Conclusion

Praseedha G. “In search of a black female self: A study of the autobiographies and select works of Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou” Thesis. Department of English, Mercy College Palakkad, University of Calicut, 2010
Conclusion

Ideologies can be held by a person or a group or a culture. No doubt a personal ideology is a result of life experiences and education. But even though personal ideologies grow out of experience, they are not entirely private; experiences and our memories of them, are influenced by prevailing cultural attitudes about ethnicity, gender, class, appearance, ability, and occupation, among other things. (Sharon Crowley, Debra Hawhee)

The genre of autobiography has undergone numerous modifications from its original form. In this thesis the focus has been on whether the ‘self’ represented through their autobiography, strictly follows empirical issues in terms of ‘race’ and ‘gender,’ as has been noticed in African American female autobiographies in general. The theme of ‘quest,’ that forms a part of this thesis, attempts to find how African American women resist the conventional form created by Western “values” and “ideals.” Zora Neale Hurston, and Maya Angelou’s autobiographical and non-autobiographical works which were taken up for analysis within this thesis focuses primarily in bring out the ideological standpoint in crafting the self in their life narratives. This standpoint is later extended to a selection of their non-autobiographical works to locate how they devise strategies to subvert the dominant ways of presentation of the self.

The two autobiographers works encompass a wider canvas than merely recounting individual experiences. In recounting a life of success rooted in the public world, both these autobiographers differentiate themselves to form distinct individual identities through their self-life-writing. Through their
penetrating autobiographies, the two writers have managed to produce narratives of resistance, that also display their historical and social context. They underscore the enormous odds posed against them by their respective milieu making their work ‘political.’ As Selwyn Cudjoe astutely notes: “When resistance is the chief preoccupation of a country (or a race), the aesthetic must become political” (58).

In charting their quest for the self, two major epistemological issues, pertaining to the theoretical and empirical category have been taken into account. To address the theoretical part within self -life -writing, the theory put forth by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson have been used. The self -in -writing and the self written are clearly divided by these theorists into four different categories namely, Historical I, Narrating I, Narrated I / Object I and Ideological I. These divisions help in separating the strands of the self that is represented to throw light on the self that represents it. African American existence has been plagued by the empirical issues such as race, gender and class, therefore, their life narratives are pre-supposed to reflect these issues. In bringing out the Ideological base for the presentation of the ‘self’ in their life -writing, the idea of the Historical I to either, align the self towards, or away from the usual empirical themes, play a crucial role in deciding the direction of the Ideological I. While analyzing the presentation of the self through and away from the empirical issues, it is interesting to note the way in which they have attempted to infuse the same within a selection of their non-autobiographical works.
In using the theory propounded by Smith and Watson, the *Narrating I* or the omnipresent narrator takes on the role of the mouth-piece of the *Historical I*, the autobiographer. Therefore the method of projection of this *Narrating I* has significance in the analysis of the autobiographies. It is fascinating to note that the mode of experimentation adopted by both the self-life- writers which mark them as unique and authentic from the rest of the canon. The *Ideological I* that is presented to the society at large through their autobiography, indirectly focuses on the self developed through social recognition – in other words – how they view themselves both as a person and in relation to other people.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Narrating I* expresses the experiences of life as an autoethnographer, using the “spy glass of anthropology” (Dust Tracks 44). Being a professional ethnographer, the life writer applies the theory of study and presentation of culture to her life-writing making it distinct from others of the same canon. Maya Angelou’s series of autobiographies, on the other hand, presents her life story using folk discourse by borrowing the style of the African American folk preacher. Religion has been a strong compelling force within her life and it is scarcely surprising that Angelou’s *Narrating I* adopts the voice of the central pivotal member of the church- the folk preacher.

The life and times of Hurston was dictated heavily by the empirical issues of colour and gender. All the intellectuals of her time and the Harlem Renaissance period of which she was a part of, used this as the central theme of their works. Yet, her *Dust Tracks* has sparing mention of the pain and
humiliation, of the segregation, and of the racial hatred in the early twentieth century America, let alone the pain she had to undergo as a woman who had to face double marginalisation. Hurston's *Ideological I* is firmly rooted in her anthropological, scientific truth-the truth that questions empirical issues. Her work is therefore based on purely objective reasoning concentrating on the strengths of her individual self and her community.

In order to achieve this goal she presents her life-writing as autoethnography. Hurston had watched the atrocities heaped on her people by the white Americans, yet, unlike her predecessors she refused to represent her *Ideological* in relation to the whites. Instead, she suggests that racial identity can become obsessive and racist and her training as an ethnographer makes her turn her life narrative into a study of the self in culture. It is of significance to note that all autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on 'auto'- the self, 'ethno'- the socio-cultural connection and 'graphy,' - the application of the research process. *(Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social)* 9.

Hurston's self-life-story focuses largely on the 'ethnography' part while inviting personal connection into issues of personal importance within and outside the realm of explicitly acknowledged social context.

In some cases her contribution revolves around the intimate knowledge of the subject matter (her own culture), and the text's complex articulation of it and its innovativeness. In other cases the theoretical and the empirical perspectives or voices are presented, sometimes separately, and sometimes in an
intertwined way, where they are in dialogue throughout the text, and where this
dialogue is what weaves the fabric of the text. Her life narrative is replete with
fractures, silences, secrets and elisions, yet the description marginalises tested
empirical features. Her Object I thereby becomes a model for the non-
representative, dispersed, displaced subjectivity.

Her life narration presents the African American culture and its people
from both an ‘etic’ (outsider), and ‘emic’ (native) perspective. By making
striking rhetorical choices the Narrating I becomes an ‘etic’ and an ‘emic’
alternately. Hurston, re-positions all existing ideas of ‘interdependence’
through the examination, and reproduction of a deep understanding of human
complexity. As an objective ethnographer, her work shows that one’s identity
need not have to be bound by an “either / or” proposition- of being an American
/African American, or man / woman. She questions the basis for this
segregation - that the white American is supposed to represent; good, beauty,
purity, normality, sophistication, and power, while the black man embodies the
opposing values; evil, ugliness, sin, abnormality, primitivism, and weakness.
She raises herself above this constraint and simultaneously becomes an
‘etic,’ when she asks, “Why should I be proud to be a Negro? Why should
anybody be proud to be white? Or yellow? Or red?” (Dust Tracks 264). What
becomes important is the way in which Hurston, by removing the racial barrier,
moves her community from the margins to the centre of enquiry, establishing
them as subjects, in a place that was reserved for the whites in the dominant
euro- centric sphere.
Apart from opposing the concept of segregation on racial differences, Hurston also vehemently opposes ‘race leaders’ and their attempt at uplifting the ‘race,’ for she feels that they were trying to further their own prospects and not thinking of the good of the community. Therefore she feels the need to connect with the African American ‘further down,’ to help understand the cultural essence of her community. By marginalising social stereotypes, Hurston centers the common folk and re-presents them in their own terms. In exploding the power politics based on racial superiority, Hurston the ethnographer, traces the history behind the enslavement of African Americans as a race both from the mythic and historical perspective to emphasise on the irrationality of the blame game - she places both the greedy Kings of Dahomy, Africa and white Americans on nearly same indistinguishable levels thereby exposing the truth regarding their enslavement.

Apart from the exposure of artificiality of ‘race’ as a construct, the Narrating I deconstructs another common view regarding ‘collective consciousness’ by exposing several naked truths regarding ‘skin folks being kinfolks.’ The ethnographer also takes on an ‘etic’ role and mocks her ‘skin folks’ who try to imitate, mock and ape the Americans. By exposing their duplicity the ethnographer also throws light on how these individuals seek recognition by turning their backs on their own culture.

The roles performed by a person are a result of the external norms of the society; they are roles attached to a person of a specific gender, race, or sexual
categorization. Usually a female autobiographer focuses on how she performs roles as a mother, daughter, caretaker, worker, and wife. Interestingly, Hurston’s life-writing detaches itself from the ‘cocoon’ of ‘womanliness,’ and extends the tenets and parameters of ‘womanliness’ to unchartered territory. By removing herself from the framing male gaze she situates the self written as a political tool. Apart from the endearing childhood before her mother’s death the ethnographer is an objective observer – an ‘etic,’ presenting herself as individualistic, refusing to follow the dictates of the society when she decides to focus on her career rather than settling down after marriage.

By turning down the stereotypical role of the African American women, and opting for her career as an anthropologer, Hurston decentres the identity of the African American women as intellectually marginalised. Instead she presents her own life as an example for how the African American women could defy all odds and live their life according to their own terms. By deliberately circumventing the rules of the genre, the Hurston also challenges the limits of autobiographical discourse.

The premise within self - life - writing as ethnography is extended to her non-autobiographical works such as, *Mules and Men* and *Tell My Horse* - which are ethnographic works regarding her research in America and the Caribbean. These books have been chosen because of the marked similarity in the treatment of *Ideological I* within all works. In the presentation of the African American folklore and its oral tradition, Hurston presents the ‘emic’ perspective in all
these works, bringing out the rich tradition that is carried on by the different tribes that were forcibly settled together in America. The ‘lying sessions’ or the ‘story telling sessions’ form an important part of both her autoethnography and other creative works. The Joe Clarke’s store porch, which forms the stage for these sessions, encapsulates the social, cultural, economic and spiritual fabric of the African American ethos. Her use of folktales and folk lore emphasise on the basic premise, which is the initial premise of all anthropological research- basic racial equality.

Hurston shows that being ‘black’ and ‘female’ does not automatically lead to a racial and gendered identity. Therefore Hurston’s autoethnography places her Dust Tracks as part of this larger social and cultural enquiry- the realisation that the lives of African Americans “are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different” that they can not be bound under one standardization of identity (Dust Tracks 192 ). Therefore, she fashions her ideology away from her African American contemporaries, to present a ‘metaphor of the self’ similar to the folktales she collected. From her expedition to the South she came to realise that African American culture, found in the Spirituals and folklore, was vibrant because it was ‘bound by no rules.’ She recognised the art of improvisation used not only in folklore but in everyday African American life and harnessed this very same strategy to control the part of her identity to reveal externally, both in her life and in her work. The recreation has always been a method followed by African Americans in terms of religion, music, dancing, proverbs, and storytelling. It was through their
storytelling, known as folktales that the slaves would entertain and educate their children. In the African American folktales, there was always an animal who was a trickster. Hurston uses this motif to make her life narrative similar to that of Brer Rabbit tales.

One of the methods in which discourses are established as dominant perceptions, is through repetition, where, representations turn into identities. African-American women have come this far by reiterating down the generations their faith and spirituality, that enabled them to sing their song of hope with great conviction and spirit. Maya Angelou, the second African American autobiographer chosen in this thesis decides to follow the dominant discourse of the times, one that throw light on the life that is ‘caged’ on racial and gender lines. Her *Narrating I* borrows the voice of a folk preacher, as one who leads the congregation with love and encouragement towards transcendence and hope. In using the sermonic mode throughout her multi-volume autobiography *Maya Angelou*, uses the incidents in her life as anecdotes that show how an African American woman could be made to feel hurt, traumatized, victimized and suppressed.

The outward pressures of a prejudiced society have their effects and the *Object I* suffers much damage when the society around reflects a demeaning picture of the young Maya. When this image gets repeated many times the misrecognised *Object I* ends up imprisoned, distorted and a reduced being, because, with repetition she ends up internalising this picture of herself. Using
the folk preacher’s style there is a slow thematic change in empirical issues such as race and gender, when the Object I internalises the inferiority initially, naturalises it, and later graduates to the level of freeing herself from her ‘cage.’ Her gradation from an insecure, voiceless young child to the stage of helpless rage, and hurt to the stage of subtle protest, to outright protest to the final stage of transcendence, to a newly found space for articulation, form the crux of her life-writing works. Her non-autobiographical works, mainly her poetry in the Complete Collected Poems of Maya Angelou, the themes expressed in her self-life-writing are repeated to show how the same theme forms the basis for her life as well as her non autobiographical writings.

In embodying the African American oral tradition, Maya Angelou, the Historical I, borrows the voice of the folk preacher. By selecting events from her life interweaved with the method followed by a folk preacher, she places the Object I as graduating through different phases of life. The Historical I adopts the black preacher’s creative use of language and storytelling, using allusions that serve to heighten the sense of displacement, shame and dislocation. As a person who had travelled far and wide and seen different cultures and traditions, the Historical I makes her life narrative more like a bildungsroman. Her life narratives are haunted by empirical notions forming a vicious triangle to engulf her—these pertain to masculine prejudice, white illogical hate and Black powerlessness. Her spirituality serves to heal, and gives her the strong will to survive the destructive social and political forces that threaten her life daily thereby helping to discover her inner self.
The *Narrating I* as the folk preacher foregrounds another important principle behind their capacity to overcome and emerge formidable, this is linked directly to the support and bonding with other women within the community. The African American women as mothers, sisters, friends etc affirm one another’s humanity and the right to exist. Maya Angelou’s sense of her individual worth came up first from her grandmothers and later from her mother Vivian Baxter. Her poems further reiterate the fact that any person could see themselves as valuable and worthy of being allowed to live their life according to their own terms.

Angelou’s autobiographical series has what has discernible patterns as seen within most of the African American autobiographies that tie them together because the outer world apprehended by black autobiography is consistent and unique. The themes of racial prejudice, love for the ancestors, love for the aged and pride in one’s own individual strength that are a part of her life narratives are also seen within her *Collected Poems*. She owes the art of transposing feelings into language – both prose and poetic with equal eloquence. Both her poems and life writing works shoe her skill at integrating the feelings and thought, passion and reality, abstract and concrete, and to transcend and triumph over all odds. The use of native proverbs, slang and colloquial language lends it a color of its own and helps to shape her conception of identity, self and acknowledgments.
Her poetry and life narratives have at its centre, African American female characters such as: her mother, her paternal grandmother and Mrs. Flowers who helped in crafting her life from humiliation to transcendence. The strength that she gained from the church makes her borrow the style of a folk preacher, who uses anecdotes to explain and lead his congregation to the path of righteousness. Angelou does the same when she strings together anecdotes that mark her transformation from being a non entity to an accomplished writer and poet.

Hurston and Angelou share a common unique agenda in respect to the presentation of their culture, whether in their self-representational work or fiction; they attempt to dispel the myths imposed on them in an alien ethos. As a fourth and fifth generation African American they try to re-interpret and negotiate identities imposed on them. Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou also embark on a journey to unravel the 'African American' and 'Female.' Both autobiographies deal with the issue of freedom and the determination to stand up to the social and political oppression that beleaguer their human existence. Being writers from the South, they celebrate the strength, vitality and bonding of the Southern African American community when they describe about their life in the South. The struggles, fears, happiness and closeness of the community echo through their portrayal.

While Maya Angelou realistically situates the race problem as the crux of the African American existence. She borrows the folk preacher’s voice, uses
formal devices such as rhetoric, anaphora, and rhyme to make her poems so memorable, for, they come from a cultural tradition that had never had a voice in poetry. In that sense, Angelou’s use of forms was itself political, not just the content of her poems. Her use of the language of image, narrative, and melody makes her poetry a suitable vehicle for bringing the concerns of gospel, tradition, and local cultural experience together into a creative synthesis that is authentic to each. Hurston, on the other hand, prefers to take up the folk tales, folklore and the customs and rituals within the community as the connecting force that integrates the society. By blending folklore into her personal account she narrates not only about her community but also dispels several myths regarding her race.

Smith and Watson remind us that “at any historical moment, there are heterogenous identities culturally available to the narrator” and that “the ground of the Ideological I only apparently stable and the possibilities for tension, adjustment, refixing, and unfixing are ever present” (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader 62). Amidst all these elements of fixing and unfixing, both these life writers try to present their feedback into everyday understandings of how ‘common lives’ and ‘extraordinary lives’ can be recognised” (The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography 3).

Reading these women’s personal and lyrical acts using a multi-layered theoretical framework, elucidates the scholarship of using both poetry, folk
preacher's discourse and folklore as protest, as a tool for fostering community building and as a site for engaging in subversive Black rhetorical practices. The rhetorical power of these texts by women autobiographers is the employment of literary space to negotiate male-dominated scientific and social discourse for the purpose of shaping cultural, economic, or social ideas and reform. The autobiographers use tangled threads of discourse in unique ways to force the reader to question scientific, religious, and social beliefs and doubts for the purpose of reconstructing personal values that give the readers a model of feminist negotiation of public discourse. But the ground of the ideological 'I' only appears stable. There are several possibilities for adjustment, refixing, and unfixing. In making self-identity and the life that informs it a continual project of resistance, one can claim one's identity as a site of freedom. In this way, critical self-analysis becomes a political form of self-representation, one with great potential for social change. Moreover, Hurston and Angelou imply that the African American race will not just endure, but will triumph with a will of collective consciousness that Western experience cannot extinguish.

In life, people often have to make choices in difficult, ambiguous, and uncertain circumstances. At these times, we feel the tug of obligation and responsibility. That's what they end up writing about. Both these writers use a rite of passage into a less restricting and oppressive existence, a transition into the mythic dimension, where as an autoethnographer and folk preacher they are able to create a world that they envision. The study of life narratives in terms of their culture and its nuances helps provide further critical insights into issues of
race, gender, and religion at the intersection of art and politics in American culture. Through their life narratives, they show how people are in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and what their struggles mean. Besides this, they also propose new models for women who do not identify with the existing ones.

The Ideological I within these life-writings not only dispels myths regarding the African Americans in general and African American women in particular, but also reconciles the relationship between one’s skin colour, one’s gender and one’s internal self. Maya Angelou begins her life narration by charting her growth from ‘cagedness’ to freedom and finally ends with a feeling of transcendence. Hurston however, conversely begins her narrative from this very concept of transcendence (of Angelou), and ends in a note of stronger sense of empowerment, although she lived a generation before Maya Angelou. Hurston departs from the usual road taken by autobiographers to present the ‘self’ down a road that is hardly traversed by others, yet one that is intimately and truly connected to the free uninhibited life of Eatonville. Hurston ignores the cages that bind her, to voice the self through other empowering ideas- such as connecting to her own roots, making her in many ways a precursor to Maya Angelou in terms of the ideological rather than the temporal and spatial. Hurston's willingness to go against the grain and to experiment with new ethnographic styles and methods positions her as the foremother of what is today called interpretive anthropology, or the new ethnography.
The inter-textuality between Hurston’s and Angelou’s autobiography and their other texts has been used here to show the importance of this kind of relational analysis. Although I have clearly given autobiography priority in this study, it is the autobiography’s relationship to their other texts and to the other kinds of signifying systems mentioned in them, that gives the autobiography itself an added dimension. The purpose of this thesis is to show how Hurston and Angelou pushed the boundaries of the dominant script in order to create spaces whereby people would see African-Americans as idiosyncratic individuals. Attempt has been made to show how these accomplished writers showed the world that they could form their own terms, live and die for it, as Hurston did. In doing so they also speak to the future like many other African American women writers who consciously reshape the ‘African American’ ‘female’ roles. These women espouse objective, adaptable, and also courageous techniques in constructing their self identity using a two-pronged approach. They were providing public intellectuals with social, cultural and public education. The education that they sought to teach was based on life experiences. The very base of empirical notions is questioned and they seek to invent better images of the self through their life narratives and select non-autobiographic works. Despite the fluid, complex and changing nature of individual life narratives, consistency lies perhaps in the continuation of one’s own culture which forms a vital link by itself. As such, these women are iconic radical ‘Black’ ‘Female’ subjects and folk poets committed to breaking silences and transforming their community and the world. Through their narratives, they
try to lead to a positive change trying to make the world a better place. Their life narratives and other non- autobiographical works strive to leave the communities, participants, and their own selves better off at the end of the narratives than they were at the beginning. This is why it is imperative for research to go beyond the search for the empirical issues to examine the dynamics between individual life narrators and their similar culture to make 'history' in a sense.