

# PORTFOLIO – CREATIVE WRITING

Portfolio of creative writing work

Semester I

**St. Joseph's University**

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## PORTFOLIO OF CREATIVE WRITING WORK

In partial fulfilment of the requirement for the award of the Master's Degree in MA English

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This is to certify that **AALAYA SONTI** has successfully completed the Portfolio titled **“PORTFOLIO OF CREATIVE WRITING WORK”** in the course of MA English for the year 2022-2023.

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I, Aalaya Sonti of MA English first year, would like to declare that the following Portfolio is mine, based on personal experiences and I have taken due care to avoid plagiarism. I understand that my portfolio can be rejected and I may be barred from writing the examination if any part of the work is found to be plagiarised or borrowed.

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### **Personal essay**

The second wave of the pandemic hit us hard. News of our inner circle, our families falling sick and catching the virus was all over. Beds were unavailable in hospitals, and the world was, in every sense, taken far away from the 'normal.' My family was no different. My dad being a diabetic patient, had to be so much more careful. We heard the news of his classmate who passed away due to covid, and we were doing everything in our control to not catch the virus.

It was at this time, of peak fear of death, that I fell sick. I remember going to the hospital, all covered up with my father and my sister, Shruthi. I remember my father being terrified of visiting hospitals and still being there by my side, helping me through everything. I most vividly remember coming home and instantly being quarantined.

I was not diagnosed yet. The RTPCR would take five or more days, but I was still diagnosed with covid and was prescribed medication. I was alright in the beginning. I ate fine, slept well, and took all my medicines on time. My sister would sit near the window and talk to me about what to do. We would wear gloves and masks when they all came near my room. My mother visited me while giving me food, but my father was kept far away.

Within a couple of days, my health got worse. My appetite decreased, and I began vomiting. I was given a liquid diet. I got sick. My RTPCR came negative, but we were told that the test couldn't be trusted either. We took advice from several doctors and family members. I had no strength, and my fever didn't come down. My mom wanted to hold me tight when I shivering or vomiting. My sister stopped coming to talk to me. She came to shun my mom away from me. My dad still stayed put, far away from me.

It was not until a state of shock that we decided to rush to the hospital. Again, masked up and gloved, I sat behind my dad in the car. All of our hearts racing, we knew my father was the last person I should've been close to. With his health, getting covid at the time was an unimaginable loss.

It was not until an hour and a CT scan later that I was confirmed to not have covid. The sigh of relief that the doctor and my entire family had at listening to the words: "yeah, she doesn't have covid" is unexplainable. I got admitted immediately; thankfully, non-covid beds were available.

My mom stayed with me in the hospital. I let her touch me, hold me, and hug me. I knew how badly she had wanted to do this for several days. After that, my sister visited us twice, and my dad came in to take care of all the billing and financial aspects of the process.

When my sister visited me, she told me about the day I was locked up in my room. My dad said (please bear with my amateur translation skills from Telugu to English), “If I touch her, and the virus leaves her and comes to me, I’ll happily take it.” She also told me that his eyes swelled up while saying this.

I was dumbstruck. At that moment, I realized that my father, in the literal sense, loves me to death. Knowing the repercussions, he would have if he got the virus, for him to even have a thought like that, made me feel blessed to have him.

I have not always felt this way. I remember the time in 12th grade when he got so mad at me that he threw a cup at the wall to shut me up. We didn’t talk after that. We didn’t speak for a year and a half after that. In fact, it was not until I fell sick that we started having a proper conversation. This is also a reason that his willingness to take the disease for me felt so surreal. Our silence meant us having issues with each other, but it never meant that we stopped loving one another.

I know that my father loves me. I’d like to believe that it is partly because he sees a version of himself in me. As a child, I was the most carefree soul that one could find. I was loud, demanding, obnoxious, pampered, and above all, very, very annoying. But he still dealt with all of it. He was my pillar as a child.

Growing up, our routine was fixed. First, he would wake my sister and me up with a song (that I will definitely sing to my children if I have any). Then, my sister would go downstairs to get ready with my mom. Finally, my dad would bathe me, dress me, comb my hair, and even put on my shoes and socks.

It was always, somehow, all the time... uncomfortable for me the way socks were put on. I would say, “Comfortable ledhu” (“It’s not comfortable”), and he would have to redo it again and again. This is one of the many stories we still talk about when discussing the ‘fairy tale’ of my childhood.



I call it a fairy tale because that is what it was. Childhood felt like a world our parents designed for us, free from reality, life, and imperfections. As a result, we always looked up to our parents as the perfect people.

My father was perfect to me. He was highly philosophical and could really dumb things down for us. We had proverbs running around in our house often. Nothing literature-esque. They were often life lessons on how to be and live. Most of them are at the tip of my tongue, and I know for a fact that Shruthi (my sister) would say the same. We would have to listen to ‘Eat what you take, and take what you eat at the dining table. Nobody in our family served us food. We had to take exactly the amount we wanted and had to finish all of it.

Other philosophies included ‘Balance and conscience,’ which basically meant that in life, we have to forever be balanced and not have extremes of anything or the greed for having either extreme because that would make us lose our conscience. We would often listen to ‘The best help is no help,’ which basically taught us to give space to people while they are working and help when needed. You get the gist; we were a philosophical family.

I never realized how much I had inculcated these ideas until recently when I got out of the bubble of childhood. Although I don’t agree with everything my father taught us, in many ways, I see myself following all these teachings, consciously and unconsciously.

Two core memories I have with my dad are both related to God. It is pretty ironic because neither is he a blind believer, nor am I a believer at all (I am figuring that out, it’s a story for another time). Before we went to bed, my parents would sit with us and tell us stories every night. We co-slept for a really long time; as I have already mentioned, my sister and I, in many ways, are incredibly spoilt children. My father would then make us recite a prayer to the Hindu lord Hanuman. This stopped a while after we grew up.

The second, and the fun one, is when we used to come home hurt or were crying (yelling in my case) with pain. My father would hold up a fist near the injury and say (I am translating here), “Om Hanuman, take off the pain, take off the pain, take off the pain.” The pain would’ve magically been transferred to his fist, and we had to blow on it as hard as we could to send it far, far away.

It is these two things that I somehow still follow in my life. Whenever a friend of mine would get hurt, and I do it to date, I would hold up a fist and say the same thing in English. Many

think it's cute, and most blow reluctantly. Some of my friends think it works too (it is funny, none of us usually think god works, but this... this does).

I don't pray every day, but every time I wake up from a nightmare, I recite the prayer till I fall asleep. As a child, I imagined that my father was lord Hanuman, and he was sitting there, near my head, removing all my tensions and nightmares as I went to sleep. I don't think I imagine that anymore, but I know that the prayer was my go-to; it is a reminder of my parents protecting me.

As I grew older, I began to see flaws in my perfect father. I saw him as a flawed husband and an imperfect person he was. It was shattering. For a very long time, I was mad at him for not being perfect...my perfect. Our ideas clashed. I questioned Hinduism, and he disliked it. I questioned patriarchy, my parents' way of dressing me up, their marriage, their idea of what career path I should follow, and so many more things. My father never agreed with me, we fought a lot, and we fought often. Even though all the disagreements, he let me speak. He always let me be vocal about what I think and how I want to be.

In retrospect, I realize that growing up was hard, not just for me but for my parents too. I started wanting to be more independent, move out of my parents' cocoon, and this change was hard for my father too. But he handled it... just fine.

I didn't miss him for the years that we didn't talk. I knew he was wrong for forcing me into a career path I didn't want. I knew his flaws were more significant than his goodness. I knew he was not a good husband and would disapprove of my dating life. I knew that he was disappointed with the kind of daughter I turned out to be. I knew that he hated me. After all, he was never good at communicating.

But all of my beliefs about how he saw me were shattered when he said that he would take the sickness from me if he could, even if that meant that he would suffer forever. He didn't hate me. At that moment, he was my dad who took care of me as a child, the person to whom I used to go running as soon as he came from his office. He was the person that carried me on his shoulders through all of Mysore. He was simply the father of the child in me. I realized that he could maybe not like me for the person I grew up to be, but he forever loves me. Perhaps, he loves me because he sees a part of who he is in me. Maybe, I am, in so many ways, as flawed as he is.

Our relationship got better after that. Studying Indian literature in college made really fascinated me. I started focusing more on Telugu. I understood the language better, watched more movies, and interpreted the lyrics better. I spoke about all of this to my father. In many ways, the barrier of language that I didn't know we had slowly started to drift apart. He started listening to me again, we disagreed, but we at least spoke.

We joke around often, even now. We laugh a lot at home. We talk much more again, but the real issues have yet to be spoken about somewhere. I never told him about my boyfriend or how their marriage scarred me.

My dad sometimes opens up to me about things he often shuts off about. He recently told me a story about his sister who passed away. He apparently was really fond of her, and when she committed suicide, he had difficulty channeling his feelings. He recently told me about how helpless he felt in the situation and how that was why several bonds broke in the family. It was the first time we had spoken about her in length and more so about how he felt about the whole thing.

We talk more now. He always helps me out when I'm in trouble. One of the qualities that I admire the most about him is his calmness in tense situations. He doesn't keep calm when he is angry, which rarely gets, but in every other way, he is the one person that knows how to handle any situation. He calls himself an eagle in the sense that he won't smother us when everything is fine. He'll just watch over us like an eagle and land whenever we're in trouble.

Since childhood, I can't think of any situation where my father lost his cool in public. I got caught drinking, and he had to pick me up from a friend's place covered in vomit. He helped my sister get into her hostel at 1 am when my mom was furious that she had lied to them. When I met with a minor accident, he came immediately and ensured I was okay. It is this tranquillity that I admire the most.

I often see just the opposite in my uncle or my aunt, and every time I have to stay with people other than my family, it is the peace that we often have that I miss the most.

We're learning to work with boundaries now. Many things have changed. I often talk about my mom in counseling. My mother just does not get recognized enough and is the invisible person in the family without whom this family can not run. More precisely, it is my mom's

invisibility and the lack of agency she takes for herself, her needs, and her desires that make my family run.

I often think of being in my mother's position. I could not imagine being in an unhappy marriage, having to sacrifice my needs and wants to fulfill others, or even being in a state where her effort simply goes unrecognized. I was torn between writing about either of my parents. I know that Shruthi would write about my mother. I want her to be more visible in the family, and maybe writing about her would, in some ways, make her heard.

But above all, it is with my father that I share the most complicated bond. I spent the entire 2 years of quarantine living with him. As a government employee, my mother had to go to work, and Shruthi had to work in the hospital.

My father and I haven't fought recently. We don't even eat dinner together anymore. We sit together after college, and he listens to me whine about several things. I often complain about the things that matter the least. In an effort to grow up and be independent, I try to rely less on him. He tries to let me trust my instincts. He is always hovering over my life like that eagle he wishes for me. I am grateful for it, sometimes.

I don't try to think of being in his position. Somehow, I never wanted to be him. Even though I don't like to admit it, I am more like him than I would like to be. It isn't a bad thing. As I grow up, I think I understand him better.

Our relationship gets complicated. It is often the strings of childhood that bound us together; we have significantly less in common now. However, we still try to have conversations. We laugh at the same things. I laugh at myself, and he laughs at me too. My mother admires our bond; she wishes she had the same with her father.

Every other male authority that I have seen in my family reminds me of the reasons I shun patriarchy. I am so grateful to my parents for giving my sister and me the space to be vocal and independent.

I am often called the rebel of the family. Nobody on my mother's side of the family is fond of me. As a child and a teenager, they expected my rebellious side to be just a phase. But as I grew up and continued to speak my mind, they began to dislike me for the person I am.

Through all this, I know I wouldn't have had the courage to speak my mind in front of my family if not for my dad. He spoke for me in front of my uncle (I absolutely hate him. All my friends know him as 'the uncle I hate'), my grandparents, and even his own family.

I remember the good and the bad, but I know he has my back through it all. It is this safety net that I will always be thankful for, no matter what phase we are at in our relationship. Although my parents aren't necessarily 'cool,' through all these years of growing up, I realized that what truly matters to them is for Shruthi and me to be happy and independent.

From all of this and so much more that I couldn't encompass in this essay, I am thankful for my dad because, in many ways, I see a bit of him...in me.

### Critical essay 1

As a cinephile myself, I absolutely love movie reviewing and critiquing. I've had internships in film reviewing, and I engage in a lot of content analyzing movies. The aspect I enjoy the most is understanding the perspective of the reviewer or critic and how their thoughts align with mine. It is more so that I enjoy watching reviews that I don't necessarily agree with. So it is with conviction that I have with movies and movie reviewing that the first essay that I chose to critically analyze is *The Movie Lover* by Pauline Kael.

She begins by talking about her job in *The New Yorker* and her intention as a writer. She wanted to write for the world to know her way of thought. Next, she talks in her essay about how people perceived her. She acknowledges her audience as picky, exuberant readers and elaborates on how their relationship has changed her experience of viewing a film and vice versa. However, this slowly began to change for her. What once was carefree writing slowly began to be read and re-read several times to not be perceived incorrectly. William Shawn was her editor and what fascinated me was the amount of agency the writer was given. "He had given me a handshake agreement when he hired me that no word would be changed without consultation, and he stuck by his word, but I had to fight for every other contraction, every bit of slang, every description of a scene in a movie that he thought morally offensive—not my description but the scene itself."

Her discussions were interesting because she was often assertive, not because she knew she was right, but because she deliberately made an attempt not to be 'one of his pets.' Her assertiveness comes from a place of rebellion, and she never shied away from being a disappointment in front of William Shawn.

His approach to the disputes he had with the writers was interesting because he managed to keep each reader isolated in their rebellion for a while. It even took Pauline Kael years to know that they were other writers who challenged his perspective.

The piece also covers how her writing was perceived by actors. While a few acknowledged her and liked her, there was some backlash and fights that he had to face. It was these fights that gradually isolated her from gatherings. There is a shift in her relationship with writing about movies. Her individuality or the ability to use movies to socialize turned out to be a consistent effort for her to stick to the canon.

In hindsight, she says her writing had a sense of urgency and excitement because she often wrote her immediate thoughts about a movie. It was almost like the rush after watching a film inspired her to write. However, she acknowledges that even though this set her apart and helped her gain recognition, it was a disadvantage because she often came across as a reckless writer. The sense of urgency gave her lesser objectivity. Her denial of ‘tidying up’ her writing made them seem fresh and yet impulsive.

She ends the piece by writing about her wanting to continue writing about movies if she could. Her writing helped a more significant interaction of the public with the cinema and the critique herself.

This piece especially fascinated me because of the rawness it offers. Pauline Kael gives the audience insight into how she worked with movies and the politics around them with people like William Shawn and how the readers and actors directly impacted her writing.

She calls her job “...the best job in the world.” I do, in some ways, envy the passion she possesses for films. Her intention with her job is set to clear from the beginning. She says, “I had written about movies...trying to...avoid saphead objectivity and let the reader in on what sort of person was responding to the world in this particular way.” This is the aspect of film reviewing that I often cherish. The engagement with the audience becomes personal, giving a larger space for dialogue about movies. This is precisely what is happening in the present day with social media. Indian reviewers like *Tried and Refused Productions* and *Film Companion* have a more profound sense of engagement with both the movies and their audience. This holds true with other reviewers, like *Pop culture detective*, that does the same.

The next thing that fascinated me was the introduction of William Shawn in the piece. Her idea of holding her ground for the sake of it interests me. The amount of agency he gave the writer and the unwillingness to change their content without their permission is appealing. Her examples of rebellion were her signs of protest. The examples are hilarious but more so give more insight into how she saw her role as a writer. Authenticity mattered to her the most, and she continuously found ways to express herself through different mediums.

“On the day after my review of Mailer’s “Marilyn” appeared in the *Sunday Times Book Review*, we ran into each other in a hallway. “Why didn’t you give that to us?” he asked. “What for?” I answered. “You wouldn’t have printed it.” “That’s right,” he said mournfully.”

In her piece, she includes retrospection. She writes about how her impulsivity was her advantage and yet her most significant flaw. This is where I am conflicted. As a person who writes occasionally, I often find the need to present the most objective criticism of a film or a T.V. show. As much as I write my first thoughts about movies, I believe in rendition and refining. I also enjoy engaging with content where one reviews their own reviews to understand better their shift in opinion after creating content out of the excitement that watching a film provides.

I beg to ask the question, 'Can authenticity only be provided with impulsivity?' As a writer (something I wish to manifest at least), I believe that editing is key to providing relatively objective writing that genuinely encompasses the potential of the film. However, Paulina Kale initially rejected this stream of thought and clearly asserted her intention with movie reviews.

This is why all these reviews become her history and form her as a writer. It is not her lack of understanding of the need for retrospection but her desire for 'emotional nakedness' that made her provide the raw content she put out. This is also the reason why her writing becomes her. Quoting her last line: "I'm frequently asked why I don't write my memoirs. I think I have."

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1994/03/21/the-movie-lover>



## Critical essay 2

In one of our undergraduate classes, we were having a discussion about the biggest fears that we have. As we all shared ours, my teacher (one of the people who inspires me the most) spoke about his fear of being forgotten. It is almost as if the last piece of the puzzle fit, or as Aristotle would call it, anagnorisis (if this was a play or a novel). I realized how much one's fear shapes the person they are to be. I also learned how many people share this fear of being forgotten and never seem to come to terms with the mortality of memory. It is this recurrent phenomenon that *Forget Me Not: Making peace with the fear of being forgotten* talks about.

Athazagoraphobia is the fear of being forgotten. The writing talks about the Egyptian belief in the 'second death,' which occurs when the memory of somebody completely fades away. Memory is, in so many ways, crucial to all of us. It is more about the fear of not being remembered than the fear of being forgotten. The question of legacy, or what one leaves behind in this world, comes into the picture.

It is the futility of life that makes people quickly forget the dead. This piece heavily reminded me of the Disney film 'Coco.' The death of the great-grandfather of the protagonist was two-fold. On the one hand, the death and decay of his physical self sent him to the afterlife. But, on the other hand, the metaphorical death of his memory came with the forgetting. It was his lack of having the ability or agency to pass on a legacy that was the cause of him being forgotten.

It is this same phenomenon that the piece looks into. As the author seems more into her past and her ancestry, she finds out more about the people that have been forgotten. The lack of remembering everyone and the evidence of the futility of their life often brings back the fear of being forgotten.

This brings us to a very dark and cynical thought of impermanence. Everything in this world is impermanent. As the piece suggests, "Here today, gone tomorrow." The writing shows that it is not just us and our existence that is temporary but even the most minor things, like one breath replacing another, and time that is once gone can never come back.

It is this Buddhist thought of anicca or instability. Any thing "simply won't stay the same." Isn't this true with not just people but memories associated with them as well? As time passes, our perception of events, incidents, and people changes too. Then why do we hold on so dearly to people and things if we must all once be forgotten?

The text takes a positive turn from this cynical thought. “By accepting that change is a part of life, we can save ourselves from the grief we feel when something is lost or broken.” “What’s more, it helps us to appreciate the value of what we have in this moment, knowing that there is no guarantee it will be here tomorrow.”

The impermanence of things and people enables us to appreciate them. But, conversely, an eternity of anything fundamentally ‘good’ or ‘bad’ dwindles its meaning. A concept beautifully portrayed in the show *The Good Place*, directed by Michael Schur.

(spoiler alert)

In the final season, when all the main protagonists finally enter The Good Place, they are appalled by the unliveliness of the place. This place they struggled so much to enter was Heaven for eternity. It was a life of eternity filled with the joy of all goodness. In contrast to the happy image of The Good Place that one imagines, the people are dreary and dull.

It was the permanence of goodness that made even Heaven unexciting and repetitive. Therefore, one can say that it is in the impermanence of things that we find joy and appreciation. Maybe, being forgotten gives us more reason to ‘live a life you will remember’ (Avicii, *The Nights*).

But this brings us to the following problem: the need to be extraordinary to be remembered. “As psychologist Ronald Siegel writes in his book *The Extraordinary Gift of Being Ordinary*, “Who aspires to be ‘plain,’ ‘average,’ or ‘normal?’” This need to be above the ordinary, although impossible to achieve, leads us into “Dr. Siegel explains that we often get caught in a “self-evaluation trap,” where our self-worth is dependent on achievement or the positive regard of others, so we constantly seek the next affirmation or accolade.”

After all, isn’t it the ability to be invisible that makes us one among the many? Thus, the validation we get from people boosts our self-esteem. The desire to be accepted and recognized drives away the fear of being forgotten. But it is imprudent to constantly allow people to have power over our self-esteem. If it is only through the validation of the public that one finds solitude, then this peace that one gets is so fragile and arbitrary.

Thus, “By embracing our ordinariness, we can develop a positive self-regard that is not dependent on external praise or achievement.”

The piece then brings us to the next question, “So that’s it then? We are all destined for oblivion, with no choice but to accept the fear of being forgotten?” Well, the answer to this is quite simple. People might forget names, experiences, and even memories, but the impacts remain. It is not the need to do something extraordinary to be remembered. We need to focus on being human because we are forever passed on in terms of how we love, our wisdom, and our impact on other people. Like the butterfly effect or the chain reaction, our lives never truly vanish; they just pass on from one person to another.

I am no science student, but if I remember correctly, “Matter can neither be created nor destroyed. It can be transferred from one form to another.” If we, as 8 billion people, live such futile lives are just ‘matter’ in the larger sphere of life, then can we ever truly be forgotten?

<https://medium.com/@fillerbite/forget-me-not-making-peace-with-the-fear-of-being-forgotten-73e539f1c1fa>