Writing Lives Through Social Networking Sites: A Novel Mode for Catharsis

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Life Writing implies recording the various events of a person’s life, either by that person or someone else. It includes autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, diaries and even personal stories shared on social media like blogs, Facebook pages, and WhatsApp groups. The current paper analyses life writings on social networking sites (SNS), focusing majorly on the popular Facebook pages ‘Humans of New York’, and ‘Humans of Bombay’, as a means to attain catharsis. Before the emergence of social media, it was quite difficult for lay men to narrate their life and bring it forth to the public sphere. However, the condition has changed tremendously with the social networking sites gaining ground in the recent years. The popularity of such platforms is employed by people in various ways. Some has utilized it to narrate various instances of their life and made it accessible for common people. ‘Humans of New York’ and its similar page in the Indian context, ‘Humans of Bombay’, have become quite famous among netizens, as sites where random people narrate their personal stories, which is made accessible to people round the world. There are more than 18 million followers for the Facebook page, ‘Humans of New York’, which was initially started as a photoblog by Brandon Stanton. ‘Humans of Bombay’ is lead by a team and has around one million followers on Facebook. The present paper attempts an analysis of how the ordinary people have used the social networking platforms like ‘Humans of New York’ and ‘Humans of Bombay’ to narrate their life as a means to vent their feelings and attain catharsis.

Key words: Life writing, catharsis, social networking sites, technology

Life Writing implies the recording of the various events of a person’s life either by himself or someone else. Though the genre of life writing was of great demand among the masses, initially it wasn’t included in the academic considerations. However, gradually it gained the much needed social and academic recognition. As Ian Donaldson states, “Once neglected within the academy and relegated to the dustier recesses of public bookstores, biography has made a notable return over recent years, emerging, somewhat surprisingly, as a new cultural phenomenon, and a new academic adventure” (23). Earlier life writings comprised mainly of autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, testimonials, fictionalised biographies and personal letters. Ever since the digital media gained ground, life writing has extended its boundary, adopting novel platforms to translate life.
Writing life as mode to attain catharsis can hardly be over emphasised. Sister Jesme notes in her autobiography titled, *Amen: The Autobiography of a Nun*, that she writes for catharsis. Evan Dwan writes affirming the cathartic value of writing life, “self-expression is cathartic. When we write our worries, fears, frustrations, regrets and sorrows down we learn to face, embrace and let go of them. You empty yourself of your burdens and feel a greater sense of lightness and relief afterwards” (web source). At times it can be a two way process, where a writer vents out his feelings, narrating the experiences on the one side and on the other, a reader relates to it and feels empowered.

There are quite a variety of medium accessible for the people today to narrate their own life or someone else’s. For instance, biopics or biographical films, still stand as a popular and a favourite trend in movies. Biopics present the life of a prominent person either of the past or the present. A few of the recently celebrated Hollywood biopics include *Rocket Man* (2019), *Bohemian Rhapsody* (2018), *First Man* (2018) and *The Theory of Everything* (2014). Bollywood has also produced several noted biopics like *Sanju* (2018), *M S Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016), *Dangal* (2014), *Mary Kom* (2014), and *Bhag Milka Bhag* (2013).

Life writing has progressed and gained momentum with the wide spread popularity of numerous social media platforms like Facebook, Life Casting, Post Secrets, Twitter etc. The term ‘life casting’ is coined by Justin Kan, who used it initially to digitally share his life, twenty four hours a day. Since then, it has evolved to be an ever growing social media site, enabling people to stream various events of their life and communicate with other similar participants. Sharing various moments of a person’s life with his or her loved ones has been made quite lucid with Life Casting. However, the chances of receiving derogatory comments from viewers, that may adversely affect the participant and others, cannot be ruled out.

Post Secret, created by Fran Warren in 2005, is yet another popular community where people are given the opportunity to confess or disclose a secret, without revealing their identity. A person can mail their information which will be posted in the Post Secret’s website. Though the community provides ample arena for an individual to confess and vent their feelings, the authenticity of such information remains questioned. Also this community tends to promote the voyeuristic tendency in people by giving them a chance to be mere spectators rather than participants.

Twitter is yet another social networking service launched in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams. The messages sent through twitter, widely known as ‘tweets’, are restricted to 280 characters. As per the reports of the American Daily, USA Today, by 2018 Twitter has more than 321 million active users to their credit.

*Humans of New York* is a renowned social networking site with 20 million followers. Brandon Stanton began it in 2010 as a photography project. He captured photos of random people he met in the New York city and uploaded it along with a brief personal story they had
narrated to him. It has attained instant popularity. They have generously employed Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to reach to the masses. The work is also featured in two best selling books namely *Humans of New York* and *Humans of New York : Stories*. The ever increasing popularity of this Social Networking Site (SNS) encouraged many to create similar platforms, and *Humans of Bombay* in the Indian context is one such. It was Karishma who started the page in 2014, drawing inspiration from Humans of New York. She affirms,“ I am looking forward to seeing more people open up to larger aspects of their life.

In the present paper, the life writings shared both in *The Humans of New York* and *Humans of Bombay*, during the month of August, are analysed. A total of 22 posts were shared in the Humans of New York and among these, the majority of narrations dealt with the issues in interpersonal relationships. It included domestic abuse, workplace stress and bullying. Astoundingly, such posts received the maximum number of likes, shares and comments from readers. As for most of the narrators, when the self expression was a means for attaining catharsis, the cases of the readers were not different. For many readers, it was an ample platform which aided them in catharsis, leading on to empowerment. The followers and narrators were not restricted to New York but round the world. As Smith and Watson affirm, social networking sites enhance ‘transnational exchange’ which in turn will promote ‘global community building at least virtually’.

However, about 50 posts were shared in Humans of Bombay, and the major discussion was around various inter personal relations. When issues related to inter caste marriages, domestic abuse and homosexuality covered the major section, tales of bullying, chasing ones dream against all odds, were also found. According to Karishma, the founder of Humans of Bombay, the favourite story she had written was about the life of Zaaria, a woman who struggled in an abusive marriage and came out of it with much struggle. She also recollects about the overwhelming support Zaaria has received when her story was uploaded. Besides this, the page has also succeeded in raising funds for the needy. She had raised funds for Kranti, an organisation which works in support of the daughters of sex workers in Mumbai. Unlike its counterpart, Humans of Bombay constantly raise funds for the treatment of children, just by narrating their tale.

Life writing through virtual social media platforms is one of the most popular and easiest ways for catharsis today. Despite having both pros and cons, analysis of such bits of life writings provides immense possibilities to understand human psyche. From the perspectives of the author and the reader, sharing and reading one’s story that was never told before is both exciting and consoling.
References


