



BIOGRAPHY AS AN ART OF EXPLORING SECRETS: A STUDY OF "THE LAST WORD" BY HANIF QUREISHI

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ABSTRACT

The last Word by Hanif Qureishi, is the story concerning the triumph of fiction over biography. The novel is actually a criticism on those modern writers and polishers who measure art in terms of material gains. The writing is no more holy and idealised and the writer is no more Prophet or Vates. The utopia of writing which remarks art as something holy, idealised ad perfect, is upside down ad has grown to be the dystopia of writing where all the ideals are dismantled. I have found it more like a theoretical criticism than a fiction which has encompasses the whole world of research holding different standpoints regarding creative art. Harry and Rob represent two contradictory stands about writing but later both ideologies become amalgamated. It is a comment on such writing which only focuses on sexual and sensational account the life of intellectuals. Finally such conception of writing is disillusioned at the end. It is also a criticism on the mentality of readers that they take pleasure reading such stuff which is sexual, sensational and delightful. Art is only considered a food for sensuousness and not for thought. In reality the art has become delusions, the writing of madness which targets to down all perfection associated with art. The boundary between public life and personal life is merged and the biographer confuses art with the artist.

Key terms: biography, secrets, writing, art, secrets, personal life, utopia, dystopia, business.

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The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance, -Aristotle.

An artist without signing any agreement yet bound to create such writing which is elevated than ordinary. A Writer has more noble, dignified, sensitive and genius soul and imparts same nobility in the consciousness of the readers. A work of art that aims at propagating graciousness becomes a fraction of the existing body of literature. Plato exiled such writers from his utopia who circulated offensiveness through their work. Somerset

Maugham said, "Art, if it is to be reckoned as one of the great values of life, must teach man humility, tolerance, wisdom and magnanimity. The value of art is not beauty, but right action."

Biography, according to Merriam-Webster is "The story of a real person's life written by someone other than that person". Mostly a biography doesn't remain neutral because subjectivity of the biographer influences the stuff and his own ideology may corrupt the true account. in this sense the writing is not sacred which aims at to reveal those secrets which may be assets or guilt

of the person's life which he enjoys or regret in his solitude. These no more remain as secrets when they are published for material and commercial purposes. The whole content, e.g. the feelings, emotions, the happy hours, etc is treated as raw material and reshaped and moulded under the power of the subjectivity of the biographer. The whole account is manipulated in order to accord the new trends of market and the truth is amalgamated to achieve the Ideal in the writing. Here the nature of truth is obscure and questioned. Modernity has reversed all ideals regarding the nature of truth.

The last Word by Hanif Qureshi, was essentially a combat between two writers. One is Harry Johnson, the literary biographer who had been commissioned to write the biography of the other writer, Mamoon Azam, Indian-born novelist, playwright and essayist whom the former "had admired since he was a teenage book fiend, a nerdy connoisseur of sentences, a kind for whom writers were gods, heroes, rock stars"(The last Word 2). Mamoon was like a lighthouse for Harry, so he didn't miss this opportunity and immediately gave his consent when Rob, "a respected and innovative publisher" (2) approached with this idea to explore the life of the person who was like a saint for him. Harry had been credited before with the successful biography of Nehru, "containing new material and the familiar story had been spiced with interracial copulation" (3) which was even liked by the Indians. In this novel Harry is hired for this purpose "to revitalise both Mamoon's career and his bank balance. Harry greatly admires Mamoon's work and wants to uncover the truth of the artist's life" (Faber & Faber, review). So the biographer resided in the country house of Mamoon where he finds a cynical and manipulative master instead of literary god and the battle for the last word starts between both writers. According to amazon.com review,

"To an extent, *The Last Word* is a biting commentary on celebrity biographies, which dish dirt to titillate rather than illuminate. Contrary to Liana's belief ... Harry's publisher believes that readers want icons to be trashed so they can consider themselves the icon's equal." (More wit than substance...)

There is a contrast between Harry's and Rob's views about writing. Harry's conception about the concept of writing or art though was not so much pure or innocent but still based to present positive aspects and true account of the life events of the writer. Rob "seeks a more naked truth, a salacious tale of sex and scandal that will generate headlines" (Faber & Faber, review) and believed in the authority of the publisher to a great extent that he could influence the writer's work as much as he could that he sometimes "He would cut his writer's work arbitrarily, or change the title, without informing them" (6). The last world actually presents the whole world of Research that how the facts are amalgamated with the fantasy to create the work of art which later becomes long lasting. This work also throws light on the viewpoint of the writers and readers that how the mindset has become mechanical. The very idea of the writing has been converted into something commercial. The idea of writing is changed and the writing has developed into something like business and it passes through all stages of production to make it a fine product. Rob represents modern frame of mind which produces all those things which are in demand and thus the morality becomes relative.

The worth of writing is measured in terms of its sales and profit and which can be sold on high price. The whole notion of writing or art is dismantled that art is something idealised, perfect and priceless. The Utopia of writing has turned out to be the dystopia of writing. Similarly the concept of writers is also perverted. In ancient times the writers were called vates and prophets and their work was considered divine. In the start Harry was committed to give a genuine account of Mamoon's life and to bring all the valuable and admiring aspects into limelight again. While discussing with Liana he appreciates Mamoon as "he is one of the greatest writers ...I want to give a true account of his fascinating life."(17). Rob wants Harry to present the writer as Dionysus whose life has been an account of debauchery. It is criticism on the whole creative process. Harry's perspective has been contaminated time to time by that of Rob's who believed "writing a form of extreme combat and humanity's saving grace. For him, the writer should be the very devil, a

disturber of dreams and wrecker of fatuous utopias, the bringer-in of reality, and rival of God in his wish to make worlds"(6). The art is the thing which is written in the fashion and trends which accord the market. The biographer has the licence to explore the secrets and does not care the reputation, feeling and emotions of the personality. The personality becomes the "Subject" to explore. Even that at a place the art becomes a game for the writer. Rob blesses his advises to Harry time to time that he would have to use the tricks on Mamoon to look back in the past so "The past might take on new tones as the subject looked back" (4). He also advises him to consult Liana, the writer's wife, if he would need because she would be cooperative but he may have to "sleep with her" (8) because these are the pranks which are used by the a few writers in modern times.

In this "veil tearing task" (24) may things were revealed like he was a very excellent tennis player. Though he was seventy years old still very vigorous and bouncing in this game. He was very fond of television and loved gossips. He adored Indian and Pakistani cricket. He had a vast knowledge of these sports. He even a fan of football and had watched world cup with Nietzsche. How much he had been compassionate and devoted to his first wife, Peggy. How much he was idealised by Liana. He was living a life of an ordinary man who had fears, desires, liking, disliking, side affairs, etc. An admiring shade of his life was that he was the creator of the new worlds of fictitious characters. He was like god to construct or violate their lives. But the biographer takes the licence to violate the life of his subject who is greatly admired and loved by the public. He directly addresses the people, "you think you like this writer? See how badly he treated his wife, children and mistresses... Hate him, Hate his work". (44) All complimentary attributes and achievements of Mamoon were a slap on the face of Rob who wanted Harry to present him as Satan and his "last flirtation, last illness, death, obituaries, and acknowledge children and of course mistresses" (10). In Rob's views these "juicy parts" of the book will enhance the rating and admiration of the book which portray the subject as "a dirty bastard, an adulterer, liar, thug, possibly a murderer" (9).

Another thing that is noticeable that, not only the subject's past was excavated but all other close ones of the subject were investigated, like Marion, Liana, Peggy, etc. I like the last chapters when the literary biographer becomes himself the subject for the writer. Likewise the biographer has the warrant to access into the personal diaries and notebooks of the nearer and dearer ones of the writer. Harry inquires the nature of relationship between Mamoon and his wives. Liana was a sincere and loyal wife and took care of him very well. She considered herself Tolstoy's wife. She wanted hagiography of his husband and to make him a "Brand" in this way he will be sold on high worth. She belonged to a puritanical, catholic background. But Harry was required by Rob to pronounce her as "the man-eater" (8).

Peggy the first wife had died twelve years ago who had an artistic mind. She also travelled to India with Mamoon. She had been a patient of numerous diseases like migraine, OCD, stomach aches, etc. Mamoon confesses to Harry how they husband and wife both worked together on the manuscripts. She had been very attractive and intelligent. She had been a keen editor of the writer's work and had been loved by him for a long time. This was the first hand account about Peggy but the "filthy merchants" like Rob never wanted to offer "a portrait of a saintly saint" (50) to the readers. Rob gave this information about Peggy that the writer had drove her over the edge by beating "her blacker and bluer than a decayed stilton."(9) Which opposes the true detail? Suddenly Peggy appears before Harry and her ghost raises some imperative questions which directly challenge such perspective that encourages the writers to portray such dismal and nasty pictures of the celebrity before the readers that they should start hate them. She questions Harry, "will I be defined by my bitter end? Isn't there more to me than that? And who are you to judge?" (52). which supports the writers to mock at the feelings, emotions and deprivations. The personal diaries had been regarded as "Miseries" by the writer.

Harry impressed by Rob's style of writing as "a long game of intrigue and deception" and pulls Alice into this game. When Harry met Marion, A

Colombian model girl and Mamoon's ex girl friend, he collected many facts mirroring Mamoon's life but he wanted to confirm them first. He got many new shades of his subject's liking and disliking. Marion loved him very much and waited him for a long but the writer refused him. She cared his reading glasses. She also revealed his past life in India when he was a teenager and had sexual relations with his headmaster's wife. Alice, Harry's fiancée, had a long walks with the writer and they discussed private conversation regarding, "life. fathers. art, politics, sex" (193). She appreciated him for his intellect, deep thought, psychoanalysing expertise, his political views, his anti Marxist ideology, etc. Harry appealed Alice to "go to him and ask if Marion told the truth?" (234). She got terrified on this idea because she didn't want to play such trick on Mamoon who trusted her. As he emotionally blackmailed her, she went to Mamoon and used her cell phone for recording. The main subject was his sexual excitements and advancements. She condemned later that his quest for truth made him a criminal means to explore one's private life to such a great extent is not less than a crime.

Finally the writing becomes secret when the writer finds his inspiration in form of Alice. He uses this experience with the young couple as his subject of his new novella "The Last Passion" and translates his experience into art employing his greater expertise. Here a game of cat and mouse starts, where the expert wins the game because he knows well the tricks in art. Harry himself becomes the subject "So the old writer secretly writes about the younger man" (325). According to The Independent, review;

"For all his private shame, Mamoon emerges with the dignity of his work intact. He may be a bastard, but he is not a fraud. This "Asian Camus", a "radical transgressor" who has "looked into the dark without flinching", will snatch the last word. For Mamoon, "an artist is always... at his best in his art." A comic but not a cynic, Kureishi mocks the man but salutes the writer who has lived in truth while creating "freedom". The farce ends in a kind of prayer." (Kureishi's Novel Reflects Keats's Claim...)

The Last Word is also a commentary on the correlation of art and artist's experience. Art is merely considered an expression of the artist's life experience. An artist has two faces one is public and other is personal face. A writer in his personal life is an ordinary man who has desires, fears, cries, yelling and associations but Liana didn't want a portray of an ordinary man rather his hagiography. A writer as an artist is "a trickster, deceiver, conman...mostly is a seducer" (48). The art has become a seduction but still shouldn't be confused with that of the real experience. The prime duty of the artist is to throw universal questions towards readers but he is expected to uncover the universal truth. Mostly journalist weigh up the artist in the light of their work created and ask such inane questions which only focus to degrade him in the eyes of his readers. At the end the artist wins the combat by presenting art in its idealisation. Whereas the art in this mechanical age is a "long game of intrigue and deception" (25) where a piece of art becomes masterpiece which is written "as mad, as wild" (8).

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