
UNIT 3 AUTHENTICITY AND CREDIBILITY

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3.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit considers one of the **most** important norms of writing, viz., the **establishment** of authenticity and credibility, without which no creative writing can appeal to the reader. It **discusses** the various implications of these two concepts, and illustrates, through examples, how successful writers achieve these effects. This lesson tells you that

- the fantastic imagination of children can take any absurdity in its stride; but
- the adult mind has a sense of reality which looks for the authentic in literature;
- **although** all writing is self-expression, the act of writing filters our emotions; only those which are genuine can be expressed through **writing**;
- the writer must live the experience which he is **trying** to communicate; if he wants readers to feel something he must first feel it himself;
- authenticity of facts is very **important**; a writer must avoid crossing experience and culture barriers;
- authenticity of **locale and** culture have been achieved by such writers as Raja **Rao** and R.K. Narayan. On this authentic base they have written highly imaginative or **comically exaggerated** tales;
- credibility can be **realised** only when authenticity has been achieved;
- Mulk **Raj Anand's** story, discussed at length, shows **how** these effects have been obtained.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the **third Unit** of Block 1, dealing with the fundamental **norms** of writing. In the **first Unit** we have considered questions of a general nature like, 'Why does one

write? 'What are the two essential aspects of a literary work?' 'What are the Do's and Don'ts for an **aspiring** writer like you?'-and 'Why should one learn to be one's own critic, and why should one seek **other's** opinions?' In the second Unit we have discussed what clarity **means** and how clarity, **which is not** mere simplicity of statement, can be achieved, and also the technique to be **adopted** for achieving directness. Even if your writing attains clarity and **directness**, it will not be valued as a literary work unless it is **marked** by **authenticity** and credibility.

In this Unit, I will tell **you** what authenticity and credibility actually **mean**, and how they can be **realised** in **your work**. But there are no set formulae or recipes for achieving clarity, directness, authenticity or credibility. You are only told what they are but not what can be **done** to achieve them. What is presented here is to help you achieve them on your own through the exercise of your creative imagination. These Units do not constitute a manual, but only **an aid** to the disciplining of your creative powers.

3.2 THE CHILD ACCEPTS THE INCREDIBLE QUITE EASILY

Children love to hear **stories**. For instance, in fairy tales, **folk** tales, or new stories made up by gifted parents on the spur of the moment, giants and spirits, talking animals and plants, **kindly** gods and bad angels figure prominently, as also do improbable incidents. The child's mind accepts the absurdities with delight and asks no questions about credibility or authenticity. For example, the story may run like this: 'Once there was a **cat** who, when a kitten, liked drinking ink. She had lapped up so much ink that . . . ' of, 'An old man went **walking** in the forest. His **dog** ran behind him. The old man **walked** on and on. By chance he dropped a mitten (a glove for the hand and the wrist). . . ' The **child** enjoys listening to it, but does not question whether it is true or false, probable or improbable. Let us examine these two stories.

3.2.1 Two **absurd** but delightful stories

The first story begins **with** a **delightful** absurdity; **the second begins** normally enough, but soon becomes **quite** funny. Let us say that first a mouse enters the mitten, making it his **home**. **Gradually** a frog, a hare, a fox, a grey wolf, a boar, and a brown bear invite **themselves** in. It is only when the bear has entered the mouse's home that there is **some** crowding and the mitten is about to burst. But before another guest can **enter** and **make** that happen, the old man notices that he has lost the mitten and **goes back** to look for it. **The dog** finds it, barks, and the frightened animals run out and away. Thus the story becomes incredible as it develops.

3.2.2 The child is not worried by improbability, nor is it worried by moral issues

The child finds **nothing** improbable in **these** stories, as he is prepared to accept any odd event for the **sake of** the story—just to find out what happens next. The important **thing** for the child is **that** things should keep happening. He is not **worried** about the moral **implications** **either**. For **instance**, consider a story like the following: a tiger comes, eager to rescue his friend, the jackal, who has **fallen** into a trap. The jackal has no hesitation in using the tiger for his escape, letting him **fall into** the trap, and getting **killed** in the end. The child may feel sorry for the tiger, but will not condemn the jackal for his act of **betrayal**.

3.2.3 A sense of reality, however, comes later

As the child grows **up**, however, he develops a sense of reality. **He** is no longer willing to **accept** improbabilities; he measures up other people's **narration** of **events** against his own **experience**, his own standard of **credibility**. In this **particular Unit**, we are concerned with **authenticity** and credibility as two basic features of adult writing. The logic of **children's** literature being rather different, it **will** be **discussed** in **Course 4**.

3.3 WRITING IS A FORM OF SELF-EXPRESSION, EVEN WITH CHILDREN

The desire to write—the urge to write, if you will—arises from one's necessity to express **oneself**. This is how all writing begins. When children start writing, whether it is about an imaginary world, or a real one, it is this compulsion to express what they **think** and feel that is foremost in their minds. They do not necessarily want others to read what they have written; in fact, some are very secretive about their writing and hide it in cleverly thought-out places.

3.3.1 The act of writing itself tells the writer which of his feelings are not sincere, and which are

Writing offers a release to the writer of any age; it is an act of self-expression so powerful in its intensity that those who have felt the urge, exhaust themselves doing it, for the time being, at least; but having done it once, successfully, they must go on performing the same task, repeatedly. They find the act of creation sacred, because it is in the process of writing that the writer is confronted with his feelings and ideas more concretely. Moreover, what he cannot bind down with words will escape, and he can bind down only those which have substance, which are authentic, which have intensely lived in his mind. It is at the moment of writing that the writer **realises** that only some feelings become true through exact expression; some, which are fleeting, casual and insincere, refuse to be bound in language.

3.3.2 In writing, authenticity of emotions is measured by authenticity of expression

Thus we find that, for a writer, authenticity of emotion is measured by authenticity of expression. The poet, the short story writer, the novelist, and the dramatist are all trying to express, through different mediums, their vision of life as revealed to them through their experiences, feelings and meditations. They find that ordinary prose or singsong verse cannot express their emotions, which are complex and **sometimes** impalpable. They must find the right combination of words, the right tone, the right rhythm to express what they want to say. They must, in other words, find their own authentic voice, not merely borrow readymade images, ideas or speech.

3.3.3 For the writer what authenticity means is that he must himself believe what he wants others to believe

Authenticity, therefore, comprises for the writer, not only emotions but also expression. Every writer keeps trying to achieve perfection in this, although only a few succeed—sometimes after a very long wait. That is why the craft of writing is not an easy one to practise. There are many ways of seeking truth; for the writer, the first step is to ensure that what he wants others to feel he feels himself, that it has become a part of himself.

Activity 1

- i) Why does the child accept the incredible easily? (30 words)
- ii) Why do people write? (30 words)
- iii) What is authenticity? How can it be known? How can it be measured in writing? (50 words)

(Check your answers with those given at the end of the Unit)

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3.4 AUTHENTICITY OF FACTS

It is needless to say that the truth of facts lies at the very root of authenticity of feelings. One cannot **merely** imagine a death and write a good poem of grief; one cannot invent a beloved **and** write a true poem of love; one cannot construct out of one's head a **working-class home** and write a story of the hopes or despairs of **working-class** people. **Writers** have **sometimes** tried to do so, and although they may have fooled some, they **have** not succeeded for long. Behind an authentic feeling must lie an authentic object, an authentic background, a truth of experience. The writer must possess the power of accurate observation, and a good memory to hold the details.

3.4.1 The experience barrier : dangerous to cross it

There is such a thing as an **experience** barrier. We are born in one sort of family, **live** with a particular group of people, have a **certain** kind of social and cultural inheritance, and go **through** a limited **number** of experiences. These present the picture of life as we see it. It is possible, through wide reading, to get to know of other peoples and their **lives**; yet that kind of knowledge can **never** be as **direct and** as deep as the one we have **lived** ourselves. If, without direct experience, we **try** to portray an area of reality **from** which we have been excluded, our creative writing will sound hollow. One **common** example of this **kind** of insincerity is seen when writers with a **middle-class** background are tempted to portray life as lived in the 'high society'—upper class, **westernised**, amoral and carefree. Similarly, when writers with a **pre-eminently** rural or urban background, wish to cross their experience **barrier** and **write** on urban or rural themes, about which their knowledge is scanty, they fail to **convince** the reader. Only great writers are able to cross this barrier **with** the help of their powerful imagination.

3.4.2 Experience barrier between cultures

It is **similarly** dangerous to write about other cultures without going deeply enough into them. One of the **reasons** why very few Europeans have written with any measure of understanding about India is surely that their penetration **into** our culture has been **superficial**. It matches some of the superficial observations we tend to make about other **cultures**: the British, the American, the African, and so forth. In a recent novel, written by a foreigner who has lived long enough in India, a tea party is described, with a lot of **amused** observation. The Principal of a private coaching institution has invited his **staff** to a tea party, and among the **invitees** is a junior member who has come **with** his pregnant wife. To most of the staff, who are quite poor, the tea party seems **to** be an opulent affair. There is much dressing in one's finery; everyone **talks** in a stilted fashion, **using** Victorian English of a ripe vintage, and many **sycophantic** compliments are paid to the host. When food is served, everybody tries **to be** discreet and genteel, with the result **that** they all eat so little—all, except the **pregnant** wife of the junior teacher. She is fond of sweets, though in her **married** **We** **her husband** could satisfy this craving fully, only once. In any **case**, either because of her deprivation, or Because she is pregnant (this reason is also hinted at), she makes **a** grab at the sweets and eats them **greedily**. It is all so funny—the account of **the tea party**—the writer seems to say; **all** so funny, yet **so** sordid.

3.4.3 How cross-cultural raids can violate norms of decency

To an Indian reader of the story it is, however, obvious that the account of the tea party is indescribably cruel, and since fun is made of deprived people—the little education, the lack of money and social status—it is in bad taste. The author does not see (because the author **has** not penetrated into the culture of the characters ridiculed), that behind much of what seems to be **funny** lies inescapable **servitude** and poverty. A person of breeding (not to speak of true culture) does not make **fun** of misfortune.

The moral, therefore, is that **unless** the writer can truly say that he has gone **deep** enough into another culture to be able to understand it, he should not attempt any cross-cultural raids.

3.4.4 Total authenticity of locale and culture: R.K. Narayan

One Indian writer who never allows this to happen in his novels and short stories is R.K. Narayan. His stories **are** all set in and around **Malgudi**, a small **imaginary** town in **Karnataka**. Geographical reality is pronounced in **all** of them, as is the reality of persons, their occupations, hopes and failures, amusements, their daily life. So truthful is Narayan about the people living in this small town, so authentic is his **portrayal** of their manners of speech, their education and their attitudes of mind, that very soon after beginning to read the second story by Narayan, one feels that one has actually lived in **Malgudi** all one's life. Narayan has found all his material in this **small** town. Narayan's stories **ring** true because his authentic voice comes from the **authentic** experience that he portrays.

3.4.5 Authenticity is the base of even highly imaginative creation: Raja Rao

Even when a writer wishes to transform his material into a highly-imaginative narrative, he must first ensure the **authenticity** of the material. Once he **has** done that, he can fashion the material into the **realistic**, fantastic, symbolic or any other mode that he **likes**. Take, **for** instance, Raja Rao's story, 'The Cow of the Barricades' (included in **the Policeman** and the Rose, O.U.P.), in which the story of the cow, Gauri, and her **participation** in the Mahatma's non-violent movement is narrated. Not only is **Gauri** created authentically, bit by bit, before our eyes, but the human characters also—the Master, his disciples, and even the red men. Raja Rao creates this **authentic** world so carefully, that when at the end of the story he invests Gauri with the **conscious** purpose of a martyr walking sedately towards her willed death, we **find it** totally credible.

3.4.6 Authenticity established, the author can go in for great comic exaggeration: R.K. Narayan

In R.K. Narayan's stories authenticity serves a similar purpose, though it takes a **different** direction. With authenticity established, Narayan often imparts to credibility the **dimension** of comic exaggeration. In 'A Horse and Two Goats' (included in **A Horse and Two Goats**, Vision Books), Narayan takes eight pages to **create** the world of the story: the village of Kritam; Muni, the owner of two goats; his long-suffering and shrewish wife; the **shopman**; and finally the terracotta horse. This is **done** at a leisurely pace, till the stage is completely set for the red-faced man to arrive 'in a new sort of vehicle' which looked 'both a motor car and bus'. When **Muni** takes him to be a policeman, the comedy starts. **Muni's** knowledge of the red-faced man's **languages** is confined to a simple 'yes, no', spoken at once. The **red-faced** man cannot understand a word of the chaste **Tamil** which Muni speaks, and for **which** the village of Kritam is famous. They, however, carry on a conversation for the next thirteen pages, **talking** at cross purposes.

No one can tell what he (**Muni**) was planning to say, as the other interrupted him at this stage to **ask**, 'Boy, what is the secret of your teeth? How old are you?'

The **old** man forgot what he had started to say and remarked, 'Sometimes, we **too** lose our cattle. Jackals or cheetahs may **sometimes** carry them off, **but** sometimes it is just theft **from** over in the next village, and then we will **know**

3.5.1 Authenticity and credibility: a close look at Mulk Raj Anand's 'The Lost Child'

Let us now examine a short story titled 'The Lost Child', written by **Mulk Raj Anand**, a story that aptly illustrates what we have so far said about authenticity and credibility. Fortunately for us, h a n d himself provides a background to the story. He was doing research in Philosophy in London, and he found his work very hard.

I could not master the whole of European thought quickly. I did not know Greek or Latin or German or French. I was advised by my Professor to be honest and accept the fact that I did not know very much. But I **struggled** all the same, late into the nights, read huge tomes and brooded. But the more I read the more I felt lost.

Then I remembered some words of Guru Nanak, who had once said: We are all children lost in the world fair.' I went to sleep brooding on these words.

In the early hours of the morning, I recalled that I had been physically lost in a fair at the age of six in Kaleshwar village, on the banks of the **Beas** river in Kangra valley. I had strayed away from my parents, looking at a juggler's tricks and was crying for my mother and father when I could not **find** them. All the things I had wanted my parents to buy for me, the balloon, the sweets, the flowers, I did not want any more. I only cried out: 'I want my mother! I want my father!' Someone picked me up and tried to console me, but I was inconsolable and cried, 'I want my mother! I want my father!'

I wrote that experience of my childhood in the early morning. As I had had the experience of being actually lost, the narrative was authentic and true to my experience. Only I did not put it down in terms of myself. But I, unconsciously, wrote about a child, any child, who may get lost in the way as I had got lost.

3.5.2 How Anand establishes authenticity

h a n d says that ~~the~~ story was authentic because he had the experience of getting lost. However, it is not the same thing to have an experience and to be able to write about it with an authentic voice. Mere experience does not give a writer the authentic tone in writing. It has to be created **skilfully**. **Anand** first establishes the setting: the season, the place, the people, **the many** ways of travelling to the fair, and then introduces the child with these words, 'One little boy ran between his **parents'** legs, brimming over with life and laughter. The joyous morning gave greetings ~~and~~ unashamed invitations to all to come away **into** the fields, full of flowers and songs.' The child is full of life and a sense of **wonder**; all his five senses are fully alive and stimulated. He is happily possessed of the faculty of being totally absorbed in the sensation of the moment to the complete forgetfulness of his surroundings. On the way to the fair, he and his **parents** enter a footpath in a field.

It was a flowering mustard field, pale like melting gold, as it swept across miles and miles of even land—a river of liquid light, ebbing and falling with each fresh eddy of wild wind, and straying at places into broad, rich tributary streams, yet **running** in a constant sunny sweep towards the distant mirage of an ocean of silver light. Where it ended, on one side stood a cluster of low mud-walled houses thrown into relief by a dense crowd of yellow-robed men and women, from which arose a high-pitched sequence of whistling, creaking, squeaking, roaring, humming noises, sweeping across the groves to the blue-throated sky like the weird, strange sound of **Siva's** mad laughter. The child looked up to his father and mother, saturated with the **shrill** joy and wonder of this vast glory and feeling that they, too, wore the **evidence** of this pure delight in their faces, he left the footpath and plunged headlong into the field, prancing like a young colt, his small feet chiming with the fitful **gusts** of wind that came rich with the fragrance of **more** distant fields.

3.5.3 The poetic passages are just

This quotation **from** the story is a little long, but it serves to illustrate an **important point**. **Anand**, in his writing, rarely indulges in poetic **flights**. If he

does so here, it is with **the** specific object of establishing the authenticity of the child's world, the child's natural ability to absorb, entirely, the world around him. The child is enchanted by the dragonflies bustling to the fair. "Come, child, come" —this exhortation has to be repeated by his parents to drag him away from what engages him at the moment: a banyan tree, a shower of young flowers, cooing doves; **and** when the fair ground is reached: sweetmeat-sellers, flower-sellers, the balloon man, a juggler and finally the roundabout in full swing.

3.5.4 The shift in language further strengthens the authenticity

It is there that he loses his parents. At once, the world changes for him; panic-stricken, he ~~now~~ runs about in all directions, till defeated, 'his cries suppressed into sobs'. The bright, vibrant world of a moment before, now becomes a sinister one—heavy **men**, with flashing, murderous eyes and hefty shoulders knock him to and from with their brutal paws, until he starts shrieking for his father and mother. He is lifted up in the arms of a kindly man who, to soothe him, offers him each **delight** the child has craved for earlier. But now he wants none of these, he only asks for his mother and father; The story ends with the man offering his last allurements on the list—sweets. But the child now only wants his parents.

3.6 SUMMING UP

Authenticity and credibility are the most important norms of creative writing. A child accepts the incredible easily but not an adult. The child is able to do so because it has yet to develop a sense of reality. It is interested in knowing what is happening in the story and not in its import or implications—moral or otherwise. But the adult tries to measure what is presented in the story against what he has himself experienced.

Authenticity comprises not only emotions but also expression. To be able to make others feel what he wants to, he must feel it himself and achieve the right expression of it, which is not easy. The truth of facts is what gives rise to authenticity of feeling. Authentic feeling is not possible **without** an authentic object or background, or a truth of experience, which underlies it. Direct experience is, therefore, necessary to be able to achieve an authentic expression of the reality that is sought to be projected. That is why it may be said that there is an experience barrier which is dangerous to cross for any but the great writers. This is all more dangerous in the case of cross-cultural projections of experience. The **writer** attempting this will end up appearing to be superficial or offending. **Truthfulness** to experience is not enough; empathy, which comes of deep understanding, is **needed**. R.K. Narayan is noted for the authenticity of locale and culture which **characterises** his work. By establishing authenticity **skilfully** he is able to extend credibility towards a comic unreality which does not render the work concerned incredible, as in 'A Horse and Two Goats'. Raja **Rao** is able to build a highly imaginative narrative which is convincing by ensuring the authenticity of the material used, as in his story, 'The Cow of the Barricades'.

Mulk Raj **Anand's** analysis of his story, 'The Lost Child', brings out the authenticity of the experience embedded in it and the way in which it has been imaginatively rendered, so as to **exemplify** a universal experience—the child's first experience of separation, which is, perhaps, part of his initiation into life.

Activity 3

Discuss, in not more **than** 70 words, how an author can be fantastic without losing credibility.

(Check your answer **with** that given at the end of the Unit)

3.7 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

i) The child's imagination can take in the absurd or the improbable. The sense of reality develops only as the child grows up. The child is interested in knowing only what is happening, not in its implications, moral or otherwise.

ii) All people—adults as well as children—want to express themselves; hence the urge to write.

iii) Authenticity means the state of being true to one's experience. It is only through the act of writing that a writer comes to know whether his feelings are genuine or not. He can successfully express only those things which he has intensely felt himself. It is only when the writer is able to find the right expression for his emotion that it can be measured. Only then it is possible for the author to find his authentic voice.

Activity 2

i) Yes, it is true in most cases. But experience can also be lived vicariously, without the writer having actually undergone it.

ii) It makes the rendering of such experience, not intensely felt by the author, inauthentic or superficial. The given story illustrates it. The incidents may be true to one's experience, but the way they are projected may make them sound incredible to the reader.

iii) Though Muni and the red-faced American do not know each other's language, they still carry on an animated conversation which is unreal and comic at the same time. This is not the case of a breakdown of communication but an utter absence of communication. Still the dialogue or communication achieves a dramatic effect.

iv) No, this technique only contributes towards this effect. Detailed description and exposition are necessary. But unless they relate to the myth suggested by the cow's name, and the ethos which invests it with the aura of divinity, it will not be plausible.

Activity 3

Hints

Consider the story, 'The Cow of the **Barricades**', cited in this Unit, to illustrate this. **Gauri** is both a myth and a real cow, with the two merging in such a way that even her fantastic action in the end is acceptable.

3.8 GLOSSARY

You will find in the glossary a short list of the literary terms used in this Unit.

Authenticity: See **verisimilitude** (Unit 4)

Comedy: A story which ends happily is said to be a comedy. The characters are typical, they face typical **problems** and conflicts and these are resolved to their satisfaction.

Credibility: See **verisimilitude** (Unit 4)

Improbability results from internal logical, **organisational**, or **structural** weakness in a literary text.

Parable is a story **designed** to convey some religious principle, moral lesson or general truth by **comparison** with actual events.

Realistic, fantastic, symbolic modes: These are techniques which a writer uses to control problems of structure and **organisation** in his work. For 'realistic mode' read **Sense of reality** (below). In the **symbolical** mode the theme becomes clear through successive use of images **which** represent concepts, ideas or emotions. The image then is referred to as a **symbol**. It may be public or private, universal or local. A literary work is in the **fantastic** mode when its action takes place in a nonexistent and unreal world (such as **fairy** land); the characters are incredible. Science fiction and utopian stories are forms of fantasy.

Sense of reality: The **writer's** efforts to make his writing come close to life, as it is actually lived, give his **fiction** a sense of reality. The reader can test it on the pulse of his own experience.

Situation refers to **certain events** at a point of time which makes it a turning point in a drama or narrative. **The** initial situation from which the struggle springs, and the critical and climatic **situations** towards which the events drive, are most often referred to as 'situation'.

Structure is to be **distinguished** from form and genre (Block 2, Unit 2). It refers to the arrangement of parts of a work in relation to the whole—as, for instance, the arrangement of scenes in a novel or play. Structure controls the main story line of a narrative.

Style is how a particular writer says things—his tone and voice, his choice of words, his figures of speech, the devices (rhetorical and otherwise), the shape of his sentences (whether they **are** loose or periodic)—indeed, every possible aspect of the way in which he **uses** language.

Theme: The theme of a work is not its subject but rather its central idea, which may be stated directly or indirectly.