Women writers have been seeking their own space, metaphorical rooms of their own, for centuries. Women's spaces are largely unspoken, unwritten, unrepresented ones that have not yet been fully articulated or explained. It is in these spaces between the cultural constructions of the female and the articulation of the individual selves and their lived experiences, between cultural assignments of gender and the individual's translations of them into text that a discussion of women's autobiographical writing can be effective.

It is true that a stable autobiographical form against which women have written about their lives does not exist, and an evolving notion of what autobiography is has not been deduced from the texts women did write, or from texts that problematize autobiography or challenge the genre's formation, limits and illusion of reality. Women's self-representational writing, bracketed from the defining discussions of the genre, has both escaped and has never been offered the chance of being defined as a genre of its own.

The tale of imprisonment represented in women's autobiographies tells the grim situation of a woman's claustrophobia, when she cannot
get out of the prison of the self or of her nightmare, when she is prevented from coming into her own self through the proximate existence of another or others. By eschewing conventional autobiography and focusing on the people and the historical circumstances of her past, the female autobiographer invites the reader into a world of others, who, as they come together in her memory, become significant in the articulation of her self. They are mirrors before which she tries to create her own identity.

Gender identity is developed from a psychological perspective. These psychological factors are also inter-related with social structure, as women's psychological identities may be rendered even more precarious by social organization of modern industrial societies. In fact, depending on the type of social structure, women may have a strong sense of ego boundary and matured sense of identity, in spite of the otherwise patriarchal arrangement of society. This condition seems to be fostered when women consistently have meaningful social relations with other women and have firmly grounded role expectations. In my study, I have discussed nine autobiographies authored by women to unveil the formation of identity in women from a socio-psychological perspective.

The first two chapters are theoretical in nature and discuss the genesis and growth of autobiography in general and women's autobiography in particular, while highlighting the concept of self. It is
an accepted fact that the practice of writing about one's self rather than one's achievements has been a Christian attitude. But in due course, once Christianity became an established religion, confessional writing underwent drastic changes, taking a more reflexive and detached stance. It is only towards the end of the eighteenth century that autobiographical writings became an accepted form. Over the years, autobiography developed into a unique and autonomous genre, with its distinct laws and requirements. However, a keen interest in autobiography was perceptible only towards the middle of the twentieth century with the publication of a large number of autobiographies. Though feminism and feminist thoughts have enhanced women's consciousness and heightened their self-awareness, adequate representation in the mainstream literary genres has been unfortunately denied to women. The absence of women's self-representational texts from the critical histories is indicative of the gendering of autobiography as 'male'. However, this feature has not been confined only to a particular geographic location but experienced globally. In fact, women's self-writings have been relegated to minor and homelier traditions creating an impression that autobiography is what men write.

The predominant attitude of most critics towards women's lives is that they are 'insignificant'. More important are discrepancies between the critical canon and women's autobiographies on matters relating to
their form and content. Women’s life studies have been excluded from mainstream autobiographies and a different criterion has been drawn to evaluate women’s autobiographies to constitute an altogether different autobiographical tradition.

The concept of self, be it Western or Indian, implies knowing oneself. To negotiate the self, one formulates images to make the experience available to the reader. These images or metaphors express the feelings of the subjective self. In this context, one can consider autobiography as an actualization of the self at the moment of configuration.

Georges Gusdorf regards autobiography as a mirror in which the individual reflects his own image.¹ He avers that autobiography is not viable in a cultural setting where awareness of self does not exist. According to him the cultural specification for autobiography is a pervading notion of individualism. He reiterates the fact that the consciousness of self upon which autobiography sustains is the sense of the isolated being.

However, this individualistic concept of the autobiographical self has posed a number of theoretical problems for those who recognize that self-consciousness and self-creation are divergent for those at the periphery – minorities, non-western people and women. This has led to marginalisation of autobiographical texts by women. The inapplicability
of the individualistic models of the self to women is mainly due to the sidelining of the group identity of women. The stress on separateness disregards the difference in socialization in the construction of male and female identity. In fact, the individualized paradigm of the self overlooks the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women.

The concept of selfhood upheld by feminist and psychoanalytic theorists seems to be based on recognition of historically generated differences between men and women. Reading women's self-narratives in the light of their theories helps revise the prevailing canons of autobiography. It is only when one addresses a woman's self-narrative from a psycho-political perspective that it comes alive as a literary tradition of self-creation. The individualistic paradigms do not take into account the vital role collective consciousness plays in the lives of women, the significance of interpersonal relationships and community in women's self definition; nor is the identification of the daughter with the mother given due consideration. Since the reciprocal relationship between the mother and daughter is understood to be more direct than between mother and son, women are likely to feel more closely tied than men to their environment and in particular to others. Thus it can be stated that women are less autonomous and more likely to experience identity as relational.
Moreover, the structure of the family and family practices generate certain differential relational needs and capacities in men and women. Thus one can deduce that the very sense of identification and interdependence that Gusdorf casts off from autobiographical selves are pivotal in the maturing of a woman's identity. Feminist critics unequivocally assert that a woman cannot experience herself as a unique entity since she is consciously informed of how she is defined as a woman, i.e., a member of a group whose identity has been defined by the pre-dominant male culture.

The socio-cultural set up of patriarchy strengthens a woman's trait of relationality and eventually she is identified not as an individual but as a person with a collective identity, constantly aware of society's prescription of her female self. However, instead of impeding her growth, such a collective trait in her personality, aver psychoanalysts, often strengthens it. Nancy Chodorow's concept of fluid ego boundaries and the significance of mother-daughter relationships have proved useful to understand the evolution of the self in women's writing.

Chapters one and two provide an effective framework for an understanding of the genre. The key element in the concept of self i.e., individualism critiques the female self, which is embedded in layers of relationships. This emphasis on individualism trivializes women's self-representational writings, relegating it to a different tradition altogether.
the women's autobiographical tradition, which examines the concept of self in a female as formulated through a gamut of relationships. Focusing on the assumptions of Object Relational theorists, it becomes clear that maternal indulgence helps a female to evolve an identity in connection with others. However, one cannot totally adhere to this view since it could be debated considering the socio-cultural background in which the woman is located.

The subsequent three chapters are analytical in nature and focus on the psychoanalytic concepts of self, elaborated in the previous chapters. In the light of autobiographies authored by women belonging to diverse cultural, geographic, social and ethnic groups, these chapters discuss the extent to which theories on self can be adapted to particular lives.

Chapter three analyses three Indian women autobiographies of middle class intellectuals. If one takes into consideration the lives of Kamala Das, Amrita Pritam and Meena Alexander, it becomes apparent that the similarities outweigh disparities. Despite the fact that the manner of thinking and reactions to situations differ noticeably, from a broader perspective, the echoes of feminine protest are audible in these narratives.

Both in My Story and in The Revenue Stamp, one observes the women confronting adversities with extraordinary ingenuity and
confidence. The idea of the culturally defined womanhood overshadows their existence. Kamala did venture to return to her culturally prescribed role to realize that she does not fit into the same. Amrita, in contrast, dared to live unconventionally following her instincts. However, Meena, though articulate in her anger, focuses on her self in conformity with the need of the genre. She frequently rebels against the accepted ways of life for women in India, against a society which chooses to ignore the sexuality of a young girl. Very often she seems to be caught in a dilemma between the claims of her intelligence and the requirements of femininity.

Mother-daughter relationship acclaimed by Object Relational theorists is pertinently applicable to Meena. However, in spite of this she could not restrain herself when her personal freedom was in jeopardy. But this aspect of woman's life assumes a different dimension in the case of Kamala, who could not relate satisfactorily to her mother, nor was there mutuality in her dyadic relationship. Amrita also was denied intimate maternal care, though ordained by fate. Nonetheless, the upbringing by her father compensated to a certain extent and made her a courageous and daring female. But she could attain this stature primarily because of internalizing her mother's qualities, a feature psychoanalysts uphold as healthy in a primary relationship.

In The Revenue Stamp, and to a certain extent in My Story, one
notices a digression from the canonical views about women's autobiography, which normally centres on the lives of the narrators as women, underplaying their professional role. In both these autobiographies one finds an acceptance of their role primarily as writers, and their role as women as only secondary, though in Kamala's story her identity as a woman is equally projected. But in Fault Lines, though Meena is a writer of repute, a fine balance is struck between her role as a writer and as a woman. However, sometimes her concern seems to be more with her identity as a woman than as a writer, and even less as a university professor.

Married life for Kamala was agonizing; while for Amrita it was the only striking incident in her life, in spite of being short lived. For Meena, a liberated woman, marriage was by choice and despite racial and cultural differences she could sustain it and move ahead with her life. However, a slight tinge of regret and pain is observable when she describes her mother's happy married life amidst relatives in contrast to her loneliness abroad.

Chodorow opines that in the context of the question of ego, complexities creep into mother-identification. A girl identifies with her mother in order to attain her adult feminine identity and realize her adult gender role. However, it is equally important that she is sufficiently differentiated to grow up and experience herself as a separate individual.
This has been clearly explicated through Meena’s life. In the case of Kamala and Amrita, adult feminine identification in totality is not perceptible, although due to an innate strength and courage aided by circumstances and their intellectual capacity, they could emerge as distinct and singular individuals.

The three autobiographies discussed here have attempted to rewrite the concepts of selfhood in women, considered incapable of autonomous and isolate existence. They have established through their lives that individuality is not dependent singularly on gender or tradition nor is the mother-daughter relationship the deciding factor for relational identity.

Chapter four is a discussion of three potent and demonstrative Afro-Asian autobiographies. While varied in style and content, in a broader sense, they articulate the ‘silences’ in a woman’s life and her uniqueness. Despite the cultural, linguistic, geographical and ethnic diversities which characterize them, running parallel is a stress on matriarchal consciousness and its significance in the moulding of a woman’s character.

In “Gender, Relation and Differences in Psychoanalytic Perspective”, Chodorow maintains that the infant structures an internal set of unconscious, affectively loaded representations of others, in relation to itself, leading to the emergence of an internal signification of
This point of view has been subtly demonstrated through the life of Afaf, Soraya and Angelou. Close kinship with a maternal aunt in the case of Afaf, parents and grandmother in the lives of Soraya and Angelou respectively, has been the supportive factor that helps in the configuration of a strong self and which upholds the integrity of their female identity.

The lives of Afaf and Angelou expose the unsatisfactory primary relationship, though the narrative points to a latent maternal indulgence. At precarious moments in life, Afaf and Angelou are dependent on their strength and instincts rather than their parents. This, however, has induced in them a fresh impetus to survive despite the odds they have to face. As a contrast to them, the life of Soraya reveals complete maternal support: in spite of it she struggles to stabilize her life.

The differing facets of motherhood are clear in the narratives under study. Afaf’s mother Ban is a docile and submissive woman while Angelou’s mother Vivian is aggressive and practical. In spite of diverse maternal identity, both Afaf and Angelou exhibit similar characteristics. Steering their life even through turbulent situations, they are in control of their lives though they most often have to fight all alone. Soraya, on the other hand, goes through an extremely disoriented and baffled state subsequent to her divorce. Unequipped to live a life of her own, since she has had sustained emotional support at every stage of her life,
Soraya finds her life at crossroads when she is no more the Empress. Bereft of internal strength, she is yet again dependent solely on her parents, though she does come to terms with her devastating situation gradually.

The life-narratives of Afaf and Angelou offer personal portraits of exploitation and domination, control on personal autonomy, unhealthy parental relationships, oppression and resilience, resistance and transformation; in fact, everything that might have trampled women of lesser spirit. But they triumph against all adversities, emancipating themselves from confining role boundaries, accepting the multiplicities of their own being.

Juxtaposing Soraya’s self-arrative with those of Afaf and Angelou helps in exposing the reality that a female has a relational disposition variously defined in terms of her need to affiliate with others, to take care of others, to be connected and to relate. Soraya’s life has laid bare the fact that a woman can build on her relational strength to transform her world into her own image.

The narratives discussed have arrived at an understanding that isolate selfhood and autonomy are not merely dependent on relationships, but also on social environments and oppressive social concerns. In fact, the lives of these women have shown that oppression and helplessness are also crucial factors, which create individualism and
autonomy gendered hitherto as ‘male’.

Chapter five deals with autobiographies of Western women who acknowledge more personal reasons for writing self-narratives, affirming their achievements without apology. In the life-narratives of Agatha Christie, Doris Lessing and Patty Duke, feminine experiences are explored from childhood through puberty and adolescence to womanhood, those being the stages in the development of a sense of self that subsequently leads to the awareness of an identity.

Childhood is blissful for Christie, but in sharp contrast are the lives of Lessing and Duke, whose childhood memories are nightmarish. Social psychologists maintain that daughters of close and nurturing mothers foster positive emotions in their children. This, however, has been justified only in the case of Christie, as Lessing and Duke do not enjoy a pleasant and loving relationship with their mothers. Reasons differ, but on the whole both the writers are in a kind of inner emigration from everything their mothers represented. Nonetheless, Lessing and Duke transform their life with the gifts bestowed naturally on them. Deprived of maternal indulgence, they compensate in subtle ways through their involvement in writing and acting.

However, it cannot be categorically stated that maternal concern is altogether lacking. Though not as discernible as in Christie’s case, Lessing’s mother Emily and Duke’s mother Frances, within their
restricted capacity, take charge of their children. But it is repudiated and resented for reasons best known to them. In fact, isolation, loneliness and anxiety are the dominant emotions the daughters experience in their childhood and more so in adolescence.

Unlike Christie and Lessing, Duke has to estrange herself from her mother, which pushes her into an abysmal misery, though it is not totally devoid of a positive outcome. The life of Duke and to a certain extent that of Lessing illustrate the truth that a broken family can jeopardize the emotional stability of children. Bad parenting, unfavourable circumstances and 'strict' upbringing are salient factors which can even culminate in mental disorder.

The life narratives of Lessing and Duke pointedly stress the fact that in case of weak maternal relationships, daughters dare to step outside sanctioned limits to prove that identity is not exclusively dependent on parental influences. As mentioned earlier, oppressive situations, circumstances and authority can very often impart an inner strength to a woman to create an isolate and autonomous identity. Here the necessity of relationality in a woman's life becomes questionable. However, Christie's life does not offer such an extreme possibility as she has a satisfactory dyadic relationship, which does not require her to struggle to create an identity. In spite of it she is independent and self-willed. To sum up, one can thus surmise that the need for others in the
lives of women is more personal and subjective than socially prescribed.

Most psychological theories of self emphasize a separate self, an autonomous self-sufficient entity. These theories do not fit into the experiences of most women. It suggests that the value or bias towards individualism has affected the view of self within the traditional theories. While embracing a more relational outlook of self, these theories reject the more individualistic observations of self as being at odds with the way women experience themselves. It also suggests that the dominant cultural value of individualism creates a generally accepted view of self as one that exists separately and individualistically. One could argue that people, who experience a relational sense of self, need to develop more individualism in order to be compatible with the people at the top. This of course does not mean 'becoming like men'. One could also argue that having a relational self might be the reason that women stay at the bottom. However, it is questionable whether men too fit the traditional, individualistic model, for wives, mothers, daughters, secretaries and other women usually support them. Rather than specifically focusing on women's experiences of growth in connection, it is essential to accept the reality that all people in general grow in connection and in relationship, even when they experience themselves as separate beings. While it is beneficial to women to have theories to speak of their experiences, this could also
serve as another way of delineating and restricting their roles and identities. Through a study of the life narratives it can be said that whether in separateness or relatedness, individuals live with one another and must negotiate their place within their given structure. However, to talk about the self without considering societal power dynamics and one's place in hierarchical systems risks compromising the situation of people in subordinate positions.

Jean Baker Miller enumerating the problem that arises, when all affiliations are cast in the mould of dominance and subordination, suggests that "the parameters of the female's development are not the same as the male's and that the same terms do not apply."4 She finds in psychology no appropriate terms to describe the structuring of women's sense of self, "organized around being able to make and then to maintain affiliations and relationships."5

The experience of inequality and inter-connection, inherent in the relation of parent and child, give rise to the ethics of justice and care, the ideals of human relationship, i.e. the vision that the self and the other will be treated as of equal worth, that despite differences in power, things will be fair; the vision that everyone will be responded to and included. These disparate visions reflect the paradoxical truths of human experience that we know ourselves as separate only in so far as we live in connection with others, and that we experience relationship only in so
far as we differentiate from self. It is the dilemma – the conflict between 
compassion and autonomy, between virtue and power – which the 
feminine voice struggles to resolve, in its effort to reclaim the self and to 
solve the moral problem effectively.

Women have developed the foundations of extremely valuable 
psychological qualities. However, these qualities or 'strengths' go 
unnoticed or devalued as a result of gender inequality. A great desire for 
affiliation is commonly identified as a woman’s strength. Although this 
female predilection has been a source of women’s problems, it can also 
be the basis for important social values. It may be stated that it is 
precisely the affiliative qualities that women have developed – traits that 
are as Miller says, “dysfunctional for success in the world as it is”⁶ – 
that may be the most needed for transforming the world into a more 
humane place.

Examining the points made earlier, my study of nine 
autobiographies leads to the following observations:

- A female affiliative or relational self emerges from a structure of 
  parenting in which maternal indulgence has a pivotal role. This 
  observation, however, points to the fact that it is a trans-cultural 
  and trans-geographic phenomenon.

- Relational identity regarded a weakness in the female when 
  evaluated from the point of view of particular individual lives has
been proved to be the stimulating factor to accept one’s role in a network of others.

- The concept of self-in-relation is not structured or dependent solely on mothering and dyadic relationships. It is true that maternal indulgence is a pre-condition for developmental autonomy and its lack, can jeopardize the stable life of a woman. However, all the women who figure in my study with the exception of Meena, Soraya and Christie, have proved that much depends on an individual’s need to create a place for oneself, irrespective of extraneous factors like successful relationship with one’s mother. Individual capacity, an inner strength and a will to achieve autonomy become fundamental to the creation of this space, denied to women.

- The imperative of a self-in-relation cannot be viewed as gender based. Rather it has to be accepted as subjective and personal. The women under study have proved that isolate selfhood glorified by theorists cannot be restricted by gender.

However, a close look at the lives of the women in my study tends to lead one to a hypothesis that the autonomous self projected in their life-narratives is situational. Placed in the circumstances they find themselves in, life does not offer them the much needed familial support
and identification. Hence, the individualized concept of self becomes a strategic necessity for identification, contrary to the socially defined and accepted relational self.

It appears that women's development may involve relating to the world in a different way than men typically do. This affects their identity formation. Whether differences are due to mainly psychological factors, social factors, and/or a combination of the two is open to interpretation. In any event, a comprehensive concept of identity needs to incorporate both the male and female ways of developing in the world.

By identifying women's psychological traits as strengths, one can offer individual women, hope and a basis upon which to develop their self-worth and inner-strength. Women can begin a therapeutic process by tapping resources they already have developed rather than engaging in perpetual self-criticism for not living up to the (male-derived) maturational goals that are antithetical to their own deeply rooted dispositions.
NOTES


5 Miller, 83.

6 Miller, 124.