

Journalistic Fiction: What it is?

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In the field of journalism, facts are not always appealing. They complicate plenty of great pieces. Background details can weigh down graceful copy. Clarifications may crowd out the heart of a story. It is a lot of work to settle a point that most readers don't care about anyway. But somehow, even in this magnificentage of commentary, for people who do still care about facts, journalistic fiction is a field of concern.

In the frontline of the new journalists are some interesting writers and their writings: *Hiroshima* (1946) by John Hersey; *In Cold Blood: A True Account of Multiple Murder and Its Consequences* (1966) by Truman Capote; *Armies of the Night: History as a novel/History as Novel* (1968), *Of a Fire on the Moon* (1970) and *The Executioner's Song* (1979) by Norman Mailer; *The Dreams of Ada* (1987) by Dennis Fritz; *Libra* (1988), *Underworld* (1997) and *Falling Man* (2007) by Don DeLillo; and *The Innocent Man* (2006) by John Grisham. Some texts in the Indian context which can be put under this category are Sonia Faleiro's *The Beautiful Thing*, Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012), and Payal Shah Karwa's *The Bad Touch* dealing with the penetrating subjects like life of bar dancers, trash collectors, and child sex abuse, respectively. Though the style of all these writers may not be similar, but their approach is. All of these texts have been regarded as journalistic fiction, being based on rich research.

There are many more literary journalistic works which have not been added to the above list, but equally contribute to resources of the genre. The works, to some extent, vary in form, but clearly utilize new journalistic techniques and portray different aspects of the modern culture and society. So I hold these as fitting examples of the genre. In a close reading of the texts, I would discuss how authors have portrayed the society they dwell in. The purpose of this study is to examine the use of documentation as verifiable links to the empirical world in literature.

Literary Journalism is basically a journalistic text that reads like a novel. Literary journalism is firstly journalism. This means that the author needs to approach its topic as any journalist would. The key difference is how he then writes about this topic. A literary journalist would also use literary or narrative techniques that would make the story similar to a novel or a short story. Every single sentence, every single word must be true, just like it should be in ordinary, traditional journalism. No scene can be made up, no dialogue invented. It is observed that the literariness comes from the techniques and not from fictionalized events. Rather than answering the informational who, what, when, or where, it depicts moments in time. It appointed the techniques of realistic fiction to portray daily life.

No doubt the aspects of literary journalism have been present in writing from well before the mid 1900's, but the existence of literary style of journalism was widely recognized as its own genre when Truman Capote, an American author, marketed himself as having created a new genre of writing. He

called it "Nonfiction novel". Tom Wolfe, who is another American author, is best known for his hand in the literary journalism movement. He took the lead for getting the literary establishment's attention with the introduction to a book (*New Journalism*) he was editing. Shortly after Wolfe gained the attention of the literary establishment, "the new journalism" became a hot topic. For it a number of terms have been used, including "art-journalism", "nonfiction novel", "essay-fiction", "factual fiction", "journalit", "creative nonfiction", journalistic fiction (the term being used in this paper), and "literary journalism".

The requirement is that the writing must be based on factual details, minute observation, review of documents, or thorough interviews. There must not be composite characters or undocumented action or speculated thoughts of a third party. Literary journalism must have a distinct voice. Narrative is an important part of literary journalism, and it should seem as though the author is telling a story. Further, it is important that the author of literary journalism uses copious detail to express meaning beyond their specific reference. Historians call it "symbolic detail" or "symbolic realities." Importantly, a piece of literary journalism must attempt to achieve literary impact. It must resonate with the reader in a similar way as would fiction, drama, or poetry. This kind of writing engages the reader in a personal and responsive way.

The phrase "New Journalism" was popularized in a book by Tom Wolfe in 1974. He described new journalism as "intense" and "detailed" reporting presented "with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories" (Wolfe 1973: 15). Basically, four techniques or narrative devices are common to the new journalists and connect them to fictional realism, according to Wolfe: (1) scene-by-scene construction, or depicting people in dramatic scenes as in traditional storytelling; (2) complete dialogue as recorded and remembered rather than journalism's selective quotations; (3) varying the point of view, and even using third-person point of view; and (4) "status details" or the habits, mannerisms, gestures, and so forth that distinguish people, societies and subcultures (31-33). Wolfe cited the works of talented feature writers of the day, like Gay Talese, Jimmy Breslin, Truman Capote, Hunter S. Thompson, as well as examples of his own writings.

John Hollowell in *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, defines new journalism against traditional news reporting: "The most important difference [...] is the writer's changed relationship to the people and events he depicts" (22). He notes that style—"the use of fictional devices borrowed from short stories and novels"—was the other main feature that set new journalism apart from conventional newspaper stories (22). Connery argues in his book that a fundamental quality of literary journalism is that it is based on 'actuality', or real people, places, and events; 'verifiable detail is essential' (6).

Another characteristic of new journalism both Wolfe and Hollowell identify, is the authors' intensive and time-consuming commitment to the topic at hand. For example, Truman Capote studied the events surrounding the murders of a Kansas farmer family for six years before writing *In Cold Blood* (1966). Moreover, this kind of literature attempts to give structure to otherwise transient and inexplicable events of past or current times, and it tries to provide motive and closure to otherwise chaotic experiences.

One of the important differences between new journalism and conventional reporting practiced in newspapers is the changed relationship between the reporter of the people and events described by

him, the reporter becoming somewhat subjective towards presenting the facts instead of being purely objective i.e. telling the truth as it is 'New journalist records his personal reactions to the people and events that make news' (Hollowell 22). 'The new journalist, also strives to reveal the story hidden beneath the surface facts, but the conventional reporter must dutifully report their statements' (23). Tom Wolfe argues that the conventional journalistic practices reflected in who-what-where-when reporting usually serve to reinforce the middle-class reader's values. But 'the best new journalists use a variety of writing techniques to place the reader "inside" a world he may find quite different from his own' (Hollowell 26).

Moreover, conventional reporting does not provide closure to the events, leading to no consolation and comfort in the end. It rather presents the multiple perspectives of the same event, which is usually confusing. Their details are instantaneous and too close to time to the real events and therefore, sometimes, show incomplete reactions.

Another major difference between the new journalism and conventional reporting is that the form and style of the news story was transformed by the use of fictional devices borrowed from stories and novels. This was because of the ever-increasing "knowledge explosion" in the society which lead to demand of news coverage with greater depth and background, with psychological insights into the major figures behind the news, and with interpretation and analysis, placing the news in a broader context. All this demanded greater freedom for writers in terms of style and form.

This kind of genre has received attention from a number of critics and scholars, including John Hartsock, Norman Sims, Mark Kramer, Chris Anderson, John Hellmann, John Hollowell, Barbara Lounsberry, Thomas Connery, A.J. Kaul, Kevin Karrane, Ben Yagoda, John J. Pauly, Louis Dudek, R. Thomas Berner, Ronald Weber, Everette Dennis, Michael L. Johnson, James Emmett Murphy, Dan Hallin, D.L. Eason, Robert Boynton, and others (Sims 9). Some highly regarded literary journalists in the U.S. today include John McPhee, Susan Orlean, Tracy Kidder, Jane Kramer, Mark Singer, Joan Didion, and Richard Rhodes. Some notable literary journalists of the past century include Stephen Crane, Jack London, George Orwell, John Hersey, Truman Capote, and Norman Mailer.

It is important to note that journalistic fiction takes as its subject a broad social portraiture difficult to define topically. Subjects and personalities unfamiliar to middle-class readers were treated by journalistic writers. Hollowell has classified four main categories of the subjects of new journalism: (1) Celebrities and personalities; (2) the youth subculture and the still-evolving "new" cultural pattern; (3) the "big" events often violent ones such as criminal cases and antiwar protests; and (4) general social and political reporting (40). These authors have used different techniques to represent different subjects from all the classes in the society as categorized by Hollowell.

Hiroshima, the most famous of all, awakened Americans to the horrors of atomic warfare and threw light on the beginning of nuclear age. It was a literary classic in which Hersey wrote a forthright account of what happened on the day of atomic attack on Hiroshima in 1945 and in the year afterwards to the city's inhabitants and especially to six survivors chosen by Hersey for in-depth study. For the first time in history, weapons of such massive destruction were used against civilians. The bombing of Hiroshima was, in several respects, an unprecedented event. It was a novelty, on the most basic level, because the atomic bomb was a new type of weapon, based on new concepts in physics. Its effects as well as the mechanisms were also new. The immediate effects of the bomb and

the radiation sickness that plagued survivors in the years that followed were like none that humans had ever experienced. Hersey represented the horrifying experiences of the direct sufferers of the attack in a very simple language with tremendous effect on the readers' psyche.

Capote, in 1959, read a short newspaper story about a brutal mass murder of a family in Kansas and decided to investigate it. The result was *In Cold Blood*. Point of view, Tom Wolfe explains, is used by journalistic writer to "present every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader through the feeling of being inside the character's mind" (Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, p.28). For instance, Truman Capote in *In Cold Blood*, makes use of the viewpoints of comforting women close to the killers to generate sympathy for them. Capote used a third-person, omniscient point of view in writing his nonfiction account of the Holcomb, Kansas, murders. He deliberately kept himself out of the manuscript (as a character), and his point-of-view provided greater flexibility in conveying the thoughts and actions of several characters. Similarly, other authors have very effectively used the technique of voice.

The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town is a 2006 nonfiction book by John Grisham. *The Innocent Man* reads almost like one of Grisham's legal thrillers. The book tells the story of Ronald 'Ron' Keith Williamson of Ada, Oklahoma, a former minor league baseball player who was wrongly convicted in 1988 for the rape and murder of Debra Sue Carter in Ada and was sentenced to death. After serving 11 years on death row, he was exonerated by DNA evidence and other material introduced by the Innocence Project and was released in 1999. "The Innocent Man" is plural, despite its title. It is about "four men, four average white guys from good families, all chewed up and abused by the system and locked away for a combined total of 33 years."

The details Grisham provides about incorrect convictions, shoddy police work and poor prosecution certainly make a case for some sort of judicial reform. Perhaps even more compelling is the story of Williamson's mental decline and society's inability to deal with his mental illness. In many ways, Williamson's story before and after his imprisonment is just as tragic as the time he spent on death row. About two decades before Grisham's book, Ward and Fontenot's wrongful convictions were detailed in a book published in 1987 called *The Dreams of Ada* by Robert Mayer. Mr. Grisham draws heavily on that book and acknowledges an obvious debt.

The Dreams of Ada by Robert Mayer is the true story of Tommy Ward and Karl Fontenot. Ward was questioned for more than five hours in the disappearance of Donna Denise Haraway, finally confessing to her rape and murder. However, it was later revealed that Ward's confession was full of holes and was based on a dream he had. The police charged Ward anyway and his friend, Karl Fontenot, who also confessed to the murder. Ward and Fontenot spend more than ten months in jail before being convicted, without a body or murder weapon. Four months later, the body of Denise Haraway was found on the same day Ward and Fontenot had been scheduled to die before their stays were granted. *The Dreams of Ada* is a book of mystery, of foolishness, and of justice gone wrong.

The Dreams of Ada by Robert Mayer tells a story strikingly similar to that recounted by John Grisham in *The Innocent Man*. Both these books involve the murder of a young woman from Ada, Oklahoma in the early 1980s. In both cases, there are two defendants whose convictions rely on little probative evidence but involve "confessions" that emerged from a dream. Both prosecutions were led by Bill Peterson and both involved the same jail-house informant. The defendants in Mayer's book, Tommy

Ward and Karl Fontenot, were both sentenced to death, as was Ron Williamson in Grisham's book. Williamson and his co-defendant were eventually freed when DNA evidence excluded them from the crime scene. Ward and Fontenot remain in prison for life, after their death sentences were overturned. In their case, there was no DNA evidence to provide a more definitive answer. At the time of their trial, nobody had even been discovered. Both Mayer's and Grisham's writings depict that Ward and Fontenot were victims of a complete miscarriage of justice.

Further, it is interesting to note that Indian literature, especially of last two decades, is booming with writings rich in facts and research. The subject of these texts are varied, universal and touching some sensitive issues of concern in the modern society. The selected writings under consideration are best examples of literary journalism, for example, Sonia Faleiro's *The Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars* (2010) and Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012). Both these are award winning texts glorifying the pathetic and desperate lives of bar dancers and, garbage collectors, respectively. Payal Shah Karwa's *The Bad Touch* (2014) is a recently published, thoroughly-researched narrative dealing with some true stories from the society of a couple of well-known, and few not much recognized survivors of incest and child sex abuse.

The Beautiful Thing is a well-researched book-length treatment of the subject highlighting Sonia Faleiro's journalistic skills superbly. It is the story of a bar dancer, Leela, who eventually turns into a sex worker and worked in Night Lovers bar in Kamathipura, Mumbai.

It is an original work of literary journalism portraying the realities of the night life of Mumbai. It depicts how Leela, a bar dancer, fights to survive and is confident to overcome the crisis due to ban on dance bars. It is an excellent study which centres on the wretched reality of women from 'bad families'. It mesmerizes the reader with its enriching and touching details. Leela and many other women choose this life as it is a means of easy money. They are poor, uneducated young women who are either sold by a blood relative or raped by one, before running away to Bombay to make their destiny. They are basically bar dancers but sometimes take to flesh trade for more money and luxuries provided by their customers. Even being under the control of the bar owners, pimps, gangsters and even cops, these dancers also have aspirations.

Sonia depicts a world of hurt, pain, violence, and desires. It is a world of unpredictability where suffering is inevitable. At the age of thirteen, Leela was forced into this trade by her alcoholic and schizophrenic father. He would beat Apsara, Leela's mother. As a result, Leela believed that there is no comfort in marriage, it being slavery. Further, before Apsara's suffering could end, Leela's suffering started. Manohar forced Leela to act in blue films and on refusing he threw her in jail to be repeatedly raped by policemen.

Behind the Beautiful Forevers (2012) is a brilliantly written, National Book award winning nonfiction by Katherine Boo, a journalist who writes for the *New Yorker*. She has chosen the area of Annawadi, a slum in Mumbai. She depicts the life of Abdul, his family and other residents of Annawadi. Their social circle does not include a happy family, relatives and friends but other similar dancers, sex workers, pimps, hijras. Sonia meets all these people through Leela and enters their secret world. Sonia spends five years researching and conducting hundreds of interviews. She courageously interacts with people one normally does not dream of seeing.

Payal Shah Karwa in *The Bad Touch* takes up an issue not generally discussed openly or maybe people are not aware of its happening in the surroundings. This narrative gives insight into the lives of real people like Harish Iyer, Anurag Kashyap, Nidhi Bhadwaj, Jai, Amrita, Lata, Mrunalini, and many unnamed survivors of child sex abuse and incest.

Payal conducted a number of personal interviews with the interviewees who courageously shared their traumatic experiences of incest and sexual abuse which they had undergone repeatedly at various stages of their life. Through this work she aims to ebb the trauma of survivors and inspire readers with these real stories. She wants to make children as well as parents aware of the issue of child sex abuse which usually remains untold. She discusses the survivors' narration of real experiences, period of coping with the trauma, myths associated with child sex abuse and the facts pertaining to the subject. It is astonishing to know that according to the reports of WHO, India has the largest number of sexually abused children, with a child below 16 years raped every 155th minute, a child below 10 years every 13th hour (BT 74).

This nonfiction also deals with few commonly accepted myths, like only girls are the victims of CSA; children are generally abused by strangers; children lie and make up stories about sexual abuse; only adolescent children get abused; children should be encouraged to forget about the abuse, as there are no harmful effects of child sex abuse; and child sex abuse takes place only in the lower strata of society.

Payal, then, provides some indicators which will guide one to handle the situation well. She enlists physical, behavioral and psychological indicators which are astonishing but real. The urgent need of the hour is to get awareness about the indicators and then handle the issue very cautiously as it is quite sensitive. She provides information about some highly active NGOs working day and night for this cause, like: 1098, ARPAN, FACSE, Muskaan, RAHI, Elaan, etc.

While reading the lines the readers become shocked, horrified and even numb, as if having firsthand experience. The reader feels torn apart to see the inner truth of these incidents. It is astonishing and pathetic to note that the abuser is sometimes an uncle, a peon in the school, a friend of brother or sister or a very close relative. The victims have to go for counseling sessions, to the psychiatrist, and even sometimes, take several kinds of medicines and therapies to come out of the effects of the abuse. Most important role played to cope with the trauma is played by the parents. They help the victim to come out and live a stable life once again.

These books are salacious accounts of the exploitation, be it as a tender innocent child or as a hard and pushing grown up. These are the stories of the victimhood of real characters in real circumstances. Basically these texts arouse a feeling of awe due to the declining values in the society which force women to indulge in such professions, like bar dancers and sex workers, by not punishing culprits of sex abuse and rape on time. At times, the victims become mentally and physically unfit to adjust in the same society. All these issues dealt with by the authors are giving an insight into the changing face of society, manhood, relationships, values, and awareness on how to tackle them.

In some cases, authors have changed the names of some characters to protect their identity. No matter, whatever is the name, be it Jameela, Leela, Ameena, Anita, or Anurag, Lata, Jai, etc., we need to acknowledge that through these names, we have been taken to another world of reality. The

purpose is to understand the nature of circumstances which lead to such happenings in an ultra-modern society where everything even our relationships have become corrupt. Each text ends with a hope to see changes and move once again towards a moral society.

Although these books have quite similar themes, yet these have different kinds of closure. Payal ends up her book with a hope that people become aware and don't let any more cases of CSA to take place. She wants the parents to be aware and provide children with knowledge of not being a victim in the boundaries of the house which is believed to be the safest place. So, her slogan is 'prevention is better than cure'.

Beautiful Thing does not provide any possible solution to the problem. It mesmerizes the reader to a great extent but without any help to transcend it. Finally the reader closes the book with a feeling of having journeyed through the stark realities of "other" life. In the end, after the clubs are closed in Mumbai, Leela and Priya happen to meet Sharma. He arranges for their flight for Dubai where they would work as bar dancers and sex workers. But because poverty is too much, and this profession is a means of easy money, many more unexplored "Leelas" would continue taking birth every moment.

These texts depict the themes of abuse, suffering, rape and self-mutilation being treated lightly in these professions. These texts are well paced, sharply observed and rich sources of the inside lives of bar dancers, some of whom eventually turn into sex workers. This paper is an attempt to study the extent to which these texts have made use of literary journalistic techniques to give voice to women as well as sufferers used to being voiceless and a face to society which is usually invisible or is otherwise not wished to be seen even by the same sex. The need of the hour is to strengthen the related moral values which are deteriorating every new day.

These journalistic books are calm but the reader can feel a silent anger under the tenor. The texts have, through techniques of journalistic fiction like, using facts pertaining to the issues highlighted, applying real characters and backgrounds, plot, contemporary themes, and closure, aimed to encourage all to respect values and traditions, provide a safe environment for women, and being humanitarian towards all human beings.

So in the end it can be said that by uniting the literary narrative techniques with the journalistic research methodologies like immersion reporting, accuracy in depiction, careful structure of events, etc. to depict some daily experiences and real events, literary journalists generalize the emotions, feelings and experiences of the characters. Usually the readers have a feeling of empathy and rejoining with their own experiences and sensations. This is what makes these books different from the ordinary. They represent a literary activism of sorts both in their content and form and also in terms of questions raised.

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