
UNIT 4 AUTHORIAL VOICE

structure

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4.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, you will learn to identify the author's voice without which it is never possible to plumb his deeper meaning. An author has several choices open to him.

- He may speak directly to the reader (the autobiographical or direct mode).
- He may **communicate** with his reader through an intermediary—an imaginary character.

He may also exercise his privilege as an **omniscient** creator who comments openly on his characters' thoughts and emotions, telling the reader all that has to be known about a situation, scene or character.

What is of basic importance is the need to listen carefully to an author's distinctive manner of speaking in order to understand the impulsion behind his writing.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we discussed the importance of authenticity and **credibility** in creative writing. Unless a writer makes his story—characters and situations—life-like, he will not be able to establish any rapport with his **readers**. Often, story writers and novelists announce on the first page that all characters and scenes are purely imaginary, and any correspondence with persons, living or **dead**, is purely coincidental. But, in actuality, this is only a subterfuge because, as Somerset **Maugham** has rightly observed, no writer can project anything intensely **moving** out of his imagination alone. Most writing is, in fact, either veiled autobiography, or is based on the experience of someone very close to the writer. This is what lends an aura of verisimilitude to any successful writing.

It is, therefore, necessary for you to understand how an author's voice can **be** heard by the reader, even when he writes in the third person, using the **indirect** method of narration.

4.2 THE AUTHOR'S VOICE—HOW TO PERSONALISE IT

When you read a story, a feature-article, a poem, or a play, don't you feel as though you are hearing **the** author's voice? This is because every piece of writing is a sort of **utterance**. Herein the writer addresses his reader in the distinctive manner of his speech—directly in his own voice or indirectly through a person created by him. If you are imaginative enough you should be able to conjure up his voice in your mind's ear. You may then interpret this voice as being compassionate or bellicose, tender or abrasive.

The voice becomes immediately recognisable if the writing is done in the first person singular—in the autobiographical or confessional mode. There is, here, no intermediary **between** the writer and the reader. The writing then reads like an intimate dialogue between the two.

But even if a writer chooses the indirect method of narration, a sensitive reader should still be able to **recognise** the author's voice as it filters through his imaginary characters, **particularly** his protagonist. The art of narration may, therefore, be described as a triangular operation involving the teller, the reader and the tale. It is often said that we should trust the tale and not the teller. But then, isn't the story the creation of a writer who has his own predilections? How can one, therefore, ignore the element of subjectivity in any form of writing? The author's voice will come through in spite of his masked objectivity. So, as a writer, you shouldn't strain too hard to suppress your natural voice. Be your honest self; write freely and boldly, letting your heart speak out the truth, and nothing but the truth. If you are speaking **with** somebody else's voice, strutting about in borrowed plumes, you'll be found out soon, and your writing will never ring authentic.

4.3 MODES OF DIRECT ADDRESS

We will now analyse **the** diverse narrative strategies adopted by a writer to address his reader.

4.3.1 The Direct Method or the Autobiographical Mode

As mentioned above, **this** mode of writing enables the writer to speak directly to his reader, as though he is **talking** intimately to a confidant, in an informal, conversational **manner**. A writer may use this method as a therapeutic exercise—'to shed his sickness' (to quote D.H. Lawrence). In this form of writing, the author just wishes to unload his **agonies** or joys on his reader who, therefore, becomes his co-sharer. Haven't we **often** felt the irrepensible urge to unburden ourselves of something that lies like heavy lumber on our minds? I should advise you, at this point, to read the opening chapter of Tolstoy's famous novel **Kreutzer Sonata** to see how the protagonist (who is, in fact, the author's prototype) shares his personal agony with his fellow **passengers**.

But a beginner should be wary of speaking out in **his** own voice too often, even though **this kind** of writing seems to be much too easy and effortless. If not judiciously controlled **and skilfully organised**, an autobiographical form of writing may lapse into **maawkish** sentimentality. Such a writer often feels tempted to even fabricate characters **who** are only thinly-veiled extensions of his personal self. A **discerning** reader, however, should have no difficulty in perceiving a falsity of tone in the author's voice.

Activity 1

Given below is an **autobiographical** sketch by Kamala Das, a well-known poet and writer in both English and Malayalam. Read it closely and answer the questions, that follow.

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

A Writer's Predicament (a personal statement):

In the family that I was born into, all women behaved like bonded slaves in order to survive; and nobody seemed to **think** it funny.

I belonged to the matrilinear and matriarchal community of **Nayars** but there **was** not a single woman in my family who had the courage to take a decision **without** consulting the men. Obviously there was something wrong with all of **us**. Perhaps what was wrong was our admiration for Mahatma Gandhi who was then the national hero. **Gandhiji's** photographs were hung on every wall giving us the feeling that he was the head of the family, not the uncle who sat with his **books** on the patio or the father who sent the money necessary to keep the **establishment** going. **Gandhiji**, like every other North Indian, was not familiar **with** the psychological aspects of a matriarchal society. He was not interested in such things anyway for he was busy trying to get freedom for the country. The development of women's minds and the nurturing of their self-respect did **not** interest him. The advice he steadily gave to the Indian women was the sort of advice which only those of a patriarchal society would comprehend or **appreciate**, and, yet the women of my family obeyed his whims, gifting away **their** jewellery to his Harijan-fund and dressing themselves in austere white like Jain nuns. Almost **all** of them were sexually frigid and so could appreciate **his** stand on celibacy as a desirable way of life.

Gandhiji had made a cult out of their anaemic outlook, settling their dormant **guilt** in regard to their long-suffering husbands and had spiritually laundered them clean. They began more and more to behave like North Indian women. They refused to sit down in the presence of their uncles, brothers and sons. They **ate** only after their men had had their fill. They kept themselves to the **zenana**, never once raising their voices to express any opinion. They may have **become** excellent nuns but in that **rarefying** process they **lost** their identity and turned vague and colourless. Even the diseases that finally carried them away **were** vague and colourless. A breathlessness followed by fatigue and death. An **attack** of indigestion. Quick departures that underplayed the tragedy of their lives. The sick lay silent till death arrived with its own grand silence. The **mourners** **were** silent too. It was thought unbecoming to weep for the dead. We **heard** only the fall of the axe on the branches of the mango tree which had to be **chopped** to provide logs for the cremation. The Nayars were burnt on **mango-logs** in the southern wing of their estate. We seldom strayed into that region fearing the silence of our tightlipped ancestors. Our grandmother told us of **Sita** the favourite goddess of every patriarchal society. She was pregnant **when** taken out to the forest and abandoned. That had to be done because one of the **washermen** suspected her chastity. Sita's husband, Rama—the king, supposedly the epitome of courage, did not have the guts to ignore such **rumours** and to keep her by his side.

To a Nayar **woman** who was financially independent, inheritor of the **family-wealth**, poor Sita's predicament was incomprehensible. Nobody could **have** dared to treat a Nayar **woman** the way Rama treated his weak consort. If things **became** unpleasant at her husband's, she would return to her own home and its **perennial** security. My own great grandmother had done that. No eyebrow was raised when she returned home leaving the corpulent Raja of **Cheralayam** for reasons of her own.

But my **mother** was different. She had read enough books by European **authors** to lose her essential identity. Book-learning wears down the intuitive **powers** a woman is born with. Mother's ideal was the submissive wife of **Mahatma** Gandhi. Martyrdom, in tolerably small doses, was what people, **like** **my mother**, secretly aspired for. Her expectations were fulfilled, for my father **was** an **autocrat** who loved to shout at his wife and to impose his will on **everybody** who was maintained by his earnings. There was tension gripping us **when** he was in the house. Whenever I stayed with my parents in Calcutta I suffered from mysterious headaches that kept me awake at night. Father did **not** particularly care for the company of children. Very often we were sent away to our ancestral home in **Malabar** or to boarding schools where we **breathed** easy. Then some fine morning he would decide to take us back to the city saying that the savages needed some training. This continual shuttle

between the **city** and the **village** made us nervous wrecks. We did not or could not belong to either of the two worlds. Gradually we grew thin. We had the pale, pinched **look** of orphans. We were wanted only as a concept was wanted. Wanted only as long as we kept ourselves confined to the dark rooms beside the kitchen. **No** wonder then that we developed the cunning of the creatures that live **underground** and in the dark, like moles and other rodents. We learnt to move **about** noiselessly and to disappear when footsteps came our way. We were **volcanoes** waiting to explode. I took up writing, hoping that it would help the volcano within to erupt in a slow, orderly way. I knew that I had to turn **myself** inside out. In talking to my readers I found my private voice; and perhaps my peace.

Truth was the **only** medicine that I knew which could heal the diseases of the society that had nurtured me and afterwards had begun to strangle me. I was a part of it, a **raw** spot like an exposed nerve throbbing with pain, and because I was hurt, **hurting** came easy to me. I was bringing order into a disorder assembled over the years, the long decades that had converted the robust matriarchal **society** into the weak, hypocritical one that rendered each of its members faceless, sexless and rudderless. My writings brought forth enemies. My **relatives** shunned me. My father threatened to kill himself. My cook was bribed to **poison** me.

Miraculously I **survived**. At fifteen I had been married off to a son of the richest feudal **family** in our locality. At that time there were **fiftysix** members living within that sprawling house along with their children and retainers. For generations **they** had cultivated the habit of **taking** law into their own hands and being wealthy, none had dared to question their ways. They could get away with rape, **arson** and murder. They settled disputes in their own yard, flogging the **erring** ones and confiscating their property. A loud-mouthed **daughter-in-law** was the last thing they needed. Each **time** I published a story, changing only **the** names, I faced stony silences, pregnant with wrath. Was I planning to be a detective around the place? They were possessive about their secrets. **There was** yet another writer who belonged to the family — Aubrey **Menen**. **Whenever** I told them that Aubrey was planning to visit his father's house they **said** that they should be given advance warning so that they could get away to **Calicut** or some such place to hide. Writers were feared and shunned. **Everybody** had his or her dirty secrets to safeguard. Surely they could not have **writers** snooping around, ferreting out the details of discreetly accomplished **crimes**.

When I **preached** a new **kind** of morality and supposedly gave courage to the young to follow the dictates of their conscience I began to get letters from every part of **the** country. Rituals had no meaning for me. Religion was equally meaningless. Therefore, the orthodox and the traditional hurled obscenities at me. Their **attitude** brought **suffering** to my husband and children. And, yet not once has any son of mine told me that I was wrong to take the path I chose instead of the smooth self-pampering one that tradition had laid out for a woman like **me**. This, more than anything else, makes me smile when I update the balance **sheet** of my life.

Now answer the following questions

- i) What is **distinctive** about the author's style that makes it **suitable** to autobiographical **writing**? (50 words)
- ii) Can you identify **the** paragraph where the author's voice sounds most bitter and ironical? (50 words)
- iii) How did the **author** find her 'private voice'? (40 words)

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

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4.3.2 The Author's Voice in diary-writing

There is a marked **difference** between the author's voice in a narrative sketch and a **diary**.

Read the **following excerpt** from a diary as **carefully as** possible:

Awoke this **morning** at **six**. Went for a walk. Had my **breakfast** at **8--an** egg omelette, a cup of **milk** and an apple. Went to office at ten, worked continuously **till** five, with an hour's break for lunch. The day would have ended blankly except for the evening party at **Pandey's**. It was a large crowd, and the **usual** din of gossip about weather, **taxes** and TV serials. And then she swung **in**, like a swan-dressed in a **translucent** sari, her ebony hair cascading **down** her sensuous **shoulders**. But it was her voice that held me—her mellifluous **and** husky voice with its **tantalising** pauses and whispers. What's there about a woman that casts a **spell** over you—her dress, her hair or her voice? After I returned home, I couldn't help **thinking** of her—even dreamt about her.

If you compare this **diary** note with the autobiographical sketch by Kamala Das, **cited** above, you should be able to distinguish between the two voices. Whereas Kamala Das's voice **gives** the impression of a steady flow, the excerpt from the diary **sounds** like a stutter—jumbled and incoherent, **as** though the author is **blabbering** away. It's only towards the end that the diarist's voice seems to be controlled by a **dominant** emotion—love or infatuation.

4.3.3 The Direct Mode used through an imaginary character

If a writer wishes not to speak directly to his reader (so as not to let **him** in on his private feelings—or for any other reasons) he may, as a subterfuge, create an **imaginary** character and use him as his channel of expression. This mode **offers** the **writer** a double advantage—the security of privacy without the loss of the intimacy of direct speech. This is how Graham Greene uses this strategy in his story 'A Day Slaved':

I had stuck closely to him, as people say, like a shadow. But that's absurd. **I'm** no shadow. You **can** feel me, touch me, hear me, smell me, **Im Robinson**.

Having created this imaginary character, Graham Greene now lends him a writer's **traits** (his own)—close observation, curiosity and concern for exactitude.

Presently we came to a railway bridge and underneath it he met a friend. I am using **words** again very inexactly. Bear with me. **I try** to be exact. I pray to be exact.

4.4 AUTHOR'S VOICE WITH PARTIAL OMNISCIENCE

We may **also** now **consider** the voice of an author who feigns only partial omniscience. **This is obviously** a device to **win** the reader's **trust**. In this **form** of writing, the author **speaks** with humility, even ignorance, to seek the **reader's** help in resolving some **problem i.e.**, a character's inscrutable motivation. This is again only a strategy because the **writer** is otherwise **supposed** to know everything. He is the all-knowing **creator**.

To **understand this point**, let's examine the closing paragraph of Somerset Maugham's story, 'The Kite', in which the protagonist divorces **his** wife because she fails to share with her **husband** the joy of kite-flying. The story ends with the author's own reflections:

I don't know,' I **mused**. You see, I don't know a thing **about flying** a kite. Perhaps it gives **him** a sense of power as he watches it soaring towards the clouds and of **mastery** over the elements!

4.5 THE ALL-KNOWING AUTHOR—HIS VOICE

As I have explained **above**, every author is all-knowing, **even** when he **pretends to be** only partially so. **Every** writing is shaped and controlled **by** its creator's vision. No wonder, creative writing is often described as a sort of divine activity. But **even-if** an author prefers to remain invisible behind his work, the reader **can** still hear his voice, between the **lines**. This voice often carries **the** ring of absolute authority because **the** author knows his **character** like the back of his hand. His judgement is, therefore, **infallible**, his analysis of motivation is definitive. Note, for instance, the opening paragraph of Saul Bellow's story 'A Father-to-be'.

The strangest **notions** had a way of forcing themselves into **Rogin's** mind. Just **thirty-one and passable-looking**, with short black hair, open forehead, he was a **research chemist**, and his **mind** was generally **serious** and dependable.

What greater **evidence** of an author's omniscience is possible than such comments which are designed to let the reader into the innermost recesses of a character's **mind!**

4.6 SUMMING UP

In this Unit you will **have realised** that the art of narration is a triangular operation involving the **teller**, the reader and the tale. Therefore, it is **necessary** for you to listen intently to the **Author's** Voice to comprehend whether

- he **speaks directly** to the reader or
- through an **imaginary character**.

Direct address **can take** the **following forms**:

- the **autobiographical** mode (this mode may be used as a therapeutic exercise by the writer), and
- **diary writing**.

The Author's Voice, **in any mode**, may be

- partially **omniscient** or
- **all-knowing**.

This last choice the **writer** makes **keeping** in view the extent to which he **desires** the reader to **participate** in the creative process.

Activity 2

Read the following 'Letter to my Grandmother' by Kamala Das.

- i) Comment on the author's voice in terms of her skilful blending of fantasy and reality. (70 words)
- ii) What is the distinctive nature of the author's tone? Is it sentimental, ironical, romantic or rational? (40 words)
- iii) Write an imaginary letter to a deceased relative or friend sharing some personal problem. (150 words).

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

A LETTER TO MY GRANDMOTHER
(Kamala Das)

This afternoon while I was alone in my Bombay flat I dreamt of rain. Little fairy-feet of rain **stamped** up the street with a sound like kindergarten laughter. **Then** it swelled all of a sudden, wrapping the vacant lots between the sky-scrapers and the blue patches of the sea in a grey veil. The trees on both sides of our street looked humbled with their leaves, vertical and dripping, and from the pavements flowed rivulets of muddy water, **gurgling** as they filled the potholes and the crevices on the asphalt. And, every flower pot in our garden was waterlogged, the little **worms** surfacing to plop dead. At our **gate** stood, looking up at my verandah, **not** one of the numerous friends in the **city**, but you, attired in the dingy white of a widow and drenched like one of the trees, just a bit humble, just a bit wary, and when I called out to you, you smiled in instant recognition as though I had never changed at all **from** the arrogant young woman of twenty that I was when you left, to a **faded** woman, heavy in body and in mind. But before I could **run** down to bring you up to my drawing room with its blue drapes and the faded carpet, I woke up. Then there was nobody smiling at me. No **rain** either. Outside my window the sky was bright as stainless steel. The street lay dusty and stunned under the whiplash of the **sun**. The trees looked like thirsty mendicants **thrusting** out dirty palms of burnt leaves. So the rain **was** unreal; **as** unreal as your visit to Bank House in Bombay twenty-one years after you died, lying **paralysed** in our old ancestral house, which became mine a few years ago, only because my brothers and my sister, all rich and self-sufficient, did not want to live in such a house but preferred to build their own houses in cities, complete with commodes and geysers and bathtubs. Do you remember, long long ago, weeping beneath the **Bakul** tree one morning while my younger brother and I stopped our game of chess wondering why you were sad and your telling us that one of us should, when we become rich, rebuild the old house? Every afternoon while your mother slept in the cool middle room upstairs and the servants slept downstairs on the black floor or on the wooden garners, you prowled round the house, **filling** the cracks of its walls with lime. The lime-paste **bun**t the tips of your fingers **and** **discoloured** them. I looked at them with pity. In fact I looked at every part of you only with pity although even at sixty your hair was black, glossy and your face unlined and the contours of your body lovely. You were widowed in your **early thirties** and the husband, the impoverished Raja, left you nothing but a few **memories** of love and laughter. You lived austere on the meagre earnings from the family-estate sharing your life with your mother, your aunts and your **brother** who **was really** only a cousin but whom you loved deeply and humbly. When my parents **sent** me from Calcutta to you, you rejoiced, for there was someone at last to lie near **you** on the three-sectioned mattress which you pulled down from the cot onto the cool floor at night fearing that **I might** fall down in sleep. You did not tell me any sad story. Least of all the sad story that was **your** biography. But once when a **neighbour** had come visiting, and the two of you were discussing the plight of women widowed early in life you said, not knowing that I was near enough to hear it, that a widow is a **mere** slave who must serve the lucky ones in the family until death. At that moment I **looked** at your clothes. The blouses made at home out of unbleached cotton, and the **choti**, dingier still, proclaiming to all the state of your destitution. That evening I asked you why you could not wear whiter clothes, softer linen. You only shook your **head** and turned your tear-filled eyes away. You wanted **your-life** to be shabby. But everyone adored you. Every relative who **fell** ill or was about to have a baby asked **for** your **soothing** presence. And for the touch of your hands. When I was a new **mother** and only **sixteen** and a half, staying in **Kerala**, away from my husband, a

could ~~be used~~ to pester me for kisses each time he met me alone near a tree or a pillar. I was ~~not~~ averse to this game, being young and neglected by the legal mate. Once or twice he ~~kissed~~ me and ~~gave~~ me the unpleasant taste of his mouth. One day you asked me not to talk to him. How did you know that he was interested in me? Were you spying on my movements in those days? When you told me that a girl's chief asset was a good reputation? I laughed sarcastically. I hated you when you turned puritanical and stern. One day after a quarrel on similar lines I turned on you with anger and said, I wish you die, grandmother. You went pale. Afterwards you did not ever scold me or tell me to be restrained in my behaviour with boys. I wish I had told you all about myself before you died. You were afraid that I would develop into a lustful woman. You were so wrong. I hated sex. Getting only that in its crudest form, I was trying to find another kind of relationship between a man and woman. I wanted to be Juliet to some young Romeo. I associated love with tragedy and beauty. I chose the most undeserving of men to love, and to spoil with love. I knew how the respectable ones behaved. I was married to one. I wanted to know if the disreputable ones were gentler with women. Youth blazed like a summer-sun. But it set fast too. I loved my Sons to an unpardonable excess. I wanted them to fill the emptiness of my life, which strangely enough, began to be felt only after I read from my mother's letter that you had died. All the invisible shackles of love were removed from me, and poor death had set me free. I could kiss any man young or old, who wanted a kiss from me. I could even mate with them if I so chose. My husband was anyway too busy to care. But while my sons grew, growing with me into a mental maturity I experienced something akin to happiness. When you grow up take me to see the films, I told my first son and he promised me that he would. But adolescence comes burdened with inhibitions and secret complexes. It soon occurred to me that he did not wish to be seen out with his mother although I was young still and more cheerful in disposition than all his friends. At nineteen he started to work, being as proud as I was, and not wishing to be dependent on his father who was always a struggler with his accounts at the first of every month. I sold my stories to the Kerala journals for twenty-five rupees in order to remain financially independent. It is possible that I have written in all over five hundred stories, writing them at night at the kitchen table while my family slept soundly. Grandmother, I have tried my best to succeed. Just as you had to make the hundred rupee note go a long way each month I have had to make my meagre talent go a long way. Two of my sons are young men with beards on their chins. One is plotting to set up an institute to train up politicians and the other has stopped talking to me. You will wonder why. I asked him to study for his examination. What I felt twenty six years ago when you chastised me, he feels towards me now when I remind him of his duties as a student. Life comes a full circle, doesn't it, grandmother? It is perhaps his turn to wish a woman (dead in order to be free. It is perhaps my turn to get a paralytical stroke and lie in a dark corner wishing for death and early release. Or perhaps a heart attack that will settle my nerves forever and not for mere dribblets of time like the Valium I take to chase my loneliness away. The only fault the pill has is its capacity to strengthen your memory when you do not want it to be strengthened. For instance, when I do not want to turn sentimental like the old, I suddenly remember how my son cried for a green shirt when he was a chubby five year old and how good he looked in it when it was bought.

With all my love,

Bank House
Bombay 20.

Kamala

4.7 ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

i) You **will** notice that she uses highly emotive language, and writes in the first **person** singular. This is what makes her writing particularly suitable to **autobiography**.

ii) Do you consider paragraph 5 or the last paragraph to be the most ironical? **Explain**.

iii) It is obvious that she writes **as** a rebel against society. In the process of **communicating** with her readers, she is able to sort out her own ideas.

Activity 2

i) In this letter, the narration is in the form of diary-writing. Her intense self-involvement comes through in her narrative **voice** which is direct, informal and intense.

ii) You **will** notice that the tone in the letter is a blend of sentiment and irony.

iii) **Hint**

In your **answer** try to remove **some** misunderstanding that you had with the **deceased**.

4.8 GLOSSARY

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

Autobiography: An account of a man's life written by himself. **While** an **autobiography** belongs to the same **category** as writing in the **confessional** mode, it is more **organised** and its material is arranged in a well-defined **chronological** order.

Persona is the narrator in a work of fiction who speaks as if for the author, but is **distinct** from him. In different stories the author's persona can be different.

Protagonist: The principal actor in a play or a character in a novel, short story.

Scene: 1) the place where **some** act or event **occurs**; 2) an incident or situation in real life; 3) a division of an act or a play; 4) a unit of dramatic action in which a single **point** is **made** or an **effect** obtained.

Subjectivity and objectivity: When these terms refer to writing they refer to the perspective and the voice of the author. **Subjective** writing focuses on personal experience and feeling—as in autobiography or autobiographical fiction. When a writer practises **objectivity** he is 'outside' of, and detached from, what he is writing about—he is writing **about** other people, not himself.

Verisimilitude: A degree of likeness to truth in a fictional work which causes the reader to accept, temporarily, that the characters and actions are probable.

4.9 ADDITIONAL READINGS FOR BLOCK 1

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