



ROLE OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORIES IN BERYL BAINBRIDGE'S *THE BIRTHDAY BOYS*

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ABSTRACT

This research article aims to understand the role of autobiographical memories in the life of characters of Beryl Bainbridge's The birthday boys. The concept of autobiographical memory and its functions is drawn from the book of H. L. Williams' Autobiographical memory. It also referred from the article of S. Bluck's, "A tale of three functions: The self-reported uses of autobiographical memory". This research article also attempts to verify the drawn functions of autobiographical memories in respect of Captain Scott, Uncle Bill, Taff Evans and Capt. Oates and Birdie Bowers. The novel principally renders an imagined account of Capt. Robert Falcon Scott's expedition to the South Pole in 1912, told in the voices of Scott and four men who followed him to their deaths. In each account a birthday is celebrated, or mentioned therefore the title. As a popular imagination, the Antarctica expedition holds a prime place in the novel. It is an example of man's hubris¹ in the face of the power of nature. This paper argues that the functions of autobiographical memories are fore grounded in the novel through the principal narrators and characters of the novel.

Keywords: *Hubris, autobiographical memories, directive functions, social, functions, self-representative functions, adaptive functions.*

INTRODUCTION

Autobiography as a literary genre has existed for centuries. Augustine's (354–430) *Confessions* is commonly considered as the first Western autobiography. It has also gained increasing popularity in the modern and postmodern eras. As the name itself suggests, autobiographical memories could be literally taken as the memories that we would write



about in our autobiography, if we ever decided to write one, so that we might tell people who we are and how we have become what we are right now. Autobiographical memories are the memories of significant personal events and experiences from an individual's life².

Autobiographical memory is a memory system consisting of episodes recollected from an individual's life, based on a combination of episodic (personal experiences and specific objects, people and events experienced at particular time and place) and semantic (general knowledge and facts about the world) memory³.

S. Bluck and others in their article "A tale of three functions: The self-reported uses of autobiographical memory" defines the role of autobiographical memories. They have principally focused on directive, social, and self-representative functions of autobiographical memories.

The directive function of autobiographical memory uses past experiences as a reference for solving current problems and a guide for our actions in the present and the future. Memories of personal experiences and the rewards and losses associated with them can be used to create successful models, or schemas, of behavior which can be applied over many scenarios. In instances where a problem cannot be solved by a generic schema, a more specific memory of an event can be accessed in autobiographical memory to give some idea of how to confront the new challenges.

The social function of autobiographical memory develops and maintains social bonds by providing material for people to converse about. Sharing personal memories with others is a way to facilitate social interaction. Disclosing personal experiences can increase the intimacy level between people and reminiscing of shared past events strengthens pre-existing bonds. The importance of this function can easily be seen in individuals with impaired episodic or autobiographical memory, where their social relationships suffer greatly as a result.

Autobiographical memory performs a self-representative function by using personal memories to create and maintain a coherent self-identity over time. This self-continuity is the most commonly referred to self-representative function of autobiographical memory. A stable self-identity allows for evaluation of past experiences, known as life reflection, which leads to self-insight and often self-growth.

H. L Williams and others have rendered on adaptive functions of autobiographical memory in their book named *Autobiographical memory*. Autobiographical memory serves an adaptive function. Recalled positive personal experiences can be used to maintain desirable moods or



alter undesirable moods. This internal regulation of mood through autobiographical memory can be used to cope with negative situation and impart an emotional resilience.

Above described functions of an autobiographical memories works in the present novels. To find out how these autobiographical memories help character to deal with the personal and social crisis in their life and how with the help of these functions of an autobiographical memories do they overcome in adverse conditions is the main subject of present research paper.

The present novel under the study is full of with characters autobiographical memories. These autobiographical memories help to the explorers of the Antarctica expedition to gather courage and to increase confidence level where the temperature sinks to -60⁰F in the alien areas of the South Pole.

As it has already been put in the directive function of autobiographical memory that literary character uses past experiences as a tool for solving their current problems and they use it as guide for their actions in the present and the future. In the present novel the literary characters seem fulfilling the directive functions of memory. Being the participant and leader of *Discovery*⁴ expedition (1901-04) Captain Robert Falcon Scott and rest members did seem learning something from the failures of *Discovery* expedition. It is generally expected that human being must learn something constructive from the past bad experiences. They do not seem to repeat mistakes. As we notice being the readers that *Terra Nova* Vessel is fitted to the requirements of the expedition. Separate laboratories are constructed on the ship for the scientists. It has a separate dark room for photographers. It has a new stove in the galley, instrument and chronometer-rooms. Iron free ice house is constructed for the frozen meat. They have fixed standard compass and the pedestal for magnetic work purpose: “She’s barque –rigged and fitted to the requirements of the expedition, with laboratories...for scientists....dark room for photographers... new stove in the galley, instrument and chronometer-rooms..... ice house is for the frozen meat....we’ve stuck the standard compass and pedestal needed for magnetic work”⁵ (12). Here it looks that explorers have learnt something from the previous expedition and have taken almost all sorts of care while constricting the ship.

Captain Scott had an experience that dogs are the best animal for the sledging in the South Pole and he also had experience that it works well in bad circumstances. Henceforth his past learning’s (memory) allowed him to take dog’s along with motors. He put much faith in the motors rather than the dogs. He seems to take help from technology and reduce their human efforts. But unfortunately his plan of the motors does not work well. It was not his fault. Capt. Oates shares his memory regarding the use of motors for sledging: “Teddy Evans and



his lot had been manhauling three-hundred miles.....to the breakdown of the motors, and still appeared as keen as mustard, I felt ashamed” (168).

As it has been said in the directive functions of memories that the memories of personal experiences and the rewards and losses associated with them can be used to create successful models applied over many scenarios. Birdie Bowers shares his personal experience of his mission of penguin rookery Cape Crozier. Birdie Bowers, Uncle Bill and Cherry have been appointed over mission of Cape Crozier in order to study the birds inhabited in the South Pole and to collect their eggs. They had to go through different disasters such as: “When the temperature on the Barrier surface reaches a certain low point the runners can’t melt the crystals and one can only advance by rolling them over and upon one another” (131). They could not able to take a sleep: “Our sleeping bags were daily turned into frozen boards, and in trying to prying them open one had to be careful lest the leather broke like a glass” (134-35). Even the crew is so optimistic in their mission but nature never seems losing any opportunity to make them pessimistic: “On the twelfth day the temperature registered -69 degrees” (137). They are unable to standstill on the icy land: “We were like flies fluttering against a window that would never open” (142). At one point Birdie Bower himself lost his footing and rolled clear to bottom but fortunately he lay on the tent: “I really believe we’ve been saved for a purpose” (150). On the 28th day of mission they have been caught by nature once again: “On the 28th the temperature was -47, andwe wouldn’t see the sun for month....the sky turned blue” (151-52). Here Birdie Bowers memory of mission of penguin rookery Cape Crozier is associated with loss but Birdie Bowers rightly cleared in the novel that the purpose of the worst journey in the world was to collect eggs which proves the scientific purpose of mission but according his understanding they have discovered the mystery on the way and that is the brotherly love which is the missing link between God and man: “It may be that the purpose of the worst journey in the world had been to collect eggs....., but we’d unraveled...-the missing link between God and man is brotherly love” (125). Here seems the past memory of Birdie Bowers associated with adventure delivers the universal law of brotherhood. This universal law can be applicable for the centuries and centuries. Here the memories of mission of penguin rookery Cape Crozier of Birdie Bowers create the universal law of brotherhood which would be applied over many scenarios.

Often time it seems that when a problem cannot be solved by a generic schema, a more specific autobiographical memory of an event can be accessed in to give some idea of how to confront the new challenge. This directive function of autobiographical memory is observed in the case of Captain Oates. The participated Captain Oates had come from India. He was a captain of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons⁶: “There’s another bloke arrived from India, a Captain Oates of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons” (8). It is an amazing shock for him to opt for the final team of Antarctica campaign. He never expected this: “As for me, my



inclusion was so unexpected that I didn't know what to feel" (168). Actually he has been suffering from foot ache: "I didn't take my sock off because the size of my foot unnerved me" (153). He literally requested Captain Scott that he should not be included in the campaign on the ground of his poor physical fitness: "It did cross my mind to tell Scott I wasn't fit" (168). Here we observe that the universal schema of the readiness is all seems turn upside down in the case of captain Oates. One must be ready to face eleventh hour situation and one must maintain courage in any odd situation is not observed in Captain Oates. Here Capt. Oates looks gathering courage from one of his past autobiographical memory about his friend named Teddy Evans and his colleague. He remembered how Teddy Evans and his lot have managed to drive breakdown motors for more than three-hundred miles. Still they look fit and healthy: "but when I thought of how Teddy Evans and his lot had been manhauling three-hundred miles.....to the breakdown of the motors, and still appeared as keen as mustard, I felt ashamed" (168). He considers himself foolish to quit the mission when it is the matter of ten or eleven days of marching which separates him from his goal: "it seemed foolish, never mind cowardly, to back out when only ten or eleven days of marching separated us from our goal" (168). Here past autobiographical memory of Capt. Oates helps him in preparing for the next challenge put before him; hence the directive function of autobiographical memories fulfills.

As it has been said the social function of autobiographical memory helps to develop and maintain the social bonds by providing material for people to converse about. We can have many instances of the social function of autobiographical memory in the novel. (Taff) Evans has been suffering from the family discords: "all she talks about is setbacks, death, an inadequate window's pension and her and the children thrown on the parish" (16). (Taff) Evans shares his economical problem with owner of the ship: "Begging your pardon, sir, but I'm worried as to arrangements for the wages" (23). He also shared his family problems with same authority: "It's not me that's troubled, sir,' I said. 'It's the wife" (26). After having had discussion with the owner of the ship, owner assured (Taff) Evans that he would write to Mrs Evans in this regard: "Look here,' he called out. Would it help if I wrote to Mrs Evans? Would it alleviate matters?" (27). In the present instance (Taff) Evans shares autobiographical memory of his economical crises and family problems with his owner and owner has also given him solution. Here it comes to our inspection that autobiographical memory (Taff) Evans provides his family and economical problems as a material for discussion. We also observe that social bonding seems forming between (Taff) Evans and owner of the ship as both of them have understands each other's problem and provide solutions as well. Here the social function of the autobiographical memory seems fulfilling.

Captain Scott also shares one of his personal memories with Uncle Bill, Capt. Oates and others. Captain Scott has been blamed for showing favour with (Taff) Evans by Capt. Oates:



“You must have wondered,’ Scott said, ‘why I cared for Evans” (178). Afterwards Captain Scott went on explaining why he loves (Taff) Evans more. Captain Scott shares his childhood memory with crew. In the childhood he had received bad memories from his parents. His father was drunkard and he used to drink in order get relief from tension: “My father was a drunk.’ He said” (178). He has been neglected in the family as his siblings were smarter than him: “The fact that his brothers and sisters were brighter than him” (178). His mother was strenuous and loves him much: “that my mother was a strenuous character. She loved him, yet despised his weaknesses” (178). Often times he has been beaten by his father. Throughout his life he has experienced good as well as bad side of his father: “All through my childhood he altered between the good father and the bad one. Sometime he hits us” (178). So overall environment of Scott’s family was unhealthy for him and that decides his nature. Scott loves (Taff) Evans very much. He always found (Taff) Evans helping others. In the understating of Scott that (Taff) Evans always used to drink alcohol because he loved it. He never drank to pass the moment: “He drank because he enjoyed it, not because he wanted to obliterate the moment...” (179). In the opinion of Scott, (Taff) Evans is a strenuous drunk but he never give any reason for his being so and because of this he likes (Taff) Evans much: “... he never once tried to excuse his alcoholic outbursts. He was a strenuous drunk, and for that I admired him” (179). This autobiographical memory helps the rest crew to moderate their prejudice against Captain Scott for his not being secular with the rest crew. This autobiographical memory assists to form a kind of attachment and bonding between Captain Scott and Capt. Oates. This instance from the novel foregrounds the social function of autobiographical memory.

One more social function of autobiographical memory is that it helps to facilitate social interaction among the people. (Taff) Evans shares his personal memories of *Discovery* expedition with the people of Isle of Dogs. (Taff) Evans and rest crew took a halt at Isle of Dogs as their *Terra Nova* ship had undergone the refitment and the mess at Isle of Dogs: “while the ship was undergoing refitment and the mess deck....me and tom Crean....William Lashly at his auntie’s house on the Isle of Dogs” (1). Crew members has been surrounded by inhabitants of Isle of Dogs. (Taff) Evans has shared his past memories of *Discovery* expedition held during 1901-04: “It was left to me to spin the tales....tell them how Vince met his Maker, and off I’d go” (2). (Taff) Evans has also shared his memories like when they had started for expedition: “It was in the March of 1902,’ I’d begin, ‘and the *Discovery* was anchored in McMurdo Bay under the shadow of Mount Erebus” (2), he also shared climatic condition of the South Pole with people: “To be is when the temperature sinks to -60⁰ F....its lungs will stop functioning” (3), he also talked about their skill displayed in such circumstances: “The Owner....to test our skill on skis and see what weights we could pull sledge-hauling”(3), he also mentioned how they have lost Vince: “Vince wasn’t wearing crampons....he slid past me over the cliff...but I couldn’t hear him, see, on account of the



wind” (3-4). Here we could see how (Taff) Evans’s autobiographical past memories of *Discovery* expedition helps him to facilitate the social interaction with the people of Isle of Dogs.

Autobiographical memory performs a self-representative function by using personal memories to create and maintain a coherent self-identity over time. In the present novel narrators share their personal memory with others that helps them to construct and establish their own identity. Uncle Bill has shared his childhood memory. He wishes to become missionary: “I seriously considered becoming a missionary” (51). His father was against it but he has been supported still he completes his education: “He had supported me, without complaint” (51). He had started to teach missionary students. He was about to throw his whole education in the favour of Africa: “through three years of university and two years of medical training in St George’s hospital, and here I was about to throw it all up in favour of Africa” (51). But finally he becomes Orthodontologist. Uncle Bill’s childhood memory helps him in restoring his own identity.

Capt. Oates has also used his memories of South African Wars to establish his own identity as captain. He was the captain of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons: “There’s another bloke arrived from India, a Captain Oates of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons” (8). He had participated South African Wars and he had been injured as well. He had become as weak as a kitten: “I was in hospital South Africa on my birthday....with Boers I’d lost three stones and was as weak as a kitten” (163).

Self-continuity is the most commonly referred to self-representative function of autobiographical memory. Self-continuity is the ability of a character to perceive oneself as extending temporally backwards into the past and forwards into the future, and the adaptiveness of strategies of coping with job loss.⁷ Here in this novel character sees their past from which they have come from and also they try to predict where will they go and in-between journey of their life they try to adopt some kind of strategies to manage with their present bad conditions. In this way they maintain their self-continuity. (Taff) Evans had fed up with his family problems: “It’s not me that’s troubled, sir,’ I said. ‘It’s the wife” (26). He was also suffering from the economical crises: “Begging your pardon, sir, but I’m worried as to arrangements for the wages” (23). His present occupation as a explorer makes him slow down: “I’m slowing down now, I can’t deny it”(16). Here (Taff) Evans seems coming from adverse circumstances. But in the present situation in order cope with it and get come out of it he plans to start a pub after returning from the campaign: “When I return I ought to be in a position to quite the sea and buy a little pub in Cardigan Bay” (16). (Taff) Evans knows his past and he also know how he suffered in it. He also seems aware of his present deteriorating condition on the expedition. In order to face present situation he plans to do good in future



which is nothing but it is his self defense mechanism that he adopt to cope with present situation. In this way he seems self-representing himself and maintains his self-continuity.

Autobiographical memory serves an adaptive function. A literary character recalls positive and pleasant personal experiences to maintain their desirable moods or alter undesirable moods. Adaptive function of an autobiographical memory also helps literary character to cope with negative situation and it also impart them an emotional resilience. Captain Oates was a captain of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons: “There’s another bloke arrived from India, a Captain Oates of Fifth Royal Inniskilling Dragoons” (8). It is a surprising push for him to get select for the final team of Antarctica campaign. He never expected this: “As for me, my inclusion was so unexpected that I didn’t know what to feel” (168). He was very jammed due to the wounds of the foot and its pain: “I didn’t take my sock off because the size of my foot unnerved me” (153). Captain Oates requested to Captain Scott that he should not be included in the campaign on the ground of his poor physical fitness: “It did cross my mind to tell Scott I wasn’t fit” (168). Here Captain Oates seems totally negative in his attitude and approach towards the Challenges of life. In order to come over it he recalls his positive memories of Teddy Evans and his colleague. He remembers Teddy Evans and his lot have managed to drive breakdown motors for more than three-hundred miles. Still they were fit and healthy: “but when I thought of how Teddy Evans and his lot had been manhauling three-hundred miles.....to the breakdown of the motors, and still appeared as keen as mustard, I felt ashamed” (168). He thought it would be folly if it is the matter of ten or eleven days of marching which separates him from his goal: “it seemed foolish, never mind cowardly, to back out when only ten or eleven days of marching separated us from our goal” (168). Here positive and pleasant personal past experiences of Capt. Oates alter his undesirable moods. It also helps to Capt. Oates to cope up with new challenge put before him; hence an adaptive function of autobiographical memories fulfills.

To conclude, an autobiographical memory encompasses our recollections of specific, personal events. We observe how autobiographical memory functions in various ways. Directive, social, self-representative and adaptive functions of autobiographical memories exists in an opulent manner in the present novel. We could sees the characters of the novel takes the help of these function as self defense mechanism, as self-motivation source of energy, as a platform for social interaction, and to search, to restore and to construct their own identity. The principal narrators and characters seem foregrounding functions of autobiographical memories through the novel. The crackerjackness of the novel fixes on the subtle use of these functions of autobiographical memories in the life of characters in the novel.

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ENDNOTES

1. Hubris is extreme pride and arrogance shown by a character that ultimately brings about his downfall.
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3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Autobiographical_memory
4. The British National Antarctic Expedition, 1901–04, generally known as the Discovery Expedition, was the first official British exploration of the Antarctic regions since James Clark Ross's voyage sixty years earlier.
5. Beryl Bainbridge, *The Birthday Boys*, (London: Gerald Duckworth and Company, 1991) All quotations from the novel have been taken from this edition. Page numbers in parentheses have been given in the body of the book.
6. The 5th Royal Inniskilling Dragoon Guards was a cavalry regiment of the British Army formed in 1922 by the amalgamation of the 5th Dragoon Guards (Princess Charlotte of Wales's) and the 6th (Inniskilling) Dragoons. It served in the Second World War and the Korean War.
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