

BALANCING THE CENTRE OF NARRATIVE GRAVITY: Abjection and Diffraction of Self in Nalini Jameela's Autobiographies

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Abstract: Building on Eakin's critical position on the self in autobiography, this paper configures the nature of self and identity in collaborative autobiography. By integrating Dennett's idea of self as a "centre of narrative gravity" into Eakin's theoretical frame work – constituted of Damasio's neurobiological self and Ulric Neisser's Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge – the paper argues that our identities control the porous boundaries of our potentially limitless narrative-selves. These narrative selves are situated in nature as they manifest differently in different contexts thwarting any attempt to nail any one representation as original. The paper deploys Haraway's diffraction as the more appropriate metaphor for this narrative-self formation. Against this theoretical background Jameela's revision of her collaborative autobiography, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude Ātmakadha as NjānLyngikathozhilāli: Nalini Jameelayude Āthmakatha* is read as an abjection (Kristeva's formulation) of her earlier identity and self.

Keywords: Abjection, Collaborative Autobiography, Diffraction, Identity, Intersubjectivity, Self.

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1. Introduction

This essay clarifies the notions of self and identity in intersubjective contexts taking Nalini Jameela's collaborative autobiographies as a case in point.¹ The first part conceptualizes the narrative-self as potentially limitless, yet having porous boundaries determined by various identities of oneself. Though counter intuitive, this nature of our self is substantiated by subscribing to Daniel Dennett's notion of self as a centre of narrative gravity, Ulric Neisser's five kinds of self-knowledge, and Antonio Damasio's neurobiological self with bearings on life writing. For us the self is a material, conceptual, organizing principle which is fundamentally narrative and situated in nature. Donna Haraway's diffraction is adopted as the mechanics of situated self-representation in intersubjective contexts. In the following sections we argue that Nalini Jameela's revision of *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude Ātmakadha* (hereafter *OLĀ*) as *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli: Nalini JameelayudeĀthmakatha* (*NLNJĀ*) is a move to dissociate her identity as an author of the former.²

Nalini Jameela is a sex worker, a camera woman, a social activist and a writer. Born in Thrissur and having lived in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, she gained public attention through Jwalamukhi, an organization for sex workers in Kerala. Her 2005 autobiography *OLĀ*, in collaboration with I. Gopinath, made her an author. A rift with him caused her to revise *OLĀ* as *NLNJĀ* with the help of friends. Her autobiographies issue from her activism for the cause of sex workers. The collaborative process

¹This paper carries forward the argument in the essay "Registering the Self and the Registers of Self: Towards an Ethics of Collaborative Autobiography" to be published in *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies'* special issue on Donna Haraway. By disqualifying the metaphors of mirror and ventriloquism, we established in the essay diffraction as a metaphor of self-narration in the collaborative autobiographies of Jameela and Mayilamma, and suggested the self in collaborative autobiography as situated.

²Nalini Jameela, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude Ātmakadha*, Kottayam: D C Books, 2005 (June). Nalini Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli: Nalini Jameelayude Āthmakatha*, Kottayam: D C Books, 2005 (December).

discussed here pertains to the fields of human rights campaign where a community's cause drives the autobiographic project of an individual. In such instances, the collaborators invariably share an equal interest as the autobiographic subject. Section two argues that Jameela's revision is a process akin to Julia Kristeva's radical abjection. The final section, drawing from Donna Haraway, demonstrates the two variants as two diffraction patterns.

2. Self and Identity

Collaborative autobiography is an intersubjective context where an autobiographic subject co-operates with others who help with authoring. Where the subject is not a practicing writer and whose understanding of generic conventions is limited, as in the case of Jameela, the collaborator has to convert the oral accounts into a written document in the first person. Here, the collaborator is not a scribe; rather, s/he is an elicitor of stories. In this sense, it is unlike the non-interactive relationship with a recording machine. In reality, intimate experience, memory and stories are shared based on a mutuality of trust and respect. In published collaborative autobiographies the affective dimensions of collaborator-subject relationship acts as testimony that authenticates the narrative. Often the collaborator, through the paratexts, makes visible the personal bond with the subject but is careful to establish that the narrative is unaffected by this. Implied in this placatory gesture is the apprehension that a mixing of selves erodes the reader's trust; any trespass into the first person authority may be viewed as unethical. Therefore, intersubjectivity is a caveat in collaborative autobiography.

The self that emerges in this intersubjective context is a narrative-self primarily because it manifests through narration. Here narrative is both the form and nature of self. The narrative form takes shape as the subject performs the act of self narration, putting him/her self – constituted of experience, memory, events, actions and feelings – into a structured oral performance. In this narrative, the collaborator is not a mute listener but an active participant recollecting a similar experience or personal memory. This sharing of narrative can coax the subject to reveal

more of the intimate experiences and the ensuing discussion can help develop a different perspective about the event itself.³ In this way the subject's self interlaces with that of the collaborator's to precipitate intersubjectivity in collaborative autobiography.

Conceiving the self as narrative in nature is itself a theoretical stand as it negotiates with the other theories of self. Moreover, it goes beyond the mere experience of the narrative form of self.⁴ Therefore, a 'narrative-self' theory should recursively move from the available theoretical perceptions (self as an object of knowledge) and the experience of self in everyday narrative moments. This understanding of self is critical to any discussion of autobiography since self is the pulsating agent of an autobiography; any issue on representation can be answered only with an idea of the nature of self that is subscribed to. On the narrative nature of self Eakin comments, "our life stories are not merely *about* us but in an inescapable and profound way *are* us."⁵ Through this startling sense of identification between self and narrative Eakin characterizes "autobiography [as that which] not only delivers metaphors of self, it *is* a metaphor of self."⁶ Beneath this assertion is his belief that narrative is not a container of the self but the very self is narrative. To Eakin a reassessment of self as narrative is critical because the Cartesian mind-body dualism rendered it as disembodied. Therefore, the first step to conceive a narrative self is to emphasize its material aspect.⁷

To begin with, we adopt Eakin's perception as the working definition of self as a "comprehensive term for the totality of our

³This need not be manipulative strategy. It can be the result of a great friendship between the participants.

⁴A Narrative theory of self should be applicable in other areas like ethics and morality.

⁵Paul John Eakin, *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008, x.

⁶Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 78.

⁷Paul John Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 1– 40.

subjective experience."⁸ He gives an organized picture of this subjective experience by relying on Ulric Neisser's essay "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge" for its, essentially, anti-Cartesian position.⁹ Neisser proposes ecological self, interpersonal self, extended self, private self and conceptual self.¹⁰ Descartes asserted that "this self, that is to say, the soul, through which I am what I am, is entirely separate from the body."¹¹ The body or the material world works on the laws of physics, and mind, the immaterial thinking thing, has free will.¹² On the contrary, Neisser's ecological self discards the mind-body dualism, says Eakin. The ecological self, which is the earliest to develop among the five, empowers the child with a sense of agency.¹³ The body here is not the biological body alone but "any controllable object that moves together with the point of observation."¹⁴ It is the sensory experiences especially the optical flow field that enables the child to imagine itself as "a perceiving entity at a particular location in the environment."¹⁵

Eakin reinstates his theory of embodied self by also co-opting another anti-Cartesian, the neurobiologist Antonio Damasio. Self for Damasio is "an effect of the neurobiological structure of the brain"¹⁶ and "a feeling of what happens."¹⁷ Damasio proposes three kinds of selves namely – proto-self, core-self and the autobiographical self. The proto-self is "a coherent collection of neural patterns which map, moment by moment, the state of the

⁸Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, xiv.

⁹Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 22-25.

¹⁰Ulric Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," *Philosophical Psychology* 1, no. 1 (1988): 35-59.

¹¹Peter Heehs, *Writing the Self: Diaries, Memoirs, and the History of the Self*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2013, 69.

¹²Heehs, *Writing the Self*, 70.

¹³Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," 39.

¹⁴Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," 39.

¹⁵Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge," 39.

¹⁶Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 67.

¹⁷Antonio R. Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*, New York: Harcourt, 1999, 7; cited in Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 68.

physical structure of the organism in its many dimensions."¹⁸ On the innate narrative capacity of human beings, Damasio says, the "imagetic representation of sequence of brain events" (neural maps) creates stories.¹⁹ And this "natural preverbal occurrence of storytelling may well be the reason why we ended up creating drama and eventually books."²⁰ When story telling is biological to us there is no teller for these stories in the brain according to Damasio. The teller is "born as the story is told, *within the story itself.*"²¹

A limitation of Damasio's theory is that, for him, self is only biological.²² But, as Neisser's idea of the conceptual self suggests, it is also a theoretical entity. To quote Neisser, "'self-concept' draws its meaning from the network of assumptions and theories in which it is embedded, just as all other concepts do."²³ So we need a theoretical frame work where the materiality of self, its narrative aspect and the conceptual nature work together. For this purpose, and to further define the properties of the self that we manifest by being autobiographical, both in everyday narrative recounting as well as in published narratives²⁴, the authors adopt Daniel Dennett's idea of the "self as a centre of narrative gravity."²⁵

¹⁸Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 174 cited in Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 70.

¹⁹Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 189 cited in Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 75.

²⁰Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 189.

²¹Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens*, 191 cited in Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 74.

²²Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 70.

²³Neisser, "Five Kinds of Self-Knowledge", 36.

²⁴Eakin considers published autobiographies "as only the most visible, tangible evidence of" identity construction. *Living Autobiographically*, x.

²⁵We have summarised Daniel C. Dennett's idea of self from his essays, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," Tufts University, <<https://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/papers/selfctr.pdf>> (21 Nov. 2017); "The Origins of Selves," Tufts University <<https://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/papers/selfctr.pdf>>

For Dennett, self is an abstract organizing principle, a theorist's fiction, which has only the characteristics that is attributed to it. Dennett lists two kinds of selves: minimal selves, and complex selves. The minimal self, a biological principle, is the earliest form of self and present in all organisms. He defines it as a "minimal proclivity to distinguish self from other"²⁶ by creating boundaries and its fundamental principle is: "You are what you control and care for."²⁷ Dennett says, these boundaries are "porous and indefinite."²⁸ In addition to the minimal selves, a human being has a narrative self because our environment includes words also. We are "constantly engaged in presenting ourselves to others, and to ourselves, and hence *representing* ourselves – in language and gesture, external and internal."²⁹ According to Dennett, "words are potent elements of our environment that we readily incorporate, ingesting and extruding them, weaving them like spiderwebs into self-protective strings of *narrative*." Therefore, "*Our* fundamental tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition is ... concocting [sic] and controlling the story we tell others – and ourselves – about who we are." He adds that this self-representation is an automatic process for which our brain is designed and our consciousness and self are the effects of our stories. Dennett designates this self the "centre of narrative gravity" because like the centre of gravity of an object it is a conceptual entity and it helps theoreticians to predict the nature of human beings.³⁰ This centre has an organizational function because it encourages the audience to think that they issue from a "unified agent whose words they are, about whom they are."³¹

edu/cogstud/dennett/papers/originss.htm> (2 Dec. 2017); and his book, *Consciousness Explained*, New York: Back Bay Books, 1991.

²⁶Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 414.

²⁷Dennett, "Origins of Selves," 3.

²⁸Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 414.

²⁹Dennett, "Origins of Selves," 5.

³⁰Dennett, "The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity," online.

³¹Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 418.

Through this conceptualization Dennett dismisses both the Cartesian self and the materialist's idea of self as a locatable point in the brain (the Cartesian Theatre) where consciousness happens.³² For him, the Cartesian theatre and the homunculus who sits inside it, witnessing the events, are vestiges of dualism which he dismisses with his model of Multiple Drafting. According to this model our sensory perceptions and the information that we receive need not be sent to a particular area of the brain to be interpreted. He says, "all varieties of perception – indeed, all varieties of thought or mental activity – are accomplished in the brain by parallel, multitrack processes of interpretation and elaboration of sensory inputs. Information entering the nervous system is under continuous 'editorial revision'."³³ About its narrative nature Dennett says, "these distributed content-discriminations yield, over the course of time, something *rather like* a narrative stream or sequence, which can be thought of as subject to continual editing."³⁴ Clearly, when the Cartesian theatre is proved to be a cognitive illusion "the self (otherwise known as the Audience in the Cartesian Theatre, the Central Meaner, or the Witness) turns out to be a valuable abstraction, a theorist's fiction rather than an internal observer or boss."³⁵

Dennett's self is conceptual and narrative while Damasio's self is narrative and material. Where Dennett calls self as fictional, Damasio would emphasize that the self is real. Damasio establishes the subjective aspect of the self because the proto-self produces primordial feelings (like pleasure and pain) and the other two complex forms of self (the core self and the autobiographical self) evolve from this while Dennett eliminates the possibility of subjectivity itself.³⁶ Here Dennett's theory is

³²Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 101-138.

³³Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 111.

³⁴Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 113.

³⁵Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 431.

³⁶Read Dennett's chapter "Qualia Disqualified" in *Consciousness Explained*, 369-411 and Damasio's *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, Random House, Kindle.

counter intuitive because only a subjective self can create a boundary and regulate the inflow of materials in it, therefore, regarding the materialism of self we endorse Damasio's idea. But, on the one point where Dennett and Damasio would agree is that, irrespective of whether there is a narrator or not, there is no narrator prior to the narrative. That means the narrative possibilities of the self are quite large. About the autobiographical self Damasio says "it can lie dormant, its myriad components waiting their turn to become active."³⁷ Dennett's assertion that self is an artefact of social-process that creates us is similar to Neisser's conceptual self. It is a highly valuable concept except for Dennett's assertion that it is that alone. By subscribing to these theoreticians we understand self as both material and conceptual. Conceptually combining Dennett we can say that it is a feeling of organization that we feel deep inside us. The most important feature of the narrative-self is that either it has no boundaries at all or if it has, as Dennett says, they are highly porous and flexible. Because, there is no narrator controlling the narrative; it comes into being only with the narrative. This narrative is our experiential self. It is when the experiential self becomes prolific so as to make itself self accessible and interpretable we subscribe to identities.

For Eakin and for us, identity is a manifestation of Neisser's fifth mode. "It refers to the version of ourselves that we display not only to others but also to ourselves whenever we ... reflect on or otherwise engage in self-characterization."³⁸ As Dennett and Damasio point out, there are many narratives of experience in our brain; these embodied narratives are catalogued under the tags of identity. This cataloguing enables easy transaction of the self-experience in a social context or in an individual's introspective moments. Identity formation is an act of integration where various embodied experiences are arranged together while some are also left out. Though intrinsically connected to our experience its existence is in the discursive

³⁷Damasio, "The Autobiographical Self," *Self Comes to Mind*, Kindle.

³⁸Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, xiv.

realm. Therefore “identities may erode, but we remain selves of some kind”³⁹ as long as the narrative in our head persists.

Individual identity ramifies in two ways. One, it is a concept that s/he receives from society which has a bearing on the social, legal and moral realms upon which a society finds the meaning of its actions. The other, is the sense of personality that a person carves out for himself/herself from these received notions. Writing an autobiography confers one such identity tag to the subject: identity as an author of autobiography. Ideally, it is supposed to integrate all the identity states of the individual that s/he has used in order to make the self-experience comprehensible. When practicing autobiography as a genre, one is “operating under the discipline of a rule-grounded identity regime”, says Eakin⁴⁰. The subject can “get into trouble for breaking the rules” and often “self-narrators have been called to account”⁴¹ when violation is observed. Eakin lists three common cases of rule violation. They are misrepresentation of “biographical or historical truth”, “infringement of the right to privacy”, “failure to display normative modes of selfhood.”⁴² It implies that the autobiographic subject should take responsibility for the text as it carries his/her signature which authenticates the self-experience as narrated truthfully. Whether fulfilled or not, this testimony is the trust factor of the genre which distinguishes it from a novel or a poem with autobiographic elements. In other words, authorship is tied up with responsibility.⁴³

The problem with published autobiographies is that they act as reference points to the narrative-self which is never static. It constantly changes with new experiences. In an intersubjective

³⁹Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, xiv.

⁴⁰ Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 17.

⁴¹Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 17, 32.

⁴²Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 32.

⁴³ For more on authorship and responsibility Philippe Lejeune, “The Autobiography of Those Who Do Not Write,” *On Autobiography*, Paul John Eakin, ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, 185-215.

situation like a collaborative autobiography, the perception of the same event itself changes after narration. Identities regulate the porous boundary of the self, always serving us a processed partial picture of experience.⁴⁴ This condition gives us cause to rethink the mechanism of self representation in collaborative autobiography. In critical discussions of collaborative autobiography the metaphors of representation have been the 'mirror' and 'ventriloquism'. Stone opines, "the writer has temporarily turned himself into a mirror in which we watch the subject seeing and speaking the self."⁴⁵ Eakin says, "ventriloquism, making the other talk, is by definition a central rhetorical phenomenon of these narratives."⁴⁶ In both cases the instrumentality of representation is fallaciously conceived by giving complete agency to either the collaborator or the subject without the concomitant preference to the complexity of intersubjective contexts.

We cannot expect a published autobiography or any autobiographical recounting (oral performances or internal monologues of an individual for that matter) to represent the original self.⁴⁷ That means no form of recounting can offer a reflection of the subject. Rather each is a narrative highly context-sensitive and situated. Therefore, all our self/self-representations/narrative-selves are situated. Such situated knowledge(s) are metaphorized as 'diffraction' by Donna Haraway. To quote Haraway, "Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction."⁴⁸ When the credibility of autobiography rests on its referentiality, diffraction does align with the issue of ethics in

⁴⁴In this process, since they are in the discursive realm, the definitions of identities also change.

⁴⁵Albert E. Stone "Collaboration in Contemporary American Autobiography," *Revue française d'études américaines* 14(1982), 165.

⁴⁶Eakin, *How Our Lives Become Stories*, 48.

⁴⁷Except in cases of deliberate misrepresentation.

⁴⁸Donna Haraway, *Haraway Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2004, 70.

representation by opening the space for us to probe where and why the difference appears.

3. Abjection in Nalini Jameela's Autobiography

Having defined the notions of self and of identity and discussed the mechanics of formation of narrative-selves, the following section explicates the nature of self and identity by reading the collaborative autobiographies of Nalini Jameela. Jameela's case is particularly important because in *OLĀ* we have two individuals collaborating to write her identity narrative while in *NLNJĀ* a group of individuals helps her to accomplish the same. In her interview with us Jameela says, the reason to write *OLĀ* was to strengthen the advocacy of the organization for sex workers. And the most difficult part was to explain the nature of her profession. She says, "some people called us *veshyas*,⁴⁹ some called us bad women. In fact, all bad names were thrown at us. Even though the name sex worker was pejoratively meant I found it accurate."⁵⁰ Therefore, the act of writing is, for Jameela, a strategy to define her identity as a sex worker and to reconfigure 'sex work' itself. In *OLĀ*, Jameela establishes sex work as a profession of equal dignity with that of teaching and singing. Even if knowledge and talent are considered divine it is not often given free of cost. A singer is paid, a teacher is also paid, so must be the case with a sex worker, she argues.⁵¹ By presenting sex work in terms of labour economics she removes the stigma attached to it. Society perceives sex workers as people without family and incapable of honouring commitments. Jameela reiterates her identity as a sex worker – a professional – by integrating her other identities as daughter, mother, friend, wife, and activist. To a question on the detailed descriptions of motherhood, Jameela replies to Devika: "I look after my family, I also do social work, and when in financial need, as someone in

⁴⁹To tonally translate *veshya* into English one would prefer prostitute.

⁵⁰Excerpt from a personal interview with Jameela conducted by the authors on 6 August 2017 at Thrissur.

⁵¹Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, 117.

my situation often is, I do sex work."⁵² Her autobiography also integrates the events that are related to her identities as Nalini and Jameela. By birth she is Hindu; named Nalini by her parents. When she married Shahulhameed, a Muslim, she became Jameela, by concealing her identities as Nalini and a Hindu, in order to be accepted by his family.⁵³ Jameela told us that she assumed Nalini Jameela when she wrote an article titled "Ādhunikam Paurānikam" as she wanted her husband's family to know that she was writing. Her self therefore includes all these identities.

In the two autobiographies, what permeates through all the identity states is her resoluteness. Proof of this is in *NLNJĀ*: "I cannot tolerate people who establish control and authority over me for a long time."⁵⁴ This aspect of her character is highlighted each time an interpersonal relation is described. She left home when her father started controlling her unreasonably, even though she was the family's bread winner. The revision of *OLĀ* reinforces this aspect of her personality. Jameela says, the revision is the result of the harrowing post-publication events where she was questioned about elements in the narrative that were allegedly added by her collaborator without her consent.⁵⁵ For instance, *OLA* narrates the amorous relation of one of her friends.⁵⁶ Though she witnessed the events she did not include the details in her autobiography. Her collaborator who was also aware asked her to talk about it during the manuscript preparation. Jameela agreed to talk only after extracting a promise that it will not be published. Though, a part of her experiential self, she did not want to include the event in her identity narrative. Moreover, she had misgivings about the way it would be interpreted. Jameela avers that everything need not go into our autobiography as we can keep something as part of

⁵²Nalini Jameela, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, Chennai: Westland, 2007, 140.

⁵³Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, 50.

⁵⁴Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, 42.

⁵⁵Personal Interview.

⁵⁶Jameela, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude*, 46.

ourselves. "What is wrong in hiding some unpleasant elements, which may upset people?" she asks.⁵⁷

Another instance is a comment on the actress Kuttiedathi Vilasini. Jameela says she never met Kuttiedathi Vilasini. The actress interrogated her for certain statements in the text. She tells us, "I cannot take the false statements of others and answer the questions related to that." Another complaint Jameela has against Gopinath is his refusal to add a few photographs which she wanted as part of her autobiography.⁵⁸ These reflective statements constitute her idea of an autobiography: It is not about coming clean about oneself; it is about including what one wants as elements of the narrative and how one wants others to understand these elements. In this respect, she is conscious about autobiography as a "referential art"⁵⁹. It always refers back to its subject for meaning; asking him/her to take responsibility for the elements narrated and the way they are represented.

When interrogated for the elements incorporated Jameela felt the boundaries between her self and that of her collaborator, I. Gopinath (the other), merged with her identity. When this threat to her identity loomed before her, she decided to revise her autobiography. It is, what Julia Kristeva would call, a conscious gesture of radical abjection: a reaction to the threat against being. The threat is the dissolution of the boundary between the self and the other. In such a situation, the subject, in order to establish itself, abjects that which causes the mixing of the self and the other. Food loathing is the most archaic form of abjection for Kristeva and she describes that in the first person: When the "eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk ... I experience a gagging sensation Along with slight-clouding dizziness, *nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it." Actually the milk is not an other; the other is the self constructed by her parents' desire. Therefore, Kristeva says, "I expel *myself*, I spit *myself* out, I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" came

⁵⁷Personal Interview

⁵⁸Personal Interview

⁵⁹Eakin, *Living Autobiographically*, 21.

to establish *myself*."⁶⁰ The first three *myself*-s refer to the desire of her parents while the final one is the self that she establishes through the abjection of the forced desire.

This description is quite similar to Jameela's abjection of *OLĀ* which is an abject text because it violated the rules of the genre by adding elements for which the subject does not want to assume responsibility. In effect, she felt the self in it as embodying her collaborator's desire. Jameela abjects I. Gopinath's desire, *her self*, by expelling the text as well as disowning its authorship. The revision is an effort to establish *her self*. Therefore, when she revised the text as *NLNJĀ* it is her earlier identity as the author of *OLĀ* that she rejects. She cannot, however, wishfully dispel the self of *OLĀ* because, as long as the text remains, the self is conjured as its organizing principle; as the centre of narrative gravity in any act of reading and immediately attributed to be that of Jameela. Therefore, to preserve the boundary of her identity, she must balance the narrative-self through a process of abjection, which works out as a dissociation of her identity as the author of *OLĀ*, and the reconfiguration of her narrative-self through the authoring of *NLNJĀ*.

In any case, it is not easy to banish the abject or prevent it from connecting with her. In that sense, abjection is more than mere rejection. A return of the rejected is not implied in rejection. But, abjection is recursive because "from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master." Kristeva says "the jettisoned object [abject] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses."⁶¹ The recursivity with which Jameela's autobiographies are connected together prove this. For instance, even though, Jameela rejected the first book it did not put the book out of existence. Any new reader who chances upon the first version and who is unaware of the controversy would certainly read it as her autobiography. The fact of rejection remains concealed unless one reads the second

⁶⁰Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, 2-3.

⁶¹Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 2.

book whose introduction provides the background to the controversy. The matter is even more baffling for a bilingual reader who also reads the English translation of *NLNJĀ*. To such a reader, the three texts possess a family resemblance as the title of the translation, *Autobiography of a Sex Worker*, is the title of the first version of her autobiography. Moreover, there are references to the first version in the interview given to Devika, the translator. *NLNJĀ* and *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* carry the phantoms of *OLĀ* linking the narratives, uncannily into a trinity. *Autobiography of a Sex Worker* connects a self that Jameela wants to project to an autobiographic self that she abjected. In this way, the abject “disturbs identity, system, order” by remaining on the border of identity narratives in intersubjective contexts. It reminds the system about identity narratives that a mixing of selves is possible as the boundaries of the self are porous and permeable. “The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite ... it draws attention towards the fragility of laws”⁶² of autobiography and triggers a return of the abject to identity narratives constructed in intersubjective contexts.

The problematic of the abject does not end here. The abject text which lies on the borders of her identity construction helps to present *NLNJĀ* as a more authentic and ethical representation.⁶³ Jameela’s criticism of I. Gopinath’s invasion of her identity makes *OLĀ* inauthentic and unethical. As a corollary to this, *NLNJĀ* gets the leverage of an authentic text as it carries the proof that it is scrutinized by the autobiographic subject with an introductory note. Jameela in her note to *NLNJĀ* says, “in a hurry to publish the book, there was not enough time to make it perfect. It is because of that I have decided to revise and rescript my autobiography.”⁶⁴ Therefore, the abject lying on the border calls the autobiographic subject to balance the self by reconfiguring her identity as an author. At the same time, in a strange way, it validates her attempt to balance the self even as

⁶²Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror*, 4.

⁶³This perception is countered in Parvathy and Vinod “Registering the Self”.

⁶⁴Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, “Ente Ezhuthupareekshakal”.

its presence is a warning to a possible collapse of meaning when the other merges along with the self.

4. Diffraction: The First Person Pronoun and the Personalizing of Experience

NLNJĀ uses the same narrative frame as *OLĀ*: The two texts narrate Jameela's life through memory notes. *OLĀ* contains fifty six memory notes and they are not divided into chapters. In *NLNJĀ* the fifty one memory notes are divided into seven chapters. The first four chapters cover her life till 2005 (the narrative present of the autobiography) and the notes in the remaining three chapters are miscellaneous in nature; the four chapters being the four phases of her life. *NLNJĀ* structures and perspectivizes the subject's life on the lines of a traditional autobiography. The initial chapter narrates Jameela's life till her first marriage and the death of her husband; the second chapter is on her life as a sex worker; the third chapter starts where she abandons sex work for a marital life; the fourth chapter talks about her return to sex work and the later period of activism that led to the writing of the autobiography. Her personhood is sculpted as self-assertive and resolute through carefully stitched incidents that complete her provisional identity.

Jameela admits to us that after her split with I. Gopinath, for identity reparation, her original plan was to publish *OLĀ* by removing the elements that she didn't want in. But, following her publisher's advice, she had to bring forth another text, to avoid further copyright issues. She admits that abandoning the text caused her the loss of many passages diligently composed with I. Gopinath. One such instance refers to the duplicity of her father who posed as a progressive communist in public while being an absolute patriarch at home. The two texts paint very different pictures of her father. The second memory note of *OLĀ* is titled "The Man, My Father" where her father is shown as the personification of cruelty. But, in *NLNJĀ* she mocks him, ridicules him and even sympathizes with him for being her

aunt's vassal.⁶⁵ Elsewhere, she admires his fearlessness: "When people say that I am like my father I used to take it as an honour."⁶⁶ When asked about this difference in portrayal, Jameela replied that it is a natural change in perception that happened over time. Sharing of personal experiences can change one's perception of the event. She says, once when she told her daughter that her father used to do some domestic chores, her daughter replied that "then your father is not a bad man after all."⁶⁷ The narrative-self, in intersubjective context is, therefore always changing. Like the Multiple Drafts that happen in the cognitive realm of the brain, there are many drafts of the same event whenever it is narrated. We cannot label any one event as the original: each time it undergoes transformation according to the context and the people who are in the discussion, thus, giving forth diffraction patterns.

We can merely speculate about collaborative moments for their truths lie between those individuals who cooperated. Given the nature of our narrative-self, we can never pin point an intersubjective self as authentic and the other as inauthentic except in cases where fabrication is obvious. Therefore, there is a need to revise our understanding of self-representation in identity-narratives as diffraction patterns. In Jameela's case the difference in tonality of the narrative voice itself is an example of this diffraction. *OLĀ* has the tone of a highly articulate assault on society's perception about sex workers; *NLNJĀ* is more personal in tonal presentation. A significant difference between the two versions is that the personal pronoun "I" is used with more currency in *NLNJĀ*.⁶⁸ The first chapter of *OLĀ*, "Sex Worker's Manifesto", suggests the nature of the text. But *NLNJĀ* has a radically different beginning. It unspools to her earliest memory and the first person pronoun is so strongly present that it provides an immediacy of experience and the sense of

⁶⁵The references are to Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, 15-18, Jameela, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude*, 16-19.

⁶⁶Jameela, *Oru Lyngikathozhilāliyude*, 18.

⁶⁷Personal Interview

⁶⁸Parvathy and Vinod, "Registering the Self".

possessiveness she has over her memory. "First memory: I might have been two and half or three years old. [I] can remember [my] grandmother walking on four legs. Because, she can't walk. My little brother started crying when he saw her. She was trying to sing a lullaby to him. She was ninety years old. I too was scared."⁶⁹

The absence of the first person singular and its possessive forms in *OLĀ* make it a reportage-like narrative.⁷⁰ The owner of the experience and memory is absent from the narrative; there is little difference between her statements on general matters and those relating to intimate experiences. The sentences are structured on an imaginary identification between the speaker of the narrative and the autobiographic subject. There is no explicit suggestion regarding the narrator except for a few times when words like *njān* (I), *ente* (my), *njangal* (we), *njangalude* (our) appear. At other times, the sentences, isolated from the narrative, would stand for both autobiography and biography giving the impression that the autobiographic subject, in a strange way, is not the narrator. This personalizing of the narrative is the major difference between the two texts; better read as two diffraction patterns of Jameela's self.

5. Conclusion

By bringing Daniel Dennett to Eakin's discussion of the narrative-self, we have attempted to explain how the notions of self and identity work in the context of collaborative autobiographies. Continuing the discussion with Dennett has enabled us to show that the properties of the self as a narrative, without a prior narrator, is commonly held by both those who believe in the realism of selves (Damasio and Eakin) and those who emphasize its fictional nature (Dennett). Moreover, fictional or real, for both these camps, self has an organizational property. Identity, on the other hand, is an aspect of our self and it controls the porous boundaries of the narrative-self.

⁶⁹Jameela, *Njān Lyngikathozhilāli*, 13.

⁷⁰ Parvathy and Vinod "Registering the Self".

When the self is susceptible to constant interlacing, a sense of identity reminds the individual about the need to control the narrative which caters both to oneself and to others. This is true of intersubjective contexts where self, as Dennett conceptualized it, acts as an organizing principle, tempting both the narrator and the listener to think that the narrative issues forth from a single source. In collaborative autobiographies the autobiographic subject is most often identified as the source of the narrative whose 'authentic' self is believed to be represented with varying degrees of accuracy. But, this is a myopic vision as the narrative we receive is a result of an interaction between the autobiographic subject and his/her collaborator. Since this perception of collaboration as interaction and interlacing of self challenges our notions about the truth of self-narration, any discussion on collaboration should also bring an appropriate alternative mechanism for self-representation. Otherwise, without a proper metaphor, the paper's claim to the interlacing narrative-self would be unfounded. Therefore, we have reiterated diffraction as the mechanics of self-formation in intersubjective contexts.

In the case of Jameela, through her decision to revise *OLĀ*, she balances the self of the text, disowning the exclusivity of her position as the organizing principle of the narrative; implicating I. Gopinath in the act of writing. In this way she shares responsibility imbued in the writing and the publishing of the autobiography with her collaborator. Her act of revision is an effort to regulate the narrative-self in order to etch her identity as the author of *NLNJĀ*. In this context, revision becomes an act of abjection. At the same time, the abject text is a limit experience showing the self as susceptible to interlacing against the subject's wish to maintain narrative stability. Therefore, neither *OLĀ* nor *NLNJĀ* can etch the porous self with accuracy as there is no original self to be represented. Therefore, *OLĀ* and *NLNJĀ* are diffraction patterns manifesting out of different intersubjective contexts.