Chapter 2

Rendering it in Words: Self Actualization in Contemporary American Poets

A self actualizing person is a motivating person. He fulfills his individual needs, and moves towards his goal of self actualization. One way to achieve this is to extend his life in his creative efforts. Thus, self actualization can be said to be a triggering force of literature.

The need for self actualization triggers a person to make full use of his talents and potentialities to the highest extent possible. To reach the highest peak of his capabilities is the idealistic goal of a self actualizer. Hjelle quotes Maslow’s words: “A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be at peace with himself. What a man can be, he must be. He must be true to his own nature” (Personality 261).

The growth process of a self actualizer happens only when a person is constantly willing to take risks, learn from mistakes and go forward in life, making maximum use of their potentials. This requires immense courage. Self actualization is refreshing and motivating as it insists on making an individual look up and ahead to what one can be in life, with regard to his capabilities and this allows one to live life purposefully. Realization of one’s potential requires a readiness to take risks in life and be receptive to new experiences and novel ideas. This
individual readiness requires a ready society which facilitates the self actualizer. American culture and society readily provides opportunities to these self actualizers who opt for individual self fulfillment. The progressive American society sustains the growth process of the self actualizer. The company of like-minded people strengthens the courage of individuals and they strive forward to the ultimate goal of self actualization.

Self actualizers consider themselves to be active and responsible in their own area of speciality and they determine the part they have to play as they live this life. They are independent but there are also interdependent. They value the company of other people but at the same time detach themselves to have their own personal space. Their excitement in life brings about artistic creativity, insight and discoveries new to their own being. They revel in their bouts of creativity, thereby achieving happiness which is crucial to their well-being.

Self actualization needs are different for different people as every person differs in doing well what they can do best through their individuals lives. In literature, the targeted need will be the creation of literature in the form of poetry, prose, drama or fiction.

A study is undertaken of the two poets under consideration in their multicolored backdrops as women, poets, lesbian and African Americans within the contemporary society.
Women, especially, need to find their own place at home and in the society they live in. Eventually, they have to fight for their rights. Their esteem needs are very high and only the satisfaction this brings can help them lead better individual lives. They need to respect themselves and make others respect them too. They need to fight for their individuality. Women’s liberation movement is a result of this urgency of the esteem needs of women. Women as a group fight for their freedom against all forms of oppression. Their love and commitment among themselves gives them the strength and courage to face difficulties and to conquer them. They emerge as self actualized people, rising in their own worth and accomplishing what they are capable of becoming. Their creativity and their participation in all walks of life are a pointer to their capability as self actualized people. The progression of women as a single community is worth mentioning as they stand on the peaks of being self actualized people in the twenty first century.

The self actualization in the context of a poet is an area to be studied. Self actualization is the motivating factor in a person’s life which is inherent in every person. It is this inherent creativity that eventually makes a person a writer, capable of creating something on his own. He realizes his own values and makes use of it to the fullest extent he is capable. It is his motivating factor. He comes to terms with himself as a writer and creates his own work and feels satisfied. His worthiness
increases and he goes forward to use his own inner potentials more capably and assertively. He thus emerges as a self actualized writer. He makes full use of his capabilities in his writings and this makes him individualistic in his creativity in an excellent manner.

A poet must write poetry to make him happy as a self actualized person. He starts writing poetry to make him a self actualized person. He writes on his own and improves on it till he perfects the art of making poetry in his own unique way. His progress as a poet to a self actualized person is gradual but results in excellent poetry based on his own experiences and in relation to other people and on his observations of life as a whole. His poetry is his creativity at its best and he is genuinely happy in achieving it. He exults in his creativity and it brings his self esteem to its height. He emerges as a self actualized poet, fully satisfied in himself as an individual and as a self actualized poet in his creativity. He changes himself and the world around him, in and through his poems and he is fully satisfied.

Considering self actualization in the context of a woman poet makes it more specific. Women emerge as self actualized individuals in their immense need to love and be loved by others in the society in the way they want to be loved. They get their power by loving others, especially women. This bond of sisterhood becomes their power to fight oppression of all sorts and to react violently against it. They tend to
realize their own worth and the worth of their friends and they encourage each other. They share their common experiences and this leads to collective action. This interconnectedness and shared activity enables them to emerge as self actualized people. They first come to terms with themselves and then create a space for themselves. They use their potentials, strive hard and bring improvement in their creativity. Instead of doing it alone, they bring along with them their sisters too and therein we see their immense collective power.

Women tend to use their own experiences and learn from them and write about them. They turn their individual experiences into something common to all women and they write and talk about it. This enhances their self worth and their creativity. Women poets, for example, in their poetry, take experiences that are common to them at home and make them metaphors in their poetry. These familiar examples give women a bonded feeling. Their experiences on motherhood and female experiences make them experts on the subject and this leads to excellent women writing today. This is due to the emergence of women today as self actualized individuals in this century. The diversity of varied experiences of self actualized women and the specificity of individual ideas make women’s poetry today a bright thread of colorful strands.

Contemporary American Poetry specifically needs to be mentioned here. Down the Ages, American poetry has stood the test of time by being
the poetry with a tradition of the new: the tradition of radical experiment and personal innovations. It presents a language growing out of the individual experiences of the poet’s own life. American poetry is a means of self expression – a journey towards discovering one’s own identity. An American poet almost always deals with his own culture and finds out ways of expressing himself with respect to his culture.

Richard Gray, in his book, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century*, explains in detail the growth of American poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century. In the Fifties, America seemed to set the style in every walk of life, for the world, from art to technology and popular culture. Abundance was seen in everything but it also brought about its anxieties and the society was susceptible to panic at all times.

By the late 1950s, the threat of a nuclear war was frightening and the bomb became the symbol of the destructive potential of the new society – wealth on one side and the fear of destruction on the other side. There was tranquility on one side and the spirit of rebelliousness working on the other side. The possibilities of a global death terrified the Americans immensely. This fear and rebelliousness forced its way into the literature that they produced. The emergence of rock and roll in music, mainly from the Black musical forms signaled a change in the conceptualization of American society. In poetry too, this change was evident. Poets broke lose from formalism and structuralism and wrote
more freely and with genuine feelings of individualism and commitment. Poetry itself became a reinvention of the personal and public events to form a new genre in poetry.

Readings of poetry and prose, often to the accompaniment of jazz, energized the people to fight for their rights in the sixties. It was at this time that an alternative culture, both political and social, began to develop in the country. This was carried over to the seventies. Many new movements like the ecological and the feminist movements became an effective and important part of the cultural mainstream of America. The Vietnam War brought about a whole new sub-genre of poetry and poets began to fight against the horrors of war and for their freedom in and through their poems. The Civil Rights Movement increased the electoral power of the African Americans, which was an opportunity to celebrate. African Americans gave voice to their identity, both personal and communal. Their source of pride in being different was celebrated in their poems and they strengthened each other through their poems.

In the 1970s, origins of a possible economic crisis worried the Americans. After the oil crisis of the early seventies, Americans devoted most of their time and energy to the accumulation and preservation of personal wealth. They believed that they ought to take care of themselves and they renewed their belief in the personal (Cited in American Poetry 217-18).
Contemporary American poetry became more personal than the earlier poetry. The ‘confessional’ movement that began in the late 1950s with male poets like Robert Lowell and John Berryman helped women such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton to make public in their poetry their private anguish, thereby initiating the personal element in women’s poetry. The individual suffering and anger felt by women were expressed forthrightly by women, thus bringing about a revolution in confessional poetry. In the 1960s, poets like Denise Levertov and Adrienne Rich involved in antiwar movements which stimulated them to bring in a connection between private experiences and public events.

Traditional formalism was rejected and American poetry once again became a medium for the reinvention of the personal. This rediscovery of the personal element in American poetry assumed various forms by various poets, some plunging into the unconscious while others exploring their deep self and its experiences.

Gray also writes about the personal element in poets:

While writers such as Wright and Kinnell have tried to register the movements of the subconscious, others have dramatized the personal in more discursive, conscious forms. These include poets like Richard Hugo, Karl Shapiro and Louis Simpson, who explore the self’s discovery of the outer world and its reaction to it and, rather more significant, those, like John Logan,
Adrienne Rich, Anne Sexton and W. D. Snodgrass, who incorporate elements of their personal histories in their poems (American Poetry 227).

Gray writes about the theme of commitment to social and political issues which is often the theme common to all contemporary American poets. He writes about the “one aspect of contemporary American poetry that unites formalists, confessional and others: that is, a willingness to attend to social and political issues and to the historical experience of the late twentieth century” (238).

There was a shift in the recent issues of American poetry. The one aspect of contemporary American poetry that unites all American poets is their willingness to confront all issues in their life and make their own decisions about it. Even the most personal poets devote their attention to issues of gender, race or class as well as other political issues. The personal and the public consciousness were emphasized in contemporary poetry. Many women poets too expressed their ideas on issues like sexual identity and its politics. They had firm opinions on these subjects and they made their voices heard.

The personal element has always been a part of American poetry. Gray elaborates on the various stages of American poetry. Poets like Robert Bly, Robert Kelly, Galway Kinnell and James Wright attempted to plunge into the unconscious while others like Richard Hugo, Karl Shapiro
and Louis Simpson explored the discovery of the self in the outer world and its reaction to it. Still others like John Logan, Anne Sexton, Adrienne Rich and E.D. Snodgrass blended their personal histories in their poems. As the personal element in poetry increased, the structure and tone of the poems changed accordingly. The altered form of writing added to the personal and private experiences and the effects of war in their lives brought about a whole new poetry. They reflect the innermost feelings and emotions of the poets and hence they were unique in their own way (Cited in American Poetry 227).

Anne Sexton prided in being a woman, daughter, wife, mother and lover and exulted in her experiences of being a woman in and through her poems. A similar pride in the exclusive experiences of being a woman is seen in the poetry of Adrienne Rich too. From the very formal, restrained structure of her early poetry, we can sense her pride in being a woman who cannot be controlled by external circumstances. Every poem is an experience for her and she revels in it. She continues to explore her self and in the process, she confronts patriarchal politics and defies it in her own style. She emerges as a political and feminist poet writing intimate, confessional poetry, writing about her unique experiences as a woman poet.

African Americans also have made their own, distinctive mark in American poetry. They have succeeded in turning their distinctiveness as people into a source of pride for them. There has been the formulation of a
purely black aesthetic which is evident in their poetry. Their poetry was styled according to their own tradition, accompanied by jazz and sung to the rhythm of the blues. Amiri Baraka was the most accomplished and innovative among the early Black Beat poets. He believed in the power of the African Americans and consciously rejected Western culture to embrace his African American heritage. His poetry is punctuated with the energy of his people for he believed the genre of poetry to be the agent of creativity and the instrument of change in the society (Cited in American Poetry 309).

A brief history of the Beat poetry of America is worth mentioning in this context. African American writing in the 1960s, the time now called the Second Renaissance, was greatly affected by The Civil Rights movement and the struggle for racial independence. Poets responded to the political and social situation of the times and as a result, their poems were fiercely independent and different in form and style. Most African American poets chose their own experiences as themes in their poems.

Gwendolyn Brooks was the forerunner and the most celebrated of African American poets. She was the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for her book of poems titled Annie Allen. The younger generation of African American poets combined political activity and racial consciousness in their poems. These revolutionary poets rejected white traditional poetic forms for the blues, jazz and other forms of vernacular speech. This distinct black aesthetic sensibility in African
American poets experimented with new forms, gave oral renderings of poems with musical accompaniment and used their own style of vernacular in their poems. Thus the racial pride of the new generation of African American poets radiated through their poetry. Poets began to publish their works and among the most prominent African American writers were Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker and Nikki Giovanni. The triumphant growth of African American consciousness and pride is truly evident in the works of these writers and others like them. A number of poets also have been associated with the Beat writers. The Beat poetry of Amiri Baraka, the jazz poetry of Langston Hughes, the oral tradition of African Americans and the music of Charlie Parker, all brought about tremendous influence in African American poetry. The formulation of a purely ‘Black’ aesthetics brought forth the inherent pride of the African Americans. They began to celebrate their uniqueness and their collective identity proclaiming that it is beautiful to be part of the ‘Black’ community. The Black Power Movement in the sixties inspired many young poets like Mari Evans, Sonia Sanchez and Nikki Giovanni (Cited in American Poetry 313).

African Americans took great pride in their collective identity and they believed in themselves. Their excessive poetry is ample evidence for this. African American women writers were great fighters. They were eager to fight not just white racism but also the sexism of their own men. They
strongly believed that they ought to be controlled neither by the whites nor by their own men. They believed in their might as women, much to the dismay of their own men folk. They learnt to reject the elements which stopped their revolution and they also learnt to keep up the tradition which they liked, particularly the music and spirit of the blues.

Another significant aspect of the new African American writing is their aim at performance. They relied on the spoken word as much as the written form, thus keeping up with their oral tradition of reciting poems. The Spoken Word movement has gained momentum with poets like Nikki Giovanni who has recorded many albums and they have become quite popular in the United States as they combine ghetto culture, rap and hip-hop in their poems to get across the message of a counter-culture of which they are extremely proud of. Thus it can be noted that American poetry, at the turn of the new century, has succeeded in having a terrain of its own, independent and glorious in its own right (Cited in American Poetry 315).

Self actualization in the context of contemporary American poetry is eye-opening and hence worth mentioning. American poetry in the twentieth century is everything that there is. It is open and honest with no particular form or structure. Women poets write differently from men. American poetry may be said to be self actualized as it has come to terms with itself. Poets make full use of their potentials and talents and they know how to define their own worth. They are authoritative and make
their voices heard. Their opinions are their own and they assert their right to exercise their ideas to the public. American poets today are the epitome of self actualized people. They are in the forefront of academic and political debates and they exert their opinions boldly. When self actualization in the context of women poetry is described, it is heartening to know its quickened pace towards progress. Today the position of women in the world is quite improved when compared to earlier times. American women are more liberated when compared to women in other countries. Many issues, for which feminists fought in the earlier days, issues like the right of education, suffrage for women, equal job opportunities and the like, are quite common for women now-a-days. Power relations between men and women pervade all areas of life in today’s materialistic society. Women are seen as self actualized individuals fully capable of their rights and individuality. They assert themselves as individual persons as never before.

Various feminist movements in America are an example of the diverse individualities of the assertive women of today. They continue to assert their rights and continue to be a force to reckon with. Thus is the women power - the power they find in their own and their collective women experiences.

Apart from women, the other groups of people who ought to fight for a place for themselves are the oppressed people, who are oppressed
due to the color of their skin. The African Americans are the people who, as a group are trying to attain self actualization as an independent race, a group of energized, capable, creative people, living as they ought to, relying on their own capabilities. They have emerged as an integral part of the modern United States of America. Their progress towards self actualization is worth mentioning and their active participation in all areas of the materialistic world of America is self explanatory.

Self actualization in the context of African Americans is to be explored. They are a class in themselves in their country of America today. They assert their own place in all arenas of American public life. They are no longer to be suppressed due to their differences. They are an integral part of the American culture and society today.

African Americans have emerged as self actualized people as they have realized their individual and collective potentials and they have come to terms with it in their own unique way. They are no longer ashamed of their racial differences but they revel in it and are proud of it. They believe in their being American citizens with their African ancestry as a source of pride and joy. They have succeeded in introducing their form of music of jazz and the blues and making it the American music of the day. Their cultural uniqueness and unity are their source of strength which helps them to be independent African American in the present
American way of life. Their unique way of talking and dressing are an integral part of the twenty first century American culture.

Earlier, African American women had to resist oppression by both the whites and their own men, thereby making their fight doubly difficult. They had to fight against racial and gender oppression, but they triumphed in it, emerging as self actualizing women. They are seen today as strong, courageous women, guarding their children and their customs rigidly and ferociously. Their strength has inspired their men and their children to fight against oppression and emerge as strong, individual people in their own right. Their love and songs, passed from generation to generation orally, helped in strengthening their bonds for each other. This bond gave the African American people the needed courage to fight against any other kind of oppression.

Self actualization in the context of African American poetry is interesting in itself. African American poetry is very different from other poetry in their varied experiences and forms. They are written from their simple, everyday experiences and understood and enjoyed by all. The message in it is clear which is to fight against all kinds of oppression. The call for unity among African Americans and their pride in their difference cannot be ignored. The self actualizing African American folks emerge as individuals, confident of their rights in the American society and their capabilities as individual men and women.
In African American poetry, jazz and blues poetry can be read with African rhythm and music. The form is original with the individual stops and varied line structures. Their poetry can be read orally like their ancestors did and it has its own rhythm and cadence quite different from any other poetry. The repetition of words and the inclusion of the vernacular are characteristics of African American poetry. The poets use these techniques, experiment with various forms in their poetry, to emerge as self actualized poets.

Women have contributed a lot to the developing of poetry in America during the second half of the twentieth century. Social concerns and personal experiences have attracted an audience for women’s poetry and enhanced the communication of public and private issues. Contemporary American poetry by women varies in form and language and includes all areas of living in the latter half of the twentieth century and during the first years of the twenty first century.

Writing about political and social issues and being involved in them personally requires a great deal of commitment from the poets. This is evident in the poetry of American women poets specially. Gray comments:

it is one thing to have a historical consciousness…and quite another to be historically involved, to have the imagination of commitment. One such form of commitment has already been
touched on with reference to the work of Sexton and Rich: that is, the willingness of many poets to confront the questions of sexual identity and sexual politics…Another kind of commitment …is the continuing need Afro-American poets feel to give words to their identity, personal and communal. Two further contemporary issues, in particular, have haunted poets… the experience in Vietnam…and the possible destruction of the world by nuclear war (American Poetry 238-39).

Poets felt they needed to participate in fighting against these social issues and they used their poetry as a means for doing so.

Anne Sexton was a forerunner of American women poets as she brought about a distinct female identity for herself through her poems. Adrienne Rich followed soon after who also took immense pride in her identity as a woman poet. She starts her career imitating formalists but soon after, rejects it to bring about a style of her own, exposing her personal frustration and anger, fiercely fighting for her personal space. Her poems radiate from her own experiences and later on, she writes from broader feministic perspectives as well. Her confessional poetry becomes her contribution to the society she lives in. She connects the public ideologies to her personal experiences, thus being a woman poet, in her own right.

Rich and Giovanni are people who strive to become what they want to be, women whose self worth prompts them to be daring and
different in their lives. Rich turns out to be a confident, political lesbian, Jewish activist, a poet and writer in her own right, living according to her own beliefs and convictions. Her poetry and her prose radiate with her life convictions and this makes her a self actualizing women poet worth knowing. Giovanni too strives to be a Black American woman poet and single mother, who is proud of her African heritage but is old enough to be American in her own land, distinct and different with an opinion of her own. She loves her son and dares to live independently, quite contrary to social norms. She is able to cross all generational and racial barriers as she is true to her own self and her convictions lead her in her life. Her poetry speaks for itself and her oral rendering of her poems makes her well-loved and her honesty makes her a beloved and popular poet.

Both poets use their work and their careers as teachers to transport their ideas and convictions to the people they are in communion with, regardless of age, gender or race. They become poets, writers, teachers and independent women and strive to be what they can be in their own right. They take risks in their lives which prompted them to be more independent and to be more reliant on their inner strengths. They succeed to be known and loved and to be satisfying in their own lives.

The social interest generated in the self actualizing poets made them react to public issues like war and terrorism. They are passionate about other fellow beings and empathize with them and are also keen on
social issues like the environment. They grow towards self actualization by being aware of and being part of prominent issues in the world today. Their convictions are clearly made known in their creative works.

In American society today the lower levels of human desires, the psychological and security needs are generally satisfied. America, being a developed country, the culture and society aid a lot for individual growth. This is true in the lives of the two poets considered in this study. Adrienne Rich and Nikki Giovanni come from secure, financial backgrounds, with high intellectual capabilities. In the socio-physical environment of American culture, women tend to find places for themselves in groups of other women. They tend to be comfortable in the presence of other women and they get the love and affection they have and long for. This has contributed to the emergence of women societies.

If the two poets under consideration strive to become poets in their own right, they are compelled to be so by the need of self actualization in them. They are backed by their numerous women friends, support groups and family. Self actualization varies in Rich and Giovanni as their individual differences vary greatly. Rich is a Jewish American poet, a lesbian and a political activist who voices her opinions so as to be an advocate for change in her society. She is unhappy in her married life and resents it. Being the mother of three children was often frustrating and she has to juggle her life as a poet and as a domestic person. Later on in life,
she excels as a woman poet and as a political activist. She becomes a spokesperson in women groups and also in lesbian circles. She finds comfort and strength in the company of women and she voices her opinions boldly and fiercely. She becomes an authority over various women related issues. As a political activist, she raises her own opinions on legal issues like abortion and women rights and talks against war and crime in today’s world. Rich’s poetry shows how American poets are willing to take risks and be bold about their life decisions. Her former formalistic style in her poems are abandoned to take up a freer, authentic style, undoubtedly her own, which helps her to air her opinions forthrightly. She writes on her own experiences initially and she uses her poems to protest against social and political inequalities. Later on, for Rich, poems become experiences in themselves and she writes all the more because of it. The change from formal to free verse enables Rich to make the poems themselves to be unique experiences, for her. Confessional American poetry, taken to the point of being experiences in themselves, where the poet experiences a sense of their own identity, is worth reading. She acknowledges her worth as a person and her experiences become her poems. Rich’s progression from a formal young poet to a freer, mature adult is worth noticing and she develops into a great poet of the times because of her truthful venture.
Women themes and women issues, including the very personal aspects of female sexuality, become important topics in the poetry of women. Giovanni is a single mother who decides to raise her son, Thomas, on her own and refuses to name his father. She prides in being an African American woman poet and through her poetry she proudly proclaims the beauty of Black people and claims that the wealth of Black people is their love for each other. She prefers the term ‘Black’ for African American people. She mentioned this aspect in her personal letter to the scholar dated February 24, 2007: “I use ‘Black’ because there is ‘White’ ”. She sees her differences as a ‘Black’ woman as her proud heritage; her distinct hairstyle and slang in language are her proud assets and she urges her fellow women to do the same. She recognizes that she is an American citizen to the core and is immensely proud of her distinct African American identity. She upholds the family traditions and believes that love for one another holds African American families together. She talks about her personal issues and her child in her poems for she believes that her poetry is her life. She revels in being a mother and she genuinely cares for her son. She recognizes the worth of her parents and her grandparents as they help in her role as mother, poet and activist and gives them due recognition. She urges her fellow African Americans to fight for their rights and to stand up to it. She urges her people to look up to what they can be. Being a self actualized person herself, she urges her
fellow-beings to be self actualized also. She is aware of the arrogance of some African American men and lashes out against urging African American women to fight against this injustice, to the dismay of the men in her society. Nikki Giovanni has a significant position in the arena of Beat poetry of America. The Beat poets are seen to celebrate their uniqueness and their ‘Blackness’ and strive to free their people to live their own lives. These African American women poets are also keen to strive for equality and independence in their own race from their own men too. Gender discrimination among the African Americans is fiercely fought against. Women have begun to voice forth their opinions firmly and boldly, thus bringing on the emergence of a new generation of poets who dare to be different and need to be heard. The ‘Black’ vernacular and music is made popular and their unique cultural traits are adored and recognized, thus making them a strong, supportive community, who reinforce their pride and their difference uniquely and boldly.

The identity of a person is relative to the society in which he lives. One is affected by it, but one can be detached at the same time. Identity in the United States has been defined:

identity is not just a passive condition, but active, carrying expectations for social behavior. Identity has become a zone of disputation in which rival claims concerning an individual’s social character and obligations press against each other. At
issue, ultimately, is, the distribution of one’s affections and resources and energies, and the claims one can make on the affections and resources and energies of others. To whom do you belong in the sense of owing something to them, and being able to look to them for special help? The concept of solidarity actually captures the implications that the word identity has come to carry in the United States (Keywords 40-41).

The identification with one’s community enhances the identity of an individual and this is true in the case of Rich and Giovanni. Adrienne Rich triumphs in being a lesbian, radical feminist and a popular woman poet. She identifies with other women and empathizes with them. Nikki Giovanni maintains her identity as an African American and takes pride in being a woman poet with a difference. She relates to all people, regardless of age or color. Her identity is established by her solidarity to her African American people. It is further mentioned:

Americans may eventually find a way to separate the aspects of belonging that do not imply obligations to show solidarity with this or that group, and find a way instead to apply the term identity to less politically performative, more fully subjective aspects of selfhood … Identity would then be more what the professional psychologists take it to be: a mental and emotional condition entailing confident individuality and has an ability to
act effectively in society on behalf of one’s personal interests (45).

Rich and Giovanni are highly independent. Their motivation to be different and to achieve self actualization enables them to be leaders, to live differently and to encourage others to be so too.

As these poets are members of the society they live in, they influence the society in which they live. Both Rich and Giovanni are confident, self actualizing individuals, independent in their decisions. But they always aim for the betterment of the society in which they live.

Women writers appear very natural in their role as self actualizing people. Their private and public experiences enhance their writings. The critics Robinson and Richardson, in their book, *Introducing Women Studies* comment:

it must be acknowledged that the feminist insistence on the importance of sisterhood, the personal being political, the false separation of public and private spheres, a recognition of the common oppression of women and their diversity in terms of ‘race’, ethnicity, sexuality, class, age and levels of dis/ability, as well as the acknowledgement of the importance of women’s historical and immediate experience and the idea of the development of a feminist consciousness, were central concepts
to the women’s movement and began to inform the development of Women’s Studies in the establishments (3).

Feminist principles and their concerns became the chief components of debate in this field and it allows a particular area of interest to be studied from various intellectual approaches. Self evaluation and self fulfillment became the main agenda of the studies of women. Robinson and Richardson further comment: “Personal experience, then, is a vital starting point to explore differences and similarities between women. Within the context of Women Studies, women can locate that experience within a theoretical context, to combine reflection on the personal with analysis and critique”(14-15).

While analyzing the personal experiences of women, it is impossible to ignore the social realities that women have to face in their daily lives. The political, social and historical circumstances of women are also taken into account along with the personal, in feminist literary studies. A blend of the public and the private spheres can be clearly traced in the writing by women as Bertens, in his Literary Theory: The Basics puts it:

in terms of power, acts that we usually think of as completely private turn out to be an extension of the public sphere. The private and the public cannot be seen as wholly separate - on the contrary, they are intimately linked...the private sphere is,
just like the public realm, thoroughly political: it is a political arena where the same power-based relations exist as in the public world. Feminism and feminist criticism are profoundly political in claiming that the personal and the political cannot be separated. They are also political in the more traditional sense of trying to intervene in the social order with a program that aims to change actually existing social conditions (95).

Women writers are better equipped to relate their personal, female experiences better than their male counterparts since they have experienced it personally. Hence topics like female sexuality, childbirth, mothering and other specific female experiences have found their way into the works of women writers. Bertens adds: “Female critics, because of their personal experience of the workings of patriarchy, are arguably better equipped to bring to light and analyze such typically female preoccupations” (99).

African American women, lesbian women, Jewish women - all began to assert an identity of their own and began to create separate feminist literary traditions. They also applauded and celebrated their community of womanhood. The Black Arts movement brought about the spirit of a ‘Black aesthetic’ and they brought out their own vernacular style in their works and this made them unique. The African Americans
had to fight for their own identity while their women had to fight for their rights as women too. Bertens observes on them too:

> Just like women had to live up to the feminine gender roles created by a male-dominated society, black males and females were confronted with the cultural demands implied by the construction of black maleness and black femaleness that white society imposed upon them. By means of these constructions, white society practically forced black males and females to live up to the stereotypes that it had itself created (110).

African Americans rebelled strongly against the suppression imposed upon them and they insisted on their freedom and rights as individuals and as a society in general. They started writing about the presence of inequality which prevailed in their society and insisted on justice to be given them. As Bertens comments on it:

> Like feminism, African American criticism has rediscovered forgotten of marginalized black writing. It has sought to establish a specially black tradition in writing that is not only thematically, but also in its recurring tropes different from writing by white Americans. African Americans feminists have shown how writing by black women can again be distinguished from that of their male colleagues (113).
Women, now, thus write according to what pleases them and according to their own needs. Their choice of writing is their own and they are not dictated by men or any tradition. This helps them in being independent and they are not dictated by men or any tradition. This helps them in being independent and they revel in being able to use their potentialities. Their goal of writing on their own and thereby attaining self actualization enables them to be independent women. These women use their differences, their race and their female experiences in their writings and they are authorities on these subjects because of their personal involvements.