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## Autobiographical Grumbling/Autobiographical Artistry: C. D. Narasimhaiah's *N for Nobody*

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### ABSTRACT

As a variety of life writings, autobiographies generally have a private and public dimension and are also informative and pleasurable. Quite often, the writers of such works provide clues about their nature and mode of presentation in them. But in his autobiography, *N for Nobody*, C D Narasimhaiah provides no such details. Its subtitle though clarifies that it is the autobiography of a calling, for it is the "Autobiography of an English Teacher," meant for "My Family and My Students." In his Acknowledgement that features at the end of the book, he modestly calls it "autobiographical grumbling." The contention of this essay is that its form and content make it amply clear that it is much more than a kind of grumbling, for it is a serious piece of writing that is also genuinely artistic. The essay provides an analysis of its form and content from the perspective of the theory of autobiographical writings to demonstrate that it is a well-directed piece of writing which shows how Narasimhaiah chose to become a teacher, worked hard to add new dimensions to the art of teaching English and widening the frontiers of English studies in the country.

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Autobiographies, by their very nature, are supposed to be quite personal, even private, and designed to provide insight into the lives of their creators, their personality and understanding of the people and events that have shaped them. That imbues them with what is called the truth of lives. Because of a person's interaction with people and events, there is also a public dimension to autobiographies. In fact, in some of them, as for example in those of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the public dimension is much larger than the private one. Since the autobiographies usually are in the form of a narrative, they are informative as well as pleasurable.

Conventionally, the writers of autobiographies provide some clue, even some detail, about their nature, by stating the purpose or the impulse for writing them; sometimes they also write about the choice of their mode of presentation. But, interestingly, Narasimhaiah's autobiography provides no such information, for it has neither a preface nor an introduction, which normally provide details of this kind. Whatever we learn about it is only by a close look at its peritexts: title, subtitle, and a brief Acknowledgement, which figures at its end, on page 318, of its reprint of 2021, issued to coincide with his centenary year, and used in this essay.

The title *N for Nobody* does not puzzle or intrigue an Indian reader, because it points to a modest admission by the writer, common in our culture, that there is hardly anything of significance in his life. The subtitle, however, offsets this a little bit by clarifying that there indeed is something in that life, which makes it worth writing about, for it is the life of an English teacher, alerting the reader that it is an autobiography of a calling, which is reinforced

by its dedication, "To my Family and My Students." The family is invoked to make its members understand that the manner in which they figure in his account has been dictated by his dream of being an English teacher, who is different from his co-professionals, and thus to enable them to appreciate their representation of his relationship with them in his story. The students are invoked to remind them the kind of English teacher he has been and how that has defined his relationship with them.

The phrase "autobiographical grumbling" in the Afterword may be a bit intriguing, for it suggests several possibilities, but the most plausible and realistic one could be that the act of writing has not been an easy one for the writer. That is why its completion makes him happy, for living up to the expectation of his friends. Even a preliminary reading of the autobiography confirms that some kind of gentle posturing is at work in assuming a modest persona and considering one's writing no more than a kind of grumbling. The truth though is that Narasimhaiah's autobiography, both in its content and form, is a serious piece of writing, which is also genuinely artistic.

To know them as artistic forms, it is helpful to differentiate autobiographies from other kinds of life writings. Two small varieties are diaries that people maintain, regularly or irregularly, and letters they write to relatives and friends, or whoever. Both reveal a bit of the person who writes them, but they capture only what Roy Pascal calls "a series of moments in time" (3). That is, the writer situated in some specific space and time writes about how he or she feels at that particular point of time. In contrast to this, autobiographies are written by people at some stage in their lives, mostly when they have lived quite a substantial part of it, wherefrom they look back at their past from a specific standpoint or perspective. Because of this, they are "a review of a life from a particular moment in time" (Pascal 3). However, this is not to imply that they are exclusive categories. Autobiographies can and do accommodate diary materials and letters, as, for example, in the autobiography of Bertrand Russell, which has letters that he wrote to others and also the ones that were written to him.

The idea of seeing one's life in a specific way makes the autobiography different from two other forms of life writings, the memoir and the confession, which have a longer history than the former. In confessions, like the ones of St. Augustine and Jean Jacques Rousseau, which have been studied extensively by experts, the self of a person is seen largely in relation to what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson call "speculations about history, politics, religion, science and culture," (2) which implies that some material in them is not directly relevant to a person's self. The autobiography is different from it, because of its concentrated focus on a single life. This distinction may not apply that easily to the one between memoirs and autobiographies, because of their too many similarities. Both, as Pascal notes, are "based on personal experience, chronological and reflective," and what distinguishes them though is the "general difference in the direction of the author's attention," for "In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others" (Pascal 5).

Capturing life from a particular moment, which is the hallmark of autobiographies, sets into motion a series of activities. The writer, situated in the present, recalls whatever he did or happened to him in the past, but this recall is highly selective, for among the myriads of things that are in his or her past, he or she selects only those happenings or moments that they think merit a recall. This involves a great deal of reflection and selection, for charging moments from the past with significance, which is dictated by what the person thinks about his or her life at the moment of writing about it.

In the process of recalling, memory plays a vital role, for it combines with a person's imagination to give shape to the materials recalled. The idea of considering the past as a kind of reservoir of stored experiences that can be retrieved any time is not wholly correct, for the reconstruction of the past is not an unmediated act. Considering also that memory itself, as has been observed by Paul Eakin, is like a "form of story-telling that goes on continuously in the mind and often changes with the telling," (6) the recall acquires the shades of a creative act, which is closely related to what is called the autobiographical truth. Invariably, the impulse behind autobiographical writings is the desire to make the readers understand and appreciate this truth about them. But this truth too is not a fixed one but "an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is at the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure" (Eakin3).

The activity of writing an autobiography thus closely resembles the writing of fiction, for just as the fictionist selects facts, which could be both real and imaginary, and weaves them into a desired shape, the writer of an autobiography too conceives the life that he has lived till the point of writing about it as having a shape, which is a product of the constant interplay of memory and imagination. So even while the writer chooses events and incidents from the past to fit that shape, the shape itself has already assumed the proportions of a fictive structure. Like a writer of fiction, the writer of an autobiography also chooses the mode of telling it and the language appropriate for that. Because of this, autobiography acquires the shape of an art form.

Pascal's definition of the autobiography brings out these aspects quite clearly, when he defines it as one that involves the reconstruction of the movement of life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape (9).

This neat definition clarifies that the autobiography is essentially an account of a life lived by a person, and draws attention only to it. But because human beings have to live within social formations to realize their selves, some kind of interaction with the world outside of them becomes inevitable. In many cases, this interaction provides the very basis of a person's self-realization.

Since the account is written from the vantage point of the present, which could be when a person has moved into old age and ripe enough to visualize the journey of his or her self in a certain order, a person just does not look at what happened to him in the past, but sees past experiences in a new light shaped by the vantage point of the present. In this reconstruction, the evolutionary fluidity of life is held in some kind of stasis, to give it a desired shape or form, in which memory too plays a significant role. That eventually becomes the distinguishable truth of that life.

A close reading of Narasimhaiah's autobiography reveals, what he suggests in its subtitle, that it does not deal with all the aspects of his life, the whole man, as it were, but only those that have a bearing on his being an English teacher. That dictates the turn of events in his life and their representation in his book, which he self-admittedly calls an autobiography of a calling. The experts of life histories stress that all autobiographies in some sense are the story of a calling, "That is, they tell of the realisation of an urgent personal potentiality" (Pascal 112). In some cases, the inner calling merges with the larger social one. Being an English teacher is thus both an inner calling as well as a calling that gets connected with a profession, which is related to an important social function.

Narasimhaiah's autobiography was published in 1991, when he was seventy years old and had lived actively in pursuit of a professional dream with which he equates his whole being. This gives his writing the form it has, defines the range of happenings that figure in it, which have a bearing on what he considers essential in this pursuit.

The opening sections of the book present a brief picture of the small village where he was born, which is steeped in myth. That he is not just recalling his past as he had lived it then, but seeing it from his present becomes clear when he writes that David Lean used the place as a setting for his film on E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*, adding "a lie to history" (2). Not just that, he also makes a short but acute judgemental observation about the novel by calling it "an over-praised novel" (2). Another significant statement that follows soon after has a bearing on his person as man and a teacher of English:

Because myth and legend are truer than history, I hope I am more than a dubious gift of Macaulay's English education, for I know for certain that both the East and the West have shaped me, such as I am (2).

This is crucial for understanding Narasimhaiah's person: that he is not a baneful product of the introduction of the English education in India, which was aimed at producing slavish admirers of the West, who were more than willing to denigrate their rich cultural and literary past, as has been shown by Gauri Viswanathan in her *Masks of Conquest*. The admission has also a bearing on the kind of English teacher he worked hard to become, who read and wrote about the literature produced in English, but was also solidly rooted in the rich literary culture of his country. One short glimpse of it is reflected in his love and admiration for the folk songs and religious practices of his mother and sister, which "nurtured the other half of my aesthetic life in childhood" (4), and his regret that he could not study Sanskrit methodically during his time, and how to compensate for that he ensured that his children studied it for ten years.

Narasimhaiah dwells on how the seeds of his life as a teacher were sown by his hard-working parents, in which some happy chances too had an important hand. His father, in particular, wanted him to learn English, even though "it was considered a privilege of the urban elite" (8). A glimpse of what kind of method he wanted for learning it, which he discusses at length later, also figure in this section. He openly denounces the methods recommended by the specialists, by calling them "zealots of 'structures'" and "graded vocabulary." (9).

Because of his concentrated focus on his education, he writes about how he got exposed to English letters through a person who had a small primer of English with him and how he went to school and then to college and how he opted for studying English because he got a scholarship. Personal happenings, like his marriage, are mentioned in passing, only because somebody called it a "cradle marriage," while detailed information about his teachers in school and college is provided with great affection. Though he considers the inclusion of details from his present in the recollection of his past as "self-regarding digressions," they are a part of what I have already described an essential feature of the autobiographical act.

Apart from telling us about his childhood, school and college days, Narasimhaiah also dwells on how he was in and out of jobs till he finally got a proper one in Mysore, and because the city saw him flower into the teacher he wanted to be and became his *karmabhoomi*, as he would have liked to call it, he describes it in lavish detail, which is both informative and pleasing. He combines this with details about his education, his job, and how because of the recommendation of his teacher Eagleton, he was sent to Cambridge for two years to "acquire a grasp of colloquial English and make first-hand acquaintance with English social life, both essential to successful teaching of English" (43).

Narasimhaiah's stay in Cambridge provides him a solid grounding in the study of literature. It enables him to assess what he calls his "mental bag," the education and training he had acquired in India, in which the learning and teaching of English literature stopped with the Romantics and Victorians, and critics like A. C. Bradley, George Saintsbury and E. M. W. Tillyard ruled the academy. F. R. Leavis's lectures and tutorials introduce him to new writers and currents in thinking about literature and how to pay careful attention to texts. This enables him not only to comprehend deficiencies of his mental bag but also to comment critically on the work of many known critics of that time. He learns that Mathew Arnold's poetry is "poetry of statement and not of enactment," and David Daiches' critical history of literature is just a compilation of "received opinions," and full of "clichés, the same generalizations and the same summaries of plays and poems without ever touching the life of poetry" (68). He acquires critical skills to read modern poetry, make sense of the concept of T. S. Eliot's tradition and Leavis' great tradition in fiction. He also understands how making the Ph. D. degree an "essential requirement for promotion" vitiates learning.

Soon after leaving Cambridge, Narasimhaiah gets a fellowship to work on the theme of "Novelists as Critics" in Harvard, but makes it to Princeton, where he changes his field of study to acquire competence in the field of American literature. His extensive reading of Thoreau and Emerson makes him write confidently about the affinities of the Transcendentalists with the metaphysical poets of England and Indian poets like Kalidasa and the writers of Rig Veda.

Back in India, Narasimhaiah works hard to use his new learning and methods of teaching and examining students. He writes in detail about the reforms he suggests and fights for, sometimes without much success, for there is opposition to his methods of teaching and evaluation, which are resented by a whole host of teachers steeped in barren routine. This confirms that he has been no ordinary teacher but a crusader with a vision. He constantly seeks new ways and means to make his teaching effective, meaningful, and interesting for which he fights against apathy, conservatism, and even new-fangled innovations imported from abroad, which created a wedge between language and literature. Because of this, we get details in the book about questions-papers for examining students, the long address he once gave to the teachers of English in a summer school, and examples of the pleasant ways in which he stimulated students to learn the language.

This is followed by Narasimhaiah's numerous visits to different parts of the world, to the U.S., Australia, Canada, England and other places to teach and also to learn new literatures of the world. These have been described in some detail and make for interesting reading. But they also form a part of his evolving journey as a teacher and enable readers to see him as one who worked with a missionary zeal to extend the frontiers of English studies and their methods of evaluation, which sets him apart from the millions of other teachers of English in India and elsewhere.

When Narasimhaiah pleaded with his superiors in his university that Indian Writing in English be included in the curriculum of English studies, he had to fight all kinds of charges against the move, including the absurd one of obscenity levelled by some teachers of English against Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*. More than that, he also set up modes of evaluation for such writings, which had a considerable influence on both the teaching and evaluation of such writings. In a volume devoted to such writings, he not only wrote lucidly about this newly-emerging field, but also set up standards of its evaluation by his essays on its early writers in *The Swan and the Eagle*.

In spite of what he wrote in the volume, critical response to such writings remained overwhelmingly historical, of the kind that had been enunciated by K. R. Srinivasa Iyenger in *Indian Writing in English*, in which he dwelt on the famous formulation of Hippolyte Taine, of race, moment, and milieu, though in an elaborately stated Indian context. Because of this, evaluations of such writings had got mixed up with reading them in relation to their time and its concerns, resulting in criticism that did not rise above the thematic paraphrase of such works.

Since Narasimhaiah had already been trained to read literature by paying close attention to the works that constituted it, he advocates the use of his method not only in his classroom teaching but also for the larger body of critics interested in such writings. In the first-ever planned series on *Indian Writing in English* launched under his general editorship by Arnold-Hienemann, Narasimhaiah writes in the volume on Raja Rao about the method appropriate for reading and assessing such works, by stating that it would draw attention to “aspects of their organization,” and “the range and depth of experience that have gone into the organization, the resources of language, especially the adequacy, for the purpose, of English for the Indian writer, the writer's awareness of his own tradition, the sense of his own age—individual racial or national—which have shaped his work” (Dhar 72). This clearly suggests that a critic of Indian writing in English has to have an orientation that sees such writings in the larger context of his or her own tradition, but has to make sure that careful attention is paid to their organization as well. In short, he pleads for “a judicious balance between the purely historical and the rigorously formal methods of critical evaluation” (Ibid 73).

After establishing the validity of teaching and studying *Indian Writing in English*, Narasimhaiah works vigorously for introducing courses on American Literature, which, in his own words, he “stumbled on ... while at Princeton” (229). In this, he is supported by the U.S. Educational Foundation of India, which organized seminars on different aspects of American Literature in virtually all parts of the country. But the real breakthrough in this comes with the appointment of William Mulder as the Director of the American Studies Centre which was established in Hyderabad. He also provides a short account of the possible course of the direction that a study of this literature would take in the years to come.

As a part of his vision of the widening frontiers of English Studies, Narasimhaiah then pleads for the introduction of what in those days passed off as commonwealth literature, being the literature produced in countries that formed part of the political entity of the Commonwealth, an assemblage of the former colonies of Britain. If Princeton provided him the opportunity to read widely in the area of American literature, his visit to Australia helped him to learn about the country's chequered history and its emerging literature, its poets and novelists. Apart from writing about his visits to the various universities of the country, he also writes his brief but insightful responses to the poetry of A. D. Hope and the novels of Patrick White. Another visit to England, on the invitation of Norman Jeffares to teach in the University of Leeds, further strengthens his motivation to plead for its introduction in India. The visit is also marked by his renewal of his old friendships, the meetings with his former teacher Leavis, and his new academic contacts and friendships, and his realization that England has contributed a great deal in shaping his thinking and dreams. His campaign for the introduction of commonwealth literature eventually ends successfully.

Apart from widening the frontiers of English studies in India, for making them relevant to the realities of the new world order, Narasimhaiah works hard to improve people's



healthy engagement with literature by launching a journal *The Literary Criterion*, modelled on *The Criterion* of Eliot and *The Scrutiny* of Leavis, in spite of knowing that he is being too ambitious and lacking the wherewithal to keep it going. He overcomes his misgivings because of what he considers the lack of healthy literary culture, for he finds that there is “no consistently reliable criticism of books and articles in any periodicals”; “it is hard to find competent men to review a book”; and even when the reviews are done, “it is not the publication that is reviewed but the person; it does not reflect close reading but praised or censured indiscriminately” (178).

He provides details about how hard he has to work to arrange finances, enlist support, and respond to a writer like Dr B. Rajan, who felt aggrieved because the journal had not given him his due. The slow recognition of the journal in countries outside India, especially by known academics and critics, makes for a heart-warming reading. That the journal has survived the onslaught of the proliferation of digital platforms and is still in print is a solid testimony to his hard work, which include his efforts to ensure that his children, also teachers of English, will keep the journal going.

The third thing that constitutes an important part of Narasimhaiah's dream as a teacher of English is to set up a centre where interested teachers and students find a place to read, think, and write, in Mysore, and close to the University. For this, he gives up the prestigious and lucrative assignment of writing a biography of Jawaharlal Nehru at the behest of Mrs Gandhi, because it necessitated his stay in New Delhi, for access to Nehru papers. She knew he was the best person to do the job because he had abridged Nehru's *Discovery of India*, which had been approved by him, and also written a full-length study *Jawaharlal Nehru: A Study of his Writings and Speeches*.

The story of purchasing land for setting up the Centre, arranging money for buying it, and constructing it bit by bit reads like a fairy tale in which obstructing and helping agents appear and reappear at crucial moments of its making, providing for turns and twists of suspense and surprise, and giving it the form of an adventure story in which the grit and determination of its protagonist provides it a pleasing closure.

Narasimhaiah explains that *Dhvanyaloka* is named after the treatise on poetics written by Anandavardhana of Kashmir, who gave the famous theory of *rasa-dhvani*, which he considers “India's greatest contribution to the world of Poetics, but not adequately appreciated” (305). Since it was in his mind right from the time of starting the *Literary Criterion*, so the centre is called “*Dhvanyaloka Literary Criterion Centre*,” with the goal of looking “at all literature and the arts, whether Indian or any other, from the *rasa-dhvani* standpoint” (305). This is because of his immense confidence in the richness of our traditional thinking on literature as a source of immense vitality. That is why his observation: “If modern writing cannot be judged in terms of *Rasa-Dhvani*, it means our literature has dried up and become either dull or trivial” (308). In seminar after seminar, in the Centre, he gives proof of the promise of using this to understand and appreciate literature. To make sure that their proceedings reach a wider public, he sets up a publications wing of the Centre, which brings them out as books, which are modestly priced.

In his illustrious career, in which he realized his cherished goals one after the other with great success, Narasimhaiah suffered a personal loss of severe proportions, when his second son passed away in the prime of his youth, and on the threshold of a bright career in teaching and research. The suddenness with which it happens forms the very last chapter of the

autobiography, which he devotes entirely to his family. He recreates the magic of his son's presence right from the time of his birth to his education in India, Australia, and then in Leeds, from where he had returned to India for a short while, only to pass away in the midst of his doting family, forcing him to ruminate agonizingly on "If this is the promised end?"

When the first edition of his autobiography went out of print, Narasimhaiah probably felt that the dream of his life, which he had worked hard to keep alive for everybody known to him in the form of the printed word, would no longer be available to those for whom it was meant, the students and teachers of English, both as a source of information and inspiration. So he resorted to an expedient, by writing another book, *Persons, Places, and Reflections*, which appeared in 2003. This time, he also wrote a short Preface, in which he states that the book is "some kind of sequel to my Autobiography, N for Nobody, first published in 1991 and sold out soon. ... So it occurred to me I could dwell more adequately on the persons and places that figure in it, because of their educative value. ..." (ii). The persons and places that figure in it are the same that are in the autobiography, but dealt with a bit elaborately. The reflections consist of six essays, which have a bearing on the issues touched upon in his previous work.

Narasimhaiah's autobiographical narrative recounts how he rose up the academic ladder on a fast track because of his brilliance and gave up the attractions of administrative power that he could have easily enjoyed only because he loved to be a teacher till the very end of his life. Because of his principled stand on issues related to his work, he withstood pressure from within the academy, both of teachers and administrators, and interference from political bosses, with boldness and courage. He worked hard to add new dimensions to the art of teaching and strove tirelessly to widen the frontiers of English studies in the country, which impacted other countries of the world as well. Narasimhaiah will be remembered for all his manifold contributions in the field of teaching and research of English literatures.

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