Chapter-1
The Changing Contours of Autobiographical Studies

Overview
Autobiography, generally and generically, is viewed as "a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular, on the development of his personality" (Lejeune 1982, 193). Further, it is commonly assumed that there is identity between the "author, the narrator and the protagonist" (ibid) which is a necessary condition of autobiography. Far from being a broad generic statement, the description reveals certain biases: an autobiography is based on an "individual's life" focusing on the "development" of "his personality". Also, it concerns a "real person" - as distinct from an imaginary or fictional entity. Most traditional definitions of autobiography reflect a similar bias. According to James Olney:

What is ..... of particular interest to us in a consideration of the creative achievements of individual men and the relationship of those achievements to a life lived, on the one hand, and an autobiography of that life, on the other, is ..... the isolate uniqueness that nearly everyone agrees to be the primary quality and condition of the individual and his experience (Olney 1972, 20-1).

However, the task of offering a definition of autobiography, particularly, in recent years, is fraught with problems as the concept of autobiography seems to defy consensus. The problems, from the vantage point of late twentieth - early twenty-first century, are the supposition that autobiography has to do, as pointed out earlier, with an "individual" and "his achievements" (in the public arena?) and "isolate uniqueness;" the assumption of a consensus evident in "everyone". The belief that autobiography focuses on the individual and that each individual possesses a unified unique selfhood, is a view widely interrogated as being of limited applicability. The definition outlined here also seems to display a hint of "mystificatory rhetoric", in its evocation of an "essentialist or Romantic" notion of selfhood, which obscures the "rhetorical underpinnings of its particular version of selfhood" (Anderson 2001,4-5). Thus, to say that the "explanation for the special appeal of autobiography.... is a fascination with the self and its profound, its endless mysteries" (Olney 1980,23), is obviously to offer one version of both the self and its representation in autobiography. That this point is a significant one is borne out if one attempts to construct a tradition or genealogy for the genre of autobiography. How does
the 'law of genre' (to take the title of Derrida's essay) work to include and legitimize (and, in fact, valorize) certain kinds of autobiography and autobiographies?

If one looks at the history of autobiography as it has developed in the West and in Europe, in the period after enlightenment, an overwhelming focus on a developmental version of the self, on change, conversion and confession becomes evident. As Linda Anderson points out in her recent book:

Account must be taken of ... the way a developmental version of the self, which is also socially and historically specific, has come to provide a way of interpreting the history of the genre: all autobiographies, according to this universalizing and prescriptive view, is tending (Anderson 2001, 9).

According to this teleological scheme, St. Augustine's and later, Rousseau's life writings would seem to furnish prime instances of this genre; they, in fact, become the paradigmatic texts against which other autobiographical writings are scrutinized/explored/studied. Also, the confessional mode adopted by these writings becomes a definitional norm and a necessary part of autobiography's conceptual apparatus.

St. Augustine's Confessions (A.D. 398-400) has been so influential that it is difficult to see Augustine as "occupying a single point in history since the characteristics of his narrative have completely infused the way we structure our understanding" of autobiography (Dollimore 1996, 131). Confessions is the first great autobiographical work; its significance lies in that it establishes a "crucial narrative design where incidents, trivial in themselves, become representative moments in the growth of a personality" (Pascal 1960, 22-3). Augustine's Confessions becomes the paradigmatic autobiographical text; the historical moment of its writing comes to be viewed as the inaugurating moment of autobiography. Thus, in Anatomy of Criticism (1957), Northrop Frye conflates 'autobiography' with 'confession', to start with, after which it gradually merges with the novel:

Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative and, therefore, fictional impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated coherent pattern .... We may call this very important form of prose fiction the confession form, following St. Augustine, who appears to have invented it, and Rousseau, who established a modern type of it. After Rousseau - in fact in Rousseau -
the confession flows into the novel, and the mixture produced the fictional autobiography, the Kunstler – roman and kindred types (Frye 1957, 307).

In traditional critical frameworks (to denote the time prior to the 'theoretical' turn) and discussions, critical opinion tends to be divided between tracing autobiography's precedents from Augustinian confession through to conversion narratives and spiritual autobiography, or linking its emergence as a modern secular genre to the rise of the novel in the eighteenth century. In the latter line of thinking, autobiography, like the novel, serves the needs of the newly emergent middle class (Nussbaum 1989, 37-8).

By the nineteenth century, there was a definite hierarchy of forms and values in relation to self-representation, with autobiography connoting not only integrity and sustained self-reflection, but also having particular class designations. Thus, one reviewer writing in Blackwoods Magazine in 1829, refers to a "legitimate autobiographical class" which excluded the "vulgar" who try to "excite prurient curiosity that may command a sale" (Anderson 2001, 8).

The issue of the generic orientation of autobiography is a particularly tricky one as it goes beyond the issue of typology and genre and brings within its purview the question of gender. Derrida points out that in French there is a different range of meanings for the term, that "the semantic scale of genre is much larger" and "always includes within its reach the [question of] gender" (Derrida 1980,221) and that 'genre' and 'gender' can be traced etymologically to the same root. Many feminist critics have used this similarly to highlight the "politics of genre" which, in their view, works to consolidate patriarchy and patriarchal law which "delegitimises women's writings" (Anderson 2001, 11).

Issues of genre and gender, legitimation, fictionalization and of private and public are of considerable relevance in looking at late nineteenth century Bengali women's narratives. However, most of these issues outlined above have received a great deal of complexity because of the influence of recent feminist, deconstructive, poststructuralist theories. Further, the "modern" (or postmodern) interrogation of the unitary subject does not simply create a break, opening up a new and different critical perspective, it also
“casts a backward shadow, transforming how we read previous writing”(Anderson 2001, 61) As Linda Anderson elucidates:

It is not that a unified self was once available and can be rediscovered in past autobiographies; there is a sense in which it always was a historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse (ibid).

This understanding of the self – of its multiplicity – is to a large extent the influence of poststructuralist interventions of the last twenty years. Although details of these theoretical developments and their implications for autobiography will be sketched out in a subsequent section, what needs to be established here is the relevance of post structuralist feminist insights on autobiography, to nineteenth century Bengali women's life-writings. Some of these insights provide a vocabulary wherein the autobiographies of several nineteenth and early twentieth women can be better understood. Here, the issue is not only the relationship of a theory or set of theories (e.g. post-structuralist feminism, psychoanalysis, etc.) to a field provided by late nineteenth century Bengali women's texts, but to a two-way evolving relationship between autobiographical theory and practice. In this research, I would endeavour to show how some women's autobiographical writings can add to and modify theories of feminist autobiography. Nor can this research, engaging with and addressing Bengali women's life-writings, concern itself only with Western autobiographical theory, which has been developed by European and American theorists in relation to their own texts and theories. For researchers and teachers in the field of English literary studies, this is a particularly fraught question (see Sunder Rajan 1990, Joshi 1994). It involves and entails not only frequent disciplinary crossovers, (for instance the work of Sangari, generally) but an exercise of drawing from other disciplines while at the same time challenging their insights and interpretations. Feminist scholars like Sangari and Chakravarti also articulate the lacunae in the field of women's studies in India, pointing out the "under-theorisation" of historical transitions and questions of woman's literacy and articulations. They speak of the need to replace "simplistic formulations and celebrations of women's 'space' and women's resistance" with broader understandings of historical transitions and movements:

Though there are some localized readings of oral traditions, specific myths, the illustrative use of proverbs and folklore, upper-caste prescription and women's own writings and autobiographies, these
remain unconnected both to each other and to the wider question of transitions (Sangari & Chakravarti 1999, xv).

In this research on four autobiographical writings by Bengali women of late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the attempt would be to look at both connections and differences in the self-perceptions of four women placed differently in terms of social and familial structures, with different class designations. Perhaps, the common feature that unites them is that all the autobiographies in question thematise a hard won access to literacy, which, however, is foregrounded differently in the texts. They also show the aspirations, whether personal, professional or nationalist, of the autobiographers. The narratives fall "inside and outside colonial reformist constellations". While Rashsundari's impulse to literacy comes not so much out of traditions of "male reform", but "from within the enclosed structures of domestic piety" (Sangari & Chakravarti, xxiii), the articulations of Binodini, Sarala and Haimabati are enabled by and can be placed in traditions of reform catalyzed by colonialism. All of them, further, mark varying transitions in notions of selfhood and female individuation and should be linked, along with related genres – essays, poems, novels, social critiques – that appeared in the second half of the nineteenth century, to processes of a burgeoning print culture and wider processes of class formation and transformation (Sangari & Chakravarti, xxiv).

The autobiographies in question have been selected, keeping in mind not only their complexity, the divided selves they represent and their choice of multiple subject positions, but also with a view to interrogate the connotative sweep implicit in the designation of 'bhadramahila'. This appellation, though widely in use (see Chatterjee 1992, Karlekar1991 and others) has certain limitations: for one, it sees the women in relation to their male counterparts in the restructured patriarchies under British rule. The term, a convenient formulation for the upper class newly educated Bengali imposes a certain false homogeneity quite refuted by the life-writings under examination. Apart from Sarala Debi's and, to a lesser extent, Rashsundari's autobiographies, the autobiographies under study suggest the fluidity and uncertainty of class positioning; if anything, they underline both a sense of mobility as well as the insecurity of manifold and "discrepant dislocations" (John 1988). For Binodini, the actress prostitute who was feted by the 'bhadralok' in her youth, there was a dawning realization that she would
never be permitted to enter polite society, despite her refinement and her sensitive portrayal of a wide variety of roles. The resultant effect in her writing is of a divided self which is remarkable in its affect, where the gulf between the public persona of the actress-prostitute and the refined sensibilities of the self-schooled actress is an impassable one. Her writings also offers an instance of the many ways in which women's autobiographical writing "position(s) itself at different or oblique angles to dominant forms, interrogating the division between private and public writing, private and public selves" (Anderson 1997, 2). Underlying this observation - or rather, undergirding it - is an understanding of women's complex relationship with the processes of representation and self-representation.

Further, feminist critics have not only commented on women's growing association with autobiography; they have remarked on how autobiographical writings also shed considerable light on the processes of engendering:

The construction of women as autobiographical subjects is inevitably implicated in or (is) a part of the fluctuating discourses which constitute the meaning of gender itself (Anderson 1997,2).

Autobiography, gender, genre are so intimately interwoven that it is difficult to separate the various discursive strands. Moreover, in the last decade or so, autobiography has been increasingly viewed as a form hospitable to women's self-portrayals and relevant to feminist studies. While traditional narrative models, which were established over a period of time, were predominantly male and rendered women's negotiations with the genre particularly difficult (Anderson 2001,33), generic modulations and changes have enabled a revisionist reading of autobiography. Thus, it could be argued that many women's autobiographies, while observing certain narrative and linguistic codes, could also offer "alternative spaces", "place(s) from which women could contest their socially sanctioned position of silence and submission" (Anderson 2001, 34).

How were these generic modulations effected? In what ways was the question of genre inflected by gender? How did the theoretical turn affect the analysis of lifewriting? How did autobiographical studies, like literary studies and cultural studies, come to straddle so many varied disciplines? These are some of the questions I will be addressing in the next section.
Autobiography: The Theoretical Turn

Recent feminist interest in autobiography has been wide and varied. One has been to initiate the trend of personal criticism, articulated in Jane Tompkins (1989). Another has been the attempt to view "uses of the self" that can capture specifically affective elements of consciousness ... not feelings against thought, but thought as feeling and feeling as thought" (Probyn1993,82-107). Probyn articulates her interest in discovery of "the feminist uses of the autobiographical as a tactic within the production of theory, or more precisely within the process of speaking theoretically" (ibid).

Feminist critics have also attempted to interrogate and destabilize the centrality of the category of "western man" in traditional paradigms. They point to the fact that the recent proliferation in the number and kinds of women's life-writings not only offer thematic, stylistic, structural and formal challenges to settled notions of autobiography, but also that they undermine many of the assumptions and definitional propositions that undergird the genre of autobiography.

At the same time, women's autobiographies are increasingly being viewed as a rich resource from which to mine information on women's lives that often go unrecorded and rarely find a voice in official versions of history. Critics like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita help us see how women's life writings often provide a necessary corrective to and supplement the 'great traditions' of literature and conventional literary histories, by including facts that such histories had previously censored. Women's autobiographical writings can be seen to offer a glimpse of the varied and different trajectories along which the self and its varied representations could be mapped, as well as the cultural economy within which they were produced (Tharu and Lalita,1991). For example, women's self articulations of their identity often seems to emerge as an inter-subjective, interdependent, relational and plural 'we', a feature that can be glimpsed as well in the life writings of ethnic minorities or marginalized, often dispossessed communities. This plural 'we' is obviously transgressive of the definitional norm that autobiography documents and represents the self writings of a single individual, and therefore marks the autobiographical writings of marginalized communities and collectivities as "outlaw genres"(Kaplan1992, 132). While reading autobiography as a document and parable of individualism has helped to shape the genre of literary autobiography in specific ways
and to determine the linguistic conventions by which the self is represented in contemporary critical discourse, the individualistic bias has obviously its limitations as well. Further, autobiographical theory would have to take into account and modify itself to meet the theoretical changes and challenges offered by the notion of the discontinuous, decentred, plural selves that fracture the unified self and beleaguer the question of identity, in recent years.

If feminist approaches to autobiographical / cultural / literary studies have yielded effective readings, it is because feminist readings have often drawn on the varied insights of a wide cross-section and range of disciplines and theoretical frameworks. In doing so, they have helped develop approaches to autobiographical / literary texts in ways where the texts can be made to speak to us with considerable resonance. Also, over the last couple of decades, the operation of theoretical trends like poststructuralism and new historicism has resulted in the loosening of disciplinary boundaries where the barriers of inclusion and exclusion have often been dismantled, with the effect that literary studies can be seen as sharing common foci of interest with autobiographical, cultural and women's studies as well. To cite one instance of the way in which autobiography shares common ground with and draws on the insights of literature as well as other social sciences: autobiography, psychoanalytic theory and romantic literature, especially romantic poetry, evince a common interest in and concern for childhood memories. Both autobiography and psychoanalysis paradigmatically involve the reconstruction of a life in narrative and the shaping of events into a meaningful framework (Marcus 1994, 214). Autobiographies in the modern period tend to make childhood a significant part of the narrative: psychoanalysis sees childhood as formative (ibid).

Similarly, questions pertaining to structural linguistics that are foundational to narrative analysis often apply to autobiography as well. Questions of textual analysis like pronominal forms (first person / third person), questions of address and temporal relations are relevant to both structural linguistics and autobiographical writing. In Problems in General Linguistics, Emile Beneveniste distinguished between enunciation (enonciation) and utterance (enonce), between the act of uttering and what is uttered. By extension, this model is used to refer, in theories of autobiography, to the subject of the enunciation (the present ‘I’ of narration) and the subject of the utterance (the ‘I’ whose history is being
recounted and who exists at a temporal as well as ontological distance from the narrating self). Further, Benveniste’s ‘enonciation historique’ or ‘narrative’ of past events is marked by the exclusive use of the third person, and ‘discourse’ in which the source of the enunciation and the auditor are marked as present. For Starobinski, this distinction is crucial, since autobiography, according to him, can only be justified as a project distinct from history by the structures of conversion or transformation. Without the change or ‘deviation’ brought about by conversion, autobiography would become history and a narrator in the first person would hardly continue to be necessary. (Marcus 1994, 194).

In ‘The Style of Autobiography’ he argues that autobiography, both as act and as a specific type of narrative, is dependent on the split between past and present selves (Starobinski, in Olney 1980, 73-74). He explores the relationship between the two, in his study of Rousseau’s ‘Confessions’:

He [Rousseau] paints a dual portrait, giving not only a reconstruction of his past history, but also a picture of himself as he relives his history in the act of writing .... what is of primary importance is not historical veracity but the emotion experienced as the past emerges and is represented in consciousness (Starobinski 1980, 198).

In spite of his claim of historical veracity – ‘I have displayed myself as I was’ – what we finally see is a self, which is created through writing. Narrativity provides the basis for subjectivity, and every time the mind goes over a past moment, more narratives are produced, narratives which are not only “differing stories of the past, but future scenarios and narratives of writing itself” (Brooks 1984, 33).

An instance of how narrative provides the basis for subjectivity can be seen in Wordsworth’s Prelude (1805, 1850). First, a representation of the split between the represented speaker and speaking subject is introduced into the poem itself. The poem shows the older mature Wordsworth recounting / narrativising the experiences of the younger Wordsworth and reflecting on the same. This attempt is for him “to see himself [in the act of] seeing himself”(Easthope 1993, 83). The representation of this split, however, raises questions and problems about the truth claims of autobiographical assertions. One such problem is that:
Temporally or diachronically the autobiographical project is negated by the problem of fixing a moment in time at which the story can be told and understood ... Written from the point of view and interpretive stance of where he is now, the poem claims to be able to separate true from false selves in retrospect. But, if the revolutionary Wordsworth had written his autobiography, it would have been a different narrative with a different interpretation of the past. Each of this series of selves comes with an interpretative stance attached, trying to re-transcribe contingent into necessary experience, and this renders the freezing of the process as it is even in the 1850 published version just that – a version, not the final truth it would like to claim (Easthope 1993, 84).

The relevance of the above passage to our understanding of autobiography is manifold. In its theorizing of the discursive gap or disjunction between the represented and the speaking subject, it reveals the impossibility of a complete or full autobiography, since the relationalities between the various autobiographical selves is bound to be a changing, contingent and unstable one. One is reminded of Catherine Belsey’s assertion in *The Subject of Tragedy* that the “full subject, the transcendental I, which is its own origin, is impossible” (Belsey 1985). An attempt to recover any sense of full subjectivity, in fact to gain autonomy or control, is always tinged with a sense of loss or mourning since the full ‘recovery’ of a ‘transcendental’ subjectivity is an illusion.

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing questioning of autobiography has been carried out by deconstructive critics like Derrida and Paul de Man. Among the wide-ranging questions raised by deconstructive enquiry is the status or notion of the ‘self’, the border between the life and the text, the significance of the authorial or ‘proper name’ and of the signature, the status of the ‘I’, the relationship between a writer’s written ‘corpus’ and his or her body, the biographical and biological, the links between auto/biography as life-writing and the problematic of mourning and memorialisation (Marcus 1994, 198).

At the same time, while many of the concerns listed above would seem to hear on issues of subjectivity and identity, Derrida’s contribution, clarifies Marcus, is not to “a theorization of the subject of autobiography as such, but to a redistribution of the autobiographical”. While Derrida cannot offer an adequate theory of agency, “his questioning of the borders and boundaries of the institutions in which the autobiographical is held is a radical one” (Marcus 1994, 199).
No account of the implications of deconstruction for autobiography can be complete unless it takes into account Derrida's discussion of Nietzsche. In fact, Nietzsche's pronouncements and their subsequent interpretations by Derrida and others have had a direct bearing on the deconstruction of traditional concepts of a unified subjectivity. Thus, a phrase like 'death of the subject' can be traced back to the influential work of Nietzsche. As Michael Sprinkler points out:

If autobiography can be described as the self's enquiry into its own history – the self-conscious questioning by the subject of itself – then Nietzsche offers the most fearful warning for any autobiographical text. The danger of the direct questioning of the subjectivity of all self-reflection of the subject lies in this, that it could be a useful and important activity to interpret oneself falsely (Sprinkler in Olney, 1980, 334).

The moment when 'subjectivity' is loosened from its anchoring in 'real' life signals not only a crisis of autobiography and historicism, but are produced by an epistemological shift where the status of the objective is questioned and becomes a subject of enquiry in all fields of knowledge.

Second, this Nietzschean understanding about the fictional nature of subjectivity is linked with the deconstructionists' reformulation and rereading of Romanticism, in particular, Derrida and de Man's rereading of Rousseau. Deconstructive criticism views both Romanticism and autobiography as defined substantially through their problematization of the subject / object relationship. Traditionally, the identity of writer and subject in autobiography was seen as providing one form of the unity of subject and object: autobiography, as such, was viewed as a privileged mode. In recent criticism, however, in a diametrically opposite view, the autobiographical mode is supposed to embody a "split between subject and object, self and other, first and third person" (Marcus 1994, 203). Self-consciousness and self-division become shared characteristics, in a sense, of both Romantic literature and autobiography.

Further, both Derrida and de Man have propounded theories of autobiography in which death, as much as life, motivates or determines autobiographical discourse. In his essay 'Autobiography as De-Facement' (1984), de Man critiques contemporary theories of autobiography as well as offers his own ideas on it. For de Man, subjectivity is an
effect of language; further, he argues that the assumed referential status of autobiography reveals the fictionality of all referentiality: although one assumes that “the life produces the autobiography”, it is equally possible that “the autobiographical project produces and determines the life” (De Man 1984, 172). By this logic, whatever the autobiographer writes is governed by the generic and technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined, in all its aspects, by the resources of his medium (ibid). This is certainly an appropriate observation, particularly when applied to numerous kinds of life writing. Deconstructive criticism has, to sum up, provided some useful tools for the study of autobiography although it has complicated notions of subjectivity and agency.

Autobiography, as mentioned earlier, also shares a common conceptual territory with psychoanalysis, although their affinities have not created symmetry between the two practices. As Marcus sums up:

Psychoanalysis is a theory of the making of an individual, and of a gendered individual in particular; autobiography, like the Bildungsroman, is a privileged site for representing this process. In both, fictions are often seen as more important and revealing than facts, while uncovering the past is viewed as a complex and difficult process (Marcus 1994, 214).

The centrality of narrative in autobiography is replicated in psychoanalysis as well. Narrative in the sense of the recounting of stories and the drive to narrate, is an important dimension of both spheres, but “so is the charge attached to images and memories which stand out against the backdrop of the past” (ibid). Further, both “paradigmatically” involve the reconstruction of a life in narrative and the shaping of events into a meaningful framework and teleology. Although the two practices diverge considerably, a number of autobiographical theories are inflected by psychoanalysis. Lacan’s account of the ‘mirror stage’, his model of human development predicated on the child’s recognition/misrecognition of a mirrored self-image, his analysis of a fragmented body and identity reflected back as whole and entire, has been particularly influential. As Grosz points out,

It is the dual and ambivalent relation to its own image that is central to Lacan’s account of subjectivity (Grosz 1990, 39).
At the same time, a certain degree of caution should be exercised while studying Bengali women’s autobiographical writings through the lens of psychoanalytic theories based on the work of Freud, Lacan or even theorists like Nancy Chodorow. Many of the presuppositions, assumptions and hypothesis of any psychoanalytic theory is based on a specific social cultural milieu and its applicability to all cultures and times is obviously limited and questionable.

Nevertheless, psychoanalytic theories and ideas provide fruitful and productive ways of reading autobiographies. Psychoanalytic feminist criticism, particularly, has added its own insights to the study of women’s life-writings. Feminist theorists like Luce Irigaray have modified and built upon the insights of object-relations theory developed by D.W. Winnicott and Nancy Chodorow. As Winnicott states, “in individual emotional development, the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face” (Winnicott 1971, in Marcus, 219). The ‘I’ or sense of self, according to object relations theory, is formed through “relationships of recognition, initially from the mother and subsequently in mirror-images, actual or metaphorical” (ibid). The postulates of feminist theorists predicated upon this model, entail a differential notion of male and female development. Men, in this account, are more autonomous, whereas women are more likely to experience identity as relational (Chodorow). For Luce Irigaray and some others, the notion of autobiographical mirroring has been especially crucial. Questions of the mother/mirror relationship, narcissism and specularity are some of the key issues to be redefined. Another such issue evident in much recent work on women’s autobiography has been the critique of individualism developed in psychoanalytic feminism. Thus, the concept of identity as wholly based on individualism has been supplemented and supplanted by notions of collective as well as intersubjective identities; in short, there has been a recognition of the need ‘for a feminist reappropriation of the mirror’. As Brodzski and Schenck put it:

After Irigaray, the question remains: how have women articulated their own experience, shaped their own texts artistically, met their own reflections in the problematic mirror of autobiography? (Brodzski and Schenck 1988, 87).
Autobiography and Third Wave Feminism

A major task for feminist theorists of autobiography like Felicity Nussbaum, Leigh Gilmore, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith has been to provide frameworks in order to theorise and contextualise women's autobiographies. Certain thrust areas have become evident both within feminist as well as within autobiography studies, for instance a distinct focus on matters relating to the body and to sexuality, to issues of language and of difference. Most of these concerns are in fact central to recent feminist discussions, which is generally characterised as 'third' wave feminism, also referred to as 'difference' feminism (Arneil 1999, Butler 1990, 1993). Third wave feminism, in fact, hinges upon the question of difference. What does the question of difference imply? For one, it would imply a focus on women's subjective and sexual difference; a questioning, by women, both of patriarchally imposed norms and standards of femininity as well as a stance of ideological neutrality. Women should, according to this agenda, try and discover their own subjective voice.

In her account of sexual difference, Kristeva makes a distinction between 'masculinity' and 'femininity' rather than between 'men' and 'women'. This difference originates in the 'semiotic', coinciding with a time prior to the acquisition of language which falls during the initial stages of the mother-child bonding. With the acquiring of language, one enters the 'symbolic' sphere of the father. Though the symbolic attempts to repress the semiotic in language, it is nevertheless present. When the feminine or "semiotic writing is freed, it will embrace rhythm, sound and the maternal body" (Arneil 1999, 196-7). One question that arises here is: to what extent are women's writings and particularly, women's life-writings 'different'? Are they semiotic, in the realm of the uniquely subjective, or are they as likely to be in the 'symbolic' sphere, miming male/patriarchal/phallocentric writing? Obviously, an equivalence of male with patriarchal or phallocentric is not unmediated or unproblematic.

Further, some of the intellectual debates of third wave feminism around issues of subjectivity, identity and difference has, in turn, generated some discussion on the project of feminist autobiography. While these issues are felt to be crucial to the project of scrutinizing women's life-writings, the obverse can be seen to apply as well. Not only do these debates around identity, experience, in a sense, validate the enterprise of
studying autobiographical writings, they, in fact, make women’s autobiographical or life-writings central to the project of outlining the intellectual concerns of third wave feminism.

Autobiographical articulations are of considerable significance to third wave feminist theorizing since a lot of its concerns cluster around the concept of identity. At the heart of third wave or poststructuralist feminism’s focus on identity is a challenge to the notion of ‘women’ as a unified self with one perspective. Multiple viewpoints and identities, contradictions and conflicts, are, in a sense, third wave feminism’s answer to dualistic categories and fixed binaries of ‘men’ and ‘women’, ‘individuals’ and ‘groups’. Thus,

We learn that feminists speak in different voices and from multiple historical, cultural, racial, economic and sexual locations. We learn of the shaping power of overlapping allegiances and oppressions which intersect in often conflicting modes (Carraway, 6, in Arneil 1999, 206).

Three crucial concepts to do with identity may be said to enter the “feminist lexicon”: one is fluidity rather than fixed identity, the second is multiple rather than a single identity; the third is contradiction (ibid). The first comes in part from French feminist arguments about the nature of the unconscious and how it lies outside the grasp of our unified sense of rational self. Identity or the ‘self’ is not fixed, but fluid and unstable (Arneil, 207). Thus, a subject is always a subject in process:

A fixed identity is perhaps a fiction, an illusion - who amongst us has a fixed identity ….. All identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning and, as a result, the identity of the speaker. And in order to take account of this de-stabilization of meaning and of the subject, I thought the term ‘subject in process’ would be appropriate (Kristeva 1994, 352-1).

Beyond the notion of a unified self, poststructuralist and feminist theorists have also challenged the notion of ‘woman’ qua woman, with some essential singular identity. Instead, women exist as a multiplicity of identities, defined in terms of differences to other identities (Arneil 1999, 206).

Feminist theorizing adds a further complexity to the idea of difference. Difference, feminist theorists feel, should not address or incorporate the idea of
multiplicity but also of power, and particularly the relationship between power and difference. Difference, critically speaking, embraces the idea not only of pluralism but of the power relations that accompany difference; indeed, “differences of identity exist only in relationship to the historical oppressions which created them” (Arneil 1999, 207). Thus, “gender, race or class consciousness” is an “achievement” forced on us by the “terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, racism and capitalism” (Haraway 1989, 197).

**Autobiography and Postmodernism**

Another critical point about difference is made by Bordo (Bordo 1997, 335-357) when she refers to the “effacements” and obfuscations effected by the idea of difference in “postmodern culture” (1997, 335). In a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society like the U.S., necessary distinctions between white and black, rich and poor, privileged and deprived are often reduced to a play of endless differences,  

> “an undifferentiated pastiche of differences, a grab bag in which no items are assigned any more importance or centrality than others”.

This play of differences, “plastic pluralism”, where differences are uncritically endorsed without any critical examining, blunts and reduces the political edge of and destabilizes a consistent or positioned social critique.

Further, the notion of ‘difference’ implies a certain critique of, and resistance to, current paradigms of knowledge. This critique is against totalizing and universalizing theories (such as those of the Enlightenment) and further, asserts the need to attend to difference(s), plurality of identities and multiple positionalities. The implications of this postmodern critique for identity politics and for autobiography is discussed by, among others, Leigh Gilmore (1994), Seyla Benhabib (1992) and Patricia Waugh (1997). Both Benhabib and Waugh argue that postmodernism and feminism are incompatible, unless the former is scaled down to a diluted ‘weak’ version. In its ‘strong’ version, the postmodernist idea of the “death of the subject” has subversive implications for feminism; it does not serve feminist goals but rather “shows up the internal incoherencies and contradictions within feminist theory” (Benhabib, 1992, 77). Benhabib’s formulation
of the conceptual options enabled by postmodernism is stated in contrast to Jane Flax's notion of the death of the subject. Postmodernism, according to Benhabib, replaces the "sovereign subject" of the Enlightenment with the study of contingent, historically changing and "culturally variable social, linguistic and discursive practices" (ibid). This is a move not towards the French tradition of stipulating the 'death of the subject', but towards the radical situatedness and conceptualization of the subject. Feminist thinkers would claim that "gender" and the various practices contributing to its constitution are one of the "most crucial contexts in which to situate the purportedly neutral and universal subject of reason" (Benhabib 1992, 78). This view is in contrast to the entrenched categories of western philosophy which obliterate differences of gender as these shape and structure the experience and subjectivity of the self. Further,

Western reason posits itself as the discourse of the one self-identical subject, thereby blinding us to and in fact delegitimising the presence of otherness and difference which do not fit into its categories (Benhabib 1992, 78).

Situating the subject in the context of various social, linguistic and discursive practices would enable an articulation of the changing bases of subjectivity, without necessarily undermining the subject. Thus, concepts of agency, autonomy and rationality have to be interrogated and reformulated, but not necessarily always done away with, if one follows through the logical implications of Benhabib's argument, for autobiography. On the other hand, Flax's version of postmodernism has impossibly radical implications for the study of autobiography:

Man is forever caught in the web of fictive meaning, in chains of signification, in which the subject is merely another position in language (quoted in Benhabib 1992, 79).

In contrast to this line of thinking about postmodernism, is a view that it entails not just a "crisis" in the "understanding of selfhood", but offers certain possibilities as well. If individual subjectivity is not a basis, but a result of historically variable discursive operations", that subjectivity is in "process", constantly being "reconstituted in discourse every time we think or speak" (Weedon 1987, 32-33). Since selfhood can no longer be viewed unproblematically as "founded upon a unitary coherent subjectivity"
(Waugh 1992, 179), it is “indispensable to develop a theory of the subject as a decentred detotalized agent, a subject constructed at the point of intersection of a multiplicity of subject positions” (Chantal Mouffe, quoted in Gilmore 1994: 3). Further, this challenge to and interrogation of subjectivity, effected by the impact of postmodernist thinking, challenges, in turn, the “emancipatory ideals of modernity” which seem necessary to the feminist endeavour. Keeping the emancipatory potential of the enlightenment project in mind, is it “possible to modify” these “absolute epistemological foundations of the enlightenment rather than urging their total abandonment” (Waugh 1992, 180)? She continues:

As a political practice, surely feminism must continue to posit some belief in the notion of effective human agency, the necessity for historical continuity in formulating identity and a belief in some kind of historical progress. All along it would seem that feminism has been engaged in an effort to reconcile context-specific difference or situatedness with universal political aims: to modify the enlightenment [project] according to the specific needs and perspectives of women (Waugh 1992, 180-1).

The most important point for autobiographical studies, here really is: to what extent do the theoretical reformulations suggested by feminism and postmodernism modify and shape one’s readings and perceptions of both specific autobiographies and autobiographical studies in general? Leigh Gilmore conceptualizes the relationship between postmodernism and autobiography as a two-way engagement:

What do the theories, methods and insights of postmodernism allow us to know about autobiography? What do the techniques, practices and cultures of autobiography reveal about postmodernism (Gilmore 1994, 3)?

In recent years, there is an increasing tendency within autobiographical studies to incorporate postmodern critiques of subjectivity. Also, the theoretical exchanges between feminism, postmodernism and autobiography has led to a mutual historicization of these categories; especially in the context of their shared interests in theorizing the subject (see Marcus 1994, generally). Not only that, postmodernism’s “performance of questioning” not only “intersects with but also structures contemporary interest in autobiography” (Gilmore 1994, 3). Thus, terms like subjectivity, identity and history, which were hitherto taken as the staple – and stable – elements in life writings have
shifted within postmodernism, thereby destabilizing and shaking the constructed foundations of autobiography studies (Gilmore, 5). The terms and categories, the perceptual lenses through which autobiography is viewed is significantly different, following its engagement with postmodernism.

One major shift has been a problematisation of generic typology, which has moved autobiography into the broader arena of cultural studies; further, this questioning of typology provides a kind of conceptual leverage whereby notions of “literature” and “culture” are being re-examined. Postmodernism, further calls all categorical thinking into question along with the modes by which categories are consolidated and maintained. In terms of autobiography and autobiographical studies, the categories under scrutiny are not only those by which the genre is constituted, but critical interest itself (Gilmore, 4-5).

Also, postmodernism has also led to a focus, within literature, culture and autobiographical studies, on questions of self-representation, specifically the analytical and experiential category of the “self” and the politics of its representation. The ‘self’ of traditional autobiography and the representational practices whereby this self is mapped, can be seen as being ideologically produced. The generic self of autobiography is exposed as, more often than not, white and male. A study of autobiography inflected by postmodernism and feminism needs to question and scrutinize the methodologies that produce and reproduce cultural identity. As Leigh Gilmore points out:

The Augustinian lineage drawn by traditional studies of autobiography has naturalized the self-representation of (mainly) white, presumably heterosexual, elite men. Efforts to establish a genre of autobiography based on the works of Augustine, Rousseau, Henry Adams, and so on, must be seen as participating in the cultural production of a politics of identity, a politics that maintains identity hierarchies through its reproduction of class, sexuality, race and gender as terms of “difference” in a social field of power (Gilmore, 5).

Gilmore’s critique can be extended to the field of colonial autobiography as well, whereby the politics of autobiography can be seen as operating in collusion with the politics of colonialism. Analyzing the politics of colonialism and gender in the autobiographical writings of the colonized, Doris Somner asks:
Is [autobiography] the model for imperializing the consciousness of colonized peoples, replacing their collective potential for resistance with a cult of individuality and even loneliness? Or is it a medium of resistance and counter discourse, the legitimate space for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography (Somner, in Smith and Watson 1998, 1)?

Depending on the way in which they may be made to speak, autobiographical writings of colonized people can function as both. As an instructive example of such a counter-discourse can be cited Mahatma Gandhi’s autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, where Gandhi follows a series of self practices, like vegetarianism (‘Experiment with Dietetics’ Gandhi 1927: 47-8) for disciplining the self. At the same time, his autobiography shows him gradually refining a set of practices (honesty, self-restraint) which forms the basis for political resistance and a counter-discourse to colonialism. Interestingly, the beginnings of colonial education seems to have engendered numerous autobiographies by both men and women (Karlekar 1991, Chakrabarty 2000). These included ‘Brahmo’ autobiographies by Sibnath Shastri and others, which drew from the indigenous tradition of ‘Charita-sahitya’ as well.

Similarly, many of the early women’s autobiographies from Bengal (late nineteenth and early twentieth century) could be viewed as attempting to carve out a “legitimate space” for producing that excess which throws doubt on the coherence and power of an exclusive historiography. This is a function it shares with subaltern histories, which can also be viewed in a similar light. Subaltern histories and women’s lifewritings serve to fracture and refract the linear narratives produced by official versions of history and reproduced in much dominant historiography.

At the same time, too much emphasis on or generalization of the term ‘colonized’ and ‘subaltern’ sometimes runs the risk of erasing the subject’s “heterogeneity and agency”(Smith and Watson 1992, xiv). The problem of subsuming all women under the umbrella term of colonialism has become “increasingly apparent in feminist theories that hypostatize a universally colonized “woman”, universally subjected to “patriarchal” oppression (ibid). As many theorists such as Spivak and bell hooks, among others, insist, “privileging the oppression of gender over and above other oppressions” erases the complex and contradictory positioning of the subject. The “axes of the subject’s
identifications and experiences are multiple," because "locations in gender, class, race, ethnicity and sexuality complicate one another", nor do different "vectors of identification and experience overlap neatly or entirely (ibid). Just as there are various and multiple systems of domination, patriarchy also takes multifarious forms. It is not possible to isolate any universally applicable form of patriarchy across all times and places. Also, within a given social structure, men occupy various positions in patriarchy, and exist in different relationships to it.

Erasure of the subject's heterogeneity also takes place when there is an insistence upon an "undifferentiated global sisterhood of oppressed women" which "empties the subject" of all its "uniqueness /difference / colo(u)rfulness" (White and Stallybrass, in Smith and Watson, xv) by "colonizing under the sign of the same those differences that might otherwise call that totalizing concept into question"(Butler 1990, 13). If one agrees that there are "political implications of analytic strategies and principles" (Mohanty 1984, 336), then apparently neutral strategies, closely examined, often reveal new regimes of power / knowledge. Such a scrutiny would help in developing a critical consciousness where the "political implications of analytic strategies" become somewhat clearer. One of the things that might become evident is the need to resist any mode of theorizing, which is totalizing. Gillian Whitlock suggests that one way to achieve this is by paying attention to specific colonial regimes, when the student of colonialism realises that there are differences both between the "conceptual place and colonial relations" of India and within the colony as well, in terms of their relation to the imperial power and their acceptance of colonial culture (Whitlock 2000, 2).

These differences could be further graded in terms of the gender, class, social positioning (caste in the Indian and Bengali context), rural / urban location and level of access to and the language of literacy. Obviously, a variety of "subject positions arises from this terrain" and there is no single frame of reference for the variety of autobiographical writing produced in the local languages or in English, in the former colonies of the British empire. Also, thinking broadly of the "constitutive nature of subjectivity" and of the "differential deployments of gendered subjectivity" helps to "tease out complex and entangled strands of oppression and domination"(Smith and Watson, 1992, xvi). In addition, "in the emergent, dominant and residual phases of
empire, the interpellation of the subject is shifting and complex, with different
negotiations and authorizations emerging through autobiography” (Whitlock 2000, 2-3).

Of course, there has to be a salutary reminder of the fact that colonialism is one of
the grids, albeit a crucial one in the production of nineteenth century Bengali women’s
autobiographies. Where colonialism may be said to have impacted autobiography is
through the introduction of literacy and education, at the point “where the very sense of
the possibilities for self-definition are constituted”(Whitlock 2000, 5). Further,
autobiography is produced in moments and spaces in which subjects are “driven to grasp
their positioning and subjectivity” (ibid, 6) and therefore bears the traces of its origins in
specific historical relations of power, rule and domination. Also, autobiographic writing
“can suggest the ground ‘in between’ where differences complicate both across subjects
and within individual subjects” (ibid). It is this question of the plural self and the
plurality of modes of self-representations, it is also important to loosen and unhitch
autobiography and autobiographical studies from its liberal humanist orientation which
emphasizes the individual rather than collectivities. While questions of freedom and
emancipation are important, it is necessary to yoke autobiographical studies to more
progressive agendas.

Here, I have suggested ways in which autobiographical studies is being remapped
in response to numerous generic and theoretical challenges. It emerges that there is a need
to locate the autobiographical in specific material, social and cultural contexts. It is only
then that it would be possible to move closer to the idea of contingent locations that has
been opened up by post-modernism. In the next chapter, therefore, I would be discussing
the various discursive contexts-social, cultural, historical, ideological - that gave rise to
women’s autobiographies in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal.