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The Ethics of Biography: Power, Truth, and Representation in Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word*

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Abstract: Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word* (2014) places the ethics of biography at the centre of a comic, erotic, and self-reflexive narrative. Harry Johnson, a young writer, is commissioned to produce the biography of Mamoon Azam, an ageing and celebrated Indian-born novelist living in England. What begins as a literary commission becomes a struggle over who has the right to tell a life, which facts should be disclosed, and whether a truthful biography can ever be separated from interpretation, desire, and power. This essay argues that Kureishi treats biography not as the neutral recovery of an existing truth but as a contested act of representation. Through Harry's research, Mamoon's efforts to control his image, and the interventions of the publisher Rob Deveraux and Mamoon's wife Liana, the novel exposes the unequal power relations built into life-writing. Drawing on theories of biography, postmodern historiography, and ethical criticism, the essay examines the authority of the biographer, the status of factual truth, the ethics of disclosure, and the representation of a culturally complex literary subject. The novel ultimately suggests that biography must negotiate between historical accuracy and the irreducible ambiguity of human identity.

Keywords: Hanif Kureishi; *The Last Word*; biography; ethics; representation; truth; power; V. S. Naipaul; metafiction; life-writing

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Introduction

Biography appears to promise a special relationship with truth. It gathers documents, letters, interviews, and memories and arranges them into a coherent narrative. Yet the biographer does not simply discover a life; the biographer selects, interprets, orders, and gives meaning to fragments. Paula R. Backscheider locates the form in the tension between the historical record and the imaginative act of making a life intelligible (1–4). Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word* turns this tension into its central narrative problem. The novel opens with Harry Johnson travelling to the country house of Mamoon Azam, and the narration states the commission plainly: "Harry was about to be employed to tell the story of the man he was going to visit" (Kureishi 1). Almost immediately, however, the task begins to unravel. Harry wonders, "Where would you start, and how would the story, which was still being lived, end?" (1). That question—how to give final shape to a life that is still in motion—haunts the entire novel.

The novel's ethical force comes from the competing agendas that gather around this commission. Harry's stated ambition is "to give a true account of his fascinating life" (17), but his publisher, Rob Deveraux, wants something closer to an "extreme biography" (9) and warns him that the "old man will exasperate [him] with his stubbornness and taunting" (8). Mamoon, meanwhile, hopes the book will revive a fading reputation. Harry is therefore suspended between scholarship and commerce, admiration and curiosity, respect and intrusion. As Mark Lawson notes in his review, the novel's real interest lies less in literary gossip than in its reflections on the business of writing, reading, and biography. This essay argues that *The Last Word* treats biography as an ethical contest rather than a neutral record: a struggle over who has the authority to represent another person, and what that representation does to the person represented.

The novel is frequently read alongside V. S. Naipaul and the controversy surrounding Patrick French's authorized biography of him. Mamoon, however, is not simply Naipaul under another name. Kureishi uses recognizable biographical echoes to question the very practice of turning a living writer into an object of narrative knowledge. The ethical problem is therefore larger than roman à clef identification; it concerns the authority to represent another person and the consequences of transforming private experience into public narrative.

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Biography, Truth, and the Problem of Objectivity

The first ethical question the novel raises is whether biography can ever give an objective account of a life. Petr Chalupský classifies *The Last Word* as biographic metafiction, a form that makes visible the difficulty of knowing and textually representing historical truth (103–05). Mamoon himself puts the point more savagely, describing the biographer as "the undertaker of the literature world" (Kureishi 80)—a figure who arrives to lay out the body of a career before it is finished. The image matters because Harry is not a transparent recording device. He is a young writer with ambitions, anxieties, sexual desires, and debts, and everything he sees is filtered through that consciousness. Early on he asks himself, "what was a person then, but a self which travelled between private fantasy and public recreation?" (61). The question already concedes that the self Harry hopes to capture is unstable, divided between what is imagined and what is performed.

Kureishi dramatizes the instability of factual truth through Mamoon's resistance to the project. Reading Harry's drafts, Mamoon tells him, "You are now making an imaginary life," and adds with deliberate irony, "I have to say, I particularly like it when you remember things which never happened" (241). The remark is paradoxical: biography claims to be factual, yet the biographer must create narrative shape from incomplete and contradictory evidence. Mamoon's complaint exposes the gap between factual information and narrative truth. A life contains countless events, but a biography must decide which of them matter and how they connect, and in making those decisions it inevitably invents.

Esterino Adami argues that the novel is built around the power of words and repeatedly links writing to researching, remembering, revising, and manipulating facts (1–4). For Mamoon, "words were the bridge to reality; without them there was only chaos" (Kureishi 46). A writer who has organized his whole existence around language is uniquely threatened by a book in which someone else chooses the words. Biography thus becomes a metatextual activity: the novel tells a story while questioning the process by which stories about people are made. The ethical danger lies precisely here, because once evidence is turned into narrative, interpretation begins to look like fact.

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Jung-Hwa Lee's reading of the novel in the context of the post-truth era is useful because it distinguishes postmodern scepticism about a single universal Truth from the political rejection of facts altogether (129–32). Kureishi's novel does not celebrate falsehood. It asks how truth is mediated through language, memory, desire, and narrative form, and it insists that this mediation carries ethical consequences.

The Power of the Biographer

Biography is an unequal encounter because the biographer gains access to information that can shape the subject's reputation. Harry depends on Mamoon for access, while Mamoon depends on Harry for the construction of his late-life and posthumous image. The relationship is reciprocal but unequal. Mamoon can withhold information, tell contradictory stories, and test Harry's nerve; Harry, in turn, holds the power to select, reveal, and publish. Kureishi notes that Mamoon "had more or less complete control over his speech; he didn't like his words to run away from him" (240). Biography threatens exactly that control, since it hands Mamoon's words to someone else to arrange.

Power does not run in only one direction. Mamoon repeatedly turns the tables, warning Harry, "I'd like you more as a fictional character, and you should be flattered to appear in one of my works, even without your trousers" (101). The subject threatens to become the biographer of his biographer. Liana, too, polices access to the house and to Mamoon, and her contempt for Harry as a young man riding "on a magic carpet of privilege" (69) reminds the reader that a biographer's class position and confidence shape what he is allowed to see.

Rob Deveraux intensifies the conflict by treating biography as a commercial product. He wants a book that will make Mamoon marketable again, and he expects sensational revelations to do it. The publisher's presence shows that the ethics of representation cannot be separated from the economics of publishing: a private episode becomes valuable because it can be converted into public interest, and the biographer becomes vulnerable to the market's appetite for scandal. Harry's investigations into Mamoon's marriages, affairs, and treatment of others show the danger of confusing access with entitlement. That a biographer can discover something does not

mean it ought to be published. The ethical question is not only "Is it true?" but also "What does its publication do to the person represented?"

The novel also exposes the power of style. When Harry tells Mamoon, "I'm trying to make you look interesting here. I can make you look good in bed, as out of it" (239), he openly admits that the portrait depends on his choices. Even when words are recorded accurately, the arrangement of dialogue, the selection of quotations, and the framing of gestures can make a subject appear brilliant or ridiculous, tender or cruel. Representation is never innocent.

Truth, Disclosure, and the Ethics of Privacy

The Last Word is provocative because it refuses to separate literary achievement from private life. Harry announces that he intends to write an "intimate, psychological portrait" (234), and he is tempted to believe that the private life explains the public work. Mamoon supplies plenty of material for that belief. He describes marriage as a "defence, a levee against the turbulence of desire" and calls adultery "the only fun left" (100). Such pronouncements invite exposure, yet the assumption that private conduct unlocks the work is itself ethically dangerous, because it reduces a complex artist to biographical gossip.

The novel stages a sustained tension between the public's desire to know and the individual's right to privacy. Liana tries to influence what Harry learns; Marion, Mamoon's former mistress, holds memories that could damage him; and the story of Peggy, his first wife, lies beneath the whole investigation. No single participant owns the complete truth, but each holds a fragment of it, and biography becomes a negotiation among them. Mamoon concedes as much when he tells Harry, "Harry, you know more about my many selves than I do" (240). The line is half compliment and half accusation: the biographer's knowledge is real, but it is assembled from versions, and the subject no longer recognizes himself in their sum.

Kureishi's achievement is that he does not settle this problem with a simple moral rule. Instead, he makes the reader feel the seduction of biographical revelation. Harry's discoveries are fascinating because they promise to make Mamoon knowable, but every discovery also raises the possibility of distortion. The ethical reader must therefore resist the desire for a final, totalizing portrait.

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Representation, Cultural Identity, and the Living Subject

The ethics of representation in the novel are also shaped by cultural identity. Mamoon is an Indian-born writer who has become an important figure in English literary culture, and his position is marked by histories of colonialism, migration, race, and the postcolonial literary marketplace. His attachment to England is expressed in literary terms: for him, "the pretty little sinking island was a storehouse of genius, where the best words were kept, made and remade" (46). Writing Mamoon's life therefore involves more than reconstructing an individual career; it also means representing an immigrant intellectual who has staked his identity on mastery of the English language.

Kuğu Tekin argues that the novel presents biography as a creative process rather than a purely objective historical record, and that the biographer's task is to create a truthful portrait of personality rather than catalogue events. The distinction matters for cultural representation. A biographer who reduces Mamoon to an exotic immigrant, a difficult Asian writer, or a literary scandal would reproduce stereotypes rather than produce knowledge. At the same time, the novel complicates any easy postcolonial celebration of its subject. Mamoon is neither simply a victim of stereotyping nor a morally exemplary representative of postcolonial literature. He is arrogant, vulnerable, intelligent, manipulative, and artistically ambitious all at once. Kureishi's portrait is ethically valuable precisely because it resists any single identity category.

The novel's proximity to Naipaul adds another layer to its ethical argument. Reviewers and scholars have identified Mamoon as a fictional counterpart of Naipaul while stressing that the novel transforms its model rather than reproducing it. Kureishi creates a fictional biographer writing about a fictional author who resembles a real one, producing several levels of representation at once. Lawson acknowledges that the Naipaul connection is hard to ignore, but he locates the book's importance in its broader meditation on literary culture. This suggests an ethical distinction between identification and interpretation. Readers who treat Mamoon only as Naipaul may miss the novel's larger argument about biographical authority; the challenge is to recognize the historical echo without reducing the fiction to a disguised accusation.

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The roman à clef form is therefore ethically productive. It creates distance while preserving resemblance, and that distance allows Kureishi to ask questions conventional biography cannot easily ask: How much can a biographer know? What happens when the subject resists? Does authorization guarantee ethical legitimacy? Can a biography ever capture a person without constructing a new version of that person?

The Biographer as Artist: Between Craft and Responsibility

One of the novel's central arguments is that biography is an artistic practice as well as a scholarly one. Harry must select scenes, arrange chronology, interpret motives, and create narrative momentum, so his work comes to resemble fiction even when its materials are factual. Mamoon recognizes this with mixed irony and approval: "the idea of becoming a fiction does appeal. To my surprise, you might have the makings of an artist" (241). Yet artistic freedom does not cancel ethical responsibility. The more powerful the biographer's technique, the greater the danger that the subject will be reshaped to suit the biographer's aesthetic purposes.

This tension can be framed as a distinction between accuracy and adequacy. A biography may be factually accurate and still ethically inadequate if it creates a misleading overall impression; conversely, a biography may use interpretive language and still deepen understanding of its subject. Kureishi shifts the ethical debate away from factual correctness alone and toward representational responsibility.

The ending makes this shift explicit. Harry's book, *Among Strangers*, is finished only after he adds "a few paragraphs about the dying writer" (339–40), and the narrator tells us that Harry "had completed his work, which was to inform people that Mamoon had counted for something as an artist" (344), remembering him as "a writer, a maker of worlds, a teller of important truths" (344). After all the quarrels and revelations, the biography closes not with scandal but with an act of judgement about artistic value. The title becomes ironic: who has the last word—the subject, the biographer, the publisher, the reader, or the novelist who frames them all?

Power, Gender, and the Ethics of the Private Life

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The novel also raises the question of whose experiences become literary evidence. Mamoon's relationships with women are repeatedly treated as material for understanding his character, and his own statements frame women as objects of fascination rather than subjects: he calls woman "always other, and a provocation" (171) and insists that "the body of the young woman is the world's most significant object" (174). Liana, Marion, and the younger women around Harry risk becoming supporting evidence in a male literary narrative. An ethical biography must ask whether such figures are represented as persons in their own right or merely as instruments for interpreting the central subject.

This issue matters because biography can reproduce the subject's own hierarchies. If Harry accepts Mamoon's self-understanding without critical distance, the biography becomes an extension of his self-fashioning. If Harry reacts against Mamoon and exposes every failing, the biography becomes an act of punishment. The ethical position lies between obedience and revenge: the biographer must preserve the evidence while remaining alert to the power structures that shaped it.

Conclusion

Hanif Kureishi's *The Last Word* turns biography into a sustained ethical inquiry into power, truth, and representation. Through the relationship between Harry Johnson and Mamoon Azam, the novel shows that writing a life is never a neutral act. The biographer holds the power to select facts, shape interpretation, expose secrets, and influence reputation, while the subject tries to control or resist that representation. The novel's metafictional structure makes these processes visible and prevents the reader from accepting biography as transparent access to truth.

The novel does not abandon truth, however. It proposes a more demanding conception of it—one that respects evidence while acknowledging the role of narrative, memory, perspective, and interpretation. The ethical biographer must do more than collect facts. The biographer must weigh the consequences of representation, the dignity of the subject, the privacy of others, the commercial pressures surrounding publication, and the cultural assumptions that shape interpretation.

Ultimately, *The Last Word* suggests that a life cannot be fully possessed either by the person who lived it or by the person who writes it. Mamoon tries to control his story, Harry tries to interpret it, and Rob tries to sell it, but none can claim final authority. Harry's opening question—how a story "which was still being lived" could ever "end" (1)—is never fully answered, and that is the novel's deepest ethical insight. Biography is an encounter between lives, memories, documents, desires, and narratives. Its responsibility lies not in pretending to eliminate ambiguity but in representing ambiguity honestly.

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