

PSEUDO-AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS; RETHINKING
WITH ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *A FAREWELL TO ARMS*

Bidhan Chandra Das: M.A (Double), B.Ed
M. Phil Scholar under the Department of English,
Dr. C.V. Raman University Kota, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh
Email : bidhancd990@gmail.com Contact : 9093034219

&

Dr. Om Prakash Tiwari, Associate professor,
Department of English, Dr. C.V.Raman University,
Kota, Bilaspur, Chhattisgarh.

ABSTRACT

World of fiction has been heavily influenced through biography, auto-biography, imaginary story, historical incidents, personal experience (or the known fact) of the author and the like. But there grew another new genre in literature, namely Pseudo-autobiography which combines both fictional and truthful elements at a time and wipes of the notions of what is expected in conventional story lines by privileging the fictional over the truth. While conventional biography, autobiography or fictional story has proved to be a common trend among most of authors, a few authors have instead inclined on the pseudo-autobiography as a method through which they have tried to deconstruct their mediated persona and manufacture their own hyper real identity. This paper aims how Ernest Hemingway became successful in doing so through his novel *A Farewell to Arms*.

The brutality of the fiction of Hamingway has led many readers to rethink over the pseudo autobiographical element of author's personal life. Nothing could be farer from truth. Actually the

major elements in Hemingway's life shaped many of his attitudes, and indeed shaped much of his work: the fact that in World War-I, he suffered a painful and terrible mortar wound, which made him conscious of the dread possibilities of the loss of manhood. This paper deals with Hemingway's portrayal his personal experience of World War-I in *A Farewell to Arms* and with his fictional events. Through the pseudo-autobiography, Hemingway is able to deliberately deceive and confuse the reader by utilizing both fact and fiction to create a hyper real narrative. This paper discusses, with reference to ideas of testimony, truth and the autobiographical pact, how the pseudo-autobiography of Hemingway proves more useful than conventional autobiography for celebrity authors.

Keywords: Life events, fictional incident, pseudo-autobiography, hyper real identity.

The world of fiction and the world of real life are two spheres which can never be made separate from each other. They are interconnected and inseparable. In most instances art draws from life through the reverse is also true. Though they interpenetrate yet they retain their separate and distinct identities in so far as that life is chaotic, disorganised, disordered and a puzzling jumble. It has no unity which however forms the life and soul of art. In creating a work of function, the artist almost always draws on human experience which may be his or somebody else's. He however has to fictionalise it as he cannot make a mirror copy of life. Art should not be more transcription of life but that art draws from real life can be in no doubt. In the same way Ernest Hemingway too leaves his mark, expresses his being, his life, in *A Farewell to Arms* to deconstruct their mediated persona and manufacture their own hyper real identity.

Hemingway is a towering and glowering American novelist and his novels are sharply focused and illuminating. He uses his powerful expression to introduce his life incidents and express it through his writings. In the same way in *A Farewell to Arms* we see something or the other that indicates as pseudo-autobiographical elements as Hemingway took help of the incident of his life that plays a significant role in his novels. His maximum spokesmen are the reflections of his very self. The novel shows his own struggle where the reader can see the harsh reality of life in Hemingway's face to face situation. Temptation, love, greed, failure, agony, struggle, want of recognition, criticism, violence all are there in his novels that reflects the incidents of the author's own life with fictional events.

Ernest Hemingway was born in 1899 in Illinois, USA. When he was young the First World War broke out and he decided to join the Italian army as an ambulance driver. After the war he worked as a correspondent in Europe. As a correspondent he visited France, Spain and Greece, and among other things

reported from the Spanish Civil War. He stayed in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s. Hemingway travelled a lot and has lived all around the world, for instance in Paris, in Florida and on Cuba. He devoted himself a great deal to hunting and fishing, and also enjoyed bullfighting. Food and drink were other things that he appreciated in life. Most of these real life incidents got special hold in the novel as the book *A Farewell to Arms* is also about an American named Frederic Henry who has joined the Italian army and serves as an ambulance driver. His roommate and best friend, Rinaldi, is fond of a British nurse, Catherine Barkley, who works at a nearby British hospital. Henry visits the hospital with Rinaldi and finds Catherine very attractive. Rinaldi notices the attraction between them and leaves them alone. At first Henry just wants a physical relationship with Catherine. She realises it and indirectly explains that she does not approve of it. She has lost her husband during the war and is afraid of being abandoned once again. Nevertheless Henry manages to convince Catherine that he loves her. An approaching offensive dispatches Frederic Henry back to the front. While he is sitting with his men in a dugout eating, a trench mortar shell suddenly explodes and blasts open the shelter. Many men are killed and Henry's both legs are severely wounded. At first he is taken to a field hospital where he meets Rinaldi. A few days later he is transferred to an American hospital in Milan. Catherine follows him and gets a job at the hospital. They develop strong feelings for each other and Catherine becomes pregnant. When Henry first arrives at the hospital the doctor is away at another clinic. Therefore Henry has to wait a couple of days for the treatment to begin. When the doctor finally arrives he and two other colleagues decide that it is best for Henry to rest six months before they perform the operation. However, Henry refuses to accept the fact that he has to stay in bed for such a long time and therefore consults another doctor. This fourth doctor declares that Henry is fit to be operated the following morning. The surgery is successful and Henry gets better. During his recovery he spends most of his days with Catherine. At one time he goes with Catherine and some friends to the horse races. Henry and Catherine get tips from their friends and therefore manage to bid upon winning horses. However they do not win a lot of money because of the odds. So they decide to go on their intuition and put money on a horse which no one else has bet upon. It makes them feel better, even though they do not win. The episode shows that the only way to win is to take risks and that one should try to go one's own way. After a while Henry is in such condition that he can return to the front. He does so and ends up in a big retreat where he is separated from his men. During the retreat the vehicles get stuck in the mud and because of the delay, two soldiers try to escape. In preventing their attempted escape Henry starts to shoot and kills one of the soldiers. The mud illustrates man's inferiority and impossibility to have control over life.

The Italians are not happy about the setback and try to find someone to blame. Frederic Henry, who is lieutenant, has been separated from his men and speaks Italian with an accent, is not safe. He can easily be accused of not having control over his men, not defending the positions or of being a German infiltrator. Henry is confronted with the battle police but manages to flee before they shoot him. It becomes the definite break with the army. He returns to Catherine and together they go to Switzerland by boat. In Switzerland they are arrested, but since both have foreign passports they are eventually released. They decide to go to Monteux where they enjoy life, have a good rest and walk in the nature. They stay in a cabin close to Monteux all the winter but in the spring they return to town, partly because the bad weather but also because it is time for Catherine to give birth to their child. The delivery drags on and Henry becomes more and more concerned. Finally the doctor informs him that it is not possible to deliver the child naturally. Catherine has to be operated and they agree of implementing a Caesarean. The doctor delivers the child but only to discover that it is dead. Furthermore Catherine has got an injury sustained during the childbirth, a hemorrhage. Her condition is very critical and both Catherine and Henry realises that she won't survive. Henry says goodbye to his beloved wife and then leaves the hospital in the rain. Rain is a very common phenomenon in the book which occurs when something bad takes place, for instance during the retreat. Like rain, the happiness and misfortune are very unpredictable and vary swiftly. That's why the author realizes *"If people brings so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry"*

That the character of Frederic Henry is based on Hemingway himself is a point that need be argued. But as a pseudo-autobiography Henry, the hero of the novel, is also given many points of difference from Hemingway the novelist. Henry is an American like Hemingway. Though the wars they are involved in are similar and, both are non-combatants. Henry is a Lieutenant in the ambulance unit of the Italian army during the First World War. His reasons for joining the war are unclear. However, Hemingway was fascinated by war and tried to get in the American army. But he was continuously rejected for some defect in his eye. Ultimately he joined the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver. He was only nineteen at that time but in the novel, Henry is more mature and older man. He is certainly not an adolescent as the young Hemingway was. As Henry in the novel feels that the war was not dangerous yet wished the war were over

so Hemingway also felt that the war was not dangerous for him. But unlike in the novel he is bored and volunteers for canteen service. A major point of similarity is that both Henry and Hemingway are severely wounded in the lower part of the body that is in their legs. It is however from these personal experiences that arises the graphic and vividly realistic passages that describe the war front and the war. Even the love affair and many other facts pertaining to the affair are drawn from Hemingway's personal experiences. After Hemingway was wounded he was treated at the hospital at Milan where he fell in love with an American nurse Agnes Kurosky. It is similar with Henry who has already met Catherine who is British, before he gets wounded by men. It can be concluded that the love affair in Milan, Catherine's pregnancy, the bliss they later share in isolation in the mountains of Switzerland are ideal dramas that Hemingway might have wished to have achieved with Agnes but could not, in real life.

Hemingway received a medal for bravery so does Henry in the novel. But Henry has not done any heroic deed and he plainly says so. In the novel, Hemingway uses the notion of the medal for bravery to ironically comment on those likes Ettore Moretti who came into the war to earn medals and stripes and enjoyed doing so and on those imposters who tries to wrangle medals just for showing off: *"We think. We are not peasants. We are mechanics. But even the peasants know better than to believe in war, Everybody hates war. There is a class that control a country that is stupid and down not realise anything and never can. That is why we have this war. Also they make money out of it."* It is also a comment on the war. Usually the really brave and heroic do not survive to tell the tale and get medals, also most medals were awarded for flimsy deeds, exaggerated. Hemingway has also drawn from experience the episode of Henry catching jaundice. Hemingway had actually caught jaundice towards the end of his stay in the hospital in Milan. However, he uses this episode to create a colourful and interesting chapter in the novel. In the novel Henry is accused by Miss Van Campen for having induced jaundice upon himself due to excessive drinking, has his leave cancelled and Henry has to go back to the front. It is also used to comment again on how during the war, soldiers were sometimes prone to injuring themselves to avoid active duty and how suspicious nurses and doctors would have treated them and even those who were actually at the Italian front in Gorizia. Their affair begins here and blooms in Milan where they consummate their love. Hemingway and Agnes never enjoyed a full blown affair so in the novel the affair is pure invention. However, Hemingway did propose marriage to Agnes who was much older than him and she refuses but of course for reasons personal and different from the practical reasons that Catherine gives in the novel. Agnes pinches Hemingway's love in the bud who pined after leaving Milan and actually fell sick when he received a letter from Agnes saying that

she wouldn't come to America and that she was marrying someone else. On the other hand, in the novel, Catherine completely surrenders herself to Henry. She negates her individuality to merge with Henry. She is an ideal woman almost a characterization of the ideal woman as fantasized and genuinely disabled. Some critics have pointed out that Hemingway's choice of Switzerland as the place where the lovers enjoy their idyll is also drawn from personal experience. Hemingway visited Switzerland with his first wife and son and the description of the scenic beauty of the place the snowcapped mountains, the vast expanse of lake, the view from their villa, and the idyllic atmosphere are drawn from life. While it lasted, Hemingway's marriage to his first wife Hadley was good and their period of marriage was actually a period in which he was quite creative and thus it was a happy and fruitful period. After divorcing his first wife Hadley Richardson, Hemingway married her friend Pauline in 1927. So the novelist's urge to mingle the fact and fiction in his writing is expressed in the speech "*I knew I did not love Catherine Barkley nor had an idea of loving her. This was a game, like bridge, in which you said things instead of playing cards. Like bridge you had to pretend you were playing for money or playing for some stakes. Nobody had mentioned what the stakes were. It was all right with me.*" Even Hemingway had based his description of the scenic beauty of the mountains of Switzerland on a personal experience with his second wife Pauline. The ordeal of the caesarean section that Catherine undergoes towards the end of the novel is again based on a real life incident. His second wife Pauline had to undergo a cesarean section herself. She also gave birth to a healthy baby boy. However, in the novel Catherine gives birth to a still born baby boy and also succumbs to internal hemorrhage after the caesarean. Henry's tension and ordeal is therefore a magnified version of what Hemingway must have felt. Hemingway has thus used personal experience to bring realism to the text and heighten the drama and intensity of the last tragic moments of the novel which is pure fiction. Thus Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* bears pseudo-autobiographic features.

Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* therefore becomes a brilliant example of the fusion of life and art. It is therefore a success for being art inspired by life but it has not being dictated by life. Life and its experiences have enhanced the text. In the characterization of Henry, the protagonist, Hemingway has relied heavily on himself and by choosing the first person narrative he took the risk of identifying too closely with Henry. But Hemingway cleverly avoided this mistake by imposing a distance between himself the creator and between Henry the created who is also the narrator. He achieved this through imparting Henry with slight other characteristics which were not his own and by making him undergoing fictional incidents as per the requirements of his novel. The narrator therefore emerges at the end of the novel as a man who has

undergone various experiences and learnt a philosophy of life that is his own. Therefore in conclusion it can be said that, *A Farewell to Arms*, contains enough pseudo-autobiographical elements to make it seem page out of Hemingway's life but these elements are transformed through the aid of imagination to become the story of another personality Henry who is based upon but distinct from Hemingway.

A farewell to Arms is thus a pseudo-autobiography, no matter how remote from the author's experience the tale seems to be ; the novelist leaves his mark, expresses his being , his life, in this tale which can illustrate both of fictional and truthful elements. Hemingway here subverts notions of what is expected in conventional autobiography by privileging the fictional over the truth. While conventional autobiography has proved to be a popular genre among celebratory authors, Hemingway has instead used the pseudo-autobiography as a method through which to deconstruct their mediated persona and manufacture their own sense of self. Thus through *A farewell to Arms* Ernest Hemingway weaves the net of fiction with the knot of life events.

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