

# ADDICTION RECOVERY MEMOIRS: A GATEWAY TO LEARN LIFE LESSONS

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## Abstract

The current research paper presents the relevance of literature by highlighting the educative value of memoirs in our life. Undoubtedly memoirs are as integral and important part of English literature as other genres like poetry, novel, and drama. Contemporary memoirs are an ideal 21st-century genre for the intellectual minds and readers of literature. Being the contemporary readers' choice, memoirs throw a flood of light on living a quality life. Twenty-first-century witnessed a great number of memoirs on addiction writing that have contributed to the realm of literature. The current research unfolds the genre of addiction recovery memoirs written by women in the 21st century. Women of the 21st century have come upfront boldly to speak their tales of addiction. Research on women's alcohol addiction, treatment, and recovery is emerging. The present research study takes five addiction recovery memoirs of the 21st century into account. The researcher has explored 21st-century memoirs by women that present the circumstances and factors that push the females towards drinking, how they get addicted despite having endless hidden talents, their individuality at stake after addiction, and their respective combat with alcohol addiction in different ways, the tools and techniques opted to detoxify their whole beings from the ill effects of alcohol, their rebuilding themselves, their success in achieving sobriety and ultimately leading a life that ushers eudaimonism. The selected texts for the research study are *Diary of An Alcoholic Housewife* by Brenda Wilhelmson, *Blackout: Remembering Things That I Drank to Forget* by Sarah Hepola, *Between Breaths: A Memoir of Addiction, Panic and Treatment* by Elizabeth Vargas, *Woman of Substances* by Jenny Valentish, and *Quit like a Woman* by Holly Whitaker.

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The present research study is based on memoirs written in the 21st century. Memoirs are factual and real stories about someone's life. 'Memoir' word is derived from the French expression *mémoire* which means 'reminiscence' or 'memory.' A memoir is any nonfiction writing that emphasizes the author's personal experiences. Contemporary memoirs are an ideal 21st-century genre for the intellectual minds and readers of literature. Exploring any work that can match the sensibilities of a reader as his or her own is an important factor to hit at. A fresh genre that has not been critically analyzed much is looked for by the researchers. The primary objective of such a search is to find a genre that students and researchers of literature can well connect themselves with. More than anything else, a researcher can well connect the lived experiences of his or her life with such a genre. During the search, Russell Baker's *Growing Up*, Patricia Hampl's essay entitled "Memory and Imagination" in her book *I Could Tell You Stories*, and William Zinsser's *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* were explored. In the words of Zinsser, in the closing decade of the twentieth century, many personal narratives have gushed out of American soil. "Everyone has a story to tell, and everyone is telling it" (Zinsser 2). Hence, the researcher has found memoir to be the ideal genre suited for the present research study to improve her literary abilities in writing, sophisticated reading, and critical thinking.

The most distinguishing trait of these memoir writings from traditional texts is that they are completely thought-provoking details of real events or experiences but also crafty records. The literary techniques are abstracted from contemporary litterateurs, including using identifiable individual opinions, interrogating statements, and often vaccinating insecurities and contemplations into their original texts. The writers of bestselling non-fiction books such as Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Michael Herr, John Hersey, and Lewis Thomas began to find themselves named as originators of a new genre. The genre of memoir advances to crystalize in many literary expressions such as a report, personal profile, life story, journal, diary, and memoir. Memoir, which has roots in autobiography, has existed as a published genre for much longer than most readers realize. Hampl's *I Could Tell You Stories* dates the first Western autobiography to Augustine's 13-volume *Confessions* in 397 A.D. Since then, presidents, corporate tycoons, generals, and numerous celebrities have acted on the need to recount their life stories. Early memoirs consisted primarily of personal accounts by famous people, often written near the end of the authors' lives. At worst, these autobiographies were rambling, unreflective, inflated volumes that literary critics deemed marginal forms of literature unworthy of reading. Thankfully, during the last 20 years or so, autobiography and the old memoirs have been re-born as literary memoirs and transformed into a dynamic and highly readable genre that we term contemporary memoir. In "Memory and Imagination", the writer states:

Memoirs must be written because each one of us must possess a created version of the past. Created: that is, real in the sense of tangible, made of the stuff of a life lived in the place and history. We must live with a version that attaches us to our limitations, to the inevitable subjectivity of our points of view. We must acquiesce to our experience and our gift to transform experience into meaning. (Hampl 32)

The current research study has focused on this genre of literature by journaling memoirs about how the authors under the research study get transformed and make their life's worst experiences turn into the meaningful path of higher living.

Literature deals with life and the present study emphasizes that no genre in literature deals with life as powerfully as a memoir. The memoirist presents a real-time life in the past to benefit the readers by striking the major challenges taken and relevant lessons learned during that particular phase of life. The researcher has taken the genre of memoir for research study as it has been rightly called a confessional genre of literature that bespeaks about a writer. Reading Baker's *Growing Up*, various interests in the details of his life, the significance of relatively short lives, and good reasons for writing life stories strike the minds of readers. Baker realizes that he has little knowledge of family lore and history and that he has not related many of the family stories and accounts to his children. He confesses this failing and states, "We all come from the past, and children ought to know what went into their making, to know that life is a braided cord" (Baker 8). This metaphor of the braided cord and the realization motivates many published writers to find satisfaction in sharing their personal, reflective, and illuminating accounts with various readers, emphasizing what we understand as purposeful points in their lives.

The present article unfolds the genre of addiction recovery memoirs written by women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Women of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have come upfront boldly to speak their tales of addiction. Research on woman's alcohol addiction, treatment, and recovery is emerging. (Milton 7) The research emphasizes the image of a new woman portrayed in all five memoirs mainly written by women memoirists who do not feel hesitant in revealing their life's true stories to the world. These female memoir writers have depicted the social problem of alcohol addiction as felt individually in their works respectively. The current research illustrates how alcoholism in the west is addressed by the memoirists in their works.

The research article has explored 21<sup>st</sup>-century memoirs by women that present the circumstances and factors that push the females towards drinking, how they get addicted despite having endless hidden talents, their individuality at stake after addiction, and their respective combat with alcohol addiction in different ways, the tools and techniques opted to detoxify their whole beings from the ill effects of alcohol, their rebuilding themselves, their success in achieving sobriety and ultimately leading a life that ushers eudaimonism. The selected texts for the research study are *Diary of An Alcoholic Housewife* by Brenda Wilhelmson, *Blackout: Remembering Things That I Drank to Forget* by Sarah Hepola, *Between Breaths: A Memoir of Addiction, Panic and Treatment* by Elizabeth Vargas, *Woman of Substances* by Jenny Valentish, and *Quit like a Woman* by Holly Whitaker. One of the primary steps in the process of this research was to take a comprehensive and extensive exploration of literature specific to women, their alcohol addiction, and their common dilemmas and predicaments. The increasing rate of alcohol consumption among women writers has been a universal topic to take a glance at. But the research related to women memoirists' combat against their alcohol addiction has not been addressed yet.

The present research study talks about the symptoms and reasons emerging among women in the West. There is no doubt about it that addiction is not something good for the person and his or her healthy mind. An addict tends to lose herself. Gradually self-confidence sinks. Alcohol addiction is a health problem that affects one's mental equilibrium. Alcohol craving crops up when an individual suffers some trauma, endures abuse, experiences assault, meets an accident, sustains disaster, undergoes an attack, witnesses violence, feels the death of a dear one, etc. These aching acquaintances further aggravate an individual's sorrows as well as stresses. Thus, an anxiety-stricken person finds himself drowning in the sea of afflictions where inaccessible shores of peace prompt more tribulations. It is obvious to react in such circumstances. Many times, the trauma leads to symptoms: fierce flashbacks, distressful dreams, nagging nightmares, uncontrollable thoughts, merry-killing memories, feeling on the edge, personal threat, disconnection with the outer world, disturbed sleep, hopelessness, losing trust, triggering memories, negative emotions (wrapping the individual in the form of guilt, shame, fear unknown, changed thought process), hyperarousal, etc. It is highly significant to consider the very fact of how the traumatic experience affects an individual. When the trauma is unexpected, it prolongs for longer than usual time sometimes resulting in death or mutilation. Due to post-traumatic stress disorder/ PTSD, the normal day-to-day activities of the victims are stuck. For a stressed person it is arduous to continue life's pace smoothly. Many people begin to feel better after a few weeks or months of the occurrence of PTSD. But if it continues for more than weeks and months and interferes with work or domestic life, then it indicates that the person is suffering from an acute form of PTSD. People suffering from PTSD have multiple disorders or problems. These problems include -a pessimistic attitude toward life, distress and depression, anxiety, physical pains and chronic aches, relationships- highs and lows, and last but not least temptation to drink or drugs. All five memoir writers experience the same predicament and cannot help using alcohol to temporarily come out of their miserable mental makeup.

Alcohol abuse is different from Alcoholism. Rather an alcohol abuser drinks alcohol in large quantities or guzzles it frequently. The regular intake of alcohol makes the consumer an alcoholic. But a hardcore positive person makes up a firm mind to change his circumstances and refines the track of life by boosting courage and further combating his addiction honestly. Alcoholism is no more only a western concept and has become a part of the Asian social and cultural setup as well. In the west, many women memoirists suffered from crushing post-traumatic stress disorder and took refuge in alcoholism. It is not so in the context of Indian Culture. No doubt, there may be many women, especially in metropolitan cities of India, who have suffered from acute trauma and found their resort in alcoholism. But perhaps none of them choose to write a memoir about their experience of post-traumatic stress disorder and then about relishing relief in the realm of alcohol and ultimately leading to sobriety. This is how in the present research work; the memoirists and their works are chosen from the west only. There are various reasons for consuming alcohol. The chief reason is their culture and social milieu. In the west, drinking alcohol is a common affair. There is sometimes a familial atmosphere that encourages one to drink. When one is in a mood of celebration or dejection, once again he or she goes for a toast. Every consumer has his reason or logic behind drinking alcoholic substances.

This current research study pertains to five addiction recovery memoirs that are full to brim with the memoirists revealing to the world about their combat with alcohol, their subsequent redemption, their sobriety, and their positive perspective toward good healthy sober living in finding self-actualization and eudaimonic life. Culturally occidentals differ from orientals. There is a sea gap between their mindsets and cultures. Despite cultural differences, drinking is happening worldwide. The researcher has picked women writers who drink, join hands with alcohol to seek an escape, make themselves what they have dreamt to be, fight anxiety aches and stress sordidness, and finally emerge as victorious souls all motivated. Brenda realizes the value of life after losing her near ones. Her frequent visits to Alcoholics Anonymous meetings help her in becoming sober. Sarah Hepola confesses honestly that the sparkling idea flashed across her mind that many people do not drink at all, if they do, they drink moderately. Sarah's real spiritual awakening comes into being as she states that her craving for alcohol can be stopped not by control, but by never starting. Elizabeth Vargas fixes her addiction problem by taking an honest off from her chic job and joining a rehab center. Jenny Valentish's research memoir offers eight beautiful ways to choose one's emancipation and this way has motivated quitters and similar ones.

Memoirists taken under this research are ladies of grit and grace. They all can be role models for many of us. It is noteworthy that many people after getting addicted to booze suffer severely. Furthermore, they are never able to come out of their tight grip. Their stories just end in smoke. They curb their talent for writing by sinking deep down into the bottle of booze. On the contrary, some are steel-willed. No doubt, they adopt alcoholism to fight PTSD but ultimately, they can snatch their selves from the seducing clutches of the bottle to be sober. Such writers and their studies see the light of day. They become famous worldwide and leave imprints on many who need to be motivated. Amongst these are placed all four authors of my research study. The lives of these five memoirists become the fountainhead of inspiration and positivity for those who have drowned themselves in the bottle of booze and yet go sober.

The research highlights that alcohol is a short-lived temporary resort. The memoirists in this research study tried alcohol, soon they realized it is soothing for a temporal period, therefore they rejected this route of alcohol marked by them earlier. Moreover, they picked up the path of positive health and sobriety to reinvent their creative selves. Alcohol is tough to tackle as read in many works of literature. But all these five memoirists prove that addiction can be cured. They struggle hard, grip on their glory, and shine out as sober beings to help others trapped in the alcohol net. The researcher has been an avid reader of memoirs. These memoirs are compelling help to all life lovers. Above all these five books end on a positive note to follow. The works in the research are penned by female writers and their works highlight the tough times, callous cares; tense moments, aches of anxiety, and shaky situations witnessed by these four writers. Their turmoiling circumstances trouble them and tempt them to taste something addictive. The journey of all the five memoirists rolls on the wheels of an alcohol-chariot. Exceptional females turning into fierce alcoholic freaks are mirrored in the research work. Finally, they rise gracefully coming out as conquering healthy sober souls. "Tough times don't last, tough people, do" (Schuller 5). Life witnesses tough times as no life is bereft of struggles and combats. Life is replete with storms. Likewise, Haruki Murakami also comments in *Kafka on the Shore*, "And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about". (211) Strong winds may come in one's life in various shapes and forms. The five memoirists - Brenda Wilhelmsen, Sarah Hepola, Elizabeth Vargas, Jenny Valentish, and Holly Whitaker, taken up in the current thesis also face similar strong winds in the guise of pulls and pressures on the domestic front, anxiety about declining careers, and decaying relationships, rebellious nature against accepted norms and constant fight against substances. When they come out of the whirlwinds of life, they are not the same, but rather much grown up, mentally awakened, emotionally regenerated, and physically resurrected. In *The Parable of the Talents*, the writer Octavia E. Butler says, "To rise from its ashes, a phoenix must burn". All five memoirists learn a lot even from the stormy situations they undergo such storms. Willa Cather, writer of *The Song of Lark* pens "there are some things you learn best in calm and some in the storm." The turmoil in the lives of these authors makes them

understand what Vironika Tugaleva writes, “Emotional pain cannot kill you, but running from it can. Allow. Embrace. Let yourself feel. Let yourself heal”.

The current research upholds the torch of self-love, self-care, self-cleansing, self-worth, self-knowing, self-exploring, self-enlightening, and self-opting. A sobriety path is not an easy path but it is worth opting for. The chief aim of going sober is all about a tender realization to love self so much that there is no room left for any dependable drink. Sarah Hepola rightly remarks, “I was lost for a very long time...I don’t do that anymore. Now I remember” (230). Even Holly Whitaker assures that she encountered her best and high self after becoming sober. Holly Whitaker writes, “Recovery was the first time in my life that I found comfort in my own company.....I found myself” (287). Elizabeth Vargas supports the other memoirists that she becomes strong and grateful. She realizes poignantly, “I remember how I looked around at the beauty all around me and decided then to soldier on, timing my breath to my steps” (243). Thus, all five memoirists discover their true worth, impeccable individuality, and stunning sober self after being recovered from their respective addictions. Attaining sobriety is no less than a prizewinning moment. The five memoirists Sarah Hepola, Elizabeth Vargas, Brenda Wilhelmson, Jenny Valentish, and Holly Whitaker are the real role models of the current research who gift themselves the recognizance of sobriety. All of them vow earnestly for soberness and they succeed in striking a right as well as delicate equilibrium ‘between insight and one’s desire for escape and abstinence from one’s addiction’(Gluck). The book *Living Sober* written by an AA member Barry Leach emphasizes the strong notion of thwarting the very first alcoholic beverage. The consequences of this useful tip given by Berry Leach will be thriving. The quote from *Living Sober* is worth sharing hereby, “If we do not take the first drink, we never get drunk. Therefore, instead of planning never to drink, or trying to limit the number of Drinks or the amount of alcohol We have learned to concentrate only on drink: the first one” (Leach 5).

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