CHAPTER V

A Study of Self and Identity in Western Women's Autobiographies

Of the ambiguities encountered in reading autobiographies, perhaps the most challenging is the question about the kind of self the writer reveals. The writer appears to present what is popularly called an 'identity', a psycho-social construct made up of such elements as physical being, intellect and emotion, experience, behaviour and attitudes. The idea that the individual possesses a single fully defined 'true' self, to be either disclosed or discovered is a myth. We often realize that we have been unaware of aspects of ourselves when they come to our attention. The act of reflection may bring a new understanding of one's self, and the hard thinking about one's experience that is a necessary part of autobiography is likely to produce new insights as to what one's self is. If a writer should carry on this process of self-examination longer, or more intensely or at a different time, or under different circumstances, the perception and presentation of the self might well be affected.

Looking at women as autobiographers, one must remember that the selves they project are inevitably shaped, perhaps in ways of which
they are unaware, by a circumstance of which they are very much aware: their need to conform to or rebel against a society largely defined by the values of a patriarchal society. Recent analysts of women's autobiographical writing have argued strongly that while intense awareness of self is a striking characteristic of modern autobiography, self-awareness has not impelled female authors to glory in the uniqueness of their individuality. Rather, these memoirs reveal how the self-consciousness that writers exhibit is that of being women first and individuals second, an awareness similar to that of members of other groups in positions of minority or inferiority.

Among critics who have devoted their attention to autobiographies written by women, there is ready consensus that these works challenge critical assumptions about autobiography as a genre, assumptions that have developed largely through a study of male autobiographers. In the growing corpus of critical work on women's autobiographical writings, certain traits have recurrently been noted as characteristic of these gender-marked narratives.

One such feature is a focus on relationships with others, rather than as in men's autobiographies, on the development and successful accomplishments of the self. In her evaluation of the earliest women's autobiographies written in English, Mary G. Mason hits upon the idea that the self-discovery of female identity seems to concede the real
presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of the female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’.¹ For all her singularity, her strong individuality and distinctiveness of personality, a female often requires a substitute figure, or ‘other’, with and through whom she might identify herself. This need makes itself felt particularly in the telling of her story. Estelle C. Jelinek too in the introduction to her collection of essays on women’s autobiography notes an “emphasis by women on the personal, especially on other people.”² The emphasis on relationships with others which feminist literary critics have found in women’s autobiographies would appear to support the assumption of a good deal of recent work on female development. Mention has to be made in this context of Nancy Chodorow’s influential study, The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender³ which accentuates the requirement of a strong mother-daughter bond facilitating the woman to have a sense of self which is continuous with others and highlights the fact that unlike men, women experience themselves relationally.

The concept of mother-daughter relationship as the basis for the formation of identity has been dealt with exhaustively in the earlier chapters in the context of Indian and Afro-Asian women writers. This chapter will undertake a discussion of three Western women writers with a similar point of view. My study will include two British
autobiographies – Agatha Christie’s *An Autobiography* (henceforth parenthetically referred to as Christie); *Under My Skin* – Volume one of Doris Lessing’s *My Autobiography* (henceforth parenthetically referred to as UMS); and an American biography, *Call Me Anna*, The Autobiography of Patty Duke, an Oscar award winner of the twentieth Century (henceforth parenthetically referred to as Anna). A brief note on the emergence of autobiography in Britain and America is also attempted in the relevant sections.

It is generally accepted that the rise of autobiography was associated with the increase in historical sense and self-consciousness, which were the effects of the Renaissance. However, it took a while for the changes to sweep through England from Italy. Hence, the appearance of autobiography in England, like other literary forms, came relatively late. Around the middle of the seventeenth century, roughly a score of autobiographies had been penned in England. However, after 1640, there was a sharp increase in the number of British autobiographies, mainly due to the formation of a tradition of religious autobiography in the various Protestant sects.

Cynthia Pomerleau observes that despite the fact that women comprised more than half the population, their autobiographies make up roughly ten percent of the total produced in the seventeenth century. In a way, it can be attributed to the fact that men had more educational
opportunities than women and access to a wider range of experience. But though scanty in number, women’s narratives were by no means weak imitations of those of men. On the contrary, in many respects they seem to be more modern, more subjective and more given to self-scrutiny. Furthermore, writings by women are the early examples of the form. In fact, two of the most remarkable autobiographical works of the century were authored by women before 1660 – Anna Trapel’s Report and Plea or a Narrative of her Journey into Cornwall\(^8\) (1654) and True Relations of My Birth, Breeding and Life\(^9\) by Margaret Cavendish. Indeed autobiography must share with the novel the distinction of being one of the first literary genres shaped with active participation of women.

The women who produced secular autobiographies in the seventeenth century were largely upper class, and their disposition was by and large one of acceptance. Women not only accepted their subordination, but also actually found it a positive virtue, one that they could constructively work to achieve. On a perusal of their works, one is aware that the feeling of subordination affected these women relatively lightly because the social system still allowed them a kind of dignity. They played an essential role and saw themselves as indispensable to the completion of the social unit. There was still a sense of connectedness with their husbands, a sense of linked and shared fates. It may also be
that subordination was less onerous than it might have been because, as is evident from the autobiographies of the period, the social system permitted upper class women to take some legitimate pleasure in their own achievements. As long as women were willing and able to operate within the system of female subjugation, to see evidence of their own excellence, as exceptional, individual marks of courage or intelligence, they did not threaten the social fabric but perhaps even reinforced it. Moreover, single life was still seen as an acceptable way of life, for the unmarried female relative could still be a productive member of a household. In fact, women had genuine and positive feelings about the unmarried state for its own sake, not simply for the absence of the problems imposed by marriage.

For the seventeenth century English women, much more than men, love acted as a defining force. Although it is not possible to say whether love was intrinsically more important to women than to men, it was more crucial to the way women saw themselves. The self is largely defined by the choices one makes. But it has to be accepted that the choices realistically open to a woman were far more limited than those open to a man. In other ways too, women's lives were more restricted than men's, since they lived in a world where men made the rules and for centuries women were bound much more oppressively by tradition and prescriptions of behaviour.
In Pomerleau’s opinion, the idea that oneself, one’s feelings, one’s spouse and domestic relations were appropriately and essentially worth writing about, was in effect a female idea. Apart from interpersonal relationship, the other area in which women could operate with relative freedom was religion. The mushrooming growth of Quakerism during this period is an important event in the history of women and of women’s autobiography as it preached and practised equality of women.

The eighteenth century witnessed many alterations in this situation. Economic progress and social complexity allied to the industrial revolution and the resulting population shifts from rural areas to the urban centres began to disturb the equilibrium maintained by the force of centuries of tradition, and the feminine sensibility in autobiography underwent a corresponding change. To begin with, new elements of society found voices. The growth of literacy and of the publishing industry created a non-elitist audience and a tribe of authors eager to satisfy its tastes. A growing sense of injustice of the disparities when what is not a crime in men, is scandalous and unpardonable in women, made resentment of the double standard and even outright hostility towards men, a significant element in the autobiographies of the eighteenth century English women.

There is, however, much evidence in the autobiographies of the eighteenth century, of extensive feelings of discontent, isolated voices
speaking out and a burgeoning sense of independence. Women began to realize that they would have to look elsewhere than in marriage for contentment and fulfilment. The novel contributed to this new awareness by helping to expose the assumptions underlying the traditional model for relations between the sexes. The American and French revolutions and the spread of democratic ideals affirming the rights of man inevitably raised the question of the rights of women. The long-established view of woman is antithetical to the motive of autobiography - a desire to synthesize, to see one's life as an organic whole, to look back for a pattern. Women's lives are fragmented; they start as young women and are successively transformed from without into spinsters, wives, mothers or matriarchs. The process is not one of growth; rather they enter into each stage more out of adherence to societal prescriptions than as a process of evolution.

According to the observations of Elizabeth Winston, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, women have revealed an acute self-consciousness of the criticism they often aroused, merely because they were female. One notices an interesting pattern of response to this criticism in the autobiographies of professional women writers, British and American; who were born in the twentieth century. In the autobiographies published before 1920, the women authors tend to establish a conciliatory relationship with their readers, by attempting to
justify their nonconformist ways of living and writing, so as to gain the sympathy and acceptance of the audience. Women who have published autobiographies after 1920, however, no longer apologize for their careers and successes, though, a few still display signs of uneasiness at having violated cultural expectations for women. Writers who have recently published their works openly assert their intellectual and aesthetic gifts and their serious commitment to literary life. This change in the autobiographer's relation to her readers indicates an important change in the writer's self-image and in the kinds of autobiographical intentions she exhibits. That is, the more confident these women became of the legitimacy of their way of life, the more freely they used autobiography for overtly personal and thus more self-validating reasons to express strongly held beliefs, explore and understand the self, or experiment with the conventions of the genre.

Women writing between 1850 and 1920, Winston avers, show ambivalence about being professional writers at a time when the usual pattern for a female was immersion in domesticity. Their need to assure the readers of their womanliness results in apologies, disclaimers and words of self-deprecation. These autobiographers express their desire to entertain their readers, defend past actions or leave a record for their children – intentions directed mainly toward satisfying others.

The women, who published autobiographies after 1920, show a
stronger professional commitment and belief in the value of their work than the earlier women writers, though, a few still tender more or less defensive explanations for their divergence from traditional female roles. They put forth various reasons for writing autobiographies such as the desire to present and recommend the ideas for which they have lived, to show the improvement in women's lives since the Victorian days, to pay tribute to a way of life that has vanished and to achieve self-understanding. Not only do they use their autobiographies to inform and exhort their readers or to clarify the past for themselves but also to affirm their personal superiority and to experiment with the autobiographical form.

Though the women who wrote previously enjoyed an enthusiastic reception during their lifetimes and were thus able to support themselves and their families, they felt the need to justify their actions, which explains the strong pressure on women to fulfil the cultural expectations for their sex. Women were not considered autonomous individuals but dependents of their families and husbands, whether these men really provided for them or not. They were assumed to be intellectually inferior to men and born to express their limited creativity through reproduction rather than through art. A true woman was supposed to be modest and self-effacing and would never invite unseemly publicity by writing for publication. Given these restraining expectations, even
exceedingly gifted women would have had difficulty sustaining their self-confidence as artists. They needed persistent affirmation of their work from people whose opinions they respected, to quiet the doubt within and to confront the negative voices without it. It is not surprising then that in autobiography, the most self-assertive and self-revealing of the genres, these professional women writers should feel particularly vulnerable to criticism.

Women autobiographers writing before 1920 consciously worked to establish a special relation with their audience. They sought primarily to justify their ways of living and the fact of their writing. The particular acts they felt compelled to defend reflect the cultural stereotypes that restrain women from fully realizing their potential. Reacting to the established beliefs that women find their vocation only as wives and mothers, these women defended their choice of a career or their deviation from the traditional material and maternal roles. Generally it was only later in this century, as stereotypes became less rigid and women writers began to experience fewer negative reactions to their untraditional assertive behaviour, that female autobiographers acknowledged more personal reasons for writing and affirmed their achievements without apology. The Western writers whom I have chosen for my study indisputably belong to this category of women writers.
Section I: Agatha Christie’s *An Autobiography*

“What can I say at seventy five? Thank God for my life, and for all the love that has been given to me” (Christie, 551), says Agatha Christie, concluding her autobiography. This in fact, sums up her life story, which she began to write in 1950 and completed fifteen years later when she could candidly declare, “I am satisfied. I have done what I want to do” (Christie, 7).

Though this is an autobiography, beginning, as autobiographies should, at the beginning and going on to the time she finished writing; Christie has not allowed herself to be too rigidly circumscribed by the straitjacket of chronology. Nor does she feel obliged to put everything in. Few people could have extracted more intense and more varied fun from life and Christie’s autobiography is a hymn to the joy of living.

Christie has time and again felt that the urge to write one’s autobiography overtakes one sooner or later as in her case. For her, autobiography was much too grand a word, which suggested a focused study of one’s life, implying names, dates and places in a chronological order. She longed to “plunge (her) hand into a lucky dip and come up with a hand full of assorted memories” (Christie, 10).

Life in Christie’s view consists of three parts; the absorbing and usually enjoyable present which rushes from minute to minute with fatal speed, the future, dim and uncertain, for which one can make
innumerable interesting plans, the wilder and more improbable the better and thirdly, the past, the memories and realities that are the bedrock of one’s present life “brought back suddenly by a scent, the shape of a hill, an old song, some triviality that makes one suddenly say, ‘I remember’...with a peculiar and quite unexplainable pleasure” (Christie, 10).

Down her memory lane the first picture that emerges from her mind is that of her walking along the streets of Divard on a market day with her mother. Her childhood and her adolescence revolved round her mother to such an extent that she could in no way visualize herself independently. “One of the luckiest things that can happen to you in life is to have a happy childhood” (Christie, 13) asserts Christie, and in truth she has had a happy childhood. She had a home and a garden she loved; a wise and patient Nanny, two people as father and mother who loved each other dearly and made a success of their marriage and parenthood – the essentials for a complete blissful childhood.

Christie’s father, though deficient in outstanding characteristics, was a much-loved man. He was not particularly intelligent, had a simple and loving heart and really cared for his fellowmen. A remarkable feature that made him lovable was his endearing nature and a good sense of humour. Her mother, Clara, in contrast was an enigmatic and arresting personality, more forceful than her husband, startlingly original
in her ideas, shy and miserably diffident about herself, with a natural melancholy.

Christie was particularly interested in her parents, not only because they were her parents, but also because they achieved that very rare production – a happy marriage. Her mother had an unhappy childhood spent with her aunt, as her parents were unable to cope with the dire financial constraints they were under. Clara’s aunt though kind, good natured and generous was insensitive to a child’s feelings. Though Clara had all the so-called advantages of a comfortable home and a good education, what she lost and what nothing could replace was the carefree life with her own brothers in her home.

Years later Christie realized that her mother’s ideas were always slightly at variance with reality as a consequence of her childhood and upbringing. She saw the universe as more brightly coloured than it was, people as better or worse than they were. Perhaps because her childhood years had been quiet and restrained with her emotions kept well below the surface, she intended to see the world in terms of drama that sometimes came near to melodrama. Her creative imagination was so strong that it could never see things as drab or ordinary. Christie remarks that her mother had curious flashes of intuition, of knowing suddenly what other people were thinking. In fact, her ability for reading the thoughts of others was always a surprise for the family to the extent
that Madge, Christie’s sister once remarked, “Anything I don’t want mother to know, I don’t even think of, if she’s in the room” (Christie, 19). Clara, had been passionately enthusiastic about education for girls, but quite strangely when Christie was a child, she swung round to the opposite view. According to her, “No child ought to be allowed to read until it was eight years old: better for the eyes and also for the brain” (Christie, 24). Nonetheless, Christie had a remarkable competence to grasp and equipped herself with the talent to read on her own, much to the distress of her mother.

An amazing bonding with her mother was one of the finest things that happened to Christie right from infancy. She narrates an incident in her childhood to endorse this fact. Once one of her pets, a canary disappeared and she was so crestfallen that she cried endlessly throughout the horrible dragging length of the day. When however, the bird appeared, mother admonished her that one should never cry about things until one is sure of it. More than the joy of the bird’s return, the strength of her mother’s love and understanding in times of trouble struck her. In the black abyss of misery, holding tight to mother’s hand had been the one comfort. Christie had frequently felt that there was something magnetic and healing in her touch, which would provide her the strength and vitality of her mother. The all-encompassing dyadic relationship she shared with her mother is unquestionably one of the
pertinent factors, which made Christie love her life and allow her to live it to the lees. Mother’s indulgence was total where she could imbibe discipline in her daughter all the while catering to her emotional needs. She taught Christie to respect the leisure of even servants and treat them with utmost courtesy. Clara’s philosophy had always been that one must be polite to people whose position forbids them to be rude to others.

Childhood was indeed blissful for Christie with her siblings and loving parents. She mentions a childhood expedition with her brother Monty that further explains the way Clara has nurtured her children. Though her nurse was very apprehensive about sending little Christie with her brother on a boat because “Young gentlemen don’t know how to look after a little girl” (Christie, 34), Clara affirmed that Christie had sense enough not to fall overboard. It was also her way of expressing her appreciation of Monty’s “unusual act of unselfishness” (Christie, 34). One finds here that in subtle ways Clara understands her children, encourages and appreciates them at the apt time. A close parallel is observed in the manner in which Christie and Soraya have been brought up. The encouragement and approval of her mother go a long way in helping Christie to take life in her stride thus making it a success.

Christie spent most of her childhood at Ashfield to which she had acute sentimental attachment. She had always been accepted in the family, quite kindly though, as the ‘slow one of the family’. In fact, she
was very inarticulate and always found it difficult to assemble in words what she wanted to articulate. Her infirmity is expressed thus:

Agatha’s so terribly slow was always the cry. It was quite true and I knew it and accepted it. It did not worry or distress me. I was resigned to being always the slow one. It was not until I was over twenty that I realized that my home standard had been unusually high and that actually I was quick as quick or quicker than the average. Inarticulate I shall always be. It is probably one of the causes that has made me a writer (Christie, 46-47).

She had a capacity to create a world of her own, which extended from her childhood to her later days as well. This had helped her tremendously as she grew up because she had never, all through, suffered from the tedium of ‘nothing to do’. An enormous number of women, Christie opines, suffer from loneliness and boredom. To have time on their hands is a nightmare and not a delight. She feels that if things are constantly being done to amuse somebody, naturally one expects it and when nothing is done, one is at a loss. On hindsight, Christie was increasingly sure of the fact that her tastes have remained fundamentally the same. What she liked playing with as a child, she had liked playing with later in life. Reflecting and remembering quiet moments of everyday life is what she enjoyed most in life.

In her essay “The Socialization of Gender Differences”, Leslie Brody puts forth a hypothesis that daughters of warm and nurturing mothers internalize a sense of wellbeing and actually experience less frequent negative feelings than do other daughters, thereby expressing
them less frequently. However, when they do express negative feelings, they may feel comfortable expressing them intensely because their nurturing mothers respond non-punitively. This argument would be consistent with the Object Relations’ perspective that nurturing and close mothers foster positive emotions in their daughters and also foster comfort with the expression of a wide range of intense effects. Christie’s blissful childhood is justified considering the pleasant and warm relationship she shared with her mother – her companion, adviser and mentor. In subtle ways her mother had helped her children to come to terms with life and enjoy it to the maximum; an essential foundation for a strong self-identity.

Authority, Christie recognizes, is an extraordinary thing and she says her mother had it in full measure. In fact, she had always observed that her mother was seldom cross and hardly ever raised her voice, but she had to only gently pronounce an order and it was immediately fulfilled. The lack of this gift in her children was quite a surprise to Clara. Later in life, when Rosalind was born and Clara came to stay with Christie, she could experience her mother’s authoritative nature and her ability to master the situation. She truly longed for such female maturity. In fact, some of the advice her mother gave her children is proof of her maturity and level-headedness. She used to constantly tell her daughters, “Never go back to a place where you have been happy. Until you do, it
remains alive for you. If you go back it will be destroyed” (Christie, 81). Christie could experience the truth of this statement extremely well and she owes all her happiness to her mother, a perfect dyadic relationship that brought out the best in her. To a child the world is simply what is happening to him or her; and that includes the people in it, whom they like, whom they hate, what makes them happy and what makes them unhappy. Christie’s world was full of her mother, her love and support and of course her stern and severe demeanour at times.

Clara had her schooling in an establishment in Cheshire. Hence, she sent her elder daughter Madge to a boarding school. But in due course she was entirely converted to the view that the best way to bring up girls was to let them run wild as much as possible; to give them food, fresh air, and not to force their minds in any way. This was a very healthy approach in bringing up girls, which helped her children face life with courage and determination.

Christie’s father died when she was eleven and all on a sudden she became cognizant of the fact that life has taken on a completely different complexion. She stepped out of her child’s world, a world of security and thoughtlessness to enter the fringes of the world of reality. She had absolutely no doubts that from the man of the family came the stability of the home, which is evident in her remarks “we all laugh when the phrase comes, “your father knows best”, but that phrase does
represent what was so marked a feature of late Victorian life” (Christie, 116).

Though it is believed that due to healthy parenting and her mother’s indulgence, a girl tends to build up her identity in a network of others and she thus has a relational self, one finds the contrary situation in the case of Christie. She had an exceptionally happy childhood and very satisfactory maternal affection. In spite of it, in her teens, she felt enormously advanced in age and experience. In fact, she no longer thought of herself as protected by others. She had her own protective feelings. She felt responsible for her mother; all the same, a keen desire of introspection overpowered her — the need to know herself, what she was proficient in and could attempt successfully and what she should avoid. She was aware of her shortcomings as well; especially that she was not quick-witted. In fact, she had to give herself time to look at a problem carefully before deciding on how to deal with it.

Christie has always enjoyed her life and lived it positively as a consequence of her blissful childhood. She believed that one of the secrets of existence is enjoying the gift of life that one has been bestowed with. Her awareness of herself and of women in general has led to the belief that the position of women over the years has changed for the worse. She feels that “Women have behaved like mugs. We have clamoured to be allowed to work as men work. Men, not being fools,
have taken kindly to the idea. Why support a wife?” (Christie, 134). In her opinion, having established ourselves so cleverly as the weaker sex, modern women should be broadly on par with the woman of primitive tribes, who toil in the fields all day, walk miles to gather fuel and carry all the household equipments on their heads while, “the gorgeous ornamental male sweeps on ahead, unburdened save for one lethal weapon with which to defend his women” (Christie, 134). A very subtle exposition of her feminist thinking is rendered through her words.

Christie recollects that her love for literature and passion for creative writing was no doubt due to the unfailing encouragement of her mother, who read out to her Dickens and Scott which she greatly enjoyed. Sensing the need for a better schooling for Christie, Clara arranged tutors for her daughter and later sent her to Paris for further education. Physical separation from her mother had its toll on her mental state and she pined for her mother’s sight. The attachment to her mother was so strong and endearing that her absence seemed to drain her of all strength. She observed that her mother’s mere presence stabilized her emotions nurturing her back to strength. A happy and healthy childhood coupled with a strong maternal bond, initiated Christie into the belief that “If the thing you want beyond anything cannot be, it is much better to recognize it and go forward, instead of dwelling on one’s regrets and hopes” (Christie,167-68). She constantly adhered to the philosophy that
“If you can’t take the risk of doing something you want, when the chances come, life isn’t worth living” (Christie, 296). It is surprising that a woman who was nurtured very protectively by her mother can uphold such a point of view.

Psychologists argue that biological factors create the need for connection in females, as girls and boys are programmed from birth to experience and respond to the world differently. But they differ in opinion and claim that gender behaviour is largely an effect of how a child is raised. Nevertheless the drive for connection in girls and women is indeed a powerful force and is most likely the result of a combination of biology and culture. The drive for relationship stands very near to the core of a girl’s identity and may form her frame of reference for experiencing life. The challenge to the parents is to teach their children how to balance competing claims of the need for connection with their need to develop a fully autonomous self. Christie’s mother has unfailingly realized the need for such a tutoring of her daughter and it is evident in the kind of life Christie had all through – a perfect balancing of dependence and autonomy.

In Western society, ‘coming out’ was of great importance in a girl’s life. In an affluent family, the mother arranged a dance, but Christie being aware of her financial status knew that she could not look forward to such luxuries. However, Clara did not want to deny her
daughter what was considered a young girl’s birthright. In fact, she wanted her daughter to

emerge like a butterfly from the chrysalis, from a schoolgirl to a young lady of the world, meeting other girls and plenty of young men, and, to put it plainly, be given her chance of finding a suitable mate (Christie, 170-71).

Owing to dismal financial conditions Clara was cognizant of the difficulty Christie would face, to enter society on usual terms. But she always had a way of tackling situations. Her choice of Cairo as a convalescent centre was mainly with Christie in mind who was by nature shy and not brilliant socially. Hence, Clara’s intention was to familiarize her daughter with all finer aspects of social life imperative for girls of her age, which would be a worthwhile experience for her.

Her whirlwind marriage with Archibald Christie and the subsequent honorary work in the hospital were, so to speak, aberrations in her life. But it was while working in the dispensary that she first conceived the idea of writing a detective story. She was so obsessed with the idea of the detective story and the characters, that it drove her to the point of gross absentmindedness. Clara’s encouragement to her daughter’s pursuits was amazing. In fact, Christie owes her creative genius and her successful writing career to her mother, as it was she who initiated Christie into the world of literature.

One of the most exciting things that ever happened to Christie was going round the world. On one occasion, on a tour with Archie, she
was severely affected by seasickness and Archie insisted she get back to England. But Christie made her choice very clear as always. She decided to get off the ship to dry land and try her hand at some work. Archie with his conventional patriarchal views could not believe that a woman could work alone in strange circumstances, because those days employment for women was also scarce. Women were only daughters to be supported or wives to be supported, or widows to exist on what their husbands had left or their relations could provide. They could be companions to old ladies, or they could go as nursery governesses to children (Christie, 299).

Nonetheless, Christie was determined to go ahead, which is a testimony of her independent nature and her capacity to decide for herself. Total emotional security had not weakened her capacity to think and act independently. On the contrary, her happy frame of mind enabled clear and unprejudiced thinking. Christie could never claim to have been a great mother to Rosalind on the lines she had been cared for by her mother. An emotional rapport with Rosalind was lacking. Nevertheless, she enjoyed motherhood and its experiences thoroughly, though she was not totally committed to the care of her daughter trivializing her priorities. According to her,

there is nothing more thrilling in this world, than having a child that is yours, and yet is mysteriously a stranger. You are the gate through which it came into the world, and you will be allowed to have charge of it for a period... it is like a strange plant which you have brought home, planted, and can hardly wait to see how it will turn out (Christie, 340).
It is quite strange that a woman who had a very strong maternal indulgence and total attachment to her mother could be capable of such thinking. But Christie has had the best of both worlds. Enjoying a relational identity and kinship with others, especially her own immediate family, she did claim to have an isolate sense of self and an independent thinking, deriving sustenance from her affinity to others.

Her torturous divorce transformed her into a hardened being, suspicious of the world and better attuned to deal with life. Clarity of thinking helped her to turn adversities into opportunities. Steadily she matured from an amateur to a professional writer. She had travelled far and wide with Archie and for the first time after her separation she decided to set off all by herself to find out what kind of person she was; whether she had become entirely dependent on others as she feared. Her observation in the course of the journey was that “not until you travel by yourself do you realize how much the outside world will protect and befriend you, not always quite to one’s satisfaction” (Christie, 376).

Her meeting with Max, in the course of her journey was another turning point in her life. She realized in the course of her life that as one moves ahead, it becomes tiring to keep up the character one has invented, relapsing into an individuality of one’s own. This of course may be disconcerting to others around the individual, but is a great relief to the person concerned. Christie recapitulates her strengths and
weaknesses and comes across as a person less ambitious, aware of limitations, but all the same, one who can assert her individuality if need be. She often felt that she would never be quenched of hope. "Why should one give up any hope until one is dead?" (Christie, 522), is her constant query and she has successfully imbibed this virtue in her life. She would at times contemplate retirement from writing. However, with the success of each book, she would extend the deadline.

Christie admits that she enjoyed her second blooming, which according to her comes when one finishes the life of the emotions and of personal relations. She suddenly found at the age of fifty that a whole new life had opened before her filled with things she could not think about before. For a while her personal life had absorbed all her energy: but with a new vision, she found herself free to look around and enjoy herself laying bare the fact through her life that though age brings its own physical discomforts, one's thankfulness for the gift of life is stronger and more vital during these years. Old age for her has some of the reality and intensity of dreams and all through she has enjoyed dreaming enormously. This capacity springs from a happy and blissful childhood, mother's love and care and a healthy upbringing. Nothing of her childhood was lost, though she did go through a broken marriage, financial strain, personal tragedy and so on.

A healthy upbringing is the prime requirement of a strong sense
of selfhood. However, a woman’s identity is based on a self-in-relation. This has posed numerous problems to women who have contested this notion of relational selfhood. Christie, though well brought up and emotionally stable as a result of strong dyadic concern, did exhibit streaks of an individualistic identity through her choice of a literary career, which considering the age she wrote in was problematic for women. However, one can always argue that her choice of a career was also due to maternal prompting and encouragement. Her life did have its ups and downs. But her strength and positive approach to life facilitated her journey through turbulent days. Internalizing her mother’s strength, which in the opinion of psychoanalysts, is possible mainly in a healthy mother-daughter relationship, she did venture into life to become a successful creative writer.

Section II: Doris Lessing’s Under My Skin

Women most often introject the cultural tradition and having internalized their experiences with their mother and their heritage develops a context for their role: the role of recipient and performer, opines Indira J. Parikh. There is however, another group of women who though exposed to the cultural lore seem to react to their experiences of their mother and their heritage by internalizing assertiveness. Dissatisfied with the restrictive role and the inevitable
nature of their life space, these women try to establish for themselves the role of a navigator and to take charge of their lives. They actively attempt to carve out a space for themselves where they can find expression of their being. Doris Lessing is one such writer who through her autobiography reveals her attempts to steer her life to take charge of it.

Under My Skin, the first volume of Doris Lessing's autobiography begins with her childhood in Africa and ends on her arrival in London in 1949, with the typescript of her first novel. It charts the evolution, first of her consciousness, then of her sexuality and finally her political awareness with an almost overwhelming immediacy and is as distinct and challenging as anything she has ever written. The second volume, Walking in the Shade,13 (1997) picks up Lessing in 1949, when she moved to London with her young son shortly after the publication of her first novel, The Grass Is Singing14 (1950), and follows her through 1962. Here one finds Lessing displaying the restless intellect that would become the hallmark of her literary career.

In her vivid, beautifully paced memoir, Lessing sets the individual against history, the personal against the general and shows by the example of her life set down honestly, how biography and fiction mesh, how fiction transmutes the personal into the general, and how the particular experience illuminates the universal. Lessing's autobiography
is not just about a particular childhood, but about all childhoods, not just about white marginality, but about all forms of interior exile, rebellion, subversion and the secret of self-making.

Though born in Persia, in 1919, in Lessing’s telling, the tenor of her life was set even before she was born – in the devastating impact of the First World War on her parents. Alfred Cook Taylor, Lessing’s hapless father, lost a leg in the trenches and married the determined nurse who tended to him; already thirty-five, she herself had lost her lover in the war. To this union of sad circumstances redolent with disappointment and sacrifice, Lessing traces her own feelings of loneliness and the need to escape that caused her to flee from the life of marriage and babies that her upbringing and culture had mapped out for her. She was unaware of the importance of being born in 1919 when half of Europe was a graveyard and people were dying in millions. Her mother Emily’s childhood and girlhood, Lessing informs us, were spent doing well in everything because she had to please her stern parents:

She excelled in school, she played hockey and tennis and lacrosse well, she bicycled, she went to the theatre and music hall and musical evenings. Her energy was phenomenal. And she read all kinds of advanced books, and was determined her children would not have the cold and arid upbringing she did (UMS, 5).

While her mother was an exemplary ‘Victorian and then an Edwardian girl’, the pattern of a modern young woman, her father enjoyed a
country childhood, for he spent every minute out of school with the children of the farmers.

Lessing often joked that it was the war that had given birth to her, as a defence when weary with the talk about the war that went on and on. But it was no joke. She often felt that there was something a “dark grey cloud, like poisonous gas” (UMS, 10) over her early childhood. Perhaps it was from the war that she felt the “struggling panicky need” (UMS, 10) to escape with a nervous aversion to where she had just stood as if “something there might blow up and drag her down by the heel” (UMS, 10).

If one tries to claim one’s own life by writing an autobiography, at once the question of veracity looms large, avers Lessing. She confesses that there are certain aspects of her life, which she tries to understand better, the foremost of it being her relationship with her mother. She had been in nervous flight from her mother ever since she could remember anything. And from the age of fourteen she set herself obdurately against her mother in a kind of inner emigration from everything her mother represented. In fact, for years she lived in a state of accusation against her mother, at first hot, then cold and hard and the pain, not to say anguish, was deep and genuine. Maternal indulgence was almost impossible considering the relationship she shared with her mother.
Lessing has described her childhood as an uneven mix of some pleasure and much pain. The natural world, which she explored with her brother Harry, was a retreat from an otherwise miserable existence. Her mother, obsessed with properly raising her daughter, enforced a rigid system of rules and hygiene at home, installed Doris in a convent school, where the nuns terrified their charges with stories of hell and damnation. Lessing was later sent to an all girls’ high school in the capital Salisbury from which she soon dropped out. She was thirteen, and it was the end of her formal education. However, Lessing’s transformation into a self-educated intellectual was remarkable. The parcel of books ordered from London fed her imagination, laying out other worlds to escape into. Her early reading included Dickens, Scott, Stevenson and Kipling. Later she discovered D. H. Lawrence, Stendhal, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky. Along with this her early years were also spent absorbing her father’s bitter memories of the First World War, taking them in as a kind of poison. She says, “We are all of us made by war, twisted and warped by war, but we seem to forget it” (UMS, 10).

Her most vivid early memory was not the actual birth of her brother, but her introduction to the baby. She was made to believe that it was her baby and she should love it. But very soon she realized that she was tricked into love, thus cleverly outwitting her jealousy, which threw her into a flame of rage and resentment. She did love the baby, and then
the infant and then the little boy with the most passionate protective love. Nevertheless, these circumstances and others of similar magnitude determined her emotional life forever.

Lessing's mother, who was deprived of love in her childhood always reiterated that love is all one needs and that a child should be governed by love. She made sure that her children suffered no such deprivation. However, no matter what her mother believed in, Lessing realized that love is a word that has to be filled with an experience of love, which in her case was lacking. She states painfully,

What I remember is hard bundling hands, impatient arms and her voice telling me over and over again that she had not wanted a girl, she wanted a boy. I knew from the beginning that she loved my little brother unconditionally and she did not love me (UMS, 25).

It cannot be ignored that her early childhood made her one of the "walking wounded" (UMS, 25) for years. She believed in the truth that some psychological pressures and even well-meant ones are as damaging as physical hurt. Hence all her life, she would understand, feel at home and often live with people who had created their own families. But whatever be the negative emotions associated with her mother, Lessing admits that her mother was conscientious, hardworking and always attempting to do her best.

She was a good sort, a good sport. She never hit or even slapped a child. She talked about love often. The tenderness she had never been taught came out in worrying and fussing and – in the
case of my brother – making him ‘delicate’ so she could nurse him; in my case, actually making me sick for a time (UMS, 26).

Lessing’s father on the other hand was affectionate but not tender. In fact, neither parent liked displays of emotion. But if Lessing had been like her mother, things would have been smoother and comfortable. Unfortunately for the mother, Lessing was “an over-sensitive, always observant, judging, battling, impressionable, hungry-for-love child. With not one, but several skins too few” (UMS, 26).

Apart from her mother, Marta, a cross old woman dominated the nursery. Her mother’s partiality to her brother and indifference to her often threw Lessing into a miserable state and years later on introspection, she could observe this pleasure in authenticating her inadequacies not only as insensitivity, which it was, but also as another expression of her mother’s natural theatricality. In a way one can presume that her mother’s behaviour was a reaction to her father’s reprimands and her fear of paternal authority. This image of the nursery, and her mother, feature in her Memoirs of a Survivor, (1975) which she subtitles “An Attempt at an Autobiography.”15 Though it is an exaggerated and enlarged portrayal of her parents, Lessing opines that it is appropriate for the world of dreams. Her mother’s constant refrain, “I have sacrificed myself for my children,” is played upon in this work. She often felt that women in those days had no inhibitions about making
such statements. Her mother often came across to her as a frustrated complaining woman who considered her children as a burden:

She talks all the time about what a burden her children are to her, how they take it out of her, how much she is unfulfilled and unappreciated, how no one but a mother knows how much she has to give of herself to ungrateful children who soak up her precious talents and juices like so many avid sponges (UMS, 29).

These dramatic monologues were quite common with children as intended listeners, and to their misery she would blame them for being a burden and a disappointment draining her life. Lessing dejectedly states that there is no need to look for memories of abuse and cruelty elsewhere.

Lessing recollects how her mother went to the extreme of denouncing her daughter as a hateful child who should have been killed at birth itself. The truth that her mother could diminish, demean and betray her own daughter was quite beyond Lessing's comprehension. She could not force herself to believe that even robust and insensitive children remain unaffected by such an assault on their very existence. But as she reiterates, she “was born with skins too few. Or they were scrubbed off (her) by those robust and efficient hands” (UMS, 30). She could remember, sharp, clear and immediate, how her father sat and watched the events and people around him with a slow sardonic smile. When her emotions became uncontrollable and she felt the need to kill her mother if she could, she would take refuge in her father.
The dichotomy in her mother's character is clearly evident in Lessing's account of the way Emily wanted her children to experience what they should. She took the children to different places and explained to them fundamental facts about matter. Her innovative methods of instruction are well appreciated by Lessing:

She boiled the skulls and skeletons of birds and small animals until the flesh fell off so we could learn the structure of bones. She blew birds' eggs, and dismantled birds' nests. She cut open termite nests to show us their gardens, their nurseries, their roads, their galleries. She showed us cast snakes' skins and the eggs of spiders and snakes. She pulled flowers and leaves apart and made us draw their parts (UMS, 99).

A further endorsement of her mother's care and concern is evident when her father was to leave for Persia, after five years at home. Emily was unwilling to leave her children behind in England, though uprooting them meant jeopardizing their education. She was adamant about it being aware of the horrors of bullying and neglect small children could suffer from ill-chosen parental substitutes. One finds here a total contrast in Emily's manner and thinking. She can be as uncaring and indifferent at times, and yet a doting and concerned mother at other times. Perhaps one can attribute this disparity in her behaviour to the circumstances under which she spent her childhood.

Instances of admonitions and betrayals were numerous in Lessing's life. But while these instances went on, the business of education went on too, for it was her mother's main concern. Emotional
imbalance gradually drove Lessing to the point of stealing; ridiculous things like pots of rouge, ribbons, scissors and money too. She even started to lie about everything. Her anxious parents soon realized what she required was an ordered, regulated life. However, they could do little to help her out, as her emotions and feelings were by then decided by neglect and indifference. Her mother’s dramatics and ‘show of emotion’ became unbearable to Lessing in course of time. Emily constantly complained of a ‘bad heart’ and several times a day she would summon her children to her bedside where she would dramatically demonstrate her ‘bad health’. Lessing would often be “consumed with flames of rage” (UMS, 65) and though she embraced her warmly, she resented and repudiated the emotion, and in due course she refused to go to her bedside.

As mentioned earlier, though the mother-daughter relationship here is certainly strained, Lessing understood and accepted her mother’s talents and was much appreciative of her ability to cook, sew and invent recipes. In spite of all this her intermittent rage against her mother pushed her to decide on getting away from home to ‘anywhere’. Stealing ten shillings from her mother’s handbag and packing a little food in a pillowcase, she and her brother got ready to leave home. The plan was nonetheless aborted by the dogs whining and jumping around them. This was probably an attempt to show the world that she was grown up and
she continued fresh tricks to make the people around her aware of her growing up. Nevertheless, she was cognizant of the truth that the condition of being grown up and free is far away for she “was still in the state where the end of a day could hardly be glimpsed from its start” (UMS, 109). According to Chodorow, girls do not need to develop a gender identity, which is different from that of their mothers. They are socialised to identify with and model their emotional expressiveness as females, learning to express a wide range of emotions in close relationship with their mothers. But what girls do need to do, particularly during adolescence, is to develop a sense of self that is different from that of their mothers. This is mainly because in adolescence girls have difficulties in separating from their mothers and in developing their own identities. They may learn to use negative emotions, especially hostility and distress as a way of communicating, differentiation or autonomy, from their mothers. This would be especially true in a Western context where the development of adolescent autonomy is adaptive for both males and females.

At the age of ten, Lessing converted to Roman Catholicism. Her submission was sudden and her mother exploded into reproaches at the sight of the holy water and rosary in her possession. This, as a matter of fact, marked the beginning of a rejection of her mother, “like the slamming of a door” (UMS, 124). Her conversion in fact, was purely
superficial, to the extent that she questioned her theistic ideologies and was cynical of being an atheist. But what she could achieve in the process was to put an end to the conflict of being a Protestant in a Catholic school. This was also in a sense her way of retaliating to her mother’s indifference to her and preference for her brother. Her will to do what pleased her, very often meaningless acts, was her defence against her fragile dyadic relationship.

Her warm feelings for her parents died as she entered a premature adolescence. She was adamant about relating to her parents. Recollecting her school days and putting herself back in one scene or another, she experienced a raw loneliness, isolation and anxiety. Her mother’s claim that Lessing’s intelligence was maternally inherited annoyed her, and further spoiled their relationship. Her mother’s oft repeated statement, “You are just like me” (UMS, 150), made Lessing white hot with rage. She was not willing to identify with her mother and accept any of her capacities and abilities though internally she was appreciative of her mother.

Lessing’s fourteenth year was, according to her, “a make or break year, a sink or swim year, a do or die year” (UMS, 155). In fact, she was struggling with her life against her mother. There was a natural discord between them in everything, which included even food and clothes. She admits that there is something about adolescent girls that does the
strangest things to their parents. All the while she was also conscious of
the fact that her parents would have been efficient and loving but for the
war. In flight from her mother, Lessing left home when she was fifteen
and took a job as a nursemaid. By every mail she received letters from
her mother; frantic, disorganized lengthy letters, accusing her in every
paragraph of her usual crimes – selfishness and obstinacy. In course of
time, she took to reading as an aid to daydreaming, dreaming of glorious
futures as a dancer, singer and designer.

Her mother dealt with Lessing’s transition to adolescence very
dramatically by magnifying embarrassing incidents like her first
menstruation. When she used a bra for the first time, Emily screamed
out to her husband to have a look at his daughter, which mortified the
child considerably. Out of all proportion was her anger, and her disgust
at her mother was so strong that for years she put it all out of her mind.
Even a small infringement of a child’s sense of decency can seem an
enormity. She felt that it was not tactful for a mother to whip up her
fifteen year old daughter’s dress to expose her breasts to her father.
Physical insensitivity was compounded by something else. Later on
meeting a therapist friend of hers whose specialty was mothers and
daughters, Lessing came to realize that it is common for mothers to be
so identified with a girl-child that she can hardly tell the difference
between her own body and the child’s. In her significant work Of
Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution. Adrienne Rich asserts that “mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival – a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.”

Though Rich’s statement endorses the therapist’s justification of Emily’s behaviour, Lessing knew for sure that her mother was not anywhere near this level of neurosis. Yet she did handle Lessing’s limbs as if they were hers, or at least her property.

Lessing was every bit as sensible as her mother wanted her to be. In adolescence, her need to deck herself up in better clothes necessitated the search for avenues to make money. She took to the butchers, the birds she shot, to earn enough money for her dress materials. Her mother was beside herself: “she raged and accused and stormed but what she really said was, ‘you are escaping me, you are leaving and I am stuck here in this awful miserable life of mine and I shall never be able to get out’” (UMS, 174).

Years later Lessing was able to understand the import of her indifference to her mother, when a therapist apprised her of her immaturity. As a daughter she should have confided in her mother and in her life there was never a flaming, shouting, screaming stand-up quarrel, which would undoubtedly have altered their relationship for the
better. The completeness of dyadic relationship was not possible in her case as feelings and emotions were bottled up and curbed.

In 1937 she moved to Salisbury, where she worked as a telephone operator for a year. There she married Frank Wisdom at the age of nineteen and had two children. However, a few years later, feeling trapped in a persona that she feared would destroy her, she left her family. Very soon she was drawn to the like-minded members of the Left Book Club, a group of communists “who read everything and who did not think it remarkable to read” (UMS, 259). Nevertheless, during the post-war years, Lessing became increasingly disillusioned with the communist movement, which she left altogether in 1954. It took four years for her to become critical enough to discuss her doubts with people still inside the communist fold. By 1960, she had ceased to feel residual tugs of loyalty and was free. She realized that being free was easier for her as a writer, which would set her at a distance from reality. She says, “The whole process of writing is a setting at a distance. That is the value of it – to the writer, and to the people who read the results of the process, which takes the raw, the individual, the uncriticised, the unexamined into the realm of the general” (UMS, 397). Until the moment she walked out of that house, she ran it, supervised the servants, went dancing and drinking, took the babies for walks up and down the avenues under the trees. She continued to make clothes for the children
and herself and Frank. "She cooked... but all the time her mind was on this other world, which she belonged to and was her right" (UMS, 260).

She adored children in her childhood and had longed for babies of her own. But she did not possibly think much as she left her two small children. She never wanted to replicate the life of her parents - a doomed life devoid of happiness, nor did she feel guilty for leaving her children. Nevertheless, it took her a while to realize that it was guilt, which was painting an attractive picture of herself as she might have been, had she not walked out of marriage. However, this picture altered with her changing understanding of herself. She was cognizant that she would 'get on' with Frank just as she had always done because of the ability of young women to adapt and please. While having increasingly less in common with him she would have understood him and been a good mother to the children, whose inner natures and capacities would be developed to their fullest. She hated the system of marriage, but she kept to herself the thoughts she had about it.

It is impossible to remain normal while living among people who think differently. Had she stayed on in her marriage, far from being that wise, strong, compassionate centre of the family, an example to her children and a friend to her husband, she would have been a liability. Her marriage with Gottfried Lessing was a matter of convenience because in those days affairs, let alone living together attracted
unpleasant comments. Her marriage was another revolutionary step she took. Taking up the job of a junior secretary in a legal firm to be with Gottfried, she was contented and happy, though she earned very little. Though she often met a number of people each day, she preferred solitude. Even an hour of solitude was very welcome to Lessing.

Against the backdrop of the war, marrying a German was an act of defiance, which her parents could not handle. Gottfried insisted on them staying together until he got British nationality, after which they were to divorce. In the meantime, they decided to have a baby and in a very light-hearted way they informed their friends, “We’re going to fit in a baby now, because we’ve got nothing better to do” (UMS, 347). In fact, their discussions were on the surface the essence of practicality and common sense because they had never intended to stay married; rather they were forced into marriage by circumstances.

Subsequent to her divorce, she spent her days at a boarding house with little money and a small child. At Cape Town, she realized she had her friends and her mother to support her. But in London, she was on her own. However, neither then nor later did she feel that she had made a mistake. She felt it was a question of temperament. Gathering herself together to see things clearly was a long process. The child, which other people saw as burden, was what saved her. Women do wait more than men and Lessing felt that she had spent a good part of her life waiting.
The question of women's passivity is consequential. However, very often it is a defensive mechanism and perhaps it is protective too, when one looks ahead and plans, but plans are often based on illusions.

Political reasons kept Gottfried away from Doris. But she was looking forward with never a glance behind her. She was no doubt waiting for a future, for her real life to begin. Behind her a door had slammed shut. In fact, doors had been shutting behind her all her life. The worst that she could remember was her experience at a boarding school before she was seven. She says, "I knew all about the mechanism of the shut door, recognized not by some loud external bang but by what went on inside me" (UMS418). The assertive ending of her narrative emphasizes her confidence and her need to have a life of her own. "I was born out of my own self, so I felt. I didn't want to know. I was not going home to my family. I was fleeing from it. The door had shut and that was that" (UMS, 419).

According to J. L. Surrey, through the girl's awareness and identification with her mother and through the mother's interest in being understood and cared for, the daughter as well as the mother becomes mobilized to care for, respond to or attend to the well being and the development of the other. Moreover, they care for and take care of the relationship between them. It becomes important for a girl to experience validation of her own developing empathetic competence. Thus mothers
empower their daughters by allowing them to feel successful at understanding and giving support at whatever level is appropriate at a particular period of development. Thus a girl develops a self-in-relation through her mother’s ease in responding to infant female attunement. This sense of self that emerges in the daughter is characterized by an “ongoing capacity to consider one’s actions in the light of other people’s needs, feelings and perceptions.”19 She comes to feel that “maintaining the relationship with the main people in her life is still the most important thing”20 and her “self esteem is based in feeling she is part of relationships and is taking care of relationships”,21 through which, she can express empathy and care.

A close study of Lessing’s Under My Skin, however, disclaims such possibilities. Neither the mother nor the daughter seems to have benefited by a mutuality of relationship. Due to the circumstances under which she had lived, Emily could not make a success of her life. Lessing, however, was fortunate enough to have been endowed with a literary talent though she was also a product of disturbed circumstances.

Life had not been smooth sailing for Lessing. However, her creative ability and her need for emotional autonomy spurred her to achieve whatever she aspired to. Though her achievements may not appeal to others as these are incongruent to societal standards, to Lessing her life was worth living. Lack of maternal indulgence was not
only a lapse on the part of her mother, it could even be a deliberate act of Lessing to keep herself away from any entangling relationship. Of course her mother was lenient towards Lessing’s attitude of uncaring and occasionally indifferent behaviour. In short, Under My Skin testifies to the fact that Lessing has totally negated psychological explanations of women’s relational identity. One can say that Lessing with her intellectual ability, sought to create an individual identity, which offered more possibility. To put it differently, she sought to create her own psychic space.

Section III: Call Me Anna: The Autobiography Of Patty Duke

When the Europeans arrived on the shores of the United States of America in the seventeenth century, they began to record their experiences of the new country. Since then autobiography has become perhaps the pre-eminent form of American writing. Critics note that qualities in autobiography such as the valorisation of individualism and focus on success suit their national character. Readers respond to the personal authority in autobiography that suggests direct contact between writers and readers. Young people find role models in the stories of women and men who overcome obstacles and achieve success. The popularity of autobiographies by sports figures and entertainment personalities of the United States indicates identification with those
writers. With the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, more white women as well as women and men of various racial and ethnic groups began to write and publish autobiography for popular audiences and scholars. In academia, research on and teaching about women’s lives have brought the history of women’s autobiography to the general public.

White teenage girls and well-to-do white women who kept diaries and journals contributed to the earliest American autobiography – the mostly religious and spiritual Puritan tradition of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Most other colonial women had neither the leisure nor the literacy to participate. Extant documents from that period include religious and secular accounts of domestic life and travel. Anne Dudley Bradstreet (1612-72), the first recognized American woman writer, honoured for her poetic work, *Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* (1650), included autobiography in these domestic poems. And in 1660 Bradstreet wrote a short autobiographical prose narrative, *To My Dear Children*, which reviewed her life, questioned providence and encouraged her children in piety. But the most distinctive women’s self-stories of the period were those written by white women in captivity – the first unique autobiographical form of America. These writings were religious narratives by white women captured by Native Americans during times of unrest between settlers and native people and
later released. The most celebrated among them is Mary Rowlandson's 1682 work, *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson, a Minister's Wife in New England*. The subject matter of women's and men's autobiographies during the seventeenth century was similar; a female perspective on those times made major contributions to the tradition.

Puritan autobiography continued in the 19th century and increase in literacy permitted women to expand their boundaries of the domestic autobiographies with stories of unhappy childhoods and marriages; experiences in prisons, mental institutions or convents; and of women who assumed disguises in search of adventures, escape or entry into military service. During the 'American Renaissance' (1820-1850) when a large number of popular women novelists flourished, one of the most interesting women's autobiographies was the unfinished memoir of Margaret Fuller. In the second half of the century, pioneer women, going West as missionaries or accompanying their families in search of better economic conditions, wrote journals, letters and other forms of narratives that addressed women's isolation, fears of childbearing and other privations. Towards the end of the century, improvements in women's social, political and economic conditions led to the emergence of reform-minded and feminist women, including the suffragettes, who wrote seriously of women's lives and careers. While White citizens
struggled to shape their identity from the seventeenth through much of the nineteenth century, in their writing and in other ways, they also denied almost entirely, the humanity of African slaves, their descendants and free Black people. Except in abolitionist literature, there is little mention of Blacks in literature of the period.

American women's autobiography in the twentieth century has flourished, with an astonishing diversity that blends the voices of Native American, Latina, Asian-American women and women of different classes, educational backgrounds and sexual orientations, with those of Black and White women who founded this tradition. Women's narratives, once neglected for their differences from conventional male autobiography, now self-assuredly engage brilliant experiments in textual self-creation. Women's autobiography today celebrates women's lives and to borrow from Margo Culley, offers splendid "fea(s) ts of reading", which will be substantiated through a study of Patty Duke's autobiography *Call Me Anna*.

Women's personal narratives, generally unfold within the framework of an apparent acceptance of social norms and expectations, but nevertheless describe strategies and activities that challenge those same norms. In many of the personal narratives of women, one comes across a mention of her helplessness in the face of her fate even while she goes about creating her life according to her own requirements. One
such life-narrative is *Call Me Anna: The Autobiography of Patty Duke*.

Patty Duke’s autobiography is a gripping tale of her life filled with manic depression and the highs and the lows she has endured in life. She was born on December 14, 1946, in Elmhurst, New York into a troubled family with parents who often had vicious, violent arguments. Her immediate family consisting of her father, mother, sister and brother Raymond lived in impoverished conditions in a small house. She admits, “Sure we were poor, but we weren’t desperate, we weren’t like homeless people who may have nothing at all to eat” (Anna, 7).

Duke’s mother Frances had a strong sense of responsibility to her family. Her refrain, “These children we brought into the world” (Anna, 7) is in sharp contrast to the oft-repeated phrase of Lessing’s mother, Emily, that children were a burden to her. In fact Frances was proud of the fact that she raised perfectly clean children. Duke sarcastically mentions in this context that “People of her generation in that neighbourhood had very little to be proud of, but were proud of the way they kept a home” (Anna, 7).

Duke was emotionally attached to her father who was an incorrigible alcoholic. He never got past the eighth grade and when he left the navy after the Second World War, he had tried though unsuccessfully a number of jobs; every thing from working for the telephone company to being a parking lot attendant, a cab driver and a
handyman. Her father deserted the family when Duke was hardly six, and Frances had to take care of Duke and her two siblings single-handed. Of course in Duke’s memory, father was a dignified figure, which is rather incongruous considering his reputation as an alcoholic. But she had her doubts whether the image of the father, which she conjured up in her mind, was the man who really existed or “just a terrific ideal” (Anna, 10), she had created. She remembers a strong attraction, almost a physical need to be close to him when he was at home, and the longing when he was gone. Her sentiments are strongly expressed in her envy of “little Pamela who lived next door because she had a great dad who would take (her) places” (Anna, 10). Even after years of separation from her father, talks about him or even his picture would fill her with sadness and tears were always very close. In fact, she never stopped wrestling with her loss and inevitable romanticisation of her father, and she was cognizant of its interference with her marriages because she felt that “as long as that idealistic figure exists, who could live up to that?” (Anna, 13). In truth she was not clear about the reasons, which made her father the way he was: whether it was character flaws, or lack of societal knowledge about alcoholism or any other unknown reason. But the intensity of her feelings for her father could best be summed up in her own words, “Whatever it was, my need is to say through my life and my work, ‘that this was a magnificent soul who
didn’t get a chance’” (Anna, 13).

Duke’s emotionally unstable mother, hence, had to shoulder the responsibility of her children, taking up several odd jobs. Duke recalls that her mother had episodes of severe depression, which made parenting three children almost challenging. There were times when she could be warm, wonderful and generous, both of spirit and of material things, but much of the time she was depressed. Very often the children were victims of her miserable life. She did a lot of what the children called “acting out” (Anna, 14), either because she didn’t want to be alone or she needed to take revenge if not directly on her husband, on those close to him. But Duke realized sadly that it was also dreadfully self-destructive, because her mother suffered deeply after each of her dramatic episodes.

Duke was desperately emotionally attached to her mother and if she was around would spent her time with her, holding her hand, the normal and satisfying relationship between a mother and daughter, essential for the healthy development of a female child. However, mere physical presence and holding hands can hardly aid in identity-formation or individuation. Far from laying the foundation for a healthy growing up, of merger and separation, Duke often suffered in her mother’s company.

Indira J. Parikh observes that for a female child, adolescence is
a period in which multiple dualities of her being and becoming emerge simultaneously. At this juncture, more than anyone else she needs her mother to set right the complexities in her mind. In Duke’s case the presence of her mother was merely physical as their relationship was devoid of emotional mutuality. This however, was not a consciously created situation; rather her mother’s state of mind and the circumstances under which she lived might have contributed to such a state.

The first major breakthrough in her life came up when she was introduced to the Rosses, through her brother Raymond, who with an acute interest in dramatics started acting at the age of seven at a boy’s club. Irving Harris, a talent scout, identified his talents and introduced him to John and Ethel Ross, managers who worked with child actors and over the next several years he worked in numerous shows and commercials.

Duke’s father had left home by then and her mother was forced to work for a while as a cashier in a department store and eventually became dependent on Ray’s income. Before long, Anna Duke was introduced to the Rosses. Duke’s first impression of them was that they were very opinionated and seemingly very secure about what they knew and what should be done with Duke. The feeling they exuded was of extreme superiority and a kindly gesture of condescending out of the
goodness of their hearts to help Duke to become superior too. The circumstances at home and her mother’s initiative in taking her to the Rosses changed Duke’s life entirely. Mother’s dismal situations threw her into a helpless state and once the decision to leave for the Ross’ home was made, there was nothing much she could do to help her daughter. In fact, the picture of Duke’s mother as portrayed in the narrative is that of an emotionally and physically weak female, who is forced by circumstances to part with her daughter and push her in a direction, vaguely conscious of the consequences.

Duke often wondered if her offbeat look was what impressed the Rosses, a promising feature for an artist. She was initially much against acting and if there was any desire, she stated, it was the desire to please, which was very important to them. The Rosses might have recognized her intelligence, “a bright shiny little kid, who would understand the score and who could easily be controlled” (Anna, 21). But, as a matter of fact, Duke did have a strong basic instinct for acting. She was good at pretended games in childhood and had a good imagination. But she was too self-conscious to exhibit her talents. However, John and Ethel Ross could instil confidence in her to let her imagination run free.

The unhappy and bleak atmosphere of her house, however, could not be substituted at the Rosses. In truth, it was unbearable as they were verbally abusive and controlling. Physical estrangement from her
mother, her enlivening force, made her life miserable. However, inefficient or helpless a mother is, her mere presence can alleviate misery in children. Maternal proximity and concern undeniably function as supportive factors in children, to resolve their emotional fluctuations. Duke was undoubtedly denied this support, though, physical situations at the Rosses’ were far more satisfactory.

In the course of her life with the Rosses’, Duke had to face a situation, which had great repercussions in her future life. The Rosses’ decision to change her name because “Anna Marie was too long and not "perky" enough” (Anna, 23) came as a great shock to her. Her opinion was not solicited and she was aware that it would not be accepted either. Thus overnight she was changed to Patty Duke from Anna Marie. Years later, however, this change became terribly traumatic to her, though initially she did not realize, “that was the tip of the iceberg, the beginning of the little murder of Anna Marie Duke and the rebuilding of the Frankenstein’s monster that became Patty Duke” (Anna,24). When the Rosses announced, “Anna Marie is dead, you’re Patty Duke now” (Anna, 28), it was as if she really did die. She believed that when people take away one’s name they are in fact, destroying one’s identity. Though it might seem like a lot of fuss over a bunch of letters strung together, one’s name is in fact, a very important symbol. Duke felt as if they had killed a part of her and in truth they had. Years later on recapitulation
she realized that if one thing summed up her previous bondage to the Rosses it was the name they had stuck her with. On one level she disliked her name because it was a little girl’s name and it was very important to her that all diminutive and cute things vanish from her life. But more than that because the name came from the Rosses, because it was given to her as an edict over which she had no control, it symbolized them. She depicts her agony and bitterness thus,

that name meant those faces, it meant that helpless, non-person time in my life, so much so that for many years all the awards I won for acting were very well hidden and packed away because I couldn’t stand the name on them (Anna, 158).

The transformation however, was not limited to name alone. Her speech patterns, her appearance and her attire too underwent drastic changes. They seemed to be hardly aware that losing one’s identity could be most lethal, and could drive an individual to even a nervous breakdown, which happened to Duke in course of time. She states,

and though I didn’t feel it at first, that name change did indeed turn out to be a lightning bolt that reached deep into my mind and touched a major concern of mine, which was a fear of death so powerful it precipitated daily anxiety attacks from the early 1950s to 1953. I was obsessed, truly obsessed with my mortality. And guilty, as well, about not worrying about my parents’ death, or my sister’s or brother’s or my children’s or anyone else’s. Just my own (Anna, 28).

In due course she realized that the Rosses had taken away her parents, her name and eventually her religion from her and they had a blank slate to handle her as they wished. In fact, she was mentally
wrecked and went into a state of limbo, similar to that of people who are in jail or even mental hospital. Her words,

you simply can’t think about the bad things because there is nothing you can do about them. You have to live in the reality you’re in. You don’t make a conscious decision not to think, you just stop thinking (Anna, 30).

are a sincere revelation of her helplessness and her resigned state of mind.

The overwhelming irony of the Rosses’ plans and schemes is that they genuinely thought they were doing the right thing with all their disparaging comments, helping her become a solid citizen, by keeping things in perspective for her. They were not out-and-out monsters and were self-righteous. When they created a cocoon around Duke they might probably have thought of saving her from difficulties in growing up. But reality was far from it. They overplayed their roles and Duke was not allowed to grow and learn at her pace, the pace of a child. Everything they gave her by way of love was very superficial. Duke often wondered if their love was all a scam and a lie, but she knew later that “they did love (her); only they just didn’t know how” (Anna, 31).

Duke who was deprived of love at home or at the Rosses’ could probably have been an unnoticed almost orphaned girl who would have faded into oblivion. But her natural talent for acting pulled her out from the abysmal misery to the limelight. Though weak relationships with
parents and immediate family had its effect on her, Duke moved on in life even when she was denied freedom of any kind.

The effect of emotional imbalance and lack of sympathy and support manifest themselves in various ways in different individuals. In the case of Duke, one finds that whenever she had to deal with anything that upset her 'throwing up' was the only safe way to take a break. She sadly observes that none of the people she dealt with were sophisticated enough to know that vomiting is psychologically motivated. Emotional support from her mother or foster-parents was frighteningly scarce which contributed to the misery in her life.

Living with the Rosses did not start overnight. It was a slow evolutionary process, which gradually became full time. She was constantly made to believe that spending more time with them would further her career. At the age of thirteen when she assumed the status of a Broadway star, it was imperative that she stayed permanently at the Ross household. Duke sadly recollects that she never lived with her mother after the shift. In his essay “Families and Children”, Sudhir Kakar observes that the psychological identification of a female child with her mother is so strong that even the loosening of this bond, not to mention an actual break, may be a source of psychic stress and heightened inner conflict. A separation from the family, whatever the necessity or reason for such a step, not only brings a sense of insecurity
in a worldly social sense, it also means the loss of a significant ‘other’ who guarantees the sense of sameness and affirms the inner continuity of the self. Psychiatric observations on the occurrence of certain kinds of mental disturbances following a break from the family, especially from the mother, amply bear this out.

Adolescence hurls a female child into a strange situation when every answer can be countered by another question; every affirmation be clouded by doubt; every certainty be eroded by unpredictability and every action by a judgment. Each step for her is a discovery and a confrontation, with joy on the one hand and repulsion on the other. Psychologists opine that in early adolescence, the emergent maturity of the body locates the girl in the experimental space, which is very confusing. Within her is the experience of unfolding with its accompanying sense of thrill and embarrassment. It is at this explosive state that the much acclaimed maternal indulgence becomes pertinent. The child is more than ever dependent on maternal assurance and strength at this stage, when she undergoes varied psychological experiences. Unfortunately for Anna her mother was of little help in her dilemma and she had to cope with her disturbing situation as best as she could.

At a crucial age when maternal influence and proximity is very essential for a female child, Duke was separated from her mother against
her will. The traumatic mental disturbances she went through in later life were necessarily an offshoot of this separation. Adverse effects of this separation were also visible in her mother. The years she spent at the Rosses marked the beginning of a really dark period, complicated and traumatic, for both Duke and her mother.

Social psychologists recount that it is the mother’s responses and cues which at first help shape a child’s individuality and nurture her capacity in culturally approved ways, help turn passive receptive experiences into active volition. Thus a mother’s responses to her child depend not only on her emotional stance towards motherhood deeply rooted in her own life-history, or upon the inborn constitution of her child, but also upon her cultural image of the role of motherhood and of the nature of a child. This psychological point of view however, does not hold good in the case of Duke. The behaviour of Frances complied with the wishes of the Rosses. An emotional wedge was driven between Duke and her mother, which made it easier for the Rosses to detach the child from her home. But to Duke the effect of this estrangement was of a greater magnitude. She often justified her anger at her mother, because she believed that a parent makes an unspoken agreement with a kid, of care and affection. She felt that her mother has failed in this commitment by palming her off and shirking her responsibility. To make matters worse her mother expected her daughter’s loyalty,
constantly reminding Duke of motherhood.

The aftermath of the close watch and scrutiny of the Rosses was that Duke could not manage 'aloneness'. She confesses that during her first marriage she used to take bath with the door open and just being by herself in any room was almost impossible for her until much later in life. She attributes this claustrophobia to the close monitoring of the Rosses. She says,

When you have been watched and monitored for all your formative years, it's very hard to get used to not being watched and monitored, very hard to be without the background noise of chatter. If you're alone, then you must have thoughts of your own. And those were not permitted when I was growing up (Anna, 44).

The autocratic, almost brutal way in which the Rosses dealt with Duke is evident here. Though she was the principal earner of the Ross household, she was hardly the centre of attraction.

Duke’s initial motivation for acting was fear; a feeling that if she did not live up to the expectations of others, the consequences would be terrible. Absence of maternal support had led to anxiety and fear psychosis in the little child so that even as she grew up and in her later life she could never completely free herself from psychic problems. Hence, the key elements in life for her from childhood had been the need for a sense of belonging, and attention and affirmation from those around her.
Duke shares with her readers her journey from extreme highs to debilitating lows. It is indeed hard to understand and fully grasp what she went through. The Rosses controlled every move of hers and introduced her to a life that as she explains, “had they not crossed my path, the likelihood of my becoming an actress was slim, and the joy of that far outweighs any of the pain” (Anna, 255). Though she acted in three reputed films, it was her performance as Helen Keller in the new Broadway play that won her critical raves and she became the youngest star ever on Broadway at the age of twelve. Later when the play was filmed it fetched Duke the richly deserved Oscar award.

In spite of her successful acting career she missed her childhood fun and companionship. As she grew older, she missed the company of girls of her age. The Rosses deprived her of fun and games and she was made to believe that the show business was her life as well as theirs. Her enviable professional success only created more problems with her ‘mentors’. In fact, her fame and success made them more and more neurotic. The fear of losing Duke loomed large ahead mainly because they were apprehensive of driving her away thorough their actions.

Ever since the Rosses took control of her life, they informed her in so many words that her father did not exist. She knew that her father used to surface periodically, sometimes for financial aid from the Rosses, sometimes just to talk. Duke sorrowfully realized that like her
mother, he was also insecure not being aware of reality and their role in it. Hence, with the purest of motives he died of a broken heart.

On her nomination for Oscar, in the best supporting actress category, the Rosses broke the eventful news to her along with a flat statement “your mother’s not coming” (Anna, 108). Duke’s assumption, by then based on experience was that for any kind of occasion, her mother would invariably be excluded, since the Rosses felt that she was an obstruction and a constant problem. Coming from the Lower East side, depressed all the time, she did not present a pretty picture and just as Duke had no ally to the decision of the Rosses, neither did her mother. The Oscar situation and the fact that she could not be a nobler person and stand up for her mother caused her great distress for a very long time.

Even though she managed to call her mother at the earliest and Duke felt the happiness in her mother, it was one of those usual, “public private calls monitored by the Rosses with layer upon layer of cover-up” (Anna, 110). Fleeting moments of longing for her parent’s proximity flashed through her mind that evening. She felt:

here’s a major achievement, the youngest person ever to win an Academy Award, the biggest A plus I ever got, and I had only the Gestapo and the dog to share it with. And if the truth be known, I would have preferred a date (Anna, 110).

Duke sorrowfully realized that she had lost out on all the normal
teenage activities. As glib as she was for a person of her age, she was really not that outgoing and certainly not about teenage pursuits. She had never witnessed a dance and was ignorant how teenagers danced. In fact, she was not a teenager of her times, but someone too busy talking with forty-year-olds. Freedom of any kind, including financial freedom was denied to her. She earned about a million dollars, but neither she nor her parents had a say in financial matters and her earnings only supported a decade’s worth of very expensive living. Years later when she had fame, money and freedom to live the way she wanted, she regrets that her life was snatched off more than her money. She expresses her extreme regret and resigned feelings thus:

My life was ripped off. I was not allowed to grow and learn at my own pace, the pace of a child. If you don’t get to have opinions, don’t interact with people of your own age, you never learn how. Precious years, years of my life were taken that I can’t have back. It’s not that I wouldn’t like to have half a million right now, but really that’s meaningless to me. You can’t give me half a million or even twice that amount and call us even. No way (Anna, 110).

It is true that material pleasure is hardly a substitute for parental affection. She had been deprived of her natural right of affection and support from her parents and she was sure that nothing could compensate it. Her whole identity had undergone a tremendous change when she felt the deprivation of domestic bliss and parental indulgence.

Lack of formal education was a major problem for Duke as it was the source of real frustration and shame. She was most often intimidated
and scarcely participated in the conversations of people who had college education. Gradually she realized that either she ought to attend college or become better informed on her own. Reading voraciously and listening avidly she found ingenious ways of expression to conceal her ignorance.

Though she attended a few schools, the Rosses refused to let her have a social life, or mix with kids of her age. In short, her stay with them was physically and mentally suffocating and Duke had to bear the brunt of her mother’s thoughtless act. Childhood abuse and ill treatment affected her mental make-up making her a mere puppet at the hands of her mentors. But things improved for her after her meeting Grandma Howe, Ethel’s mother.

Princess Soraya, subsequent to her divorce had confessed that she did not know how to live or even to walk properly in public. This was the consequence of cloistered court life and etiquette. One can say that Duke was also in a similar state after her separation from the Rosses, though the situation under which she lived was different. When she moved into an apartment immediately after her separation, she realized to her consternation that she hardly knew anything about running a home. Her misery was enhanced at the realization that she was living a life-style that was totally alien to her. Her words are indicative of desperation at her inability to confront the situation:
I was panicked at not being prepared to live life. I was fine on the set; I knew how to hit my marks and say my lines – this was where I belonged. But as soon as it was time to go home, I was lost (Anna, 148).

Probably if she had stayed on with her mother, however adverse the situation had been, she would have picked up ways to battle with her life. From the age of seven until she was eighteen, her life had been much against her will and she was almost ignorant of the art of living. She had pledged her body, mind and emotions to the Rosses and could not handle her life when she recovered. Gradually the pent-up resentment gushed out and Duke turned down no opportunity to humiliate or even hurt them.

The Rosses made a fresh attempt at reconciliation through Frances, but this time round she flatly refused to coax her daughter to fall in the trap. Duke refused to have anything with her mother and continued to live all alone. Though people around her criticized her for being rebellious, Duke had justification for her behaviour. For her it was a total rejection of anyone who claimed to have loved her – and was thus ‘a very fitting and just behaviour’ of a girl deprived of care and dictated to by others who enforced their will and pleasure on her. Duke was unwilling to compromise anymore because her precious years had been jeopardized and she resented everyone, be it her own parents or the Rosses, who was responsible for it.
Looking back Duke realizes that most of her behaviour was 'text book', not in the least creative. The smoking, drinking, swearing and hostile actions were according to her “attention getting devices”. It did not matter to her that it was bad attention that she was attracting as long as it was attention. The psychological impact of her being thrown into unfavourable circumstances and of the bleakness of her life for a long period of time, had made her an emotional wreck. She constantly made violent attempts to get things even with her ‘offenders’.

However, her involvement in acting and her devotion to her career proved to be a saving grace. When her ‘Patty Duke Show’ series folded up she sadly realized that there were no substitutes for her in life. When the show fell apart, she got buried into the rubble and realized too soon that if one had belonged to a place all one’s life, unhappy though it may be, that place is ‘home’. The feeling of abandonment when ‘home’ is gone, she states, is just as real as one’s mother giving one up to live with other people. One observes that Duke is reiterating the bitter truth of her mother abandoning her. This incident and her subsequent life had such a serious impact on the little girl that in spite of tremendous success in her career, she felt very low when she was denied attention. The craving for care and support, denied to her in infancy, surfaced frequently in her life troubling her persistently. The upshot of all this was her depressive state when her series folded. It seemed easier for her
to be crazy and she resorted to strange defence mechanisms, which made people believe that she was inefficient and unsuitable. Harry tried to bring her out of this derelict state to some kind of reality and assuage the fear of the ‘demons’ raging inside her. Strangely enough, she was suffering from anorexia – the refusal to grow up; an attempt to starve herself to get smaller. It was, in fact, an attempt to physically match how small she felt mentally. In her depressive state she felt a demonic engine driving her all the time, the only escape from which was the peace of a Valium-induced sleep. She was going through the culmination of lifelong feelings of rejection, abandonment, mismanagement and bad parenting. In truth, she was completely ill equipped to be an adult and the infant in her was enraged.

Her meeting and subsequent marriage with John Austin proved to be an idyllic phase in her life. When she first met Austin’s parents she was instantly welcomed with unrestrained love and had much more of it to follow. She admits undeniably that it was the first parental relationship she had experienced in which she could do absolutely no wrong and cherished it all her life. The marriage with Austin had an impact on Duke’s identity as well. He preferred to call her Anna and she reacted to it with sheer delight mixed with nervousness, which is evident in her statement, ‘I felt I was ready to be Anna, to reclaim myself, but as much as I loved the idea, I was afraid to get too attached to the name,
afraid it would last a bit, as it had with Harry, but never stick” (Anna, 235). Because of what she had been with the Rosses, being Anna was much more than a superficial change; it symbolized what she felt as the rebirth of the core of her soul. Working from the outside in, her new/old name became a powerful emotional tool. She could feel herself coming back to life day by day after many years.

Even after the death of John and Ethel Ross, Duke could not consider them with any kind of objectivity because of more than two decades of their control over her life and career. She decided on a difficult fact that there would never be a true resolution of her feelings: “I will never finish with them till I’m dead” (Anna, 255). Yet her feelings in due course had become manageable and giving them their due, not compromising their identity, was very important to her. She knew for a fact that they started out with the best intention towards her but fame and success distorted their perspective. Moreover, she realized that there was a goodness about them that they left behind in her; they made her into a real believer. She could identify with what the Rosses did to her in a positive and a negative manner. Analyzing all that the agony of living with them had brought to her, she developed an inner strength.

It has been mentioned in the previous chapters how a female has the capacity to derive strength from her circumstances and use it to
become stronger, move out of her self as defined by others and create an inner strength which would help her face situations and deal with people on her own terms. An example of this is Duke’s relationship with her mother. She understands that she had made many overtures to her during the years after her break from the Rosses. But either they were inept or she was not ready or may be she was afraid.

Towards the close of her narrative, Duke mentions her revived relationship with her mother. It now becomes a natural relationship that has to be built, on which Duke has to spend a lot of effort and energy. She felt that reconciliation with her mother had been the ultimate satisfaction for her. Even though the dyadic relationship had suffered temporary setbacks, a revival of this symbiotic attachment to her mother transforms both the mother and the daughter, thus proving that a girl’s attachment and merger of identity with her mother is an absolute necessity for fulfilment in life.

The period between the seventies and the eighties saw Duke active in social and political fields along with her successful acting career. When she was honoured with the Eleanor Roosevelt Award for her political and social commitment her very thoughts and self-esteem underwent a drastic change. She confesses:

It affects me at the very core of who I am and who I need to be. It legitimizes my father’s short life; it does the same for my mother’s seemingly ignorant existence. And it also makes me recognize that I don’t have the right to attempt suicide, that in
whatever infinitesimal way, I am making a difference. And that makes a difference to me (Anna, 255).

The conclusion of her autobiography is with a confession that “I have horrible times, I have great times, I have so-so times, but I wouldn’t trade my life today for anyone’s, not anyone’s” (Anna, 298). The story of her life however, ends with a life rebuilt, in fact, with a new beginning.

A broken family can jeopardize the emotional stability of children and is best explained through Duke’s life. Bad parenting, unfavourable circumstances and ‘strict’ upbringing – these were the dominant factors in her life for a considerable period of time, which culminated in psychic disorder. But though psychologically Duke lived with a sense of discrimination, hurt and anger, socially she had carved out a space and defined a meaningful role for herself.

In her essay, “Family Structure and Feminine Personality”, Nancy Chodorow opines that for girls, the relationship with their mother tends to be characterized by more of effective and personal identification. Her development of feminine identity is based on gradual learning through everyday experiences, not external or fantasized influences. Duke’s life was devoid of a natural learning process through everyday maternal experiences due to her transplantation to the Ross family. She lived and grew up in adverse conditions and was an unfortunate victim of circumstances.
However, it has to be affirmed that in spite of temporary impediments, her career helped her to bounce back to life achieving all that she did with fortitude and courage. Duke’s life is a testimony to the fact that adversity can drive an individual to make an opportunity of it and move ahead in life, though Duke had to pay a heavy price for it.

The life-narratives discussed in this chapter emphasise maternal relationships with daughters as the deciding factor for a strong identity in women. However, one gets to understand that in the case of weak relationships, instead of compromising on her weakness, a woman very often steps outside the psychologically ordained aspects to prove that identity need not depend only on parental influences. Circumstances, oppressive life situations and authority often drive a female to acquire an inner strength to discard societal conventions and norms to constitute a life exclusively for her. Relationship, which is the prime requisite for female identity according to psychoanalysts, becomes questionable in such cases where a woman’s relational experiences can be restricted based on the parameters she sets to include people in her life.

Agatha Christie’s life does not offer such an extreme possibility, as her relationship with her mother has been very strong and binding. Yet, she mastered her life through individuality as a writer. Lessing, also of daughters. Superficial differences might be evident, but on a writer par excellence does exhibit streaks of extreme independence and
individuality, but she was driven into it by her circumstances and maternal eccentricity. Duke’s life, however, can be viewed from a totally different perspective. Familial situations denied her the right to maternal indulgence and the support offered for her upbringing did more harm than good. She did not offer to be a passive victim of circumstances. On the other hand, she came out of her appalling situation by sheer hard work and determination. The narratives of Lessing and Duke can be said to have a common structure. The female protagonist displays a clear pattern of rejection of the ‘others’, whose presence dominates both her life and her narrative – a rejection that is a necessary prelude to the attainment of individual autonomy.

The lives of the women discussed yet again prove that in extreme situations women flout the psycho-sociological views of identity and relationships. The need for ‘others’ in their lives becomes more personal than the one prescribed by society. A close look at the lives of Christie, Lessing and Duke, all of whom belong to the Western middle class society, reveals that geographic, cultural and ethnic differences cause no remarkable changes in the universally acclaimed maternal indulgence a deeper analysis, the psychological explanation offered about the dyadic mother-daughter relationship as an aid to the development of a female identity is found to be of global significance.
NOTES


4 Agatha Christie, An Autobiography (Great Britain: Fontana Books, 1977) (All further references are to this edition and are incorporated in the body of the text itself).


7 Cynthia Pomerleau, “The Emergence of Women’s Autobiography in England,” Women’s Autobiography: Essays in

8 Anna Trapnel, Report and Plea: or a Narrative of Her Journey into Cornwall (London: Thomas Brewster, 1654).


16 Chodorow, 167.


21 Miller, 5.

22 Anne Dudley Bradstreet, Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America (London: 1678).


26 Parikh, 106.