Chapter 2

Between Literature and Journalism

I

Despite the recognition of autobiography as one of the forms of mainstream writing, all its variants are not accorded a literary status. Autobiographies of sportspersons, for instance, are simply dismissed as mere journalistic, “anti-intellectual” and “unworthy of academic study” (Dawson 768). The overarching presence of journalists as ghostwriters in these collaborative life accounts consolidates the impression of such autobiographies as being either too flat or aesthetically descriptive to sustain any critical attention. Most sports autobiographies are considered reportage of the testimony provided by the autobiographical subject to the scripter. They are assumed to consist solely of “scores and statistics – batting averages, shooting percentages, earned-run averages, running yardage, passing percentage” and so on (Shaw 148).

This chapter intends to dismiss the presumption that sports autobiographies are merely stretched pieces of journalism. While maintaining that autobiographies of sportspersons draw mainly from their journalistic reservoirs, the chapter elucidates that these accounts transcend the regulatory codes of traditional journalism and enter the domain of literary writing. These life narratives trudge along an in-between aesthetics effected by the simultaneous presence of literary and journalistic devices. The tropes that these accounts employ are simultaneously abstract and concrete, complex and simple, connotative and denotative, figurative and literal, implicit and explicit, reflective and active, verbal and visual, and ironic and un-ironic (Easthope 89). This chapter underscores and critically evaluates the flexible grammar of sports autobiographies, paying particular attention to life narratives of the boxing legend Muhammad Ali, the tennis sensation Martina Navratilova and the ace sprinter Milkha Singh.

Andre Gide, in If It Die, asserts: “Memoirs are never more than half-sincere, however great the desire for truth; everything is always more complicated than one
makes out” (250). ‘Truth’ here implies a reliance on facts and empirical evidence. Gide suggests in an undertone that life narratives are equally fictitious and imaginative and evince a degree of creativity. They penetrate the realm of art and utilize all “the rhetorical resources of fiction and drama” (Shapiro 421). The journalists as co-autobiographers take liberty with the dialogue, fictionalize the historical incidents, use anecdotes for a serious purpose, penetrate the psyche of the characters, experiment with chronology, and develop a reporting style full of metaphors and images. In the process of exploiting the fictional resources, while life narratives of sportspersons transgress the boundaries of traditional journalism, yet they barely approach the distinction of canonical literature. In the system of literary ghettoization, autobiographies of sportspersons remain a lower form of literature on the account of their emergence from a field of popular culture. They neither live up to the expectations of literary ‘Great Tradition,’ nor do they succumb to standard journalistic conventions. They instead debunk the “polarized oppositions” (Easthope 90) that are embedded in the assessment of fiction and non-fiction. In other words, these accounts emerge as literary hybrids that lurk in-between the oft-perceived binaries of journalism and literature – fact and fiction, entertainment and seriousness, personality and character, documentation and experimentation, and timeliness and timelessness.

II

The life stories of sportspersons, more often than not, are written when the athlete is still active on the field or till the time his or her image is abiding in the public eye. They are accounts of the immediate past or the simultaneous present, and tend to fall within the domain of journalism which counts on the topical issues. It becomes an uphill task for an autobiographer to bring the text out of journalistic impersonality through some imaginative reconstruction in order to lend the book a scope of re-readability, a virtue denied to journalistic enterprises. Nevertheless, any kind of reconstruction has its own limitations. An autobiographer’s imaginative and creative reworking on the content and style may emancipate the book from the burden of ‘timeliness’ but it cannot elevate it to the ‘timelessness’ of great literature. The
autobiographical narratives of sportspersons, in terms of their sustainability, are poised well in-between the temporal extremes of daily decadence and everlasting impression.

The incompatibility of autobiography with imaginative reconstruction upsets an autobiographer/ghostwriter in developing an autobiographical personality. Unlike literary characters, there is little scope of build up in the already established persona of an athlete. E. M. Forster, while speaking of literary characterization in Aspects of the Novel, asserts that “[a] memoir is history, it is based on evidence. A novel is based on evidence + or – x, the unknown quantity being the temperament of the novelist, and the unknown quantity always modifies the effect of the evidence, and sometimes transforms it entirely” (Forster 45). He also adds that “the historian records whereas the novelist must create” (46). The possibility of a fundamental change in the institutionalized public persona of an athlete through some “unknown quantity” of modification seems disagreeable but an autobiographical narrative does not paint a two-dimensional media driven image of the athlete. It rather penetrates the personal and the subjective and explores aspects of an athlete’s personality beyond his normal news-value.

Roy Pascal, in Design and Truth in Autobiography, states that each autobiographical narrative differs according to its subject’s “profession” and his “specific achievement” (132). A sportsperson’s “profession” is to exhibit his sporting prowess on the playfield and his “specific achievement” is the entertainment of spectators over a period of time. An athlete, in that sense, pursues “acts of far less significance and possess[es] attributes of far less stature than did mythological heroes of ancient times” (Berg 135). Unlike epic heroes, a sportsperson does not undertake heroic odysseys; nevertheless, he rises to a celebrated status. He hardly meets the definition of a modern celebrity with fifteen minutes fame. He rather simultaneously performs as an entertainer, philanthropist, social activist and a representative of his race, gender and/or community. Therefore, in covering the lives of subjects who influence cultural dynamics, autobiographies of sportspersons cannot become pieces of sheer entertainment.
Lifewriting of sportspersons, defying the label of amusement narratives, assures seriousness but not to the level of spiritual profundity. Despite being the narratives of achievement, sports autobiographies do not match the heroic proportions of autobiographies of the nationalist elite. In the autobiographies of nationalist elite, life itself stands for a sagacious desire to ‘experiment with truth’ and encompasses their ‘long walk to freedom.’ These autobiographies appear as national allegories where ‘the personal’ is just a means to chronicle ‘the national.’ Life narratives of sportspersons also engage with the issues of national and global importance but their credibility remain in the depiction of the personal experiences of the athletes. Unlike the spiritual testaments of national heroes, life stories of athletes effectively remain autobiographical and refrain from claiming that the history of the world is identical with the biography of great sportsmen.

III

James Olney opines argues that in the field of Autobiography studies the focus has shifted from autos [self] and bios [life] to graphein [writing] (Onley 22). This emphasis on ecriture and strategies of composition validates the fact that “we conceive of our lives in the image of fiction” (Blasing 67). An observation of the Afro-American pugilist Muhammad Ali’s autobiography The Greatest: My Own Story reveals that it is “actually composed and framed as an artful invention” for it entails “all the devices of skilled narration” (Howarth 365). With the use of literary devices such as characterization, deployment of vivid imagery, setting a milieu, arrangement of plot, consistency of theme, and psychological and realistic descriptions, the narrative of Ali’s life does evince flashes of literary brilliance that lift it beyond mere journalese. The attempt is to recreate the experience, not in its terms of its plain historicity, but in terms of its intensity and impact on the personal unconscious. Since the focus shifts from history to experience, its narration attains novelistic ramifications and the autobiography in the process tends to be more auto-fictional while being realistic.

An autobiography is a search for identity whose construction “takes place within the text and during the moments of its composition” (Jay P. 46). The
autobiographical story and its subject develop “rhetorically and tropologically, rather than historically” (44-5). In *The Greatest: My Own Story* the development of Muhammad Ali’s personal quest is traced through a mythological framework. Ali’s self-portraiture seeks parallels with Jesus Christ as he entitles the chapters as “The First Coming”, “Rumblings from the Grave”, “Resurrection” and “The Second Coming”. In the chapter entitled “Resurrection”, Ali’s comeback to boxing is allegorized symbolically: “baby being torn out of the womb” (Ali and Durham 275), “a blasting-off into outer space” (276), “to dig you out of the grave” (277) and “puttin’ new blood in your veins” (279). The life narrative rhetorically produces an autobiographical subject different from the one who actually lived the life. Thriving on mythical allusions, his actions and struggles take on a secondary meaning outside the world of factual referentiality. Ironically, the autobiographer employs Christian mythology in his quest of fighting against the injustices meted out to the non-white/‘black’ race by the dominant/Christian/‘white’ people. Notwithstanding, it enables him to pursue a dialogue with the white America.

*The Greatest: My Own Story* infringes the journalistic dictum of chronology, according to which, an autobiography must “begin at the beginning of the author’s life, with a dreary recitation of where his ancestors were born, what their names were, and what day and hour he was born” (Shapiro 436). Muhammad Ali’s life narrative begins *in media res* when the boxer is already thirty-one years old and “coming home after a defeat every man, woman and child in my hometown saw or heard about, just like everybody else all over the world” (Ali and Durham 17). The story commences dramatically and a narrative suspense is maintained about the “MOST THRILLING FIGHT IN HISTORY” (17). Gradually, the narrator, using the technique of flashback or analepsis, takes the reader back to the screams and cries of the crowd in San Diego Sports Arena. Hereafter, a series of flashbacks, disregarding the linearity of time, leads to several parallel narratives: Ali’s family and childhood, his mission of emancipating his people, his Christian past, his slave identity, treatment of black people in the restaurants and hotels, and the beginning of his boxing career.

The journalistic mapping of the contingent incidents or the breaking-news phenomenon is surpassed as the personal narrative is weaved around a historical
backdrop that serves a thematic unity to otherwise autonomous events. While providing a personal account of Ali’s defeat against Ken Norton and the consequent humiliation in Norton’s home-town, the narrator sets up the general milieu of the hatred and fury against the black race in the white America: “But I know those faces, those voices out there are not just a ‘home-town reaction’. It’s the reaction of most of White America. I’m used to having half the audience come to see me get beat, regardless of who my opponent is. I’ve denied them this day for a long time, and now that it’s here, they are making the most of it” (19). In this particular instance, the groups of words that signify plurality such as “those faces”, “those voices”, “most of white America” and the phrases that exceed temporal boundaries such as “I’m used to”, “for a long time” hint towards a usual and familiar course of events. In the pursuit of building up a general atmosphere, the incident is linked with a larger flow of history where ‘the specific’ becomes a part of ‘the general’ and transgresses contingency.

The autobiographer further attempts to sustain the theme of racial discrimination through the insertion of interviews, taped conversations, poems, personal letters, newspaper columns, television debates, epigraphs and religious sermons. These entries seem outlandish at the outset and give an impression that the story is a journalistic patchwork of eclectic forms, but they are strategic choral devices that provide an overall picture of what actually was going around. For instance, while passing by the old church in Louisville, the sight of small children singing the religious sermons draws Ali inside the church. The children, thrilled on having their hero amongst them, respond to his request and start singing again:

... What is God to you?

We are not perfect, living in the way we do.

But God knows just what we have been going through ... (32)

Through the direct inclusion of these lines that evoke an element of irony, the integrity of the Christian sermons is questioned. The autobiographer here implies that the Christian God is indifferent to the miseries of the Afro-Americans. The insertion of biblical sermon provides a thematic and textual (rather than a referential) unity in
Similarly, Bertrand Russell’s letter and Langston Hughes’ poem are embedded in the larger context of the racial tension. Catering to the organic structure of thought, these references function as more than mere name-dropping of important personalities but they are not catapulted to the level of literary allusions in their symbolic value.

The tone of Muhammad Ali’s autobiography, like other narratives of minorities, is full of anger and rebellion. Unlike the non-committed account of a journalist, Ali’s life story vehemently directs the outrage of a discriminated autobiographical subject towards the white America. The element of anger, driven through his rhetoric, emancipates the text from the journalistic sophistication. Ali hardly minces his words as he questions: “How could they say that my religion, Islam, was a ‘race-hate’ religion after all the plunder and enslavement and domination of my people by White Christians in the name of white supremacy?” (141). In this instance, his emotional state of mind, which is subdued in the journalistic reportage, reflects through the tone of his narrative. The tone is further accentuated through the use of images and metaphors that are discarded in traditional journalism. With an abundance of animal imagery, the book seems to be a testament from the jungle:

> Then, there was this nightmarish image I always had of two slaves in the ring. Like in the old slave days on the plantations, with two of us big black slaves fighting, almost on the verge of annihilating each other while the masters are smoking big cigars, screaming and urging us on, looking for the blood. (244)

The image serves more than ornamental purpose as it is a vehicle to direct the autobiographer’s anger against ‘the masters’ who consider ‘the blood’ of the black fighters merely as a source of entertainment. Nonetheless, the image fails to carry literary sophistication due to the explicit claim in the quoted lines that the figurative medium, used for explaining the fight of the two slaves, is an ‘image’. Moreover, the unnecessary information, that the comparison is being made with the ‘old slave days on the plantations,’ attempts to limit the response of the readers.

Unlike the formal and sophisticated account of a journalist, Muhammad Ali’s life story exploits the power of rhetoric in the vindication for the rights of the
discriminated people in America. His speeches – addressed to the blacks and the whites alike – direct people towards a common shared goal. William Howarth believes that doctrine alone does not provide a leader persuasive authority, “to lead he must master oratory, the art of being heard” (368). On the virtue of his oratorical skills, Ali seems to emerge as a “pastoral figure, closely attentive to his listening flock, speaking aloud for the benefit of others” (371). His art of persuasion reflects in his attempt to convince Joe Frazier, a fellow boxing champion from the Afro-American community, to support the cause of freedom and justice:

Joe, we can ride around together, you and me. Go through the ghettos. We would walk and walk together, not forgetting our people because we both can earn money and we live halfway decent. We could go to the old black people who work on dead-end jobs, drudgery . . . and have nobody young and strong to help them. People nobody knows, nobody wants. The black people who don’t know where their next month rent is coming from. We could get up in the morning preaching freedom and justice. I know both of us, deep down in our hearts, are sick and tired of seeing black people hungry, catching hell, being shot and killed. (Ali and Durham 245)

In this particular instance, rhetoric not only allows Ali to interpret his past in meaningful terms but also guides him to define his position and his role. Rhetorical speeches include two subjects – the leader(s) and the followers – sharing some grounds of commonality. Like a master rhetorician, Ali establishes a dual relationship with the common people. He and Frazier, living a ‘halfway decent’ life, are definitely superior to the people ‘nobody knows, nobody wants’, but at the same time, the poor masses for them remain ‘our people’. The cult of leadership, in return, demands sacrifices as he emphatically adds: “I don’t care what they do to me, jail me, shoot me, I don’t care. I just want to go down in history that I didn’t sell out or Uncle-Tom when I got famous” (245). The life story, in this sense, minutely cultivates the nuances of the art of rhetoric to evince literariness.

The Greatest: My Own Story counters the journalistic depiction of Muhammad Ali aka Cassius Clay as a “dumb, brute athlete” (141). In claiming that “CLAY IS
HATED BY MILLIONS” (141), “BIG MOUTH SHUT FOR ALL TIME!” (17), “CLAY INSULTS UNCLE SAM” (283), media accounts represent a unilateral image of Muhammad Ali that establishes him as a braggart, unpatriotic and blood-thirsty fighter. Through his campaign poems and interviews, Ali himself sponsors this image but that is primarily to force the authorities to reissue his license to fight. His life story contrarily explores those subjective traits of Ali’s personality that hardly match his public persona: “Since the first day I decided to become a fighter, I challenged the old system in which managers, promoters or owners looked upon fighters as brutes without brains. I’d known fighters to be the most human of humans and among the most talented people to be found anywhere” (126-27). Here, Ali’s statement reveals his admiration for the fellow fighters and also breaks the stereotypes established through media representations.

The multifaceted persona of Muhammad Ali is poised between the journalistic stereotype and the literary prototype. The life narrative, in projecting the humane side of its subject, dismantles the stereotypes associated with his personality and calling, but fails to elevate him to the canonical status of a “universal man” (Sartre 59). As opposed to the notion of a universal ideal representing the humanity at large, Ali’s testimony epitomizes his own life or, to the most, the African-American community in the United States. He is modeled on a Sartrean hero who, given the condition of his community in the States, “can only write about Negroes or Whites seen through the eyes of Negroes” (58). The response to racism in The Greatest: My Own Story is, thus, overtly expressed: “He never forgot how the whites treated him, would never let a white man come in the house” (Ali and Durham 37). Other canonical literary texts, such as Heart of Darkness and Things Fall Apart, deal with similar ideological content but the treatment of racism in these texts is “complexified” (Easthope 84) and “more layered” (85), calling for a “plurality of meaning” (84).

Despite such extreme stances taken in the course of narration, Muhammad Ali’s life story never sounds monologic. Moreover, the first person point-of-view hardly seems to limit the meaning as the whole story is reconstructed in the form of scenes and dialogues. The dialogues characterized by what Bakhtin calls “internal stratification” of the language into “social dialects, characteristics group behavior,
professional jargons” (262) not only allow “a multiplicity of social voices” (263) in the text, but also anchor rapid shifts in the point-of-view. They provide multiple perspectives on the same event. For instance, an extended dialogue between Ali and his wife depicts diverse perspective on their religious allegiances. A major shift in the point-of-view takes place when Ali’s wife, Sonji, responds to his charge that she was not performing the duties he “expected from a Muslim woman” (Ali and Durham 188):

Well, certain things would happen and I would try to discuss them with you. I’m the kind that can’t believe in anything just on blind faith, not even God. The arguments would come when I’d say something about the religious rules, or about the white devil, or . . . you’d take it back and ask the head of the temples, “Why is my wife in doubt about this or that?” You would never answer me yourself. (188)

Sonji’s response offers significant insights into Ali’s character. By confessing that she ‘can’t believe in anything just on blind faith’, Sonji implies that Ali’s devotion to Islam was based on ‘blind faith’. In the course of dialogue what the subjects reveal is ‘presentation’ and what the readers may read between is ‘interpretation’. This tension between presentation and interpretation “generates in autobiographical narratives the kind of complexity and ambiguity” that is usually associated with fiction (Shapiro 434). While the reconstruction of action through dialogue provides space for connotative interpretations, it takes away the possibility of reflection on the part of the autobiographical subject. Since the action is depicted as taking place in the present, Ali fails to reflect upon the situation. The adopted means merely allows him to respond through a dialogue.

On the other hand, autobiographers, writing with a sense of distance from their past, commonly seek to assess their actions through reflection. Malcolm X, for example, in his autobiography contemplates over a similar kind of situation when he had a quarrel with his wife over his disinterestedness in making more fortune: “We nearly broke over this argument. I finally convinced Betty that if anything ever happened to me, the Nation of Islam would take care of her for the rest of her life, and of our children until they were grown. I could never have been a bigger fool!” (Haley
and Malcolm X 297). In this instance, the reflective statement completely alters the meaning of the action that precedes it. Therefore, the lack of reflection in Muhammad Ali’s life narrative at times amounts to the explosion of explicit action at the cost of in-depth analysis. Although *The Greatest: My Own Story* fails to penetrate the literary core in terms of depth and profundity, it possesses ample richness to transcend the journalistic superficiality. Following a middle path, the life narrative defies easy classification and emerges as a text of aesthetic in-betweenness.

IV

Tennis sensation Martina Navratilova’s life story *Being Myself*, ghostwritten by American sports journalist George Vecsey, is an amalgam of opposite realities: serious and candid, political and personal. Similarly, the autobiography, in terms of textuality, is “definitely nonfiction and obviously literature” (Hogarty 58). On the surface level, the life narrative seems to be another bit of journalism. Vecsey, deriving substantial benefits from his career as a sports columnist for *The New York Times*, extracts facts and information about Navratilova’s life from several newspapers, sports magazines and biographies on her life. The assemblage of this already circulated material – that can be identified through the statements like “Mike Lupica wrote in the *New York Daily News*” (Navratilova and Vecsey 64), “My friend Ted Tingling, the tennis designer, once said of me in *World Tennis Magazine*” (67), “I once told the Roy Johnson of *The New York Times*” (106) – suggests that the method used for constructing the life narrative is similar to the process of deriving match reports from scorecards. Nevertheless, this seemingly journalistic method is curiously blended with the elements of creativity and fictionality that lend artistic excitement to the autobiography.

Like Muhammad Ali’s autobiography, Navratilova’s life narrative experiments with timeline or the actual sequence of events. In the first few chapters, there is a tremendous movement of time as the narrative begins when she “was three years old” (15), takes the readers back to the times when “the Communists took over Czechoslovakia in 1948” (15), covers her first visit to America “when I was sixteen” (16) and gets back to the time of her birth “in the summer of 1956” (19). Despite the
extensive fluctuations in time, the narrator maintains the accuracy of facts and dates, an ethical requirement in journalism. Nonetheless, unlike journalistic accounts where “naked facts” are “pushed at the readers with machine gun fire rapidity” (Krieghbaum 2), the deployment of exact dates and years in Navratilova’s autobiography serves a strategic purpose to involve the readers attentively in the narrative. With the help of time-markers which interestingly postpone the required information, the narrator keeps the reader in check and also creates an element of narrative suspense. The life narrative engages in a constant dialogue with the readers to enhance their curiosity: “Want to know another secret?” (17), to draw their attention: “You take one look at her” (18), to raise questions: “did you ever have a dog stare at you while you were eating?” (31), or to gain their sympathy: “you can still see the scar” (55).

In autobiographical accounts, the methods chosen by the autobiographers to retrieve the past “involve a degree of fictionality” (Gudmundsdottir 6). In Being Myself, the autobiographer claims that “I still get flashes of that now” (26), or “I can remember it as if it was yesterday” (33) but her memory is neither detailed nor coherent enough for a justifiable recapturing of the past. Rather, she provides a cursory account of her childhood adventures: “After we moved back from the Krkonose Mountains, the next part of my childhood was spent gathering mushrooms and blueberries on Brdy Mountain above my village of Revince” (20). In the very next line, her shift from “mushrooms and blueberries” to the nuances of the Czech language exhibits her failure to capitalize on her almost forgotten childhood. She attempts to fill the voids of memory through imaginative reconstruction or fictional interplay. Fiction, serving as a “supplement of memory” helps the autobiography transcend the journalistic “truth-value” in the favour of literary “act-value” (Gratton 253). In Navratilova’s life story, fiction ‘acts’ as a linkage between the private and the public memory in order to draw a larger coherence. It intertwines her personal experiences with the on-going history of Czechoslovakia:

They’d sign us out of school, take us to a parade where they played the Czech national anthem and always the Russian one, too. Everywhere we’d look, we’d see our red-white-and-blue flag hanging next to their red flag. There would be banners and billboards all over the place
proclaiming ‘Friendship with the Soviet Union Forever’ – emphasis on the forever. (Navratilova and Vecsey 74)

In order to defy the journalistic concreteness, the naked personal facts seek a garb of something grand or noteworthy. Either they appear in unison with the public history or attempt to deliver a simultaneous ecological narrative. The linkage of the personal and the public history, as exemplified in the above instance, appears far-fetched, or at best causal, as the autobiographical subject, merely having a right to “look” and “see” (74), is presented as a ‘participant’ rather than a ‘contributor’ in the making of history. Likewise, the autobiographer attempts to situate the actions in the specific seasons and hails natural surroundings and landscapes – the groves of apple trees, the Krkonose and Brdy Mountains, mushrooms and berries, snowfall and skiing – but the autobiographical narrative does not achieve the finesse of mainstream writing in portraying the scenic beauty.

Since autobiographical accounts are based on the events that actually happened, it becomes a precondition for an autobiographer to present the already circulated reality in a defamiliarized manner. Accordingly, as opposed to dreary reporting, Being Myself adopts the technique of literary realism to enliven well-known incidents. The narrator illustrates a lively account of the people’s reaction to the Russian intrusion in Czechoslovakia:

[W]henever one of the Russians would close the tank turrets, somebody in the crowd would pick up a rock and throw it at the tank. It would bounce off the armour, accomplishing nothing, but it made a wonderful noise. After a while, a lot of us started tossing rocks and pebbles at the tanks. Clang. Clang. Big Deal. (76)

In this instance, the narrator, using the technique of realism, not only delineates the facts picturesquely but also captures the peculiar mood of the situation. The narration involves multiple temporalities since it hints towards the past happenings and the future possibilities. Realistic description gives the autobiographer an edge over the journalist by enabling him to sketch the character-portraits and set up the milieu. The readers witness several portraits like that of a “tall, handsome man with blond wavy hair” (39) or “the redheaded left-hander from Australia” (34), but these non-
descriptive sketches lack symbolic value that often compliment the actual self of the person being portrayed. Likewise, the experiments to present the milieu in the life narrative often end up in delineating a social status through talk of limousines and Cadillacs, pizzas and hamburgers, Virginia Slims and Avon, and furniture and carpeting.

As opposed to the use of pedantic language, Navratilova’s life narrative exploits the rhetorical devices such as symbols, imagery, metaphors, allusions and analogies to further the cause of defamiliarization. For instance, the different approaches of the people in Czechoslovakia towards life are displayed symbolically: “Every Czech and Slovak sees a little Svejk in him- or herself – but I had a very little dosage. I just couldn’t be Svejk … In a country where people played a clay-court style of life, just to survive, I was the serve-and-volley kid” (70). In this example, the Good soldier Svejk symbolizes passivity and defensiveness which is also synonymous with the Czech people’s ‘clay-court style of life.’ On the contrary, Navratilova’s approach towards life is that of an aggressive ‘serve-and-volley kid.’ The usage of figurative mediums undoubtedly employs literariness in the narrative, but the selection of sporting metaphors obscures the text to the non-sporting readers. The sporting jargon runs throughout the narrative in the form of analogies and epigrams: “It was like a baseball hitter trying to hit two home runs with the same swing” (213), or “wanting to win the point was the main thing, not the artistry of a hard shot” (249). In the background of a sports autobiography, the argot from the playfield is bound to develop organically but it subsequently limits the readership of the book.

In the context of ghostwritten accounts, George Vecsey voices the subjective opinions of his autobiographical subject and, in doing so, he breaches the journalism’s code of editorial independence. The ethical principles of journalism such as truthfulness, skepticism, transparency, and impartiality assist a journalist to abide by the convention of objectivity (Black 106-07). American writer and journalist Janet Malcolm believes that a journalist turned autobiographer simply fails to follow the poetics of objectivity. In her article “Thoughts on Autobiography from an Abandoned Autobiography,” Malcolm asserts that:
Another obstacle in the way of the journalist turned autobiographer is the pose of objectivity into which journalists habitually, almost mechanically, fall when they write. The “I” of journalism is a kind of ultra-reliable narrator and impossibly rational and disinterested person, whose relationship to the subject more often than not resembles the relationship of a judge pronouncing sentence on a guilty defendant. This “I” is unsuited to autobiography. Autobiography is an exercise in self-forgiveness. The observing “I” of autobiography tells the story of the observed “I” not as a journalist tells the story of his subject, but as a mother might. (<www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2010/mar/25/thoughts-on-autobiography-from-an-abandoned/>)

For Malcolm, the observing ‘I’ and the observed ‘I’ represent respectively the older and the younger self of the same person. Her observation also finds its corollary in the context of ghostwritten accounts where the ghost becomes the observing ‘I’ and his subject turns out to be the observed ‘I’. In this sense, despite his practice in journalism, Vecsey is a mute spectator to Navratilova’s self-justifying account. Whereas, her “obnoxious” behavior on the court is advocated blaming the poor “officiating” (Navratilova and Vecsey 149), her resorting to smoking finds its defense as her “first big rebellion” against any kind of oppression (108). In resorting to advocacy, the life narrative neither provides a scope for unbiased judgment nor turns out to be a reflective confession or apology that the genre of classical autobiography is usually known for.

Dealing with diverse themes such as homosexuality, defection, multiculturalism, feminism and gender stereotyping, Navratilova’s autobiography covers a wide range of contemporary issues. In the textual treatment of these discourses, Being Myself turns out to be a juxtaposition of opposite realities. Going beyond the binaries of literature and journalism, the life narrative proves that “it is difficult to keep the ‘purely’ literary and the purely ‘referential’ in their proper (opposed) places” (qtd. in Gudmundsdottir 5). With all its apparent experiments, the life story artistically ‘excites’ but fails to ‘transport’ aesthetically.
Having the undertone of a tale, Indian athlete Milkha Singh’s autobiography *The Race of My Life* apparently draws its energies from the picaresque tradition.\(^{15}\) Despite its protean nature, a picaresque narrative strictly demands certain protocols – a first-person narration, a protagonist of a low station (generally a criminal or an orphan), his struggle for existence in the chaotic and hostile conditions, and his journey(s) leading to adventures (Mancing 182). With Milkha Singh as an orphan hero who survives the hostility caused by the Partition, the autobiographical narrative qualifies as a real life tale in picaresque form. The life story, building upon the metaphor of running or ‘race,’ is indisputably an adventure story where the ‘race’ triggers the episodic unfolding of the events – fleeing from Pakistan, racing trains to steal and survive, running to win an extra glass of milk, and sprinting to be hailed as ‘The Flying Sikh’. The element of displacement, which is at the heart of the picaresque narratives, develops automatically against the backdrop of the Partition. Nonetheless, Milkha Singh’s life story fails to sustain the humorous and witty tone of classical picaresque writings for his ‘adventures’ turns into ‘misadventures’ in terms of the loss of family and the elusive Olympic medal and the train looting ‘picaro’ evolves into a ‘hero,’ a wise man and a role model.

In delineating the brutality of the Partition, Milkha Singh’s autobiography parallels mainstream Partition literature written by Khushwant Singh, Saadat Hasan Manto and Amrita Pritam. Whereas the journalistic writings on the Partition depict the “pornography of violence,” the literary endeavours present “savagery with a human face” (Kumar S. 42). Despite being a first-hand victim of the havoc, Milkha Singh reproduces his experiences empirically: “We were simple village folk and to us the creation of an India and a Pakistan were alien concepts. Our only concerns were to till our lands, earn our daily bread and live in harmony with our neighbours, whether they were Muslim, Hindu or Sikh” (Singh and Sanwalka 8). Maintaining a sense of purpose, the life story refrains from resorting to journalistic sensationalism generally adopted for market gains. Rather, it seeks to neutralize the general sentiments against Pakistan: “This spirit of camaraderie, particularly from the Pakistanis, dispelled some of the rancour of our bloodstained past” (62). Though the life narrative sporadically
displays the autobiographical subject’s dual relationship with Pakistan for being a land of childhood adventures as well as painful memories, yet this ambiguous relationship with the previous homeland is not developed as subtly as it is done in the mainstream Partition literature and other confessional accounts related to the event.\textsuperscript{16}

The life narrative takes on an anecdotal flavour while sharing Milkha Singh’s experiences on and off the field. An anecdote is not simply a journalist’s tool since it leads to the partial explanation of the events. Milkha Singh’s autobiography incorporates the amusing anecdotes and also situates them in the specific cultural contexts. He relates the account of a fellow athlete, Zora Singh, who had “a flourishing six-inch-long handlebar moustache, whose tips almost reached up to his eyes” which subsequently “terrified the English officer’s three-year-old son” (Singh and Sanwalka 88). In another instance, Indian athlete Lal Chand on tour in Germany makes unnecessary hue and cry in the hotel for his lost shoes to find them again in his room (85-87). The anecdote throws significant light on the psyche of the people under discussion and also provides an insight into the culture being portrayed. Its intrinsic state of in-betweenness, with reference to the sensory and the tellable, or the elevated and the despised (Cohen 131), renders it naturally compatible with sports autobiographies.

Following an unusual trajectory, Milkha Singh’s life was first adapted into a biopic \textit{Bhaag Milkha Bhaag} directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, before being put into words in his autobiography \textit{The Race of My Life}. The cinematic adaptation of his life evidently affects the form of his autobiography. The generic urge of the biopic “to dramatize actuality” (Bingham 10) reflects even in the words on the pages. The textual medium, despite employing different tropes and techniques from its visual counterpart, re-produces the dramatic effect in the form of mental pictures. The influence of the screen on the script is apparent in the graphic narration of the autobiographer’s on-field heroics:

The six of us finalists stood at the starting line in our vests and shorts. Khaliq got the outer lane and I the inner one. We wished each other good luck, a mere formality neither of us meant. The gun was fired and the race began. The spectators held their breath, watching, waiting… We both completed the first 100 metres and were running in tandem,
our steps parallel. Despite focusing on our running we were each aware of the other’s progress and were pushing ourselves and our utmost limits. It was fast, it was furious, it was neck-to-neck. Then there was high drama. About three or four yards from the finishing line, I pulled a muscle on my right leg. Then my legs got tangled and I tripped and tumbled over the finishing line. At the very moment, Khaliq breasted the tape too. (Singh and Sanwalka 60)

The narration evokes visual atmosphere as it incorporates the meticulous details—both material and sensory. The concrete objects such as vests, shorts, gun, and tape juxtaposed with sensory experiences, that is, watching, waiting, tangling, tripping, and tumbling assist in unfolding the ‘high drama.’ The expressions such as ‘running in tandem,’ ‘steps parallel,’ ‘neck-to-neck,’ ‘four yards from the finishing line,’ and ‘breasted the tape’ unfurl the elements of suspense and drama associated with the domain of sports. As opposed to a journalist’s interest in ‘who’ won the race, by ‘what’ margin, breaking ‘which’ previous record, the autobiographical narration paints a rather complex physical, mental and socio-political landscape around the race. Even when it comes to moments of ‘flat’ description sans action, the autobiography tends to portend and sufficiently surcharge the narrative with curiosity and anticipation.

Touching the solemn strands of elitist historiography, The Race of My Life attempts to create the illusion of a national allegory. The chapters entitled “Life in Undivided India”, “Ten Days in Jail”, “My Army Life”, “This was Not Sports”, “My God, My Religion, My Beloved”, “Meeting Pandit Nehru”, “Going West”, and “I Have a Dream” promisingly raise serious expectations to eventually culminate in bathos or anti-climax. For instance, the chapter entitled “Ten Days in Jail” parodies the incarceration narratives since Milkha Singh is imprisoned not as a political prisoner but for travelling by train without a ticket. Similarly, in the chapter “My God, My Religion, My Beloved,” the running track deceivingly turns out to be his God, his religion and his beloved. Deriving its title from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s path-breaking speech, the chapter “I Have a Dream” trivializes the very idea of ‘dream’ exhibiting Milkha Singh’s fatherly insecurities over the careers of his children. The titles invoke austere possibilities but the chapters deal with relative mundane aspects
of life. This failure suggests that despite transcending the codes of journalism, the life story does not deliver refined literary aesthetics, and hence, remains ‘in-between.’ Having a hero of national importance as its subject and set in the backdrop of the Partition, the life narrative attempts to map the ‘nation’ but the ‘personal’ retains its prominence.

VI

Autobiographies of sporting figures may not fall in the category of literature in the highbrow sense but they do display enough literariness to merit re-reading and critical perusal. They do possess textual, ideological and thematic elements that merit academic consideration. The diverse range of tools and techniques employed in these narratives suggests that these accounts are not run with a single formula of monological empirical veracity. Philippe Lejeune demands from the practitioners of autobiography that “we must abandon the code of autobiographic verisimilitude (of the ‘natural’) and enter the space of fiction” (as qtd. in Silvennoinen 240). Life narratives of athletes not only fulfill this expectation but, following a democratic poetics, they also silence the old debates of fiction versus nonfiction or “aesthetic versus fact conventions” (Griswold 459). The on-and off-field achievements of the athletes do not necessarily translate into the market success of their autobiographical tales, the very act of scripting them is equally important. The three autobiographies discussed in the chapter attain a degree of literariness through distinct strategies. Muhammad Ali’s autobiography does away with mere chronicity in favour of a dialogic description of his thrills and bouts of humiliation; Navratilova’s autobiography employs the strategy of defamiliarization to engender an element of fictionality; and Milkha Singh’s life narrative runs its course by way of a racy retelling of personal anecdotes. The life narratives of sportspersons exploit the textual space to move independently between the boundaries of literature and journalism. Over the years, journalism has been upgrading itself in the form of ‘New Journalism’ that illuminates non-fiction “with techniques usually associated with novels and short-stories” (Wolfe and Johnson 15). On the contrary, literature, with its flexibility, is all set to incorporate the narratives of ‘popular culture’ within its dynamic fold. Sports autobiography, in this inchoate phase, serves as a meeting ground for both kinds of genres.
Notes:

1 For the factual and detailed information about their autobiographical subjects, journalists as ghostwriters rely largely on diary notes, newspaper articles, memorabilia, school report cards and certificates, biographies by other writers, telephonic conversations, personal letters and other anecdotal sources. All these sources provide dates, names, events and topics which could otherwise be irretrievably lost. The availability of all this material affects the aesthetics of the sporting memoirs.

2 Literature aspires to canonicity following its own yardsticks of sublimity. This element of sublimity is found in the Literature (with a capital ‘L’) that epitomizes the “highest achievement of aesthetic,” “moral merit,” “universal resource of ethical and formal model for humankind”, “not of an age, but for all time” and “the best that has been known and said in the world” (Widdowson 4).

3 Wendy Griswold, in his article “Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature,” suggests that breaking the old high/popular distinction, a literary ghettoization is taking place in which the literary system is breaking down into a tripartite system – “a high literary level, a middle-brow level, and a popular level of genre fiction heavily influenced by other forms of popular culture” (464).

4 Out of the three autobiographies that I shall be discussing in this chapter, only Milkha Singh’s autobiography The Race of My Life was written several decades after his retirement from the professional sports.

5 Gary Whannel, in his book Media Sport Star: Masculinities and Moralities, asserts that the public persona of an athlete is a “social product, the result of a set of institutional structures, production practices, representational conventions and the relations of production and consumption” (49). He furthers adds that the representations of an athlete are conventionalized to this extent that “any possibility of access to a ‘real’ seems to recede” (49).

6 In the ancient/mythological narratives, the hero was a legendary figure who “possessed attributes of great stature such as bravery, strength, and steadfastness, and who was thought to be favored by the gods” (Berg 134). Sportspersons, on the other
hand, emerge either as “mediated heroes” who represent “exceptional morality, social responsibility and intellectual capabilities” (137) or with sporting antiheroes who rebel against social inequalities and “express disillusionment with the status-quo – in society and in sport” (142).

7 Andy Warhol prophesized that “[i]n the future everyone will be famous for 15 minutes” (quoted in Andrews and Jackson 3). Warhol’s statement suggests that in the media driven environment a certain “democratization of fame” is taking place (quoted in Andrews and Jackson 3) but it also implies that the celebrity status is ephemeral in nature.

8 The very titles of the autobiographies of national elite – such as Long Walk to Freedom by Nelson Mandela, My Experiments with Truth by Mahatma Gandhi, Daughter of the East by Benazir Bhutto and My Country My Life by Lal Krishan Advani – imply a quest for something greater than their own personal selves. On the other hand, the titles of the autobiographies of sportspersons – like Muhammad Ali’s The Greatest: My Own Story, Navratilova’s Being Myself, Milkha Singh’s The Race of My Life – convey a narcissistic engagement with the self.

9 Fredric Jameson, in his essay “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” avers that all third-world texts are “allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel” (69). He further maintains that even those texts which are “seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic- necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society” (69).

10 Thomas Carlyle, in his book On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History, claims that “the history of the world is but the biography of great men” (34).

11 In a personal exchange of letters, Bertrand Russell praises Muhammad Ali for his courage to put up a fight against racism and expresses his wholehearted support to him (Ali and Durham 122-3). In this racial connection, Ali also mentions a poem
entitled “I, Too” that was originally written by Langston Hughes in 1926, which exhibits the discrimination faced by Afro-Americans in public places (Hughes 46).

12 David Caute, in the Introduction to Jean Paul Sartre’s book What is Literature?, writes that literature, for Sartre, is not a sedative but an irritant, a catalyst provoking men to change the world in which they live (xi). As a result, his heroes/anti-heroes are basically the men crushed by the world although they choose and act (xii-xiii).

13 Victor Shklovsky, in his essay “Art as Technique,” propounds his idea of defamiliarization. According to him, the purpose of the art is to recover the sensation of life. The technique of art, he believes, “is to make the object ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (12).

14 The Good Soldier Svejk is one of the best known characters in the Czech literature. He is the imbecile protagonist of Jaroslav Hasek’s novel The Good Soldier Svejk and His Fortunes in the World War. Living his life modestly without bothering anyone, Svejk appealed to the communists to use his persona with a “proper political slant” (Navratilova and Vecsey 68).

15 Both bildungsroman and picaresque narratives deal with the growing up of the protagonist. In the bildungsroman narrative “the journey through life” is internalized (Beards 205), whereas the protagonist of the picaresque tradition relies on the adventures of the outside world for his self-development. Moreover, the bildungsroman protagonist is “usually more passive, reflective, intellectual and artistic than his picaresque counterpart” (205).

16 For example, Urvashi Butalia’s The Other Side of Silence records the personal experiences of the many survivors of the Partition. The confessional chronicling of the experience exposes different faces of the same historical incident (Kumar S. 42).

17 According to Tom Wolfe, the New Journalism is a higher form of journalism that “read like a novel” (Wolfe and Johnson 9). It is an attempt to write nonfiction “with techniques usually associated with novels and short-stories” (15). However, the new form was initially considered as “superficial”, “ephemeral”, or “mere entertainment” (37) but, for a time being, it virtually wiped the novel out from the literary scene.