



Narrative Healing: Influence of Autobiographies and memoirs on Mental Health Awareness

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How to Cite this Article:

Sarfraj, R. (2026). Narrative Healing: Influence of Autobiographies and memoirs on Mental Health Awareness. International Journal of Creative and Open Research in Engineering and Management, 2(7).

<https://doi.org/10.55041/ijcope.v2i7.031>

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the concept of narrative healing the mental dilemma due to the impact and implications of the autobiography and memoirs. It tries to analyze the influence of autobiographies and memoirs on public perception of mental health, exploring how personal recovery narratives can challenge stigma, raise awareness, and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of mental health issues. I'll be choosing Iranian woman autobiographies in order to understand the impact of an autobiography over the stabilization of mental health and process of its awareness towards the society. This paper explores the concept of narrative healing, focusing on the influence of autobiographies and memoirs on mental health awareness, with a particular emphasis on Iranian women's autobiographies.

The self written narratives by Iranian women writers had immensely contributed towards the process of upholding the marginalized strata of the society to the world. I will be looking forward to explain the benefits and uses of reading and writing autobiographies and memoirs in respect with its role that it plays while reducing the stigma of the mental awareness. An Autobiography is a narrative account or a real life documentary, which indeed expose the actual historical and realistic facts, which is very significant in creating and promoting empathy towards the society. In the past few decades, mental health awareness has

undergone significant transformation, spurred in part by the growing number of autobiographies and memoirs that explore personal experiences with mental illness. Psychology and biological studies have consistently shown that structured writing about traumatic or stressful events, when writers delve beyond factual description into emotional processing, alleviates both psychological and physical symptoms. Researchers link these effects to "narrative identity" – the evolving life story people use to reconcile past hardships with future



aspirations. Redemptive and agentic narratives are associated with greater mental health and maturity. In trauma treatment, autobiographical writing empowers survivors to break their silence, reclaiming authorship over their pasts, and being recognized as an ethical and artistic process that fosters embodied recovery and psychoanalytic exploration.

All these first-person autobiographies play an impeccable role in breaking the stereotypes while emphasising the health issues, social stigma, and a rational understanding of society. Unlike any other, scientific or practical texts, an autobiography will give a clear picture of the actual reality of society while creating abstract lived experiences which are very much relatable and humanized. This paper examines the role of autobiographies and memoirs in shaping mental health discourse, focusing on their ability to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and create new pathways for empathy and connection in the broader public consciousness.

Keywords: consciousness, stigma, marginalized, resistance, scientific temper, mental illness.

INTRODUCTION

An autobiography is keenly dedicated towards a vision of contributing to society while imparting the moral values within society as well. This narrative not only fosters the mindset of an individual but also serves as beacons of hope for those grappling with similar issues. When people read an autobiographical narrative, they feel connected to the story, which is being narrated in the book. And sometimes it is also possible that the reader might have felt the same situation, which the writer is trying to narrate.

Our mental well-being is directly connected to the health of our physical body, and the complexity is that we face in between this is often intriguing, challenging, and enlightening. This paper examines how autobiographies and memoirs, as forms of “narrative healing,” contribute to mental health awareness by offering unique insights into the emotional and psychological challenges faced by those with mental health conditions.

With the narration of an autobiography, the writer not only narrates the actual story but is also trying to give voice to experiences that are often silenced, stigmatized, or misunderstood. So, when we read an autobiography, sometimes we might also feel provoked and challenged towards a dogmatic stigma. Each narrative holds the capacity to encapsulate real-life experiences and also to educate and provide different perspectives on mental and physical health.

An autobiography called ‘From Miniskirt to Hijab’ by Jacqueline Saper narrates the entire story of the Iranian Revolution, which took place in 1979, while emphasising the lives of the marginalized women who were subjected to fundamental religious intolerance and patriarchal implications. Jacqueline Saper has made an impeccable record of the Iranian Revolution and the Islamic regime, while exploring the rigid conditions of the Iranian government and the state. Many female readers who read this autobiography may have felt a connection with the story of the author. Because the condition of the majority of Iranian women way back in Iran was almost the same. Almost all of the female start of society was subjugated to the rigid ideas of patriarchy and the Islamic regime. So it becomes quite important for the female readers of Iran to read these kinds of autobiographies in order to strengthen their mental capacities and well-being. Quite recently, we see how the conflicts in Iran took place because of the hijab. Due to the death of Mahsa Amini, many revolutions took place in Iran, which resulted in the destruction of the healthy mental well-being of the Iranian population. These narratives help individuals make sense of their experiences, promoting psychological resilience and healing. These narratives often reveal the true and unfiltered experiences regarding the emotional and mental struggles in order to cure the mental illness and to open up a new possibility to nurture the physical and mental conditions by articulating their mental health journeys.



An Iranian women writer and a Nobel laureate, Shirin Ebadi, who also had to suffer through a mental trauma by the Iranian Islamic regime for her work *Iran Awakening*. She was also imprisoned and expelled from Iran, and right now she lives in America and fights for her rights.

There have been many studies done on the impact of autobiographical writings, which suggest that expressive writings can help us in reducing anxiety, mental trauma, depression, and anger, thereby increasing peace in mental health.

Autobiographies like Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* provide unique cultural perspectives and highlight the intersection of mental health with social, political, and cultural issues. For Iranian women writers, self-narratives can be considered a weapon against their subjugation and exploitation. It is equally important to understand how feminism looks at modernity and religion. Modernism is a worldview that can be traced back to Enlightenment philosophy. According to Shukri (2011: 3), the beginning of philosophy about equality between genders can be traced back to the Cartesian thinkers who followed the idea of René Descartes, which was to make sure all received ideas were evaluated in a methodological doubt to achieve a new sound foundation of knowledge.

Similarly, Kauthar (2005: 184) posits the same viewpoint, and feminism usually circulates around three major problems, which are philosophical, theological, and practical.

Jacqueline Saper in her book *From Miniskirt to Hijab* accounted that she grew up in a

Muslim family in a healthy, liberal, and rational environment. Before the downfall of the Shah of Iran, women were free to dance, sing, bike in public, and sunbathe on the beach. But after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, women lost a lot of their rights. Also, the Hijab was legally enforced. She believes that religious intolerance is the inability or unwillingness to tolerate or respect another person's religion. It can manifest itself in many ways, including verbal abuse, physical violence, and discrimination. Any Iranian woman who has faced the same kind of situation will feel very much connected with this autobiography while emphasising more on the possible speculations and solutions to deal with the demise. One of the very important aspects of an autobiography is that it humanizes the mental conditions with an actual, productive picture of the very human existence and exploitations.

For instance, books like *Darkness Visible* by William Styron and *An Unquiet Mind* by Kay Redfield Jamison offer deeply personal accounts of depression and bipolar disorder, respectively. All these narratives will help the people to understand the mental abilities and illnesses in a very broader way, which sometimes the clinical psychologist wouldn't be able to do.

Historically, mental health has been marginalized in both medical discourse and cultural representation. It's often linked to moral judgement, stigma, and silence. As a result, autobiographies and memoirs have become increasingly important for people to express their experiences of psychological anguish, trauma, and recovery. These texts emphasize lived experience, emotion, and subjectivity in contrast to clinical narratives that focus on diagnosis and objectivity. They challenge social conventions about mental illness while documenting individual suffering. This study explores how autobiographies and memoirs facilitate narrative healing and raise awareness of mental health issues. It argues that life writing empowers authors to reclaim agency over their experiences and offers readers alternative perspectives on mental health beyond pathologisation. By placing personal suffering within broader social, political, and cultural contexts, autobiographical narratives transform private pain into public knowledge.

Narrative healing is based on the belief that storytelling is fundamental to human cognition and meaning-making. Scholars like Jerome Bruner suggest that narrative structures help individuals organize chaotic experiences into coherent forms, restoring a sense of continuity and identity. In trauma studies, Cathy Caruth



highlights how trauma disrupts linear memory and language, making narration both challenging and essential. Autobiographical writing becomes a therapeutic tool for processing trauma by giving voice to experiences that resist articulation.

Autobiographical narratives have long been acknowledged by feminists as a kind of struggle against the production of knowledge that is dominated by patriarchy. Autobiographical narratives, according to feminist scholars, legitimize emotional and embodied knowledge, particularly for excluded individuals whose suffering is frequently minimized or medicalized. As a result, story healing challenges political systems that stifle mental suffering in addition to psychological issues.

Autobiographies profoundly impact readers and can also be therapeutic for the author. Memoirs foster empathy by immersing readers in the inner lives of individuals through personal accounts of mental suffering. By exposing the emotional depth and everyday reality of mental illness, memoirs humanize it, contrasting with statistical or clinical portrayals. This compassionate engagement is crucial for raising awareness of mental health issues. Memoirs depict mental illness as a complex response to social, cultural, and historical factors, challenging stereotypes that portray it as weakness or deviance. Readers are prompted to reconsider their assumptions and prejudices through identification and emotional resonance, promoting a more sympathetic public discourse.

A good autobiography majorly aims at destroying the stigmas in order to break the barriers and to build good mental health. Memoirs like *The Centre Cannot Hold* by Elyn Saks, a law professor who lives with schizophrenia, challenge the stereotype that those with mental illness are incapable of leading successful lives. Similarly, *Furiously Happy* by Jenny Lawson combines humor and brutal honesty to discuss depression and anxiety, making these conditions more approachable for those who may not understand them. As more great public figures go on sharing their stories and narratives, the more the public will understand that mental illness or the exploitations are no more shameful conditions. Instead, they will also start to read more and more narratives in order to understand the ground reality while emphasising more on exploitations and finding solutions to them. It is quite evident with what happened in Iran. It is only because of the great Iranian women writers who have led a foundation of liberation with their narratives, which later on was dimensionally built further by other young activists and writers. This foregrounded foundation has always been the base for all the resistive attacks against the conservative notions in the country.

One of the best examples to understand the power of an autobiography or a memoir is Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, which exclusively aims at producing the actual, real picture of the bell jar while showing the progressive fragmentation of her own mental state. It is a perfect example of how an oppressive force can isolate society from the world under the deteriorating mind. The protagonist, Esther Greenwood, mirrors Plath's life in significant ways, including her experiences with a prestigious internship in New York, a suicide attempt, and hospitalization for severe depression. Through Esther, Plath explores the intense pressures faced by women, the suffocating effects of societal expectations, and the isolation that accompanies mental illness. Plath's depiction of mental illness runs counter to many of the stereotypes that were prevalent at the time. Rather than being portrayed as "hysterical" or irrational, Esther's mental state is presented as a legitimate response to the pressures and constraints she faces. This nuanced portrayal challenges the reader to view mental illness not as a personal failing but as a condition that is influenced by societal forces and pressures. The novel's impact on the discourse surrounding mental illness is profound, and it remains a vital part of the conversation about narrative healing and the role of autobiographical fiction in mental health awareness. This research demonstrates that autobiographies and memoirs are powerful tools for narrative healing. They transform both personal experiences of psychological suffering and societal perceptions of mental health. Life writing challenges the professional and often reductive frameworks used to interpret mental illness by prioritizing lived experience. By actively reconstructing meaning rather than merely recounting suffering, autobiographical narratives empower authors to reclaim control over suppressed histories and fractured



identities. This makes narrative healing a tangible practice that renegotiates identity memory, and subjectivity rather than a mere metaphor. Furthermore, by placing psychological suffering within social, cultural, and political contexts, autobiographies and memoirs broaden the conversation about mental health beyond illness. They reveal that mental suffering is often influenced by factors like trauma, systematic violence, exile, gendered oppression, and religious regulation rather than being an isolated individual condition. Life writing encourages cultures to acknowledge their role in causing and perpetuating psychological illness by exposing the ethical and political dimensions of mental health through the integration of human narratives within larger power structures.

All the above autobiographies are not just a narrative, but also a powerful tool to challenge the stigmas and cultural norms in order to bring about a deeply stigmatized topic of discussion into the limelight. All these narratives mainly focus on exploring the sense of alienation and their struggle to carve out a meaningful identity, which has also become a central theme to the narratives.

CONCLUSION

These autobiographies are the medium through which we can analyze the real situations of Iranian society, the quest for the empowerment of the female sections of society, to resist the dominant, and to produce a more liberal culture and literature. This liberal culture will feed the society with a very positive mindset and positive mental health in order to establish a sense of equality and peace in their respective societies.

Iranian cultural formation occurs purely based on fundamentalist thoughts and ideas they follow, so it is quite evident with the cultural materialistic setup that their culture is way more contextualized and historicized, while it can be severely analyzed with cultural materialist and New historicist perspectives. This is exactly why all these autobiographies are more emphasized on creating positive mental health while opposing these fundamental thoughts. As the genre continues to evolve, it remains a vital component in the ongoing effort to create a more compassionate and understanding world for those affected by exploitation and the factors that have had impeccable adverse effects on their mental stability.

Furthermore, the author-reader dialogue demonstrates how autobiographical stories can transform. By immersing readers in personal experiences of vulnerability, terror, and resilience, memoirs cultivate empathy and awareness.

From a literary perspective, personal writing challenges prevailing epistemologies that prioritize coherence, objectivity, and reason.

Consequently, life writing confronts institutional authority that often minimizes or dismisses individual suffering by asserting subjective truth. Crucially, narrative healing demands resistance. Writing candidly about mental illness defies societal norms of shame, normalization and silence. Autobiographies and memoirs thus become platforms for ethical witnessing, preserving testimonies that challenge invisibility and erasure. They assert that psychological pain is a human and social reality necessitating justice, care, and structural change beyond medical treatment.

Autobiographies and memoirs are crucial at the intersection of social critique, literature, and mental health. They challenge oppressive structures affecting mental well-being and foster empathy by transforming personal suffering into shared understanding through narrative healing. Life writing emphasizes storytelling's therapeutic power and its potential to forge more compassionate futures. This makes it an essential literary and ethical resource as modern societies grapple with increasing mental health challenges.



By offering intimate insights into the struggles and triumphs of individuals living with mental health conditions, these personal narratives humanize mental illness, reduce stigma, and foster empathy. They perform both as a comfort and also as an opportunity for the needful. Sometimes an autobiography serves as a comfort for the one who has felt exploitation and suffering while on the other hand, it also serves as a severe opportunity for the one who is looking forward to bringing some changes in society with the help of rational and democratic principles and ideologies. As the genre continues to evolve, it remains a vital component in the ongoing effort to create a more compassionate and understanding world for those affected by oppression and exploitation. So the cultivation of autobiographical narratives has always been a groundbreaking attempt in understanding the psychological phenomena of society's exploitation and also to find some possible solutions to establish a sense of equality and prosperity in society.

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