Chapter 4

Between Resistance and Censorship

I

Censorship is generally understood as a means to protect the standards of community by fending off (counter-)cultural practices that deem to be destructive to the social values.¹ In other words, the primary objective of censorship – whether overt or implicit – is to maintain the status quo.² Culture is perceived as a process of continuous struggle between the normative cultural order and the countercultural practices. Stuart Hall describes ‘culture’ as a “constant battlefield” where the dialectic of cultural struggle takes place (“Notes” 67). The autobiographical accounts of sportspersons participate in this cultural dialectic and simultaneously inform and are informed by its emerging practices. As a sub-genre of lifewriting, sports autobiography offers a veritable record of dominant culture as well as counterculture, norm as well as deviance, subjection as well as abjection. It is a testimony of resistance(s) against the dominant cultural stereotypes, gendered expectations, economic hierarchies, racial differences, exclusion mechanisms and established behavioural norms. In this defiant pursuit, counterculture lends resistive energies to a sportsperson’s personality which ultimately influences the aesthetics of his autobiography as well. As a result, the element of resistance generated by counterculture becomes the core metaphor of sports memoirs.

The present chapter is an attempt to identify the nucleus of resistance in the sports autobiographies, with particular attention to life narratives of American tennis sensations Martina Navratilova, Andre Agassi and Arthur Ashe. These sportspersons defy ‘the norm’ in their own respective manners. In one way or the other, they are labeled as possessing the deviant characteristics that are not shared by the dominant and conformist array of the society (Freedman and Doob 3). According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, the normative culture seeks “forcible separation from its anarchic opposite” (Mirzoeff 483). Having failed to conform to what is considered to be ‘standard’ or ‘normal’, the deviant is segregated from the aesthetic core of society. Censoring the deviant, the domain of visuality attempts to deploy unilaterally ‘the normal’.³ The
normal is presented as “the aesthetic of the proper, of duty, of what is felt to be right and hence pleasing” (476). The chapter highlights how sports autobiography combats censorship and serves as an act of countervisuality by exploring the so-called deviant identities. It not only engages ‘the anarchic other’ into a dialogue with history but also foregrounds issues otherwise forbidden to/ignored by the public eye.

As a cultural product of interventionist potential, sport autobiography, however, exposes the ‘standard’ social order but it does not endorse the radical overthrow of ‘normative.’ Sportspersons fight cultural censorship but not to the effect of creating an autonomous cultural order. As a cultural hero, the protagonist of a sporting tale is obligated to negotiate with the twin components of culture and counterculture. In fact, it is the unresolved binary play of culture and counterculture that lends the necessary aesthetic edge to sports autobiographies. Consequently, the autobiographical accounts of sportspersons showcase resentment towards the discriminatory policies but do not claim to be the manifestos of political ideologies. The life stories condemn the segregation of peripheral identities but, at the same time, voice out their desire to be recognized with the core group. In other words, the idea of resistance in the sports memoirs proliferates but there is no promise of revolutionary upheaval. It does not unfold in the form of “political mobilization”, rather, appears as an “everyday” practice (Hollander and Einwohner 540). Sports autobiography, in this way, treads along a mediated path between resistance and censorship. It, however, frustrates the repressive mechanism of censorship by foregrounding the forbidden but refrains from extreme radicalism.

II

Czech-American tennis player Martina Navratilova’s life-story Being Myself is a testimony against any kind of censorship. Born in a communist set-up in Czechoslovakia, with all its prescriptive regulations, she is exposed to direct as well as indirect methods of oppression. The oppressive communist regime violates her “sense of justice” (Navratilova and Vecsey 15) since it curbs not only one’s economic possessions but also the verbal expression. She shares with a sense of disappointment: “I had to curb myself from saying what was on my mind. In those days self-restraint was a serious concern for adults who wanted to avoid being thrown in jail” (52).
According to Judith Butler, censorship is “the regulation of the social domain of speakable discourse” (Butler, “Ruled Out” 252). In the communist Czechoslovakia, the curtailing of verbal autonomy is contrived in the form of educational propaganda. With the instillation of codified rules, schools generate among students “a morose acceptance of what they can do and what they can’t” (Navratilova and Vecsey 52). In such a stipulated environment, Navratilova is considered “an outsider for asking questions” (51). Even as a child, she pursues her educational training with a sense of skepticism as she realizes that “something was not quite right” (52). The tentativeness in her remark suggests that censorship through educational propaganda functions in a rather camouflaged manner.

However, once the authorities witness Navratilova’s rebellious temperament, they overtly start regulating her life on-and-off the field. She is accused of her “too Americanized” way of living (125) and is reprimanded for being “too friendly with American players” (125). In the backdrop of Cold War politics and the Iron curtain policy, her affinity with American players is decoded as an “international intrigue” in the garb of sportsmanship (130). She sustains her fight in a moderate manner as the political scenario during the Cold War ruled out the possibilities of open resistance. Arthur Karasz, in his article “Resistance in the Iron Curtain Countries”, proclaims that the resistance activities in the Cold War countries cannot be considered as a political movement since “the present war is a cold one. In consequence, the present resistance movements are not actively supported from abroad, their actions are unorganized, and their performances cannot be so spectacular” (Karasz 145). As a result, instead of overt rebellion, Navratilova chooses the alternative way i.e. the defection. Defection entails the element of resistance as it is a refusal to live under oppression. Moreover, it is an act of transgression beyond the Iron curtain. The word, however, at the same time, suggests an escape, a lack of political resistance and a failure to put up an open fight.

As the Czech authorities seek “total control” of Navratilova’s tennis career (Navratilova and Vecsey 127), they curtail her foreign tours in the name of giving opportunities to junior players. Even when she is allowed to play outside Czechoslovakia, the authorities make sure that she comes “right back” (128). The
looming fear of her defection to the United States, or the fear of losing “an asset to their economy” results in the tightening of authoritarian control, but “the more I won, the less they could control me” (127). When she ultimately defects to the United States, the Czech officials employ different mechanism to blacklist her from the public memory. As part of disciplinary apparatus, Martina Navratilova is censored from the sports pages and public galleries of Czechoslovakia:

Even in the souvenir shops of Czechoslovakia you can find a poster of the latest junior hotshots, but you won’t see any of Ivan Lendl or Hana Mandlikova, who are still citizens but live mostly in the West. And even if they could make money selling Martina mementoes, they wouldn’t do it. (43)

Despite her constant feats at the Wimbledon and the US Open, the Czech authorities write Navratilova out not only from the souvenir shops but also from the walls of the Revnice tennis club. She laments that despite her long held association with the club, there is “[n]ot a trace” of her posters and photographs in the corridors of club. Moreover, she becomes a “non-person” (43) in the television coverage of matches and sports columns of the party newspaper. These instances reveal overt control of the state to discard Navratilova from the visual domain.

Cultural censorship, on the other hand, “expands the notion of censorship beyond the acts of removing a photograph from an exhibition or canceling a performance to include a much larger field of social conditions and practices” (Atkins & Mintcheva <http://www.alternet.org/story/34758/excerpt%3Acensoringculture>). It is a training of minds to maintain a mental compliance with the codified arrangements (Mirzoeff 480). Martina Navratilova imperils these arrangements in more than one way. She not only disrupts the ‘norms’ of essential femininity but also violates the heterosexual order. From the childhood, she appears to be “a skinny little tomboy with short hair” (Navratilova and Vecsey 57). The recurrent episodes of people taking her as a boy affect her sense of identity. Because of her boyish looks and muscular physique, she is labeled as a “bionic athlete” (235), which, to her, sounds like somebody “slightly different from the rest of humanity” (238). Her lack of essential feminine traits is assumed to be threatening for women’s sports and, therefore, people
demand her exclusion from the women’s tour. Navratilova’s autobiographical account offers an alternative realism to counter these public assumptions:

Look at me in a crowd and I don’t tower over anybody. Sure, my forearms are bigger than the other women players’, but I didn’t get them in a five-and-dime store – or a drug store, either. I got them partially from my genes and partially in the gym. If anybody wants my forearms, I can direct her to the nearest exercise machines . . . I earned them. (235)

The above instance represents a subversive bodily act which debunks the assumption that the female body is a “mute” site on which gendered expectations are inscribed (Butler, Gender Trouble 165). It redefines the idea of female physicality violating the stereotypes associated with the body of ‘weaker sex’. According to Jennifer Hargreaves, the female body has been “a locus of struggle to control and resist dominant images of sports and femininity” (Hargreaves 44). The idea of a sportswoman having big ‘forearms’, threatens the established gender relations. Nonetheless, Navratilova’s resistance is juxtaposed with a tone of apology. In justifying that she doesn’t ‘tower over anybody’, she reinstates her fears of being labeled as a ‘deviant’. The ‘normative’ fights back as she yearns explicitly: “I didn’t know who I wanted to look like, but I definitely wanted to look more feminine. I couldn’t do much about it though, couldn’t just chop down my muscles” (Navratilova and Vecsey 58). Her return to ‘the norm’, however, is sporadic but it reduces the intensity of her resistance to a certain extent.

Martina Navratilova’s life narrative is a simultaneous commentary on sexuality, a subject that is historically considered tabooed. Despite the awareness of a growing discourse on sexuality, Michel Foucault maintains that “[w]ithout even having to pronounce the word, modern prudishness was able to ensure that one didn’t speak of sex, merely through the interplay of prohibitions that referred back to one another: instances of muteness which, by dint of saying nothing, imposed silence” (Foucault, The History of Sexuality 17). Navratilova’s autobiography fills up these ‘instances of muteness’ with an elaborated discourse on sexuality and its related contours. The autobiographical subject discusses in detail the “painful” memories of
her first sexual experience (Navratilova and Vecsey 115). Moreover, she attempts to offend the societal prudence by revealing that her understanding of sexuality enhanced through “lectures on sex, mostly from my father” (113). Navratilova’s revealing revelations not merely breach the censoring norms but also seem to possess “the mystic dangerousness” associated with certain taboo subjects (Webster 14).  

Furthermore, the life narrative replaces the normative ‘object’ in order to foreground the ‘abject’. Martin Jay, in his article “Abjection Overruled”, credits Julia Kristeva for cultural inception of the abjection phenomenon. ‘Abject’ is conceptualized as anything that “threatens rigid boundaries and evokes powerful fears of filth, pollution, contamination and defilement” (Jay M. 238). Profanity, in this sense, is a leitmotif of Navratilova’s autobiography. For instance, she recalls: “When I was at home, a couple of girls got pregnant when they were fifteen, which seemed a little early. I had just had my period then and was two years away from my first adventures with a man” (Navratilova and Vecsey 58-9). Moreover, the constant references to “tampons” (111), “brassiere” (34), “sweatpants” (111), and “birth control pills” (116) turn the narrative into a glossary of non-sanitized. In evoking the issues such as incest, pregnancy, abortion, menstruation, and anything that is rated “perverse” (Jay M., “Abjection Overruled” 238), the life story seems to threaten the Puritan sensibilities. It seeks a place for what has hitherto been overlooked by exploring the disregarded terrains.  

Apart from her muscular physique, what aggravates Navratilova’s ‘otherness’ is her sexual dissidence. In the heterosexual discourses, the binary of ‘male’ and ‘female’ is naturalized to the extent that the “bodily figures who do not fit into either gender fall outside the human, indeed, constitute the domain of the dehumanized” (Butler, Gender Trouble 142). Nevertheless, Navratilova makes it clear in the first chapter of her autobiography: “I have loved men and women in my life; I’ve been labelled ‘the bisexual defector’” (Navratilova and Vecsey 17). However, bisexuality is not “such a crime” in America (139), but she is often made to realize that she is “different” (139). Even when she represents America, people root against her for they want “a real woman to win” (63). Navratilova loses her major sponsors due to her (bi)sexuality driven “image problem” (63). Discursively, the word ‘image’ represents
something visual which has socially sanctioned exhibition value. Therefore, indulging in an act which is not approved by ‘the norm’, Navratilova compromises her celebrated ‘image’. However, she finds her attraction towards women to be quite “natural” (139), people around her consider the same-sex longing a “sickness” (179). Having once been told that “[s]ociety isn’t ready for it” (140), Navratilova replies assertively that “we’re society, too” (140). Her assertion, here, is an act of countervisuality for she refuses to be segregated from the so-called aesthetic core of society (Mirzoeff 477). It, at the same time, suggests that her resistance is a call for acceptance, rather than a self-acclaimed seclusion from society. After her breakup with a lesbian writer, she reflects that “[i]t was easy to be radical with her, but I wasn’t trying to shock people” (Navratilova and Vecsey 172). Thus, duty bound to “people” of her country, Navratilova’s life story denies its claims to radicalism.

At ease with her sexual preferences, Navratilova feels uncomfortable about “pretending” the standard heterosexual identity (140). Nonetheless, when her parents decide to visit her in the States, she anticipates her share of problem i.e. “they didn’t know” (174). The italicized word “know” calls for attention since it signifies more than simply knowing, getting acquainted, or being informed. Knowing here symbolically means to be able to be sensitive and disinterested towards an individual’s sexual orientation. The opposite of knowing is termed ‘agnosis’ which means “not-wanting-to-know” (Moffett 5). On getting to ‘know’ that his daughter is physically involved with women, Navratilova’s father practices ‘agnosis’ because being sensitive towards the ‘bisexual other’ might threaten the heterosexual order. Considering her unpleasant sexual experiences with her boyfriend responsible for Navratilova’s same-sex orientation, her father laments: “It’s too bad I wasn’t the first man with you, because then you would have enjoyed it more” (Navratilova and Vecsey 180). He even prefers prostitution as an alternative to her current sexual orientation as he declares: “I’d rather you slept with a different man every night than sleep with a woman” (180). The instances suggest that Navratilova’s father reckons incest and prostitution as acceptable heterosexual practices whereas her engagement with women appears ‘queer’ to him.
Eve Sedgwick throws upon a new understanding of the term ‘queer’ as she explains that ‘queer’ involves “the open mess of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excess of meaning [that occur] when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically” (Sedgwick 8). Navratilova’s life story Being Myself, in this sense, is subversive and fundamentally ‘queer’ in nature for it resists “any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity” (Wood 397). Nevertheless, maintaining its countercultural claims, the autobiography intermittently excuses the status quo and sounds sparing: “I see the problems and the injustices, but I’m proud of America” (Navratilova and Vecsey 272). All Navratilova expects in return is that “people will try to get to know me better” (272).

III

Like Navratilova’s life story, Andre Agassi’s life narrative Open: An Autobiography is a serious dialogue between the normative culture and the counterculture. The title of the autobiography calls for different levels of meaning. ‘Open’ may literally refer to any of the major Grand Slams of the sport: Australian Open, French Open, Wimbledon or the US Open. It might be seen in terms of Agassi’s opening up of his heart since the book is a confessional account. In the present discussion, the word ‘open’ seeks to be decoded as uncovering of something which is repressed and censored in the historical accounts as well as from the domain of visuality. Using the autobiographical medium, Agassi unfolds the layers of oppression that plague him on-and-off the field. He reflects in the opening lines: “I OPEN MY EYES and don’t know where I am or who I am. Not all that unusual – I’ve spent half my life not knowing” (Agassi 3). The autobiographical narrative, in this way, begins with an existential quest to ‘know’ what is hidden, or for that matter, forbidden.

The existential issue of ‘choice’ is at the heart of Agassi’s autobiographical account. In the early years of his life, the obsessive gaze of his father manifests in the form of censorship. Treating his son like a “personal property” (65), the father exercises emotional abuse to fulfill his own lost dreams through his son. Agassi shares frustratingly: “I hate tennis, hate it with all my heart, and still I keep playing, keep
hitting all morning, and all afternoon, because I have no choice … this contradiction between what I want to do and what I actually do, feels like the core of my life” (27). Censorship, here, calls for a new understanding for it operates not merely by ‘forbidding something to do’ but also by ‘forcing something to do’. In other words, it is a censorship of choice, of will, of decision making. The protagonist, however, reiterates the loss of choice in his life as he claims “[w]hat I want isn’t relevant” (29) and craves to do “[s]omething of my own choosing” (29), but he is unclear about the alternative choices in his life. He can be identified as a ‘Generation X’ slacker who represents the alienated and confused character of American youth in the early 1990s (Kusz 52). Consequently, Agassi’s father exercises his own ‘will’ and “all I can do is nod and obey” (Agassi 37).

In order to instill robotic instincts in his son, Agassi’s father structures a strict regimen of training for him. Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish*, asserts that the purpose of training is to turn “the moving, confused, useless multitudes of bodies and forces into a multiplicity of individual[s]” (170). In other words, training is used as a means of coercion which dissociates power from the body and turns it into an ‘aptitude’ or a ‘capacity’ (138). Agassi’s father employs a ball machine; “a dragon”, as part of training, to turn Agassi’s wavering energies into a ‘capacity’ to respond to the tennis ball (Agassi 27). Driven by his mathematical calculations, the father, as a coercive agency, pushes his son to the extreme limits:

My father says that if I hit 2,500 balls each day, I’ll hit 17,500 balls each week, and at the end of the year I’ll have hit nearly one million balls. He believes in math. Numbers, he says, don’t lie. A child who hits one million balls each year will be unbeatable. (28)

The above instance suggests that Agassi is subjected to a training schedule which is based on a mechanism of repetition. Repetition, here, is contrived as a means to produce a coerced being. In this sense, the dragon, throwing the balls repetitively, is a manifestation of “a ‘new micro-physics’ of power” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 139) which intends to produce “subjected and practiced bodies, ‘docile’ bodies” (138). In this process of coercion, the dragon becomes a symbol of engagement that keeps the individual fantasies in check. With the help of dragon, Agassi’s father
attempts to silence his son’s thoughtfulness since “. . . thinking is the cardinal sin. Thinking, my father believes, is the source of all bad things, because thinking is the opposite of doing” (Agassi 31). Operating through ‘the logic of practice’, the habitus of tennis seeks to form a subject who acts in compliance with the objective probabilities of his field (Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* 54). It, at the same time, tends to “exclude all ‘extravagances’” of behaviour which are incompatible with the homology of sporting culture (56). Nonetheless, the use of systematic modes of control to produce a ‘normative’ tennis legend ultimately breeds a rebel.

As a place of torture and torment, a tennis court, for Agassi, becomes synonymous with prison. He considers the backyard court in his home as nothing more than “the white lines that would confine me” (Agassi 33). As his father realises that he has nothing left to teach his son, he decides to send him to a tennis boarding school, the Nick Bollettieri Academy. Along with a chance to get rid of his father’s rage, Agassi imagines the Academy to be a place of “unforeseen benefits” (71). However, his misery continues as the Bollettieri Academy turns out to be a rather fierce place of confinement. Coming out of his romantic musings, he re-christens the Academy as “a glorified prison camp” (74). With the “rickety bunks” and “military style barracks” (74), the Nick Bollettieri Academy appears as a modern observatory. Allowing little contact with the outside world, the Academy follows the “schema of confinement and enclosure” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 172). Moreover, the thirty-five instructors not only work to “transform individuals” (172) but also contribute to the “network of gazes” (171). Under such circumstances, Andre Agassi feels an urge to protest and decides that a show of rebellion is “my last resort” (Agassi 79).

Having denied the basic choices, Agassi adopts subversive means to defy the “glorified prison” of tennis (74). Tennis as an institutional sport thrives on codified rules and a “complimentarity of expectations” from its practitioners (Jenks 86). Deriving his subversive energies from the spectacular subculture or the hippie consciousness, Agassi militates against the norms of tennis as a sport as well as tennis as a culture. He frustrates the structured ‘expectations’ by playing matches wearing torn, faded jeans, gaudy earrings and eyeliners. Due to his disparaging and offensive
get-up, the spectators want his opponents to win in order “to defy the odds” (Agassi 121). In one of his matches against Jimmy Connors, somebody from the crowd shouts: “C’mon, Jimmy, he’s a punk – you’re a legend” (121). The utterance from the spectator nourishes the binary of ‘the norm’ and ‘the odd’, of the legend and the punk. Similarly, his initial experiments with hairstyle – mohawk cut, high spikes, pink dyed hair – generate the semiotics of resistance and provoke the public response considerably. However, the hairpiece, which he wears to hide his baldness, appears to him a burden of the pseudo societal expectations. Agassi reflects, “[i]t seems so trivial – hair. But hair has been the crux of my public image, and the self-image, and it’s been a sham” (198). Therefore, as he removes the hairpiece, he emancipates himself from this ‘sham’ and gives the public “a new reason to dislike me” (199).

The violation of authorized codes through clothes and style has considerable power to provoke and disturb (Hebdige 355). According to Paul Willis, the clothing and fashion of the hippie culture lead to “a colourful unseating of conventional wisdom” (97). At the same time, the subcultural style of dressing “directs attention to itself” (Hebdige 359) and, hence, it claims to be visible. Agassi himself asserts that his revolt through style is decoded as “a desperate effort to stand out” (Agassi 83). Moreover, he explicitly claims that he seeks “attention” (114) and, that too, on a “grander stage” (115):

I’ve mutilated my hair, grown my nails, including one pinky nail that’s two inches long and painted fire-engine red. I’ve pierced my body, broken rules, busted curfew, picked fistfights, thrown tantrums, cut classes, even slipped into the girl’s barracks after hours. I’ve consumed gallons of whiskey . . . I chew tobacco, hardcore weed like skoal and Kodiak, soaked in whiskey. After losses I stick a plum-sized wad of chew inside my cheek. The bigger the loss, the bigger the wad. What rebellion is left? (86)

Agassi’s rebellion communicates practices that generate what Umberto Eco terms “semiotic guerilla warfare” (Eco 19). His intake of toxic substances connotes more than a simple act of flouting the dietary regulations espoused by the world of sport. The forbidden resurfaces through pierced body, gallons of whiskey, hardcore weed
and tobacco to have a war with the standard societal norms. What makes this warfare a ‘guerilla’ act is the hidden potential of the means adopted for fighting. Agassi undertakes the odyssey to free himself from the “micro-dot of consciousness called ‘normality’” (Willis 85). He clarifies: “[t]hey say I’m trying to change the game. In fact I’m trying to prevent the game from changing me . . . I’m doing nothing more than being myself” (Agassi 115). The game, here, symbolically stands for the sport of censorship that attempts to outplay ‘the deviant’ or ‘the other’, but ‘the other’ keeps negotiating for its ‘right to look’ (follow endnote 4).

In affirming its ‘right to look’, Andre Agassi’s autobiographical narrative extracts the idea of visibility from the Beat movement. According to Ken Gelder, the Beat sensibility is known for its disenchantment from America as a conformist and war-mongering state, the sense of its exclusion from the cultural institutions, and its affinity with the ‘street’ (Gelder 76). This attraction to the street reflects in the Beat literature since ‘the best minds’ of Alan Ginsberg’s generation ‘howl’ at the negro ‘street’, whereas Jack Kerouac scripts his protest ‘on the road’. The street or the road is a powerful symbol of one’s ability ‘to be seen’ and, thus, claiming a ‘right to look’. Agassi too, along with his brother, contemplates “living on the road, doing whatever we please” (Agassi 84). Playing the sport his own way, he even considers his tennis tours as “road trip[s]” (136). Moreover, as a means to silence his rebellion, the triumph against Agassi is registered as a “beat-down to end all beat-downs” (111). The life narrative invokes the Beat aesthetics to put forward its claims to countervisuality. Nonetheless, it refrains from responding to Norman Mailer’s beckoning “to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey with the rebellious imperatives of the self” (Mailer 339). After a little showdown ‘on the road’, Agassi rather returns ‘home’ despite knowing that it is the place “where the dragon lives” (Agassi 39).

Thus, Open: An Autobiography is a narrative of mediated resistance that seeks ‘negotiation’ rather than a ‘disagreement’ with the status quo. Like Navratilova’s autobiography, it is a call for recognition. Responding to his pirate looks when people circulate jokes about him, Agassi envisions in a resolute manner: “I tell myself that everyone is going to have to deal with this pirate, accept this pirate, when I hoist that
Despite its raucous tone, the instance suggests Agassi’s willingness to be accepted. Moreover, the idea of acceptance on hoisting the trophy redeems the normative cultural order for providing the opportunity to raise one’s social bar through achievement. As sports journalists map his transformation “from punk to paragon” (371), Agassi cringes but only to consolidate the normative:

Transformation is change from one thing to another, but I started as nothing. I didn’t transform, I formed. When I broke into tennis, I was like most kids: I didn’t know who I was, and I rebelled at being told by older people. I think older people make this mistake all the time with younger people, treating them as finished products when in fact they’re in process. (372)

In the above instance, Agassi minimizes his otherness either by reducing it to “sameness” or by treating it as a “family affair” (Hebdige 358). As he considers himself ‘like most kids’, he trivializes his personal struggle as a general phenomenon. Moreover, treating the ‘formation’ of a being as a negotiation between the ‘kids’ and the ‘older people’, he relegates cultural coercion to a level of domesticity. Most importantly, justifying himself as an unfinished product i.e. somebody in the making ‘process’, he shirks away from the responsibility of his rebellion. What Agassi thinks of his life is an apt metaphor for the idea of resistance in sports autobiography: “They call me a rebel, but I have no interest in being a rebel, I’m only conducting an everyday run-on-the-mill teenage rebellion. Subtle distinctions, but important” (Agassi 115).

IV

Arthur Ashe’s autobiography Days of Grace extends the debate on cultural censorship for it deliberates on the proscribed issues of racism and AIDS. Whereas the discussion on racism is de-emphasized because of “perceptions and beliefs regarding the sensitivity of the topic” (Evans et al. 295), AIDS is a taboo subject due to the idea of ‘disgrace’ associated with the disease. The prevailing silence on the issues encloses them in the domain of censorship. Dealing with a black American subject who contracts AIDS from infected blood transfusion, the life story breaks the
silence divulging the otherwise hidden realities. Moreover, it scripts the protest of tennis star against the dehumanizing effects of racial segregation and ‘abominable’ disease. In other words, Ashe’s autobiography is an account of a stigmatized athlete who seeks to fight his way back to ‘grace’ by means of scripting his life story. This binary of ‘grace’ and ‘stigma’ in the autobiography sets up the pivotal conflict between the culture and the counterculture.

Stigma is a characteristic of people who act contrary to ‘norm’ of a social set-up. Bruce G. Link and Jo C. Phelan, in their article “Conceptualizing Stigma”, classify labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination as the components of stigma (367). The idea of having AIDS is stigmatic for it represents more than simple transmission of a deadly virus and is considered to be “disgracing, disempowering, disgusting” (Sontag, AIDS and Its Metaphors 45). Associated with repugnance and contamination, the disease incites anticipated fears of excommunication from the normative culture. Due to repulsive metaphors attached to AIDS, it has turned out to be “the most meaning-laden of diseases” (92). Meaning, as a cultural construct, is generated through consensus and, hence, it is the prerogative of the ‘norm’. Susan Sontag suggests possible ways to counter the metaphors and meanings forcibly coupled with AIDS: “[w]ith this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from these meanings, these metaphors, seems particularly liberating, even consoling. But the metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up” (94). Arthur Ashe’s autobiography Days of Grace is an attempt to gain autonomy from the metaphors of stigma by exposing the hollowness of meanings attached to the disease. Moreover, discussing the phenomenon in all possible dimensions – social, cultural, historical, subjective, and scientific – the life narrative seeks to exhaust the prevailing myths surrounding it.

In the beginning, Ashe exhibits an impulse to censor the news of his illness imagining the revelation to be an infringement upon his family’s right to privacy. Being acutely aware of the possible ‘disgrace’ associated with the disease, he anticipates his social exile, “I knew that in some places my plates and cups would receive special attention, perhaps some extra soap and hot water. Perhaps they would
be smashed and thrown away” (Ashe and Rampersad 26). The chapter entitled “My Outing” voices out Ashe’s inhibitions to claim his illness publically. He wonders the devastating impact of illness on his public image, commercial connections, appearances on television, possibilities of travel as a tennis commentator and, hence, he maintains the ‘secret’. Keeping a secret is an act of self-censorship or forced censorship for it generates out of one’s apprehension of being ousted from society. The ‘otherness’ of an AIDS afflicted person is further aggravated since the virus is “linked sensationaly in the public mind to “deviant” sex and drug abuse”, social behaviours that are considered against the norm (18). Nonetheless, Ashe undertakes the responsibility to debunk the false beliefs realizing “stigma is the thing that needs to be changed” (21). Becoming a spokesman for the disease and the dying, he unveils the ‘secret’ – both personal and societal.

The unveiling of the AIDS phenomenon, however, is a daunting task since the discourse on a disease linked to sexual promiscuity and homosexuality is bound to produce culturally disturbing vocabulary. Helen Michie, in her article “A Few Words about AIDS”, asserts that the culture is “struggling to find a way to talk – or not to talk – about the disease” (328). Consequently, the communication on AIDS has taken place merely in the form of euphemisms, acronyms and colloquialisms (328). Arthur Ashe recollects how one of his friends “nationally known for his literary skill” finds it difficult “to say the word “AIDS” to my face” (Ashe and Rampersad 241). Therefore, he militates against the silence maintained by the prudish authorities to retain the stigmatic ‘meaning’. He recommends:

I want adolescents caught up for the first time in the sizzling heat of sex to know scientifically about the penis, the vagina, and the rectum; about blood, sperm, and mucous membranes; about pregnancy, viruses, and the fatality of HIV. In the midst of an epidemic that will only grow worse, I have no time for evasions and euphemisms or other timidly genteel deceptions . . . (271)

Ashe laments that even the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) “routinely” drop the usage of certain sex related terms in order to make the informative material “broadly acceptable” (271). He resists against the proscription of ‘taboo’ words comprehending
that the “deletions” have served just one purpose i.e. causing people to die ignorantly (271). As a result, his autobiography turns out to be a candid account on sex based information which not only defies censorship but also attempts to de-stigmatize the phenomenon of AIDS.

Hence, the primary objective of Ashe’s autobiography is to establish AIDS as a meaning free entity. In the American racist fantasy, the source of disease is the impure ‘black body’ which “harbors the potential to infect and corrupt white society” (Austin 148). Such racist constructions, generally reported as “normalized” truths, are endorsed to enforce racial segregation (130). Displaying the alternative facts and data, the life narrative seeks to explode the myths such as – a certain “risk group” i.e. drug abusers and homosexuals, is prone to AIDS (Sontag, AIDS and its Metaphors 25), or it is “a moral judgment on [African] society” (60). Ashe claims that “no credible and respected scientist, as far as I know, has talked about Africa and AIDS in terms of blame or shame” (Ashe and Rampersad 145). As he disclaims that “AIDS is not a metaphor for me, but a fact” (246), he neutralizes the phenomenon to the status of a mere disease devoid of all connotations. However, at times, the life narrative finds the metaphorical energy of AIDS “irresistible” (246), but it maintains that the metaphors and meanings must be fought with scientific thinking and rational bent of mind (248).

In his pursuit of recuperating ‘grace’, Ashe intensely combats the AIDS stigma; his resistance, however, is directed more against racism. Race, according to him, is a “more onerous burden than AIDS” (140) and he considers racism “worse than death” (140), defining it as “an extra weight tied around me” (139). In his autobiography, Ashe devotes a chapter entitled “The Burden of Race” to unfold the layers of discrimination and segregation. He recollects how as a junior he was barred from the public tennis courts, which were “reserved for whites” (66). The memories of his childhood are overshadowed by “the appalling WHITES ONLY and NONWHITES ONLY signs” (115). As an adolescent, he experiences the dehumanizing form of racism as the mother of his first white girlfriend “recoiled in horror” discovering the colour of his skin (152). Even after becoming a Wimbledon champion, Ashe identifies himself as a prisoner of the racial past. He bemoans:
While I, like other blacks, was once barred from free association with whites, I returned time and time again, under the new rule of desegregation, to work with whites in my hometown and across the South. But segregation had achieved by that time what it was intended to achieve: It left me a marked man, forever aware of a shadow of contempt that lays across my identity and my sense of self-esteem. Subtly the shadow falls on my reputation, the way I know I am perceived; the mere memory of it darkens my most sunny days. (141)

Ashe remains a victim of racial segregation from childhood to the ‘most sunny days’ of his life. His self-esteem is affected by what Fanon calls the “white gaze” (Fanon 95). His identity of being ‘a marked man’, a racial ‘other’ instigates his sense of justice. Consequently, as a representative of black community, he feels an urge to protest defiantly against the social injustices. As his dissatisfaction with his complacency grows, he finds himself more inclined towards the social imperatives. When Ashe visits apartheid ridden South Africa, he plays in the tournament with a condition that “there be no segregated seating at my matches” (115). Returning home, he continues his protests and is arrested following his anti-apartheid demonstrations on the streets. Despite being a second lieutenant in U.S. Army, he makes public appearances in colleges and universities to expose racial policies.

However, Ashe performs a significant role in the arena of civil rights and social reform, but in this fight against racism he follows a ‘middle passage’ (title of a chapter) between protest and conformity. In his autobiography, he confesses his “relative inaction” during the civil-rights struggle (124). Even when he decides to protest openly, he considers his father’s advice to be “careful” (123). His most exemplary protests and demonstrations reflect a lack of revolutionary zeal as he remorsefully accepts that “a demonstration such as the one in Washington, when I was arrested, was mainly a staged or token affair, a piece of political choreography” (124). At times, in the flow of narrative, Ashe radically exposes the injustices against the black community in America, but he pacifies his radicalism through statements such as – “I don’t want to be misunderstood” (140), or “I don’t want to overstate the case” (141). His conscious battle against racism reflects in the fact that his
autobiography is equally a critique of his own community. Though he considers himself a “race man”, still he is “appalled by the level of irrationality in our community” (175). Ashe cultivates such reflective resistance due to his dual commitment to normative culture and counterculture. His on-field idea of resistance is suggestive of his off-the-field take on life: “[w]e not only had to try to win, but we had to try to win with grace” (70).

‘Grace’ is a loaded word as it not only symbolizes personal virtue but also engenders the semiotics of social conformity. Arthur Ashe’s nostalgia for the ‘days of grace’ balances his acts of resistance against AIDS stigma and racism. His autobiography is a glossary of words like “misbehaved”, “disorderly”, “cursed” (2), “discourteous” (5) with a definite ‘never’ preceding these words, or, words like “honest”, “principled”, “integrity” (3) requiring no affirmative. His life story begins with a declaration: “IF ONE’S REPUTATION is a possession, then of all my possessions, my reputation means most to me” (1). In order to retain this reputation, he exercises self-censorship and tends to be “more on guard” (10). He nourishes his ‘grace’ on the field displaying respect for the ‘norms’ of sport. Despite his differences with John McEnroe, Ashe considers him an “incorrigible brother” and terms their fights “intrafamilial” (90). Moreover, the last chapter entitled “My Dear Camera”, addressed to his daughter, is full of do’s and don’ts, must’s and mustn’ts which feature his obsession with ‘grace’. In fact, the idea of resistance in the autobiography is significantly driven by Arthur Ashe’s desire to attain an unblemished identity. The period of protest, therefore, appears as an interlude in the general drama of conformity.

V

Bertolt Brecht opines that “[r]eality is not only everything which is, but everything which is becoming. It’s a process. It proceeds in contradictions. If it is not perceived in its contradictory nature it is not perceived at all” (qtd. in Mirzoeff 477). The three autobiographies discussed in the chapter exemplify how the genre of sports autobiography contributes to the domain of reality in its ‘becoming’. In capturing the unceasing negotiation between the culture and the counterculture, the life stories deflate cultural reductionism and provide what Clifford Geertz calls “microscopic” or
the ‘thick’ description of culture (Geertz 21). These subjective accounts render culture as an “inspectable form” and, subsequently, expose the hollowness of essentialism(s) (19). They foreground the oft considered taboo identities in order to lend them a share in the history of visuality. Nonetheless, in their attempts of de-censoring, there are certain realities which these life-stories do not tell/fail to tell/or choose not to tell – at times because of narrative compulsions and, at other times, being unaware of the deeper penetration of the censored means.

Notes:

1 Counterculture refers to an anti-establishment cultural phenomenon which developed first in the United States and then spread throughout the Western world. It grew with African-American Civil Rights Movement and then unfolded into many subcultural groups such as the Beats and the Hippies. Counterculture(s) operated against the “deep-rooted conservatism and hostility to otherness that characterised dominant discourse” in the 1950s and 1960s (Gair 4). The values and norms of the countercultures, therefore, differ from the mainstream society. The movement also informed a new era of literary, artistic and musical creativity.

2 The term censorship was commonly limited to “direct forms of regulatory interventions” exercised by the censoring authorities, mostly the state or the religious institution (Muller 4). This form of censorship is regulated by some sovereign agency that imposes a ban on any material – written, visual or sometimes virtual. This type of censorship is generally known as overt or explicit censorship. The covert or implicit censorship, on the other hand, operates through hidden cultural practices. As opposed to the notion of ‘not allowed to see’, this form of censorship prepares the ground for ‘refusing to see’.

3 According to Nicholas Mirzoeff, visuality is an old word which means “the visualization of history” (474). This process is imaginary because “what is being visualized is too substantial for any one person to see and is created from information, images, and ideas” (474). This production or assemblage of visuality goes through a
three tier process i.e. classifying, separating, and aestheticizing. First, it classifies by
naming, categorizing and defining the visible. Secondly, it segregates those it
visualized to prevent them from the ones it left out. And finally, it makes this
“separated classification seem right and hence aesthetic” (476).

4 Countervisuality is a refusal to be segregated from the domain of visuality (476). It
seeks “the recognition of the other” in order to have a place from which to claim a
right to look (474). It proposes “a real alternative” to the so-called reality generated
by visuality (485).

5 Autobiography, as a genre itself, has an interventionist potential for it interrupts the
continuous flow of dominant histories (Gallagher and Greenblatt 50). The anecdotal
narratives of autobiographies, in general, and sports autobiographies, in particular,
serve as counterhistory since they attempt to fill the ‘gaps’ and ‘inconsistencies’ in the
established history. Like the dialectic struggle of dominant culture and
counterculture, history and counterhistory also are “moments in a continuous
conflictual process rather than substantial opposing activities with independently
distinguishing characteristics” (52).

6 The Cold War was a political, ideological and military tension after the World War
II between the Eastern Bloc (which included the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact
allies) and the Western Bloc (which included the United States and its North Atlantic
Treaty Organization (NATO) allies). The Iron curtain symbolically “represents an
attempt to permanently, artificially, and arbitrarily split off an area from its
neighbors” (Brager 3). The term refers to policy of the Soviet Union to separate itself
and its satellite states from the non-soviet controlled areas in the West. The policy
perversely affected day-to-day social and economic contact between people on the
both sides (3). The curtain sometimes also refers to the concrete borders such as the
Berlin Wall which divides the East and the West Germany.

7 A defector is a person who “goes abroad with the permission of his government and
subsequently repudiates his allegiance to his country” (Bergman 3). Due to the
oppressive communist rule, many writers, artists, sportspersons, physicians,
politicians, soldiers and other notable personalities from the Eastern Bloc defected to
the West. Eminent sportspersons such as Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci, Czechoslovakian tennis player Martina Navratilova, Russian hockey player Sergei Fedorov and many others left the Eastern Bloc countries to settle in the West.

8 Taboo is a Polynesian word that is defined as “beliefs that constrain actions by making certain behaviours and discussion of certain topics forbidden or discouraged” (Evans et al. 295). It is considered as a “shadow of the sacred or the ideal” (296).


10 Agnosis is a practice that is employed for “quelling opposition and retaining power” (Moffet 5). It is a “willingness to know less in order to belong more to the same group” (10), because to diverge is “to risk membership and identity” (10).

11 In the early 1990s, the Generation X discourse was produced about a new generation of Americans who did not fit in the category of normative American people. They were recognized as “irresponsible, apathetic and uncaring slackers”, especially in terms of career and economic instability (Kusz 53). The discourse was widely circulated through magazines, newspapers, television programs, music, and films showcasing an America in decline. The implied objective of the overall discourse was to produce “a normative white masculinity which can be articulated as a distinctly American figure” (52).

12 Pierre Bourdieu, in his work *The Logic of Practice*, defines the *habitus* as “a world of already realized ends – procedures to follow, paths to take – and of objects endowed with a ‘permanent teleological character’, in Husserl’s phrase, tools or institutions” (53). It is ideological in nature because it guarantees to produce ‘common-sense’ behaviour “more reliably than all formal rules and explicit norms” (54). In Bourdieu’s words, the *habitus* is an “infinite capacity for generating products – thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions – whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production” (55). In lucid terms, it keeps alive the tradition or the past of which it is the product (56).
Michel Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, proclaims that the practice of discipline develops a mechanism which coerces by means of observation (170). For this purpose, in the classical age, certain “observatories” were modeled, for example, a military camp – a short-lived, artificial city, built and reshaped discreetly to exercise power solely through exact observation. Later on, this model was followed in the development of urban sites such as working-class housing estates, hospitals, asylums, prisons and schools (171).

The hippy movement emerged in the mid 1960s in America as a subversive force against the conventional society. The hippy was a subcultural youth identity which expressed itself through exaggerated and expressive style of dressing (Willis 95). According to Paul Willis, the members of the movement disapproved ‘words’ as an effective medium of communication. On the other hand, they considered ‘appearance’ and bodily movement as the direct expression of their innermost feelings (95). Their clothes were “functionally inappropriate” for they defy the “utilitarian basis” of clothing (97).

The words and the phrases in the parentheses are picked from the most seminal works of the Beat Literature i.e. Alan Ginsberg’s poem *Howl* and Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road*. They express the general milieu of the Beat movement.

The Beat Generation writers defined themselves through their distinct style and themes of writing. Their works are largely confessional dealing with the themes such as travel, non-conformity, alienation, and spontaneity of life (Brownell 9; Gair 40). The Beat literary works are said to be inspired by drug use and sexual experimentation. They are considered obscene for their uncensored use of foul language and sexual imagery (Brownell 10).

Piracy is a form of “outlaw resistance” which thrives on “stylized forms of self-definition and self-assertion” (Mackie 28). Pirates generally emerged from “dispossessed underclasses” for whom social, economic, and political powers were circumscribed, and hence, they subversively took criminal liberties on the sea (25). The mischievous pirate archetype – an eye patch, injury mark on the face, some bird
on the shoulder, and possession of guns or swords - was prominently represented in the 17th and 18th century English literature (which is also known as the Golden Age of Piracy). These archetypal pirate characteristics are now exploited in the popular forms such as films, cartoons and video games.

18 Summarizing Kyle W. Kusz’s article “Andre Agassi and Generation X: Reading white masculinity in 1990s’ America,” David L. Andrews and Steven J. Jackson sketch Agassi’s transformation from a cultural rebel to a normative individual in following words:

In the early phase of his celebrity career, Agassi was portrayed as displaying a poor work ethic, being lazy, and lacking sufficient will: all deficiencies characteristic of a slacker. Agassi’s subsequent hard-earned victories on the tennis court problematized his slacker identity, and prompted the mass mediation of a new Agassi who exuded more traditionally valorized personal traits such as hard work, achievement and determination … Agassi, the one-time cultural rebel, ultimately contributed to the reinscription and normalizing of expressly more conservative renditions of white American masculinity, just as “Generation x” discourse became re-articulated around notions of equally docile and productive bodies. (11)

19 In AIDS and its Metaphors, Susan Sontag avers that AIDS possesses the disrepute of “a shaming, isolating disease” (45). Thus, she implies that like her previous book on cancer, the aim of this book is to regard a disease “as if it were just a disease – a very serious one, but just a disease. Not a curse, not a punishment, not an embarrassment. Without ‘meaning’”(14).

20 Susan Sontag, in her book Illness as Metaphor, suggests that diseases in the Iliad and the Odyssey occur “as supernatural punishment, as demonic possession, and as the result of natural causes. For the Greeks, disease could be gratuitous or it could be deserved (for a personal fault, a collective transgression, or a crime of one’s ancestors)” (43). In the same strain, the spread of AIDS in Africa has led to the
“stigmatization of Africa as a center of evil and misfortune” (Ashe and Rampersad 145).

21 According to Frantz Fanon, the white gaze espies a coloured body as “a repository for specific values” (202). Emanating from the white man’s fantasy, these values include cannibalism, backwardness, fetishism, slavery and other derogatory racial stigmas (92).