Chapter – I
Introduction

South Asian Literature

South Asia which is home to diverse religions, cultures and languages has made valuable contribution to World literature. The writers belonging to South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka or having South Asian descent but residing in the diasporas have contributed towards the creation of ‘South Asian literature’. The term ‘South Asian literature’ has its origin in the Cold War during which “some American academics began to construct the category of ‘South Asian Studies’” because “the influx of South Asian students in western universities boosted the demand for courses on South Asian culture as well as politics” (Alam).

Literary works written in English and other vernacular languages by writers belonging to different South Asian countries have many similarities because they grew up in countries which share historical and cultural connection, which in turn binds the various diversities and subsumes the political conflicts of the region. South Asian countries “share a common repertoire of myths and legends, epics and religions as well as similar traditions of storytelling” (Lal Speaking xxi). Colonization, ethnic strife, Partition, migrations to the West in search of better life styles and the struggles to move towards democratic forms of government are the pointers which indicate the common political and social background of these nations. These pointers also have a direct bearing on the literature of the region. Consequently, it is observed that in the works of South Asian writers, the themes, settings, communities and characters bear
much semblance. Their writing predominantly deals with the British Empire and its legacy, struggle for Independence, the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan, the Bangladeshi war for independence from Pakistan, racism, caste system and life as immigrants in new countries. Hence, it can be claimed that South Asian literature interrogates notions of nationalism, home and homeland, the collision of the ancient and the modern culture as well as both individual and collective identity.

South Asian literature is important not only because the above mentioned themes shed light on the social, political and economic milieu of the region but also because of the literary output of its women writers. Malashri Lal underscores the importance of the writings by contemporary South Asian women by stating that their "texts are questioning the traditional imperatives" (Law of the Threshold 28). Some of the writers who have contributed to the corpus of South Asian literature are Mahasweta Devi, Jyoti Lanjewar, Ajeet Cour, Sukrita Paul Kumar, etc. (India), Kishwar Naheed, Zaheda Hina, Feryal Ali Gauhar, Bano Qudsia, etc. (Pakistan), Taslima Nasreen, Rizia Rahman, Selina Hossain, Jahanara Imam, etc. (Bangladesh), Manju Kanchuli, Banira Giri, Benju Sharma etc. (Nepal), Kunzang Choden Roder etc. (Myanmar), Latifa, Batya Yaqoob etc. (Afghanistan) and Jean Arasanayagam, Kamala Wijeratne etc. (Sri Lanka).

This study would focus specifically on women from South Asia because in spite of belonging to uneducated sections of society and marginalized spaces, they have made an attempt to be heard through their writings which underscore their marginalized status. Homi K. Bhabha rightly opines in this regard that "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination . . . displacement – that we can learn our most enduring lesson for living and thinking.
There is even a growing conviction that the affective experience of social marginality . . . transforms our critical strategies’’ (172). The practice of writing life narratives initiated by marginalized women had not been observed earlier in writings by South Asian women who belonged mostly to privileged sections of society.

In contemporary times, reading and analyzing the writings of these South Asian women can contribute towards understanding the issues which lead to their marginalization and can re-define feminism in South Asian context. One notable feature of recent writings by women from South Asia is that they re-present South Asian women not as mute ‘objects’ but as “sexually transgressive, politically astute and determined to claim educational and employment rights” (Hussain 54). These writers have made an attempt to “transcend barriers of nationality and culture by focusing on the awareness and awakening” which is experienced in the course of writing (Hussain 53).

Understandably, the issues involved in women’s struggle for survival in this part of the world are different from those of women belonging to other sub-continents. In this region, women are victims of multiple forms of oppression which has its basis in gender, caste, religion and class. Out of these factors, caste and religion have a huge impact on the lives of women in South Asian countries. Therefore, the feministic concerns of women in South Asia are different from those of women in the West. Naturally enough, this difference also has a bearing on the literature of the South Asian region. Hence, through an analysis of the chosen texts by South Asian women writers belonging to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, this study would examine the various debilitating factors which intersect the lives of South Asian women in these countries and also their response to the issues inherent in the
quest for selfhood through the medium of their writings.

South Asian women writers have experimented with various forms of literary expression, such as fiction, autobiographical fiction, poetry, autobiography etc., to give vent to their anguish. However, the autobiographical mode of expression has been extensively used by women in South Asia in order to voice their opinion on “South Asian womanhood within both minority and majority cultures” and their “creative output” documents this struggle (Hussain 1). Perhaps, one of the most important reasons for its usage is that autobiography, as a reflective act, allows women writers to exercise autonomy in re-looking at their ‘self’ and re-inventing their lives and personalities, in the light of self-knowledge gained, through the process of writing. Such self-introspection and self-understanding is not possible if one chooses fiction or any medium other than autobiographical mode of expression. Misch has drawn attention to the fact that autobiography as a mode of expression for both women and men “springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understanding of others; or the need of self-assertion . . . . It abounds in fresh initiatives, drawn from actual life . . . .” (4). Therefore, this study would examine autobiographical works by South Asian women writers in order to assess how far they succeed in re-inventing their lives.

In India, many women experimented with autobiographical writing during pre-Independence days but these accounts were more or less focused on their husbands and their achievements. Their self-awareness and self-understanding as women was lacking in these writings. However, “with the advent of Independence in 1947” when women were more aware of their rights and their place in society “. . . autobiography became more politically charged . . . . Significantly, many female
politicians wrote memoirs that juxtaposed the concerns of women against the preoccupations of the new nation” (Boynton, italics mine, 520). Notable women autobiographers of this period are Vijaylaksmi Pandit, Krishna Huthee Singh and Nayantara Sehgal. Migration to other countries also made women write about another relevant issue which is “the gendered consequences of leaving their home/land” (Boynton 520). For instance, Meena Alexander’s Fault Lines (1993) followed by Shock of Arrival (1996).

In Pakistan, the very first autobiography written by a woman was Sara Suleri’s Meatless Days (1989) which was followed by a sequel Boys Will Be Boys: A Daughter’s Elegy (2003). Benazir Bhutto’s autobiography Daughter of the East (1989) explored “the redemptive possibilities available to Pakistani women” and “the triumphant proclamation of Bhutto’s ability to lead the Pakistani nation” (Boynton 521). In Bangladesh, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain wrote an allegory Sultana’s Dream in 1905 when women were content to follow the traditional roles assigned to them. In this exceptional work, which was written a hundred years ago, she condemned male domination and dreamt of a world where women would be emancipated. Taslima Nasreen’s autobiographies are yet another instance of a woman trying to break free of the traditional roles assigned to her and re-claim her sexuality.

Thus, one observes that the feminist concerns of South Asian women have experienced a huge change and they have expressed “a growing awareness of patriarchy and its demands on women and the desire to move from tradition to modernity” (Hussain 69). Many women writers have used varied autobiographical forms of expression to engage with hitherto unexplored questions of ‘sexuality’ and ‘selfhood’ which are relevant to women in contemporary times. At the same time, the
tone of the writings of South Asian women has changed from "mild self-castigating introspective to the more overt and strident denouncement of the oppressive hegemonic tactics to subdue women" (Bande 20). This change has in turn helped them to emerge as progressive and enlightened thinkers, writers and feminists. Hence, it can be argued that South Asian women are "constantly pushing the boundaries of autobiographical narration" and "many women, by the very act of writing, challenge the limitations imposed on them by tyrannical social strictures" (Boynton 521).

However, what makes this study more interesting as well as challenging is that it is not confined to the study of autobiography as a written account of the life of a person written by that person. It would also examine other autobiographical forms such as testimonio and memoir which are closely associated with autobiography but assume varied forms. Although, all autobiographical works are by nature, subjective, there are subtle differences between the three forms of expression mentioned above. Testimonio is an autobiographical account in which the narrator speaks about her/ his life which is inextricably bound with the life of her/ his community. Thus, the individual story merges into the story of the community thereby emphasizing the collective aspect of narration. Memoir is a form of expression which is woven around a particular incident or memory. It does not concern itself with the whole life of a person or chronology of narration. Autobiography, on the other hand, focuses on the entire life of the writer and events are described in chronological order. Since the three forms of expression are different from each other, this study would examine how each of these forms functions as an apt medium of expression for the women writers who have employed them and how it allows them to reinvent "the language as well as the content of creative expression" (Lal, Speaking xxii).
The present study would examine Dalit writer Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008) which has been termed as testimonio by Sharmila Rege because of the aspect of collective identity espoused by this text. The second text chosen for this study is Mukhtar Mai’s *In the Name of Honour* (2007) which can be termed a memoir since it focuses on the memory of rape and its ramifications for Mai. The third text is Taslima Nasreen’s *Wild Wind* (2006), an autobiography which describes Nasreen’s life chronologically and engages with questions of women’s sexuality. The purpose of making this particular selection is to focus on women from different regional, social and cultural backgrounds in order to examine how their lives are intersected by certain discriminatory factors such as caste, religion, class and gender as well as how they respond to this marginalization. The autobiographical works of Kamble, Mai and Nasreen break the silence imposed on women by the patriarchal society and raise questions regarding caste oppression, gender-discrimination and control of women’s sexuality. These writers make an attempt at “breaking the stereotype and seek to come into their own” (Lal, *Speaking* xxvii).

This study would focus on how the emergence of the writers’ selfhood takes place through the processes of self-introspection which awaken their analytical faculties, self-understanding which gives them the strength to accept themselves as they are and self-empowerment which happens as a result of their engagement with social work which enables them to look beyond their marginalized position. In other words, this study would examine how the “expression of self in autobiography” functions as “both its cause and effect” (Varma 17). At the same time, this study would examine the different kinds of feminism which emerge in the context of Dalit and Muslim writers. Most importantly, this study aims at finding out how the act of writing enables these women from diverse backgrounds to make a journey toward
creating a measure of order and personal space in their lives. In addition, this study would focus on the role of memory in the shaping of an autobiographical work, writing as a therapeutic exercise and the commitment of these women writers to make their lives meaningful by contributing constructively to society.

**Diverse Facets of Women’s Literature in South Asia**

South Asian women's literature in today's era brings into light various factors such as caste, class and gender which have an oppressive bearing on the lives of women. It would be pertinent to use the metaphor of chrysalis for the restrictive hold of these factors that women experience in their day to day lives. A chrysalis is a hard protective coating which encloses the pupa of a butterfly. Once the pupa matures into a butterfly, it pierces the chrysalis by using the two sharp claws located on the thick joints at the base of the forewings to make its way out. Having emerged from the chrysalis, the butterfly will usually sit on the empty shell in order to expand and harden its wings. Similarly, patriarchal ideology has functioned as a chrysalis for women. Various beliefs, notions, rites, and traditions have been devised to keep women within the chrysalis of patriarchy. Women are often discouraged from expressing their thoughts and exploring their sexuality. Hence, using this metaphor, one might assert that recent women writers are beginning to pierce this restrictive chrysalis of patriarchal ideology through the weapon of pen and this is making it possible for them to grow tender wings of freedom and self-dependence. They no longer want to follow the ideology and code of conduct prescribed by their male counterparts blindly. The patriarchal ideological dictates and restrictions have forced women to rip open the constricting and so called protective encasing that was supposedly designed to shelter them from the harsh world outside. Now these women
writers are re-defining their lives according to their own sensibilities.

There is yet another self-imposed restraint that functions as a chrysalis and hampers the growth of one's self as a writer/autobiographer. Many South Asian women writers/autobiographers, according to Brinda Bose, recognize that self-censorship is the most difficult frontier to cross in their journeys toward self-expression and self-realization. These “censorships – not merely of the state, the society, the family, the spouse, but also of the self – remain at the forefront of anxieties and impediments that burden most South Asian women writers in their processes of creative work” (17-18). Self-censorship has a debilitating effect on the writer/autobiographer and prevents her/him from being candid and honest. In a poignant and thought-provoking reflection, Bangladeshi English novelist Shabnam Nadiya introspects: “What is that I fear? Being recognized? Family looking over my shoulder? These are things that I can put my finger on. But what about a silence so deep that it is binding? Censorship is not about books. Its true aim is to leave us lingering in the dark” (qtd. in Bose 19). However, in present times women are making a bold effort to break the chrysalis of self-censorship, particularly in autobiographical writings, with the intention of experimenting with new themes and styles of writing and re-inventing their ‘selves’.

If one looks at works by South Asian women writers in the past years, their creative output foregrounds their quest for self-discovery and self-realization. The interests of women writers and their attitude towards themselves and life in general have changed with the change in South Asian society. This change in the attitude and perception of South Asian women writers arose when a consciousness developed in them about their democratic rights and their sense of fulfillment as persons with
individual identities, in addition to their roles as wives and mothers.

Earlier, in South Asian literature women were stereotyped as wife, mother and daughter. They were portrayed as self-effacing and self-sacrificing women in literature which was in accordance with the traditional image of women. However, South Asian women writers gradually started rejecting this kind of secondary portrayal of women in literature. In this context, Hussain forcefully argues that Indian women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sehgal have expressed dissatisfaction with “the cultural and sexual roles assigned to Indian women” through the issues raised in their stories. The predicaments and hardships that these characters face are “a rite of passage” which they have to go through in order to become strong and symbolize “transformations from weakness to strength and from restriction to freedom” (56).

Shoshana M. Landow further substantiates Hussain’s argument by comparing “the images of suffering women in Kamala Markandaya and Meera Mahadevan’s works to recent subversions of the traditional image in works by Chitra Fernando, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Sara Suleri and Anees Jung. In contrast to the main women characters in Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and Mahadevan’s *Shulamith* (1975), female characters created in the 1980s and the following years, assert themselves and defy the constricting patterns in marriage and family strictures.” Similarly, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1931), a Bengali writer of pre-partition India, wrote an allegory *Sultana’s Dream* in 1905 when women were content to follow the traditional roles assigned to them. In this exceptional work, which was written a hundred years ago, she dreamt of a world where women would be the rulers and men will follow their orders. This change in the trend shows that seeds of
rebellion were present inside the women but it found an expression in the writings of women over a period of time.

South Asian women writers have made a substantial contribution to the corpus of South Asian literature. The creative output of Diasporic Writers like Meena Alexander, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kiran Desai, Anjana Appachana etc. of Indian origin, Moniza Alvi, Sara Suleri, Kamila Shamsie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Qaisra Shahraz etc. of Pakistani origin, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Dilara Hashem of Bangladeshi origin etc. has created a niche for South Asian Women’s Writing, within the diasporic context. They have explored their quest for identity in a new, unknown country and the bitter-sweet experience of living in a multicultural society. Some have also dealt with certain taboo issues like incest, same sex love, etc. One can assert that in their works the ethos of their native place is in the process of constant making and re-making.

Women’s writing in English by those residing in their native countries such as Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Manju Kapoor etc. from India, Bina Shah, Muneeza Shamsie, Feryal Ali Gauhar etc. from Pakistan, Taslima Nasreen, Shazia Omar etc. from Bangladesh, to name a few, has also enriched the corpus of South Asian literature. The exploration of the ‘self,’ either through the medium of fiction or autobiographical writings, is a major theme in their works. These writers have portrayed women as they are “caught in the flux of tradition and modernity, bearing the burden of the past and the aspirations of the future. There is a search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self” (Dass 11). These women writers have grappled with complex issues such as sexuality, servility, subjugation and the place of women in society and have shown their protagonists as evolving into mature,
confident and strong women. They have also communicated their respective cultural ethos, through the medium of a global language.

Literature in translation, especially the translations of marginalized literature, has emerged as a very important area of study. Translation has its own unique advantages. According to K. Suneetha Rani, “Whether translation of marginalized literature into English is empowerment of writers from marginalized community or not, it is definitely enrichment of literature in English. It opens a world of first hand experiences of the downtrodden, their anger, their commitment” towards upliftment of their community and their enthusiastic participation in various social movements. “These translations fill up major gaps in Indian writing in English which has not been able to accommodate the voices of the socially and economically marginalized sections” (1-2).

It goes to the credit of many regional women writers in India like Baby Kamble (Marathi), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), Maitreyi Pushpa (Hindi), Indira Goswami (Assamese), Amrita Pritam (Punjabi) etc. that they have painted detailed and sensitive pictures of the societies they write about – be it Baby Kamble’s sensitive and authentic portrayal of Dalit life in Maharashtra, Mahasweta Devi’s portrayal of tribal life in Bihar and Jharkhand, Maitreyi Pushpa’s portrayal of the highly feudal life in Bundelkhand region of central India, Indira Goswami’s poignant pictures of the widows of Assam and the town of Vrindavan or Amrita Pritam’s expression of her anguish over massacres, during the partition of India. Similarly, regional writers like Umera Ahmed, Bano Qudsia, Fatima Surayya Bjiya etc. who write in Urdu and Jahanara Imam, Mokbula Manzoor, Selina Hossain etc. who write in Bengali have contributed richly to the corpus of regional literature in Pakistan and
Hence, it can be claimed that as literature is considered a mirror to life, language barrier should not act as a deterrent in our way of looking at life as lived by writers belonging to different walks of life and attaining deeper understanding about it. Many inspirational and thought-provoking texts would have remained unread had they not been translated. At the same time, readers would never have been able to access World Literature without translation. Talking on a more regional level, the readers in India would not have been able to enjoy literature written in regional languages in different parts of the country. Writers such as Amrita Pritam, Kamala Das, Ashapurna Debi, Mahasweta Devi, Baby Kamble, Baby Haldar and many others would have been just names for us. In order to enable the regional writers to voice their concerns as well as to give more impetus to the publication of regional literature, several niche publishers in India are translating regional literature into English like the Delhi-based ‘Zubaan’ which is devoted solely to women writers.

**Varied Women, Varied Feminisms**

The process of emerging into feminist self-awareness through writing is an integral part of the exploration within this study. Hence, it would be useful to understand the meaning of the word ‘feminism.’ The term ‘feminism’ derives from Latin root *femina* meaning ‘woman/ female.’ Besides, signifying a belief in the social, political and economic equality of sexes, feminism also stands for the movement that advocates equal rights for women. Cuddon defines feminism as an attempt to interpret/ reinterpret women’s experience as represented through different genres of literature and also “questions the long standing, dominant, male, phallocentric ideologies, patriarchal attitudes and male interpretations in literature” (338).
Feminism challenges the politics of socio-culturally assigned roles in which women are by and large disadvantaged and also reacts to sexist bias against women alongside contesting traditionally gendered role playing.

Feminist scholars have generally divided the historical emergence of feminism into four phases. First wave feminism refers to the feminist activity during the nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United Kingdom and the United States. It emphasized a homogenized global sisterhood and the main aim of this movement was to give suffrage to women. What has been called as Second wave feminism refers to the period of feminist activity beginning in the early 1960s and lasting through the late 1980s. Second wave feminism dealt with issues concerning equality and “women’s experience under patriarchy . . . which silenced women’s voices, distorted their lives and treated their concerns as peripheral. To be a woman under such conditions was in some respects not to exist at all” (Rivkin and Ryan 527-28). French feminism also believed that the understanding of the masculinity as powerful, reasonable and essential attribute of the mind is derived from the definition of femininity as vulnerable, emotional and essential aspect of the body.

Third wave feminism has its origin in the 1990s. It seeks to challenge or avoid what it deems as ‘essentialist’ definitions of femininity, which often assumed a universal female identity and over-emphasized the experiences of upper-middle-class white women. Third wave feminists emphasize the fact that women are of “many colors, ethnicities, nationalities, religions and cultural backgrounds” (Tong 284). The major impact of this feminism is “the acceptance that gender differences are not created by society alone but by the way that each of us sees ourselves as gendered beings and the way we look at the world from this perspective. This leads us to the
idea that we can recreate the world by viewing it in a different way” (Gallant 194). Also considered part of the third wave feminism is sex positivity – a celebration of sexuality as a positive aspect of life, with broader definitions of what sex means and what oppression and empowerment may imply in the context of sex. At the same time, developments in lesbian feminism, transgender politics and queer theory caused a rupture in the traditional thinking about heterosexual norms.

Fourth wave feminism is known as “post-feminism,” a term that originated from media in the early 1980s and “has always tended to be used in this context as indicative of joyous liberation from the ideological shackles of a hopelessly outdated feminist movement” (Gamble 44). In popular culture, however, post-feminism signifies rejection of second wave feminist thought as it had been perceived, propagated and practiced in a rather essentialist manner.

Having introduced the different phases of feminism briefly, it is important to take the discussion one step further by emphasizing that feminism is no longer a monolithic forum speaking for a common cause for all women. Scholars from what was earlier referred to as Third World countries have rightly averred that because of social, cultural, political and economic disparities between developed and undeveloped or developing countries there is an evident rift between First wave feminism which emphasizes a homogenized global sisterhood, women’s rights as well as reproductive choice and Third wave feminism which emphasizes localized feminisms.

Even in the context of Third wave feminism, the differences between various categories of feminism become all the more pronounced when we take into account the different cultural and religious backgrounds of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.
Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan have defined feminism in the South Asian context in the following words: "An awareness of women’s oppression and exploitation in society, at work and within the family, and conscious action by women and men to change this situation" (4). This definition was unanimously accepted by women from India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka in a South Asian workshop. Therefore, this study would examine the emerging feminism within India, Pakistan and Bangladesh particularly in relation to the specific texts chosen for analysis i.e. Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), Mukhtar Mai’s *In the Name of Honour* (2007) and Taslima Nasreen’s *Wild Wind* (2006).

When theories of First wave feminism were used to explain the subordinated position of Indian women in Indian patriarchal society by many scholars, it was found that they were highly unsuitable in the Indian context because it “tends to ignore the specific experiences of ethnic groups located outside the western cultural perspective” (Gamble 327). An eminent scholar like Malashri Lal has aptly pointed out that the situation of an Indian woman is quite different from her Western counterpart because she believes in adapting and adjusting herself to her surroundings for the betterment of her family. Suma Chitnis also argues convincingly that an Indian woman has to subjugate herself to “several hierarchies within the family (of age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships) or within the community (particularly caste, but also lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power)” and these hierarchies have been “maintained and integrated by means of a complex combination of custom, functionality and religious belief. The oppressiveness of all these hierarchies is somewhat relieved by a strong sense of deference to superiors, a sense of mutuality . . . and, above all, by a philosophy of self-denial, and the cultural emphasis on sublimating the ego” (11).
Hence, Westernized feminism was challenged by various theorists for not entirely addressing the needs of Indian women. Theorists like Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Chela Sandoval resisted western feminist intervention especially due to their naivety vis-a-vis issues related to Indian culture. Mohanty in her well-argued essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” denounces the manner in which average Asian woman is represented as opposed to her western counterpart who is modern and educated and free to make her choices/decisions. She argues vehemently by saying that “the average third world woman” is portrayed as leading “an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, family oriented, victimized, etc.)” (qtd. in Gamble 327-28). Spivak also accentuates the “importance of respecting differences in race, class, religion, citizenship and culture between women” (qtd. in Morton 71-72). However, just differentiating between First and Third wave feminism is not enough. Even within India, there are different kinds of feminisms which cater to the needs of different women namely Dalit women, tribal women, Indian Muslim women, rural women, urban middle class women and women belonging to minority communities.

Within India, feminism is generally viewed as emerging in three different phases. According to Geetanjali Gangoli, the first phase, is recognized as beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, when male European colonists began to speak out against the social evils of Sati and child marriage (16), the second phase, from 1915 to Indian independence, when Gandhi incorporated women's movements into the Quit India movement and independent women's organizations began to emerge and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women in
the work force and right to political parity (Kumar 23). One can opine that Dalit
feminism has its origins in the second phase when women started participating in the
struggle for freedom under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. This enabled Dalit
women to contribute constructively to society and re-define themselves within the
framework of Dalit feminism.

First of all, this study would examine the emerging feminism in the Indian
context, specifically, in relation to the text chosen for analysis i.e. Baby Kamble’s
The Prisons We Broke. The feminist concerns of a Dalit woman are markedly
different from those of the middle class Hindu woman. A Dalit woman has to face
“two distinct patriarchal structures/ situations: a brahmanical form of patriarchy that
deply stigmatized dalit women because of their caste status as well as the more
intimate forms of control by Dalit men over the sexual and economic labour of ‘their’
women” (Rao 1). Therefore, it would not be wrong to claim that the empowerment of
a Dalit woman has to first start from within the four walls of her house. Dalit society
cannot claim equality and integrity for themselves unless they start treating their
women as equals.

When one talks about feminism in Islamic context in the countries of Pakistan
and Bangladesh, one must take into account the influence of religious principles
which pervade every aspect of the life of Muslims. Abu Khalil in his article entitled
“Toward the Study of Women and Politics in the Arab World: The Debate and the
Reality” has discussed three schools of thought regarding women’s rights under
Islam. The first school denies any claims that women are subordinated under Islam
stating that Islam provides many rights for women and also that Muslim women have
more rights than Western women. The second school acknowledges that women are
subordinated but the fault lies with the interpretation of Islam by men. The third school of thought attempts to improve women’s rights by reinterpreting the Islamic texts from a feminist viewpoint (16).

However, the feminist movement has not received any support from the Muslim society. The very fact that the feminist movement had its origin in the West has also allowed its critics, who wish to suppress feminist action, to “discredit those actions as being unpatriotic by suggesting that speaking out about women’s issues implies an unpatriotic criticism of one’s culture and country” (Sakr 821). This is exactly what happened in Mai’s case. When she took her rapists to court and spoke out against the oppression of women in Pakistan in front of the world’s media, she became the target of Islamic fundamentalists who accused her of defaming the country. When Nasreen spoke in favour of re-claiming her sexuality and against the dictatorship of Muslim clerics, there was a scandal in male-dominated Bangladeshi society and a fatwa was issued against her.

Moreover, as Hashim has pointed out, the feminist concept of equality of sexes does not sit very well with Islam because it does not regard both the sexes as being equals. On the contrary, “the sexes are seen as complementary with important roles defined for each gender based on their particular strengths and weaknesses” (9). As such Muslim women’s demand for equality may be mistaken as a sign of revolt by the Muslim patriarchal society. Under such circumstances, one might aver that it would be best for Muslim women to assert themselves within the fold of their Islamic laws and traditions. The advantage of this view is that it maintains women’s cultural legitimacy within the Islamic discourse. Women who follow this ideology usually “retain the support of men since they are not challenging the accepted gender roles of
division of labor and are able to negotiate within their society’s existing constraints” (Foley 55).

This study would focus on and examine two autobiographical texts authored by Muslim women from different backgrounds i.e. Mukhtar Mai’s *In the Name of Honour* and Taslima Nasreen’s *Wild Wind*. While Mai is an illiterate woman who started championing for women’s causes only after being targeted by Muslim patriarchal society, Nasreen became a staunch and aggressive feminist from an early age. Religious fanaticism and orthodox patriarchal society have been the common destructive factors in their lives.

However, the response of these two women to counter these twin forces of oppression has been markedly different from each other. Mai sought to retaliate through the display of resolute strength. She took her rapists to court and also started working for the upliftment of Muslim women. She not only opened a school for young children but also gave shelter to women who were abused in one way or the other by their men folk. The most commendable part is that she achieved all this at the cost of her own life and also through the help of people all over the world who generously donated for her cause.

Nasreen, on the other hand, made aggression and pen her potent weapons against injustice and subordination. She wrote aggressively against the abuse of a woman’s body and its commodification. Nasreen puts into practice the views propounded by Hélène Cixous that “by writing herself, woman must return to the body. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard” (351). Owing to such rebellious attitude, the religious clerics issued a *fatwa* against her and she was forced to leave Bangladesh. However,
she still continues to write about the issues and causes related to women.

As clarified earlier, this study would examine three texts written by women from different parts of South Asia i.e. India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, and attempt to understand the nature of the feminisms emerging from these contexts in the second, third and fourth chapters respectively. The kind of feminism we would explore through this thesis arises within the regional context and is not borrowed from the West. It is a popular misconception that feminism came to us from the West. This is obvious in the writings of some educated writers but when we explore the writings of Kamble, Mai and Nasreen in regional languages, a different feminism, unexplored before, comes through, needing critical attention.

**Unearthing the ‘Self’**

One of the relevant issues to be examined within the context of this study is the emergence of the writer’s ‘self’ and the possibility of achieving self-awareness and self-representation in one’s life, especially through literary re-presentations. One may opine that the consciousness of self as a distinct entity manifests itself in an individual since childhood. If this consciousness is fostered in a healthy environment, it will make the child grow into a mentally strong and responsible adult. However, if this consciousness is damaged or wiped out due to subjugation, domination and/or humiliation, then the awareness of self gradually decreases and the individual just becomes a non-thinking entity.

In response to the question as to whether “self” exists in reality or not, Dan Zahavi argues that the “notion of self is crucial for a proper understanding of consciousness and consequently it is indispensable to a variety of disciplines such as philosophy of mind, social philosophy, psychiatry, developmental psychology and
cognitive neuroscience” (1). He argues that notions of experience, self-awareness, and selfhood are interrelated and despite that the first-person perspective becomes all the more important along with the articulation of various levels of self-awareness.

The concept of ‘self’ as a distinct and autonomous entity has been subjected to a meticulous scrutiny by many psychologists, thinkers and theorists. Carl Jung has viewed ‘self’ in terms of psychological wholeness which is technically referred to as “individuation.” He further clarifies that individuation is a process by which a person becomes a psychological “in-dividual” i.e. a separate, indivisible unity or whole” (Jung 275). As such individuation process is

a psychological ‘growing up,’ the process of discovering those aspects of one’s self that make one an individual different from other members of his species. It is essentially a process of recognition — that is, as he matures, the individual must consciously recognize the various aspects, unfavourable as well as favourable, of his total self. The self recognition requires extraordinary courage and honesty but is absolutely essential if one is to become a well-balanced individual. (Guerin et al. 137)

One might suggest that the quest for selfhood which this study is concerned with is essentially similar to the individuation process described above. All the three writers undertake a painful journey which is sometimes solitary and sometimes shared with others and this journey enables them to ‘grow’ into ‘mature individuals.’

In this context, another psychologist, Abraham Maslow’s theory of “Hierarchy of Needs” is also relevant. It shows a pyramid depicting the levels of
human needs – both psychological and physical. According to this pyramid, the basic/physiological needs of a human being for food, water, sleep, excretion and self-care are at the bottom of the pyramid. At the fourth level, there is a need for safety and security of body, family, health and property. At the third level, there is the need for love, belonging and friendship. The second level includes the need for respect and self-esteem. The most important need for self-actualization stands at the summit of the pyramid of needs. Self-actualization refers to “people’s desire for self-fulfillment, namely the tendency for them to become actualized in what they are potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more and more what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming” (Maslow 22).

If one takes this theory into account, then one realizes how all the concerned writers emerged as strong individuals as they transcended the various levels step by step in order to achieve self-actualization. For instance, the journey of Kamble acquires a special significance because for her looking beyond the ever present basic physiological needs in order to focus on her ‘selfhood’ has, indeed, been a difficult step. It would not occur to many Dalit women to strive for the betterment of community or question patriarchy in the face of adversity. For Mai, coming one again into her own ‘self’ after the rape was a painful and stressful journey. Starting from distrust and thoughts of suicide, she gradually learnt to share, trust, love, challenge, question and finally to look beyond her trauma in order to give meaning to her life. Nasreen, it can be argued was already better off in her life than Kamble or Mai. However, her need for respect and love were never fulfilled. In order to achieve self-realization, she had to break past the barriers of religion, patriarchy and sexual codes. Once she did this, Nasreen found herself a truly empowered woman.
Moreover, it is to be noticed that understanding and constructing the ‘self’ is a continuous process. From the time of the Socratic injunction, “Know thyself” and St. Augustine’s plea in his *Confessions* (AD 398), “I beseech you, God, to show my full self to myself,” to M.K. Gandhi’s declaration in his *Story of My Experiments with Truth* (1940), “What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha” and the emancipatory aspirations of the self in the subaltern autobiographies of more recent times, autobiography has been seen as “self-expression, self-understanding, self-construction and self-transcendence” (Satchidanandan 108).

The quest for self-expression, self-realization and self-construction manifests itself in different forms in the works of male and female writers. Anjali P. Kulkarni has successfully argued that the ‘self’ of female autobiographical writing differs from that of male autobiographical writing. While male writing focuses on a well-formed and fully integrated self, the woman occupies a number of positions from which she can grasp herself and her relations to others. Thus, we have a continuously shifting feminist consciousness. The subject of an autobiography by a female writer is ever in the making and is informed with a sense of temporariness, thereby causing a continued deferral of any final identity (154). Further, “women carry out a multiple act of writing the ‘self’ through body language, response, action and last of all the act of writing” (Jain 218-19).

Anjali P. Kulkarni has allotted three specific “selves” to a woman. The first is woman’s “social self” which projects her public image. She views herself in connection with society at large and this “self” occupies the centre stage. Then comes the “familial self” in which she is inextricably bound to her family and evaluates
herself on the basis of how far she succeeds in rising up to their expectations. The third and most important self is the “private self” which is at the core of her consciousness. Grasping this self, understanding it, evaluating it and above all respecting it are perhaps the most difficult aspects of autobiographical writing. The “private self” may clash with a woman’s “social and/or familial self” and leave her in an apologetic mode about her “different real self” (154). It is this emphasis on the theme of personal identity, of self, that is at the heart of modern perceptions of autobiography. Some have even argued that “autobiography is tantamount to ‘metaphor of self’: ‘We do not see or touch the self, but we do see and touch it through its metaphors: and thus we ‘know’ the self”’ (Olney 34).

Discovering, understanding and realizing the ‘self’ is a complex task. Not everyone may be able to achieve this goal. Throughout their lives, majority of the human beings struggle and strive to fit into the parameters prescribed for them by others in order to gain social acceptability and are not even aware of their own ‘selves’. For example, if we talk of Kamble’s narrative, we can perceive very clearly the strategies employed by the upper caste members of society to keep the Mahars on the margins of society and thwart their analytical faculty. The Mahars internalized the notion of inferiority propagated by the Brahmins and resigned themselves to marginalized position in society. It was in such circumstances that Kamble realizes that she can be proud of her identity as a Mahar woman only when she instills similar feelings in the members of her community. This is why Kamble’s text has been selected for analysis in the context of this study because it is representative of how the emergence of selfhood within the Dalit context is inextricably intertwined with group identity.
Through her writings and deep introspective reflections, Kamble not only tried to examine her real ‘self’ but also motivated the Mahars to examine and preserve their cultural identities because “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall 4).

Similarly, in the case of Mai the code of conduct had been precisely laid down by the upper caste Mastoi clan for her tribe and no one dared to go against this code. Besides, Mai was a woman and in the context of the Pakistani tribal community to which she belongs, women are not encouraged to have individual identities other than that of daughter, wife and mother. When she raised her voice against violence based on gender, biased tribal laws and state dictatorship, she discovered a new Mukhtar Mai who was completely aware of her new found resolute strength and insight into her life as well as the lives of Pakistani women. The analysis in the third chapter of this study is an attempt to examine her memoir In the Name of Honour as a critique of Pakistani tribal and judicial system as well as a painful journey towards the realization of ‘self.’

Taslima Nasreen is an educated doctor but what Muslim patriarchal society expects of her and thousands of Bangladeshi women like her is very clear. Generation after generation of women is taught to conform to a particular demeaning and de-humanizing code of conduct. Muslim women in many countries are made to undergo female genital mutilation in order to wipe out any trace of sexual pleasure that they might get during the sexual act. This is done to regulate the sexuality of women.
When Taslima Nasreen spoke in favour of re-claiming one's sexuality and regaining the control over one's body, she was accused of being immoral in her conduct and a *fatwa* was issued against her. The act of stepping out of the folds of tradition as well as the thought of asserting one’s ‘self’ and nurturing it not only seems a reactionary idea to the male-dominated society but also creates problems for the women who dare to be different from the prescribed norms. Thus, through a study of the autobiographical works of these three chosen writers, this thesis would explore how they strive to negotiate their ‘social and familial self’ in order to be able to assert their ‘private self’ and how their works become a symbol of a continuously evolving self because “in all cultures people can be observed to protect multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly” (Ewing 251).

**Autobiography: A Historical Perspective**

Since this study would examine various forms of autobiography, it becomes indispensable to talk about its origin. Emphasizing the Western origin of autobiography, Georges Gusdorf argues:

> Autobiography is not to be found outside of our cultural area; one would say that it expresses a concern peculiar to Western man, a concern . . . that he has communicated to men of other cultures; but those men will thereby have been annexed by a sort of intellectual colonizing to a mentality that was not their own. (29)
Gusdorf is not the only Western literary critic to have claimed that only Westerners can write autobiography. Ray Pascal, claimed in 1960 that autobiography is “a distinctive product of Western, post-Romantic civilization, and only in modern times has it spread to other civilizations” (180). However, Leila Ahmed has critiqued the Gusdorf school of autobiographical criticism by examining the tradition of autobiography in Islamic-Arabic letters. Ahmed distinguishes between the classical autobiographies “of rulers, religious-mystic autobiographies, and the autobiographical accounts of scholars and modern Arabic autobiography” (154). Domna Stanton further emphasizes the Eastern origin of autobiographies by referring to the “introspective writings” of Japanese women in the Heian period (6).

Initially, when South Asian women expressed themselves through their autobiographical works, they were not very confident and the reason for this was the continued suppression they had faced in their families and outside. In the male-centered world, women suffered self-suppression in two ways: one is the sacrifice of their rebellious spirit since they knew it would not succeed on account of their physical and social weakness. The other is the suppression of their mental faculties which can be harmful to them by way of male reactions or social opposition. The male-dominated literary canon considered the writings of women as having no literary merit and many women found themselves captured by an apologetic feeling and a general sense of being inferior.

Hence, “it is not by chance or as a result of some personal inadequacy that many women find self-doubt an unwanted part of . . . lives . . . . This is understood to be a direct consequence of the ways patriarchy operates in women’s lives to undermine . . . sense of self and thus through self surveillance, maintain particular
relations of power” (Swan 104). In the face of such prejudiced attitudes, the act of writing and publishing an autobiographical work by a woman is considered an anti-social act. By opening the private truth to public reading, a woman not only discovers the hidden side of her ‘self’ but also transcends the very boundaries of social rules by laying it bare.

In the Indian context, an eminent scholar like Susie Tharu has pointed out that when women wrote, they did not self-consciously think of their works as literary projects. They simply gave expression to their feelings and aspirations. Although, the initial writings of women were over-shadowed by the towering personalities of their husbands and contained mostly descriptions of domestic life, even in “relatively conventional accounts we come across passages that give us a glimpse of many-faceted struggles involved: the pain of being constantly watched and corrected; the feeling that they were not good enough . . . . the longing for the support of the world they had lost, and so on” (Tharu 160). Thus, the expression of the ‘self’ which is an acknowledgement of the fact that women have an independent identity became a major feminist concern for women autobiographers because until they write “an unbearable pain reverberates through the entire body” (Singh 16). Only by writing down their thoughts, their feelings, their experiences can the woman writer succeed in breaking down the existing social power structures and create a place for herself in the world of masculine hierarchies.

Another noteworthy point is that in today’s era more and more South Asian women writers have started exploring and asserting their ‘sexual selves’ through their autobiographical writings and this new change is pronounced in their style of writing as well. The attempt of women at re-claiming and writing about their bodies which
were branded as well as exploited as the property of the dominant males was hitherto not observed in the South Asian literary scene. Such bold attempts were made by writers such as Kamla Das, Taslima Nasreen, Nalini Jameela, Sara Suleri etc. Emphasizing the need of women to explore their sexuality, Stephen Heath argues, “the woman is close to the body, the source of writing . . . because she speaks with the body, writing is from the body” (Heath 221). This aspect would be explored in the chapter on Nasreen’s autobiography.

It is to be noted that initially, when women writers realized that they must narrate their stories or others would do it incorrectly, they were only interested in determining and picturing the lives of women “as they have been living, as they live and as they are led to imagine themselves” but now they are concentrating on “how women can live afresh” (Rich 35). Moreover, literature also has value as an instrument of social protest and revolutionary change. Thus, women are seizing the occasion to speak, making a shattering entry into history, which has always been based on their suppression. Examples of such writings include Dalit and Afro-American literature by women writers.

However, some scholars like Joyce Carol Oates also caution us that women-authored works do not necessarily make serious art. She states that a feminist theme cannot make a sentimental, weak and cliché-ridden work valuable. Similarly, a non-or even anti-feminist theme explored by a male writer does not make a serious work valueless, even for women. Women’s problems, women’s insights, women’s adventures are just the raw material and what matters in serious art, whether by male or female writer, is ultimately the skill of execution and the uniqueness of vision. Joyce Carol Oates argues, “. . . the serious artistic voice is one of individual style, and
it is sexless; but perhaps to have a sex-determined voice . . . is after all, better than to have no voice at all” (208).

For women, reading literary works in which their own experiences are reflected can be an important authentication of that experience, their own identity and values. Realizing that their niche in the world is broadening, women may expect to find, in the autobiographical works written by women, the best ways of coping with life. At the same time, through writing women can engage in an attempt to excavate those elements of female ‘self’ which lie buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. For men, reading literary works by women can often provide insights, perhaps sometimes surprising ones, about those with whom they share their daily lives.

In autobiographical literature by women, one can say that there is a multiplicity of female experience. Women from different strata and walks of life have created a unique collection of literature which is devoted to exploring the diversity of female experience and the elusive search for ‘selfhood.’ It is to be noted that as women explore their sense of identity in their autobiographical works, they powerfully re-define their own lives and re-discover their ‘selves.’ Writing plays a vital role in forming their perception and understanding as well as in carving out their feminist views and in sharing them with others.

**Autobiography: Its Varied Forms**

Autobiography as an art form combines the elements of both literature and history. It not only presents before us metaphors of the autobiographer’s self but also a creative history of the period during which he or she has lived. Autobiography by its very nature brings to us an increased awareness of the nature of our own selves. It
appeals to us because it helps us find an order and meaning in life that is not always
to be found in experience itself. “A genuine autobiography is both an essay in truth
and an experiment in being, thus, combining the most significant features of
philosophy, psychology and history” (Brians 89).

As Satchidanandan has pointed out, autobiography today has become “a major
subject of research and debate, and a site for raising several questions about the
construction of the self and its technologies, the nature of the subject, the nature of
language, the relationships between the reader and the writer and their relationship
with time and the way autobiography helps the reader’s own self knowledge and
knowledge of man and the world in general” (108).

One may put forth a variety of reasons for this emerging trend. Firstly, the
new interest seems to have been impelled “partly by the increasing engagement with
the questions of self and subjectivity especially stimulated by thinkers and analysts
from Lacan to Foucault and partly by the new concern for alternative forms of
historiography inspired by new movements like Feminist, Black, Dalit, Gay, Lesbian
and Minority movements that have turned autobiography into a strong form of
subaltern protest, self-assertion and identity formation” (Satchidanandan 109). There
has been, as can be seen in works like James Olney’s *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning
of Autobiography* (1972), Michel Foucault’s *Technologies of the Self* (1988) and
books and articles by J.Borel, E.W. Bruss, M. Riffaterre, M. Raymond and others, a
convergence of literary, philosophical and psychological interests in the study of
autobiography.

Secondly, according to Gilmore, media that posits a naturalized speaker who
is simply telling his or her story has come to permeate contemporary culture. The
efflorescence of talk shows and their mutating confessional forms has pushed forward another representative: neither celebrity nor statesperson, but the dysfunctional and downtrodden common man (17). Thirdly, categories such as ‘personal criticism’ and ‘creative non-fiction’ indicate the appearance of the autobiographical ‘I’ in places it had not appeared previously. For instance, professors of literature have produced a discourse of ‘personal criticism’ that levers the autobiographical ‘I’ to the fore, sometimes in essays published in scholarly journals or anthologies, and sometimes in memoirs. Woven throughout these innovations is post-structuralism. With its re-conception of language, agency and the human subject, post-structuralism is important for writers whose interest in the self is closely linked to an interest in what language about the self can be made to do (Gilmore 17).

Finally, the literary market has proved a shaping force. Market demand currently encourages marketing practices such as subtitling an author’s first book as a memoir when in previous years it might have been classified as fiction or selecting for publication an autobiographical work by someone whose story would not have previously been expected to appeal to a so-called general audience. The extent to which the current expansion is driven more by marketing and publishing choices than by writing practices is not clear. Thus, one can agree with Gilmore that political and social movements, the forces of popular culture, developments in academe and the market all contribute to and are shaped by the current hothouse of ideas about telling the story of the self (17).

Thus, writing autobiography is not something which is confined only to persons gifted with literary skills. At one time or another, we may find ourselves reflecting on our lives in more or less deliberative ways. We, the readers also engage
in a whole range of more mundane autobiographical acts. We tell about our lives to start up friendships and keep them going; to help doctors and therapists diagnose our ailments; to create a family history for our children; to forge allegiances and pass the time in the gossip of the workplace. As such “reading autobiographies and novels can be a focus for ruminations and may offer alternatives as they explore moments of crises . . . . In them, the characters are forced to realize their own incompleteness, indeterminacy and most important of all, internal freedom” (Curthoys, italics mine, 11-12).

It is to be noted that it is difficult to define the limits of the genre. While confessions, journals, memoirs, meditations, testimonies and self-portraits are often recognized as different forms of autobiography, fiction, poetry and even drama have also been not only examined for elements of autobiography but have at times been read as forms of autobiography albeit in imagined modes. Literary scholars also consider letters, personal literary criticism, oral history, daybook, documentary, travel writing and diaries as different forms of autobiography. To make clear that the study of autobiographical texts includes all of these types, many scholars now use the term ‘life writing’ when they refer to personal narratives in general, despite the fact that life writing is just English for biography. However, it would be useful to differentiate autobiography from other forms of self-expression in order to bring out the distinctive qualities of the different modes of autobiographical writings used in the specific texts by the women writers chosen for analysis in this study.

Biography and Autobiography

Biography can be seen as a twin form of autobiography by way of its focus on the lived reality of a person’s life. The similarity between both the forms is that it is a
successful presentation of personality . . . of the period to which the author belonged" (Prasad 173). However, this presentation of a personality is subjective in autobiography and objective in biography with regard to the author. The generic conditions demand that the autobiography must be a narrative while a biography can be simply descriptive. Moreover, the biographer is generally free from the self-consciousness that pre-occupies the autobiographer.

Another noteworthy point is that the biographer and autobiographer are motivated by markedly different reasons. The need for writing biography is “generally caused by the common events like death of a person, one’s admiration for that person’s high achievements or an occasion of reward and so on” whereas autobiography is the result of “an urge for self-revelation” (Varma 17).

Varma has further pointed out that “biography in its formal purpose of relating one’s life to the socio-historical context, records a person’s life with only those events that are socially or historically significant” and does not try to “understand the emotional truth of the moments in his object’s life” (17). On the other hand, autobiography is an expression of the author’s innermost feelings and thoughts. The autobiographer not only wants to present the facts of his life but also make his work aesthetically interesting and emotionally satisfying for her/ him.

Another technical difference between the two forms is that a biographer has to record the life of his subject strictly chronologically whereas an autobiographer does not have to bother particularly about the sequence of events and order of time. The autobiographer is concerned more with the significant moments in one’s life and the process of the growth of ‘self’. As compared to the biographer, the autobiographer enjoys freedom of choice, manner, space and expression. In spite of the differences
between the two forms, both the forms share problems of skepticism and doubtfulness in the portrayal of truth since both cannot escape the artfulness of creation.

**Diary and Autobiography**

A “diary is a day-to-day record of an individual’s activities by an individual” (Naik 40) and is prompted by the urge to maintain the private source of recorded information. A diary is a detailed document as far as exactness of particular time and events from the writer’s life are concerned. Autobiography, on the other hand, depends completely on the writer’s memory, her/his power to store and recall the past life. An autobiographer has to choose from the facts stored in her/his memory and analyze the past in the light of the present in the course of telling her/his story.

An individual can record her/his innermost feelings, thoughts and desires in the diary without inhibitions because it is meant for personal reading. An autobiographer, on the other hand, does not have the freedom to record the most secret part of her/his life because “of its ‘to-be-published’ feeling that makes the writer conscious” (Varma 19). Thus, self-censorship operates at various levels in the writing of an autobiography and a successful autobiographer is one who is able to overcome this hurdle. A diarist does not pay much attention to the way of one’s expression which is usually scattered and unorganized whereas an autobiographer “romanticizes and aestheticizes his expression to make it as interesting as possible” (Naik 42).

It is to be noted that women were specifically interested in diary writing because “a personal journal was one of the few places where women could enjoy complete freedom of expression” (Neubauer 1). For women, it was much easier to write a diary as compared to other forms of writing because the process of
maintaining a diary can be compared to having a talk with a friend. Moira Monteith studies the scope of women’s writings while she talks about the diary-like personal writings:

It has proved difficult for women to publish their own experiences openly, so the diary has been a very important means of expression. Even published writers such as Virginia Woolf found the form of diary “liberating” and exploratory, a place where things could be written that were not written in letters or published work. (2)

A very well known example of diary-keeping is Anne Frank’s *The Diary of A Young Girl* (1952). It documents her experiences when she went into hiding during the German occupation of the Netherlands in World War II. It would be pertinent to conclude by saying that the two forms are not to be confused since they are separate and distinctly oriented in their pattern and scope.

**Letters and Autobiography**

A letter is written in reply to other person’s letter and has an individual orientation. Autobiography, on the other hand, is written not for one reader but “for many readers with whom the writer has no specific contact or relationship. It is because of this wider social connectivity that autobiography comes closer to the truth of life” (Varma 23). “Letters are written generally to demand or offer feedback” but autobiography is written in “a specific state of mind” (Pascal 31) and itself proves a feedback to the life lived.

In writing a letter, the author holds no conscious motive other than communicative response. In the writing of autobiography, however, the author seeks
to achieve certain pre-fixed goals through the process of writing. Another difference as pointed out by Olney is that “it is optional for the writer of letters to revitalize the past but in case of autobiography, the author has no choice. The autobiographer can neither escape the past nor can he evade the consciousness of its presentation” (45). Further, the writer keeps the reader in mind while writing her/ his letter and shapes the expression accordingly. In letter writing, the possibility of publication is hardly imagined. On the contrary, the autobiographer cannot imagine what sort of readers are going to read her/ his autobiography and the fact that her/ his work is going to be published creates a pressure on the mind.

As mentioned earlier, even though letters are also included under the umbrella of autobiography, there are some scholars and thinkers who feel otherwise. According to Ray Pascal, “the inclusion of letters or diary entries in an autobiography appears irrelevant, creates incoherence of style and makes an uneasy juxtaposition of different points of view” (24). A well known example of letter writing is Jawaharlal Nehru’s letters addressed to his daughter Indira when he was at Central Prison, Naini.

**Memoir and Autobiography**

The life of a writer consists of numerous kinds of events, experiences and influences which have an impact on her/ his individual story of ‘becoming.’ Memoir is an appropriate form for writing about such influences and experiences. Memoir is, in fact, an artistic presentation of a memory that keeps on lingering in the writer’s mind. Memoir, thereby, tends to be colored by the author’s mood about that singular memory she/ he aims at expressing. According to Joan Fitzgerald, a memoir is a form of writing, “in which the author described his ‘external life’ that is the circumstances in which he lived, rather than his intellectual or spiritual growth . . .” (qtd. in Pascal
An autobiography is different from a memoir because it has no colouring of a momentary mood or feeling about a particular event or object. It is always more impartial, private, honest and faithful to the experience than a memoir.

Memoir has a single focus, "not on the self but on one incident, occasion, person or place or even journey that is memorable for the writer. Many times a memoir is written about a dead person or a lost person or a place visited in the past. Sometimes it is written for paying a tribute. Memoirs are also the byproduct of a close friendship, intense relationship or profound experience" (Gray 36). The distinction between fiction and memoir as an autobiographical piece is blurred in such memoirs that describe such episodes. On the other hand, an autobiography focuses solely on the exploration and understanding of the self.

A memoir holds the interest of readers by virtue of its first-person voice narrating the first-person experience. In both memoir and autobiography, "I" refers to the self. However, Varma has very well brought out the difference between a memoir and an autobiography in the following words, "a memoir lacks the vision of the writer and can create misleading impressions" whereas in an autobiography, "the full-fledged version of self-depiction is actually attempted truthfully by the writer" (22). Thus, one notices that even though both the forms appear similar, there are subtle differences between the two forms which set them apart.

**Testimonio and Autobiography**

A testimonio is a narrative that has been relegated to a peripheral space in literature and represents subjects excluded from authorized representation. Testimonio is a genre commonly associated with Latin American atrocity narratives. John Beverly defines it as: "A novel or novella-length narrative in book or pamphlet
form, told in first person by a narrator who is also the real protagonist of the events he or she recounts, and whose unit of narration is essentially a “life” or significant life experience” (92). At the same time “the situation of narration in testimonio has to involve an urgency to communicate, a problem of repression, poverty, subalternity, imprisonment, struggle for survival and so on” (Armstrong 2). An autobiography, on the other hand, can deal with a wide range of themes. In a testimonio, the witness portrays her/his own experience as representative of a collective memory and identity and “truth is summoned in the cause of denouncing a present situation of exploitation and oppression or exorcising and setting aright official history” (Gugelberger 17). Testimonials show that the self cannot be defined in individual terms but only as a collective self engaged in a common struggle. An autobiography, on the other hand, pre-supposes an autonomous individual subject and does not speak on behalf of other members of the writer’s community.

Having discussed the various forms of autobiography, it is explicitly clear that autobiography does differ from the various forms of autobiographical writings. An autobiography concentrates exclusively on the ‘self’ of the author whereas an autobiographical text has its own thematic shifting from the subjective self of the writer. Moreover, the idea of subjective vision is so prevalent in autobiography that the writer is autobiographical throughout the text without any effort to hide his motives of self-presentation. An autobiographical text, on the other hand, not only narrows down the scope of subjective reflections but also moves with a partial sense of self-depiction, away from the subjective towards the objective. The major difference between autobiography and other autobiographical writings is that the former is steeped in self-introspection and self-analysis whereas this element is not at all pronounced in the latter. To sum up, one may assert that the “self” is the core of
autobiography while biography moves around life, the diary around the moments, memoir around its object of memory, testimonio around a collective consciousness and letters around a relationship.

In this thesis, three different kinds of life writings have been examined i.e. testimonio, memoir and autobiography. In Baby Kamble’s *The Prisons We Broke* (2008), which has been called a testimonio by Sharmila Rege, the self of Baby Kamble evolves and grows gradually as she identifies herself completely with her community, stresses on collective identity and works for the upliftment of her community. In Mukhtar Mai’s memoir *In the Name of Honour* (2007), the painful memory of a traumatic incident is used constructively by Mai to make her life more meaningful by dedicating it to the service of helpless women in Pakistan. Her interaction with abused women like her helps her to achieve self-realization and self-understanding. In Taslima Nasreen’s autobiography *Wild Wind* (2006) self-actualization takes place through aggressively re-claiming her sexuality and independent identity as a woman.

It is to be noted that self-realization is a continuous process and a person keeps on re-discovering and re-realizing her/ his potential at different stages throughout life. The analysis in the succeeding chapters of this thesis will examine how writing their autobiographies is one such stage in their process of growth. This juxtaposition of the life writings of the three women writers chosen for analysis allows us to examine three different forms of self-expression and growth which evolves from three different contexts. It also allows us to focus on and examine three different modes of the self evolving into feminist thought and expression.
Role of Memory

Memory plays an important role in the writing of autobiographies. In recent years, “there has been an expansion of research utilizing memory work and auto/biographical methods, which have been particularly effective in the writing of feminists of colour” (Ali 88). “The memorial presence of the past takes many forms and serves many purposes, ranging from conscious recall to unreflected re-emergence, from nostalgic longing for what is lost to polemical use of the past to reshape the present” (Bal vii). Georges Gusdorf notes that the autobiographer “gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to re-assemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to re-group them in a comprehensive sketch” (qtd. in Varma 55). In such a task of re-assembling the scattered elements, memory becomes an agent for recollection of the events from the author’s life.

Since remembering plays a very important role in the creation of autobiographies, Mieke Bal’s interpretation of four kinds of memories (vii-x) is relevant and useful in the context of this study. According to Bal, first of all, comes habitual memory i.e. memory which can be so habitual that it appears to be automatic. This kind of memory includes certain things learned in childhood, enforced by discipline and practiced later in life. For instance, one knows from one’s previous experiences that getting wet in the rain would lead to cold, one will have to miss the school and one’s parents would become angry. But such minimal proto-narratives remain buried in routine and contain no events that stand out.

The second type of memory, according to Bal, is narrative memory. It differs from routine or habitual memories in that it is affectively colored, surrounded by an emotional aura that makes it memorable. Often, the string of events that composes a
narrative memory offers foreground and background, preparatory and climactic
events. In the process of recalling, sometimes certain involuntary memories surface,
when the narrator hits upon them by some gesture. From having been routine
memories lying dormant, they suddenly become narrative memories about which the
writer stops to wonder. The gray, unnoticed memories become affectively colored by
the narrator's sudden response to them.

Taslima Nasreen's autobiography, *Wild Wind* can be better interpreted and
understood when related with this type of memory. Her autobiography is a string of
memories encompassing her youthful days, which throws light on how and why she
evolved into the daring and outspoken woman that we know today. In this text, she
has laboriously put together memories of her days at her parents' house, her budding
career as a doctor and a writer, her affair with Rudra, sexual disease she caught from
him, her betrayal at the hands of Rudra, and her struggle to hold together the threads
of her life. Each memory adds a new dimension to her personality and life. She
consciously makes the effort to draw out each and every forbidden memory from the
deep recesses of her mind even though she knows that not many people would
applaud her for being candid. While writing her autobiography, Nasreen also looks at
herself as an outsider and renders a totally unbiased and true account of her life. For
her, recalling and recording the past is a self-healing exercise and an attempt to
unburden her heart.

The third kind of memory is cultural memory which serves to keep alive the
cultural heritage of the past and this in turn becomes the stepping stone to a
meaningful future. It is neither an artifact of the past nor exists in a present cut off
from the past. Rather, cultural memory links the past to the present and future.
Cultural memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual one. In the second and third category, we can put the writings of Kamble. Her writing contains a string of narrative and cultural memories, each of which throws light on the different facets of her life and personality. She delved into her past and came up with heart-warming as well as heart-wrenching memories which have made her testimonio brilliantly alive and tremendously inspiring.

Kamble’s testimonio, *The Prisons We Broke* is her first writing venture and has a unique quality about it. One may strongly assert that the desire to liberate the voice of ‘self’ by inscribing it into community is deeply entrenched in the testimonio of Kamble. As she herself says in an interview with Maya Pandit given at the end of her text, “Well, I wrote about what my community experienced. The suffering of my people became my own suffering. Their experiences became mine. So I really find it very difficult to think of myself outside of my community” (136).

Kamble has used her memories for achieving varied goals. To begin with, she draws on her memory, to tell her own story through the story of her community thereby emphasizing their collective identity. It is to be noted that she does not write about any specific person in her testimonio. Pandian has pointed out that this “strategy of erasing specificities by masking them with a veil of anonymity lifts the narrative from the local and turns it into a universal statement about oppression” (54). For Kamble, memory is a powerful and potent weapon because when put into words, it has the power of influencing people and bringing about a huge change.

Secondly, Kamble’s narrative serves as a link between the older and the younger generation. Kamble constantly laments the fact that the younger generation has forgotten its roots in their desire to usher themselves into the folds of the Hindu
religion. The Hindus exploited the Mahars ruthlessly, even when they made a great show of having nothing to do with them. The Mahars internalized the inferior status relegated to them and kept on considering the Hindus as superior beings. Kamble deliberately picks up those memories which expose the hypocrisy of the Hindu religion.

Thirdly, through the use of her memories, Kamble has also highlighted the importance of education in the lives of Mahars and Dr. Ambedkar's contribution to it. Her memories also underscore the importance of Dr. Ambedkar's Untouchability Movement. She has adroitly painted the lives of Mahars as it was lead in reality and even when she writes about such repulsive things like lice-infested saris, snot-nosed children, grueling bathing routines which were enough to peel the skin off from one's bones, we cannot help admiring her for fishing out such interesting memories from the depths of her mind.

The fourth type of memory which Bal has explicat upon is the traumatic memory which entails the painful re-surfacing of events of a traumatic nature. Much discussion has been focused on the need for traumatic memories to be legitimised and narratively integrated in order to lose their hold over the subject who suffered the traumatizing event in the past. Traumatic memories remain present for the subject with particular vividness and/or totally resist integration. In both cases, they cannot become narratives, either because the traumatizing events are mechanically re-enacted as drama or because they remain 'outside' the subject. The only way to overcome the trauma is to interact with others. This could mean confiding in a therapist or someone who is willing to listen. In other words, a second person is needed for the first person to come into herself/himself in the present and to become
able to bear the past.

Mukhtar Mai’s memoir, *In the Name of Honour*, can be called an attempt to overcome traumatic memories. She came into prominence in June 2002, when journalists in Pakistan first learned of her gang rape, punishment for an “honour crime” allegedly committed by her brother Shakur, which could never be proved. But instead of committing suicide as girls in such a predicament usually did, Mai took her rapists to court. Coming out of the trauma was a slow and painful process. When Marie-Thérèse Cuny, a writer who has long dedicated herself to the cause of women’s rights, approached her in order to pen her life story, Mai saw a ray of hope. The long days which followed not only saw the birth of a moving and inspirational book but also provided an emotional outlet for her. As mentioned above, narrating her story proved extremely helpful for Mai and helped her to overcome her trauma.

Apart from these various kinds of memory, there are varying moods and specific colorings of memory. A writer employs each of these memories at one point or other while narrating her/ his life story. It can also be said that the autobiography is a product of the writer’s social and cultural milieu and the memories associated with it, which ultimately shapes her/ his personality. At the same time, Bell Hooks also emphasizes the role of memory in negotiating ‘self’ through the act of writing in the following words, “Remembering was a part of a cycle of reunion, a joining of fragments, ‘the bits and pieces of my heart,’ that the narrative made whole again” (159).

However, recalling is not an easy task. It cannot be claimed that memory is just a kind of device or machine for reproducing our already-written life stories—as something to be oiled and gently coaxed into action. “What gets remembered in any
given situation is an occasioned matter, done in the service of our particular projects, and harnessed to the textual conventions for constructing stories that will have the requisite appearance of truth, persuasiveness and accuracy" (MacLure 377). In the act of “remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another world and surely it is not the same, in any real sense, as that past world that does not, under any circumstances nor however much we may wish it, now exists” (Olney 47). This may result in fictionalization and/ or glorification to an extent. The possibility of distortion and/or exaggeration of self cannot be ignored. The question of truth and functioning of memory contribute to the limitation of authenticity in self-narrative. Pascal believes that, “there is no final and complete truth about man . . . the man changes as he writes his autobiography” (195).

Even though memory plays a very important and decisive role in shaping the life-story of an individual, its role in the creation of autobiographical works raises many relevant questions within the context of this thesis. Does memory conspire with the self, only to favour the presentation of the self? Does memory influence the present stance of the writer? Is it possible for the writer to remain objective while recollecting memories of a traumatic kind? Does a woman writer use her memories selectively in order to pursue a feminist agenda or is it actually a faithful representation of her life? This study would attempt to explore these issues through a detailed analysis of the chosen texts.

**What Compels the Writing of Autobiography?**

An attempt to examine some of the motives involved in the writing of autobiographies is relevant to the purpose of this study since it would help us assess how far the writers have succeeded in achieving their goals. In the process of
transcribing life into a book, memory is only a mirror like agent for the portrayal of past but the writer aims at much more than a mere portrayal of the past. The life that the author writes about is to be made attractive in language, acceptable in notions, aesthetic in vision and appreciable in self-image. From the psychological point-of-view, “no one can know so well as the autobiographer himself what motives prompted him at decisive moments, what his secret hopes and ambitions were and how far his career fulfilled his real aspirations” (Prasad 174).

To begin with, writing an autobiography is a way of re-looking at oneself, of unearthing oneself, of relying on oneself again. A writer writes both to recapitulate what she/ he knows about her/ himself already and to discover what she/ he does not know yet, hoping to come into a new sense of her/ his life and to invent fresh beginnings even at a later age. Emphasizing the necessity of such writings, Hélène Cixous stresses, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (347). Thus, the quest for self-knowledge becomes an important motive for Kamble, Mai and Nasreen for writing the autobiographical works chosen for this study. Consciously or unconsciously, the authors showed psychological insight into the issues affecting their lives which lead to a contemplative self-analysis and self-understanding.

At the same time, the act of writing autobiographical works can also help to unburden one’s heart as well as to preserve one’s memories. Talking especially about Kamble, Mai and Nasreen, one can assert that they wanted to share and preserve the experiences of their lives not only because it may have some instructive value for the readers but also because writing was one of the ways for them to be self-assertive and
to create a space for themselves. For Bell Hooks, writing her autobiography is like storing one’s memories in a hope chest for safekeeping. She states:

Certain memories were for me a . . . treasure. I wanted to place them somewhere for safekeeping. An autobiographical narrative seemed an appropriate place. Each particular incident, encounter, experience had its own story, sometimes told from the first person, sometimes told from the third person . . . . It was the act of making it (memory) present, bringing it into the open, so to speak, that was liberating.

(158-59)

Another important motive is that by writing the self, the concerned women writers could challenge accepted notions of femininity and considerably alter and redefine feminism within the South Asian context. The role of the woman writer in re-creating a balanced world is emphasized by another feminist writer Rosalind Brachenbury who believes “nobody writes in a vaccum, away from the political and social structures in which we live” and “the role of women today is to create the present and consider a new world” (56). The feeling of responsibility in re-constructing their social roles gave Kamble, Mai and Nasreen courage and confidence which they expressed through their writings. Emphasizing her sense of responsibility towards the society she lives in, another eminent writer Amrita Pritam writes in her autobiography *The Revenue Stamp*: “Wherever in the world a wrong is done, I continue to feel a deep sense of outrage” (qtd. in Singh 19).

Writing their autobiographical accounts also enabled Kamble, Mai and Nasreen to purge themselves of negative feelings because “sharing and finding speech for the articulation of ‘suffering’ is empowering in itself; it is a demonstration
of strength acquired through self-reflection. It counters the common notion of a woman’s passive acceptance of victimization” (Lal Speaking xxiii). Moreover, sharing their pain with readers was relatively easier for these writers because “there are things so deeply personal that they can be revealed only to strangers” (Miller 1). Freudian psychoanalysis where the verbalization of individual experience was considered therapeutic emphasized the importance of the autobiographical mode of expression. The act of writing helps the authors to overcome their complexes and normalize their lives through the confrontational and confessional mode. Emphasizing the need to verbalize one’s life, Amrita Pritam writes, “An autobiography is generally taken to be the gospel of truth set in glittering words of gold . . . an artifact of self-praise. The basic truth is writer’s own need” (qtd. in Goyal 169).

Bharat Muni, the reputed founder of the ancient Indian theatre, in his monumental work on dramaturgy known as The Natya Shastra, also made a distinction between the feelings of life and the emotions of art and extolled the need to express one’s feelings and thoughts through the medium of art and literature. The feelings may be painful, but as “they are manifested in a work of art they become capable of yielding delight and relief” (Singh 23-4). Thus, writing their autobiographical narrative enabled the concerned writers to look at past from a different perspective and to use this knowledge as a means of self growth and change in a practical way.

Besides being individually unique, these women’s personal narratives are also important because they have tremendous historical significance. Antoinette Burton authenticates this point when she writes that “women’s writings and memoirs of
domestic spaces all over the world constitute legitimate and valuable historical archives" (59). These women who attempt to write about themselves are engaged in the re-creation of their story, the story that already exists. Their act of writing inevitably turns out to be a way towards their self-introspection and self-assertion, thereby replacing their agonies with multi-faceted awareness and suppressed observations with liberated expressions.

Having talked about the various motives that could have possibly prompted Kamble, Mai and Nasreen to write about their lives, it would be apt to talk briefly about the chosen texts. The first text taken up for this study is Baby Kamble’s Marathi text Jina Amucha (1986), translated into English by Maya Pandit as The Prisons We Broke (2008). Kamble’s narrative has been called a “testimonio” by Sharmila Rege. According to Pandian, a testimonio is a narrative that “exists at the margins of literature and represents subjects excluded from authorized representation.” The unique quality of testimonio is that “it depletes the ‘I’ – an outcome of bourgeois individualism – and displaces it with the collectivity of the dalit community” (55).

In a similar vein, Kamble has talked about the injustice perpetrated against her by the members of upper caste through the depiction of the Mahar community which bore the injustices of the Brahmins. The focus in a testimonio is not on aesthetics but on depicting the gruesome and oppressive situation of the Dalit community of the Mahars of Maharashtra. One can contend that in a testimonio there is no “problematic hero” as in a novel but there is a “problematic collective situation” (Beverley 95).

Kamble’s particular text is important for this study because of three reasons. Firstly, it is written by a Dalit writer who reveals how a Dalit woman’s life is
intersected by social discriminations arising due to her caste, class and gender. A Dalit woman is disrespected and abused not only verbally but this abuse permeates into her life both spatially and corporeally. To cap it all, the abuser is not always the upper caste male/female but also her own Dalit counterpart.

Secondly, Kamble’s text functions as a representative text on behalf of the poor, down trodden and abused Dalits who have been languishing in the dark for centuries. It not only acquaints the readers with the dismal existence of the Mahars but also questions the society which had been complacent in the face of such gross inhuman conduct. Thirdly, it also takes us back into the pre and post-Independence era when the Mahars were carving a new identity for themselves and playing a key role in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar’s Untouchability Movement.

This study would focus on the psychological and spiritual transformation that Kamble and her community underwent as Mahars. It would also try to address certain key issues: Can a Dalit woman break the vicious cycle of humiliation and subjugation enforced on her by the upper castes and also by males of her own community? How does spatial and corporeal segregation drastically alter a Dalit woman’s life? Can education really empower the Dalits, especially the women? Has society changed its outlook towards Dalits?

The second text taken up for this study is Mukhtar Mai’s *In the Name of Honour* (2007). This text is not an autobiography but a memoir. Memoir comes from the Latin word *memoria* meaning memory. A memoir may be regarded as literary representation of memory and deals with a specific period in one’s life. The analysis of the chosen text would reveal how the writing of a memoir also functions as a therapy. Writing or talking about one’s feelings and past events can be an excellent
way to work through them in one’s head and find some peace or resolution.

Mai’s text has three-fold importance. Firstly, it is not written by Mai but orally narrated by her to the French author Marie-Thérèse Cuny who published her story. Thus, this can be considered as an attempt by her to break her silence and demand justice. This also draws our attention towards a different category of literature namely oral narratives. Secondly, Mai’s memoir brings to light the fact that women face a constrictive network of tribal justice, physical violence and state dictatorship in one of the most religiously disciplined states of South Asia namely Pakistan. Mai’s memoir also serves to show how Pakistani upper caste society uses weapons such as rape to maintain supremacy over socially and economically weaker sections of society. Thirdly, Mai is not an educated woman but her determination to take her rapists to court and educate the young girls of Pakistan is commendable. This makes her a woman writer with a social commitment. This commitment also helps her in overcoming her grief and moving on in life.

This study would, accordingly, focus on all these aspects and try to trace the various stages of self-empowerment which shape Mai’s memoir. The study would engage with some important questions which emerge from this memoir. Can a sexually abused, low caste woman actually rise in rebellion against the feudal lords and most importantly against the powerful political set up of Pakistan? Is it possible to get over memories of a traumatic nature and start afresh? Is the healing of sexually abused ‘self’ a solitary journey or does one need an ‘other’ to identify with and speed up the healing process? Is publishing Mai’s memoir an attempt by white women to portray their Asian counterpart as weak and therefore, in need of help from the empowered white women?
The third text chosen for this study is Taslima Nasreen’s autobiography *Wild Wind* (2006). This text has been chosen for study because in contrast to the earlier text by a Muslim tribal woman, this text presents an educated and bold woman whose life is intersected by religious fanaticism and literary censorship. This text would add a new dimension to this study in so far as it is a bold and probably the first attempt by a Muslim woman writer in Bangladesh to re-claim her sexuality. Nasreen presents a text in which body functions “as the central issue and its gratification” is a “significant concern” (Bande 22). This study would engage with a number of thought-provoking questions: Can her autobiography be regarded as an attempt to break the models of sexuality which have been assigned to women by the Bangladeshi writers? Does her writing bring out the exploitation which is inherent in the Bangladeshi patriarchal society? Is religion a liberating or constricting factor in the lives of women? Has Nasreen’s autobiography been successful in claiming a space for itself in the Bangladeshi literary canon which has hitherto been dominated by only male writers? Is Nasreen’s autobiography a clarion call for liberty of expression and freedom from literary censorship?

This study would also focus on some relevant questions inherent within the writing of autobiographical works, such as: How do women writers strive to attain selfhood and assert their individuality? Is the ‘self’ a static entity or a dynamic one? Is the emergence of selfhood a solitary journey? Can one’s interaction with society help in gaining a deeper insight into the ‘self’? Does writing one’s story really have a cathartic effect? Does the writer emerge as a stronger individual having a clearer sense of the ‘self’ through the process of writing? Are the writers able to look beyond self-censorship and re-present themselves through their autobiographical writings? Do their writings enable these women to re-create a new world for themselves based
on equality and mutual respect? Have these writers succeeded in breaking the chrysalis of patriarchal domination through the act of writing?

This study would make an attempt to engage with the questions posed above, within the context of the chosen texts. Each chapter would trace the two-fold journey – personal and literary – undertaken by the writers in an attempt to evaluate how the writers re-discovered their ‘selves’ as well as contributed constructively to the corpus of South Asian autobiographical literature by trying to understand the issues pertinent to the contemporary South Asian woman.


