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
Chapter — I

Positioning 'Black' 'Female' Autobiography

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past (Marx).

The term 'autobiography' according to the Oxford Reference Dictionary, was coined as late as 1809 by Robert Southey who used the term while commenting on the life of a Portuguese painter, Francisco Vieura in the Quarterly Review. Etymologically the word “autobiography” is a compound of the Greek terms ‘autos’ (self), ‘bios’ (life), and ‘graphe’ (writing) (55). At its simplest, then, autobiography can be defined as “self-life-writing.” There is a little of the ‘self’ in many other forms of art, but the self in autobiography is clearly more pronounced and distinct. A diary, memoir, journal / reminiscences and letters all deal with the same self, but from different standpoints. While a diary chalks out the day-to-day accounts of one’s life they are not generally meant for publication, a memoir is developed by recording the public events with very minimal stress on the ‘self.’ Roy Pascal adds, “The diarist notes down what, at that moment, seems of importance to him; its ultimate, long-range significance cannot be assessed” (Truth and Design in Autobiography 3). In her essay, “Autobiography: A Literary Genre,” Sarojini observes that a journal, on the other hand, “is written to a plan” (Women’s Writings: Text and
Context 201), adding that it adheres to specific objectives and records only certain types of occurrences.

Autobiography is not merely a retrospective account of the autobiographer's life; it involves the shaping of the past and imposing a coherent pattern to one's life-story. There have been varied arguments regarding the segregation of autobiography as a separate genre. Yet the act of writing one's life, which may find its traces in fiction, also presents a credible claim as a distinct category. The early American Republic witnessed vast outpouring of personal narratives, mainly by citizens of the new nation and others by visitors from overseas. Benjamin Franklin's account of his early life in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (1793) is the most famous precursor in autobiography that led to the rise of Romanticism as a pre-condition for authentic autobiographical writing. Rousseau's *Confessions* marks the beginning of the modern Romantic autobiography. Stephen Carl Arch in his book *After Franklin: The Emergence of Autobiography in Post-Revolutionary America 1780-1830*, sees a "paradigm shift" taking place from "classic to romantic," a transition he identifies with a shift from "traditional to modern" and from "patriarchal to democratic values" (13).

Traditionally, autobiography has been viewed as a narrative of reputed men of distinction and credit. It has been seen as an outcome of an attempt to correct his public image in the form of apology, to sustain the image he has in
society, to gain public recognition or notoriety, as a means of earning one's living. This established view is largely based on readings and critical analyses of seminal texts by St. Augustine, Goethe, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Henry Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. James Olney, an eminent critic on autobiography states that, “In the works of three authors one can trace the central line of life-writing in the western world. St. Augustine, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Samuel Beckett: each of them is crucial; no others are necessary” (Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography 11). Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, a spiritual autobiography mirrors “his” era with “his” viewpoint, “his” ideology, “his” idea of representing the community and “his” sense of universality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les Confessions* and Samuel Beckett’s *Company* romanticizes St. Augustine’s subject by making it more secular and universal. The traditional development of the male autobiographical self begins in relationships, but develops into an understanding of his separateness from others.

While these are the wide-ranging rules governing the writing of the male autobiographical canon, the rules stand adapted when it focuses on the African American life narration, for, his attempt mainly focuses on ‘telling a free story,’ claims William L. Andrews in his, *To Tell a Free Story: : The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*. Andrews adds in his *African American Autobiography* that the nineteenth century abolitionists sponsored the publication of the narratives of escaped slaves in the belief that
the first-person account would mobilise white readers more than any other kind of antislavery discourse. The twentieth century African-American autobiography was also written with the potential to liberate the white reader from racial prejudice, ignorance and fear (*African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* 1).

The African American Slave Tradition was highly constraining and hence they developed a distinct tradition of their own. Slave narratives, document slave life primarily in the American South from an invaluable perspective of first-hand experience, as a historical source. Increasingly in the 1840s and 1850s they reveal the struggles of people of colour in the North, as fugitives from the South recorded the disparities between America's ideal of freedom and the reality of racism in the so-called "free states." The genre of autobiography also serves a means through which the mystified image of a Negro being 'savages, brutes and illiterates' is decentred. Some of the famous African Americans who heralded the male autobiographical tradition were Henry Bibb through his *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb* (1850), Solomon Northup's *Twelve years a Slave* (1863), *Narrative of the Rev. Noah Davis* (1859) by Rev. Noah Davis, *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) by William and Ellen Craft, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1892) by Fredrick Douglass were some of the fore runners of the Slave Narrative Tradition.

The universalizing agenda of the western male autobiographical subject and “the sense of individual rebellion of the African American tradition,” as Couser calls it in his *Altered Egos: Authority in American Autobiography*, leaves little room for the kind of multiple, contradicted subjectivities that might be encountered in women’s self-life-writing. The women’s autobiographical tradition began initially by appendaging their life-story to their husband’s work, for it was considered that women's autobiography was just a minor, homelier tradition, just a part of the greater
and more valuable tradition, that of the male. Thus, the all - important western male tradition was considered the touchstone whereby all other heterogeneous subjects became marginalized. Mary A. Mason in her essay, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” identifies Margery Kempe’s *The Book of Margery Kempe* (qtd. in *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* 30) as the “first full autobiography in English by anyone, male or female.” Here she draws on a number of literary conventions of the time, namely, voyage and pilgrimage literature, lives of saints, fables intermingled with dramatized episodes that resembles the picaresque novel. Margaret Cavendish’s question, “Why hath this lady writ her own life?” (qtd. in *Life / Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography* 19) evokes questions regarding the space specified for women to voice their concerns in life-writing. Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle’s “The True Relation of My Birth and Breeding” in *The Life of William Cavendish (Duke of Newcastle)*, was first published as an appendix to her husband’s republished autobiography *The Life of William Cavendish (Duke of Newcastle)*.

Estelle Jelinek lists three prominent types of women autobiographers in the late nineteenth century: writers, pioneers who traveled West, and feminists and reformers (*The Traditions of Women’s Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* 5). While the basic doctrine within a Western male autobiographical subject is his ability to celebrate his self through individualism, a female autobiographical subject is supposed to represent her
‘self’ in terms of her relations to others. The re-presented feminine self within autobiography would be seen as a by-product of intersection of the various layers, such as the self in terms of class, race, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities, for, as, Chodorow in her Reproduction of Mothering, observes that “The basic feminine sense is a sense connected to the world, while the basic masculine sense is ‘to separate,’ and any deviation from the prescribed ideology was seen as a narcissistic endeavour” (54). Therefore, conventional male autobiography ‘tells’ the reader who the subject is. It states the identity of a man, which is understood as fixed and solid. On the other hand, women’s autobiography constantly ‘questions’ who the writer is. It leads to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a fixed or stable identity. Rather, women’s autobiography asserts that women are fluid, simultaneously employing various identities. Elizabeth W. Bruss in her Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of A Literary Genre observes that, “Revisions to the form of conventional autobiography take shape through metaphor, myth as seen in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior and metaphor in Lauren Slater’s Lying, vignettes, communal stories, poetry, and photographs as in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Storyteller” (131).

The African American women’s autobiographical tradition like other traditions is plagued by the classic statement of Sojourner Truth, who expressed the predicament of the African American slave women at the Women’s Rights Convention in 1853,
... Look at me! Look at my arm! I have plowed and planted and gathered into the barns, and no man could head me ... and ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man (when I could get it), and bear the lash as well ... and ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen women and seen them most of all sold off into slavery, and when I cried out with a mother's grief, none but Jesus heard ... and ain't I a woman? (The Narrative and Book of Life 120-21)

The predicament highlighted by Sojourner Truth is greatly relevant within the genre of African American autobiography, for, all these testimonies portray the role of the African American women or rather the lack of it during and after the slavery period thereby serving as important historical source. The impulse to write historical autobiography remains very strong in this particular ethnic group because, as Albert Stone puts it, “It has been the fate of numerous black Americans to have been systematically prevented from creating history” (The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays 176). The earliest autobiographical narratives were generally pseudo-narratives of female slaves penned by whites. The African American autobiographer assumes the role of a social and political commentator by placing their selves as a bridge between the races, whether as mistress, as maid, a nurse or as humanist. Nellie Y. McKay, in “The Narrative of Self: Race, Politics, and Culture in Black American Women’s Autobiography,”
suggested a different perspective of reading autobiographies of African American women. They must be read in their specific and historical context of gender and race, because the self of African American women is different from the self of African American men, but also from the self of middle-class, white women (qtd. in *Women, Autobiography, Theory – A Reader* 96).

The usual theme within the African American female autobiographical tradition is the attempt to create an identity of a mother and fierce protectoress. Helen M. Buss, in her “Reading for the Doubled Discourse of American Women’s Autobiography” points out that, “A major part of the energy was directed towards debunking the racist, gender ideology of the white culture” (*Auto/Biography Studies* 95). Therefore they find other space through which they can articulate themselves more freely using the networks such as the church, bonding with elder women of the community etc.

The presentation of the self in all autobiographies, no matter how progressive or radical, are always produced in retrospect. Hence writing one's autobiography will always necessitate selection and introspection before charting out special moments and turning points that justify and make possible the telling of a life story. The typical important moments captured within any autobiography are: first childhood memories, going to school, first love, first time you became conscious of your gender, your race, your class, or your sexuality, your first experience of death, your first job, the first time you questioned a cherished belief or thought about something in a new way, and so on. Likewise, Paul Paul Eakin maintains that autobiography is a process “in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness” (*Fictions in Autobiography* 5). When an autobiographer retroactively thinks of his/her life in terms of important turning points, they do so because they want to show
how they have changed, how they got to the place they are now at, and to frame what would otherwise be a continuous and undifferentiated outpouring of our life experiences. But the moments they choose to foreground are not innately more important than any others. They are constructed to be important.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks* and Maya Angelou’s series of autobiographies are the self-life- writing works examined in this thesis, for, they offer a context for discovering personal identity by giving them space and voice to portray their own culture through deliberate selection of events. Their works were chosen due to the multiplicity in treatment of self by centering and de-centering dominant ideology mainly with regard to racial and sexual categorizations.

Hurston was a novelist, anthropologist, playwright, essayist, and key figure in what is now termed the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and political movement of the African Americans centered on Harlem, New York in the 1920-30s. Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Hurston’s novels, including *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* and *Mules and Men*, provide an example of a creative writer’s journey into the realm of the African American experience, through which the reader is made aware of the relationship between social forces and the construction of identity. Some of her other works include, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine, Their Eyes Were Watching*

*Dust Tracks* was written through 1941 and the early 1942. In its early chapters she recounts her childhood at Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated, all-black township in America. Her father, John Hurston had been the town's alderman and three times its Mayor. He had written many of the laws in the late 1800s, which are still observed to the present day, and was also the moderator of the South Floridian Baptist Association. Her mother, Lucy Ann Potts had fallen in love with an “over-the-creek nigger,” John Hurston and had eloped with him much against her parents' wish. She describes her infancy as a delightful period that she cherishes throughout her life due to its secure and carefree air. Her mother who had been instrumental in building her spirit urged her “to jump at de sun.” Her father she recalls as a person who is pivotal in bringing about the change in Eatonville. When Zora was nine year old, her mother’s death and father’s remarriage lead the outspoken Hurston to leave home. Life changes drastically and young Zora, her brothers and sisters drift apart. Her brothers and sisters go back to school while young Zora although underaged is sent to the school at Jacksonville. Her father ask the school to adopt her, for, young Zora is not liked by the new
Mrs. Hurston. The school authorities refuse to take her in, and she is sent away with little money. She tries to get a job as a maid in some households and finally becomes a maid to a prominent performer. When the performer quits, Zora finds herself out of job and tries a hand as a waitress, and finally gets admittance at the Night High School at Baltimore. She is also offered a seat later at Howard University, which is considered the capstone of Negro education in the African American world. While at the University she worked part-time in a barber's shop. The final part of her book is devoted to some of the important issues such as friendship with Fanny Hurst and Ethel Waters, her love life and marriage, the contradictions within race and religion etc. Dust Tracks follows Zora Neale Hurston from childhood to adulthood, from storyteller to writer, from student to teacher, and from a woman of values from the community to a woman of her own independent values that reflect back to the community.

Mules and Men, the other work chosen in this thesis is a treasury of African American folklore as collected by Hurston, a famous storyteller and anthropologist who grew up hearing the songs and sermons, sayings and tall tales that have formed an oral history of the South since the time of slavery. Returning to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, to gather from within the social context of African American life, the stories, “big old lies,” songs, Voodoo customs, and superstitions recorded in these pages capture the imagination of the readers. It also contains many sayings, fragments of songs, rhymes and legends etc. Mules and Men is seen as a lasting monument to the
African American people. Her work, *Tell My Horse* is the second non-autobiographical work taken for consideration in this thesis, it documents the anthropological research in folklore, Hoodoo and the like in the Caribbean-focusing mainly on Haiti and British West Indies. The Voodoo rituals and the secret behind the zombies provide insights into the politics, sociology, and anthropology of Haiti and Jamaica.

Maya Angelou (original name Marguerite Johnson), was born to Vivian Baxter and Bailey Johnson at St. Louis, Missouri on April 4, 1928. She is an acclaimed poet, educator, historian, best-selling author, actress, playwright, civil-rights activist, producer and director. In 1993, Angelou became the second poet and first African American in U.S. history to write and recite original work at a Presidential Inauguration. She has received the Mother Teresa Award - 2006 for her service to humanity; and has several honors and degrees to her credit. Her important works include a multi-volume collection of autobiographies, entitled the *Collected Autobiographies*, include *Caged Bird*, 1970; *Gather Together*, 1974; *Singin' and Swingin'*, 1976; *The Heart*, 1981; *God's Children*, 1986, *A Song*, 2002. A few of her non-fiction works include short story collections namely, *Wouldn't Take Nothing for My Journey Now*, 1993; *Lessons in Living*, 1993; *Even the Stars Look Lonesome*, 1997.

Her first autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* remains till date one of her best loved works. Marguerite Johnson and her brother Bailey
are sent to Arkansas by their parents when she is three to live with their father's mother, Mrs. Henderson / Momma who is strictly religious, and owns a general store where the children are expected to work. Then their father arrives suddenly, and takes them to St. Louis to stay with their mother. Unfortunately her mother's boyfriend, Mr. Freeman begins to molest, and finally rapes young Maya. Soon after he is discovered, and mysteriously killed, probably by her mother's family, young Maya believes it is all her fault, and stops talking for a long time. She and her brother are sent back to Stamps, where she meets Mrs. Flowers, who teaches her that speech and writing are beautiful and important. Momma decides that Maya and Bailey have to go to California to be with their parents. She doesn't know why, but she thinks it's because Bailey has seen, up close, a dead black man and a white man who is happy to see the man dead. She reads some lesbian literature and, not understanding her developing body and mind thinks she is a lesbian. She approaches a popular boy and asks him to have sex with her, and three weeks later finds she is pregnant. She has the baby, and is afraid of hurting it for a while, but soon realizes that as long as she has good intentions, her instinct will help her care for it.

Following her highly acclaimed first autobiography Maya Angelou writes her second volume *Gather Together* which is set at the time of World War II. Angelou, still known as Marguerite / Rita, has just given birth to her son, Guy, and is living with her mother and stepfather in San Francisco. The book follows Marguerite from the ages of 17 to 19, through a series of
relationships, occupations- as an “absentee manager” for two lesbian
prostitutes, a failed attempt to enlist in the Army, with descriptions of cities
visited as she attempts to raise her son and find a place for herself in the
world. It continues exploring the themes of her isolation and loneliness, and
ways she devises to overcome racism, sexism, and her continued
victimization.

Singin’ and Swingin,’ the third volume of her life narration, shows
Maya, at 22, with a five year old Clyde, working as a salesgirl in a music
store Melrose Record Store after Louise Cox (a white woman) the part owner
of the store offers her a job. Her suspicious nature regarding the whites takes
a back seat as she befriends Louise Cox and later courts and marries a Greek
ex-navy man Tosh Angelos. The marriage ends when Tosh admits that he was
“tired of being married.” The separation from Tosh leaves both Clyde and
Maya broken hearted. She gets hospitalised later for an appendectomy and
wishes to move to her grandmother’s to heal in body and spirit. But she is
horrified to learn of her death. She gets a job as a dancer in a night club. Later
she joins Purple Onion, a dance troupe. Here, she christens herself as ‘Maya
Angelou’ and becomes a popular dancer at the club. She details all her
experiences at various places such as Italy, France, Yugoslavia, Belgrade etc.
She is forced to cut short her visit when she learns of Clyde’s bad health.
Later she receives an offer as a dancer in Hawaii which she gladly accepts.
She then takes Guy along with her to the island.
The Heart, the fourth of her multi-volume autobiography, speaks of her acquaintance with Billie Holiday, a one time famous singer and dancer. Through her friend Abbey Lincoln she meets John Killens, a script writer, who encourages her to move to New York City to try a hand at writing. Here she joins the Harlem Writers’ Guild, and later the Apollo Theater and sings calypso songs. She also helps to raise money for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and decides to help the cause by staging a play. The performance gets noticed but life does not change. Maya Angelou later becomes the co-ordinator at SCLC. But she quits her job marries Vus Make, a revolutionary African freedom fighter and attends the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage, CAWAH meetings regularly. On hearing the news of Patrice Lumumba, a Congolese diplomat’s assassination, African americans decide to show their solidarity by staging a protest at the UN General Assembly. Maya is offered the role of a black queen in Genet’s play, The Blacks. The show is a success and is enjoyed even by the whites. Her relation with Vus begins to strain due to his indiscretions and she decides to end her marriage. Guy graduates from high school and seeks admission at the Ghanaian University for further studies. Unfortunately, he meets with an accident and is hospitalised for a long period. The book ends with his health improving and his admittance at the Ghanaian University after passing an entrance examination.

God’s Children is the fifth of her multi-volume autobiography that begins at Ghana. Here she gets a job as a secretary at the University while Guy
joins the college and begins his studies. She also becomes a part-timer at the Ghanaian Times office. The African Americans are under the scanner due to the attempt on the life of Kwame Nkrumah. This makes her predicament in Ghana worse. When Maya comes to know of the march proposed by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in support of the African Americans struggle for freedom, she and her friends decide to organize a parallel march in Ghana in tandem with King’s march at the US. An incident that makes her aware of the love-hate relationship for her homeland is when she sees the American flag being hoisted amidst booing and jeering from the Ghanaian crowd. This experience drains Maya emotionally and physically. She has a meeting with Malcolm X at Ghana. She decides to accept the offer of Malcolm X as the co-ordinator of Organisation of African American Unity in the United States. Before she leaves, she feels that she has inadvertently stumbled and found her roots when she meets a native woman, who tells her that she resembles a friend who was shipped off to America as a slave.

The last volume of her autobiography A Song, begins with Angelou’s decision to join the radical revolutionary movement of Malcolm X., the Organisation of African American Unity. While on a visit to San Francisco she learns about the assassination of Malcolm X and is greatly disturbed to see that the majority of the African Americans unconcerned over his death. Terror strikes once again with the murder of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. She designs a TV series called “Blacks, Blues, Blacks,” to present proudly upstanding free blacks. Robert Loomis of Random House proposes that she write her
autobiography. Initially she refuses, only to give in to his challenge to write autobiography. Later, she accepts the challenge and begins to write the first lines of the *Caged Bird*.

Apart from her life narratives, her collection of poems entitled, *Complete Collected Poems* has been taken up for analysis within this thesis to find the common tropes that Angelou uses in her life narrative and poems to celebrate her African American female self.

**MULTIPLE CODINGS OF “I”**

Writing one’s life seems an apparently simple task, for, the autobiographer “is writing about what he knows best- his life” (*Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* 1). But autobiography as a genre is very difficult to define. This is because it is an exploration of one’s life experience, although, “the ‘self’ is said to be elusive, ‘identity’ changeable, and ‘life’ incomprehensible,” (*Female Journeys* 1). Women’s self- life - writing / life narrative finds its roots in the effort to find a voice and re-define one’s self to the world at large.

The positioning of the autobiographical subject plays a significant role in the formulation of all autobiography, for, “the major epistemological issues of our time are raised in connection with the nature of ‘selves’ - on how to understand and how to study them, under what kind of intellectual conditions *Reproduction of Mothering Feminist Auto/Biography* 5). Autobiography in
general, as a genre, can be a site for pondering two types of questions, namely, theoretical issues dealing with the self or the subject, and empirical issues regarding race, gender, class and working life. This thesis attempts to combine the two approaches—the theoretical and the empirical in an attempt to find the reason underlying their strategies of self-representation. This would, “allows us to recognize that the I is multiply coded in a range of discourses: it is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of ‘identity,’ multiple figurations of agency” (Autobiographies: A Feminist Theory of Women’s Self-Representation 184). The acceptance and recognition of multiple subjects—as a result of race, gender, education, culture etc, implies that there is not a unique concept of subjectivity such as the—Western, white and middle class—but that there are alternatives to this model. These alternatives make possible a shift from an uncritical understanding and acceptance of a single model of autobiographical self to the recognition of diversity.

Formerly, the autobiographical contract affirmed “the ‘identity’ between the names of the author, narrator and protagonist” (On Autobiography 27). This idea of a stable, unitary, transparent self of the Pre-Renaissance period has been deconstructed in the Post-Structurally inspired discussions about the self. Complexity marks the act of writing by the autobiographical I as, the writer becomes split into “both as the observing subject and the object of investigation, remembrance, and contemplation” (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader. 1). To put this in perspective, telling one’s life story involves, “A narrator here and now telling about a protagonist of the same name, there and then” (The
The texts are found to mediate between two beings (writer and reader) spatially and temporally (then and now).

In analysing the positioning of the autobiographical I within Zora Neale Hurston’s and Maya Angelou’s life narratives, from the theoretical perspective, Smith and Watson’s argument, suggesting that, “We need to think more critically about the producer of the life narrative, and proposes to go beyond the I-then and the I-now, and to look into the multiple I’s, to find the ideology spoken through the I, by the flesh-and-blood-author” (*Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* 58–59). This theoretical premise has been made use of, in this thesis. Thus, within the framework of writing autobiography Smith and Watson locate four layers of the autobiographical I. Foremost, is the ‘real’ or *Historical I*. This is the authorial I that is assumed from the signature on the title page of the autobiography. The ‘real’ I is the historical person, the one producing the autobiographical I’s – but it has to be remembered that this person’s life is far more diverse and dispersed than the story that is being told. It is possible, to verify this I’s existence, but this I is still “unknown and unknowable by readers and is not the I that we gain access to in an autobiographical narrative” (*Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* 59).

While this *Historical I*, or, in this context, Hurston / Angelou, the autobiographer, is the self in flesh and blood, the next I’s are purely textual categories. The second, the *Narrating I* is the one available to readers. This is the Narrator, the ‘I’ who dominates the autobiographical narrative. The
Narrating I, is "neither unified not stable" but "split, fragmented, provisional, multiple, a subject always in the process of coming together and of dispersing" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, 60). The third category of the autobiographical I is the Narrated I or the Object I. This category is distinguished from the Narrating I in such a way that, "the Object I is the subject of history whereas the Narrating I is the agent of discourse" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, 60). The Narrated I is "the protagonist of the narrative, the version of the self that the Narrating I chooses to constitute through recollection for the reader" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, 61).

The fourth category, the Ideological I, reaches again out from the textual level and refers to broader societal, intellectual and cultural contexts. It is "the concept of personhood, culturally available to the narrator when she/he tells her/his story" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, 61). Every autobiographical Narrating I is historically and culturally situated and each is a product of her or his particular time and experiences, hence, the autobiographical works focus around this. Smith and Watson remind us that "at any historical moment, there are heterogeneous identities culturally available to the narrator" and that "the ground of the Ideological I is only apparently stable and the possibilities for tension, adjustment, refixing, and unfixing are ever present" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader, 62). These four layers of autobiographical I are put to use within the life narratives of the two life-
narrators-cum-professional writers, Hurston and Angelou, with special emphasis on their *Ideological I*.

The African American autobiographical form is closely related to the rise and development of the slave narratives, a unique genre in American literature, which was used to tell their formerly unheard stories. This makes the genre of the life narratives of the African Americans grounded basically within the realm of the empirical. The slave narratives served as a political tool enabling individuals and groups to rewrite history into histories. Here the *Historical I, Narrating I, Narrated I* and the *Ideological I*, amongst other things, shared the pervasive longing for freedom, dignity, and self-respect. Analysing the role of the subject/object within these works involves not only examining the cultural construction of personal identity, but also analysing the construction of one's social and cultural fabric. In many ways the retrospective accounts of Hurston and Angelou were not simply supposed to be their own individual story alone, but similar to other life narratives, thereby “representing the collective group” (*Black Autobiography in America* 14). Rosenblatt, while discussing African-American autobiography in his essay “Black Autobiography: Life as the Death Weapon,” emphasizes on the same, when he states that African American autobiography actually exists as a separate genre, “Because there are discernible patterns within black autobiographies that tie them together and because the outer world apprehended by black autobiography is consistent and unique” (516). He also claims that there are two elements in African American autobiography that are constant, they are -
the expressed desire to live as one would choose as far as possible, and
criticism of the external national conditions that make one’s freedom of choice
limited or simply non-existent" (516). Eventually, it is noticed that the life
narrator has his life chalked out for him/ her even before she embarks on the
job of narration.

An African American female autobiographer has to decide whether she
needs to define the autobiographical I’s in terms of “African- American-ness”
and/ or “female-ness” or use other ideological tools, thereby making these
paradigms the operational pre-requisites of the Ideological I. Therefore, the
subject-in process is, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese puts it, “torn between
demonstrating their virtuous womanhood and their individualism” (Feminism
Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism 223). The Narrating I, the voice
within the story in turn develops the Object I using the Ideological I. This
conscious Historical I or the author in -flesh-and-blood could manipulate the
position of the various textual I’s to suit her purposes.

Liz Stanley describes the act of writing autobiography as “Ideological
accounts of ‘lives,’ which in turn feed back 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).
She observes that the Historical I essentially tells the reader the story that she
wants them to have and writes with that purpose, and not from the perspective
of simply revealing her story to the world. The autobiographer may also resort
to chronological or achronological ordering of events in order to bring out the desired effect in the construction of the autobiographical I. Thus, by selecting and ordering their events to the last detail the autobiographer attempts to create a well-crafted narrated self within the autobiography.

No two experiences of African American, or for that matter, any two individuals can be identical. Consequently, all members of marginalized communities quite differently recognize and re-order their narrated I’s and their autobiographical subjects also demonstrate signs of the same. In analyzing the use of the ‘Ideological’ within the life narratives, different theorists have been used depending on the backdrop in which the narratives have been penned. Hurston, being an ethnographer blurs the margins between ‘ethnography’ and ‘autobiography,’ making her self-life- writing an ‘autoethnography.’ In analyzing her work in this light, the autoethnographic theory of Fetterman, Ellis and Brochner have been of great use.

Maya Angelou’s work incorporates spiritual resistance against empirical issues. Her life-writing is therefore analyzed based on the most important figure of African American Church- the African American preacher. The theory presented by Bruce A Rosenberg, is used in analyzing Maya Angelou’s life narratives. The empirical issues such as racial and sexist ideology of the society that dictate power (or the lack of it) are analyzed using the postulates of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks and Teresa de Lauretis. The Historical I is thereby analyzed by interconnecting the empirical and the theoretical issues to
understand the presentation of the autobiographical I’s that assist in the course of personal narration.

Patricia Hill Collins’ suggestion that the African American female, the *Historical I* in life narratives, is plagued by,

The prevailing images of mammy, matriarch, welfare mother and Jezebel provide the ideological justification for racial oppression, gender subordination and economic exploitation . . . Matriarchs were considered overly aggressive, emasculating, strong, independent, unfeminine women . . . The welfare mother was the woman as a breeder image . . . the Jezebel image was that of a sexually aggressive woman. (*Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* 31)

The life narrator has to contend with these widely prevalent ‘myths’ and try to represent themselves against this pre-determined ideology. The role of the reader plays an important part in determining the strategy adopted by the *Historical I*. The *Ideological I* in the life narrative also makes efforts to expose the strategies of subjugation by the American male who construct a stereotype of the African American female. The African American life writer may position her life narration deliberately outside the ‘white gaze,’ yet, they may be framed by the ‘male gaze.’ In analysing the gender postulations within these life narratives, Teresa de Lauretis’ four ideological propositions such as, “Gender is (a) representation,” “Gender is a construction,” “Gender is
constructed by the 'State apparati' and that "Gender is a construction and a
deconstruction" (3), are of great use. An astute Historical I would cleverly
manipulate and bring out the levels of constructions of the self in terms of
gender. When they do so,

There have always been women who cross the line between
private and public utterance, unmasking their desire for the
empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they
unmasked in their life the desire for publicity. Such women
approach the autobiographical territory from their position as
speakers at the margins of discourse. In so doing, they find
themselves implicated in a complex posture toward the
ingendering of autobiographical narrative. (Women,
Autobiography, Theory: A Reader 303)

Here, Smith quotes the dilemma of the erudite Historical I who
understands the multiple coding of the self with regard to ideological
perspectives that Collins pointed out with an inner urge to craft their Narrated I,
Narrating I, and Ideological I as per their own terms. Their textual self
becomes a "Bad Subject," to borrow Althusser's term, for they do not adhere to
the dictates of dominant ideology, and are "punished" through mainstream
societal ridicule, obsequy, or ostracism" (Women, Autobiography, Theory: A
Reader 303). Smith sees the female autobiographer as caught in a double bind:
if she elects to say nothing or little, she is silenced; but when she tries speaking,
to recount her life, she goes up against all the patriarchal assumptions about what an individual self is and how its story should be told. But, as both authors use their autobiographical narratives for “expressing self-revelation” there is a shift in the way each author reveals how they reach a point of maturity (*Maya Angelou: A Critical Companion* 29). These are some of the issues to be considered in the life- narratives of Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou.

Teresa de Lauretis’ and Collins’ systematic scientific understanding into the gendered construction and its impact on the historical narrator reveal the African American predicament as a “construction.” Powerful social institutions such as religion, patriarchy, marriage, educational systems, and the like reproduce ideology in an ever-changing dynamic process. Almost all the female autobiographers underscore this biased Eurocentric ideology exposing their norms on the matters of race and gender as being predisposed and biased. An African American female autobiographer who has witnessed the patterns of hierarchy, suppression and domination based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation find ways and means through her cautious use of the textual I’s to expose these myths. While doing so, they may situate themselves within the ‘walls’ constructed by race, class, gender, and sexual oppression follow to expose its flaws, or they may devise certain strategies that dismantle these ‘walls’ that inhibit their freedom.

The need to challenge and reinvent the images and thereby the identity of African American people and other people of colour, and particularly women
of colour, has led to the establishment of autobiography as a significant and principal technique of creating new images. The redefinition of the textual I's, from different ideological perspectives, through the writing of autobiography, is supposed to place power into the hands of the writer, to define who she is and to share her self-identity with the readers.

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese also notes that, “The tension at the heart of black female autobiography derives in large part from the chasm between an autobiographer’s intuitive sense of herself and her attitude toward her probable reader” (Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism 74). A majority of the writers of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century were under the patronage of generous and benevolent white Master / Mistress. Their readers were by and large whites with/ without liberal views, male intellectuals, but very rarely were there African American women who read autobiographies. The politics of power alters / displaces the textual self, for, the text is a by-product of a constrained condition. Thus the presentation of the Narrated I and the Ideological I in the text are doubly distorted creating ‘strained, muted, constrained or even silenced voices’ (Feminism Without Illusions: A Critique of Individualism 76). Thus the clash between the ideologies of two groups decentres the real story of the Historical I. Here the autobiographer’s work is subjected to the ‘wider public gaze’ and hence she compromises on her several positionings. Apart from the subject- object relationship within the construct of autobiography the third important angle remains the assumed imaginary relation to its readers.
Patricia Hill Collins identifies three spaces, "social spaces where Black women speak freely... resisting objectification of the other" (Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment 95). The first is black women's relationships with one another, the second being cultural connections such as the black women's blues tradition and finally the voices of African American women authors. In order to gain a deeper understanding into the philosophy of life of Hurston and Angelou it is essential to locate the standpoint within their life-writing to 'their public safe spaces'- their non autobiographical works. This is because, these African American life narrators, also professional writers, naturally choose this domain to voice their ideology. Liz Stanley's observation regarding "inter-textuality of the genre of fiction and autobiography" is highly relevant in the case of all autobiographers especially African American women autobiographers. Hurston's novels speak more unreservedly as regards to racist and sexist ideology. Her two semi-autobiographical accounts, Mules and Men and Tell My Horse have been considered in this thesis along with her autobiography Dust Tracks. Maya Angelou's select poems, chosen from Collected Poems, have also been taken up for analysis along with her collected autobiographies. Her capacity to transcend the genre allows for deeper engagement with the politics that she cherishes in her life.

The thesis attempts to analyse how the autobiographer / writer while recounting their past, simultaneously re-construct their selves by using a
particular ideology. The thesis attempts to explore the double bind – theoretical and empirical behind the positioning of the autobiographical subject. It also tries to locate whether these I’s fall within or outside the realm of conventional female African American autobiographical identity. Apart from this, the difference in the use of rhetorical devices and narrative strategies by the life narrators as they dissemble racist and sexist stereotypes in (re)constructing ‘black,’ ‘female’ subjectivity through an image of active resistance, outright protest, subtle resistance etc. are also analysed. The standpoint that they take up as a protagonist, as a victim or as an observer along with the relationship that they try to establish with their audience, all form a part of the circle between the narrator and the reader. The safe space of fiction which also allows these black women life narrators to escape and resist “objectification as the Other” (Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment 101) to serve as a means of self empowerment are also focused on in this thesis.