

Re(discovering) the Self: Memory and Narrative in Gabriel García Márquez' *Living to Tell the Tale*

Chitra V R

Associate Professor
Department of English
University College
University of Kerala

Abstract: The paper discusses the ways that autobiographies can serve as documentaries of memory of the physical self and of a deeper philosophical signification. The memoir, which is a referential better suited to such narratives, brings out different contours of the self. The multiple ways that the self can be written through the act of remembering becomes of grave importance in a day and age of short attention spans and digitized memory drives. Thus, the act of autobiographical telling becomes performative- a selective oeuvre of events and incidents that serve a positioned narrative.

Keywords: Gabriel García Márquez, *Living to Tell the Tale*, Autobiography, Memoir, Paul Ricoeur

In his Nobel acceptance speech in 1982, Gabriel García Márquez described Latin America as a "source of insatiable creativity, full of sorrow and beauty, of which this roving and nostalgic Colombian is but one cipher more, singled out by fortune." The writer went on to say that "Poets and beggars, musicians and prophets, warriors and scoundrels, all creatures of that unbridled reality, we have had to ask but little of imagination, for our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable" (McGuirk and Cardwell 211).

Even when Márquez says that there has been a lack of conventional means to render lives believable, in his memoir Márquez tries to create a world so similar to everyday life and yet so very different from it, a reality in which the veneers of the real and the fantastic fade away quite naturally. Fantasy is used not as part of narrative structure but as a total world where normal relationships are reversed, where events are controlled by irrational forces and there is a constant contrast between the expected and actuality. It is significant how the narrator is forever beguiled

by the possibility of multiple versions of a past reality, of even his own reminiscences rescued from the memories of others as he always had "intrauterine remembrances and premonitory dreams"(63). Such prophecies, dreams, and irrational fears in the story of Márquez's life helped him give a realistic touch to what seems magical in life and portray a new affirmation of reality. This privileged the formation of his protagonists and episodes in most of his later fiction.

As Margarete Sandelowski states in the article "Telling Stories: Narrative Approaches in Qualitative Research", "the imposition of a narrative order on life illuminates the differences among what anthropologist Edward Bruner called a life –as – lived (what actually happened), a life –as – experienced (the images, feelings, desires, thoughts and meanings known to the person whose life it is), and a life – as – told (a narrative)" (163). Sandelowski elaborates that "these representations do not simply re - present, but rather (re) construct lives in every act of telling for, at the very least, the outcome of any one telling is necessarily a re-telling (163). This is pertinent to what Márquez says in his memoir, "Well, then the first thing a writer ought to write is his memoirs, when he can still remember everything" (*Living to Tell the Tale* 350).

Life writing, or any other personal account is a representation of life at a given moment rather than life itself. In telling stories, what is remembered and forgotten, and why, change over time because acts of remembering are implicated in how people understand the past and make claims about their versions of the past. Life narrative inextricably links memory, subjectivity, and the materiality of the body. Paul John Eakin in his work *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* problematizes the notion of autobiography as 'the story of the self' and argues that in the act of narration one is engaged in a process of making a self and that "our lives in and as bodies profoundly shape our sense of identity" (xi). The ability to recover memories, in fact, depends upon the material body that perceives and internalizes the images, sensations, and experiences of the external world. Memories are 'autobiographical subjects' created as the subject reconstructs a sense of identity while engaging with the world.

French philosopher and historian, Paul Ricoeur observes that by telling personal and collective stories, we make sense of our lives for "the reaffirmation of historical consciousness requires the search, by individuals and by the communities to which they belong, for their respective narrative identities" (274). An autobiography is in fact, a reflection of history resulting from the reconstructions of the past through several memorized events internalized by individuals. Events thus remembered "do not follow a single life story, but also highlight facts which make sense for the memory of an (imaginary) community" (Cuesta 2). The narrative of the self, evinces an interest in self-reflection about the personal and collective experiences as understood by the self and others. Life narratives are significant in this way because they are one way of defining the self or the existential selves. The way in which a person sees oneself in one's own mind is the internal self while the described self represents the outward or projected self (Smith and Watson 25). Smith and Watson point out that a memoir showcases the two selves, "one is the self that others see— the social, historical person, with achievements, personal

appearance, social relationships” (25) and the self - experienced only by that person, the, self felt from the inside that the writer can never get “outside of” (27).

Living to Tell the Tale, the first of a projected trilogy narrates what, on the surface appears to be the portrait of the young artist through the mid-1950s, but at a deeper level, transcends a straightforward autobiography. Memoir is an artistic expression in which people present themselves in the way they see themselves and can be largely fictional and offer wholly inaccurate depictions of lives even when it purports to be a ‘true’ account of one’s life. As Márquez rightly observes in *Living to Tell the Tale*, “the memory is clear, but there is no possibility that it is true” (63). Memory can play us false. The writer says, “So many contradictory versions have been the cause of my false memories”(63). In acts of remembering, how people remember, what they remember, and who does the remembering are historically specific and situated. Márquez remarks that “nostalgia, as always, had wiped away bad memories and magnified the good ones” (17). A particular culture’s understanding of memory at a particular moment of its history makes remembering possible for a life narrator.

Nevertheless, the politics of remembering also is related to the questions of who is authorized to remember and what to remember, what is forgotten, both personally and collectively. Sharing a social past, memory is an “intersubjective phenomenon”, as W. J. T. Mitchell suggests: “...a practice not only of recollection of a past by a subject, but of recollection for another subject” (Smith and Watson 17). Thus, acts of personal remembering can be fundamentally social and collective. Individuals determine how they would like to be viewed by others as the impressions widely matter. In daily interactions, this process becomes so streamlined that “individuals effectively projects a definition of the situation” (Goffman 6) in order to develop and maintain their intended projection of self.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their work *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* assert that the term “memoir” has emerged as a more inclusive term for representing a much wider range of forms of self-writing.

The term memoir, then, seems more malleable than the term autobiography, foregrounding historical shifts and intersecting cultural formations; and so when a narrative emphasizes its mode as memoir, as in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, readers are invited to think about the significance of that choice and the kind of reading it invites. (26)

Memory, apparently so immaterial and personal and elusive, is always implicated in materiality. The central story of *Living to Tell the Tale*, is the narrator’s journey with his mother to sell the home in which he had grown up. Márquez writes, “On the day I went with my mother to sell the house, I remembered everything that had made an impression on my childhood but was not certain what came earlier and what came later, or what any of it signified in my life” (62). This

journey ignites an outpouring of memories that spans Márquez's life from his birth in 1927 through the beginning of his career as a writer to the moment in the 1950s when he was about to leave for Europe. It is a story permeated with people, places, music and events, above all, parts of undisclosed history and incidents that would later appear, transmuted and transposed in his fiction. Márquez pertinently exclaims "Memory is more interested in the future than in the past" (5).

Psychologist Frederic. C. Bartlett, one of the forerunners of cultural psychology in his work, *Remembering*, asserts that memory retains "a little outstanding detail" (qtd in Lee 128), while the remainder of what we remember represents an elaboration that is merely influenced by the original event. *Living to Tell the Tale* expounds the author's life as a series of events and feelings weaved together by threads of memory. The memoir begins in *medias res* at a particular day in writer's life "My mother asked me to go with her to sell the house" (3) and then tells the story of how and why that day was unforgettable:

This simple two-day trip would be so decisive that the longest and most diligent of lives would not be enough for me to finish recounting it. Now, with more than seventy-five years behind me, I know it was the most important of all the decisions I had to make in my career as a writer. That is to say: in my entire life. (5)

The story begins from a journey he has to undertake as an adult to his native town Aracataca with his mother which evokes the whole memory of his childhood. Márquez recalls:

I was convinced my bad luck was congenital and irremediable, above all with women and with money, but I did not care, because I believed I did not need good luck in order to write well. I did not care about glory, or money, or old age, because I was sure I was going to die very young, and in the street. (365)

It is this nostalgic journey to his hometown, where he lived until he was eight years old that records past his memory, that would decide the vocation of the young precocious boy. This journey was significant in his life and is reminiscent of the opening line in his magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude*: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice" (1) and many other moments, when an event is identified as setting in motion the story and the meanings that flow from it. Márquez is consciously connecting a moment in his own life to certain moments in his fiction, where a decisive, unforgettable experience is illuminated and obsessively returned to.

Frederic. C. Bartlett refers to this key characteristic of memory as reconstructive: ‘We are so good at this sort of reconstruction . . . that we are often consciously unaware that it has happened. This seems especially likely to happen when a memory is told and retold . . . In such situations the “reconstructed” memory often seems as real as the “recollected” memory” (8). Márquez’ observation in this regard is interesting as he states that he was able to reconstruct the story, “rescuing the truth that had been lost in a tangle of contrary suppositions and reconstructing the human drama in the order in which it had occurred, and apart from all political and sentimental calculation (443). The writer remarks that it would not have been possible at the moment it happened “because of the awkwardness and unwieldiness of reality” (443).

Memories, individual and collective of past events vary to a great extent. Just as socio-cultural contexts shape individual memories, a “memory” which is mediated must be actualized by individuals, by members of a community of remembrance, who may be conceived of as *points de vue* (Halbwachs 48) on shared notions of the past. In his collection of essays, *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self Narrative*, Ulric Neisser notes that “if the remembered event seems to have played a significant part in the life of the rememberer, it becomes an example of autobiographical memory and may form part of a life narrative” (1).

Craig R. Barclay in his work *Autobiographical Remembering: Narrative Constraints on Objectified Selves* reinforces the notion of multiple selves and posits that because there is no single self, the image of the self is the product of a selected number of memories and their corresponding versions. He claims that the reconstruction of memory that occurs in the mind is a self-serving mechanism that allows people to fill their personal needs of self-image and societal belonging. He writes, “My position is that the self is not remembered because the self does not exist as something to be remembered”(71). The choosing of certain events and the subsequent choice to mould them into a narrative is clear evidence of multiple selves in memoir. This is evident in Márquez's writing that was constantly informed by his leftist political views, themselves forged in large part by a 1928 military massacre near Aracataca of banana workers striking against the United Fruit Company. Márquez writes: “From the first line I was certain that the new book ought to be based on the memories of a seven -year-old boy who had survived the public massacre in the banana zone in 1928. But I rejected this very soon because it limited the narrative to the point of view of a character without sufficient poetic resources to tell it ” (366). He was also greatly influenced by the assassination two decades later of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, a leftist presidential candidate. Márquez exclaims, “At no moment did I realize that I was already an apprentice writer who would try one day to reconstruct from memory the testimony of the hideous days we were living through” (298).

In his article “Group Narrative as a Cultural Context of Autobiography” Jerome Bruner writes that what we remember from the past is necessary to keep that story satisfactorily well-formed and that when new circumstances make the maintenance of that well-formedness sufficiently difficult, “we undergo turning points that clarify or “debug” the narrative in an effort

to achieve a clearer meaning”(41) and such form of continual revision in self narrative is a form of self-preservation that represents the struggle between the self of the past and the self of the present.

Representations are constructions, with whose help the pasts, the presents, and the envisioned futures can be shaped, articulated and reflected as a story, history, or biography. Since language is a cultural tool, memory and recollection are also cultural phenomena. Largely, it can be said that in a retrospective culture, different ways of representing the past, present, and a foreseen future, which rely upon the attainments of memory and recollection, are themselves prominently thematized. Actions are performed in a symbolic medium such as language, which inevitably gives them shape. Alluding to this aspect Márquez writes in his memoir: “... my life was always agitated by a tangle of tricks, feints, and illusions intended to outwit the countless lures that tried to turn me into anything but a writer” (120).

Memory, especially episodic or autobiographical, change, and the contents of memory are complexes of ideas which are constructed and re-constructed in the process of recollecting, “... even the most personal and intimate ones—as dependent on cultural and social semantics as well as on linguistic or other symbolic repertoires and modes of expression” (Brockmeier 218). In tellings, events are selected and then given cohesion, meaning and direction; they are made to flow and are given a sense of linearity and even inevitability. Echoing Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Márquez uses his memoir as justification for telling an artful story that challenges notions of authoritative record or chronology. Time is fluid in Márquez's Colombia, flowing back and forth among the mythic moments of his personal history to accommodate his fascination for place. While recalling a trip he took as an adult to his grandparents' house in Aracataca, he veers suddenly back to childhood and his earliest infant memories in that house. Born in Aracataca, a small Colombian town near the Caribbean coast, on March 6, 1927 as the eldest of the eleven children of Luisa Santiaga Márquez and Gabriel Elíjio García, a telegrapher and a wandering homeopathic pharmacist, Márquez was raised for ten years by his grandmother and his grandfather, a retired colonel who fought in the devastating Thousand Day War that hastened Colombia's loss of the Panamanian isthmus. His grandmother's tales would provide the inspiration for Márquez's fictional style and Aracataca became the model for “Macondo,” the village surrounded by banana plantations at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains where the writer's magnum opus *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is set. Márquez writes: “Only today do I realize how much my mother's unhappy state of mind and the internal tensions in the house were in accord with the fatal contradictions in the country that had not surfaced yet but did exist” (227).

Gabriel García Márquez dedicated himself to three cultural passions—his fictional works, cinema and journalism in addition to his love for music and plastic arts. The search for literary expression was therefore one of the foremost concerns of writers and poets in Latin America and it is in Márquez's narrative style, in his “magical realism” that Latin America found its most

potent literary voice. It was for his political convictions that he was exiled several times from Colombia, his country, and was denied US visas during years for his clear and forthright criticism of Washington's violent interventions from Vietnam to Chile. For Márquez, memory and narrativisation is not an individual act, it is for him recollection and collision of people's narratives he had not witnessed. The writer talks about his frail memory and perils of nostalgia and the "events that he professes to have witnessed are not childhood memories but the memories of later family conversations in his 'lunatic' house" (Carr 48). He places importance on creative mining of memory rather than nostalgia. Márquez writes:

I needed this old age without remorse to understand that the misfortune of my grandparents in the house in Cataca was that they were always mired in their nostalgic memories, and the more they insisted on conjuring them the deeper they sank. (64)

While narrating his formative years in secondary school and college he cites specific works that affected his development as a writer, such as Joyce's *Ulysses* which "provided invaluable technical help to me in freeing language and in handling time and structures in my books"(247) and Kafka from whom he learned that "it was not necessary to demonstrate facts: it was enough for the author to have written something for it to be true, with no proof other than the power of his talent and the authority of his voice" (247).The writer provides in great detail his intellectual and emotional progress through school and the university years when he wanted to write and pursue a journalistic career.

Márquez toys with the boundaries of truth and fiction throughout his memoir. He acknowledges that his memory is often faulty, especially with regards to his crucial, formative years with his grandparents. And his explorations of key moments in his life show that, despite his vivid "intrauterine memories" (63), the events were often temporally impossible. Further, he sketches his tale with recollections of ghostly presences and occult events, alongside the documented accounts of his early successes as a writer.

With its play on time and truth, memory and storytelling, *Living to Tell the Tale's* literary form acts as early evidence for Márquez's inevitable calling as a writer, with the enticing promise of the literary career about to explode. Entwined with personal and cultural history, Márquez's portrait of himself as a young writer is as revelatory and powerful as his fiction. For through the very process of recollection, the writer surveys and explores his own history, toward the end of making and remaking the sense of who and what he is, by inquiring into some of the very conditions of self-understanding that are woven into the fabric of contemporary life itself.

Remembering for Márquez is thus tacitly a kind of writing, which, rather than being a re-presentation of the past, refigures it in and through consciousness. The very process of widening

an understanding of the past by rewriting and reconstructing it is tantamount to its deformation and, distortion. For it is often impossible to ascertain the validity of statements made by an author within a memoir or biography. Hence the veracity of truth regarding the much larger questions matters in such a text. Nonetheless, the fictional dimension of both recollection and those narratives based upon it, are often taken into account often leaving the truth claims behind. As Sidonie Smith observes, when we read or listen to an autobiographical narrative, then, we listen for and attend to the role of remembering—and conscious forgetting—in the act of making meaning out of the past and the present. In a way, life narratives, depending on the memory they construct, are records of acts of interpretation by subjects inescapably in historical time, and in their relation to their own ever-moving pasts. (Smith 24)

Rather than assuming the role of 'autobiographer', Márquez assumes the role of a reporter, a witness, who will tell it as it is. The writer says: "The truth is there were no witnesses. An authorized version would have been the legal testimony of my grandfather and his contemporaries from both factions, but if there ever was a file of documents, not even its shadow remains" (39). He could conjure up some memories a series of 'coincidences', strewn together, that he resists the desire to falsify and distort his experience, however powerful it may be. Márquez avers:

... the terror of writing can be as intolerable as the terror of not writing. In my case, moreover, I am convinced that telling the real story brings bad luck. It comforts me, however, that at times the oral account might be better than the written one, and without realizing it we may be inventing a new genre that literature needs now: the fiction of fiction. (358)

Living to Tell the Tale is in no way a conventional literary memoir but is rather, as critic Christopher Carduff writes, "a way for an elderly master to revisit the monuments of his life's work and to view them from a different angle, to exhibit them in a different light, and to at once elucidate them and deepen their mystery" (qtd in Garagiola). The writer's intimate experiences which are personal and the stories he learned from others make Márquez an autobiographer of the collective self that constitute an integral part of his identity. Being a witness in society the narrator becomes the reader of his own experience, and the writer becomes an outsider of dominant culture. For Márquez "Getting a life means getting a narrative, and vice versa" (Smith and Watson 80) and his memoir demonstrates the truth that the life lived counts for as much as how it is relayed.

The narrators of autobiographical writing as they are telling unified stories of their lives, are creating or discovering coherent selves which are the myths of identity. For there is no coherent "self" that preludes stories about identity, about "who" one is nor is there a unified, stable absolute self that can remember everything that has happened in the past. Construing

autobiographical telling as a performative act, Márquez aptly remarks: “Today I realize that the novel itself could be another novel” (230).

Works Cited

Barclay, Craig R. “Composing Protoselves through Improvisation.” *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, edited by Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, 1994, pp. 55-77.

Bartlett, Frederic C. *Remembering*. Cambridge UP, 1932.

Brockmeier, J. Review of *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. *Memory Studies*, vol. 3, no.2, 2010, pp. 74–76.

Bruner, Jerome. “The ‘Remembered’ Self.” *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, edited by Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, Cambridge UP, 1994, pp. 1–54.

Carr, Raymond . “Being Prodigal with the truth.” *The Spectator*, 6 December 2003. Accessed 8 Sep. 2014.

Cuesta, Marta. “How to Interpret Autobiographies.” *Razón y Palabra*, vol. 16. No.76, 2011, n. pag. Accessed 6 Sep. 2014.

Eakin Paul John. *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*. Cornell UP, 1999.

Garagiola, Meredith. “Living to Tell the Tale.” *The Yale Review of Books*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2012, n. pag. Accessed 8. Sep. 2014.

García Márquez, Gabriel. “The Solitude of America: Nobel Address, 1982.” Translated by Richard Cardwell. *Gabriel García Márquez: New Readings*, edited by Bernard McGuirk and Richard Cardwell, Cambridge UP, 1987, pp. 207-11.

---. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Translated by Gregory Rabassa, Penguin, 1970.

---. *Living to Tell the Tale*. Translated by Edith Grossman, Penguin, 2003.

Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday life*. Anchor Books, 1959.

Halbwachs, M. *The Collective Memory*. Harper and Row, 1980.

Lee, Hermione. “‘From Memory:’ Literary Encounters and Life-Writing.” *On Life - Writing*, edited by Zachary Leader, Oxford UP, 2015, pp.124-141.

Neisser, Ulric. “Self-Narratives: True and False.” *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, edited by Ulric Neisser and Robyn Fivush, 1994, pp. 1-18.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 3, U of Chicago P, 1985.

Sandelowski, M. “Telling Stories: Narrative Approaches in Qualitative Research.” *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, vol.23, no. 3, Fall 1991, pp. 163- 66.

Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. U of Minnesota P, 2001.