INTRODUCTION

"Autobiographers cannot lie because anything they say, however mendacious they know it or not"

Stanley Fish, Reading Autobiographies

“All writing is Confessional” (qtd in Ramanan 1) said Nietzsche. There is hardly a writer who does not select from personal experience to build a verbal artefact which, however imaginative it might be, does not have the stamp of the writer’s personality. Writing an autobiography usually thought of as looking back, can just as easily be looking across or through, with the passing of time. Autobiography is a relatively new field of literary and cultural study and women’s autobiographies in particular being new subjects of discussion and study. Research of autobiography favor an interdisciplinary approach- literary criticism, sociology, psychoanalysis, history and women’s studies- all having valuable perspectives to contribute to any analysis of the representation of an individual’s life.

Women’s autobiographical narratives present and interpret woman’s life experiences. They can make many forms including biography, autobiography, life-history- a life story told to a second person who records it – diaries, journals and letters. 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. Autobiography localizes the very program of much feminist theory the reclaiming of the female subject—even as it foregrounds the central issue of contemporary critical thoughts—the problematic status of the self. Recent studies have assumed a common argument that women’s autobiography represents a separate and distinct tradition. A feminist reconstruction of women’s autobiography, against the backdrop of the twentieth-century philosophical questions of the self, can begin to use autobiography for the fertile ground as it is.

Though various style autobiographies took—journal, confessional, memoir, first or third person narrative—they always had a problem in sharing narrative space with other genres because of its specific burden of telling the truth. No other genre, not even biography and history, has their claim to truth. Autobiography therefore is destined to be perpetually on its guard, which under deconstruction, appears to be as much a rhetorical stance as that of its non-autobiographical other. Derrida sketches out in the opening chapter of his *Grammatology* entitled, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” Autobiography is no longer “an open book” for the reader-taker but a writing, “a signifying practice” (qtd in Tirumalesh 6-26). with all its implications.

The understanding of any study related to autobiography immediately confronts the problem of defining the term. Because of the rich variety inherent to those works that have been called “autobiography” and the multiple definitions that have emerged from them as well as the seeming lack of clear
generic bounds, some scholars have suggested the impossibility of a prescriptive definition for the term. James Olney observes:

\[ \text{…one could understand the life around which autobiography forms itself in a number of other ways besides the perfectly legitimate one of “individual history and narrative”: We can understand it as the vital impulse- the impulse of life- that is transformed by being lived through the unique medium of the individual and individual’s special, peculiar psychic configuration ; we can understand it as consciousness, pure and simple, consciousness referring to no objects outside itself, to no events, to no other lives; we can understand it as participation in an absolute existence far transcending the shifting, changing unrealities of mundane life; we can understand it as the moral tenor of individual’s being. Life in all these latter senses does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of individual being. (qtd in Smith and Watson, Autobiography 145)} \]

Definitions and criteria pertaining to autobiography, including such facets of theory, style, audience and others, have been variously formulated. The word “autobiography” was ostensibly first used by Robert Southey in Quaterly Review in 1809 and the first autobiography was probably written by a minister, Rev. W.P. Scargill, and published in 1834 (qtd in Olney Autobiography 5). Nevertheless some scholars credit Rousseau’s Confessions
published in the 1760’s: Montaigue’s *Essays*, written during the latter half of the sixteenth century and Plato’s *Seventh Epistle* written during the fourth century B.C., as innovative work leading to the development of autobiography. Although various definitions do somewhat cohere, almost every critic writing about the genre emphasizes a distinctive inherent quality. William L. Howarth defines autobiography in “Some Principles of Autobiography,” as “a self portrait with artist being the model as well who must alternately pose and paint” (364).

Patricia M. Spacks describes in *Selves in Hiding* the act of autobiography as “the dynamic process of recorded choice” (112). According to James Olney in *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*:

> An Autobiography projects a single radical energy originating in the subject center, an aggressive, creative expression of the self, a defense of individual integrity in the face of an otherwise multiple, confusing, swarming, and inimical universe. (15)

On the other hand Philip Lejeune defines autobiography in his essay “Le Pacte Autobiographique” as “retrospective narrative in prose that a real pattern makes of his own existence when he emphasizes his individual life, especially the story of his personality” (qtd in Smith and Watson, *Autobiography* 136). According to Giddens, in his work *The Modernity and Self-Identity* the process of actually writing an autobiography, getting it published and having it read is a very minor variant of much more general autobiographical thinking.
He says that in this “broad sense of an introspective self-history produced by the individual concerned [autobiography] whether written down or not… is actually the care of self identity in modern life” (qtd in Cosslett 26).

Autobiography is a form, which reveals the inner being of the writer, it is a self-exploration which teaches the reader about the life of the writer in a way which a Bildungroman would do. This problem is associated with the gender prejudice and has been tersely put forth by Susan Stanford Friedman: “A man has the luxury of forgetting his sex. He can think of himself as an “individual.” Women…, reminded at every turn in the great cultural hall of mirrors of their sex…. Have no such luxury (qtd in Newman 2).

Woman’s autobiographical writing: seldom taken seriously as a focus of study before the seventies was not deemed appropriately “complex” for academic dissertations. Critics such as Gerog Misch, Georges Gusdorf, and Williams Spengeman, restricted their focus to the lives of greatmen-Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Gothe Carlyle, Henry Adams whose complicated lives and literary tones assured their value as cultural capital. According to the theories of critics that include Sidonie Smith and Estelle Jelinek, autobiography is an intensely subjective reconstruction of the past events and past selves. The narrative reconstruction of those events involves the autobiographer in a process of selective and retrospective ordering of past experiences in which the author offers a recreated version of that remembered
self. As a result, the narrative gives the reader an image of the author’s self which is self-reflective where the eye becomes the introspection of “I.”

Estelle Jelinek in *Women’s Autobiographies: Essays in Criticism* compares women’s autobiographies with men and agrees that autobiographies written by men contain the most hasty references if any, to wife and children and that these autobiographies often present a restrictive male view of “history revealing the subject’s connectedness to the rest of the society”, representing the times and “mirroring the era” (17). She adds, “While women’s life writing emphasize personal and domestic details and describe connections to other people”(10). and women concentrate instead on their personal lives-domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who have influenced the, almost ignoring their own careers and worldly affairs. Discussing the autobiographies of well known and publicly successful women, Patricia Meyer Spacks comments upon their self deprecatory stance in “Selves in Hiding” as quoted in *Women, Autobiography, Theory : A Reader*: “They use autobiography paradoxically, partly as a mode of self-denial” (88).

Earliest recorded autobiographies by women were cloistered by nuns such as Hildegard of Bingen, Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avilla. They spoke of the emotional and spiritual inner lives of the women who wrote them. These women suppressed their deeds and experiences in the physical world to describe instead their journeys of the soul. Little secular autobiography written by women exists with the exception of purely pedantic household accounts or
fantasy romances distinguished as fiction. Generally women’s experience were
distinguished as fiction, such as Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* and end
with the heroine safely married and living happily ever after. The personal
narratives illuminate the course of life overtime 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, at least implicit, considering the
meaning of the individual and social dynamics which seem to have been more
significant in shaping the life. 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.

In the fifties and sixties, several women’s memoir became best-sellers:
some were by prominent or “notorious” women, others by unknown writers
who created compelling life stories. By incorporating hitherto unspoken female
experience in telling their own stories, woman revised the content and purposes
of autobiography and insisted on alternative stories. The translation of Simone
De Beauvoir’s multivolume autobiography *Memoirs of the Dutiful Daughter*,
[1959] *The Prime Life* [1962] and others- was important for its interrogation of
the category of “woman” making of self. In this Beauvoir traces the progress
and success of self terms of intellectual and political achievements and also
mirrors the history of the times. Anais Nin’s multivolume *Diaries* [1962]
combined self-exposure and literary experimentation. A generation of girls
grew up reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* [1952] and *I never Promised You a Rose Garden*, Mary MacCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, [1957] first serialized in magazines in the fifties, was acclaimed as life writing of high seriousness by the eastern establishment. Lillian Hellman’s three memoirs *An Unfinished Woman*, [1969] *Scoundrel Time* (1973) and *Pentimento* [1976] were considered as bestsellers and incorporated in films. Similarly for Asian American writing, the proliferating critical scholarship on Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* [1976] inspired examination of narratives, of immigration and theorizing of specific national identities, hybridity, and generationally distinct histories. Revising the concepts of women’s life issues- growing up female, coming to voice affiliation, sexuality and texuality, the life cycle have been pivotal for the texts and theory of woman’s autobiography. 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. 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.

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. Most centrally, women reading other women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as “mirrors” of their own unvoiced aspirations. In recent years much work has been done on women’s Autobiography and there is a strong school of thought that believes that when women write, they are usually autobiographical.

In 1980’s feminist autobiographical critics encountered an obvious gap, the absence of women’s texts from an accepted canon of autobiographical writing. It was not that women did not produce texts, but they were, as in other genres, deemed up to be unimportant, crude illegitimate and fail to live up to the necessary text of ‘great writing’ Women’s autobiography questions who the writer is. It finally comes to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a fixed stable identity. Rather women’s autobiography asserts that women are fluid, simultaneously employing various identities. Woman cannot experience herself as an absolutely isolate self, a unique entity as her social acculturation constantly makes her aware of how she is being defined as a woman that is a member of a group whose identity has hardly been defined by the dominant male culture. It is the socialization of female which conditions them as a woman.

Around 1980 the criticism of women’s autobiography necessarily came of age. It was clear that new theories and generic definitions were required to describe the women’s writing that had been recovered and was being produced. It became clear to many feminist that academic scholars were complicit in
broader cultural practices that assumed the autobiographer to be male and reproduced cultural stereotypes of differences between men and women.

The Hoffmann and Cully collection *Women’s Personal Narratives* (1985) included women’s letters, diaries, journals and oral to expand the canon of women’s writing. The late 80’s saw a break through in numerous studies of women’s autobiography. Two books in particular proposed theories centered in woman’s textuality and the history of women’s cultural production rather than simply a gendered identity. In 1987 Sidonie Smith’s *A Poetics on Women’s Autobiography* argued that, in an androcentric tradition, autobiographical authorization was unavailable to most women. Historically absent from both public sphere and modes of written narrative, women are compelled to tell their stories differently and had done so, Medieval autobiographer Mary Kempe Smith asserted that any theory of female textuality 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.

The year 1988 saw the publications of two collections that were also influential for women’s autobiography. In *Life Lines : Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* Bella Brodozki and Celeste Schenck gathered essays which compiles First World war traditions of autobiography against post colonial forms such as the testimony of diverse sexualities in the coming out story as well as expanding the concept of autobiographical textuality to women’s
films, painted portraits and poetry. Another 1988 collection *The Private Self* edited by Shari Benstock with essays examining a wide range of women’s narrative forms, includes two influential essays that contextualizes female subjectivity in very different ways.

Carolyn Heilbun’s *Writing a Woman’s Life* [1988] was an important milestone in women’s autobiographical criticism because it called the attention of a larger public field. While many theorists of women’s autobiography worked primarily in generic terms, others grounded their analysis of women’s writing in specific historical periods. Notably Felicity Nussbaum’s *The Autobiographical Subjects* (1989) on eighteenth century women’s writing and Regenia Gagnier’s *Subjectivities* (1991) on nineteenth century British working class writing performed close readings of neglected texts of women’s writing. They provided materialist analyses of culture to situate forgotten women’s traditions within established periods of literary history, thereby revising the terms of subjectivity. The concepts of female selfhood in the work of feminist theorists Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorw, in contrast, are grounded in recognition of the historically generated differences between men and women. Application of their theories of women’s selfhood to women’s autobiographical texts—particularly those by women who also belong to racial, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities—illuminates the unfolding narratives of women’s life writing and thereby revises the prevailing concerns of autobiography.
For African American subjects who were historically denied access to public modes of self-representation, writing is not just about telling a good story. From the slave narratives published during the nineteenth century to the contemporary novel, black authors have been cutting through the culturally imposed layers that naturalize dominant white hierarchies of racialized difference. There have been pseudo narratives of female slaves penned by whites, in the nineteenth century. It is only recently that black women, preceded by such figures as Ida Wells, March Church Terrel and Ruby Giidwin began to rough out a course of high literary interest that is different from one pursued by the males.

From their earliest writings in the west, autobiography was sufficiently central to African-American that they made it the genre of preference in the development of black literary culture. In the eighteenth century and nineteenth century displaced Africans found it critical in gaining the language they needed to enter while debates on the humanity of Africans, and to challenge western European discourses on freedom and race. They believed that in mastering the literacy and the language of their enslavers they could prove to their oppressors and to sympathetic white readers that people with black skins were as intelligent as other groups. Since the life story has been the most effective forum for defining black selfhood in a racially oppressive world. Challenging white hegemony, black autobiographers used narrative to fight their battle
against chattel slavery and to engage in the search for political and psychological freedom for all black people.

The black writer did not and could not participate in an ideology of self and hence separated the self from the black community and the roots of its culture. Consequently, the personal narrative becomes a historical site on which aesthetics, self-confirmation of humanity, citizenship and the significance of racial politics shaped African-American literary expression. Black autobiographers almost always focus on the racial authentication of self. Their narratives begin from a stated position that establishes and asserts the reality of self through experience. Using the white oppressor’s language and black cultural tropes, they transformed the racially inferior, abstract African Self of the master’s text into the ultimately triumphant black experiential self. The autobiographical continuum ranges from the most private, personal revelation to the most austere, historical narrative. African women’s autobiographies often embed self and individuality in relationships to family as well as to social and political history. Self revelation may be deferred until the entire range of family relationships is revealed. Alternatively, there may be juxtaposition of the expanding consciousness of the woman-self to the developing group story.

The African women’s autobiography, as African autobiography and as women’s autobiography has to be read against theoretical discussions specific to these two. Yet there is specificity to the African woman’s autobiography which comes directly out of the fact the she has long been constructed as
publicly silenced. When applied to the autobiographical narrative process such definition accommodates what Showalter, calls it as double voiced discourse. Containing a dominant and a muted story in which the reader must keep two alternative vacillating texts simultaneously in view. 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 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.

In a more recent exploration of the poetics of woman’s autobiography: Sidonie Smith posits instead in A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: *Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*:

Since the ideology of gender makes a woman’s life script a nonstory, a silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture, the ideal woman in self-erasing rather than self-promoting, and her natural story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life, but around the fluid, circumstantial, contingent responsiveness to others that according to patriarchal ideology, characterizes the life of woman but not autobiography. From that point of view, woman has no “autobiographical self” in the same sense that a man does. From that point of view she has no “public” story to tell. (34)
These positions, coupled with Gusdorf’s notion that autobiography in western man’s story make the African woman as autobiographer doubly or triply removed from the center of the autobiographical authority. Studies on African-American women’s autobiographies reveal a similar tension that is between enforced marginalization and the desire to articulate. But the African woman is writing now more than ever, and by doing so is consistently inserting herself into a history as is the final import of autobiography.

Autobiographies of South African woman like Noni Jabauva’s *Drawn in Color* (1962) and *The Ochre People* (1963) and Ellen Kuzway’s *Call Me a Woman* (1985), locate the self more directly within a larger historical context of the collective struggle for freedom and conceal the individual woman’s story. Anne Moody published her autobiography, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) before she was 30 years old. This work documents the early life of a young black woman who came of an age an activist.

The struggle for authority over discourse which is not at the heart of autobiography is clearly more acute in the African woman’s use of this form. Not having a political madate, she has no story to tell. Society confers on the male the right to present his views: his narrative becomes the representative story. The African woman’s autobiography, like the African woman’s writing in general, thus seems guaranteed to occupy a second place position, both chronologically and historically. As one variant of a woman’s story this secondary literary status reveals many of the aspects of global female
subordination. Yet it all contributes telling a collective story that is at the heart of African Literature.

The extent to which the self is seen as important a story to be told as in the group story depends on a number of personal, social historical and political configurations. Joyce Sikakne’s *A Window Of Soweto* (1977) and Winnie Mandela’s *Part of My Soul Went with Him* [1986] are such examples. This particular mode tends towards a distinct political context and is consequently specific so far with respect to South African women writers. Buchi Emecheta’s autobiography *Head Above Water* (1986) reveals remarkable early awareness of herself as a writer. Emecheta’s early autobiographies *In A Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1975), subsequently jointly republished as *Adah’s Story* (1983), demands a stronger consciousness of the woman’s self than to racism and class oppression posed as jointly detrimental to the existence of an African woman in England.

Writings by Afro-American women, like Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1987) and Harriet Wilson’s *Our Nig* (1859) contain legitimating documentation that different readers may perceive as more or less integral parts of the texts. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1984) poignantly captures the dilemmas that seemed to confront black women writers or intellectuals of her generation. Her autobiography inimitably combines all the best and worst of Hurston’s intellect and imagination. In all Black Women’s autobiographies, the struggle for the dignity of the self
persists. Insults and injuries abound in freedom as under slavery, although in different forms. Life remains a war. But the focused struggle of wills with the master has given way to a more generalized struggle to affirm the self in a hostile or indifferent, environment. African American women’s personal narratives have spoken and continue to speak of the black woman’s resistance to cultural predeterminations of their racial and feminine selves. The literary tradition of African American woman’s autobiography has created expressions of the individual self that recent writers seek to continue, even to expand upon. One of the most eloquent successors of the African American women’s autobiographical tradition is the author Maya Angelou. Born in April 14 1928 in St. Louis, Missouri to Biley Johnson, a doorman and later a naval clinician, and Vivian Baxter Johnson, Maya Angelou has come to prominence as an author, poet singer, songwriter, actor, and playwright and film director. She is perhaps best known for her series of autobiographies, the first volume being published in 1970.

Hailed as one of the greatest voices of contemporary African American Literature, Angelou is the best known for I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, a volume of autobiography which details her encounters with racism and her prepubescent rape by her mother’s lover. Her literary works particularly works particularly I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,(1970) have generated considerable critical and popular interest in part because of their depiction of Angelou’s triumph over formidable social obstacles and her struggle to achieve

Writing in the late 1960s Maya Angelou described herself in 1972 as a born loser-had to be: from a broken family, raped at eight, unwed mother at sixteen. Yet in sixty two years Angelou has achieved prominence as a writer. Stretching the autobiographical canvas she moves forward: from the being a child; to being a mother; to leaving the child; to having a chills, in the fifth volume, achieve her independence. Angelou’s writing is unique in ways more readily appreciated than analyzed or stated. Her autobiography is set in the Black community of the rural Deep South, for Angelou the Black community is more than a place or setting. As an autobiographer she is more concerned with recapturing her growing awareness of her environment: their manners, talk gestures of bravado, their thoughts and dreams. Even though frustration and tragedy touch their lives, they retain, nevertheless a measure of integrity. The central themes to be culled from *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* and that recur throughout the autobiography are courage, perseverance, the persistence or renewal of innocence against overwhelming obstacles, and the often difficult process of attaining selfhood. Related to these is the theme of survival.
Three common American autobiographical themes appear and in Maya Angelou’s autobiographical writing: community, family and the individual. To a remarkable extent Angelou comes full circle with these themes in the five volumes of her personal history and by the time she writes *All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes* each thematic idea is sufficiently permutated as to represent something new for Angelou both community and family get absolved by the individual. Throughout Angelou’s autobiography one finds variations on the common theme of interplay between the individual and the group. Central to this configuration is the discovery that the individual self is really a series of selves evolving around a core of values, opportunities and experiences.

Angelou’s poetry like prose is highly rhythmic, reflecting the dialects of her heritage. Her collection consists of “Just Give me a Cool Drink of Water” “Fore I Diie” (1971) “Oh Pray the Wings Are Gonna Fit me Well” (1975) and “Still I Rise” (1978). Although her poetry has contributed to her reputation, most critics reserve their highest praise for her prose. Her poems convey struggles, triumphs and self-affirmations that are revealed in her autobiographical works and are likewise praised for their honesty and moving sense of dignity. Maya Angelou’s celebrity lies in her strong note of self-affirmation in a review of “Still I Rise”: “I’m a woman/ phenomenally/ phenomenal woman/ That’s me” *(Publishers weekly* 87). Like an unfinished painting, the autobiographical series is an on going creation, that rejects the finality of a restricting frame. Angelou lives “beneath” recording the minutest
of details in a constantly shifting environment and giving attention to the mundane, though essential, ordinary moments of life.

Angelou’s autobiographical writing adds her voice to the chorus of her ancestors who survived to bear witness to their enslaved existence, and to testify to their claims of oppression as woman of color in American history. The slave narratives of her female ancestors stand as stark witness to the powerlessness of the enslaved African in the face of humanity’s potential for inhumanity. That, Angelou, two centuries later can still take racial oppression as her subject, says much about the placement of her people in American society. Further it reinforces the particular importance of inspirational and political writing in African American autobiography.

In her series of autobiographies Angelou constructs a thematic bridge between the explicit expressions of racial oppression evident in the eighteenth century and the implicit expressions of racial oppression in the late twentieth century. Each generation of African American women Autobiographers has individually confronted the dynamic tension between assimilation to a prescribed American identity and their allegiance to their own culture. The tradition of African American women’s autobiography thus reveals how these tensions have been acknowledged and resisted by many women for more than three centuries Moreover, the autobiographical tone reflects a change from that of the rendered pain characterizing slave narratives, to the joyous celebration of the survival found in Angelou’s writing. As an African Autobiographer,
Angelou shares the pain of the past while celebrating the hard-won accomplishments of the present. Like the women autobiographers who preceded her, Angelou is writing her life through her readings of those other life stories that came before her. In an interview in 1983 Angelou was asked by Claudia Tate, whether her writings were “autobiographical novels or autobiographies” Angelou’s emphatic reply was “autobiographies” (151). Implicit in Angelou’s response in her recognition of a clear difference between the novel and autobiography: the novel form is a fiction in which the author employs narrative techniques in the construction of the story; the autobiographical form is where the author, as subject combines the elements of fact and fiction as recreations of the author’s life experiences. As personal memory is as unstable recording of the fact, it is unwise to assume that autobiographical writing is not the complete truth, nor should the reader of the autobiography expect it to be.

Angelou’s writings are autobiographical and not autobiographical novels. Equally important is how Angelou’s narratives challenge the dominance of any stable notion of an autobiographical subject, that traditional narrative of the white, male, Western subject, secure in the power of his gender and race. She explores instead the ways in which she, as the autobiographical subject is multiply situated in American society. As a double minority of race and gender in American society, Angelou’s creation of self challenge, the literary concepts of subject and subjectivity that have been long established in
the canon of American autobiography. The negotiation of her subjectivity provides her the literary form by which Angelou compares cultural with individual life experiences. For contemporary African American women autobiographers, then, the subject of the autobiographies is no longer considered unique and unaffected by multicultural issues such as race, ethnicity, class gender or religion.

According to Cudjoe’s theory, the conditions of slavery- expressed in the eighteenth century African American autobiographies- were replaced only by the continued violation of the personhood of the Afro-American in the twentieth century. This violation Cudjoe notes was largely ignored as it related to the study of the autobiographical writings of African American women during the same period. As a result the individual experience of the Black woman went largely ignored until autobiographies such as Angelou’s began to receive critical acclaim during the latter decades of twentieth century African American women have traditionally not only suffered as a result of their racial subjugation but also because of their unacknowledged efforts to record their experiences. It is in response to these specific concerns that Angelou offers her autobiographical writings, presenting an authentic and profound recreation of the conditions of African American womanhood in the late twentieth century.

Recent work in the theory of multiculturalism includes investigations into the autobiographies of Maya Angelou. One multicultural theorist, Soundra O’
Neale, argues in her essay “Reconstruction of the Composite self: New image of Black women in Maya Angelou’s continuing Autobiography” that:

the literary self that Angelou has claimed is a model which she holds before Black women. The creative thread with which Angelou weaves her tapestry is not herself as central subject: but rather a composite of a multiple ‘I’ who is an archetypal self demonstrating the trials, rejections, and endurance’s which so many Black women share.”(26)

According to “O” Neale, “The process of her autobiography is not a singular statement of individual that she “is” because her life is an inextricable part of the misunderstood reality of who Black people and Black women truly are”(26). For critics such a Cudjoe and O’Neale then, Angelou’s autobiographies capture the innovative blend of the personal with the communal, where Angelou the individual becomes a valid representative of the collective African American Community that has endured three hundred years of oppressive history and repeated hardships in its attempts to redirect its own existence.

Beginning with Mary G.Mason’s *The Other Voice* and continuing with Estelle Jelinek’s *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* Sidonie Smith’s *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, the agenda has been to rediscover a tradition of women’s own. The effort to reconstruct a literary past, a tradition of English Autobiography that accounts for women’s texts, originated in the
nineteenth century. Within three decades Victorian antiquarians, scholars and critics had begun to resurrect and publish the texts of women’s autobiography. 

*The Memoirs of Ann Lady Fanshawe,* (1829) *The Autobiography of Mrs. Alice Thornton,* (1875) *The Autobiography of Anne Lady Halkett* (1875-76) and numerous spiritual accounts were written by non conformist women.

Middle class autobiographies underwent significant mutations once middleclass women’s roles had been redefined to include possibilities for work outside the home, as autobiographies of Beatrice Webb, Annie Beasant, and Frances Power Cobb, reflects the distinct historical experience of women as unequal and selfless subjects. Margaret Oliphant’s posthumously published Autobiography in 1828-97 demonstrates the devasting consequences for the writing subject. Virginia Woolf did not live to write her memoirs and the bulk of the autobiographical Woolf exists in her diary band letters. In her *Sketch of the past* (1939) her effort at writing her memoirs, she comments at length on her relation to mirrors, remembering from her crucial events from her childhood. Sylvia Palth’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) published under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas is presented as a novel. It opens up possibilities within the autobiographical form which still demand recognition and development. In this English women autobiographical tradition Doris Lessing came out with her two great modern autobiographies *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997).
Born as Doris May Taylor in Khermanshah, in what is now Iran, on October 22, 1919, Lessing spent her formative years on a farm in Southern Rhodesia, what is now Zimbabwe, where her British parents moved in 1925. She has won a number of awards and prizes, including the prix Medicis in 1976 and the Los Angeles Time Book Prize in 1995. After two failed marriages, Lessing moved to London where other forms of oppression engaged her art. *The Golden Notebook*, (1962) her best known work brought her instant fame and a cult following as the high priestess of Feminism. Her radical political affinities drew her into British communist party but she resigned in 1956 at the time of Hungarian uprising, never to return.

Having won the Nobel prize for literature Doris Lessing is generally recognized as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. Her works display a broad range of interests and concerns, including racism, communism psychology and mysticism. Since she began writing, Doris Lessing has been preoccupied with names, labels and categories, and is well aware of their limiting effects on individuals. Nonetheless names and labels imposed by others seem impossible to escape, as Lessing knows from her “Jane Somers” experiment: *Diary of a Good Neighbor* (1983) and *If the Old Could…* (1984), two novels which Lessing published under the pen name, Jane Somers, “sold poorly” and “went largely unviewed”, particularly in U.S until the secret was out that Doris Lessing was the “real person” behind the book. After she revealed herself as author, the two novels were reissued in a single
volume, bearing her name. The subsequent success of *Diaries of Jane Somers* was ironically reinforced by the very publicity generated by the hoax.

More over Lessing frequently invites, in fact creates a more intimate relationship between herself and her readers than is necessary under the traditional mantle of fiction by experimenting with hybrid genres such as autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography which stretches the boundaries between fiction and autobiography to their elastic limit. The genre of autobiography as Helen Buss emphasizes posits a much more intimate relationship between author, text and reader than does fiction. Helen Buss writes in “Writing and Reading Autobiographically”:

> Autobiography offers a different contract with the reader, a guarantee that the writer id taking the risk of offering a revelation of some part of her/his own personal life. Fiction writers may indeed draw on their lives for material, but they need not attest to this. Whether it be an event in personal history, a memoir of some significant other, or the tender life of dream or fantasy, the autobiography offers a portion of the vulnerability of the personal self gestures of public testimony in order to facilitate some communal therapeutic purpose, in Writing and Reading Autobiography to effect some change, some healing, some new way of being in the world.(6)
For several decades Lessing prefers not to “risk” the “guarantee” that she is revealing some portion of her “personal life,” and therefore, does not “facilitate” the “communal therapeutic purpose” or personal healing that this thesis argues her autobiography later achieves. In the early phase of her writing career (1950s and 1960s), she chooses to fictionalize her life and writes comfortably within the genre of the novel. Because of its different reading contract, she need not attest to her sources however closely characters and events may resemble those from her own life.

After years of resistance to making herself weak by acknowledging that she is working out of her own life, admitting her life as her primary source, Lessing completes the first two volumes of her proposed autobiographies - *Under My Skin* (1994) and *Walking in the Shade* (1997). Even though the magnitude of this two volume autobiographical project suggests otherwise, she claims to be writing her autobiography under duress. When asked in an interview why she now chosen to write within the confines of the autobiographical genre, she responds “Only because somebody else is writing a biography of me” (qtd in Field, 47). She seems concerned with presenting a public image of herself which she, in part can control by giving her own perspectives Rather than risk being presented in the distorted light of someone else’s point of view, Lessing prefers to try and claim her own life by writing an autobiography by presenting, if not the truth at least her version of what she has experienced and why.
The task of relocating Doris Lessing within a critical tradition that seeks to make sense of her oeuvre is a difficult one. Many critics have situated the major sites of meaning in her texts in the struggles between the individual and collective. Others observe especially the manner in which it strikes an efficient balance between twin themes of continuity and change while dealing with problematic of discovering wholeness in a fragmentary and compartmentalized world. Lessing is described as a writer who possesses a unique sensitivity, writing out of her own intense experience, her own subjectivity, but at the same time writing out the spirit of the times. Lessing’s novels work through dialectics, opposite sates juxtaposed to manifest how paradox functions to evoke unity. The mystics too are similar in their fondness for her co-existence of contrary but corresponding states, for instance presence of God and absence from oneself.

The major unifying theme of her work is the need for individuals to confront their most fundamental assumptions about life as way of avoiding preconceived belief system and achieving psychic and emotional wholeness. Lessing’s first novel *The Grass Is Singing* (1950) was one of the first books to confront the issue of apartheid. The novel established two of Lessing’s early major concerns: racism, or “the color bar’ and the way the historical and political circumstances can determine the course of a person’s life. Lessing also established a strong reputation as a short story writer in her career. Among her most acclaimed volumes of short fiction are *Five Short Novels*, (1953) *The
*Habit of Loving* (1957) and African Stories all which deal with racial concerns in African settings and with the emancipation of modern women. Her growing reputation was secured with the highly acclaimed “Children of Violence” series which traces the intellectual development of *Martha’s Quest*, (1952) a bildungsroman in which Martha attempts to escape her restricted upbringing and her domineering mother. *A Proper Marriage* and *A Ripple from the Strom* (1958) recount Martha’s two unsuccessful marriages. *The Four-Gated City* (1969) a novel in which Martha comes to realize the limitations of rational thought and seeks to embrace and understand the higher truth of her intuition.


Lessing’s fiction reverberates with questions about identity and her approach in some what phenomenological. The keenness of her heroines find their “real” selves manifests itself firstly in an effort to shrug off the weight of what they have been. Martha in *Martha’s Quest* and *A Proper Marriage* Anna/Ella in *The Golden Notebook* Kate in *The Summer Before the Dark* and
the narrator in *Memoirs of a Survivor* undergo various social and psychological pressures, yet, the states through which they pass are instrumental in providing special insights, fresh knowledge about the self. It is this understanding that eventually unconsciously and partially though, leads to a reconciliation and an acceptance not earlier possible.

Lessing is noted for her autobiography *Under My Skin* (1994) which covers the first thirty years of her life in Persia and Rhodesia, up to her departure for London in 1949. The first half of the book examines the unhappy childhoods on a Rhodesian farm with her parents and younger brother. In the second half of her book, Lessing focuses on her early writing and her two failed marriages. Her enlightened portrayal of marriage and motherhood, her anti-apartheid stance, and her experimentation with genre and form have made her an exciting and often controversial literary figure. Throughout her career, Lessing has been able to enter sympathetically into the lives of ordinary, morally fallible people living in circumstances that make nobility impossible. The capacity to her unloveliest characters to engage the human in each other even when they have inherited a racism that blinds and separates, even when the physical burdens of old age have made their lives tedious to them – is one of the finest achievements of Lessing’s fiction. Nothing could be further in spirit from the mechanics of socialist realism. Her books are pervaded with a kind of ecological gloom; death of the bush is one of her themes, that connects her with her own childhood in Southern Rhodesia and her own memories of
what the bush meant to her as a child. This concern for nature binds Lessing to
the world of her childhood and to the whites whom she visits in the present.

Lessings’ women are highly intelligent, political human beings for
whom the battle for equal rights has already been won. In fact, according to her,
forces of race, class and color are perceived as far more oppressive in their
discriminatory potential than sex. The women who people her novels are
independent, far more aware and effectual than their male counterparts, who
are quite often, disoriented dreamers. The central point of view too is a
woman’s evocative figure of the angry young woman, upright and fighting for
justice or the cynical figure helpless against odds. Courage and commitment,
standpoint, belief and honesty with relation to Marxist ideology and feminist
agenda adds characteristic flavor to her fiction.

Lessings’s fiction reverberates with questions about identity and her
approach is somewhat phenomenological. The keenness of her heroines to find
their ‘real’ selves manifests itself firstly in an effort to shrug off the weight
what they have been. The African locale that surrounded young Doris Lessing
during her formative years generated critical tensions that found deep inroads
into her writing. Experiences of childhood and youth, the manner in which she
fought her way to education through poverty, the resourceful but overburdened,
unhappy mother, the imaginative father sitting under the stars eternally
dreaming her reading of nineteenth century realist writers especially the
Russian novelists, leading to a certain development of the psyche, awareness
and desire for self liberation due to a conventional marriage were some factors that shaped her attitudes while they also contributed to a black vision of life.

Lessing is a writer deeply rooted in and consciously committed to the social and political milieu of her time, this fact being obvious from the thematic and narrative overtones of her fiction. In fact she has been known for her prophetic vision, a kind of futuristic second sight that brings with it a foreknowledge of events. She has had a creative span life time of artistic endeavor and longitudinal perspective deriving their form. Lessing’s interest in story telling manifests also in her autobiographical project, *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade*.

There can be few autobiographies so revealing the mind of their creator. *Under My Skin* show a woman uncompromising, from the beginning, in every aspect who breaks all the rules, who battles at every turn against her upbringing and environment, which looks on the world clear and hard: and yet who also displays softness, a wonderful sense of humour, a compassion for human failure. In this first volume she begins with her childhood in Africa and ends on her arrival in London in 1949 with the typescript of her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, in her suitcase. The book is distinctive, challenging and as wholly original as anything Doris Lessing has ever written. It recalls her own mind as a child, and the life of a child with 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. The African landscapes...
often combative relationship with her parents, her intense awareness of her own body, her passionate involvement with other people and indeed with everything around her are powerfully presented.

The acclaimed-first volume was followed by a second volume, *Walking in the Shade* evokes the bohemian days of a young writer and single mother in 1950s London. *Walking in the Shade* is full of piquant accounts of her friendships with numerous writers and artists, especially those in the theatre arts. She also tells many stories of her political friends and foes. In this book she was in dreary postwar Britain, a lonely émigré, a single mother, and the party offended sociability. The cumulative effects of catching glimpses of Doris Lessing in her roles as daughter, wife, mother, mistress are to deflate her image to human size. She is merely what she always called herself in dozen book titles ago- a small personal voice one she has had great courage to raise. It makes her life’s achievement all the more impressive and all the worthier of being as far framed and revered as it is.

The Indian Panorama of women’s autobiographies in English is undoubtedly rich with some exceptional writings by outstanding women of the country. Since many of these women autobiographers have written their books during the period of the Indian struggles for freedom, there are bound to be some political leanings too. However it is essential to see whether these writers have consciously secured their ‘sense of self’. The autobiography reveals the hidden forms of inwardness and the writer’s self succeeds in establishing the
writer’s portrait of public eye. In India, as in most locations today, there are multiple feminisms whose founding ideologies, practices, and focus differ dramatically. Thus, outside of literary readings of women’s writing in English, feminist commentary from Indian subcontinent has produced groundbreaking work on the ways in which the colonial and/or nationalist state has used gender and sexuality to its advantage and concurrently to the disadvantage of women where lives are subject to such authority. In their introduction to \textit{A Question of Silence? The Sexual Economics of Modern India}, India-based feminists Mary John and Janaki Nair have cautioned that a focus on the conspiracy of silence regarding sexuality in India, must blind to the multiple sites where sexuality has long been embedded.

But there is nothing unnatural in a woman’s literary creativity, which is an extension of her biological activity. There have been many women in India who have felt the urge to express their inner selves to the reading public. These women have been lawyers, political activists, women from royal families, literary writers and so on. A woman is naturally creative and thus if she has a room of her own, she can very well write not only fiction but also defend her selfhood and narrate the story of her life.

In all the autobiographies from Sunity Devee’s \textit{The Autobiography of an Indian Princess} (1921) to Kamaladevi Chattopadhya’s \textit{Inner Recesses outer spaces} (1986) each woman starts on search to find her life’s work. What
they lack is an authoritative voice to speak only of family or religion, Spacks observes:

Although each author has significant, sometimes daring accomplishments to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative … Indeed to a striking degree they fail directly to emphasize their own importance though writing in a genre which implies self-assertion and self display. (113-14)

They shy away from their biological experiences in their self-narratives. Pre 1960 autobiographies by Indian women do not make the slightest reference to female body’s experience, but the 1960 autobiographies do show an open minded attitude to such experiences. The only two post-1960 autobiographies we have here, *The Revenue Stamp* by Amrita Pritam and *An Unfinished Autobiography* by Indira Goswami, are both articulate about their bodily experiences. The establishment of identity by women autobiographers is based on the relationship with some chosen ones, without any affiliation: they feel constricted to write candidly and unreservedly about themselves. Most of the Indian autobiographers reveal their tendency to treat their culture that is women’s culture, as a “sub-culture”. Elaine Showalter feels in her famous book *A Literature Of Their Own* that denouncing of “female – assertiveness” (13) was one of the methods used by the women of “feminize”(13) culture to expiate for their literary and public activities.
Savitri Devi Nands’s autobiography *The city of two Gateways* (1950) has a sub-title the *Autobiography of an Indian Girl*, Which demands the reader to put it into a specific category and to expect certain peculiarities in it. The discrimination meted out to her from the moment of her birth made her long to be a boy. She aspired to know more about the world with a longing so great that all else was swept aside, her discontent being a girl made her father dress her in a boy’s clothes. The work clearly shows the frustration of the girl. The same frustration is felt in Brind’s Maharani’s *The Story of an Indian Princess* (1953) who has filled all the injustices which girls had to suffer. The rebellion burning in her heart made her to “defy the convention.”

Urmila Haskar’s *The Future that was* (1972) opens up with the anguish at being born a girl, in a family which has already had the first born as a girl. In many of these autobiographies, it is seen that a sense of failure, despite having achieved success, continues through out the lives of these women. They have felt the discrimination against them in their childhood and therefore Carolyn Heilburn says in *Writing a Woman’s Life*: “Nostalgia, particularly, is likely to be the mask of unrecognized anger”(qtd in Meena Sodhi 76).

Surprisingly childhood for these women has often been projected as the happiest of times in their writings: it could be because by the time they had understood that their births were not very happy events for their families, they had already enjoyed the best part of their lives, their childhood. In “Stages of Self: Notes on Autobiography and Life cycle” Spacks says, “For women,
adulthood—marriage or spinsterness—implied relative loss of self. Unlike men, therefore, they looked back fondly to the relative freedom and power of childhood and youth” (48).

An autobiography by India’s first woman lawyer Cornelia Sorabji, deserves special mention. Her *India Calling* (1934) tells the story of relentless struggle in the male dominated society to establish a place for herself. Being a woman she faced many hardships in her career, even though she had been awarded by the government of India scholarship to study law at an English University. The situation was no different in England and at Oxford. She was told that no woman could study law. After much effort she was allowed to attend lectures; but her troubles did not end there. Just prior to her final examinations, her London examiner informed her that since she was a woman he would not examine her answer books. It was after the intervention of the Vice-Chancellor that she was allowed to appear for her examinations and obtain a degree. On returning to Indian she started to practice law; it became essential for her to take the helpless women under her shelter. Her autobiography deals mainly with her concern for improving the sad condition of women in Indian society. Nayan Tara Saghal’s *The Prison and the Chocolate Cake* (1954) does give much insight into her childhood, except that when she was three years old and having chocolate cake for her father was taken to prison; thus for her prison always associated with chocolate cake. The Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam’s *The Revenue Stamp: An Autobiography and
Shadows of words: An Autobiography published in 1970’s portray the painful independent India.

My Story (1976) Kamala Das’ autobiography in a confessional vein addresses the question of female sexuality. A companion of volume My Story was published by Penguin in 2003 under the title A Chilhood in Malabar. This was followed by Many Years Ago. Bharathi Mukerjee’s Days and Nights in Calcutta (1977) records the anguish of a diasporic woman. More recently Macmillan’s English translation of Dalit writer Bama’s autobiography Karukku (1992) originally written in Tamil has made her a representative voice of her oppressed community. Agnes Flavia’s My Story…Our Story of Re-Bulding Broken Lives (1984) spans almost the entire twentieth century which paradoxically has seen momentous changes in the lives of Indian women and also witnessed their continued oppression. The focus of the research concentrates on the autobiographies of Maya Angelou, Doris Lessing and Kamala Das. In the Asian world, the works of Kamala Das possess a power to enable her readers to reread social relations and to participate in a revolution of conciousness.

Kamala Das is a prolific bilingual Indian woman poet, fiction writer and essayist. She is the author of numerous novels in Malayalam and collections of English-language fiction and poetry. Born in 1934 into an aristocratic, Nair, Hindu family in Kerala, India, Kamala Das has the distinction of being one of the best known Indian women writers in the twentieth century. Her work in
English has been widely anthologized in the Indian sub-continent, Australia and the west, and she has won many awards for her writing including the Sahitya Akademi award in 1985 and the nomination for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1984. Kamala Das has been a unique literary phenomenon in India. Kamala Das, frank and bold and controversial in life and literature, made enormous contribution to the growth of Indian poetry in English. Although she sporadically ventured into the realms of fiction, she will be remembered primarily for her poetry because it is as a poet that she excels herself.

Kamala Das, as a poet, however, undoubtedly merits a place beside the best women poets of the twentieth century. She writes poetry as only a woman can write. She celebrates femininity, women’s body to be more specific, and in the process proves herself to be a feminist of the more radical kind. Her celebration of women’s body has not been taken kindly to by the conservative circles. Kamala Das prose and short stories are based mainly on the theme of the oppression of women and present women only as victims. In her short stories as in poetry, it is about the conflict between passivity and rebellion against the male dominated universe. Many of hr works reveal a feminist preoccupation with the breaking of traditionally held stereotype images of woman such as prostitute the other woman and the wife, the exposure of male exploitation of women for self-gratification and the portrayal of women in a non-servile independent stance.
Already well known in literary circles for her poetry in English, it was the publication of *My Story* that earned Kamala Das national notoriety among the English speaking elite India. *My Story* is to date the best selling women’s autobiography in post independent India. Vincent O’Sullivan notes that when *My Story* appeared in book form in 1976, it went through six impressions and 36 thousand copies in eleven months. *My Story* is a chronologically ordered, linear narrative written in realist style. It follows Kamala’s life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favored by the colonial Indian elite: through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extra-marital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse.

*My Story* is an attempt 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 the foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. 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. She succeeds admirably at the task of narrating her experience as a body. *My Story* sets the terms in which Das is entire body of work has been evaluated by feminists and other scholars in the subcontinent and in the west. The standard Indian feminist reading of Das’s work commends her for her
determined protest against patriarchal norms and practices that oppress women and for her courage in continuously mining her own life experiences for material.

Although as Susan Stanford says that Gusdorf, Olney and Mehlman, and many others have greatly advanced the understanding of autobiography, their related individualistic paradigms for the self have obscured the presence and significance of women’s autobiography in the literary tradition. Stanford Friedman slightly alters Gusdorf’s notion of cultural impossibility in women’s autobiographies in her article “Women’s Autobiographical Selves Theory and Practice.” She reverses his statement as:

Autobiography is possible when “the individual does not feel herself to exist outside of other, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community…[where] lives are so entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being. (qtd in Benstock, 38)

The very sense of identification, interdependence, and community that Gusdorf dismisses from autobiographical selves are key elements in the development of a woman’s identity, according to theorists like Rowbotham and Chodorow. Their models of women’s selfhood highlight the unconscious masculine bias in Gusdorf’s and other individualistic paradigms.
It is under this light the present study focuses on the autobiographies of three renowned writers – Maya Angelou, Doris Lessing and Kamala Das. Maya Angelou’s five books of autobiography are a testament of the talents and resilience of this extraordinary writer. Loving the world she also knows its cruelty. As a Black woman she has known the discrimination and extreme poverty, but also hope and joy, achievement and celebration Doris Lessing’s two volumes of autobiographies *Under My Skin* and *Walking in the Shade* has already established itself as one of the great modern autobiographies. It shows a woman uncompromising from the beginning, who breaks all the rules, who looks on the world clear and hard: yet who also displays a softness, a wonderful sense of humour, a compassion for human failure. In *My Story*, Kamala Das, a poet famous for her honesty, tells of intensely personal experiences including her growth into womanhood, her unsuccessful quest for love in and outside marriage, and her living in matriarchal rural South India after inheriting her ancestral home. Like European women authors, Das seizes control of the society's own cultural codes, particularly those formed by dominant religious ideologies. These works while considered discrete entities do share common thematic and structural motifs, although their authors are unique individuals with very distinct personalities. Some of the pervasive themes include racial imperialism and sexual imperialism and maternal politics that is firmly rooted in their roles as mothers and protectors of children. Inspite of unholy boundaries and separatisms, these narratives dramatize finally, a
deeply inclusive spiritual consciousness, by calling autobiography in the words of Dean Howells, “the most democratic province in the republic of letters” (qtd in Cahill, xviii). The thesis is divided into six chapters:

Chapter I “Introduction” provides a general study on Autobiography as a genre and in particular the growth of women’s autobiographies. 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. Most centrally, women reading other women’s autobiographical writings have experienced them as “mirrors” of their own unvoiced aspirations. The main body of the same chapter attempts closer reading on the contributions of Angelou, Lessing and Das. This analytical work, then, endeavours to present the common themes in the selected autobiographies and show the author’s responses to these themes.

Chapter II “Racial Voices” examines the racial exploitation in the lives of Angelou, Lessing and Das. Maya Angelou and Kamala Das have posited in their life experience the racial injustices that black people and Indian women have to endure and bring to light the impact of these oppressive forces on woman. These women have been conditioned by their race and gender, have suffered from the racism and sexism of American society and colonial India. The autobiographies of Lessing show an attempt to define a personal life journey through the evocation of their most intimate consciousness. Lessing provides an exploration of the abuse and mistreatment of black African people
and subjugation of women in pre-democratic societies, as evident in her autobiographies.

Chapter III “Feminist Overtones” gives a brief introduction on feminism and further examines sexual oppression in these autobiographies. All are concerned with social and cultural construction of gender marginalization and exclusion of women. 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.

Chapter IV “Rainbow of Voices” probes into the ‘Self’ in the autobiographies of these three writers in which their subjectivity is formed. This chapter covers from different strains of how women position themselves with and against others. It also deals with these authors seeing themselves through mothers, through culture and community in framing their autobiographical subjects. This chapter further analyses Maya Angelou’s six autobiographical volumes, which focuses on a young African-American female’s quest to know and develop herself. In this volume Maya Angelou, the adult poet and writer – re-examines her “other” self, the self which begins to define its identity. Lessing’s autobiographies construct a dual consciousness to protect her private self, which leads to the presentation of a divided self a
division which is also apparent. In her autobiography, Das comes to a point in her life when she questions her own sense of being exceptional. The same kind of necessity of open consciousness, to the dialogic presence of others, whether of a different race, class, gender also admits into the autobiography the other aspect of self.

Chapter V “Female Poetics” looks into the forms and narrative patterns followed by these writers in their autobiographies. Like other forms of history, its verisimilitude appeals to the reader, who seek in some “truth” about another human life. Also, the author has two resources for achieving her persuasive ends: style and narrative. 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.

Chapter VI “Conclusion” concludes the need of new approaches to evaluate and appreciate the work of women creative writers. It focuses in the recent feminist studies, in fact, the approach to works of women creative writers should be aimed at understanding their feminine sensibility and the development of their personality.