Conclusion

Sports autobiographies have hitherto been assigned a ‘low’ cultural status. The life stories of athletes are often considered “unpolitical and self-worshipping,” oblivious of the “events occurring under their noses” (Bale, Christensen and Pfister 10). They are merely perceived as easy narratives of sporting achievements and failures. The stories of the rise and fall of sport-stars, their awards, distinctions, records and numbers, their friends and rivals, their training routines and diet regulations, their love affairs and flings, and finally their hobbies and obsessions ostensibly form the stuff of this kind of life writing. In other words, sports autobiographies are believed to possess ‘entertainment’ stuff to be consumed in leisurely hours. Often these books hit the best-seller charts. This way, the life narratives of athletes are solely registered as economically driven, profit making endeavours. In terms of narrative orientation, sports autobiographies are speculated to be formulaic, lacking any sense of variety. For many, they are rags-to-riches accounts selling romantic musings to the consuming readership. Some believe that these life stories hold importance merely for ardent sports lovers. All these assumptions relegate sports autobiography to be unworthy of serious academic attention.

The thesis takes on the assumptions that tend to deny sports autobiographies their potential to participate in the processes of cultural transformation. The preceding chapters not only recognize the cultural quotient of the lifewriting of sportspersons, they also successfully establish the seriousness of this form of writing in terms of its capacities to inhere the larger debates that evolving civilizations often are confronted with. In the wake of postmodernism, the blurring of institutional boundaries has broadened the impact of sport celebrities beyond the sphere of playing field (Andrews and Jackson 7). They have a role-identity, which is determined by their abilities to affect the cultural capital. Reckoning sportspersons to be representative figures, the study cogently argues for the deep play of cultural codes that determines the life stories of athletes. In the autobiographies of sportspersons, the act of writing about oneself has also brought together the shared values of communities they represent.
According to James Pipkin, the formation of self in sports autobiographies cannot “escape the imprint of culture in which the athlete lives” (5). Therefore, as a substance of story, the off-field discourses are found to co-exist with the on-field achievements which provide an athlete a platform to speak. The first person ‘I’ in these accounts has alsosymbolized a certain group or communal identity pertaining to an athlete’s religious, ethnic, racial, national, or gender based affiliation.

The preceding chapters have presented how these off-field discourses have shaped the life stories of sportspersons. In the thesis, there has been a consistent pattern or a refrain of ‘in-betweenness’ which has held together the entire argument and has also made possible a study of several issues at the same time. ‘In-betweenness’ has also served as an alternative method to examine the problems of binary model. The chapter titled “Between the Self and the Ghost” has demonstrated the almost inevitable involvement of ghostwriters in sports autobiographies, and their ‘dubious’ role in representing the sports stars with their own cultural agenda. It has exemplified how the subjectivities of ghostwriters mediate with the cultural identities of their autobiographical subjects. Pakistani cricketer Imran Khan’s English ghostwriter Patrick Murphy has failed to suppress his Eurocentric beliefs and the myth of Western superiority in Khan’s life story. Sonia Sanwalka, in the attempt of writing her father Milkha Singh’s autobiography, has suffered the lack of first-hand experience, especially in the depiction of the Partition scenes. Muhammad Ali’s collaborator Richard Durham has turned Ali’s autobiography into a simultaneous biography of the Nation of Islam. Czech-American tennis player Martina Navratilova’s American ghostwriter George Vecsey has misrepresented facts to downgrade communism and to revere the democratic standards of the United States. Therefore, it has been discerned that the ideological biases of ghostwriters moderately infiltrate into the autobiographies of their subjects. In this chapter, various seminal issues such as subjectivity, cultural identity, and the practice and politics of collaboration are discussed in the specific context of sports lifewriting.

The chapter entitled “Between Literature and Journalism” has sought to identify the quotient of literariness in the life narratives of sportspersons. It is
generally believed that due to the involvement of journalists as ghostwriters, autobiographies of sportspersons are journalistic texts. It has been argued in the chapter that sports autobiographies overstep the conventions of journalism and adopt several means to engender creativity. However, it has also been maintained that they do not achieve the sophistication of mainstream literature and rather evince aesthetics of in-betweenness. It is observed that different autobiographies have followed distinct methods pertaining to the literary art. Muhammad Ali’s life story has exemplified novelistic techniques such as the use of images and metaphors, rhetoric and dialogue, and scenes and episodes. Avoiding the plain descriptions, the autobiographer has incorporated a mythical framework for plot development. In the autobiography of Martina Navratilova, the empirical facts are defamiliarized with the technique of literary realism. Milkha Singh’s life narrative has thrived on the anecdotal retelling of his life experiences. Therefore, the chapter has exhibited how sports autobiographies problematize the oft-perceived binaries of literature and journalism.

The issue of women in sports has always been implicated by the larger realities of culture and gender relations. The chapter titled “Between the Home and the World” has traced this interaction between the cultural codes and the pursuit of women in sports. It has been an attempt to discuss the issues of male gaze, body politics, biological determinism, and gender stereotypes via the autobiographies of three Indian sportswomen. The main focus, as the title of the chapter suggests, has remained on the spatial aspects. The sites of sports have been classified on the basis of their potential to engender bodily emancipation. It is argued in the chapter that sporting spaces have enabled women to transgress the sites of interior such as kitchen, verandah and courtyard. Autobiographies of sportswomen have emerged as travel narratives, documenting their explorations around the world. The life story of Indian badminton player Saina Nehwal has been interpreted in terms of travel and its association with identity formation. P. T. Usha’s autobiography has dealt with the sport of athletics and the geographical freedom it offers. The life narrative has also been a pretext to examine how the stereotypes related to feminine body attempt to hinder the march of sportswomen. Recording the feats of an Indian woman in the
boxing ring, M. C. Mary Kom’s autobiography has problematized the homogenous image of the Third World woman. As a journey of a working class girl, the life story has suggested how spaces of sport are inevitably linked with the socio-economic background of their practitioners. The subtext of motherhood is also explored in the context of family responsibility and sporting ambition. The chapter, therefore, has mapped the movement of Indian sportswomen between the ‘home’ and the ‘world’.

The penultimate chapter “Between Resistance and Censorship” has illustrated the incessant struggle between the normative culture and the countercultural practices. Counterculture is found to be the source of resistance in the autobiographies of sportspersons. Taking insights from Nicholas Mirzoeff, sports lifewriting is recognized as an act of countervisuality. However, it has also been affirmed that the act of resistance in the life narrative of athletes is not driven by extreme radicalism. The chapter has dealt with the life stories of deviant sportspersons who, in one way or the other, have exposed the status quo. Martina Navratilova’s autobiography has foregrounded the idea of overt censorship exercised by the communist state during the Cold War era. Having a bisexual athlete as its protagonist, the autobiography has also unveiled the discord between the deviant sexuality and the heterosexual norm. The subcultural notions such as abjection, perversion, taboo, and queer are elaborated upon through the study of Navratilova’s life story. Andre Agassi’s memoir has exposed the power mechanisms by which the normative culture produces coerced and docile citizens. Unfolding the subversive means, the chapter has delineated how Agassi counters these power apparatuses. The idea of ‘profane culture’ propounded by Paul Willis is brought into consideration while decoding Agassi’s persona. Wimbledon champion Arthur Ashe’s life story is concerned with the demythologizing of the AIDS phenomenon. The life narrative has challenged what Susan Sontag calls ‘the metaphor of illness’. However, the autobiographer has voiced out his subversive opinions but he has also maintained his respect for the status quo. Accordingly, it has been emphasized in the chapter that despite being the narratives of resistance, sports autobiographies tenderly tackle the dialectic of defiance and conformity.
The last chapter entitled “Between the Reel and the Real” has elaborated upon the impact of cinematic imagination on the aesthetics of sports lifewriting. Written in the age of visual culture, autobiographies of athletes have evinced significant pictorial tendencies. Moreover, in the narrative formation, they have exploited techniques and methods generally associated with screenplay. Sports autobiographies have exhibited an impulse of describing the past events in a perceptible manner. They have captured the sporting moments, reproducing the visual and aural effects of ‘live’ broadcast. The cinematic jargon and terminology has spontaneously developed in the description of scenes. Moreover, the autobiographies are found to be ‘character’ driven stories that offer readymade protagonists and legends to sport films. The chapter has not identified a linear movement of influence from autobiography to film or vice versa; rather it has showcased a poetics of mutual dependence. Retaining the cord of in-betweenness, it has been asserted in the chapter that there is no absolute identification between the two mediums; nonetheless, they are found to permeate each other.

The preceding chapters thus have registered a persistence of ‘in-betweenness’ in the literary and cultural aesthetics of sports lifewriting. In-betweenness has emerged as a generic trait which tethers all sports autobiographies in a common thread. Each life narrative, however, is also found to be uniquely distinct on the basis of its literary, political, cinematic, and spatial engagement. These accounts have also differed from each other on the grounds of different sports they deal with, nationalities their subjects come from, primary profession their ghostwriters are engaged in, and periods of life they are written around. Moreover, they are influenced by the larger literary trends of a particular region or country they are written in. Due to such variance, life narratives of athletes have questioned the assumptions of autobiographical verisimilitude. In terms of cultural concerns, they have pushed their limits beyond the realm of sports and have emerged as serious documents for cultural rethinking. Sporting figures may never engage the cultural imagination as did Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther and Nelson Mandela, but they would always make persistent interventions in the cultural discourse through their life scripts. For this
reason, sports autobiographies are no longer meant to be sold merely at footpaths, railway platforms, bus stops and airports; they have rather secured a place for themselves in the library racks.