CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Jewish American Women's Autobiographies: The '(M)Other' Narratives

I see generations of women bearing a flame. It is hidden, buried deep within, yet they are handing it down from one to another, burning. It is a gift of fire, transported from a world far off and far away, but never extinguished. And now, in this very moment, my mother imparts the care of it to me. I must keep it alive, I must manage not to be consumed by it, and I must hand it on when the time comes to my daughter.

(Kim Cherin, In My Mother's House 16)

Imparting the stories, of their mothers and foremothers to the daughters, is not merely a phenomenon but a strong tradition that survives among Jewish women for the centuries. This unparalleled matriarchal tradition is the strength of Jewish women writers today. Believing in the power handed down to them by matriarchs, Jewish American women write their autobiographies in order to transmit this strength to their daughters.

In Jewish literary tradition it is believed that the world's very first writer is said to have been a woman named Enheduanna. The daughter of the Sumerian warrior-king Sargon, Enheduanna was a high priestess in the service of the moon-god (Nanna) and his daughter (Inanna). Enheduanna is
credited with inscribing her hymns to Inanna, in cuneiform tablets, about 2300 B.C. Reciting her own past glories in the first person, Enheduanna simultaneously inscribed the hymns in praise of the moon-goddess Inanna’s “fierceness that accompanies her power and beauty” (Hirsfield 3). The hymns that Enheduanna wrote to Inanna celebrate their female bonding, thereby setting down the earliest surviving written account of women’s lives and an individual’s account of her inner life as well.

Enheduanna’s inscription signifies the way Jewish women have handed down their stories. Thus, since ages, through their deepest internal convictions and external thoughts, often against harsh odds and obstacles, Jewish women have been struggling to tell the tales of their own. As bell hooks writes, “women talk a talk which itself is a silence” (7), the stories of Jewish women have remained unheard to patriarchy for centuries.

Like their stories, the histories of Jewish women, across the centuries, have remained unrecorded. Their autobiographies are the crucial source to get insight into their personal stories as well as collective history. Due to a diverse range of experiences at different times and at various lands, many of the Jewish women have recorded their experiences in more than one autobiography. Writing serves as a therapy to those women who have been suffering since ages due to their race and gender. The autobiographies appear more as a result of their cathartic compulsion to narrate the intense life-stories to be born as a Jew and particularly as a woman in the Jewish tradition. When these women narrate their stories, as bell hooks suggests, writing autobiography becomes “a healing act of power” (4).
As mentioned in the ‘Preface’ to this thesis, it was after the World War II that this genre came to be known as ‘Jewish American Autobiography’. In defining the genre, the first question appears to be: Who is a Jew? Jewish ecclesiastical law decrees that a Jew is anyone born of a Jewish mother. But, in recent years, the state of Israel has struggled to develop a broader definition that anyone who practices Judaism is clearly a Jew. The second question is: What, then, is Jewish autobiography? Apparently it is an autobiography written by anyone who practices Judaism. Ben Siegel explains it more precisely, “A Jewish book, it can be argued, is one that deals with characters, motivated to action by their sense of Jewishness” (20; italics as in original). Thus, it is this sense of Jewishness of any autobiographer in America that makes the genre Jewish American Autobiography.

Historically speaking, centuries ago, Jews were known as Hebrew people. Like many names for groups, the word Hebrew was originally used as the general word for people. It was used only by contrast or in relation to other groups; and the name came to signify a particular collectivity – that of the Hebrew people. Literally, the term means one who comes from the other side – in other words, the immigrant. The word embodies the history of the Jews as a people, territorializing their temporal journeyings; and in their name inheres their identity as people living in the diaspora. Implicit in this meaning is that the Jewish people’s identity is constituted by their understanding of themselves as the ‘other’. Thus, from their earliest days, the Jewish writers are ‘other’ people and their narratives are ‘other’ narratives.
As recorded in *Jews in America* (1999) and *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America* (2008), the history of Jews in America dates back to 1654. Jews arrived in America in three different phases. The first Jews to arrive in America were a group of twenty three Sephardic Jews who entered the land in 1654. In the second phase the number increased as Ashkenazic Jews from Germany and France reached America in 1860s. The third, and by far the greatest, surge of immigration began in 1880 and continued until the early 1920s. These Jews arrived from the Eastern Europe, following the assassination of Czar Alexander II, in 1881, which called forth a wave of violent pogroms. Blaming the Jews for killing the Czar, the passage of laws restricted Jewish settlement, employment and educational opportunities. Consequently, over two million Jews left the Russian Empire and immigrated to the United States in the four decades between 1880 and 1920.

The story of Russian Jews leaving Europe for America has been told and retold, often in autobiographies and memoirs. As Irving Howe puts it in *The World of Our Fathers* (1976),

The statements one finds in the memoir literature are persuasive through their very repetition. We came because we were hungry; we came because we were persecuted; we came because life in Russia or Poland had grown insufferable. These are the answers one gets over and over again, and there is not the slightest reason to doubt them. (57).

Many autobiographies, including those translated from Yiddish, help to illuminate the mass migration with detailed stories of ordinary lives. In this sense, autobiography becomes a mode to understand collective past.
Almost all the Eastern European Jewish immigrants began life in America – their ‘Promised Land’; amidst grim circumstances. Poverty, dislocation and discrimination were common. Over 3,50,000 Jewish immigrants settled within two square miles of the lower east side of Manhattan, New York (maps attached). Jewish ghettos came into existence.

Communication in the new land was a big hurdle as their language was mainly Yiddish. Their customs, dress, and mannerism were different. Most found that the streets were surely not paved with gold in their “Golden Land”. Jobs were difficult to find, wages were low, labour conditions in the sweatshops were deplorable, ghetto housing was crowded and sanitary conditions were little better than those in the Old country.

But most Jews were gratified that in America they had the opportunity to live freely as Jews. They worked hard, struggling to learn English and to adjust to the strange ways of the New World. The process of assimilation and acculturation began. Simultaneously, the Jews succeeded in establishing a lively culture of their own. By the 1920s, there were dozens of newspapers and magazines, most in Yiddish, but several in Hebrew as well. With their unique sense of humour, Jews were successful in introducing Yiddish theatre to America.

Gradually, however, Jewish culture became Americanized. Those authors, who desired a wider, more American readership, began to write in English. As the process of Americanization progressed, many immigrants found themselves lost between two worlds. To articulate the ambiguities of
assimilation, from their very beginnings, Jewish American writers turned to autobiography. For them, writing autobiography became an effort to understand and define their own individual identities as Jewish Americans.

After their long travels and travails, to create their own space or 'a room of their own' has been a long and painful process for both Jewish men and women. But it has proved more challenging for women because they have been constantly struggling against the constraints placed upon them from inside and outside the Jewish culture. The Jewish women belong to a culture in which the "Orthodox Jewish men thank God in their morning prayers that they were not created women" (Burstein 9). In Jewish culture, women have been kept on periphery. Their subordination and victimization in the hands of Jewish patriarchy and mainstream cultures have been centuries old stories. In this sense, marginalized by their race and gender, that is, oppressed by the dominant groups and by Jewish patriarchy, the Jewish women become doubly 'Others'. By being and becoming the 'Other', Jewish women's writings have remained either unnoticed or neglected. The autobiographies by Jewish American women have remained in obscurity as a muted conversation for a long time. Consequently a huge number of autobiographies have remained invisible. It is around the early decades of the twentieth century that the Jewish American women began to write autobiographically, in English, with the support of the raw material of their own experiences. It is only recently, with the rise of the Second Wave of Feminism in 1970s and 1980s that the Jewish American women's autobiography has found its rightful place in the American literature.
In her fictional autobiography, *Salome of the Tenements* (1923), Anzia Yezierska’s protagonist declares:

I am a Russian Jewess, a flame-a longing... A soul consumed with hunger for heights beyond reach. I am the ache of unvoiced dreams, the clamor of suppressed desires... I am the urge of ages for the free, the beautiful that never was yet on land or sea. (65)

This was the dream and predicament of every Jewish woman writer. Early twentieth century was the period when Jewish American women started voicing their “unvoiced dreams”.

Responding to the bewildering conditions of the New World, the immigrant women created multiple and often conflicting images of Jew, and of America, in their autobiographies. The narratives, they eventually produced, bridged the Old World of Europe and the New World of America. Their autobiographies also bridged Jews and Gentiles, men and women, mothers and daughters, and reality and imagination. As Mary Antin writes in her autobiography, *The Promised Land* (1912), “We are the strands of the Cable that binds the Old World to the New” (xxi).

Giving voice to their traumatic experiences in the Old World and resettlement in the New World, an unusual number of immigrant women turned to writing. Through the power of words they sought to relieve the tremendous cultural and social anxieties of acculturation while shaping their own new identities as American women. Mary Antin’s *The Promised Land* (1912), E.G. Stern, also known as Leah Morton’s *I am a Woman and a Jew*
(1926) and Emma Goldman's *Living My Life* (1931) reflect the emotionally and culturally turbulent images of immigrant Jewish American women. These autobiographies mirror multiple modes of self-representation in becoming American women in the developing culture. In a very promising manner, these women embraced America as their home – the present and future. In 1912, Mary Antin declared,

No! It is not that I belong to the past, but the past that belongs to me. America is the youngest of the nations, and inherits all that went before in history. And I am the youngest of America's children and into my hands is given all her priceless heritage, to the last white star espied through the telescope, to the last great thought of the philosopher. Mine is the whole majestic past, and mine is the shining future. (364)

Troubled by their past experiences and sustained by the hope of secure future, between 1940s and 1960s, Jewish women made rapid advances in education and professional life. The American born first generation English speaking Jews soon found themselves different from their immigrant parents. The rising Second Wave of Feminism attracted the young Jewish American women. For them, autobiography became an important means of self-definition. Writer's like Kate Simon and Faye Moskowitz wrote their autobiographies from the feminist perspective. Jewish American women started "Talking Back". Unlike their immigrant parents who had remained silent about the events in the Old World, the first generation women discussed not only the past issues of their parents, but also opposed Holocaust and supported the Jews on the other side of the globe.
The daughters of 1970s and 1980s focused more on the narratives in which the mothers developed the power to speak for themselves. Growing away from their families, these women discovered the power of their identification with their mothers to sustain their ethnic and gender identity.

Jewish American women, in 1990s, could easily connect themselves to activist Jewish women who came before them. In their autobiographies, they confront the problems between feminism and Judaism more intensely. Gaining the power of telling their own stories, from their mothers, the women, at the end of millennium, started writing autobiographies in quite a different context. In their autobiographies they appear to have become more conscious about not only the differences between men and women, but also among women as well. Writers like Vivian Gornick focused more on issues such as mother-daughter relationships from a very different perspective. This was the time when survivors of the Holocaust also started writing in English. Their voices turned out to be very distinct and did not completely merge with the first generation American Jews. For instance, as an immigrant Eva Hoffman had to face drastically different experiences in the New World than her East European immigrant predecessors.

Thus, at present, the differences among Jewish American women and their writings have become, in the words of Adrienne Rich, “Split at the Root” (1989). Yet, even at the end of millennium, almost after a century in the United States, Jewish women have been struggling to speak in their own voices. For example, Eva Hoffman, in her 1989 autobiography, Lost in Translation, struggles for words to tell a story of her own, of all the Jewish women and of all women of the world. She writes, “I want to tell A Story,
Every Story, everything all at once.... I want articulation – but articulation that says the whole world at once.” (Hoffman 11)

It is through the genre of autobiography, the Jewish American women have inscribed their own stories. Special groups of women, writers and journalists, have used the space offered by the genre of autobiography to speak in their own voices in order to come to terms with their own understanding of themselves. These autobiographical writings have also led these women to resist forces in a society that had pre-established framework for their sense of self. They have understood that “writing is one of the most rebellious, incendiary acts that an individual can perform” (Golden 184). Thus, autobiography as genre has offered space to women to tell and retell their stories.

**Theoretical Framework and Chapter Summary:**

Autobiography, by its very nature, is an assertion of power of the individual. Its purpose is to express subjective awareness and to affirm personal identity. At the same time it is often conspicuously historical, reflecting the wider concerns of society and culture in general. The Jewish women in America have adopted the form to illustrate in a general sense the changing and complex nature of the Jewish-American experience. The major themes these autobiographies reveal are: the role of the Jewish woman within a male-oriented religious tradition, relations with husbands and lovers, motherhood, the bond between mother and daughter, and the particular aspects of growing up Jewish and female in America. Together, they offer their own versions of the Jewish American experiences.
Most importantly, Jewish American women utilize the flexibility of the genre of autobiography to pass on and share their experiences. At the outset of Faye Moskowitz’s autobiography, *A Leak in the Heart* (1985), she asks, “With no one but me to recall my childhood, who will validate the memories?” (4). In America, gradually over a period of time, the Jewish ghettos faded, Yiddish language and culture disappeared, but the Jewish-American experience still continues to evolve. It is here that the writers like Faye Moskowitz and many Jewish American women have not only “validated” that experience but succeeded in perpetuating it as well.

This thesis is an attempt to analyze and explore the ways in which Jewish American women writers have chosen to create themselves on the page. Keeping the focus on the history of Jewish immigrants in America with their three thousand year old traditions; the thesis examines these women’s quest for identity, their former journey in historical space and later in finding geographical space, the journey within and without. The prime focus is on the socio-cultural interactions of class, race, religion and gender in the formation of self-image of Jewish women in America as presented in their autobiographies. This study, thus, examines social construction of gender roles and how the mothers play a crucial role in the formation of their daughters’ identities. A strong bond of mother-daughter relationship that emerges out of almost a century of autobiographical writing commences altogether a new and explicit tradition for women all over the world. The remaining six chapters of the thesis depict the way Jewish American women writers, through their autobiographies; create a unique literary tradition of their own.
This chapter, i.e., the first chapter, ‘Jewish American Women’s Autobiographies: The ‘(M)Other’ Narratives’, proposes to introduce Jews and Jewish women in America. It also aims at defining Jewish autobiographies as the ‘other’ narratives. The chapter attempts to provide a brief introduction to the line of arguments to be followed in the consecutive chapters.

The second chapter, ‘Women’s Autobiography: Theory/Therapy’, aims to capture the complex interplay of multiple theoretical critiques as they have motivated a discussion of women’s autobiographies in the late 20\textsuperscript{th} and early 21\textsuperscript{st} century. The central focus here is to locate parameters in the theory of women’s autobiographies by identifying how critics have read it in relation to dominant autobiographical theory. In doing so the chapter discusses five important aspects in relation to Jewish women’s autobiographies. They are: challenging the traditional canon of autobiography, women’s autobiographical tradition, relational model of women’s autobiography and mother-daughter relationships, ‘scriptotherapy’ and memory, and immigrant women’s autobiography.

The above chapter is an attempt to prove that the critical theories of autobiography, established by the male tradition, are not applicable to women’s narratives and how women’s autobiography requires different poetics of its own. The chapter, further, offers an overview of a distinct genre called Women’s Autobiography and how it has been viewed by feminist critics since 1980s. It also discusses feminist theories regarding mother-daughter relationships, and theories such as “Talking Back” and
"Beyond Difference" in the light of recent autobiographical tradition. Lastly, the chapter focuses upon a very distinct dimension of life-narratives known as ‘Immigrant Autobiography’. As there are no theories available on Jewish American immigrants’ autobiography, the second chapter also discusses Boelhower’s theory of Italian American Immigrants’ and Wong’s theory of Chinese American Immigrants’ autobiography and to what extent these theories can be proved applicable to Jewish Immigrants’ autobiography.

The third chapter, ‘Towards Self Definition: Jews and Jewish Autobiography in America’, details the arrival and assimilation of Jews in America and how their struggles have been recorded in their literature. This chapter offers an overview of the history of Jewish American women, process of assimilation and acculturation, five phases of Jewish literature in America, Jewish literary diaspora and autobiographies of Jewish American writers, both men and women.

The three consecutive chapters talk about selective representative voices of pioneering women autobiographers of each generation and these chapters are divided chronologically as per the history of three different generations of Jewish women in America. The basic structures of all the three chapters, i.e., Chapters IV, V and VI have been further divided into two sections. The first section of each of these three offers introduction to autobiographies of three representative Jewish American women writers; each belonging to that particular phase. The second section gives a detailed theoretical analysis based on various feminist theories.
In the fourth chapter, ‘Immigrants’ Voices from the Promised Land’, the focus is on the turn-of-the-century, a time of mass migration, assimilation and cultural adaptation of the Jewish immigrant women in America. The first section discusses how three representative autobiographies, namely, Mary Antin’s The Promised Land (1912), Elizabeth G. Stern (Leah Morton)’s I am a Woman- And a Jew (1926) and Emma Goldman’s Living My Life (1931) present these women’s journey from the “Old World” to the “New World”. These autobiographies are archetypal dramatization of the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Czarist Russia. For these women, both the process of immigration and the act of writing autobiography affirm new identity; one reinforces and reflects the other.

The second section of chapter IV is an attempt to give an in-depth analysis of immigrant women’s writing by applying feminist theories. It also refers to Boelhower’s theory of ‘Immigrant Autobiography’. This analysis focuses upon the interplay of memory in the writings of Jewish American immigrant women. Feminist theorists, such as Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, observe that women suffering from traumatic memory are likely to be haunted by memories that obsessively interrupt a present moment and insist on their presence. These memories may come to the surface of consciousness in fits and fragments, despite the passing of years, as it happens in the case of Jewish women. Hence, for these women, suffering from traumatic and obsessional memories, autobiographical act works as therapeutic intervention as ‘scriptotherapy’. This section also focuses upon various shades of relationship between immigrant mothers and American-born daughters. The chapter, thus, discusses immigrant experience
characterized by a conflict of values and immigrant women’s attempts to reconcile new attitudes with old customs.

In the fifth chapter, ‘First Generation : “Talking Back”’, the first section discusses seven volumes of autobiography by three representative Jewish American women writers. The chapter includes Edna Ferber’s *A Peculiar Treasure* (1939) and *A Kind of Magic* (1963); Kate Simon’s three sequel autobiographies – *Bronx Primitive* (1982), *A Wider World* (1986) and *Etching in an Hourglass* (1990); and Faye Moskowitz’s *A Leak in the Heart* (1985) and *And the Bridge is Love* (1991). The second section is a theoretical analysis of how collectively these writers ‘talk back’ to patriarchy. Here, Black feminist critic bell hook’s theory of “Talking Back” is adopted to analyze these autobiographies.

The sixth chapter, ‘Contemporary Writers : ‘Beyond’ Difference’ discusses autobiography by the relatively young contemporary writers. The first section offers an overview of Vivian Gornick’s *Fierce Attachments* (1987), Eva Hoffman’s *Lost in Translation* (1989) and Ann Birstein’s *What I Saw at the Fair* (2003). The second section is an attempt to understand these writings with the support of Susan S. Friedman’s concept of “‘Beyond’ Difference” and how the contemporary writers easily negotiate between the old and the new. This section also discusses the notion of cultural pluralism. The sixth chapter, thus, proposes to examine the contemporary Jewish American women’s autobiographies in the global perspective.
The seventh and the final chapter, ‘Conclusion’, substantiates the hypothesis that though distorted their lives and history appear to be, looking from the point of view of literature, a unified threefold pattern emerges out of the nine decades of Jewish American women’s autobiography. Each generation of these women adopts the power of autobiography to re-create history and to make that history part of a collective past through the transformation of stark realities into literature. Passing through the prism of literature, one ray of light, namely, the genre of autobiography transforms and creates a multicoloured spectrum of life stories. These colours combined together, if not seven, at least three primary colours, create a perceptible panorama of a unified pattern. Hence, the thesis concludes with the finding of a unified threefold pattern in Jewish women’s autobiographies: (i) the immigrant women adopt the form of autobiography as a therapeutic way to overcome the trauma of exodus; (ii) the first generation records the process of acculturation and their autobiographies ‘talk back’ to the mainstream by writing their success stories; and (iii) the contemporary writers are in the search of a meaningful existence as women, as Jews and as Americans “‘Beyond’ Difference”. A unified movement shows the progression of Jewish American self from marginality to assimilation and finally, to celebration.

The thesis postulates how a study of such autobiographies dethrones the established literary canons and proposes a possibility for alternative tradition of women’s writing. It also presents how the Jewish American women’s autobiographies replace the patriarchal liturgy and propound a new tradition by offering an alternative matrilineal heritage. Finally, the thesis concludes with the idea that autobiography can become the text of the
oppressed. For Jewish American women, autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition. Hence, such study also pens new venues and possibilities for the further researchers to understand American literature as 'multiethnic literature'.

Broadly speaking, in writing this thesis, the focus is not only on the distinct lives of the nine individuals, but also on a close examination of the subjectivities presented in the narratives that reveal longer cultural processes, such as Americanization; and since these nine women represent different positions in that process of cultural identification, reading these texts and subjectivities proposes a model for ways of reading Jewish American women's autobiographies as the cultural 'other'. 
Works Cited


