruling race particularly, could read Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* so movingly. Rollo's eyes were moist as he came to the scene of Sakuntala's departure from the hermitage. Actually, he was well read in Greek and Latin; and Oxford completed his classical learning. He knew no 'Practical Criticism' – had not so much as mentioned I. A. Richards in all the three years we spent with him. But the solitary line he cited from Homer: 'Dying, he remembered Argos' ...the classical spirit meditated a profoundly poignant experience of the Argive soldier even as he must have been hoping for a family-reunion as the Trojan War was drawing to a close. (28-29)

CDN had introduced critics like I. A. Richards, Mathew Arnold, and T. S. Eliot, "It was Eliot that first, in recent times, got a hearing for the Metaphysical poets, for the Jacobean Drama, and he that struck the first most significant discordant note on Milton" (63). Many poets, playwrights, and novelists such as Rabindranath Tagore, D.H. Lawrence, Keats, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James introduced to gauge the influence of these writers on his professional personality.

In addition to these glimpses, the autobiography is an inscription of a teaching fraternity who added a new dimension to CDN teaching personality – B.S. Keshavan, A.N. Murthy Rao, H.S. Subba Rao, N. Nagesh Rao, V.A. Thiagarajan, etc. The next phase is about his career: due to financial problems and many mouths to feed, he began his career as a part-time teacher to coach supplementary students on Rs 25. He was terminated from this job. He was in utter dismay because how to meet both ends; he left the teaching profession and wanted to join any kind of work. Meanwhile, he came across an advertisement for Assistant

Food Inspectors in the Rationing Office in Bangalore, “I made a line to the Rationing Officer and begged him to give me any position: office clerk or ill writer, if not Assistant Food Inspector” (39). However, he was sent to meet N. Balakrishniya, the non-official member of the University Council, for the lectureship. It was utter disappointment that Balakrishniya shouted at him because having second class how can he claim lectureship? Here, he was embarrassed and humiliated. This is a way he started his journey as an English Professor with a lot of hurdles and difficulties. He paved the way to be a Professor at Maharaja College and later he became Principal of this college.

He received Damodardas Scholarship for his higher study in Cambridge which was an extra milestone in his career. In Cambridge, he met many writers, scholars, and philosophers: E.M. Forster, Pethick Lawrence, F.R. Levies, etc. This period was the most important period in his intellectual development. The entire chapter “To Cambridge on Damodadas Scholarship” had a picture gallery of English literary theories, criticism, poetry, dramas, novels, and soon. In his intellectual journey, there are many landmarks: Mysore, Cambridge, Princeton, Yale, Australia, etc. As he returned from Princeton, he was strongly desired to involve himself in teaching, writing, and wished to change the English pedagogy along with the syllabus. However, meantime he received an offer from Olive Reddick, an elderly American woman, to teach in one of the American universities. Placed in this context, he opines, “And now, seven years passed, and I found my work-absorbing enough not to entertain notions of advancing my interests overseas. Besides, I was a member. Of an important committee charged with the task of restructuring the University by handling over the numerous colleges to Government so as to focus on post-graduate teaching and research” (219). In spite of having pressing work, he decided to go to Yale University. His experiences were shared in the chapter “Fulbright Lectureship at Yale University”. He went to New York and after spending two days he went to Yale. He started his teaching; he got an opportunity to meet T.S. Eliot. As T.S. Eliot, a renowned poet and critic, sent a letter to CDN apologized that he was not able to meet because his health was not good and for change of air he was going to the Bahamas. But he will meet him in England. In such a way, he had a good rapport with scholarly and intellectual people. During his stay at Yale University, he was acquainted with Cleanth Brooks and Wimsatt and with whom he had a jovial and cordial relationship. He had a very good intellectual discussion with them.

Subsequently, he was attracted to Commonwealth Literature which he espoused in the chapter “Visit to Australia”. It was a comparative study of Indian and Australian literature. He studied very minutely the Australian culture, society, and literature. Various European and Asian writers, Jawaharlal Nehru, D.H. Lawrence, A.D. Hope, Geoffrey Dutton, gave their point of view about Australia. Even he brought into limelight certain theoretical aspects, mateship, and aborigine, which are the cornerstone of Australian literature. He had good exposure to the American and Australian world through his personal experiences. He got an opportunity to have a close look at the British literary and academic scene by teaching at the University of Leeds, “ While the older universities of Oxford, Cambridge, and London change slowly, today no less than in the last century, here in Leeds is a provincial university which is rather more in the mainstream of world thought” (265). He discussed elaborative how England made its own culture, ‘self-contained and self-sealed (268). Therefore, it did not pay any attention to Mathew Arnold’s request to think of Eastern culture and tradition through their literature. Here, CDN observes, “ For the truth is, England doesn’t have the counterparts of even Nabokov, Salinger, Saul Bellow and Fitzgerald, themselves struggling for places of honors once filled by top-ranking writers like Faulkner and Hemingway” (268).

Conclusion

Thus, this autobiography is politics of remembering. CDN had selected one compartment of his life that is his intellectual journey. It is a discursive formation of self – English teacher – ‘an artifact’ (Mandel 1980). The spotlight is on only his education and teaching while conceptualizing this he concentrated on places and people who fabricated his intellectual self. It navigates from his small village Ajjanahalli, Mysore, Bangalore, Cambridge, Yale, Australia, to Leeds. Each of these narrates people, litterateurs and intellectuals, and their contribution in shaping his personality as an English teacher. It sketches the world literature, in a way, a primer to English Research Scholars. It is a representation of all seminal theorists, critics, playwrights, poets, novelists, philosophers of the entire world, in other words, it displayed his likes and dislikes.

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