

The Role of Personal Narratives in Shaping Identity_ A Study of Memoir and Autobiographical Fiction

Sigrid Kim

Viennart Academy

Abstract

This study investigates the role of personal narratives, particularly memoirs and autobiographical fiction, in shaping and representing identity. Memoirs, characterized by their thematic focus and honest reflection, allow writers to share intimate life experiences, offering insights into personal growth, redemption, and struggle. Different types of memoirs, such as confessional and transformational, emphasize how individual experiences contribute to a broader understanding of identity. In contrast, autobiographical fiction blends factual experiences with fictional elements, giving authors creative freedom while maintaining a core exploration of self. The study highlights key similarities and differences between these genres, noting that both rely on subjective perspectives yet diverge in their approach to truth and narrative structure. Ultimately, both memoirs and autobiographical fiction significantly influence how the author and reader perceive identity, presenting complex portrayals of the self. The paper concludes by recommending further research into other forms of personal narratives and their impact on identity construction.

Introduction

Personal narratives are non-fictional essays that are written to describe a true story about something the writer experienced (Throne, 2019). These stories usually contain the following characteristics: plot, introduction, setting, conflict, and characters. They act as a

good medium for people to organize and present their understanding of the world and their place in it. According to Brockmeier and Carbaugh (2001), personal narratives provide meaning to human life and play a special role in shaping one's identity in the world. This may be through its influence in educating readers about ideas, influencing their contextualization

of information, and moving them toward new ways of thinking. Within the broad categories of personal narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies have emerged as notable literary genres that allow individuals/writers to convey their internal experiences and life stories. However, while memoirs focus on telling stories from various moments in the author's life and tend to read more like a fiction novel than a factual account, autobiographies deal more with facts than emotions (Dukes, 2019). Thus, this essay aims to examine how memoirs and autobiographies may represent personal identity and influence both the writer's and the reader's perception of identity.

Memoirs

The word 'memoir' is loosely translated to mean remembrance or memory. Within the field of literature, memoir refers to a narrative about important life events, written from the perspective of the author (Couser, 2012). These life events are tied together by a certain theme and are written for different reasons. For instance, a memoir may be written to share a story, heal from a traumatic experience, gain insight into the past, help others overcome similar struggles, or preserve a family legacy (Kotobee, 2022). Additionally, Maghfurah et al. (2017) further explain that memoirs are written to tell the individual story of the author, including the bad, the good, the beautiful, and the wicked. This may be written to make life-changing events or celebrate momentous occasions.

Furthermore, in order to enhance understanding of the concept of memoirs, Plona (2019) also outlined five key elements that characterize memoir writings: Theme, Truth, Point of View, Voice and Reflection. The element of theme relates to the major story or lesson that the author intends to share. Although most memoirs may include many interesting moments or stories from the life of the writer, they all usually relate to a central idea or issue. This means that the author is not just cataloging an entire life story but rather is focused on sharing an aspect that he finds interesting. Secondly, the element of truth means that the author usually writes the memoir with humility and detail while avoiding abstract statements. The author does not hesitate to discuss their shortcoming, flaws or challenges experienced but allows the reader to step into their shoes and see the world in the same way they did at the time. Thirdly, the element of Point of View relates to the manner in which the story is told. Memoirs are usually written with the use of dialogue, from a first-person point of view and with actions presented as occurring in real time. Fourthly, the element of Voice relates to the tone and unique way in which the author writes. This usually reveals the attitude or feeling of the author about the subject matter. Lastly, the element of Reflection in memoirs relates to the author's efforts to tell the story while also musing upon the events that led to its occurrence. The author attempts to share the story while trying to get answers and

unravel the events in light of his current knowledge or position.

Furthermore, in discussing the concept of memoirs, it is also important to note that there are different types of memoirs. However, Dukes (2019) highlighted four broad categories of memoirs. They are: Personal Transformation memoirs, Travel or Adventure memoirs, Professional highlights memoirs and Confessional memoirs.

Personal transformation memoirs are the most common type of memoir. In this type, the author tells a story of how they endured a great challenge and were able to turn their life around for good. This type of memoir is usually written with the theme of redemption or similar ideas. Secondly, travel or adventure memoirs focus on telling a story about the author's experiences or lessons learned during a particular trip or adventure. The author describes the little details of the trip and also highlights how the trip impacted them. Thirdly, the professional highlight memoir is one in which the author focuses on covering important moments in his/her professional life or rise to success in his or her career path. The author may share some of the awards or medals won throughout the professional journey and may also reveal some challenges experienced and how they were able to navigate around them. Lastly, just like the name implies, the confessional memoir is one in which the author exposes difficult or painful secrets about themselves, their friends, or their family and how they affected them.

The confessional memoir usually associated with portrayed honesty of the author is a good example of how memoirs can contribute to a deeper understanding of the author's identity. Kofman (2015) suggests that the author's peculiarities are what make the memoir worthwhile. Through the author's honesty, readers may begin to understand and value the author's experience and see them as a tunnel that guides them into the author's identity. In general, memoirs may mine an individual experience to get at a universal truth, bringing the author's world and identity into the open. However, critics warn that it is important to not confuse conscientious writing with honest writing. According to a legendary editor, Gordon Lish, although memoirs may sincerely report an event or action, it is not automatically an honest writing unless the author includes a reflection of the inner workings of his mind that might give readers insights about his personal identity (Kofman, 2015).

In conclusion, it can be observed from the above discussion that memoirs are a significant way of portraying one's identity to the world. Through the author's narration of personal events, readers are influenced to develop varying perspectives of the author's life and personality. These perspectives may shape their view of the world or other key issues and aspects. Some example of great memoirs that have been written include *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom, *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert and *Educated* by Tara Westover

(Kotobee, 2022).

Autobiographical Fiction

Autobiographies are one of the most popular and important forms of literature that is used as a means of self-expression in the twentieth century. Autobiographies refer to a literary narrative account of a person's life written by the person himself (Reece, 2014). This narrative is usually a factual story featuring real events and real people. According to Sargar (2013), autobiographies provide in-depth details about the personal life of the author including his beliefs and ideas, passions and prejudices, ups and downs and heart and mind. This knowledge influences the reader's conceptualization of the author's identity and "offers an ideal scope for satisfying that human urge and quest and curiosity about human nature". Furthermore, Reece (2014) explains that autobiographies are subjective in nature as they offer only individualized experiences and feelings as written by that person. The researcher further adds that autobiographies are usually written by public figures such as politicians, celebrities, statesmen, writers and artists. However, anyone can choose to write an autobiography.

Within the category of autobiographies as a form of literature, autobiographical fiction has emerged as a genre that is worthy of interest. Autobiographical fiction refers to a type of personal narrative in which the author uses fictional events or characters to represent their

actual experiences (Rexford, 2023). This type of writing allows the author to take creative liberties while sharing their real-life experiences and events. The author may embellish or fabricate various elements such as the location, characters, occurrences, plot, timeliness, etc. Mueller (2021) states that authors usually choose autobiographical fiction when they want to weave in real experiences from their lives into a fictional narrative in order to protect the identity of real people. Autobiographical fiction is usually written in the third-person perspective rather than the first-person perspective, as this allows the writer to isolate himself from the events being discussed (Reynolds, 2016). An example of this is the autobiographical fiction - *You Can't Go Home Again* - written by Thomas Wolfe. In this literary work, although the author was talking about himself, he cast himself as another character with a fictitious name. Furthermore, another notable feature of autobiographical fiction is that it follows a chronological narrative style to tell the story of a person's life from birth to the present or death. Additionally, autobiographical fiction is also characterized by the use of a narrative text and the presence of prose elements such as setting, plot, characters, conflict, and resolution (Javed & Shah, 2021).

Summarily, it can be deduced that incorporating fictional aspects allows autobiographical authors to explore and present their identities in a nuanced way. That is, portraying real life experiences as fiction and

using fictitious details, names, characters and events allows the author to honestly tell his story and portray his identity without hesitations. This enhances the essence of the story. However, it is important to note that real identities can be protected with the use of fictitious names, the author must provide transparency about the fictional elements to maintain authenticity and the trust of readers. Conclusively, autobiographical fiction is a viable way of organizing the story about a person's life and identity and reflecting on the past in order to better understand the present.

Similarities and Differences Between Memoirs and Autobiographical Fiction

In the study of memoirs and autobiographical fiction, it is important to discuss the similarities and differences between both literary genres.

Similarities

1. They are both subjective and based on the individualized life experience and narration of the author.
2. They both offer the reader access to the personal thoughts, reactions, reflections, and feelings of the author.
3. They are both based on real-life experiences, although the author might get creative and embellish facts in autobiographical fiction.
4. They both focus on the life experience of the author
5. They are both non-fiction literary genres

although autobiographical fiction may utilize fictitious names of characters and places.

Differences between Memoirs and Autobiographical Fiction

S/N	Autobiographical Fiction	Memoirs
1.	Usually an account of a person's entire life	Provides an account of only one part of a person's life or specific events
2.	Usually follows a chronological order in the narration of events	Does not follow any chronological order of narration
3.	Usually written by famous people or celebrities	Can be written by anyone
4.	Usually written in the third-person narrative	Written in the first-person narrative
5.	Usually written in the later part of the author's life	Can be written at any time

6.	Usually written to tell a life story	Usually written to reflect on the emotion of a particular life experience or event
----	--------------------------------------	--

Representation of Personal Identity through Memoirs and Autobiographical Fiction

Memoirs and autobiographical fiction provide both the author and the readers with a representation of personal identity that is achieved through various means. For instance, for the author, the process of writing and narrating life experiences involves a process of reflection and recollection of feelings, motivations, and thoughts. This process allows the author to take an introspective and candid look at their inner world in conceptualizing their identity and place in the world. For the readers, memoirs and autobiographical fiction present them with insights into an author's life that may influence their conceptualization of their own personal identity. This may be through an empathic connection with the author's story, experiences, challenges, etc. A notable example of how a memoir can influence one's conceptualization of identity can be seen in the memoir - *How We Fight for Our Lives* by Saheed Jones. Through this memoir, the author examines his identity in a society where his sexuality is not common or widely accepted. Through his stories and

reflective descriptions of events, the author pushes readers to reflect on their own sexual identity and society's view of it. Another notable example of how the element of truth can be used to shape the readers' understanding of the author's identity is found in the well-known memoir - *Educated* - by Tara Westover. Here, the author based her narrative in stark realism, sharing the raw details of her physical and emotional suffering. This facilitates a powerful connection with the reader, drawing them into the personal life, mindset and identity of the author. This memoir portrays how identity is fluid, not static and influenced by both personal experiences and external forces. The memoir demonstrates how a particular element or event (for instance, education in this memoir) can significantly influence one's identity and perception of the world (Iyer, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be observed from the above discussion that memoirs and autobiographical fiction play a significant role in constructing and representing identity. Memoirs leverage the power of truth to illuminate the complexities of personal experiences, shaping the reader's understanding of the author's identity. Similarly, autobiographical fiction employs creative license to explore the nuances of identity. By offering rich and multifaceted portrayals of self without fear of truth, the author provides readers with a more interpretive reading

experience that influences their conception of the author's identity. However, future research may focus on examining other types of personal narratives and how they may also impact or shape the author's and the reader's identity.

References

1. Brockmeier, J., & Carbaugh, D. (Eds.). (2001). *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* (Vol. 1). John Benjamins Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1075/sin.1>
2. Couser, G. T. (2012). Memoir: an introduction. *Auto/Biography Studies* 28(1). https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265899053_Memoir_An_Introduction_by_G_Thomas_Couser
3. Dukes, J. (2019, September 6). What Is a Memoir? Celadon Books. <https://celadonbooks.com/what-is-a-memoir/>
4. Iyer, N. (2018, September 13). Tara Westover's memoir is a compelling testament to the power of education. Rabble.Ca. <https://rabble.ca/books/tara-westovers-memoir-compelling-testament-power-education/>
5. Javed, A., & Shah, S. J. H. (2021, May 26). Characteristics of an autobiography with definition parts and steps. EngloPedia. <https://englopedia.com/characteristics-of-an-autobiography/>
6. Kofman, L. (2015, May 16). The Honesty Problem. Meanjin. <https://meanjin.com.au/memoir/the-honesty-problem/>
7. Kotobee. (2022, August 23). What Is a Memoir and How to Write an Outstanding One? Kotobee Blog. <https://blog.kotobee.com/what-is-a-memoir/>
8. Maghfurah, N. S., Setyorini, A., SS, M., Ihsan, P., & Hum, S. (2017). Postcolonialism in Letters of a Javanese Princess Memoir As Reflected Through The Main Character: RA Kartini (Doctoral dissertation, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surabaya).
9. Plona, T. (2019, March 30). 5 Elements of a Memoir. Prezi.Com. <https://prezi.com/jfgx1a43xdmc/5-elements-of-a-memoir/>
10. Reece, J. (2014). Autobiography. In D. Coghlan & M. Brydon-Miller (Eds.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research* (p. pp.70-72). Sage. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/277670505_Autobiography
11. Rexford, S. (2023, October 10). How To Write An Autobiographical Fiction Novel. <https://selfpublishing.com/autobiographical-fiction/>
12. Reynolds, D. (2016, July). What are the characteristics of an autobiography edited

by eNotes Editorial.
<https://www.enotes.com/topics/lit/questions/what-characteristics-autobiography-567336>

13. Mueller, L. (2021, May 7). Autobiographical Fiction: What It Is, Examples and How To Write It Yourself | Skillshare Blog. Skill Share.
<https://www.skillsshare.com/en/blog/autobiographical-fiction-what-it-is-examples-and-how-to-write-it-yourself/>
14. Sargar, S.D. (2013). Autobiography as a Literary Genre. *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research journal*, 2(1).
<https://www.galaxymrj.com/V2/n1/Sargar.pdf>
15. Throne, R. (2019). Autoethnography and Heuristic Inquiry for Doctoral-Level Researchers: Emerging Research and Opportunities. IGI Global.
<https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-5225-9365-2>