

Reframing the Self: Schizophrenia, Identity, and Digital Narrative

in

'Fallen Standing' by Reshma Valliapan

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Abstract

Narratives of self-representation have the power to engage subjectivities. They focalise the subject point-of-view interspersed in gesture, voice, body, and the self. The global recognition of personal narration post World War II gave rise to many autobiographical genres dealing with holocaust, identity, exile, displacement, and disability. Autobiography emerged as a multimedia site that connects itself to the body's materiality. It attends to the issues of the narrator's body and the cultural meanings attached to it outside the text. This makes the body a site of knowledge and knowledge production (Smith & Watson). Disability Studies address that narratives enable the destigmatisation of illness and disability, and they lead to the extension of identity politics that provoke further disability narratives.

Fallen Standing: My Life As A Schizophrenist by Reshma Valliapan explores the newness of "life text" in the digital terrain. She writes about her experience of coping with therapy and medication, she also discusses her struggle to understand her illness, surviving suicide attempts, discovering support groups, and finally coming into her own. The scientist-subject equation of this narrative enables scrutiny of Schizophrenia through self-reflexive articulations; emails and journal entries. We are forced to ask ourselves how to engage (or disengage) the pre-established narratological conventions to place such texts. And seek the role of focalisation and narrative voice to create a nuanced perception of the mental health narrative of a woman. This paper explores how digital textuality has a world-making ability that becomes a deeply personal realm to reflect upon thoughts, memories, and perceptions of self and the community.

Keywords: Disability; Mental Health; Narratology; Life Narrative; Digital Texts

"We might be crazy but we're not stupid. We are not our labels. The whole world is a schizophrenia in itself and people need to look in the mirror before assuming they are in a better state of existence than those like me."

- Reshma Valliapan

Autobiographies written by creative writers, such as Ernest Hemingway in *A Moveable Feast*, Kamala Das in *My Story*, and Oscar Wilde in *De Profundis*, can remarkably narrate facts. Similar to this, actual events are included in novels like *David Copperfield*, *Ulysses*, and *Midnight's Children*. Alfred Kazin asserts that facts have creative potential that enables the writer to create a fable based on their life to convey a dramatic point and tell a story. If we examine attentively, we frequently find that our lives follow the rules of poetic form rather than actual non-fiction. In certain ways, autobiographies as narratives aim to evoke the impact of fiction and employ common elements found in fiction, such as themes, dialogues, settings, and points of view. It is not wholly situated in the fictional domain, nor is it merely representational. Writers who stay in their own world and engage in a stream of consciousness frequently argue that the outside world is crazy. Similar to this, Reshma Valliapan shares aspects of her experiences through *Fallen, Standing: My Life as a Schizophrenist*, which no one else can adequately express for her but herself, and which at times, the outside world refuses to acknowledge. The narrative function of this autobiography is to give the impression of a world that the author experienced in her family, her school, the rehabilitation camps she was sent to, her locked room, and the mental health practitioners she visited. And she eventually discovered how to use her stories to communicate.

Readers who read personal narratives from people with disabilities are rewarded with priceless insights into their lives. It nearly becomes the duty of the writer to provide readers with fully realised characters, motivations, and expectations to keep them interested in their story. Despite the irony that we have no qualms about labelling stories as true or incorrect, Bruner contends that the narrative is a representation of reality

whose acceptance is determined by convention and "narrative necessity" rather than by empirical verification and logical constraints. Language is necessary to free writers from the shackles of memory and the past. Within the theoretical framework of autobiography, which emerged throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s in literary studies, deconstructionist principles dictated that self-representation in language could only exist as an illusion created by a subject who was entirely textual. In autobiographies, the "I" stands for the subject and the object, the past and present selves, and the reason why the present narrator is privileged is because the past and present selves are distinct from one another. The opening section of *Fallen, Standing* is written from the perspective of an angry fifteen-year-old who despises her parents and defies social norms. In the safe haven of her adult self, Reshma lets the wounded fifteen-year-old write what's on her mind.

The conventional foci of mainstream disability studies research, despite their best attempts to be inclusive, tend to essentialise the group of individuals with disabilities. It's common to believe that people with disabilities, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, socio-economic class, religion, or other characteristics of diversity, have similar perspectives, experiences, and goals. We are thus opposed to the vast binary aggregate: abled/disabled. Disability self-narratives can question popular beliefs about living with a disability and represent disability as spaces of creation and creativity rather than determinism. We have the potential to "reimagine disability," in the words of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, by looking beyond overt disability themes like disease, appearance, and genetics.

The following is an excerpt from *Fallen Standing*'s publisher's note:

"This book does not have a conventional beginning, middle, and end. It was sent as a series of emails, accompanied by text, every week – or every few weeks or months, depending. It was often interrupted. It rambled and digressed, and was written mostly in first person, but sometimes in third. It followed no predictable chronology." (Valliapan)

To avoid "imposing meaning on the reader," Denzin advises writers of "messy texts" to steer away from linear figurations and oversimplified dichotomies and to encourage readers to think rhizomatically. Reshma describes how we have the propensity to categorise people who follow their own path as abnormal, mentally sick, or insufficient, and then push them into treatment facilities or prisons according to the prevalent diagnosis. Her own experiences highlight the subtle need that teenagers have to be accepted for who they truly are.

In a dialogic email discussion with her publisher Ritu Menon (Women Unlimited), Reshma's personal story takes on a digital dimension. It serves as a component of her expanded self as well as a symbol of her unique and shared identity, evoking memories of her past experiences, relationships, and identities. Before the invention of digital devices, people believed that the "self" would evolve throughout life and that mementoes, presents, and photos would serve as important anchors for a person's or a group's recollections of these changes. With the development of technology, such items became electronic streams of ones and zeroes that might be kept locally or in an unfathomable cloud. However, there are debates on digital mediums being a lesser authentic extension of selves. Yet the focus of this investigation remains the autobiographical recollection, which is made easier in Reshma's instance by the emails she exchanges and the notes she makes in her journals. Her future behaviour is guided by the autobiographical memory's directive function, which also aids in her learning from the past. A co-construction of her extended self or selves is made possible by her first-hand sharing of her incredibly personal tales with her publisher, and as part of her email storytelling, readers are eventually taken to the world of connection and conviction. The reader is taken right away to an emotional world and skillfully led toward the goal she has in mind. According to Foucault, subjectivity and identity are created by the individual through "a daily identity practice," rather than being pre-existing concepts. The notion of auto-mediality highlights the interconnectedness between media infrastructure, subjective reflection, and self-fashioning processes (Dünne and Moser 2008, 13). It allows one to approach digital autobiographical activities without giving up on the traditional paradigms that have their roots in autobiographical studies. Because Reshma's emails serve as both a physical representation of her online

presence and a repository for her memories, it is necessary to view them as an extension of who she is. It allows her to expand epistolary autobiography through emails, she notes, in her own words:

“So here we are talking about the appearance of our insides. Well, not talking, but I’ve typed and you are reading (though you could imagine us talking and let me know how our conversation went).” (Valliapan)

Reshma challenges the presumptive and familiar, gives voice to the context and the subtle, and demonstrates via her story that the self is dialogical in the first place. In particular: (a) hallucinations (or having sensory perceptions that others do not share); (b) delusions (or having beliefs that others deem idiosyncratic and grossly implausible); and finally (c) the diminishing of will and desire. These symptoms, along with the disruptions in sense of self that characterise Schizophrenia, can be seen in her case. Being a person with Schizophrenia, she also experiences a fragmentation of her identity, in which parts of her identity become jumbled or unconnected, she deals with an incomprehensible past, resulting in a convoluted self-positioning. There are several locations where the contours of a dialogical understanding of the self can be found. Here is Dostoyevsky's account of Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*:

"sullen, gloomy, arrogant, proud ... insecure .. .magnanimous and kind ... cold and callous ... always in a hurry, always too busy and yet he lies there doing nothing". (Dostoyevsky)

These features can be attributed to Reshma's Schizophrenic episodes of highs and lows, and the voices that worked in her head can be understood in the light of Bakhtin's interpretation of Dostoyevsky's character. In Bakhtin's analysis, the polyphonic entities are said to arise via a continuous sequence of conversations between many voices that operate as distinct components within an individual (Lysaker and Lysaker). Reshma's situation of Paranoid Schizophrenia often takes the shape of polyphonic entities in her head, it is clear from the story that her mental health is collapsing when she isolates herself. She does a great job of describing the internal changes that a psychotic episode

causes in a person. She demonstrates that a person with mental illness is still the same person, only with a different perspective on the world, and that mental illness is not merely a list of symptoms that take the place of normalcy and sense. She had to negotiate with social conventions, family expectations, personal preferences, and the constraints of dehumanising labels. She exhibits a variety of spatio-temporal sensibilities in her story, and we see a heteroglossia of internal voices in the narrator.

Since Reshma is the narrator, she also controls our point of view and offers the readers a variety of ways to acquire the story's material. This contributes to her story's powerful impact and changes our perception of how she portrays mental health. Instead of being seen as "objects" of aid, healthcare, and social protection, people with disabilities are now seen as "subjects" with rights, able to assert those rights, make life decisions based on their free and informed consent, and participate actively in society, living up to the motto - "Nothing About Us Without Us!"

In *Willow Weep for Me: A Black Woman's Journey Through Depression*, Meri Nana-Ama Danquah draws attention to the fact that characterising disability only as a person's battle against hardship obscures the political reality of oppression faced by people with disabilities. This statement echoes Simi Linton's claim that "the ideas embedded in the overcoming rhetoric are of personal triumph over a personal condition, rather than a collective demand for "social change." In a similar vein, Reshma claims that schizophrenia and other mental health conditions are not illnesses that need to be "treated" or eradicated. They don't require "fixing." These are everyday occurrences that serve as a stark reminder of our inherent fragility and vulnerability. It is our society's relentless efforts of labelling individuals as "misfit" that needs to change.

Conclusions

Because persons with disabilities are marginal voices in politics, politicians in India and the world do not view the rights of disabled people as a pressing issue because their deviant bodies are not seen as vote banks. Reshma Valliappan says even at this point individuals with mental illnesses are not permitted to fly on aeroplanes unless they are sedated, according to Indian law. They do not share everyone else's right to education, cannot vote, and have no say in how they are treated. Even though many of these

outdated regulations are unlawful, no one is eager to reform them. As Anita Ghai puts it, "children of a lesser God," there are numerous instances in the metaphorical story of Indian Disability Writings where various disabled individuals are marginalised. Munshi Premchand has depicted in *Rangbhumi* the oppression of a disabled person in rural India because of his visual impairment. Girish Karnad depicts the creative theft of a physically disabled author and the erasure of her story by her own sister in *Broken Images*. However, while concluding we can also look at some of the most significant and well-known disability life narratives written by Indian authors, including *The Other Senses* (2012), *No Looking Back* (2014), *One Little Finger* (2011), and *The Blind in India and Abroad* (1944). Historical, political, and ethical issues have taken centre stage in narrative theory lately, and the personal narratives of people with disabilities have been crucial in advancing identity politics and bringing their voices from the margins to the mainstream of dominant narratives.

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