CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

These women writers, 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 female mind and the awakening of the deepest feminine self. The important element that strikes of these women’s autobiographies are the element of universality in women’s writing which cannot be side tracked. By universality, it means the collective repository of women’s experience that would be ordinarily be marginalized and treated superfluous. By writing the self the woman writer externalizes her inner experience and thereby subverts patriarchal stereotypes. They succeed reproducing a bourgeois gendered subject, a common place of dominant culture. Women’s autobiographies, are gendered sites of containment, cooptation, and resistance. The works of Angelou, Lessing and Das can help to imagine a future that integrates positive images of the past while encouraging critical and non sectarian participation in the conflicts of the present.

Feminist thinking has expanded its initial theoretical stance that emphasized the commonality of all women by reason of gender to incorporate a greater recognition and appreciation of differences among women. If women share a common need to negotiate their way through varieties of patriarchy, the particular conditions that prevail in any society-the contexts that both constrain
and enormously give meaning to women’s lives. The texts and theory of woman’s autobiography have been pivotal for revising the concepts of women’s life issues—growing up female, coming to voice affiliation, sexuality and sexuality, the life cycle. Crucially, the writing and theorizing of women’s lives has often occurred in texts that place an emphasis on collective process while questioning the sovereignty and universality of the solitary self. The growing academic interest in women’s autobiography may be the result of interplay of political economic and aesthetic factors. Autobiographies by women and people of color introduce stirring narratives of self-discovery that authorize new subjects which claim kinship in a literature of possibility. The growth of the gender ethnic, and area studies programs which address the interests of new educational constituencies, has created a demand for texts that speak of diverse experiences and issues. Sidonie Smith asserted that any theory of female textualuity must recognize how patriarchal culture has fictionalized “woman” and how in response women autobiographers challenged the gender ideologies surrounding them in order to script their life narratives.

As a body of narratives, women’s autobiographical writing provides a spectrum of gendered identity within a range of meaning that is circumscribed by the culture in which it is embedded. The autobiographies of Angelou, Lessing and Das claim an area within which they witness to and subvert the culture’s production of the female and their relegation to the private sphere. It
unmasks the relations of domination reversing hierarchies of value; but by holding them within the private sphere. Acknowledging the centrality and complexity of context reveals the range of experiences and expectations within which women live. It provides a vital perspective from which to interpret women’s ways of navigating the weave of relationships and structures which constitute their worlds. Though these writers when talking about their lives, lie sometimes, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused and get things wrong, yet they are revealing truths. These truths don’t reveal the past “as it actually was” aspiring to a standard of objectivity. They give us instead the truths of our experiences. They aren’t the result of empirical research or the logic of mathematical deductions. Unlike like the reassuring Truth of the scientific ideal, the truths of personal narratives are neither open to proof nor self-evident. They were understood only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the context that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. Sometimes the truth seen in personal narratives jar from the complacent security, as interpreters outside the story and make aware that own place in the world plays a part in our interpretations and shapes the meanings we derive from them.

Women’s personal narratives provide immediate, diverse and rich sources of feminist revisions of knowledge. In the face of women’s life stories, the search for truth requires truths-a symbolic as well as semantic revolution by which it both challenges and reconstructs the traditional definition of reality.
These common autobiographies have focused on the construction of a gendered self-identity and on the relationship between that self and society. The truths that women express are not regarded as merely subjective, that is pertinent only to a single individual experience, but, a collective experience. The truths of personal narrative are the truths revealed from real positions in the world, through lived experience in social relationships, in the context of passionate beliefs and partisan stands. They recount efforts to grapple with the world in all its confusion and complexity and with the normal lack of omniscience that characterizes the human condition.

The sum total of the personal experiences of one individual expressed through her autobiography becomes a part of the repository of the universalized experience of womanhood. This is not to discount the plurality of the female sensibility or the variety and versatility of individual female identity. Thus this study grew out of the need to demonstrate that the autobiographies of these women, despite of their uniqueness and individuality of each women’s personal preoccupations, there is a common ground upon which they could share their views and express their opinions whether good or bad.

Chapter I “Introduction” discusses about women’s personal narratives which illuminates the course of life over time and follow for its interpretation in its historical and cultural context. The very act of giving form to a whole life- or a considerable portion of it requires, social dynamics which seem to
have been more significant in shaping the life. Autobiography as a genre highlights the traditional binary opposition of truth of one’s own life, or essentially, othering oneself in the name of truth. Dynamics of gender emerge more clearly in the personal narratives of women than in those of men. Certainly, men are affected by the social construction of gender, but for men, gender has been an unmarked category. For a woman, however, the story is rarely told without reference to the dynamics of gender. Since feminist theory is grounded in women’s lives and aims to analyze the role and meaning of gender in those lives and in society, women’s personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research.

The African woman’s autobiography which comes directly out of the fact that she has long been constructed as publicly silenced. In the other words while the surface text fits the African autobiographical mould of the self as a transmitter of collective voice, the often submerged or truncated text has to do with the woman self, within the context of an ongoing story of woman’s experience. The developing discussion of women’s autobiography, arguing that self-revelation runs counter to the definition of woman in patriarchal culture, adds texture to the discussion of African woman’s autobiography.

The second chapter “Racial Voices” throws light on the impact of Racism in the autobiographies of these three writers. The evolution of Angelou’s personal consciousness raises to become a voice of universal
consciousness for African-American people. Doris Lessing’s very presence in the bush, who was brought up in Southern Rhodesia, also witnesses the effects of colonization. Kamala Das was also sensitive to the British domination in India and its consequences with the oppressive climate of Nalapat House. In the first volume I know Why the Caged Bird Sings, seems to continue the story of female slaves, though crucially adapted. During the 1930s and early 1940s influences Angelou’s outlook on herself as a black person. Even though divorce geographically displaces Angelou from her parented home, the new stable home she finds with Momma cannot protect her from racial injustices encountered in Stamps or any place else. Even under the protective arm of Momma, Angelou suffers from social reaction for her expectation as a black person. In the prologue of Gather Together in my Name, Angelou provides a communal voice to the disillusionment of the black community when their hopes for economic and racial equality in America disintegrate in the first years following World War II. Black men, securing decent jobs crossed the line that they would never be able to step back again. After experiencing economic security during the war, they began to expect, rather than just to hope, for economic opportunity. Angelou soon discovers, however that her dream for the “good times coming” would not be realized. Against this background of community and individual disillusionment over racial inequality the inward journey of a young mother’s passage into adulthood is written.
In *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* her experiences, as she encounters the white world on more intimate terms, are vastly different than those depicted in her first two volumes, *Caged Bird* and *Gather Together*. However Angelou continues to pose the most important question for her as an individual and for every member of her race that what it means to be Black in America. In order to facilitate her quest in *Singin’ and Swingin’* Angelou writes her narrative from two perspectives. In the first she examines the relationship between Black and White people in America from the perspective of a young single Black woman, and in the second, she examines the life of an individual from the perspective of a woman who has achieved success as a mother and as an entertainer.

In the *Heart of a Woman* Angelou sets herself, like her people, firmly on a spiritual quest for racial equality. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou examines the social and cultural history of Black Americans during the turbulent sixties and also her personal account of that history. Her reaction of the Civil Rights Movement helps the reader to understand the chaos of the movement’s organization, yet it also reveals the courage displaced by the Black activists during an important period in American history. Angelou’s direct involvement in social protest does not, as autobiographer, enlarge her own image as a pivotal element of the movement. she always describes her participation in civil rights demonstrations as only one member of the larger Black Community.
Angelou’s fifth volume *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, departs from the traditional focus of Black American Autobiography. This fifth volume gives the reader much more public Angelou, one who is fully politicized and whose self-definition had been changed by life in Ghana, where she confronts the reality of Black Americaness. She focuses on her son, whose growth into manhood had been described alongside his mother’s growth into self-recognition. She returns to the United States with a fully realized identity as a Black American Woman, who despite her African ancestry is fully American.

Though in Doris Lessing’s *Under my Skin*, Lessing learned that she did not want to live as a white settler, she also discovered that white Rhodesia— for all the middle-class British snobbisms, its provincialism and tedium and even more its apparent blindness to the black lives that made possible its standard of living—was not without virtues. This sense for the intricate has made Lessing impatient with politics and parties. It is emblematic of Southern Rhodesian settler culture and for the imperialist mentality that built it.

Kamala Das *My Story* provides a succinct account of changing social conditions within the narrow purview of her own ancestral house in Nalapat. In the process of writing, the self in this work, the poet herself a victim of colonial depredation. When Kamala was just a little child growing up in
Calcutta she came to realize that the British denied her self-expression, freedom, recognition of talents, social acceptance and right to exist as an independent being. This gave her a morbid sense of insecurity and rejection which led to several inhibitions, complexes and fears in her. Kamala Das’s *My Story* which at one level of analysis is a creative expression of colonial anguish begins with the nauseating memories of the British rule in India.

The third chapter “Feminist Overtones” focuses on the gender issues in the autobiographies of Angelou, Lessing and Das. 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 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. 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 of the importance of knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people. In spite of the suppression, African-American women have managed to do intellectual work.
Given the black adult’s necessity to compromise Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* grows 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. 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. Her imaginary world of language and literature is stolen by the intrusion of phallic power. Her development in *Gather Together in my Name* is reflective of a particular type of black woman, subjected to certain social forces that assault black woman with unusual ferocity. Angelou acknowledges the defeat and vividly recreates the alienation and fragmentation that characterized her life. Angelou figures as an extremely lonely young woman; a young woman more isolated in 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. In *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. It also examines Angelou’s married life with a white man. *The Heart of a Woman*
documents Angelou for the first time as an active political protestor and as the coordinator to Martin Luther King. Angelou has experienced the masculine prejudice which has ridiculed her physical appearance, and raped her innocence. Lack of black 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. In *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Maya Angelou continually reminds 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.

Doris Lessing has also displayed an amazing courage in portraying the feminine experience in her autobiographies *Under my Skin* and *Walking in the Shade* without any inhibitions in protesting against the male definitions of women against the limit set for women, against women’s finding total fulfillment in submissive domesticity. 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 in adolescence, of her sexuality and later, as a young woman of her political beliefs. Because white women and girls are supposed to avoid the bush, Lessing’s escape there is a transgressive gesture She goes into space outside her parents’ idea of where—and what she can do, and so it
becomes, for Lessing, a space of self definition, a way of opposing herself to her parents. 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. Kamala Das’s *My Story* makes her bold attempt in expressing herself by throwing the traditional Indian morality to winds in her love life. The consciousness of the culturally defined category ‘woman’ hovers 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. 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 fourth chapter “Rainbow of Voices” deeply analyses the ‘Self’ in these autobiographies and the ‘pluralities’ of self. The most salient feature of autobiographical subject is and often explicit “plural subject” rather than the singular subject. Linked in this way in which a “self” is construed and explored as something as much more than “individual”: unique in one sense, but also closely articulating with the lives of others, an articulation that can remain every bit as important after these others die. For the “authentic self” is itself very much a social product, and the attempt to assert its privileged autonomy can merely underline its ideological systems through which it is constituted.
The autobiographical act therefore explores these multiple selves while at the same time it attempts to disentangle the inner, private self from these other selves.

Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* which focuses on a young African-American female’s quest to know and develop herself. In this volume Angelou, re-examines her “other” self, the self which begins to define its identity. Just as social serotypes objectify the Black female subject, this new archetypal, composite self would impose a different manner of limitation on the Black women’s becoming, establishing a fixed notion of what Black Woman is and can become. Rather than a complacent composite, the black female subjectivity that Angelou forwards turns upon the potential for a resistant hybridity within black female subjectivity. Angelou begins this project by [re]presenting the fragmented black female subject, dispossessed of her strength, sensuality and intelligence through her cultural displacement into negative stereotypic/mythic images.

The only black female figure that impacts the Angelou’s development is her mother Vivian Baxter, who plays a crucial role in her process of subject formation, but she is by no means the only black female figure that impacts the girl’s development. Two other important formula presences collaborate with Vivian to influence young Angelou’s becoming, Grand-mother Annie Henderson and Mrs. Bertha Flowers. During the historical moment in which
Maya is growing up, these women also seem to represent three images of black female identity which the young girl must negotiate in the course of her own subject formation. Angelou, the adult autobiographers reveals these images and the identities they describe as constructs, however disrupting them to collapse the dualistic portrayals of Black women as embodied in the age old images of the Matriarch and the Jezebel. Out of the rubble of dismantled images and identities, binaries and oppositional constructions, Angelou’s autobiography opens up a discursive space of political resistance and personal potential arising from an organic, ever emerging, hybridized subjectivity.

As Angelou attempts to define herself and her aspirations against her preconceptions of Africa as Motherland, she is forced to confront her expectations, as well as those of others, thus gaining insight into herself and her compatriots. Gradually she becomes aware of the nativity of their expectations, thereby realizing that Africa provides escapes but not redemption. As personal history *All God’d Children need Travelling Shoes* is richly significant in what it records about W.E.B.DuBois, Shirle Graham and more significantly for what it reveals about Angelou’s growing confrontation with her double consciousness: her American and African Selves. By first establishing and then disrupting dominant images of black subject she escapes stasis to become a subject in the perpetual process of forming and emerging. It is a dynamic subjectivity that emerges out of the young Angelou’s girlhood, setting the stage for the multidimensional nature of Angelou’s adult years. *I know why the
caged bird sings then, does not aspire towards or conclude with a sudden epiphany of identity. There is no final “I” or “Me” that is revealed and reveled in. But there is the process of the journey not toward the self but of self.

Under My Skin which describes Lessing’s detachment from her name suppresses the loneliness and alienations she experienced because she perceived herself as unwanted by her mother who was convinced to the last possible moment that Lessing was a boy. Depending on context, the authentic ‘I’ can fulfill the social expectations through the ‘Hostess’ personality and ‘Tigger’ personalities, and also withdraw into its inner space to explore its potential possibilities, aspirations and sensibilities. This also points out the humankind’s capacity to have multiple selves. Even as Lessing expresses the desire to escape her mother through geographical distance, she actually, “incorporates her mother’s life into her own”, displaying contradictory desire to separate from her mother and identify with her. This is based more closely in understanding of “mother-daughter relations” as determined by connectedness in which the daughter “established more fluid and permeable ego boundaries with her mother. Lessing paradoxically identifies with her mother even as she tries to separate from her, which results in Lessing’s incorporation of her mother’s Under My Skin as embodied in the Hostess personality. Even so, in her late seventies, Lessing seems to separate herself from the Hostess, and to let down her guard in order to manage a reconciliation between her mother and herself, in her imagination at least: forty years after her mother’s death. In
**Walking in the Shade** Lessing finally seems able, through her imaginative transcendence, resolves the conflict she has experienced over the years concerning her division into “I” and “She” her private self, the observer and its protector and the Hostess.

The fifth chapter “Female Poetics” discusses the various techniques used by these writers. As a form of public communication, autobiographical narratives provide good reasons for actions and decisions. The general chronological structure of autobiographies can serve as a significant rhetorical resource because the authors can unfold their lives and suggest the formative forces on their thinking. Autobiographies written by women, in most cases, are almost always devoid of the unusual sense or convention of harmony and orderliness. Their narratives are not chronological and progressive, but disorderly, fragmented, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connected chapters involving linearity. Autobiographies written by women are often interrupted by long apostrophizes, meditations, quotes, anecdotes. Almost all of these devices can be found in Angelou, Lessing and Das.

Although Black autobiography is not considered a distinct, separate literary genre, it has been widely accepted as a unique subclass of the autobiographical genre, having its own distinguishing patterns, themes, stylistic preferences, and their elements. Autobiographical narratives can be plotted strictly by chronology, with the narrator looking back upon life course and
organizing the segments of telling according to the movement of historical time. But a strict linear organization of narrative can be often displayed by a chronological modes of employment. Angelou in her autobiographies employ a scheme of associational, fragmented remembering and flash-forwards. Like the autobiographies of other black woman writers, Maya Angelou’s books are not written in a rigid, sequential, linear pattern. The author is not compelled to fit her life experiences into a neat little package to show that all she has encountered and accomplished has produced certain sought after objective. Granted that there is a sense of chronology as the readers see the character of Angelou grow from a three year old displaced child to the anxiety ridden teenager, from a courageous, exciting young adult to a experienced, mature woman; the adult writer, however, freely employs digressions, loosely connected events, brief stories and reminiscences.

The two volumes of Lessing’s autobiography illustrates manifests and reflects the complexities inherent in the internal structure of this genre as well as the ways in which the craft of this writer puts its critical tensions to meaningful use. Some of the major concerns that preoccupy the writer of Under my Skin surface through this text along with theoretical discussions regarding the nature of autobiography and the process of writing it.

The narration of My Story moves back and forth in time. Kamala Das while narrating her childhood experiences she digresses to talk about her maternal uncles and aunts and her grandmother. Each fictional technique
contributes to the overall completeness and credibility of autobiographical text. *My Story* as woman’s tale of woe paid heed to its themes of loneliness and subaltern anguish. The tone of sincerity and the open confession of creative fulfillment in the writer’s words underscore Kamala Das as a true confessionist. The female autobiographist is viewed as radical and subversive when she writes the self and hence the diffidence and confession that attend women’s writing. Thus this chapter sees style as the act of the individual and defines it as the fashion in which each autobiographer satisfies certain conditions of the genre.

The women autobiographies from the earliest to contemporary period, many women resist the conventional form created by western values and ideals. This resistance is initiated by their early exclusion from the public realm. Once women were included in and granted access to history, they redefined importance in term of experience. Interestingly their experience was different from the conventional story, which recounted a life of success rooted in the public world. Although the completely coherent self was recognized as an illusion, that self went on to differentiate through individualism. The problem was that the most women did not see themselves as separate and distinct individuals. Their lives were much more fragmented and more fluid than distinct. Naturally in the autobiographies of Angelou, Lessing and Das, the construction self and themselves is as fluid as with others.
This study concludes the need of new approaches to evaluate and appreciate the work of women creative writers. It stresses on the individuality and autonomy women. In the recent feminist studies, the approach to works of women creative writers should be aimed at understanding their feminine sensibility and the development of their personality. One such possible approach is to relate an autobiography of such creative writers to their literary works so as to trace the parallel development of personality as a individual and as a writer. Literary works are always subjective and as such they reveal the personality of the writer. In other words, literary works are full of autobiographical details. An autobiography of a woman creative writer is therefore, a great asset to understand her creative genius feminine sensibility and individualism.