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## **Narration of Trauma in Yuvraj Singh's Autopathography, *The Test of My Life***

**Renuka Shyamsundar Belamkar**  
Ph. D Student,  
Christ University Bangalore.  
&  
**Dr. Preetha Vasana**  
professor of English,  
Jyoti Nivas College Autonomous.

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### **Abstract:**

This paper looks at Yuvraj Singh's narration of his experience of the illness as an autopathographical account. While tracing Singh's journey through and out of the illness, the paper argues that the narration employs various narrative techniques, like the disjunct between the focaliser and the narrator for instance, to articulate the trauma of ailment and the loss of a healthy self, in the post illness healed phase. Furthermore, the genre of autopathography is examined as located at an intersection of two disciplines- humanities and medicine, which allows the emphasis on the subjectivity of the ailing person, who is otherwise categorised and objectified as the patient.

**Keywords:** Illness, Autopathography, Narration, subjectivity, trauma, pre-illness.

### **I**

Narration is the act of telling and re-telling a story. It can be explained as the representation of an event or of a sequence of events. The nature of narration in literature differs from genre to genre. Within prose narratives like autobiographies, testimonials, auto fiction, fiction, to name a few, critics have distinguished a number of characteristics that augment narration. For instance, the choice of narrator and the point of view is a key component to narration. To the many dimensions of first and third person narrators, and the use of plural narrators, theorists like Manfred Jahn, differentiate between focalizer and the narrator (96). Quoting Gerard Genette he observes that the narrator is the one who narrates the story and the focalizer is the one whose perspective the story is narrated from. Jahn also adds that the narrator and the focalizer may or may not always be the same (96-97). Porter Abbott further distinguishes between plot and narrative. The former is the larger linear story

–line, while the latter is the manner of telling the story (40). Teresa Bridgeman quoting Genette suggests three main distinctions to show narrative time: chronology, frequency and duration (56-58). Narratives do not always follow chronology or a linear narration. Further the narration is not equally distributed among the episodes. The narrative speed fluctuates to fulfil various purposes. Genette indicates that an “isochronous narrative” or a narrative of uniform speed “does not exist” (qtd in Ashok, A.V. 20). The narration either “accelerates” or “decelerates” depending on its purpose. “Acceleration” is the use of short segment of the text for the representation of a long stretch of story time. The use of “acceleration” is often to glide through the phase of the story that is not significant to the narration. “Deceleration”, which is the slow speed narration in the text of an event or a phase from the story, is used to focus or draw attention to that particular event or phase from the story which holds significant importance to the narrative (20). The purpose of drawing attention to an event or a phase from the story is also fulfilled through the act of repetition which in narrative terminology is termed as “frequency”. “Frequency” is the relation between an episode in the story and the number of times it is narrated in the text. A single event from the story is repeated a number of times in the story, which is called repetitive frequency (23). The various narrative techniques are employed based on the generic identity of the text. The various themes that the genre or more specifically the text attempts to explore also contribute to the determining of the use of various narrative devices.

Illness narratives attempt articulation of the trauma of a specific illness from the patient's perspective. The term “Autopathography” was first introduced by G. Causer in his text *Recovering Bodies: Illness, Disability and Life Writing* in order to distinguish these narratives from pathographies, which are narrated by a care giver, friend, family member of the ill person. The term Autopathography is a blend of two words- “autobiography” and “pathography”. In this genre, the term “trauma” goes back to its understanding as a wound on the physical body. These narrations talk about the trauma of the physical body and weave that into the trauma of the psychological and emotional self. Cathy Caruth, a well-known trauma theorist, in her introductory essay to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, talks about the power of trauma, under which the traumatized subject fails to be present to the traumatic event during its occurrence. The traumatic event often registers in the psyche of the traumatized subject “belatedly” much after the occurrence of the traumatic event. (qtd in Elissa Marder). Often these autopathographical narratives are written in the post traumatic phase. The stem of psychological and emotional trauma in these narratives comes from this wound on the body.



Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience* says “trauma is not located in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way it’s very unassimilated nature-the way it was precisely not known in the first instance-returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (qtd in Elissa Marder). This explains as to why it takes time for the traumatized subject to encode and process the event.

A person's changed perspective on life and the body post the traumatic event manifests itself in autopathographical narrations. It is also a call for action against the societal marginalization of the ill. As the word itself suggests it is an autobiography, with the traumatized subject as the narrator. They explore how illness disrupts the construction of the self by changing the course or length of life. It is the patient’s tale. The change in the perspective of the traumatized subject or the recovered self, manifests itself in these narrations. It articulates a change in their outlook towards life which is deeply affected and integrated in their experience. These narratives call for an action against the stereotypical perceptions about the patient and the illness. It articulates the disruption of the normal self. It bears witness and stands as a testimony to the re-construction of the self.

Due to cancer’s status as one of the most feared and least understood of the major illnesses, autopathographies and pathographies concerning this specific disease became common in the late 1970’s, with the overall rise in autopathographical writing. The prevalence of works concerning cancer have continued and developed through the present day, but this certainly is not an entirely new phenomenon. Examples from the nineteenth century indicate that, although the works were not published, people have been discussing cancer in letters and diaries for centuries. It is only in the last few decades, however, that these cancer works have been written with the aim of reaching an audience wider than immediate friends, family, and acquaintances. Far fewer experiential accounts of tuberculosis appear in the same vein as those of cancer; by the time the vast majority of autopathographies and pathographies were being written, a tuberculosis diagnosis in the west was no longer the dire event that it once was. Though there are references of the disease in the diary entries or letters of tuberculosis sufferers such as Franz Kafka and John Keats, but this genre of illness writing did not reach the levels that cancer would in the late twentieth century. Authors did however, use their personal tuberculosis experiences to inform and shape some of their texts, as in the case of Eugene O’Neill, whose plays *The Straw* and *Long Day’s Journey into Night* both contain elements of O’Neill’s tuberculosis infection.

Autopathographies when examined and analysed according to their authorial intent are broadly classified by Anne Hawkins into four categories. The first category is "Didactic Pathographies". These pathographies serve the primary purpose to help others by providing not just personal experience of the illness and accounts but also provide practical knowledge and information about the illness and the treatment. The second category is called "Angry Pathographies", the authors of these narratives hold a strong need to point the lack of care and efficiency in the ill person's care, the treatment or even the medical system. They most often express their disappointment and criticism of the system and not so much about the illness. They expose important problems in the medical system. The third category of "Alternate Pathographies" is also critical of the medical system but the harshness present in the earlier category is not seen here. The focus in this category is more towards finding and presenting alternate treatments rather than the sole purpose of criticizing the traditional systems. These narratives also act as an appeal to the physicians to open up to alternate medicine. A number of these pathographies talk about how they combined traditional medicine with one or more alternate treatments and how this helped their recovery. The last category called the "Ecopathography" is about linking the personal experience of the illness to a larger environment, be it political, cultural, social. They expose their society's attitude and treatment of the illness and most often look at illness as a product of the toxic environment, as cultural disease. They place the illness in a larger social context than just a closed personal space and examine aspects of the environment as reasons or causes acting against the ill person's recovery. Anne Hunsaker Hawkins furthermore says that these pathographies can be classified into three major categories; the first being Testimonial pathographies, which serve a similar purpose as the second category which is the Didactic pathographies, but they also include narratives that simply express one's pain and trauma that comes from the illness, there are also narratives that purely express the experience; the third category is Angry Pathographies, those that advocate alternate medical therapies. This paper aims to analyse *The Test of my Life* as an autopathographical account which articulates the narrator's experience of illness. The text will be further examined under the broader categories of autopathographies as mentioned above. This narrative also acts as a bridge between two disciplines; literature and medicine.

## II

Yuvraj Singh is a famous Indian cricketer and a sports celebrity. He has been part of the Indian Cricket team for roughly eighteen years and has played for three ICC World Cups.



Singh was an active member of the team until the 2011 World Cup, he won the man of the match for the world cup series. He was diagnosed with cancer soon after and turned towards the conventional medical methods and underwent the chemotherapy treatment in Boston and Indianapolis. The treatment served well for him and he was discharged a year later after completing the final cycle of chemotherapy. He returned to his profession, to cricket shortly after he was discharged. These events and experiences are narrated in his book *The Test of My Life*. The book was published in 2013, a year after Singh's recovery from the illness.

Singh's book like most other autopathographical accounts, begins at a point much before the diagnosis of the illness. This is often done in order to show the readers the healthy past that existed before the illness, before exploring the illness phase. Once the illness is diagnosed and identified, the trauma of the illness creeps into the healthy life. While it disrupts the physical body and the physical strength of the person it also ruptures the emotional and the psychological strength. This intensity of the trauma of illness is brought into the book from the perspective of the focalizer who is the ill self. The narrator, who is the healed and recovered self; and the focalizer in the book, are the same person but the perspective of the two differs. In Singh, there is the narrator who is the physically healed self and the focalizer who is the ill self. The focalizer is always present but when the narrator narrates about the illness the focalizer's perspective over powers the narrator's perspective. Singh's retrospective narration begins much after the illness- the plot begins in the past and the narrative begins in the healed phase when the physical body is healed.

Yuvraj Singh repeats his memory of the 2011 World Cup, which was right before he was diagnosed with cancer. The frequency of the event suggests it's significant role in his narration and in life. He begins the book with a detailed narration of the world cup. For Singh this memory of the 2011 World Cup provides the strongest sense of self that existed before the fragmentation caused by the trauma of illness. He finds a certain solace in remembering the World Cup. His repeated reference to the World Cup shows a refusal in him to let go of the healthy past that existed before the trauma of the illness. It provides him with the image that the healed self aims to achieve and go back to. For Singh his primary identity comes from him being a cricketer. The time gap between the world cup and the diagnosis is very less which is why the memory of the world cup becomes the last and the strongest point in his life. It is in this specific memory that he sees his most complete self. This memory also lies at the intersection of the healthy past and the illness phase. Apart the World Cup, a large part of his narration is acquired by his cricket, both in the pre illness and the healed phase. The

narrator being the healed self, is able to narrate the past using a tone of positivity. His retrospective narration allows him to look at the past in a different light. He sees the healthy past in contrast to the illness phase.

In the initial part of the book he talks about his inclination towards sports even as a child and his lack of interest in academics over sports. Singh's geographical locality also plays an important role in his first encounter with cricket, he says "My first memory of cricket has nothing to do with my father and his role in my game. It has everything to do with where I grew up..." (15). In the healthy past, Singh establishes the importance of cricket. He shows how cricket is an inseparable part of his life and his identity. Singh's primary identity comes from cricket, which is why most of his narrative revolves around cricket. Through these initial chapters he establishes his image that existed in the past before the illness. The illness restricts his physical activity; which Singh looks at as a setback. In his narration he decelerates his narrative about his profession suggesting the importance of cricket in his life. The memory of the World Cup is contrasted with the memory of the illness. The narration about the illness phase, particularly about his life in Indianapolis, shows the readers Singh's most vulnerable self. He shows the effects of the illness on his life, wherein he is stripped off his identity as a cricketer and reduced to the identity of a patient. His identity as a healthy sports person is overtaken by the identity of a patient, a person who needs to be treated and cured of the illness. During his stay in Indianapolis he goes to watch one of the Super Ball matches and to watch the players play their sport instils in him a deeper sense of trauma. The physical strength and healthy image of the players reminds Singh of his own physical deterioration. He goes from being the player on ground to being a spectator, an audience. He becomes dependent on another person for almost everything; he is unable to walk by himself without help. His narration about his inability in Indianapolis plays a complete contrast to his narration about the past where he was his strongest self, both physically and mentally. The trauma of the illness also affects his psyche deeply; his time in Indianapolis becomes the lowest and weakest phase in life. But the retrospective narrator draws strength through the narration of the healthy past. It becomes the toughest "Test" of his life. The pun in his title, the test series which is the longest form of the sport cricket is compared to his battle with cancer. The "test" is extended in his life. Test cricket is seen as a challenge to a cricketer's fitness and performance. Similarly, Singh's testing phase of cancer is his greatest challenge to his form and fitness. The elongated spread of time span of the test series is mirrored in the



decelerated narration about the illness. The illness like the test series spreads over a long period of time.

Singh's *The Test of My Life*, when looked at under the larger frame of pathographies can be classified under the category of Anne Hawkins' Testimonial pathography. These narratives are simple and straightforward. Singh in his narrative is clear and shows a certain need to narrate his illness in a wider framework of his life. He does not advocate alternate therapy or expresses anger towards the medical system or the doctors. But he talks briefly about his failed attempt at alternate medical treatment with the help of Dr. Jatin Chaudhary. This attempt at alternate medical assistance led to the delay in his treatment. The narrative is mostly about his experience with the illness and his process of recovery. His narrative also serves the purpose of "Didactic Autopathography". Singh because of his celebrity status holds an influential position in the society. His illness breaks the common assumption and gaze of the public about the celebrity life. It challenges the notion of perfection that is attached with the life of a celebrity. His narration of the illness shows the vulnerability of the celebrity figure. This Autopathography becomes didactic in its message that if a celebrity figure like him can be taken down by cancer than anyone else can. But his narrative also evokes a sense of catharsis in the readers. His struggle through and out of the illness becomes a ray of hope for his readers and his fans to face and overcome the different hurdles in life. Through his book he also talks about his foundation called "You We Can" through which he aims to help other people with cancer. Singh himself read voraciously and found strength in the story of the famous cycling legend Lance Armstrong's *It's Not About The Bike: My Journey Back To Life*. Armstrong was also diagnosed with cancer but not only did he recover, he also returned to his sport. Even as Singh's narrative can help a person's emotional healing, Singh finds his catharsis and strength in reading Lance Armstrong's battle with cancer. Singh also acknowledges the constant support and love from his fellow cricketers and his family. The name of the organization that he starts as after his recovery is also a pun on his name. The name of the foundation also suggests the idea of if "Yuvi" can and everyone can, "You We Can". Because of his own experiences he is able to empathize with the others. His journey through and out of the illness changes him from being a celebrity figure to a social figure who, is able to look at life as beyond just one's own self.

### III

The genre of Autopathography moves beyond a cathartic process to a powerful literary account about trauma. It explores the larger concept of trauma, including in its narration the trauma of the body and the emotional, psychological self. Autopathography also acts as a bridge between literature and medical science. The genre shows the power of literature to heal and recover. In the contemporary world literature cannot be kept in isolation from the other disciplines. There is the intersection of the various disciplines and the binaries between the disciplines collapse with a genre like Autopathography. The narratives use the literary techniques to talk about an experience that the medical world overlooks, in their articulation of this experience they move from being just records used for medical understanding to powerful literary narratives about reconciliation and hope.

This narrative fulfils another purpose, apart from the literary and cathartic process, the writer's agenda behind the narration does not limit to the healing power of articulation. The book serves the purpose of clarifying the speculations and conjectures that the media reported about him and his illness. It becomes a platform for him to put forth his life in his own words, to provide his story to his readership. He uses the book to talk about his illness and how the illness had changed his perspective towards life. The book becomes in one sense for him a coping mechanism to comprehend and live past the trauma of his illness. He also talks about his organization in the book, which aims to help people with cancer. Though there is a general assumption that he narrates it to gain sympathy, the dark irony and struggle in the Autopathography is about how he overcomes it all. He is trying to show the people that he heals and recovers from the illness. It is also a cathartic process for him to articulate his trauma and his experience of the illness.

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