CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE LESSONS OF LIFE NARRATIVES

Writing a life story is overwhelming and satisfactory. Writing a work that deals with the inner journey demands much of attention to the context and structure of the work. Unless there is a clear framework, life experiences of the author will take him to different directions leading to chaos. A memoir is a challenging, tricky and complicated task. The writer attempts to present life experiences and characters as real as possible and there is little scope for imaginary ornamentation. Every aspect of language is to be employed by the writer so as to attain the expected meaning. Language which is descriptive is more elaborate and has to record every single activity. Writers often employ the techniques of dialogue to delve into the psyche of the characters. It is a usual practice among the writers to present the conversations in the form of indirect dialogue, providing only fragments of speech, contextualizing them with the help of descriptive language. In a memoir the author is how he or she remembers his or her life. The authors of the memoir attempt to write about the experiences which they believe have larger complications, greater appeal, and meaningful to others as well. The extraordinary ability possessed by successful memoirists, the ability to link between memory and reflection is vital to any successful memoir. From the primitive stages of human civilization the act of narrating has evolved into a complex cognitive skill which helps human race to adopt to different situations. Narrating the life experiences to others, listening to the experiences of others and passing on reflection or comments are all activities quite common among human the race.
Though the memoirs are considered to be personal expressions they do possess certain literary qualities which make them an unquestionable literary genre. Memoirs are structured like novels; they have an introduction and exposition and present the development of character. In fiction the writer gives emphasis to creating characters’ thoughts but in memoirs the author speculates how the other characters act. More than thoughts the author remembers the action of the character because action is more dramatic than dialogue. The merit of the character is revealed through actions, dialogue, appearance and crisis. The character presented in a memoir is authentic, truthful and sometimes confessional. The character of a memoir is devoid of pretention or imposed glory. A true picture of actual life is what is presented in a memoir with all the human weaknesses and intricacies. The view that the complex nature of the human character can best be explained by the concept of self adds more authenticity to the character portrayed in a memoir and the narrative. Raymond Walters Jr, a reporter from New York Times gives us an account of different ways of responding to life writing.

The reader who picks up an autobiography merely for several hours’ entertainment is not likely to be troubled about its truthfulness as long as it tells a good yarn. But what of the reader who hopes to learn something about the ways of the world and how one individual responded to them? He may follow a method discerning critics have used for centuries: when you start reading an autobiography, think of it as a person to whom you have just been introduced. Size up as best you can the personality of the man or woman who is talking and take it constantly into consideration as you judge the truthfulness of what he has to say (qtd. in Yagoda, 270).
It was the great French writer Montaigne who felt that ‘one man’s life could represent all men.’ It may not be so spectacular as that of a rock star or an extraordinarily popular politician. Memoirs, to a large extent, feed the curiosity to know about others. The innate urge that humans possess forces them to listen to or read whatever is uttered by others is an attempt to understand others and the memoir offers an exciting opportunity to understand the world and people around them. Frank and authentic narration of events attracts people toward memoirs. They often portray themes which are unpleasant, but such things have to be done in order to be convincing and truthful. Writers of this genre often represent their thoughts in private and the readers also experience it in private. Reading becomes a kind of intimate sharing of thoughts. They recognize and realize what is common and uncommon. The common perception nowadays is that the life experiences of ordinary, common people are more interesting, more varied and more often offers life lessons than those of celebrities which are often artificial and falsely glorified. The memoirs often function as a self examination bringing out essential or dominating traits of an individual. As an artistic form the memoir contains subjects who are not restricted. They grow in multiple ways as does human knowledge which expands in different directions. The art of writing memoirs has ancient origins and has been always considered a frank examination of the self, an idea to which modern science gives therapeutic validity viewing it as a tool to purge the human mind by opening oneself to others. In the present context it is also viewed as a way of becoming open to experiences and being rich in intrapersonal and interpersonal domains.

The twentieth century which was both notable and notorious in human history offered unimaginable avenues and formats to fit events or incidents which
undoubtedly possessed great appeal to the masses. Slave narratives which were so popular earlier on started waning with the emergence holocaust and genocide narratives. The subject of memoirs is not restricted to personal guilt or trauma. It has found numerous other possibilities during the twentieth century. Devastating wars and holocausts have created an interest in knowing and understanding the minds, hearts and lives of people who were caught in unfortunate circumstances. Themes became more personal though they definitely did have a social relevance. Themes such as drug addiction and alcoholism occupied the centre stage for some time. Recently there were memoirs about the life of the underworld mafias, survivors of deadly diseases and economic exploitation of multinational corporations. It has to be remembered at this point that memoirs represent the truth about particular things that have happened which may not contain the dramatic quality of a novel. Memoirs are largely aimed at providing an intellectual stimulation. The value of truth is given more importance than aesthetic quality. The emergence of television and appearance of reality shows saw an increase in human interest to witness real life displays of extreme emotions such as joy, disappointment, anguish or gratitude.

Many of the talk shows in the television brought ordinary people and their problems into the mobile devices and social networking sites offered more avenues to people to know about the secretive things of others including relationships and breakups. The inexhaustible eagerness to tell stories and to listen to the stories of others of the human race is continuous and keeps growing. The internet offers cheap and convenient ways to express personal experiences and there has been a great outpouring of personal narratives. Social media networks like facebook, blog, twitter and many similar sites offer opportunities to
people to express themselves in various ways. The present day literary scenario offers least expected ways of self expression and expression of emotions which once considered not so significant. In fact, they have taken the centre stage in the present time. In this age of personal exhibitionism and commercial interests there are memoirs which are genuine because of their truthful narrative and simple and straightforward style. In some cases truth may be fabricated but such works do not take much time to be exposed. Their superficiality is only skin deep and easily found out.

Portrayal of character and development in a memoir is a difficult task because the scope of presenting a real life character is very much restricted. Renowned author Louise DeSalvo says,

\[\text{I can say that ‘creating’ real characters in the pages of memoir is perhaps more difficult than creating fictional characters in the pages of a novel. (http://writingalife.wordpress.com)}\]

When every learning is considered for its utility value, study of literature has been mainly considered a tool primarily for learning language and appreciation skills and most recently its potential for understanding human nature is increasingly realized not only by experts in humanities but also by scientists. In such an age attempts are now made to understand and to explain human qualities by using literary characters. The field of self improvement has been gaining momentum in recent times. It focuses mainly on improving positive qualities of a human being. The utility value of the humanistic character studies has been realized by people all over the world and many inter disciplinary theories have been employed to interpret human characters. The interest in understanding human beings led to the interest on personal narratives. Memoirs which are considered to be good are
called so because they portray emotionally appealing characters. The characters portrayed in a memoir create in the minds of the reader a sense of real life or practical experience and so they are easily moved by them. To quote Louise Desalvo again:

Many memoirists begin with events, rather than with character. And that’s how many memoirists get stuck. Because unless we think about character, first, we can’t possibly write about the causal links in the narrative, about the why of the narrative, about the significance of the narrative. Memoir is driven, not by events, but by character. Even the most fantastic events described without sufficient attention to character will fall short in memoir.

(http://writingalife.wordpress.com)

While reading a memoir the reader matches his own real life experiences with that of the characters. People all over the world realise the humanizing power of the literary studies that led to the emergence of a field called medical humanities, in which literary works are used for therapeutic purposes. The emergence of scientific studies led to a situation that even literary interpretation is done with scientifically valid theories. Science particularly evolutionary biology contributed immensely to the scientific study of human nature. Cognitive science and neuroscience have influenced studies on human nature making them more scientific, more realistic, more practical and more accurate. It is proved by many that literature helps improve many human traits like decision making, leadership qualities and interpersonal communication. It gives strength to distinguish things culturally or morally whether they are good or bad. Since the study of character became more scientific there are clearly defined tools by which human character
or personality is studied. By employing trait theory human characteristics can be identified accurately and classified as positive or negative traits. Imitating others is a basic human quality which enables human beings to learn from others’ experiences. Human beings infer character traits from the recognized patterns of behavior of the others. Most sought after traits in the modern world are of those of moral reasoning and moral decision making which constitute the crust of modern life narratives. In addition to trait theory, fields like evolutionary biology, emotional intelligence, multiple intelligences and neuroscience concentrate on study of traits and characteristics. Understanding human nature includes understanding of emotional elements, cultural and historical factors and context according to Howard Gardner. Understanding human traits is very much important in the present scenario as traits are considered patterns of thoughts, feelings or actions that distinguish people from one another. The most suitable genre in literature for studying characters is the personal narrative or the memoir.

Three recent memoirs have been chosen for study and analysed using ideas from the fields listed above. The protagonists’ learning curve in relation to circumstances, situations and contexts and the people they come across and other such influences in their development is discussed in detail. The factors contributing to the positive growth of the characters are identified and listed and their thought patterns and emotive behaviours during crucial moments are selected and closely studied. In Morrie we have compassion, valuing emotions, personally committing himself to his profession, taking interest in the lives of his students, acute understanding of contexts and vast reservoirs of empathetic power. Zinn is a much more public personality. In this upright and upfront person the following traits find residence. Courage, proactiveness, standing up for public cause,
altruism, social boldness, a fair sense of discrimination (e.g. his sensitive apprehension of the difference between law and justice and foresightedness).

The following traits are seen in McCourt: self deprecatory humour, frankness, honesty, proactiveness, adventurism, innovativeness, empathy, insightfulness, inferential acumen, absence of defensiveness, self pity but an honest admission of it, emotional intelligence, ethical thinking, both introversion and extraversion. In short, he is one who is keen to keep the balance between the head and the heart.

All the protagonists have the following four of the big five traits: conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience and agreeableness.

Without exception they specialize in facing themselves squarely without any inhibitive tendencies. They never try to hide behind masks. Another common factor that brings them together is their background. All of them have had a poverty stricken background. Incidentally the three become teachers. In each of the case we have the protagonist using his hard past to understand others with compassion. The protagonists’ central characteristic is empathy. It is empathy which makes them good teachers and more important good men—good teacher men.

An analysis of the three memoirs chosen for the study shed light on the importance of personality traits and the necessity to perceive them in people. The study has demonstrated how identification and classification of these traits foreground their configuration and coexistence in a diversified social environment and multicultural context. The memoirs chosen for the study portray protagonists who influence others by the way they act and behave. Character studies contribute to the understanding of positive traits. The protagonists in these works exhibit their traits through their activities when they go through different real life
situations. Analyses of the traits of the three protagonists present more similarities in their positive traits. The protagonists possess in them some extraordinary personal traits which make them extraordinary human beings. They have a clear understanding of their environment and human nature. In a society where more and more people need to coexist, better understanding of other human beings is essential and the characters analysed in this study exhibit their extraordinary understanding of others. Their concern for others is exhibited not only in their words but in their deeds as well. The concern for others is displayed by Morrie when he teaches Albom the importance of shedding tears because it is one’s mark of essential humanity. As a good teacher Morrie wishes to see all his students turn into good and productive people. Morrie is such a man that can completely keep aside his personal identity to take another’s view. The protagonists possess clear views about things around them, society, values, culture, customs and individuals. This kind of clear understanding makes them completely acceptable to other people because the three have the capability to listen, observe and identify with others to offer solace and understanding.

The unique quality found in all the three protagonists is ‘righteousness.’ In whatever they do they think about the right and wrong. This trail moral thinking enables them to tide over many a crisis and come out unscathed. They take the right decisions because they know what is morally right. It is this quality of moral correctness that makes them different from others. The moral nature of the protagonists is what helps them retain balance of mind and stay free of inner conflicts. The absence of inner conflicts in the protagonists is readily explained by their willingness to accept physical defeat for a right cause. But they are morally victorious. Morrie displays a rare kind of strong mind, is clear about everything
and never do we find him in a state of confusion or tension in spite of the
condition he is in. During the conversation with Morrie, Albom is led to find lots
of such occurrences to reflect on and wonders at the ability of Morrie to influence
him the way he does.

Self awareness and self regulation are the other important characteristic
traits common to the three protagonists. They know who they are and what they
do. They never mess-up with things. They do not poke their noses in matters that
require no intervention on their part. The trait of self awareness makes them
understand their place in the society and helps them find a way to move on. All the
protagonists Morrie, Zinn and McCourt are people who have clear ideas about
their potentials and their lives. They realize their own strengths and act
accordingly. All of them are self guided people driven by their intuition and inner
directions. There are many instances in the narrative where they display their rare
combination of introspection and meaningful action.

Extraversion is the quality of freely expressing one’s thoughts and
emotions to others. This can be done when a person believes that what he intends
to express is correct and beneficial to others. Not many people possess this trait of
extraversion. Most of the people prefer to keep their personal emotions and
notions within themselves because they feel that what they think may not be
acceptable to others. They do not have any understanding of others. Such people
are low in empathy and cannot exchange “places in fantasy.” The inability to read
the thoughts of others renders them defensive and suspicious of even the most well
intended moves. In the case of the three protagonists they understand well others
as well as themselves. They always follow their conscience and act without
hesitation when convinced of the moral propriety of that action. This moral
strength prompts them to express themselves without any hesitation. All the protagonists are open-minded and respond with unadulterated honesty in their interactions with people. They are never afraid to reveal their true selves. Through their words and deeds they reveal their personality. The quality of extraversion is essential in a multicultural society. There is what can be called a synchrony between their actions and inner space. Only such people can talk freely to others and express themselves honestly to establish lasting trustworthy relationships.

The protagonists of these memoirs exhibit their will to be autonomous and the desire for freedom surfaces in many instances. They possess an adventurous mind and ordinary routine activities of human life never satisfy them. In order to satisfy their adventurous minds they often try to involve themselves in extraordinary activities. People around them often consider them as idealistic and looking beyond the actual human life. Life for them seems to gather purpose and meaning only when there are challenges and adventures. Though the protagonists Morrie, Zinn and McCourt are adventurous and idealistic they are at the same time down to earth practical. They do sound like and are in fact romantics. But they also carry within themselves pragmatism enough to work towards and attain the ideals. All the three succeed in this aspect to an extent. It would be relevant to remember here Zinn’s argument that he would not mind romantic elements as long as they give energy to life enhancing ideals. This ability to combine the ideal and the practical, the romantic and the classic, the emotional and the rational and the right hemisphere and left hemisphere of the human brain is emphasised in the fields of emotional intelligence. Hence the study of protagonists such as these is all the more relevant. McCourt also is unmercifully honest with himself and shows extraordinary pragmatism.
According to Allport’s trait theory social perspective is an important aspect that helps an individual in understanding the society in which he lives and guides his existence. The protagonists portrayed in these memoirs stand apart from the others because of their extraordinary quality of understanding others. The world around them is not a mystery to them. Their persistence in seeking clarity of mind does not permit them to be complacent about themselves while in difficulties. Zinn shows extraordinary sense of social perspective through his character and behaviour.

The traits of agreeableness, kindness and frankness are very much appreciable when found in human beings. They are considered to be important positive traits. People tend to revere people who possess these qualities. There is no question that people with these qualities will be considered genuine human beings. These traits will attract people towards them. People with these traits value other’s feelings and opinions and offer enough space.

Living in the present is an essential trait for any human being, especially for a memoirist, since a memoir is a record of real life incidents and activities of the protagonists. With the accounts of their life and observation they surprise the readers with sudden awareness of familiar things in a new perspective. They exhibit a rare kind of pragmatism accepting things which cannot be mended according to our will. This extraordinary quality of accepting and living in the present is manifested in many places in the narratives. They never live in illusion or false hope. They willingly accept what is inevitable. May it be a political principle or a chronic disease, they respond with equanimity of mind. What is practically unavoidable is willingly accepted by them.
Empathy is a positive trait found in all the three protagonists. It is an intellectual quality of experimenting with the feelings, thoughts and attitude of others. The protagonists have qualities of experiencing the emotions of others. Living in a heterogeneous society they attempt to accept the feelings and thoughts of others. It is to be noted here that even in the case of others’ thoughts and attitudes not going hand in hand with the protagonists they exhibit a stunningly positive outlook on life by accommodating and accepting the differences. They possess a rare combination of personal will and social concern. They stand tall in the views of others when they remain impartial.

The traits that help the protagonists in taking quick and right decisions in their life are logical reasoning and critical thinking. There is no doubt these two traits are given much importance in the present day scenario. The ability to analyse an issue from various perspectives enables the protagonists to arrive at decisions that are both correct and quick. This essentially is a leadership quality which can influence others. The positive traits possessed by them work together and help in taking a balanced and acceptable decision during critical moments of life.

The astonishing display of optimism is a noteworthy trait of the protagonists. Though living in a hostile environment and with chronic disease as in the case of Morrie they never allow pessimistic notions to creep into their minds and lead a positive life throughout. They identify something to cherish in all human endeavours. There is no stopping them from being optimistic. Morrie’s optimism remains intact even at the face of death. They focus their attention on success and fruitfulness and not on thoughts of failure. This quality exhibited best in Howard Zinn. He gains hope in an extraordinary way. He adopts a cheerful approach towards life. He has a rare balance between emotion and reason and so
he is identified as a complete personality possessing important components of emotional intelligence. Though he possesses the quality of the idealists he has also been very practical about it. In his own words he attempts to bring life and energy to ideals. In short, the optimism displayed by Zinn is profound, consistent and is backed by a deep and precise understanding of contexts, situations and people. His is an unusual optimism for it is practical and revolutionary at the same time.

The study reveals that character studies can be fruitful in understanding human nature and social behaviour. They also help identify positive and negative traits and to realise which traits are to be developed and which traits are to be omitted. The study sheds light on the personality of three characters who stand apart from others by the possession of some rare traits or by the combination of such rare traits. Professor Morrie has characteristics like desire for freedom, absolute mindedness, pragmatism and self awareness, self understanding, kindness, extraversion and empathy. He is down to earth practical, understands others and exceptionally open-minded. Zinn stands tall because of his logical reasoning, moral correctness, self awareness, self regulation, social perception, optimism and righteousness. He is realistic and moral by nature. Frank McCourt is shockingly straight in his depiction. He has extraordinary traits like critical thinking, idealism, adventurousness, frankness, self awareness, self regulation and pragmatism. His writing has no pretentions, it is plain yet powerful. The protagonists discussed offer a plethora of life lessons to be learnt by the human race. These characters can be effective case studies to identify and to improve human personality traits. Those positive traits identified in them, in all likelihood, can help the reader imbibe them because of the influence made possible by powerful portrayal of
characters. The most important thing is that these are not imaginary pretensions but experiences of a lived life. These are as real as our life.

The columnist David Brooks has been consistently quoted throughout the study. This has been necessitated as he devotes most of his columns to moral and ethical development. Moreover he frequently refers to and does mini reviews of books that advocate character study and character development. It his recent column “Why elders smile” he refers to the following books—*Light We Go* by Jimmie Holland and Mindy Greenstein, *Practical Wisdom* by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe, *The Wisdom of Paradox* by Elkhonon Goldberg and Ezekiel Emanuel’s essay in *The Atlantic*. All these deal with the idea of aging and learning. Brooks argues against treating wisdom in old age as a result of “biological, chemical and evolutionary process.” Instead such wisdom is learnt through life experiences according to him. With reference to the titles given above he highlights concepts like bifocalism—“the ability to see the same situation from multiple perspectives”—to be compassionate and detached at the same time, “learning how not to be too invested in particular outcome,” and “learning how not to sweat the small stuff.” Quoting from these books Brooks emphasises the importance of “shifting smoothly between perspective,” states the fact that the wisdom that enables a doctor to be “kind and honest” and a teacher to “instruct but also inspire” can be “earned only by acquiring a repertoire of similar experiences.” (www.thehindu.com) He also adds that “a life time of intellectual effort can lead to empathy and pattern awareness.” The similarity between developmental aspects listed here and the features seen in the protagonists we have studied is difficult to miss. Brooks sums up saying, “it’s more useful to know how individuals get better at doing the same things they do. The point of culture is to spread that wisdom
from old to young; to put that thousand-year-heart in a still young body.”

“[D]oing the same things they do” refers to persistent and critical attempts made at realizing an ideal and these we have seen in the three protagonists. The study has effectively demonstrated the importance and inevitability of such character education.

**Limitations of the Study**

Every study has its own limitations. Though there are a number of memoirs available the present study chooses only three for want of time. The study focuses only on characters, traits and development leaving other aspects pertaining to real life experiences that may have equal relevance.

**Scope for further research**

Other aspects such as socio cultural milieus, economic imbalances, political and regional issues and stylistic features of language used can be probed for further study. Of particular interest is the fact that the three memoirs are set against the background of turbulent sixties and counter culture. This aspect definitely calls for research.