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Assessment

Creative Portfolio and Critical Commentary

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Creative Portfolio: The Wretched Phoenix

I eagerly clicked on Susan Parkson's website first thing that morning. It was already the fourth of the month and her astrological forecast was not yet published the day before. She had mentioned before that that day was going to be a critical one for my zodiac sign, and she had always been usefully accurate. The website of her page loaded and to my great relief, it had been updated.

To my disappointment, there was an important astrological conjunction that occurred earlier in the month, and I had missed that. I could have seized a work opportunity had I been more alert on the recruitment website. But it was that fourth day that was going to be a massively important day. Not only was it my birthday, but there was also going to be a full moon eclipse in my sign, and together with a grand cross formation in the sky, I would, in her words, soar like a phoenix, rising from the ashes to find great blessings in career and relationships.

I was indeed bucking for a raise in my doldrums. I had the misfortune of graduating three years ago amid a financial meltdown. Unlike my peers in honours class who applied and received government scholarships along with a job waiting for them when they graduated, I had wanted to strike out on my own. To them, I landed a job with a prestigious foreign bank after graduation. But I knew better. I was merely performing a backroom clerical role with a depressed entry level salary, and I had to start off as a contract staff, which was not a small personal humiliation for someone who had graduated from a national university bearing the country's name.

Susan Parkson had advised that I slog tirelessly to gain traction in my job. She was right. I slogged it out to secure a permanent position two years ago, but I was desperately hoping for a promotion. I had otherwise no managerial duties and my pay remained depressed compared to my peers in government service. It was awful to see my peers settling down, buying their

properties and cars, and preparing for marriage, while I could hardly keep myself from drowning financially.

And I needed a good career to ask Melissa to be my girlfriend. I was sure she was waiting for me to ask her as we had been spending so much time together. Her father was a private banker and she held him to the highest esteem. Her father thought anybody in government to be stuffy and insufferable rule keepers. Melissa often spoke disparaging of Peter, our class representative in university who was on a prestigious government scholarship. He was so boring, she said. She was happy I did not enter civil service but ventured to the banking sector where she thought men of good ambition should naturally be.

And I would be made good on that day, after two years of slogging. Susan Parkson had forecasted that the eclipse would not only be hugely favourable for my career. I could also look forward to be elevated from the old form of unsatisfying relationships. I could hardly wait. I could be promoted to a manager, and from there, the Vice President positions would be within reach in another few years. Melissa and her father would then be approved of me. For once, I could finally hold my head high among my peers. And for once, destiny was on my side.

After all, I had followed the advice of Susan Parkson very closely now, working as hard as I could, and keeping a very low key. And this was particularly true for the past six months. According to Susan Parkson, my outer planets were in retrograde, I had to avoid meeting people yet maintain contact with them for now. On that birthday where I would become a phoenix, all clouds of uncertainty and gloom would be dispelled, and I could celebrate and move on to the next stage on my life. That was why I had refrained from attending almost all recent social activities. For the sake of my coming success, I even told Melissa that I would not be celebrating with her on her birthday because I had volunteered to attend an important

meeting with the New York head office on that day that would take place late in the evening. I had sent her flowers instead. She had often recounted the romance of her parents where her father would send her mother flowers whenever he had to work on their special days. I think Melissa was quietly impressed with me.

I had not met up with my peers for an even longer period. But I had always kept them updated in the group email thread about my latest at work whenever there was a group activity. I knew I had missed a couple of weddings, and maybe some birthdays and first-born parties, but I reckoned that they must have understood, if not impressed by my determination and commitment to work. Conversations in the email threads had become quiet in recent months, and I was sure they were giving me a quiet time to focus on my work.

I was excited when that big day finally arrived. It was a surprisingly quiet day at work and transactions volumes were low. Seated at my desk, my phone rang just before lunch hour. It was my supervisor who asked me to proceed to his room. His voice was jovial and excited. As I walked to his room, anticipation grew. It must be that coming jubilation that Susan Parkson wrote about. I remembered the months of government bonuses announced in the papers, and the even bigger bonuses I heard colleagues in other parts of the bank were getting.

In the room, my supervisor sat me down and offered his rather exuberant congratulations for a year of hard work and a job well done.

‘I know we didn’t have a bonus payout for the past two years due to the financial crisis. But we fought tooth and nail for the bonus pool this time, and you have the second largest payout in the department!’ he boomed dramatically.

I gave what I thought was a polite smile and thanked him with my eyebrows expectantly raised.

‘The payout is...’ he continued as he flipped some documents. My hands were clenched hard by the side of my seat. ‘...maximised to three digits, so you get the maximum of ...’ he showed me a document with my name on it.

It read ‘\$999/-’. He gave a chortle. ‘Just between us, only Susanto had more.’ He then mouthed the words in an exaggerated fashion, ‘Ninety-nine cents more.’ He laughed. ‘You know that silly girl practically lives in the office,’ he said with his shoulders shrugged.

The polite smile plastered on my face felt suddenly foolish. ‘Sign here and you can go celebrate tonight!’ he exclaimed.

With my polite-turned-foolish-now-turned-dazed smile, I signed on the document and realised that it was time to leave the room. As I made to leave, my boss called out. ‘Oh, Hansen!’

I turned to him, wondering if he could hear my silent pleading that it was for a promotion that he had forgotten to mention. It would at least make up for that embarrassing bonus.

‘IT department has just informed me that the system has been problematic all morning, but it has been fixed now. See to the volume, would you? If you can work through lunch, you could still leave with a couple of hours overtime.’ He said with frivolity and laughed.

I was sure I still had that smile cemented on my face as I made to leave his office again.

‘Hansen!’ he called again.

I jumped and looked at him with renewed expectations.

‘Keep your bonus amount to yourself, would you?’ he lowered his voice to a whisper.

‘Others might...you know...’ he laughed shyly ‘...be jealous.’

I forgot how I made it back to my seat. There had to be some kind of emergency shutdown to my wrecked nervous system. As I sat there in a daze, watching the transactions piled up in the system, I decided that I wanted to talk to somebody. Instinctively, I dialled Melissa's number. After all, she had asked me a few times about birthday plans for weeks. Wanting to impress her, I had told her that I would be very busy in the office because I was so needed.

'Hansen?' An unfamiliar male voice answered the call instead. Before I could ask who he was, his excited voice said 'You remember me? I am Peter!'

Peter, the boring class representative? 'Hi.' I replied uncertainly. 'I was...'

'Melissa is in the ladies. We are at the airport, going on a trip together. How have you been?'

I didn't quite know what to say. The emergency response system kicked in again and I heard myself replied in an odd, enthusiastic voice 'Great! Where are you guys off to?'

'Maldives!' came his reply. 'Hang on, Melissa is back.'

'Hi there, Happy Birthday!' Melissa said.

'Thanks! Enjoy your trip!' I managed to say.

'Have a good celebration with your colleagues!' she said with a noticeable whiff of cold sarcasm.

I ended the call, and looked around, wondering if I had been teleported to an alternate universe. The ring of my office phone brought me back to reality and I had to attend to one urgent transaction after another from then.

It was early evening by the time I cleared half the transaction queue in the system, and my gastric was beginning to ache. I had not eaten anything since morning. I decided to take a

short break at the office lobby. I had no appetite, so I ordered a milk shake at the café to appease the aching gastric. In disbelief at how matters had unfolded, I took out my phone and scrolled through the emails mindlessly. There was not a single mail that wished me Happy Birthday. I scrolled to an email thread with my peers from honours class. I typed ‘How’s everyone?’. By the time I had finished the shake there was no response at all. Just when I thought I needed to get my phone checked, it started ringing. It was a colleague from office. “Market is closing in half an hour, just where are you?” she demanded to know. A sense of numbness permeated. I threw the empty cup into the bin and hurried back to office.

It was nearly nine in the evening when I eventually finished my work. I left office and began a slow walk through the buildings in the city centre. I reached a quiet corner and decided that I could not go on. I sat by some steps and decided to text somebody. I chose Eric. He was a kindly classmate who was always friendly with everyone.

‘Hi bro. Are you there?’ I typed.

‘What’s up?’

‘Overtime on my birthday, can you believe it? Are you free for a drink?’

‘Nah. I am putting my boy to sleep.’

‘Wow! You are married? With a kid?’

‘Simple life. Unlike your glamorous banking life!’

I wondered why he was talking like that. They were the ones who had everything, while I was struggling to make ends meet. He had not even wanted to wish me a simple Happy Birthday. Just then the phone rang again. It was my sister. For a disastrous day, it looked like I would at least have someone to wish me Happy Birthday after all.

‘Where are you?’ she demanded to know. I wondered if that question had become my name for the day.

‘I just got off work.’ I replied.

‘Why didn’t you tell Mum and Dad about the gathering at my place this weekend? You are so irresponsible!’ From the sound of her anger, I began to recollect the developments of that day, that day I thought I would become a phoenix.

Then I could reply no more.

‘Make sure you drive them to our place for lunch at noon this Saturday, understand?’ she bellowed. And then the line was dead.

As I put away the phone, tears started welling in my eyes. Before long, I was wailing in that quiet corner. That was when I realised that a busy restaurant had a glass wall that faced the corner. I saw many eyes staring at me, including a toddler who was looking so intently that her pudgy face was stuck to the glass.

I got up with as much dignity as I could and hurried off. I felt then that I surely needed help. The family doctor that I usually visited was near my home and only closed at ten in the evening. I could still make it. I rushed down in a cab and got to the clinic with five minutes to spare. There were still a few people who were waiting and likely for some time at it. I whispered to the counter staff that I had an urgent issue.

‘Urgent?’ the staff asked on top of her voice, looking at me suspiciously. ‘What is the nature of your urgency?’

I didn’t know what to answer and I could feel tears welling in my eyes again. She probably saw that and said rather exasperatedly ‘All right, all right. You can go in when the patient in there comes out.’

There was a murmur of resentfulness from some of the waiting patients. Some of them blew their noses and started a coughing fit to make their point. Thankfully, the patient exited from the consultation room at that time, allowing me to dart in.

I had been seeing Doctor Lee for the past twenty years, and he had cured me of many persistent ailments. I started weeping the moment I sat down on the patient's chair.

Twenty minutes into the consultation, he frowned as he looked at his notes and said 'All right, let's summarise. You have four problems here. Your work played you out, your girl who was never yours is on holiday with another man, your friends have abandoned you, and your sister did not remember your birthday. Am I right?'

I sniffed loudly and nodded.

He sighed. 'You need some rest. I will put you on medical leave for two days. Have a good sleep and this will pass.'

'What's the prescription?' I asked pitifully. 'I could take something to feel better, could I?'

'You need nothing from me,' he said calmly. 'Go back and have a good rest.'

I was indignant but was helpless against a doctor's instruction to go home. As I reached the door, I asked him despondently 'What have I done wrong? I had worked so hard and made sacrifices to fulfil expectations. Why is everyone treating me like this?'

Doctor Lee gave another sigh. He walked up to me and gave a hard tap on my shoulder. He looked at me intently and asked, 'Is this about what they want, or what you want?' He gave another sympathetic tap and said 'You have worked too hard. Go back and rest, and things will start to clear up.'

I exited the consultation room and felt more confused than ever. But I was quickly made aware of the angry murmurs and stares from the waiting patients who were following my

every move. I made for the counter, hoping that I could make payment conspicuously and leave the clinic quickly.

‘Hansen!’ the staff called out on top of her voice again when I was standing just in front of her. She peered at the computer screen and announced, ‘No prescription! Twenty dollars, please!’

The angry murmurs grew louder. They probably saw me as a self-entitled bloke who was perfectly fine and needlessly prolonged their wait to see the doctor. I left the clinic with my head down. I stood on the pavement and stared at the sky. I finally admitted to myself as that day was coming to an end, that I was not a phoenix, but the biggest loser out there. I felt utterly ashamed. With a sob, I decided to run for home. The next moment, I had tripped on my shoelaces and was flat down on the pavement. I started the day with the aspirations of a phoenix taking off, but there I was, ending the day as wretched as it could be.

Two days later I woke up in the morning and discovered scabbing on my legs where I had sustained cuts from the fall. I touched them gingerly, and they felt scaly. Scales, I thought to myself. Was I literally turning into a phoenix? Maybe Susan Parkson was right after all. But I did not think I need advice from her again. I had fallen so low that the only way out was up. Anybody who was a phoenix could see that.

(2813 words)

Critical-Reflective Commentary

Introduction

This commentary on *The Wretched Phoenix* investigates two aspects of the writing of autofiction. The first evaluates the self as a creative source for autofiction. The second evaluates autobiography and autofiction in a critical manner, in terms of its representation of a certain past. Each aspect is accompanied by a reflective commentary on this writer's experience in the course of producing *The Wretched Phoenix*. This writer maintains a private blog which serves as a diary and journal. Reference will be made to the blog as part of the commentary.

The Self as a Source

The first aspect evaluates the self as a source for autofiction. There appears to be a consensus that the self provides an endless if not infinite source of creative content in writing. This is fulfilled in three ways; the nature of the self, external factors influencing the self, and the work of internal tools, all which creates a self that is ever-changing and transforming, allowing unlimited creative content to be endlessly harvested.

According to Moskowitz, the human being has multiple personalities, resulting in different and often opposing characteristics, as well as varying attributes of both genders. Such complexities form the basis of the self as a rich source of creative content. External influences such as personal encounters, environmental experiences can exacerbate and further polarise these traits and fertilise this source. She therefore sees "the self as the main source of inspiration for the work".¹

¹ Cheryl Moskowitz. "The Self as source: creative writing generated from personal reflection" in *The self on the Page*, ed. by Hunt, Celia & Sampson, Fiona (London: Jessica Kingsley, 1998), pp. 37-38.

Urmil Talwar agrees that the self "...is influenced by culture and relationships with family, friends and social groups."² In his study of Lamming's 'In the Castle of My Skin', he uses the example of how childhood experiences as an external influence can affect the self into adulthood. The present self is therefore, continuously changing with time. In addition, Charu Mathur wrote that "...individuals constantly construct, deconstruct and reconstruct a 'self' to cope with needs and situations they encounter."³ The ever-changing self, therefore provides endless source of creative content for the writer to work on.

Raymond Carver questions this notion of the self as a source. Should there be limited opportunities for external influences to constantly rejuvenate the self, would this source be depleted in due course? He uses his routine experience in a laundromat to describe the anxiety of a writer leading a monotonous routine life that not only fails to inspire the self but depletes it as a source. He "understood writers to be people who didn't spend their Saturdays at the laundromat and every waking hour subject to the needs and caprices of their children".⁴

Dorothy Brande proposes that a writer can employ internal tools to keep the self rejuvenated. She describes the tool as "wordless daydreams" where "hundreds of our fellows, engaged secretly in just such daydreaming as our own, see themselves in our fictional characters and fall to reading when fatigue or disenchantment robs them of their ability to see themselves under any glamorous guise".⁵

²Urmil Talwar. "Childhood Ghosts and the Scars of Adulthood" in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp. 111-123 (p. 111).

³Charu Mathur. "A Narrative of Self-Reclamation" in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp. 170- 178 (p. 170)

⁴ Raymond Carver. "I from 'Fires'" in *Creative Writing*, ed. by Linda Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 413-415 (p.414).

⁵ Dorothea Brande. "Becoming a Writer" in *Creative Writing*, ed. Linda Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 424-426 (p.425).

Leslie Glaister further proposes that using imagination fed by memory can serve as a tool to creating fictional works. He does not accept that writers “have no memories to draw on, or that nothing interesting ever happened to them. This is just not possible.” Imagination is one of the “unique ways of seeing ordinary things that makes the most original and satisfying fiction”.⁶ He sees imagination as a skill that can be systematically mastered to serve the needs of the creative writer.

In the writing of *The Wretched Phoenix*, additional content was added to the main storyline which was largely based on real events. Astrology was a prominent theme in the story is sourced from a personal interest. The character Susan Parkson was based on the American astrologist Susan Miller who has a practice of releasing horoscopes late almost every month. The frustration and anxiety of her fans on Facebook⁷ provides great amusement and that is captured in the beginning of the story. The use of phoenix in the story derives from my interest in Chinese mythology where the phoenix bathes in fire from which it is reborn, symbolising a turnaround for the better when the worst circumstances has come to pass. Other external influences on the fictional element includes the application of tragicomedy, an inspiration from Asian television and western sitcoms.

To some extent, I share Carver’s worry about the depletion of source from the self when there are limited external influences. It has been over a decade since I began writing novels seriously and I had so far not run out of inspiration to write, at least for protracted periods of time. In retrospect, the self as a source is continuously rejuvenated from my work and personal life. However, I do question if I could still write supposing these inspirations from external influences are no longer present. Carver’s worry can also be understood as the presence of

⁶ Leslie Glaister. “Memory: The true key to real imagining” in *Creative Writing*, ed. Linda Anderson (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp.431-433 (p. 433).

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/astrologyzone>

situational inhibitors that prevent the writer from extracting source from self. In Carver's example, a domestic routine could be such inhibitors. After all, he relents that "there've been plenty of writers who have had far more serious impediments to their work, including imprisonment, blindness, the threat of torture or death in one form or another".⁸

To a larger extent, I am more inclined to agree with Brande and Glaister where the deployment of internal tools such as imagination and daydreaming can create creative content, regardless of how bland an inspiration-lacking normalcy could be, meaning that the self as a source could potentially be unlimited. Dreams, for example could be another source of content from self.

Autobiography and Autofiction

The analysis between the two forms of writing evaluates the inadequacy of autobiography to represent a certain truth, and honest account and the authentic self of the writer; as well as how autofiction overcomes these inadequacies by including a fictionalised aspect to the biography.

The autobiography is usually regarded as an account that is objective and truthful to the experience of the writer. Ironically, one of the inadequacies of autobiography is the inability of the facts provided in an autobiography to do just that. Wagner-Egelhaaf argues that facts on their own is ambivalent; it requires fiction to provide factual meanings. The autobiographical writer, for example, is actively providing fictional inputs such as "the order in which facts are presented".⁹ This creates a problem because autobiography is usually not regarded as a work of fiction. Writers could try to hide the fictional aspects so deep that it increases the difficulty of accepting the autobiographical account as the truthful or honest account that it is expected

⁸ Carver, "I from 'Fires'": 414.

⁹ Martina Wagner-Egehaaf. "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction / the Autofictional" in *The Autofictional* ed. by Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), pp. 21-39 (p. 26)

to be. Such expectations become “self-defeating”¹⁰ because an autobiographical account cannot escape fictional and subjective inputs in the first place.

Another problematic characteristic of the autobiography is the writer. The writer is not a neutral figure in the writing of the autobiography. Instead, an autobiography is usually confessional, written for a purpose of propagating a particular viewpoint.¹¹ In fact, “nobody writes without an audience in mind”.¹² Meanings are often curated to present a certain perspective to the audience. Biographical accounts can become so self-indulging, self-glorifying and arbitrary that it becomes a much more flawed account than a fictionalised version.¹³ However, the writer may not always be aware of such flaws in the autobiography. The writer could unknowingly be producing such accounts, or in other instances where there is incompleteness or failures of memory.¹⁴

Autofiction on the other hand, reveals a greater level of autobiographical truths than biographical facts can.¹⁵ For one, there could be greater disclosure than biographical data, especially when “fictional element is deliberately introduced and artistically handed”.¹⁶ For example, fiction reveals intent because the self is elevated above “self-glorifying”¹⁷ in fiction writing. The result is a form of “experienced reality”¹⁸, which is more believable than the possible selection of facts and truths that an autobiography writer can make. The fictional

¹⁰ Mirdula Garg. “Writing the Self” in *India International Centre Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (SUMMER 2010), 92-100.

¹¹ Nilofer Kaul. “Unburying the Self? Confessions of Failure in Alice Munro” in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp.147-157 (p. 147).

¹² Mini Nanda. “The vagaries of Memory and the Shaping of the Self” in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp. 198-211 (p. 199).

¹³ Garg, “Writing the Self”.

¹⁴ Nanda. “The vagaries of Memory”, 203.

¹⁵ Garg, “Writing the Self”.

¹⁶ Wagner-Egehaaf. “Of Strange Loops and Real Effects”, 26.

¹⁷ Garg, “Writing the Self”.

¹⁸ *ibid*

aspect becomes “performative”¹⁹, providing emphasis on details that is unique to the writer in a way that an autobiography cannot. This aspect allows something more authentic to permeate beyond the surface of fictionalizing.²⁰ It conveys a resonance that a biographical data would not be able to.²¹ In general, Autofiction is more inclusive, allowing common and ordinary lives to be written with fictionalisation.²²

Autobiographies are admittedly not my favourite readings or writings. Autofiction is likely the best I can do. In the writing of *The Wretched Phoenix*, I quickly encountered problems when I first attempted in autobiographical form. The first was the difficulty in presenting the contradictory aspects related to my personality and cognitive characteristics in a humanistic perspective. Such contradictions have not reached the example of Henry Jekyll and Edward Hyde used by Moskowitz²³, but they were nonetheless difficult to be told, but far easier to be shown. In the story for example, the yearn for relationship company is contradicted by a deliberate obsession with work largely because of an inferiority complex. An inferiority complex over-compensated by possible boastfulness behaviour resulted in delusional perspectives. Another example was astrology, which is the subject of my interest and ridicule.

The second difficulty was to avoid a confessional type of writing that would present in a blunt style devoid of emotional complexities. In writing *The Wretched Phoenix*, I do not wish to pass judgement, seek forgiveness or make a point, and these are often related to confessional writing.²⁴ The intention is to share the emotional interpretations of those events at writing. This would be a personally impossible task without fictionalisation. As personally important those

¹⁹ Wagner-Egehaaf. “Of Strange Loops and Real Effects”, 31.

²⁰ Uma Parameswaran. “Writing the Self that Isn’t, or Not Writing the Self that Is, Boils Down to the Same” in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp. 53-62 (p.54).

²¹ Jasbir Jain. “The Difficulty of Writing/Reading the Self” in *Literary Constructs of the Self: Social-Cultural Contexts*, ed. by Santosh Gupta and Mini Nanda (Jaipur: Rawat Publications, 2010), pp. 63-80 (p. 64).

²² Wagner-Egehaaf. “Of Strange Loops and Real Effects”, 28.

²³ Moskowitz “The self as a source”, 37

²⁴ Nilofer Kaul. “Unburying the Self?”, 148.

events are, they are not exception to what any other person might have experienced in their lifetime. Writing in a biographically factual manner impede the underlying intensity and complexity of the account. For example, the events depicted in *The Wretched Phoenix* occurred over a period of an entire year in real life. Compressing the event to a single day is factually wrong but a more accurate portrayal of the emotional interpretation of that time.

The application of a fictional tragicomedy effect allows greater complexity to be conveyed vis-à-vis a matter-of-factly method of recount in an autobiography. It allows readers to figuratively see how these events exist in my memory and play in my mind when recalled. It also reveals the transformation in which the writer regards those events from its occurrence to the time of writing. The focus of an autofiction like *The Wretched Phoenix*, therefore, veers towards emotional meanings and interpretation of the writer which is more authentic and representative of the writer than a bare provision of facts and information in an autobiography.

Conclusion

The self is a source in the writing of the autofiction *The Wretched Phoenix*. The complex nature of the self together with external influences and internal tools provide a largely unlimited source of creative content for the writer. The autofiction by itself is a more authentic and honest expression for the writer as the fictional component allows a more accurate emotional interpretation of events that is representative of the account.

(2223 words)

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