




if 
i had
A Memoir
to tell it
gayathri prabhu
again

Amala Poli // First published in 1990, William Styron's *Darkness Visible* lays bare the nature of unipolar depression in his wrenching account of what he calls an "indescribable" illness (16). In the decades since Styron's pivotal text on depression, memoirists have continued to write about illnesses of the mind, grappling with questions similar to the ones raised by Styron in his work. And yet, few Indian authors have explored the spectrum of mental health through the genre of the memoir, due to a largely prevalent discomfort with open conversations and public engagement about mental illness.

Gayathri Prabhu's memoir *If I Had to Tell it Again*, published by HarperCollins India in November 2017, is unique in the literary landscape of India for the range of themes it encompasses and its sheer formal inventiveness in the form of a one-act play embedded at the heart of the text. Prabhu's memoir begins with the night of her father's death and her journey towards her hometown for his last rites. The writing is woven around the complex relationship that the author shared with her father, and the legacies she inherited from him: a passion for storytelling as well as a long, sustained struggle with depression. The memoir navigates multiple spools of experience and history, childhood trauma and adult suffering, witnessing depression and living through it firsthand.

Of the few and countable narratives that engage with mental illness directly in the Indian subcontinent, most fall in the domain of fiction or part fiction.[1] A sense of awareness and reflection about the milieu in which she writes is found in Prabhu's description of the difficulty her father, whom she calls SGM, faced in naming his illness as depression, his struggle with the word and its acceptance. As she notes, "We were swamped, I found, by the judgement of those who couldn't bear to have anything to do with mental illness or depression. How could a fractured mind, already suffering, endure that?" (30-31) Situating herself within the literary context and simultaneously addressing the challenges of writing a memoir in India, Prabhu states, "And I know why there are such few memoirs being written in this country about the sort of suffering that only families can inflict and endure. The rhetoric of duty, sacrifice and family honour turns ceaselessly like a giant oil press" (124-125). In such a setting, Prabhu's memoir breaks free from every convention of writing about one's family or the self, moving seamlessly across brittle and delicate

themes such as being disciplined through violence, SGM's generosity and philanthropy that extended to everyone outside the immediate family, being raised to be wary of failure and in fear of it, and the psyche of the child who wishes to protect her parent from the knowledge and trauma of her abuse.

The memoir talks directly about depression and is one of the few accounts that comes closest to explaining the condition to an outsider, like Styron's *Darkness Visible*, by succinctly capturing the individual's ability to deny the illness and talk oneself out of the need for help. Since the question of causality always receives the most pressing attention from both the individual and the caregivers, Prabhu deals with this question: "Why? It is always the first question depression sparks – where did this come from? Not asked from a diagnostic mood, but in avoidance or curiosity or habit. No doubt the wrong question each time" (127). However, Prabhu doesn't shy away from the question of causality. Rather, the memoir reflects on some of the events of her younger years and adulthood that could have precipitated depression, drawing together different threads instead of searching for a clear or definite cause. Breaking the contextual and collective silence around the prevalence of child abuse,^[2] Prabhu talks about her trauma as a child, and writes, "That cramping of words – it was my lot too. The greedy gobbling of books had given me a vocabulary, but nobody had told me about the experience, about what bodies can do to each other" (95). Writing about the terrifying, destructive, death of language that she experienced due to abuse at the hands of a relative in the sixth grade, she describes the transformation in her handwriting, which changed almost every day as the body struggled to fight the shame and guilt of the knowledge of assault. These sections call to mind Mary Karr's memoir *The Liars' Club* **[3]** as these authors remember their fragmented childhoods with no hint of self-indulgence, and with a sparseness and brevity of prose.

Not just in relation to the oeuvre of works that comment on aspects of health and illness, but with a formal inventiveness unseen in most memoirs, *If I Had to Tell it Again* experiments with form to create a space for dialogue with the remembered parent. A section of the memoir is titled 'Leap': a one-act play, where a woman in her early forties, a shadow who is a woman without a defined age, and a man in his mid-sixties are in conversation (Prabhu 41). This section of the memoir is the conversation that the author imagines with her father, offering as it does a space for the father's voice. It is a poignant, self-reflexive part of the memoir where the author describes her attempt at suicide through the character of the woman, thus narrating this incident to the character who represents the father. In turn, the father, while denying his own depression in the play, becomes an onlooker in the struggle with the illness that his daughter lives through and which she survives by a mere miracle due to the love and persistence of her dog. Often, memoirists struggle with the ethics of representing loved ones. Here, the memoirist attempts a resolution through the play, where the possibilities of the dialogue form are maximized in the conversation between the shadow self and the woman, the woman and her father.

Prabhu addresses the question that every memoirist is inevitably faced with about the motivation for writing a memoir, and why it must be read or relevant in the first place, by looking at how the oppression of silence that surrounds child abuse and mental illness can only be resisted through a telling of the personal narrative. She revisits these ideas and further develops them in a piece titled

“Why Remember Why Tell: Notes from a Reluctant Memoirist” [4] that explores the reception of public tellings, and the treacherous terrain of assumptions, expectations, and criticisms faced by the memoirist.

Prabhu’s memoir reflects on grief, unfinished conversations with a difficult parent, and love that persists and evolves with forgiveness. It also creates a space for thinking about how we can honor the tellings that come our way with compassion and kindness.

[1] Jerry Pinto’s work in *Em and the Big Hoom* (2012) is relevant here. A work of autobiographical fiction, it tells the story of the narrator’s mother who suffers from bipolar disorder. Pinto draws heavily from his life and childhood in this text. Other relevant titles include Malaysian author Reshma Valliappan’s *Fallen, Standing: My Life As A Schizophrenist* (2015) and Amandeep Sandhu’s novel *Sepia Leaves* (2007).

[2] Pinki Virani’s work in *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* (2000) reveals the conspiracy of silence that exists around child sexual abuse in India, its socio-historical reasons, and the immediacy and urgency of the problem. (Virani, Pinki. *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000).

[3] Mary Karr and Lena Dunham, *The Liars’ Club* (London: Picador Classic), 2015.

[4] “Why Remember Why Tell: Notes from a Reluctant Memoirist” – an essay on why a public telling matters, published in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, August 2018 – postscript-EPW. Full text available at <https://gayathriprabhudotcom.files.wordpress.com/2018/09/postscript-epw.pdf>

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Works Cited

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