Chapter – II

Writing Differences in Male/ Female Autobiographies:

A Theoretical Perspective

The critical theories on autobiography tend to marginalize women’s autobiography-writing and often have a strong subjective as well as objective bias against it. This chapter is an attempt to prove that most of the critical theories established by the male tradition are not applicable to women’s life writing due to biological, socio-political as well as psycho-cultural reasons; that women’s autobiography-writing is different. For male individuation ‘dissociation’ is a must, while for women according to feminist psychoanalytic theorists like Chodorow and Rowbotham ‘association’ is central to their individuation. Men’s autobiography in form, is dominated by an ‘I’ and this ‘I’ is always at the center of every incident. While women’s autobiography differs in that it goes in circles. She does not stand at the center; there is often a man at the center and she is in the periphery with a dotted ‘I’ (Benstock). The chapter is an in-depth study of the theory of writing differences in the genre of autobiography under four distinct headings.

Association/ Dissociation

Gusdorf’s concept of autobiography is focused on the model of self that is essentially western and individualistic. One starts dissociating oneself from the others and tends to think of himself as the center of a living space. In a sharp contrast to the theories of Gusdorf and Olney, the psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan focus on the
development of the self through an intense interaction with the others. In Jacques Lacan's theory, the child's separation of himself from his mother is followed by the mirror-stage and a Narcissistic identification first with his own image and then with others. Individuation for women lies in association, while for men it lies in dissociation.

In men's autobiography-writing 'I' is at the center of every incident, well defined, isolated and opposed to the world. But women's autobiography-writing project a dotted 'i' which is on the periphery, collective, relational and representative of a class. Shari Benstock in her *Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writing* notes:

The self that would reside at the center of the text is decentred and often is absent altogether in women's autobiographical texts. The very requirements of genre are put into question by the limits of gender – which is to say because these two terms are etymologically linked, genre; itself raises questions about gender (1988:20).

Following Georges Gusdorf, other theorists of autobiography from Ronald Barthes to James Olney have persisted in maintaining the idea of centrally located isolate 'I' as the precondition for autobiography. "Separate selfhood is the very motive of [autobiographical] creation", asserted James Olney (Olney; 22). Under the influence of these critics there developed a school of critical thinking which valued autobiography as a genre of individualistic self. Naturally, this school believed that a culture which did not encourage individualistic image of self would not provide proper soil to autobiography. Gusdorf had gone up to the extent of saying that in ancient civilization of the east the genre could not flourish at all because of the
rejection of ego by those civilizations on metaphysical plane and whatever scattered autobiographical work was done in those countries was dismissed by him as nothing but “cultural transplant” (29).

Lately, since 70’s feminist theorists like Patricia Meyer Spacks, Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Nancy Chodorow, Sheila Rowbotham, Nancy Friedman and others have started questioning the traditional paradigm of isolate self on the ground that it doesn’t take into consideration minority classes as, to quote Friedman:

... the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities and many non-western peoples. The model of separate and unique selfhood that is highlighted in his [Gusdorf’s] work and shared by other critics established a critical bias that leads to the misreading and marginalization of autobiographical texts by women and minorities in the process of canon formation. (34)

According to these critics, the Gusdorfiand theory of centrally located isolate selfhood supports restrictive and unspoken canon of White Male autobiographers. These male critics, notes Dr. Ranjana Harish in her essay “In the Cultural Hall of Mirrors: Issue of Gender Genre Incompatibility of Women’s Autobiography” (1998) have advanced the understanding of autobiography greatly but their insistence on individualistic paradigms for the self have obscured the significance of women’s autobiography-writing in literary tradition.

In Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World (1978) Rowbotham uses the metaphor of mirrors to describe the development of women’s consciousness. But her mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to
form an identity. A woman can not, Rowbotham argues, experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined as a woman, that is, as a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the dominant male culture. This sense of collective identity, however, can also be a source of strength and transformation, and lead not only to alienation, but also to the potential for a "new consciousness" of self. There is always this dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription, as Rowbotham notes in her *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1978):

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we could begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation came the experience of one part of ourselves as strong, foreign and cut-off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity... the manner with ourselves was not variance with ourselves as an historical being – woman. (31)

Basing her study of woman's identity formation on the premise of Simon de Beauvoir's argument, Rowbotham too holds that it is "the socialization of females (biological category) which conditions them as women (cultural category)” (Harish: 26). Woman in Rowbotham's view is a construct. Autobiography is a "cultural mirror hall" before which an individual woman stands but the mirror does not reflect back an individual isolate self. Susan Stanford Friedman advances Rowbotham's argument further and adds a collective dimension to it. The mirror of autobiography, to quote her: "projects an image of WOMAN, a category which is supposed to define an individual woman's identity." (38)
Nancy Chodorow in her book *Psychoanalysis – and the Sociology of Gender* (1979) examines the psychology of gender socialization and suggests that the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to women as they have, in her view, a relational identity and fluid ego boundaries which mark their orientation to self, from that of men. Looking at the psychoanalytical theory from feminist perspectives, she argues:

Growing girls come to define themselves as continuous with others: their experience of self contains more flexible and preamble ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (41)

A woman forms her identity in relation to others. The socio-cultural set-up to of the patriarchy intensifies her traits of rationality and finally she emerges not as an individual but as a person with collective identity constantly aware of the society’s prescription for her female self.

Benis Johnson Reagon identifies black women’s autobiography- writing as ‘Cultural Autobiography’ because the story of a black woman’s selfhood is inseparable from her sense of community. Mary Mason, in her essay “Autobiographies of Women Writers” (1980) argues that women’s sense of self exists within a context of the deep awareness of others. The research in women’s identity formation in the Indian context by the psycho analysts like Sudhir Kakar, Indira Parikh and Aashish Nandy support the theory of women’s collective selfhood. According to these psychoanalysts, instead of hampering their growth such a collective trait strengthens their personality.
Women do not possess the proverbial isolate self that could reside at the center of the text. Thus, when she holds a pen to write her autobiography, the product is going to be different both in form and content. One can anticipate finding in women's texts a disinterred self finding itself through the age-old feminine strategy of denial of public acclaim, a story of self-denial rather than self-glorification, of personal rather than the political aspect of life.

**Personal/ Public**

The traditional political and military chronology is largely irrelevant to the history of women. Women's autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment of the history of their times. They tend to concentrate on their personal rather than public lives and we are given domestic details, family problems, close friends and the people who influenced them. This is seen even in the case of women whose political life in their claim to fame. This is because, for a woman personal is political.

Patricia Meyer Spacks highlights this element of women's autobiography in her essay aptly called "Selves in Hiding" (1980). She discusses five most successful women's autobiographies and shows how these autobiographies are the "stories of unusual female achievement" but nevertheless "the narratives convey singular absence of personal satisfaction in achievement" (132). All these five great women of public accomplishment; Emmeline Fankhurst, the English Suffragist; Dorothy Day, a founder of the radical 'Catholic Workers'; Emma Goldman, the fiery anarchist; Eleanor Roosevelt; and Golda Meir make the 'personal' more important than the 'public'. In Spack's view, by doing so these great achiever women "use
autobiography paradoxically as a mode of self-denial" (132). Evading an assertive self in public in favour of a passive, private self in Spack's view is a narrative strategy which reflects "both a female dilemma and a female solution" (132).

Besides this, the periods which are commonly regarded by the historians as the turning points in the human history are not necessarily the same for both the sexes. Men's autobiographies were published in a significant number during the Civil War period while women's autobiographies increased as educational opportunities for women increased, which is during the progressive era - 1880 to the First World War, an era of unprecedented public service by women and during the late 1960s and 1970s. The periods of greatest productivity for women's autobiographies have not been during revolutionary male times but during the high points of women's history. In *The Female Experience* (1977), historian Gerda Learner notes:

The periods in which basic change occur in society and which historians commonly regard as turning points are not necessarily the same for men and women. This is not surprising when we consider that the traditional time frame in history has been derived from political history. For example, neither during or after the American Revolution nor in the age of Jackson did women share in the broadening out of opportunities and in the political democratization experienced by men. On the contrary, women in both periods experienced status loss and restriction of their choices as to education or vocation, and new restraints imposed upon their sexuality, at least by prescription. Thus, the traditional political and military chronology is largely irrelevant to the history of women (xxiv-xxv).
An interesting instance of the marginalization of women and their autobiography-writing in the Indian context is clearly reflected in Amrita Pritam, an eminent Punjabi poetess, novelist, and short story writer. She was the first woman writer to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award. Moreover, she received the Padma Shree, the Jnanpith Award, and the Padma Vibhushan. Amrita Pritam’s works have been defined as a ‘woman’s lyrical cry against existential fate and societal abuse’. In a male dominated society it is difficult for a woman to establish the concept of woman’s autobiographical self. Originally written in Punjabi, Pritam’s autobiography Rashidi Ticket (1976) is an honest chronicle displaying warmth and cheerfulness, in spite of the struggles, challenges, and the mental agony she had to undergo. The English translation of the book was published under the title The Revenue Stamp (1977).

When Pritam proposed to write an autobiography, Khushwant Singh, a fellow male writer, remarked that there was nothing significant enough in her life and that the narration of her life would not require more space than the back of a revenue stamp.

The above caustic remark from a fellow male Punjabi writer accounts for her choice of the title – The Revenue Stamp. In this celebrated autobiography, she presents her inner self as well as external visible aspects of her personality in a very effective and artistic style. The book is full of details associated with her private life, devoted to introspection and self-assessment.

The restrictive male view of history is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of history; it is representative of his times, a mirror to his era. This criterion is adequately supported by many male autobiographies which concentrate on chronicling the progress of their
author's professional or intellectual lives, usually in the affairs of the world, and their life studies are for the most part success stories. Augustine's *Confessions* (400), an essentially philosophical document of his time, traces the vicissitudes of his spiritual progress until his successful conversion - Rousseau's *Confessions* (1781), Gibbon's *Autobiography* (1793), and Goethe's *Poetry and Truth* (1812-31), though personal in some respects, are also success stories and can be read as histories of their era. Adams adheres so closely to this theme that he excludes twenty of his mature years as a husband and a professor in order to detail the conflict of his age between eighteenth and nineteenth century sensibilities. Men's autobiography-writing, notes Jelinek in her *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, focus on their successful professional life and its relationship to their times, with little or a much smaller percentage allotted to their personal lives. Of course, happy exceptions to this observation can be found in the autobiographies of a man like Bertrand Russell.

Women's autobiography-writing, on the other hand, rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers and concentrate instead on their personal lives - domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and especially people who influenced them. In *The Book of Margery Kempe* (1436) the emphasis is on both the hostile and friendly people Kempe met on her pilgrimages rather than on her religious progress.

Even in the autobiographies by women whose professional work is their claim to fame, we find them omitting their work life, referring obliquely to their careers, or
camouflaging public life behind the personal aspects of their lives. Elizabeth Cady Stanton states in the Preface to *Eighty Years and More* (1980):

> The story of my private life as the wife of an earnest reformer, as an enthusiastic housekeeper proud of my skill in every department of domestic economy, and as the mother of seven children, may amuse and benefit the reader.

> The incidents of my public career as a leader of the most momentous reform yet launched upon the world the emancipation of woman will be found in “The History of Woman Suffrage” (9).

Julian Mead, like Adams, skips twenty years of her life in her autobiography *Blackberry Winter* (1972). But they are her most active professional years - the time between the birth of her daughter and grand-daughter because her autobiographical intention is to outline the proper training of children. The first Indian woman autobiographer Maharani Sunity Devee of Kuch Bihar in her autobiography *The Autobiography of an Indian Princess* (1921) hardly discusses her public life, while the fact is that she ruled the state on behalf of her minor son for many years and proved herself a very successful ruler. The ruling queen of Bhopal Nawab Sultan Jahan Begam of the female dynasty of Bhopal State writes her autobiography in two parts under the title *An Account of My Life* in the year 1910 (translated 1990) wherein she gives a detailed account of her grandmother Nawab Sikander Begam’s mother Nawab Shah Jahan Begam’s reign and how these two women provided benevolent services to the people. The volumes also talk in great detail about the internal politics of the Royal families in the most fascinating manner. Full of supporting documents like maps, charts, government declarations, official letters with seals of the British Raj or
the Bhopal State and a number of pictures, these volumes may interest historians a great deal. They are indeed fascinating. However, the most disappointing fact about them is that the volumes called *Account of My Life* concludes with the coronation of Nawab Sultan Jahan Begum as the Ruler of Bhopal!! The author chooses to exclude her own successful years as a ruler from her own autobiography! The volumes which provide most valuable details about an outstanding, exceptional (perhaps the one and only) female dynasty of an Indian princely state during the British rule giving all the intricate details of the three generations of Bhopal State's Muslim female rulers, who ruled the State most effectively from behind the “purdah” maintains complete silence over the author's own ruling years. The said autobiography concludes with Nawab Sultan Jahan's coronation in the year 1901!

Is this the result of the feminine trait underlined by theorists like Specks and Heilburn of ‘avoidance of public projection of power’ or the proverbial ‘feminine’ preference for the private over the public which is well accepted as a trait of women writers by the contemporary gynocritics!

This emphasis by women on the personal, especially on other people, rather than on their own work life, their own professional success, or their own connectedness to current political or intellectual history clearly contradicts the established criterion about the content of autobiography. Women’s autobiography projects an image of private strength and public passivity. It does not mirror the official history of the autobiographer’s time. Thus, the belief that a good autobiography is always representative of its times and is a mirror to the era also does not hold true in relation to women’s autobiographical writing. Women’s writings, in
this context, serve as reservoirs of social customs and traditions and can be treated as authentic data to do research in social sciences.

Besides this, women are more likely to write about their children in their autobiographies. The emotional and physical needs of children are essential aspects of female life studies. While male authored autobiographies mostly overlook personal life, especially details regarding wives and children. Male autobiographers mention their children but only briefly.

**Self-Conscious/ Self-Confident**

While man's autobiography projects a self-image of confidence and determination, the self-image constructed by woman is often the opposite. Men tend to idealize their lives or show how to cast them into heroic moulds to project their universal import. They may exaggerate, mythologize or monumentalize their boyhood and their entire lives. Perhaps for the fear of appearing sentimental, they often desist from revealing crises in their childhood but are more likely to relate adult crises, usually turning points in their professional lives. The self-image, thus projected is of confidence in contrast to the self-image projected in women's autobiographies which reveals self-consciousness.

Autobiography, especially a woman's autobiography, is a complex interplay of social structure and social content in the multiple network of relation through which the 'I' must compose, a 'self'. To transform the private ambition into public record is always difficult for women. There is a special relationship between women
and convention. It is demanded of a woman to be very meek and apologetic. She has to display her timidity and ask for assistance. As Freud defines, the term 'masculine' in psychology means 'active' and the term 'feminine' means passive. Women writers were confined to follow the social order that limits them.

The impulse to speak of the self must find forms for its fulfillment; literary conventions provide categories of interpretation. In women's autobiography the operation of social convention could be seen in purer form. According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, society makes women dwell in a state of internal conflict with necessarily intricate psychic consequences. It is like a double positioning of women between public and private, between their own expectation and those of others.

The nature of public and private selves is for women, in some ways, the reverse of what it is for men. The experience that women share gives to their account of themselves often a characteristic subterranean tone and status. One hears a single note of complaint and feels the bitter tensions of passivity; a social condition, a fate, embodying the concealment rather than absence of force.

Moreover, the impact of gender-based oppression on women's views of themselves and later on their ways of representing themselves in writing is to be best found in the life narratives of women, than in any other form. Carolin Heilburn's *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988) argues that the only way to fight patriarchy and create a space for women is to undertake life-writing. She advocates women's life-writings as a sure means to creating a better empowered woman of the next generation. Her agenda is purely 'gynocentric.' Like Elaine Showalter, who coined the term
'gynocentric, Heilburn too believes in fighting patriarchy by creating women's tradition of sharing intimate information. Heilburn chooses autobiography/life-writing as a tool for creating such a tradition. Both these contemporary gyno-feminists bring a U turn in feminist thinking. Rather than criticizing and competing with man, or complaining against him, their shade feminism is all inclusive. Rather than remaining 'man focused' with anti-feeling they advocate woman-centred positive tradition. Interestingly, Kamla Bhasin in her What is Patriarchy? (1994) also argues on the same lines, so does Irigaray, a contemporary French feminist and Helen Buss, a contemporary Canadian feminist theorist on Women's Autobiography. The answer to the questions, who am 'I'? Where am 'I' located? are not simple for woman. She confronts great difficulty in self-inscription. The difficulties faced by woman in her own inscription of 'I' are well expressed by Mary Eagleton in Working with Feminist Criticism (1996):

  Difficulty of saying 'I'
  Finding the courage to say 'I'
  The intimacy of 'We'
  Saying 'We' when really mean 'I'
  The False unity of 'We'. (146)

One of Helen Cixous' most accessible ideas is her analysis of what we might call 'patriarchal binary thought' under the heading 'Where is she?' (1974) Cixous lines up the following list of binary oppositions:
Showalter in her essay *Feminist Criticism in Wilderness* (1981) has used Ardener’s diagram given below to highlight the ‘difference’ between men’s and women’s world.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Passivity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sun</td>
<td>Moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day</td>
<td>Night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>Heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intelligent</td>
<td>Sensitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Showalter explains Ardener’s diagram of the relationship of the dominant and the muted group as under:

Unlike the Victorian model of complementary spheres, Ardener’s groups are represented by intersecting circles. Much of muted circle Y
falls within the boundaries of dominant circle X; there is also a
crescent of Y which is outside the dominant boundary and therefore (in
Ardener's terminology) "wild." We can think of the "wild zone" of
women's culture spatially, experientially, or metaphysically. Spatially
it stands for an area which is literally no-man's-land, a place forbidden
to men, which corresponds to the zone in X which is off limits to
women. Experientially it stands for the aspects of the female life-style
which are outside of and unlike those of men; again, there is a
corresponding zone of male experience alien to women. But if we
think of the wild zone metaphysically, or in terms of consciousness, it
has no corresponding male space since all of male consciousness is
within the circle of the dominant structure and thus accessible to or
structured by language. In this sense, the "wild" is always imaginary;
from the male point of view, it may simply be the projection of the
unconscious. In terms of cultural anthropology, women know what the
male crescent is like, even if they have never seen it, because it
becomes the subject of legend (like the wilderness). But men do not
know what is in the wild. (Showalter: 262)

Showlater, thus, reiterates her own concept of gynocentric orientation of
gender difference which can be meaningfully used to discuss writing differences in
this thesis.

Thus, under patriarchal order women are oppressed in their very psychology
of femininity. One needs to note here that critics/theorists Irigaray, Cixous, Heilburn,
Showalter, Benstock, Robotham, Chodorow, and Kakar are all contemporary
intellectuals. The 'outdated', 'essentialistic, concept of binary opposition of sexes
originally introduced by Freud and his followers, which was rejected absolutely in the
60's and 70's starts again getting accepted by the modern day intellectuals mentioned
above in an era of 'feminist thinking' which upholds "difference" as the key-term. It
is in this light of modern day gender-theory that the thesis undertakes to take fresh
look at the act of autobiography-writing by men and women in pairs – hailing from
the same family and hence, up to some extent, inheriting and sharing the same value
system.

In women’s autobiographies it is often marked that silence is used as a refusal
to take part in the story. But, actually when women speak of being silenced they don’t
mean that they are incapable of speaking a language adequately, rather they refer to
social and culture pressures which undermine their confidence and make them
hesitant about speaking. According to Robin Lackoff, this unease in women is partly a
product of patriarchal power. In her brilliantly argued book *Language and Woman’s
Place* (1975), Robin Lackoff focuses on how woman’s language (WL) is embedded in
her financial, social, and cultural dependence on man. Such a dependence of woman
influences her use of language – written as well as spoken – establishes this world-
known linguist in her classic book.

For women patriarchal power works at three levels - domestication,
prescription and expectation. Domestication of women is done by prescribing norms
for them. Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her *Imaging a Self: Autobiography and in
Eighteenth Century England* (1975) notes:

There is no feminine nature, only a feminine situation which has in
many respects remained constant through the centuries... The notion
of ‘femininity’ is a fiction created by men, assented to by women
untrained in the rigors of logical thought or conscious of the advantage
to be gained by compliance with masculine fantasies...Man offers
women safety, the temptations of passivity and acceptance; he tells her that passivity and acceptance are her nature. (29)

Women, thus, project an acceptable self in their writings adopting the ideology of self-subordination, which implies among other things, suppression of narrative about the self. Women’s autobiographies, to a striking degree, fail directly to emphasize their own importance, though writing in a genre which values self-assertion and self-display. For women the immediate community is their family or neighbours. They tell of lives led by others’ values and based on others’ assumptions than their own. According to Mary Mason, ‘other’ or ‘others’ may be represented as husband, children, even God, but in all cases the female self depicted is as profoundly influenced by the ‘other’ i.e. ‘delineation of identity by alterity’ and this primary relationship structures their autobiography.

On the other hand, men depict their childhood as idylls of innocence and redemption and their lives as heroic. The productivity of men toward embellishing their autobiography results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they have encountered. This is contrary to the self-image projected in women’s autobiographies. They reveal self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self image. Thus, idealization is not typical of the female mode. In place of glowing narratives, women tend to write in a straight forward and objective manner about both their girlhood and adult experiences. They also write obliquely, elliptically or humorously in order to camouflage their feelings, the same technique is used to play down their professional lives.
Coming to the discussion of narrative techniques and architectonics of the genre of autobiography, critics have often asserted that the male autobiographers consciously shape the events of their lives into a coherent whole. By means of chronological, linear narrative, they unify their work concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality. It is not surprising that with men socially conditioned to pursue the single goal of a successful career, we find such harmony and orderliness in their autobiographies. Such unity shows a faith in the unity of the world and their own self-images. The "unidirectionality" of men's lives is appropriately cast into such progressive narratives, notes Jelinek.

On the other hand, irregularity rather than orderliness is seen in women's autobiography-writing. The narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. The multidimensionality of women's socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write their autobiographies as well. Thus, the established critical standards exclude women's autobiography-writing from the genre and cast into the "non-artistic" categories of memoir, reminiscence, and other such forms.

In a very interesting study, titled Women's Autobiographies (1980) Estelle Jelinek shows the gender specificity of autobiography as a form by citing examples of famous male and female autobiographers. The earliest male autobiographer, Augustine, narrates his life story progressively up to the time of his conversion and
than crowns it with three chapters of brilliant intellectual analysis. Rousseau’s *Confessions*, however excessively detailed, are persistently chronological and progressive. Franklin wrote his autobiography during several sittings over a period of eighteen years, yet resuming the narrative each time where he had left off. Goethe’s autobiography, also written over a number of years, is methodically chronological. To add Indian male autobiographers in the same context one may think of Gandhi, Nehru, Chagla, Deshmukh, Morarji Desai, A P J Abdul Kalam and many others. All these men narratologically structure their autobiography with a single-minded focal point. Hence, they succeed in producing an aesthetic experience of a perfect art form. All these male autobiographers proceed linearly with no miscellaneous forms to disrupt the orderly time sequence or the style.

Compared to the above male authors women autobiographers lack the perfection of form. The earliest self narratives by women, like the one by Margery Kempe (1436) is constantly interrupted by her long apostrophes to God and by descriptions of her many weeping fits. Teresa’s life story is broken with a long dissertation on prayer and with sporadic descriptions of her raptures; and Stanton’s history is interrupted by anecdotes, portraits of people, and quoted letters and articles of her own and by others.

One can trace the same kind of fragmentation and disorderliness in the structure of autobiography in some of the interesting early autobiographies by Indian women like Ishvani Pseud’s *The Girl in Bombay* (1947), Urmila Haksar’s *The Future that Was* (1972), Savitri Devi Nanda’s *The City of Two Gateways: The Autobiography of an Indian Girl* (1950) and Lakshmibai Tilak’s *I Follow After* (Eng. Trans. 1950).
None of them structure their autobiography in a continuous, uninterrupted narrative. The most interesting example of such a disorderly yet fascinating autobiography is the first autobiography by an Indian woman named Bahinabai titled *The Story of My Life* (1700), who wrote her autobiography in verse originally in Marathi which got published only in 1928. Her writing had to wait for about two centuries to get published! She was translated and published by a Jesuit priest called Justin Abbot who lived in Pune. On getting published, this autobiography generated interest and curiosity among the reading public. A well known poet known for perfection and precision of poetic form, Bahinabai’s autobiography disappoints the readers so far as the architectonics is concerned. She narrates her life story in the said book, in flawless metres (in Marathi) but the contents that she deals with are fragmentary and scattered and hence the first autobiography by Indian woman namely Bahinabai’s *The Story of My Life* tends to indicate the way the female pen would carve their self-narratives in future.

This discontinuous form is seen even in the 20th and the 21st centuries female autobiographers like Stein, McCarthy, Hellman, Margaret Lawrence, Atwood, Maya Angelou, Indira Goswami and many of the contemporary autobiographers. As Jelinek rightly observes, the controlled chaos of Kate Millett’s autobiography *Flying* (1974), *Sita* (1977), with its mixed chronology, flashbacks within flashbacks, and its stream of consciousness, clearly reflects the fragmentation she experiences in her multiple roles as writer, teacher, film maker, critic, sculptor, political activist, bisexual and feminist. Another such autobiography by a contemporary Canadian woman Mary Meig entitled *Box Closet* (2002) stands out in memory as the one which not only portrays a fragmented life in a fragmented way, but also, like a typical postmodern
text erases the generic boundaries completely. The said Canadian text makes use of all the techniques like first person narration, third person narration, travelogue, letters, diaries, dialogues (drama), poetry etc., each one telling a part of her story in a piece of jig-saw puzzle manner, making the readers keep on expecting more and more to happen, keeping them asking what ‘next’ and finally creating a perfect life story told in a ‘back and forth style’ with all kinds of narrative techniques. The fragmentariness of such narratives does not interfere with the total impact of the final product, perhaps the fragmentariness of woman’s autobiography is the reflection of the realities of their lives. To quote Jelinek, from her Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980):

From earliest times, these discontinuous forms have been important to women because they are analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives. (29)

Thus, the final criterion of orderliness, wholeness or a harmonious shaping with which critics characterize autobiography is often not applicable to women’s autobiography-writings. One may not recognize women’s autobiography-writing as uniform, but it also can not be condemned as formless because it does have a curious form of its own. It attests what Estelle Jelinek calls: “The continuous female tradition of discontinuity in women’s autobiographical writing” (11980:20).

Based on the foregoing argument one can conclude this chapter by reiterating that the present thesis is based on the premise of contemporary intellectual trends in academia world over, that looks upon autobiography as the central genre which cuts across various disciplines like Gender Studies, Women’s Studies, Social Sciences,
Cultural Studies, Political Studies, Legal Studies, Human Rights, Linguistics, and of course, Literature. It is based on the gynocentric theory of 'gender-difference' and thus it tends to overlook the radical feminist assertion of 'equality of sexes.'

Logically, then, the thesis argues that men and women write their autobiographies with different objectives, in entirely different ways, achieving absolutely 'different' desired results. The chapter has listed out the basic 'differences' and has thus upheld the 'poetics of difference' in autobiography-writing. In the following chapters this well-defined theory of 'difference' will be applied to the four pairs of autobiographers namely - Jawaharlal Nehru and Vijayalakshmi Pandit; J.B.Kripalani and Sucheta Kripalani; Chintaman Deshmukh and Durgabai Deshmukh; Mahatma Gandhi and Madeline Slade. The application of the gynocritical 'theory of difference' to the four select pairs of autobiographies by Indian political personalities in the following chapters will attempt to establish the hypothesis that the genre of autobiography is significantly influenced by the gender of the author and, thus, as a result the act of autobiography-writing is gender-specific.