CHAPTER III

Feminist Overtones

I’se still goin’ honey

I’se still climbin’

And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair

Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son”

Maya Angelou, Doris Lessing and Kamala Das considered among the most significant writers of the twentieth century record in their writings the inner realities of the female mind and the awakening of the deepest feminine Self. Feminism, like most broad-based philosophical perspectives, accommodates several species under its genius. In Barbara Berg’s The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism, she defines feminism as a “broad movement embracing numerous phases in women’s emancipation.” (qtd in Hooks, Feminist Theory 25) However, her emphasis is on women gaining greater individual freedom. Expanding on the above definition, Berg adds:

It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from x-determined role; freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughtfully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman’s right to individual conscience and judgement. It postulates that woman’s essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not
depend on the other relationships of her life. (qtd in Hooks, *Feminist Theory* 25)

Women, in their eagerness to highlight sexist injustice, focused exclusively on the ideology and practice of male domination. Unfortunately this made it appear that feminism was more a declaration of war between the sexes than a political war to end sexist oppression. Militant white women were particularly eager to make feminist movement a privilege over men. Their anger, hostility, and rage was so intense that they were unable to resist turning the movement into a public forum for their attacks. Fundamentally they argued that all men are the enemies of all women and proposed solutions to this problem - a utopian woman nation, separatist communities. Their anger may have been a catalyst for individual liberty resistance and change. It may have encouraged bonding with other women to raise consciousness.

Sexual discrimination, exploitation, and oppression have created the war between the sexes. Traditionally the battle ground has been the home. According to Engels in *The Origin of Family*: “The modern family is founded on the open or concealed slavery of the wife…Within the family he is the bourgeois and his wife represents the proletariat” [qtd in Greer 247] Woman was as Mary Wollstonecraft says in *Vindication of the Rights of Women*: “She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (66). Men usually secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress through
conditioning. They do this through institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, each of which justifies and reinforces women’s subordination to men with the result that most women internalize a sense of inferiority to men. Mary Wollstone Craft says:

Women are told from their infancy and taught by the example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, ‘outward’ obedience and scrupulous attention to a pettine kind of propriety, will obtain for them the protection of man… (33)

The significance of the feminist movement is that it offers a new ideological meeting for the sexes, a space for criticism struggle, and transformation. Feminist movement can end the war between the sexes. It can transform relationships so that the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with feelings of intimacy, mutuality and camaraderie. One of the radical feminist to insist that the roots of women’s oppression are buried deep in patriarchy’s sex/gender system was Kate Millet. In her *Sexual Politics* Millet argued that sex is political primarily because the male-female relationship is the paradigm for all power relationships:

Social cast supersedes all other forms of inegalitarianism: racial, political, or economic, and unless the clinging to male supremacy as a birthright is finally forgone, all systems of oppression will
continue to function simply by virtue of their logical and emotional mandate in the primary human situation. (qtd in Tong 25)

While it is evident that many women suffer from sexist tyranny, there is little indication that this leads a common bond among all other women. There is much evidence substantiating the reality that race and class identify creates differences in quality of life, social status, and life style that takes a precedence over the common experience women share—differences that are rarely transcended. Woman pay for their happiness with their freedom. Simon de Beauvoir insisted that this price is too high for anyone because the kind of contentment, tranquility, and security that marriage offers woman drains her soul of its incapacity for greatness. She says in *The Second Sex*:

> It is not without some regret that she shuts behind the doors of her new home; when she was a girl, the whole countryside was her homeland; the forests were hers. Now she confined to a restricted space; Nature is reduced to the dimensions of a potted geranium; walls cut off the horizon. But she is going to set about overcoming these limitations. In the form of more or less expensive bric-a-brac. She has exotic countries and past time; she has her husband representing human society, and she has her child, who gives her the entire future in portable future. (502-503).

A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that universally women are oppressed. This assertion implies that women share a
common lot, that factors like class, race and religion. Sexual preference etc. do not create a diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of the individual women. Bell Hooks says in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*:

> Under capitalism, patriarchy is structured so that sexism restricts women’s behavior in some realms even as freedom from limitations is allowed in other spheres. The absence of extreme restrictions leads many women to ignore the areas in which they are exploited or discriminated against; it may even lead them to imagine that no women are oppressed. (4)

Bell Hooks, the black feminist, says that she is often asked whether feminist struggle to end sexist oppression is more important than the struggle to racism or vice versa. All such questions are rooted in the belief that the self is formed in opposition to another. Therefore one is feminist because one is something else. Most people are socialized to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility. Rather than seeing anti-racist work as totally compatible with working to and sexist oppression, they often see them as two movements competing for first place. Feminist discourse has itself been politics directed at changing existing power relations between men and women and in society as a whole. These are power relations which structure all areas of life: the family, education, the household, political systems, leisure, culture, economics, sexuality and so on. In short, feminism questions and seeks to
transform what it is to be a woman in society, to understand how the categories woman and the feminine are defined, structured and produced. The range has moved from Kristeva’s “Woman can Never be Defined” to ways of understanding how gender – the normative movements of the masculine and the feminine – is constructed in a society. The notion that woman is constructed as living the gift or donation of herself for the fulfillment of others’ desires. Alison Jaggar on her book *Feminist politics and Human Nature*, provides a theoretical framework powerful enough to accommodate the main insights of Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, and even liberal feminist thought:

Contemporary feminists are united in their opposition to women’s oppression, but they differ not only in their views of how to combat that oppression, but even in their conception of what constitutes women’s oppression, in contemporary society. Liberal feminists… believe that women are oppressed insofar as they suffer unjust discrimination; traditional Marxist believe that women are oppressed in their exclusion from public production; radical feminists see women’s oppression as consisting primarily in the universal male control of women’s sexual and procreative capacities; while socialist feminists characterize women’s oppression in terms of a revised version of their Marxist theory of alienation.(186).
The foundation of future feminist struggle must be solidly based on the recognition of the need to eradicate the underlying cultural basis and causes of sexism and other forms of group oppression. Without challenging and changing these philosophical structures, feminist reforms will have a long-range impact. Consequently, it is now necessary for advocates of feminism to collectively acknowledge that women’s struggle cannot be defined as a movement to gain social equality with men, that terms like “liberal feminist and “bourgeois feminist” represent contradictions that must be resolved so that feminism will not be continually co-opted to serve the opportunistic ends of special interest groups. So far it has been extremely difficult to fully articulate Black feminist positions in a racist society such as the US because the politics of race is ubiquitous, and overwhelming that they shift subsume all other discourses. Thus gender oppressions seem best over tuned within the context of movements to transform various societies. Black women everywhere can be victimized by the system and men, their children and others in their lives, precisely because of their race and gender combination. Societies still have to struggle with social reconstruction as was attempted in criteria and link questions of gender to new modes of being in these societies.

Bell Hooks says when one is black an affirmative response is likely to be heard as a devaluation of struggle to end racism. Given the fear of being misunderstood, it has been difficult for black women and women in exploited oppressed ethnic groups to give expression to their interest in feminist
concerns. A central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that universally women are oppressed. This assertion implies that women share a common lot, that factors like class, race, and religion, sexual preference, etc. do not create diversity of experience that determines the extent to which sexism will be an oppressive force in the lives of individual women. Sexism as a system of domination is institutionalized, but it has never determined in an absolute way the fate of all women in this society.

Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance of knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. One distinguishing feature of the Black feminist thought is its insistence that both the changed consciousness of individuals and the social transformation of political and economic institutions constitute essential ingredients for social change.

In spite of the suppression, African-American women have managed to do intellectual work. Anna Julia Cooper, Sojourner Truth, Mary McLeod Behune, Toni Morrison, Ida B. Wells, Barbara Smith, Maya Angelou and countless others have consistency struggled to make themselves hard to have used their voices to raise essential issues affecting Black women. Like the work of Maria, W. Stewart, Black women’s intellectual work has fostered Black women’s resistance and activism. The vast majority of African-American
women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. This initial condition shaped all subsequent relationships that Black women had within African-American families and communities, created the political context for Black women’s intellectual work.

Survival for most African-American women has been such an all-consuming activity that most have had few opportunities to do intellectual work as it has been traditionally defined. The drudgery of enslaved African-American women’s work and the grinding-poverty of “free” wage labor in the rural south illustrates the high costs Black women have paid for survival. The millions of impoverished African-American women currently ghettoized in inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of Black women’s economic exploitation.

Taken together the seamless web of economy polity and ideology, function as a highly effective system of social control designed to keep African-American women in an assigned, subordinate place. This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals to protect elite white male interests and worldviews. Black women’s exclusions from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite male idea and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women’s ideas and interests in traditional scholarship and popular ideas.

As mothers, teachers and sisters Black women were central to the retention and transformation of this Afro centric worldview. Within African-
American extended families and communities, Black women fashioned an independent standpoint, the meaning of Black womanhood. These self-definations, enabled Black women to use African derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all Black women’s grounding, traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive Afro-centric women’s culture. “Double jeopardy” for black women is therefore, triple jeopardy in white America. Zillah Einsentein makes this point in her discussion of “capitalist patriarchy” which “requires racial oppression alongside and class oppression” (qtd in Gayles 6) while all women are oppressed in a capitalist patriarchy, Einstein writes, “what they share as sexual oppression is differentiated along class and racial lines in the same way that patriarchal history has always differentiated humanity according to class and race” (qtd in Gayles 6) She cautions against seeing “sex or class, race or class, sex or race” we need to “see the process of that relations of power.

As Bell Hooks says that during the cotemporary feminist movement, women’s liberation was often equated with sexual liberation. On the cover of Germanine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, the book is described as “the ultimate word of sexual freedom.” On the back cover, Greer is described as a “woman with a sense of humor who is proud of her sexuality” Feminist thinkers like Greer believed that assertion of the primacy of sexuality would be a liberatory gesture. As Rowbotham says women can move beyond alienation
through a collective solidarity with other women that is, a recognition that women as a group can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by group identity based on their historical experience. In taking the power of words, of representation into their own hands, women project onto history, an identity that is not purely collective. Instead this new identity merges the shared and the unique. The self constructed in women’s autobiographical writing is often based in but not limited to, a group consciousness- an awareness of the meaning of cultural category woman for the patterns of women’s individual destiny.

Angelou affirms that as quoted in “Con Artists and Storytellers: Maya Angelou’s Problematic Sense of Audience” she got “really got roped into writing her series of autobiographies from I know Why the Caged Bird Sings, by an editor who dared her to succeed in the difficult task of writing an autobiography as literature” (qtd in Lionnet 130). I know Why the Caged Bird Sings creates a unique place within black autobiographical tradition, not by being “better” than the formidable autobiographical landmarks described but by its special stance toward the self, the community and the universe, and by a form exploiting the full measure of imagination necessary to acknowledge both beauty and absurdity.

The emerging self equipped with imagination, resourcefulness, and a sense of tenuousness of childhood innocence, attempts to foster itself by crediting the adult world with its own estimate of its god-like status and
managing retreats into the autonomy of the childhood world when conflicts develop. Given the black adult’s necessity to compromise with prevailing institutions and to develop limited codes through which nobility, strength, beauty can be registered, the areas where a child’s requirements are absolute-love security and consistency- quickly reveal the protean character of adult support and a barely concealed aggressive chaos. Maya Angelou chose childhood as an organizing principle in her first volume *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. It recounts the life of Maya Angelou from the age of three to the age of sixteen: the first ten years of which were lived in Stamps, Arkansas and the last three in Los Angeles and San Francisco. In this Angelou calls displacement the most important loss in her childhood because she is separated from her mother and father at the age three and never fully regains a sense of security and belonging. Her displacement from her family is not only an emotional handicap but is compounded by an equally unsettling sense of racial and geographic displacement. Her parents frequently move Angelou and her brother, Bailey, from St. Louis to Arkansas to the West coast. As young children aged three and four who are wearing wrist tags that identify them ad Marguerite and Bailey Johnson Jr., with a note addressed, “To whom it may concern” (CB 4) states that they are traveling alone from long Beach, California to Stamps, Arkansas to the case of Mrs. Annie Henderson Angelou explains that she and her brother Bailey were shipped to the home of their paternal grand-mother when parents decided to end their calamitous marriage.
From that day until the day of their arrival in Stamps, the children are literally on their own. There are nights when Maya and Bailey cry and share their loneliness as unwanted children who have been abandoned by their divorced parents. In Stamps, their lives were severely limited by racial prejudice. Within the first pages, she sums up the demoralizing period of alienation. “If growing up is painful for the southern black girl, being aware of her displacement is the rust on the rarer that threatens the throat.” (CB 30)

The pain of her continual rejection comes not only from the displacement itself, but even more poignantly, from the child’s acute understanding of prejudice. The autobiographical project was a response to external pressures, it is in many ways directed to a white audience, but at the same time, it succeeds in gesturing toward the black community which shares a long tradition among oppressed people of understanding duplicitous uses of language for survival. Clearly for Angelou, writing an autobiography has to do so with “revelation of personal affairs and like Hurston she does not reveal her inner self” (qtd in Lionnet 131). Indeed, the passage about Momma can be read as an important, example of the self-situating power of literary texts. Momma’s caution functions as an explicit warning to the reader who is thus challenged to take note of the double voiced nature of Angelou’s text. Angelou alludes to her grandmother’s secretive and cautious ways with language:

Knowing Momma I knew I never knew Momma. Her African bush secretiveness and suspiciousness had been compounded by slavery
and confirmed by centuries of promise and promises broken. We have a common saying among Black Americans which describes Momma’s caution“If you ask a Negro where he has been, he’ll tell you where he's going” (CB 164-165).

She alternates between a constantive and a performative use of language simultaneously addressing a white and a black audience, using images and instructing, using allegory to talk about history and myths to refer to reality, thus undermining the institutions that generate this alienated form of self.

The way in which Angelou’s text presents the events leading to her rape and the trial provides an interesting context to the whole notion of familial rape versus social violation. Raped by her mother’s neglected lover, she identifies with her rapist, where densely physical presence had released in the lonely child a sense of belonging, of affiliation and security. Yet her trust is betrayed by the man she wanted to love as a father. Her body has suffered excruciating pain but that in itself is nothing new for a child used to repeated corporal punishment. Her imaginary world of language and literature is stolen by the intrusion of phallic power. Her family, as a whole, fails her. Yet the “rape” is not over. She also has to confront society in the courtroom, and that encounter reduces her to total silence. It is during the trial that she finally internalizes the religious teachings of her childhood completely and consequently begins to perceive herself as evil: “I had sold myself to the Devil and there could be no escape.” (CB 73) The defendant’s lawyer attempts to put the blame on her, and
the child becomes convinced that she is responsible for the rape. “I didn’t want to lie, but the lawyer wouldn’t let me think, so I used silence as a retreat.” (CB 70)

The child quickly learns how to decode the social system in order not to be victimized any further. She has no choice but to lie for survival’s sake. On the familial and social level, the spirit has been punished, justice has been done. On personal level, however, Maya’s ordeal is just beginning: having sworn on the Bible to say the truth, she is now much more traumatized by the memory of the lie and of their belief that she is responsible for the man’s death. The little girl is thus in possession of another deadly secret: that every word she utters may allow her inner and evil reality to escape and to hurt or kill others. She has no choice but to remove herself from the community by refusing language:

I discovered that to achieve perfect personal silence all I had to do was to attach myself leeglike to sound… I simply stood still in the midst of the riot sound. After a minute or two, silence would rush into the room from its hiding place because I had eaten all the sounds. (CB 73).

But it is the result of her own absorption of patriarchal, social and religious discourses that she stifles herself. She has become a docile and benumbed element of the oppressive system that controls her life, until the discovery of literature allows her to weave her own story.
It is after a year in Stamps that she meets Mrs. Bertha Flowers a very dark-skinned woman, whose color “was rich black.” (CB 78). She is a maternal and nurturing figure like Momma, but her aristocratic demeanor and formal education make her an instant role model for Maya, the imaginative reader of English novels. This woman has a positive self-image and makes Maya “proud to be a negro just by herself.” (CB 79). As a narrative figure she is the opposite of the tall white god like policeman, and she becomes Maya’s savior a sort of tribal deity who helps her reevaluate her position within the community as well as the community’s virtues.

Angelou begins to compare the “uneducated” speech patterns of her grandmother unfavorably to Mrs. Flower’s perfect diction and elocution. The child begins to notice the “texture” of the human voice and simultaneously opens up to human language as Mrs Flowers encourages her to read aloud and try “to make a sentence sound in as many different ways as possible”(CB 82). But she also teaches Maya that illiteracy is not ignorance and that in the “mother wit” of country people is “couched the collective wisdom of generations”(CB 83). Thus from the start Maya is forestalled from destructive temptation to hierarchize different cultural models ot to devalue the “primitive” folk attitudes of her rural background.

Reading for Maya, is also a depersonalizing, but this depersonalization returns her instead to the collectively human dimensions she had forsaken, with language, in her attempt to shield herself from the wrath of God the Father.
Reading enables her to enter into a human dialogue with Mrs. Flowers, to
discover the loving and nurturing intellectual relationship. She loses her self
but merges with a community of theirs. Bertha Flowers is an ideal other but not
a mirroring presence: She medicates and guides Maya’s entry into a
multiplicity of private lives, which can only enlarge and enrich the girl’s point
of view. By the time they have criss-crossed the western half of the country
traveling between their parents’ separate homes and their grandmother’s in
Stamps. Each time the children move, a different set of relatives or another of
their parents’ lovers greets them and they never feel a part of a stable family
group, except when they are in Stamps at the general store with Momma and
Uncle Willie. Of her stay in St. Louis, she understands that it is not her real
home:

In my mind I only stayed in St. Louis a few weeks, as quickly as I
understood that I had not reached my home, I sneaked away to
Robin Hood’s forest and the caves of Alley oop where reality was
unreal and even that changed every day. I carried that same shield
that I had used in Stamps: I didn’t come to stay” (CB 58)

Shifted from temporary home to another, Maya develops a tough
flexibility that is not only her protective “shield”, but also her means of dealing
with an uncertain world. Her first volume however ends with the birth of her
son and the awakening or the beginning of strength and confidence in her
ability to succeed and find her place in life. For Angelou in I Know Why the
*Caged Bird sings* particularly home is migratory, some times joyful but generally a difficult apace which she must eventually leave in order to grow, as in Africa in her subsequent work. At the beginning of *Caged Bird* Maya seeks rebirth-transformation from the roles or masks society has prescribed for her – grand daughter, sister, black, female, daughter, and single mother-into new identity May forms for herself. At the book’s end Maya experiences a partial transformation through the birth of her son. By giving birth to her son Angelou moves from adolescence into motherhood. Thus signaling an end to her childhood and the beginning of a premature adulthood. Momma, Uncle Willie, Bailey, Henry Reed, Daddy Clidell, Mrs. Flowers, Miss Kervin, and Vivian all contribute to her transformation, providing Maya with guidance, assistance, and support needed throughout her journey. However her world and her identity change when Maya discovers she is pregnant. Her pregnancy changes her from a child isolated from her family to a valued family member. As a mother-to-be, she gains membership, identity, unavailable to her as a daughter. The last mark of isolation in which she has lived is that no one notices her pregnancy until she tells her parents of it, in her eighth month. And even after that Maya was able to feel the strength of her mother Vivian Baxter: “Well, that’s that. No use ruining three lives” (CB 244). There was no overt or subtle condemnation. She was Vivian Baxter Jackson. Hoping for the best, prepared for the worst, and unsurprised by anything in between. (CB 245). increased autonomy and acceptance for her own body. Beginning to reject the literary
myths that led her to deny her own agency, Maya accepts complete responsibility for her pregnancy. This acceptance of responsibility also leads Maya to a greater acceptance of her own body’s powers:

I had a baby. He was beautiful and mine. Totally mine. No one had bought him for me. No one had helped me endure the sickly gray months. I had had help in the child’s conception, but no one could deny that I had an immaculate pregnancy. (CB 245)

Angelou’s use of the word “immaculate” (CB 245) not only challenges racist stereotypes that associate black women with illicit sexuality, but it also suggests Maya has shed her earlier conceptions of the body as dirty and shit colored. Maya begins to see in herself the power and beauty she sees in her mother Vivian. The gratitude she feels for her son’s birth leads to a false sense of possession which is critical in Maya’s relationship with her son. But even with this feeling, Maya is afraid to hold her new son, fearing that in her clumsiness, she will somehow hurt this beautiful baby she helped to create. Forcing Maya to sleep with the baby, Vivian awakens Maya and points to the baby snuggled at her side. Vivian advises Maya “you don’t have to think about doing the right thing. If you’re for the right thing, then you do it without thinking” (CB 246) Thus Vivian instills in Maya belief in herself. Vivian’s statements connect Maya to her biological womanhood.

In *Gather Together in my Name* an artistically more mature work than *Caged Bird*, Angelou transcends the boundaries of adolescence to embrace
more universal concerns about independence, self-reliance and self fulfillment. A more subtle, less obvious reason for this insecurity relates to the young mother’s strong feelings of guilt about her illegitimate son, feelings that the adult Angelou never fully explores or explicates in her autobiography. *Gather Together in my Name* introduces us a world of prostitution and pimps con men and street women, drug addiction and spiritual disintegration. Angelou manages to survive in the world but her life is without dignity and purpose and, at the end of her work she concedes that she had no idea of what she was going to make her life, “but I had given a promise and found my innocence.” (CB 181)

Her primary motivation during these early years of motherhood is to spare her son from the insecurity and rejection she faced as a child. She is lone in her struggle to come to terms with her dilemma for neither her mother nor Bailey can assist her search for emotional security nor help her to resolve her recurring financial problems. To support herself and her son, Angelou becomes a short order cook, a waitress at a nightclub, a madam in charge of her own house of prostitution, a night club dancer, a prostitute and the lover of a drug addict. This restless frustrated, trying one roles in an instructive process of self education in which Angelou undergoes a variety of experiences that will continue her passage from innocence towards maturity and adulthood.

Her development in this volume is reflective of a particular type of black woman, subjected to certain social forces that assault black woman with
unusual ferocity. Thus when Angelou complains bitterly that her mother “hadn’t the slightest idea that not only was I not a woman, but what passed for my mind was animal instinct. Like a tree or a river, I merely responded to the winds and the tides” (GT 23). In responding to her mother’s indifference to her immaturity, she complains that “they were not equipped to understand that an eighteen-year-old mother is also an eighteen-year-old girl” (GT 8). In *Gather Together in my Name*, Angelou acknowledges the defeat and vividly recreates the alienation and fragmentation that characterized her life. Maya figures as an extremely lonely young woman; a young woman more isolated in a bustling California than she was in the quietude of Stamps; a young woman who had to use both that imperious attitude and life saving pride to exist. For as she recounts:

I had managed in a few tense years to become a snob on all levels, racial cultural and intellectual. I was a madam and thought myself morally superior to the whores. I was a waitress and believed myself cleverer than the customers. I served. I was a lonely unmarried woman and held myself to be freer than the married woman I met. (GT 61)

And who in the middle of the text advised by her mother

People will take advantage of you if you let them. Especially Negro women. everybody, his brother and his dog, thinks he can walk a road in a colored oman’s behind. But you remember this, now. Your
mother, raised you. you’re fully grown. Let them catch it like they find it. If you haven’t been trained at home to their liking tell them to get to stepping. Here a whisper of delight crawled over her face.

“Stepping. But not on you.” (GT 128).

Throughout the volume the narrator’s imagination yearns for something beyond her reality. Maya is brave, tenacious, and hopeful in a way which transcends the unrealistic optimism of many contemporary autobiographies. It is primarily Angelou’s imagination that helps her to keep her identity intact while teaching her act out roles of survival as a black woman.

_Singin and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas_ where Angelou feels “unanchored” as the family bonds of her youth are torn asunder under the impact of life in California. Under these new circumstances the author examines her feelings and her relationship with the larger white society as she encounters white people at an intimate and personal level for the first time in her life. She worries about her responsibility to care for her young son and provide him with a secure family life. In _Singin and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas_ she continues to trace her pursuit of romantic ideals in the face of loneliness and disappointment. She marries Tosh Angelous, white Greek-American sailor. Unfortunately after a year her “Eden” like home life and ‘Cocoon of safety’ begin to smother her sense of integrity and independence. When her marriage ends, she is afraid that she will be cast into a ‘maelstrom of rootlessness’ [SS 44]. In spite of this failure she feels better to
deal with her own life. Angelou again looks for a way to give her young child a stable home and a permanent sense of family security. But, her son temporarily, distrusts her and wonders whether she will stop loving him and leave him behind to be cared by others.

Angelou’s relationship with Tosh rescues her from abandonment, isolation, and subsequent victimization of her past. Music first draws Angelou and Tosh, a sailor of Greek descent, together. This musical bond grows and Maya finds herself enjoying outings. When Tosh propose marriage, Maya accepts not out of love for him, but because he was the one who first proposes to her. This shows Maya’s desperation and lack of confidence in her own ability to attract a mate. Marriage for Maya, represents an escape form “disease, danger and want” [SS 14]. Her marriage to Tosh is the fulfillment of Maya’s fantasy and also serves to legitimize her in society’s eyes. She thought this marriage would be a shield she could use to protect herself. Indeed, Tosh does make a safe haven for Maya says in an interview with Judith Rich in

Conversations with Maya Angelou:

He provided a climate for me and I figuratively climbed into his armpit and sort of curled myself around and got healthy. He provided the climate for me to examine myself, to heal all those scars. I will never stop thanking him, being grateful to him. At first it was exactly what I needed. I’d been very much brutalized by life.

(qtd in Elliot81-82)
Maya has yet to learn that her relationship with Tosh cannot protect her from life’s onslaughts, nor can Tosh provide her with an identity and a purpose. Tosh being rigid in his ways keep his wife from changing. Maya, seeking to live up to society’s dutiful wife image, equate a well-kept house to a healthy marriage. Eldridge Cleaver in *In The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs*:

The myth of the strong black woman is the other side of the coin of the myth of the beautiful dumb blonde. The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot and place her on a pedestal; he turned the black woman into a strong self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen… The white man turned himself into the Omnipotent Administrator and established himself in the Front Office. (qtd in Greer 67).

In this marriage Angelou slowly loses her own separate identity and becomes the obedient, submissive little wife. She allows to dictate what she does and whom she sees. Angelou’s realization begins when Tosh tells Guy that there is no God. Living with Tosh Angelou begins to miss her religious tradition. In denying God’s existence Tosh negates Momma and all her lessons. The solution to her dilemma is for Angelou to be “an obedient, dutiful wife, restricting their arguments to semantic differences, never contradicting the substance of Tosh’s views.” [SS 35] By acquiescing to Tosh’s demands, internalizing racial conflicts inside and out side marriage, by channeling her efforts towards establishing the ideal home, Maya has isolated herself from
family, friends and society. As a result she becomes skeleton of the old Testament. The inner strength that Momma instilled in her comes to her rescue. This trait affects the center of power in their marriage, for Maya’s attending church represents her refusal to continue being the “dutiful wife ready with floors waxed and rugs beaten, with… fingers between the pages of a cookbook and … body poised over the stove or spread –eagled on the bed.” (SS 48)

Because of this shift of attitude, when her marriage with Tosh finally does end after a couple of years, Maya emerges “a saner, healthier person than the young greedy girl who had wanted a man to belong to and a life based on Hollywood film, circa 1940.” (SS 49) While at a service she recovers her black identity when she is overcome by the spirit and the surrounding congregation and prays for her sins.

I cried for my people, who found sweet release from anguish and isolation for only a few hours on Sunday. For my fatherless son, who was growing up with a man who would never, could never understand his need for manhood; for my mother, whom I admired but didn’t understand: for my brother whose disappointment with life was drawing him relentlessly into the clutches of death: and finally, I cried for myself, long and loudly (SS 39).

There is no reason to believe that Afro-American women experienced gender as the seamless wrapping of their selves. Slavery bequeathed to Afro-American women a double view of gender relations that fully exposed the
artificial or problematic aspects of gender identification. Slavery stripped black men of the social attributes of manhood, in general and father-hood in particular. As a result, black women had no satisfactory social definition of themselves as women.

In *The Heart of a Woman*, as she continues the account of her son’s youth, she turns to the story of her own childhood repeatedly. When Guy was fourteen Angelou decides to move to New York. She does not bring Guy to New York until she found a place for them to live, and when she arrives after one month of separation he initially resists her attempts to make a new home for them: “The air between us [Angelou and Guy] was burdened with his aloof scorn. I understood him too well” (HW: 35-36)

From this similar encounter with Guy, Angelou learns that the continued unseat of her own childhood is something she cannot prevent from recurring in her son’s life. In fact, she identifies her own situation and the threat of dislocation as common condition among black families on America and acknowledges the special responsibility of the black mother. Gordon O. Taylor, in “Voices from the Veil: Black American autobiography” says:

> She questions whether she loves her children enough—or more terribly, does she love them too much?.....In the face of these contradictions she must provide a blanket of stability, which warms but does not suffocate and she must tell her children the truth about
the power of white power without suggesting that it cannot be challenged. (341-361)

Not only for Angelou but for many black women, as a black mother providing stability for the children as family disintegrates is a virtually impossible task. As a single parent Angelou has been solely responsible for her son from the very beginning of his life. Many times Angelou feels that she and her son are skating dangerously “on thin ice.” Apart from his basic needs in addition to love and companionship, Guy frequently intimates that his mother should be responsible for order and security.

My son expected warmth, food, housing, clothes and stability. He could be certain that no matter which way my fortune turned he would receive most of the things he desired. Stability, however, was not possible in my world: consequently it couldn’t be possible in his. (HW 123)

*The Heart of the Woman* documents a period when Angelou for the first time becomes an active political protestor and as the coordinator to Martin Luther King. She meets Vusumzi Make, a black South African freedom fighter, and marries, hoping that he will provide her domestic security. Their marriage ends after some months, despite Angelou’s efforts to contribute to their financial assets by working as editor of the *Arab Observer*. In choosing to live in Ghana following the deterioration of her marriage to Vusumzi Make, Angelou hopes to find a place where she and her son can make a home for
themselves, free at last from the racial bigotry she faced throughout the united States, Europe and the parts of middle east, While Guy is recuperating from his injuries, she carefully evaluates her assets and concludes that since his birth, her only home has been wherever she and her son are together: “We had been each other’s home and center for seventeen years. He could die if he wanted to and go off wherever the dead folks go, but I, I would be left without home” (AGC 7).

Her initial expectations therefore for feeling at ease and settling down in West Africa are understandably considerable:

We had come home and if home was not what we expected, never mind, our need for belonging allowed us to ignore the obvious and to create real places or even illusory places, befitting our imagination. (AGC 19)

Unfortunately, the Ghanaian people do not readily accept Angelou, her son and most of black American community in Accra, and they unexpectedly find themselves isolated and often ignored.

The conclusion of *The Heart of a Woman* announces the new beginning for Angelou and hope for her future relationship with Guy. Although Guy has assumed that he has been fully grown up for years they have at last reached a point where they can treat each other as adults and allow one another the chance to live independently. Being caught in the crossfire of her race, gender, and nationality, Angelou realizes she must discover how she fits in the scheme
of things. While Angelou tries to fit in, as Shirley Hardin puts it in her article “Reconciled and Unreconciled Strivings: A Thematic and Structural Study of the Autobiographies of Four Black Woman” continually faces society’s “pre-definition of her as a black female American; a role symbolized by “stereotype, suppress, ridicule and ignore her- those that represent an anti-self in order to discover her true self.” (37) Society’s pre-defined role shows Angelou struggle is not merely that of every unwanted child, or every black child, but every female child as well. Not only has Angelou awakened to her social position, but she also experiences physical changes. She feels as though she is on a tightrope, teetering in the middle of two sides: teen and adulthood. Her identity undergoes a change in part because her body is changing. Aware that the black female’s condition is battered in her early years by all those common forces of nature at the time that she is caught in the tripartite crossfire of masculine prejudice, white Illogical hate, and Black lack of power. The fact that the adult American Negro Female emerges a formidable character is often met with amazement, distaste, and even hostility. Angelou has experienced this tripartite cross-fire – masculine prejudice has ridiculed her physical appearance, and raped her innocence: white illogical hate has tried to define her future by limiting who and what she can become; and black lack of power has left her little alternative but to discover some way in which she can empower her self-if she can find that self after being caught in such a massive crossfire.
The confrontation of self with the blue street tradition takes place while she is with her mother, Vivian Baxter, in St. Louis and California. Vivian is kind in counseling Maya concerning her sexual confusions, in creating a celebrating atmosphere that children would in her matter-of-fact acceptance of Maya’s unwed motherhood, and in the strong support she gives to idea of self reliance. Her philosophy, too, has its brief maxims, involving around” protective institutions and meeting it with an on-topmanship derived from the tough and alert self. Thus she believes in preparing for the worst hoping for the best, and being unsurprised at anything which happens in between. But in her fluid existence amidst threatening chaos, one drawback is the requirement of intense absorption, in one’s own life and in the alertness which makes on-topmanship possible.

In *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou continually remind the reader that the quest for a place to call home is virtually endemic to the human condition. She examines her ambiguous feeling about ‘going home’ and faces painful truths about slavery and Black betrayal, and about the joys and disappointments in living in Ghana. She begins to discover that she is a Black American, and in Africa she is Black American in exile. It reveals Angelou’s growing confrontation with her double consciousness: her American and African selves. Although she does not discover herself fully in Africa, her search has brought her “closer to understanding myself and other human beings” (AGC 196) and before she returns to America she is literally
claimed by Africans and acknowledged as one of their lost sisters: “I had not consciously come to Ghana to find the roots of my begins, but I had continually and accidentally tripped over them or fallen upon them in my everyday life.” (AGC 205) In the end, there is the affirmation of her Afro-American roots: her recognition that she and her people have withstood in the evil hour hence her proclamation:

The women wept and I wept. I too cried for the lost people, their ancestors and mine. But I was also weeping with curious Joy. Despite the murders, rapes and suicides, we had survived.... Through the centuries of despair and dislocation, we had been creative, because we faced down death by daring hope” (AGC 206).

Having glimpsed their strength she, recognized that America is home in spite of all its cruelties, she must return to her native land.

Maya’s life with Make parallels many events in The Blacks, a New York production in which she plays the role of the white queen All the roles in this play mirror Maya’s role as Mrs. Make: both the roles in the play and Maya’s designed self are unrefined caricatures of images imposed on by others. Maya’s relationship with Make is a mirror image of the relationship between the blacks to the white court one of lower to higher, slaves to masters. This false image Maya has imposed on herself to please her husband troubles her. The play points out how the blacks have become like the whites they so despise; similarly, Maya becomes the kind of women she has tried to avoid
being. Maya realizes her mask of “shadow” or a reflection of Make, his society, and society as a whole. The qualities she beholds do not belong to her; they belong to Make. Confronting her illusion is only the first step in order for Maya to regain her true image; next, she must confront Make with what she really is, thus dispelling the illusion. Suddenly the irony of her choice becomes clear to Maya: she has made the choice in a husband, one who is an African political leader and freedom fighter. Yet, his South African upbringing leads to patriarchal dominance over his wife. Maya realizes that the people’s freedom Make fights for does not apply to the female gender. Indeed politics supersedes personal liberation Maya’s realization that she no longer loves him makes her confrontation with Make easier. She can no longer abide the lame excuses infidelities: “I am a man. An African man … A man requires a certain amount of sexual gratification. Much more than a woman needs, wants, or understands.”(HW 245-246) Make’s words and actions toward Maya finally convince her of the cultural gap existing between them: “Vus was an African and his values were different from mine.”(HW 247) Inspite of Maya’s impassioned dedication to Africa, she cannot deny the cultural gap existing between the American culture to which she is intimately linked, which is evident in her relationship with Sheikhal, a rich Mali importer. He wants to take control of her life, expects passive compliance from her. Maya reacts with: My upbringing had not fitted me for even a pretended reticence. As a Black American woman, I could not sit with easy hands and
impassive face and have my future planned. Life in my country had demanded that I act for myself or face terrible consequences. (AGC 69).

When Sheikhali proposes marriage, he commands: “I will marry you, for you are a good woman. In Mali the women will teach you to be better. If you are intelligent enough, you will learn enough. Because of me, you will be respected. But you must lose this White woman way” (AGC 94). Both of these statements are critical of Maya, and Maya must note their importance. For in both instances, one sees Maya outwardly admitting to having an American identity, and Sheikhali implying an American identity by her acting like a white woman. Although at times Maya may not like her American identity, she longer denies its existence.

Like Angelou and Das, Doris Lessing, also excels in her autobiographies., *Under my Skin – Volume one of my Autobiography to 1949* and *Walking in the Shade* projects the experience of herself as an entirely unique entity in the dominant male culture.

The very sense of identification, interdependence and community which are the key elements in women’s autobiographies according to Rowbotham gets highlighted in these autobiographies. Lessing first volume *Under my Skin* gives an exhaustive account of a life through difficult time in Persia and Rhodesia, upto her departure for London in 1949. The first half of the book examines her unhappy childhood on a Rhodesian farm with her parents and
younger brother. In the second half of the book, Lessing focuses on her early writing and her two failed marriages.

*Under My Skin* shows a woman uncompromising from the beginning, in every aspect who breaks all the rules, who battles at every turn against her upbringing and environment. She looks on the world clear and hard: and yet who displays softness, a wonderful sense of humour, a compassion for human failure. The book is distinctive, challenging and wholly original as anything Doris Lessing has ever written. It recalls her own mind as a child and the life of a child almost overwhelming immediacy mapping the growth first of her consciousness, then the adolescence, of her sexuality and later, as a young woman of her political beliefs. The African landscapes, her often combative relationship with her parents, her intense awareness of her own self and body her passionate involvement with other people and indeed with everything around her are powerfully presented. The process of self coming to the world without and finally emerging in all its glory, purges by the fire of life, is authentically inscribed in Lessing’s *Under my Skin*.

Doris Lessing’s autobiography begins with her African experiences of the early formative years, where her parents brought her to the African-wild at the age of five and she left Rhodesia now Zimbabwe, to live in London. Lessing’s mother comes to prominence in the first volume of her daughter’s autobiography as a desperate manipulative woman with limitless urge for control. Doris responded with deep anger against a mother who on principle
refused to feed her when she cried and who later made it clear that she preferred her son to her daughter. Her brother’s birth serves one of the powerful incidents from her past that she recollects with great lucidity. She is told she must love him. When told what she must feel she instinctively recoils from the emotion, defiantly feeling otherwise. She remembers her mother’s impatient arms and her hard voice telling her she wanted a boy when Doris was born, feeling then that her brother would get unconditional love, not her. “Nature knows that what it is doing, prescribing amnesia for early childhood” (UMS 25) Lessing suggests nature has her own way of ensuring that unhappy childhood memories are erased from the child’s mind. As Doris Lessing Kamala Das also had a strong passion to dominate, to establish her self, to assert her sovereignty.

There is the mother figure once more that, relentlessly stalks Lessing’s writings particularly that aspect which insensitively damages the children psychologically. The consistent refrain:

I have sacrificed myself for my children haunts their lives as she cruelly reiterates how “no one but a mother knows how much she has to give herself to ungrateful children who soak up her precious talents and juices like so many avid sponges”(UMS 29)

But years later, writing her autobiography she tries to understand and accept, making valiant effort to justify the mother’s merciless stance. Most of all Lessing’s escape into the bush dramatizes her rebellion again against her
mother. This battle reached its peak when Lessing was fourteen at the onset of her puberty, when her own body’s maternal capabilities emerged: “My fourteenth year was a make or a break year, a sink or swim year, a do or die year for I was fighting for my life against my mother” (UMS: 155).

As Luce Irigray has described it, the mother daughter conflict is indeed a struggle for life, in so far it reflects the daughter’s desire for a sense of self independent from her mother. Lessing’s mother suddenly aware of her daughter as a sexual being, sees this sexuality as making her daughter vulnerable. But, her daughter experiences it as strength, one that will give her power to separate fully from her mother. Doris as a young girl watches her parents sitting side by side in front of their house in the Rhodesian countryside, their face full of anxiety and worry:

There they are together struck together, held there by poverty and much worse – secret and inadmissible needs that come deep in their two different histories. They seem to me intolerable, pathetic.

Unbearable, it is their helplessness that I can’t bear (UMS 120)

Young Doris tells herself to remember this moment always: “Don’t let yourself forget it. Don’t be like them” (UMS 120). Lessing prepared herself for a revolution against gender arrangements as well as against women’s unquestioning acceptance of these arrangements.

Doris Lessing dropped out from school at fourteen; left home and had a succession of jobs as a nurse maid and a telephone operator and began
dreaming of escape to some glamorous far off land. To the world, she presents the face of a clever, amusing and highly competent young woman, who was known to her friends as ‘tigger’ which was an image of a girl of a lonely nature, over sensitive, and defiant. Lessing’s first marriage, at the age of nineteen had been to a man, much older than herself- a marriage involving not the real woman but the tigger self, the jolly young matron. Not yet ready for motherhood, she gave birth to a son, and then neglected him. He responded with anger and bewilderment uncannily like that of young Doris and a second child followed.

Although Lessing’s detachment as a writer would aid her in the pursuit of the freedom she so coveted, this liberation would also become a price. She leaves her husband and also her two young children. She represents the new young woman who is in search of autonomy and freedom. In the course of her narrative it is seen that Life for Lessing is moving inevitably towards frustration and to an increasing disillusionment. When she decided to move she writes: “With the half of myself I knew I was not going to stay in this life. I had nothing in my mind as serious as a plan or a programme. No, I merely dreamed of a life in … Paris or London. I did not belong here” (UMS 235). Of this decision Lessing writes simply that the unhappiness she felt in her first marriage would have made her ‘a liability’ to her husband and children if she had stayed. She writes,
But I was not exactly abandoning mine to an early death. Our house was full of concerned and loving people, and the children would be admirably looked after - much better than by me, not because I did not perform this task exactly like every other woman around me, but because of this secret doom that was inside me - and which had brought my parents to their pitiful condition. (UMS 263)

This reflects the author as a self-absorbed and a heedless young woman. As Rowbotham argues, cultural representations of woman lead not only to woman’s alienation but also the potential for a ‘new consciousness’ of the self. Not recognizing themselves in the reflections to cultural representations, woman develops a ‘dual consciousness’ the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription Susan Standford Friedman in her “Women’s autobiographical Selves” says:

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another … one part of ourselves as strange and foreign cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity”( qtd in Smith, Autobiography 76)

Similarly Lessing has also displayed an amazing courage in portraying the feminine experience without any inhibitions in protesting against the male definitions of women against the limits set for women, against women’s finding total fulfillment in submissive domesticity. When she was planning to
leave her children she writes: “I carried, like a defective gene, a kind of doom or fatality, which would break some ancient chain of repetition. One day they would thank me for it” (UMS 262). What Lessing was looking for, was to a degree found, a more inward, more fully modern conception not only of character but of the self and of the self’s experience of the time. Lessing’s antagonism towards the house and, by extension, toward her mother, is expressed more pointedly in her fantasies where she often dreams of the destruction of the house, perhaps playing out a displaced desire in her mother’s death. In *Going Home* she imagines the death of the house in detail, how it would have taken place:

> It was the ants, of course, who finally conquered, for when we left that house empty in the bush, it was only a season before the ant-hills sprouted rooms themselves, among the quickly sprouting trees, and the red galleries must have covered all the walls and the floor. The rain were heavy that year, beating the houses to its knees. (55)

The flight into the bush is facilitated by the fire and would suggest that this too was part of the goal all along: finally to live in the bush, away from her mother. Lessing, the bush reared tomboy, is at home in the bush, in addition, it indicates her sense of it as a place of freedom and privilege, where, she might find sanctuary from England and her mother—though her mother follows her and brings her back to the salvaged house.
Because settler culture keeps women in or around the house, Lessing experiences the bush as a space of freedom from gender constraints. Boys and girls generally played separately the boys, as Lessing remembers outside shooting with air guns, the girls playing in the house. But, she recalls, “when I was alone with my brother we went alone into the bush” [UMS 98] because white women and girls are supposed to avoid the bush, Lessing’s escape there is a transgressive gesture.

I walk up out of the bush where I have been by myself and stop when I see my parents sitting side by side, in two chairs in front of the house…. I stand there, a fierce unforgiving adamant child, saying to myself I won’t I will not. I will not be like that. (UMS120)

In this image, Lessing’s parents sit immobile seemingly stuck together and stuck together in a world trapped. By contrast Lessing has freedom of movement: she can go out of the bush. This feeling that the bush represents freedom stays with Lessing. Most of all, Lessing’s escape into the bush reflects he escape from the constraints of the gender roles imposed on British female settlers in Southern Rhodesia.

Her mother, suddenly aware of her daughter as a sexual being, sees this sexuality as making her daughter vulnerable. Her daughter experiences it as strength, one that will give her power to separate fully from her mother. Lessing’s first striking experience of her body as sexual also takes place in the bush:
In a corner of the bush near the big land, I stood with my rifle loose in my hand, and suddenly saw my legs as if for the first time, and thought. They are beautiful. Brown slim well-shaped legs. I pulled up my dress and looked at myself as far as my panties and was filled with pride of body. There is no exultation like it, the moment when a girl knows that this is her body, these fine smooth shapely limbs.

(UMS 173)

For the first time Lessing experiences her body not as an extension of the family house but as her own: there is pride and possession in these words. This is a feeling she cannot have in the house; the gun in her hand signals that the feeling will be kind of weapon she can use both to push he mother away and to assert her domain over the land. Lessing’s body is a weapon that can transport her back and forth across the purity marker separating bush and the house. Though Lessing identifies her feeling as specific to girl, her feelings of mastery over the bush can also be read as another moment of cross-gender identification: her escape still takes place within assumptions about English domination. Her bodily self-confidence defies cultural efforts to force her into a house that denies the bush but sends her into an English masculinist paradigm of conquest control, as a conqueror of the bush not a creature of it.

Doris Lessing’s description of sexuality the manifestation of it in her woman is suggestive of body conciousness. This writing from the body, in terms of form, helps in disestablishing the patriarchal phallogocentric
discourse. Lessing becomes a communist and met Gottfried Lessing, whom she married in 1943. He was, in his wife’s words “the embodiment of cold, cutting, Marxist logic” Lessing does her best to explain and portray sympathetically this unappealing man, with whom she describes her sexual life sad. What he really needed she writes, was a woman kind enough to “treat her man as a baby, even for a few hours of the dark.”(UMS 318) Though he encouraged writing he did not approve of what she wrote. She had married him to save him from interment as an enemy alien: “to strengthen his application for British citizenship, she remained in an “unhappy but a kindly marriage”. Only in 1948 when his application was approved, did they feel free for the divorce. For both Das and Lessing married life seemed a dreary and wasted life because of their rejection of culturally accepted roles. In Walking in the Shade When Lessing leaves the African farm and settled in London, she passionately fell in love with Jack a Czech doctor She writes:

He fell in love with me jealously, hungrily and even angrily... The way I saw this-felt this-was that now I was ready for the right man:my ‘mistakes were over… All my experiences had programmed me to domesticity. I had never been ‘really married to Frank Wisdom, but for four years we had conventional marriage. Gottfried and I hardly been well matched…The law and the society saw me as a woman who had had two marriages and two divorces. I felt that these marriages did not count.( WIS 41)
As Simon de Beauvoir puts clearly that wifing and mothering are two feminine roles that block women’s bid for freedom. While it is true that many women have been victimized intellectually, emotionally and physically by men, it is also true that some have managed efficiently to counter male power. This was very much visible at one instance when Lessing got the Somerset Maugham prize for her novel she says about Jack, “I was afraid to tell him – rightly, as it turned out – for he at once exclaimed, ‘And that’s it, that’s the end.’ …. ‘You don’t love me; you care about your writing.’” (WIS 146).

Lessing describes her pain how she stood immobilized and tears flooding when Jack left her after four years. And she had many affairs after this but in all that she had an irritable need to escape to get away. Throughout Walking in the Shade Lessing serves as a prototype who has started the massive task of cultural transformation.

Nobody had the trouble I’ve seen” These words spoken by a black woman could very well have been uttered by an Indian woman. Though they were not enslaved and uprooted by the white man, she, the Indian woman in her own way carried the burden of the family, has slaved for her husband, her children, and family whether extended or nuclear. Kamala Das a prolific bilingual Indian woman poet, fiction writer in her autobiography My Story makes a bold attempt in expressing herself by throwing the traditional Indian morality to winds in her love life. The awareness of the culturally defined category ‘woman’ looms over her existence, to which she tries to return to her
culturally defined self and then discards it realizing that it is not meant for her, that she cannot live her life in accordance with cultural prescription. Kamala Das voices her desires and asserts herself through her autobiography *My Story*. The denial of freedom and of autonomy becomes the sole reasons for Das’s psychic disorder, as she writes “I began to shed my clothes regarding them as traps” (MS:110) By the rejection of all the masks, artificialities and social restrictions she projects herself for an authentic expression of self.

Kamala Das marriage with a much older man, was trapped in the bonds of marriage, the eternal, inescapable bonds which Das detested. She suffers through her husband’s selfishness and neglect of her emotional and psychic needs. Faced with the failure of her marriage and impossibility of leaving it, her son’s illness and her husband’s rejection for her, she finds herself poised on a balcony in a moment of suicidal temptation: “I felt revulsion for my womanliness The weight of my breasts seemed to be crushing” (MS: 94)

Instead of throwing herself off the balcony, “she lit the reading lamp… and began to wonder about a new life, an unsustained future” (MS 94) Centrally located in the text, the passage repeats the central theme of woman writing her self, not only as an act of identity among other acts, but as the primary act. She saves her life by telling her life. As it foreshadows a later passage by french feminist Helene Cixous, who asserts that a woman must write her self to mark:
“her shattering entry into history which has always been based on her suppression…To become at will the taker and the initiator, for her own right in every symbolic system, in every political system” (qtd in Iqbal Kaur: 100)

The protagonist chooses writing against suicide, self inscription against self- destruction. The role of motherhood reveals a more redeeming aspect of Kamala Das’s personality. As a loving, caring and dedicated mother sitting by the sick beds of her children praying, she appears more appealing than as the wife with her unfulfilled cravings. There were several occasions when Kamala tried to put an end to her life, but did not succeed at it was miserable. Kamala Das’s husband insisted on making her ‘a woman’ on showing her place. Kamala was ordered to:

“Dress in saree, be girl
Be wife they said, Be embroiderer, be cook
Be a quarreler with servants. Fit in. oh,
Belong, cried the categorizers. [An Introduction]

The feeling that she was a doomed and chained being made her very restless. This depression from domestic responsibilities, the care of her child, lack of emotional communion with her husband the denial of freedom to the extent that he had stifled even her sobs, led her to a state of utter despair: “The growing misery inside me, the darkness that lay concealed, removed from my face all that was once pretty, I was like a house with all its lights put out” (MS 110)
Das similarly oscillates between two contradictory positions: one exceptional woman in conflict with her traditional society, struggling for a subject status specifically endowed through her writing, and the other, that most unexceptional Indian woman, the Krishna devotee. Das’s subsequent examinations of her woman’s experiences are informed by these postcolonial ambivalences as well as gender and feminist concerns. In the autobiography Das comes to a point in her life when she questions her own sense of being exceptional. The same kind of necessity to open consciousness, to the dialogic presence of others, whether of a different race, class or gender also admits into the autobiography the other aspect of self, of tradition. Yet it is this aspect of woman as patriarchal mate, the most unexceptional of women in Indian society, that the autobiographical discourse has been most energetically dislocated. Kamala Das’s awareness of her own personal journey by voicing her self for a new identity seems to have realized that, “I had the idiocy to think myself as Kamala, a being separate from all the rest and with destiny entirely different from those of others” (MS 214).

With this sense of realization and the sense of belonging to humanity at large that is seen at the end of her autobiography show that she has won the battle. Kamala Das in her book eminently succeeds in discovering her true selfhood and she insists on being herself even in the midst of all kinds of pressures, mounted on her by entrenched patriarchal values. She discards the emasculating and constricting conventional taboos which she thinks militate
against her essential life. But, she does not foreground her femininity in this book, as a gesture of defiance as the feminists stridently insist in doing. Her aim is to attain wholeness in her personality, to achieve what Woolf, and before her Coleridge, called an androgynous mind. There exists a complete integrated harmony between the male and female elements to her mind. She not only doggedly continues with her writing, which considered as an intellectual exercise, is regarded as the male activity, but also breaks all the iron-shackles of false decency which tend to make a woman’s writing puerile and worthless. Consequently, in both her poetry and the book under discussion, her androgynous imagination soars and ranges like a wisp of cloud. Simultaneously, however, her femininity makes her glory in motherhood, and makes her heart quiver with the tenderness of love which is continually seeking.

*My Story* is the only attempt of its kind among Indian women autobiographers in English to tread the untrodden challenging area of exploring and sharing one’s experience as a body which serves as foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. Discarding the superficial way of the fellow women autobiographers, who try to grapple with the acute problems of their existence avoiding any talk about their bodies, she confronts her body with unparalleled frankness and honesty. But the most noticeable fact of her bold attempt is that, in spite of trying hard to kill the “Angel in the house” within herself and throwing the traditional Indian
morality to winds in her live-life Kamala Das constantly remains aware of her deviation from accepted norms. The awareness of the culturally defined category ‘woman’ looms over her existence. Time and again she tries to return to her culturally defined self and then discards it realizing that it is not meant for her, that she cannot live her life in accordance with the cultural prescription.

Kamala Das too narrates her bitter childhood experiences of partiality and prejudice in her European school in Calcutta in the days of British rule. The political scenario during the British rule in India made her experience a kind of unconscious hostility towards her parents. She cherished an unconscious wish that were born to a ‘white couple’ who would have been more proud of her verses. She recalls her having been an abandoned child by her parents which gave her an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and lack of self worth. Kamala Das for whom nothing could be more dear than her freedom was restless with the attitude of her parents:

They took us [the children] for granted and according to the tugs they gave us. They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that we were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of a banyan growing out of the crevices in the walls of ancient fortress.(MS 77).

But Kamala, with all her potential to defy, to challenge and to reject the ‘givens’, to make something out of what was made of her.
To a sympathetic reader who looks upon the writer as a fellow human being and not as an accused on whom he is required to pass his moral judgment, Kamala’s case provides an excellent opportunity for a psychological study of the loveless and emotionally deprived life of an imaginative romantic being who could not get what she desired out of any of her usual, socially recognized relationships. The lack of security and love in her well-to-do parents, as well as her husband’s family made her whatever she became. ‘Women are not born; they are made’, said the great French feminist Simone de Beauvoir in her thought provoking book *The Second Sex*. In her view it is the socialization of women as women which makes them what they become. Kamala’s case convincingly demonstrates the truth of this observation. She was an ordinary girl, a ‘good’ girl from the society’s standard, whom her deprivation and psychological needs turned her into a rebel. Circumstances made her what she became. With an understanding husband she would have been a happy wife and would have made a success of her marriage. But her husband’s aggressive, assertive approach to sex and her, as yet, immature body at the time of their marriage, resulted in her being labeled as frigid, an adjective that comes in handy to any man, who, a member of the dominant group, readily uses it for woman who fails to boost his ego or play up to him in such a way as to confirm and enhance his feelings of being a real “man”. It is strange that even in the context of this most intimate relationships between man and woman, in which they both ought to be equal partners giving and receiving
pleasure from each other, women are looked upon as mere instruments of joy, judged solely on the basis of the extent to which they satisfy the men and are readily labeled as cold or frigid when they fail to do so, while in fact the poor ones do not even know what frigidity is; for more often than not, as Nancy Friday points out in her book *My Mother My Self*, they are strangers to their own bodies. In her work *The Female Eunuch*, Germaine Greer says about women’s condition:

Her essential quality is castratedness. She absolutely must be young, her body hairless, her flesh buoyant, and she must not have a sexual organ. No musculature must distort the smoothness of the lines of her body, although she may be painfully slender or warmly cuddly... So the image of a woman appears plastered on every surface imaginable, smiling interminably. (69)

Later, when Kamala had physically matured, her husband lost interest in her after the birth of their first son, and resumed his flirtations with his cousins. Driven by sheer indignation Kamala now made up her mind to “unfaithful to him, at least physically” (MS 95) Feeling as if her love were alms meant for general distribution she started for looking for the “begging bowls” needless to say there was no dearth of such begging bowls to come across. In those relationships she was no more passive. She discusses a number of affairs she had, Unlike any other woman autobiographer she makes an open confession of her sins, if sin they are to be called.
What an irony of fate it is that Kamala who was condemned by her husband as frigid who herself accepted the label saying that sex did not interest her except as a gift that she could grant to her husband to make him happy. But, out of sheer disgust and a burning desire for revenge she steps outside the sacrosanct orbit of marriage and sends for the handsome bricklayer working across the street in order to gratify her own desire. But this was only her first transgression and which was followed by many more.

Revolting against the rigid gender divisions that a sexist culture wishes to establish – divisions according to which men are superior, God-like, while women are inferior, inert, “afflicted with natural defectiveness,” Das has voiced, without any inhibition, her restlessness with the fact that the sex-roles, as perpetuated by a society ruled and governed by men, trap women in wifehood, and motherhood and do not allow them any freedom for self actualization. Marriage as an institution nauseates Kamala Das because it legitimizes violence on women and gives men a legal control on women’s bodies. Kamala Das condemns the gender divisions created by the male dominated society and pities the lot of women because they have been losers in the war of the sexes. The male desire to relegate women to margin that suffocates her. She writes: “Even the air conditioner helps a little, All pervasive is the male scent of your breath” (MS192).

Even as child Kamala Das had an overwhelming awareness of victimization that exist between men and women as well as an awareness of the
adverse effects of sexist culture on female psyche. Her father, who thought himself sovereign, expected total submission from his wife and she did display a passive acceptance of the scheme of things which negated women. Kamala Das’s *My Story* contains ample evidence of her as Patricia Waugh, puts in her *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Post modern.*

awareness of the arrest of feminine development brought about by an economic system, family structure which produced in women dependency, insecurity, lack of autonomy and an incomplete sense of who they are even at the level of bodily ego. (qtd in. Dhawan 107)

The feminine mystique, she feels has always been exploited by man who treats woman as his slave. The male manufactured definitions of femininity nauseated her. She deserted the male gaze because it situates women as an object. The sexual politics that prevailed in the relationship between her mother and father and several other couple around her also shaped her view on marriage. The power politics in sex relationships was repulsive to her. So, she wanted to escape marriage –bondage. The way she tried to plea the postponement of her marriage, shows her keen desire for flight from womanhood. Even when her marriage “was fixed” she tried to escape it. “Not yet I said. Let me go back to Calcutta to finish my exams…” (MS 85) She could not escape her destiny but she displayed tremendous courage in flouting the traditional image of the “perfect woman”. She refused to be a traditional
bride and behaved like a “tomboy” on her wedding day. She revolts against the fact that the male psyche tends to treat woman as a desirable commodity. It causes her great anguish that men expect total submission from their wives. Her husband too was an egoist, a bit too sure of his conjugal rights and believed in ruthless exploitation of woman as an absolute Other. She narrates:

> During his stay in Malabar, he spent most of his time with his cousins and his Sister-in-law, paying me little attention and never bothering to converse with me. At night he was like a chieftain who collected all the taxes from his vassal, simply without exhilaration. (MS 94)

Kamala’s husband could not tolerate her assertion of feminine subjectivity and “stopped me from going up to the terrace for the rehearsals in the evening. You must remember you are a wife and mother, he said” (MS 98)

But she, who was struggling to create a new order, a brave new world where women too could be treated as human beings, could not develop a sense of her invisibility. She reacted against the traditional society’s definition of womanhood, against the traditional sex-roles and was resolved not to be a stereotype. She writes: “I kept myself busy with dreary house work while my spirit protested and cried, get out of this trap, escape” (MS 98).

The traditional positioning of women is not only expressed by Maya Angelou, Kamala Das but by Lessing also. All are concerned with the fact that the social and cultural construction of gender marginalization and exclusion of
women, the hostility between sexes and the patriarchal socialization often leads to neurosis in women. Angelou, Das and Lessing and other women writers have used multiple strategies to tell their stories in autobiography, fiction and poetry. The stories of Angelou, Das and Lessing shape their female identity in such a way that the self, however invented, is a witness against racism, sexism and classism. In spite of their multiple strategies of self-construction, active resistance to oppression of all kinds has been at the center of the history of women’s lives. These narratives are as politically significant as more overt modes of protest. Bell Hooks says that the feminist efforts to develop a political theory of sexuality must continue if sexist oppression is to be eliminated. The struggle to end sexual oppression is only one component of a larger struggle to transform society and establish a new social order.