CONCLUSION

Now the blindness in human beings…..is the blindness with which we are all inflicted in regard to the feelings of creatures and people different from our selves…`Hence, the stupidity and injustice of our opinions, so far as they deal with the significance of alien lives. Hence the falsity of our judgments, so far as they presume to decide in an absolute way on the value of other persons’ conditions or ideals….It absolutely forbids us to be forward in pronouncing on the meaninglessness of forms of existence other than our own; and it commands us to tolerate, respect and indulge those whom we see harmlessly happy and interested in their own ways, however unintelligible these may be to us.

(William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” 229; italics added)

William James’s above quote is applicable to all endeavors that take human beings as their subject-matter, like the present one. It is a plea of empathy and respect in the face of ‘difference’. It is also a caveat against arrogance in interpretation, against chauvinism and against universalizing ones own subject-positioning. Above all, it is a reminder that there is never only one narrative, a reminder that we must bear in mind in this concluding part of the thesis, as we look forward and backward at the challenges of re-reading women’s auto/biographical texts.

The task of this thesis has been to identify the elements of a woman-centered approach for reading women’s life-writings; “auto/biography” and indicate the direction of its further maturity. Inevitably, we have looked backward at the history of auto/biography, at canons and conflicts. The canonical, rather the established traditions of “auto/biography” have been fruitful in positioning, toward changes that are needed if existing genres are to contain women’s narratives. In the context of established traditions, negation and U-turns that are unavoidable in woman-centered study have unexpectedly
opened many pathways. However, it doesn’t indicate that objectivity is not completely abandoned but rather re-visional, calling for the integration of thinking and feeling.

For that reason to neglect the study of women’s auto/biography is to contribute to the age-old social production of obscurity which has for so long devoured women’s work. Thus, while concluding the thesis, a basic rundown of the “Law of Genre” auto/biography is a necessity.

Autobiography is ‘personal’ and ‘private’ writing. The female subject in autobiography speaks with a first-person voice, when they write reflexively, societal images and stereotypes of women are present in their minds. They are surrounded by definitions of “who they are”, these cultural prescriptions are conveyed in private writing. It is a paradox, that in a first person ‘personal and private writing’ the third person representations are not very much absent. They are defined from the perspective of the dominant group. Aspects of femaleness that are of use or value to men dominate such images. The imaginative construction of “woman” is distant from the collective experience of women. The constraints operating on women’s space and women’s voices are reflected in the narratives women create.

As examined in the first chapter, some theoretical and critical works on autobiography read as though autobiographical impulse translated trouble-free ally into action, with the text emerging automatically. Upon inspection, such works without exception assumes a male subject. To invest oneself with the historical significance, to claim the attention of the reading public, to follow the model of previous notable lives—all these positioning more easily attained by the male than female autobiographers.
Much of the recent interest in autobiography in literary studies has stemmed from a theoretical concern with the broader question of genre. In the introductory chapter, questions of subjectivity constantly led into questions of genre – indeed, it could be claimed that the discourse of ‘subjectivity’ is a genre. And, as Jonathan Loesberg writes in “Autobiography as Genre, Act of Consciousness, Text”: “Because autobiography is also clearly a generic distinction, the debate over the generic status of the form constantly makes complex and disrupts the debate over the concern and possibly the root of whatever the genre autobiography is” (171).

Theoretically, discussions of the both auto/biography as a genre are also inseparable from debates about factual and fictional discourse, authorial intention and reference. These concerns in auto/biographical discourse are related to the questions of authorship and authenticity. The use of genre criticism in auto/biographical discourse has been debatable ever since autobiography began to be substantially theorized, from the 1950s onwards, as a specifically ‘literary’ genre.

James Olney and others have argued that the attempt to fit autobiography out with formal and linguistic pacts and functions violates the freedom and fluidity of self-expression and self-representation. Autobiography lies between ‘literature’ and ‘history’ or, perhaps, philosophy, and between fiction and non-fiction; it becomes an acute expression of the already contested distinction between fact and fiction. As an answer back Sidonie Smith writes in *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (1987)
The theories seem to derive from certain underlying assumptions: that men’s and women’s ways of experiencing the world and the self and their relationship to language and to the institution of literature are identical; or that women’s autobiographies, because they emanate from lives of culturally insignificant people are themselves culturally insignificant; or that autobiographies, because they may not inscribe an androcentric paradigm of selfhood are something other than real autobiography; or that **autobiography is fundamentally a male generic contract**.(14; emphasis added)

Thus, based on such a contention a number of feminist critics, as discussed in the first chapter pursued the etymological link between ‘genre’ and ‘gender’, and have publicized how the mechanisms and institutions of genre function to repress women’s personal writings, seen as infected, the purity of ‘true’ autobiography. So, concrete system of genre replicates the androcentric discourse from year to year, from generation to generation. Women have been positioned outside the laws – of genre and of selfhood - within which the ‘pacts’ of fiction and of history operate. Failing as ‘universal’ subjects, their lives and identities cannot provide the bases from which the laws of human nature will be drawn.

An underlying dynamic of gender shapes literary genres, as it does other institutional forms. Gender scripts at the societal level are linked at a deeper level with masculine personality, and with the scholarly genres in which men reflect themselves to each other. Nevertheless the androcentric tradition of autobiography was untroubled by gender until 1980. In that year Estelle Jelinek troubled the smooth surface of generic autobiography by contrasting male autobiography with female autobiography. As remarked the recognition of gender in autobiography cast a new light on the difficulties women have in inscribing themselves in the genre.
Most often, the critic/reader is implicitly asking how well women’s narratives match to male autobiography. The common features of men’s autobiographies—pattern, destination, a “significant” (public) life, solitariness, “universal” themes, and the suppression of the personal—become the criteria for evaluating women’s narratives. Consequently, emphasis on these themes contributes to the invisibility of women’s narratives. Feminist theorists have accused the patriarchy of propagating an ideology that marginalizes women. Sidonie Smith firmly believes that traditional autobiography has been implicated in this tendency to privilege the male experience. She argues,

From its roots in the Augustinian notion of the soul in search of God to its flowering in nineteenth century realism, autobiography flourished because there seemed to be a “self” to represent a unique and unified story to tell which bore common ground with the reader, a mimetic medium for self-representation that guaranteed the epistemological correspondence between “narrative” and “lived life”, a self-consciousness capable of discovering, uncovering, recapturing that hard core at the center. (Smith, “Gaze” 72)

Autobiography as a male-constructed and dominated genre, for the exploration of the self, echoes this primary interest in male-centered experience, effacing, as patriarchal writing does, the voices and experiences of the “others”. This patriarchal tendency to negate in turn explains the resurgence of interest by women and feminist theorists in redefining the genre.

Nancy Miller has argued that gender is itself a genre. In *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (1980) she asserts:

The difference of gender as *gender* is there to be read only if one accepts the terms of another sort of ‘pact’; the pact of commitment to decipher what women have said (or, more important, left unsaid) about the pattern of their lives over and above what any person might say about his, through genre. I say ‘his’ deliberately, not because men in fact lead genderless lives, but because the fact of their gender is given and received literally as a mere donnee of
personhood, because the canon of the autobiographical text, like the literary canon, self-defined as it is by the notion of a human universal, in general fails to interrogate gender as a meaningful category of reference or interpretation. (267)

In Miller’s argument, genre becomes defined more positively as a context for reading, rather than a prescription for writing; gender is a genre in that it implies an understanding of the conditions under which the text operates and should be received. Thus genre provides the necessary framework for an interaction between reader and text in which gender is central. Miller argues that genre distinctions implying a hierarchy of literary forms need to be broken down.

This argument against hierarchisation is paralleled by a widespread growth of interest in forms of personal writing, such as diaries, letters and journals, used not simply to supplement biographical knowledge of a significant figure but as text in their own right. Such forms are almost totally outlawed by generic definitions of autobiography as a continuous prose form reconstructing the whole of a ‘significant’ life. These apparently ‘private’ forms (which were, in fact, often written for circulation or publication) are being redefined as some of the most important modes of self-expression or self-construction for women and ones that need to be included in any account of autobiography.

As stated in the first chapter Auto/biography, encompass all these ways of writing a life and also epistemological links between them. Therefore, ‘Biography’ and the use of personal narratives are empowering methods for telling the everyday histories of ‘woman’s’ struggle and resistance. As with any methodology, biographical and narrative research practices have limitations. Biographical research into the narratives of women has the potential to reclaim
and reinterpret both historical and contemporary issues of culture, gender, and conceptualizations of the self, as articulated by the biographical subject.

Studying what biographers say about their work extends our understanding of the possibilities of the narrator’s role. In this kind of association the data gathering process is seen as one of recording of meaning constructed in the dialogue between biographer and the subject. The knowledge that constitutes the subject matter is itself a social emergent, created rather than merely accessed in a focused interaction between two members of the same group. Biography poses problems for the construction of a specifically feminist form in a way that autobiography does not. These problems relate closely to the boundaries set by ‘the facts’, the external collectable challengeable facts. However, typically there is felt to be a readerly unwillingness to stretch biographical convention thus far: once ‘fiction’ and ‘fantasy’ enter, then biography as ‘the truth’ about a self is assumed to depart along with positivist ideas about research and writing.

Conventionally, biography is treated as self-sealed; the biographer as apparently absent from their text. So, the biographer claims expertise to say what happened and what is meant. But, a feminist study, as the present one ask a question ‘who says?’ Thus, ‘who says’ is someone who has produced one more interpretation from among a range of possibilities, and who has produced it from one particular angle rather than any other. In other words, ‘the biographer’ is a socially-located person, one who is sexed, raced, classed, aged, to mention no more, and is so every bit a much as an autobiographer is.

As a step forward the ‘new biography’ as a canon, is a testimony and an oracle, constructing the ‘white light of fact’ against the colored light of biography revealing that facts are also ‘double faced’ and are open to more than
one interpretation. An attempt was made to look into the suitability of ‘new biography’ as a genre to put across the notion of Personal is Political; the confessional nature of biography and also the volatile relationship between the biographer, biography and the reader.

The present research project revolves around the seminal idea Personal is Political. In the second chapter Personal is Political, the slogan used in feminism and feminist theory has been explained at length. The whole study included three postulates A system of gender domination, ‘The’ system as political and Personal is Political in a direct sense. Thus, these discussions bring to a contention that historically, it is men who have acted within the public realm and have moved freely between it and the private realm, while women have been mostly restricted to the private realm, and subjected to the authority of men within it. But the feminist assertion that the Personal is Political issued a direct challenge to this public/private dichotomy; rather it destabilized all that had previously been presumed. Therefore, the essence of feminism lies in its re-evaluation of the persona and its insistence on the location of ‘politics of revolution’ within the minutiae of the everyday. Patriarchal male-domination, according to radical feminists, is present across time and culture and exist every sphere defining it as political.

Thus recovering the personal through explicating women’s everyday experiences should be recognized. The social world they presently inhabit is the one they conceptualize through a worldview provided by a sexist society and thoroughly androcentric social science. They need to reclaim, name rename their experiences and thus their knowledge of the social world that they live in. therefore there is a stress on “the personal” as “political” aspect.
As an outcome a new definition of politics was formed, which include everyday struggle and power relations and also reclaimed women as politically active rather than apolitical. Thus, it also hints at the subordinated position of women in politics tied to gender as a system of power that affects the understanding, practice and study of politics. Therefore, the essence of feminism lies in its re-evaluation of the persona and its insistence on the location of ‘politics of revolution’ within the minutiae of the everyday. Recovering the personal through explicating women’s everyday experiences should be recognized.

‘Auto/biographical’ texts of women represent both the individual and the group and are sites for politicizing the collective self. Such writings can be read as acts of cultural intervention. Within the framework of this thesis, cultural space refers to that branch of cultural studies largely derived from the study of literature which includes biography and autobiography. Thus Auto/biographical writings offer the possibility of articulating notions of collective selves which include cultural, socio-political and historical memories. Furthermore, are identified as being a pertinent literary genre for a way of reclaiming a sense of cultural identity and as a mode of self-representation. Thus by undertaking a detailed study of Nehru Women’s Auto/biography, the thesis put forward the premise that auto/biographical texts can be viewed as a literary extension and accordingly these literary genre are ideal methods for writing about the life histories and experiences of women.

Based on the line of argument discussed in the first three chapters, and by applying and analyzing various literary theories to the autobiographies of Nehru Women’s Auto/biography, the thesis concludes with the multiple findings:
1. The ‘Gender’ categorically shapes the auto/biography of a female self at the same time ensigns the reading and interpretation of the same.

Gender shapes the auto/biography of a female text. Equally, gender colors the reading and interpretation of the narrative. Understanding women’s experiences, or accounts of them, requires one to read the code of gender. The fe(male) reader must recognize how women and men write gender into their accounts, and into accounts of lives. Autobiographies of women provide a portrait of gender arrangements that are invisible in the dominant discourse and that yield to a gender – sensitive reading. Inevitably, women’s autobiographies “tell on” the gender arrangements of their society. In reading/writing about women, the collective situation of the women, as revealed in autobiography, must be taken as context.

Female autobiography is not autobiography as usual. Their self-writing is animated by the tension between external control of women and the assertion of female subjectivity, a tension visible, of whatever form. For women autobiographer, the process of self discovery is accompanied by a sense of contestation and risk. Women do not write their autobiography as an isolated being, but carries a whole tradition of women’s writing within them. They see themselves as an extension of the collective consciousness of women’s subculture.

The study illustrates how autobiographies by Nehru family women, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nayantara Sahgal and Krishna Hutheesing separately endorse the ‘differences’, a ‘gender’ differential projection of ‘self’. In other words, the effect of ‘gender’(a socio-cultural ‘construct’) as well as sex(a biological ‘given’) in writing ‘self’. The thesis validates that ‘gender plays an important role in the creative process of writing ‘self’: the gender-boundness of the genre’. Through the study of Nehru women’s autobiographies it is attested
that when women write their autobiography their identity is ‘relational’ and their identity boundaries are very fluid compared to men’s. These facts of their gender identity influence the genre a great deal, in both form and content, making women’s autobiography discontinuous in form and personal in content.

Primarily, Nehru women’s autobiographies project an image of private strength and public passivity. Which direct to the study of the feminine dilemma of dual self- the dilemma of living with two different, even opposite selves? This springs out of the gender based individuation process of women and that most women solve it in their lives as well as in “life writings” by “underplaying” their inner selves. In other words, they subordinate their inner selves- making them “muted” to borrow a phrase from Showalter – to project an acceptable image of self. Hence, such a study opens new possibilities to understand the means for “evading an assertive self” in public in favor of a passive, private self, as a narrative strategy which reflects both a female dilemma and a female solution.

Biographies of Indira Gandhi indicate that belonging to a politically active family, Indira Gandhi was familiar to talks of jail-going, lathi charges, and secret parleying at a very tender age and this grooming in a charged atmosphere, transformed her into an indomitable Indira who shaped the country of her future. But the irony is, why did such a politically charged woman enter into politics hesitantly? Katherine Frank’s words seem to support this irony, “Intermittently the powerful woman had longed for a normal, private life ...” (217). The public/private dichotomy prevails even in the most elitist, as already discussed under the subtitle ‘Paternalistic Dominance: A System of Gender Dominance’. The patriarchal system is so well knit and entrenched that it is invincible. Moreover, it seems so natural that women themselves would
perpetuate the system. The male control over women does not necessarily mean that it leads to violence of all forms all the time under which women suffer. It rather could be very subtle that it can almost become invisible and therefore invincible.

2. Based on the argument in the second chapter, the thesis establishes that, love and patriarchy have become so unified in this society that many people, especially women, fear that eliminating patriarchy will lead to the loss of love. Not just loss of love, but the sense of loss of control. Patriarchy is synonymous to control, discipline, and order in the household. Thus the role propagated for women by men is that of homemaking, a way of life of a housewife, which both lauded, and limited, female creativity, smothering it with advice and instruction as well as restriction. The ideal of woman as homemaker and mistress of arts was grafted onto the housewifely role. Women too, accepted and absorbed this into their way of life. Women have internalized this concept so intensely that their conscience begins to trouble the moment they think there are other avenues open for them. A woman in general scorns to leave her housekeeping, the woman’s sphere.

Did Indira Gandhi come under such a spell? Had the passion of politics seized her before marriage, would no other love come between her and politics? How did she extricate herself from the devotion of housekeeping? Did she strongly believe in Friedan that the partial absence of women will make their husbands and children into better people and that woman, if they wish to be normal as well as moral they ought to choose career over marriage and motherhood? These questions challenge the facts about Indira Gandhi giving rise to doubt if facts get fictionalized while different depictions and interpretations are made by the biographers. However from the biographical
evidences it becomes apparent that Indira Gandhi the woman could not be separated from Indira Gandhi the prime minister.

3. The discussion of Indira Gandhi’s Biographies in chapter five establishes that not only the gender of the auto/biographical female self, but also the gender of the biographer plays a very important part in the construction of true biographical self. Different images of Indira Gandhi are created by different biographers. This again depends on the sex and cultural background of the biographers. The biographers, at one point or the other, agree that to assert her position as Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi had to confront with the Syndicate, the powerful group of kingmakers. Male biographers evaluate that people often took Indira Gandhi’s gender as a weakness. Indira was the ‘dumb doll’ in the Parliament. Indira’s antagonist Morarji Desai once referred to her as ‘this mere chokri’ (slip of a girl). Journalists called her ‘the little woman’.

All her biographers give credit to her as a “Crowd Puller” and her metamorphosis from the “gungi gudiya” to and iron lady’. Her male biographers attribute her success to her patriarchal rule as a matriarch one cannot but fail to notice the critical note in the words of Inder Malhotra , “...she was the ‘only man in a cabinet of old women”(91) was a back-handed one and really centered on women’s handicaps in politics.

This is to prove that women are the victims of de facto discrimination and that even if the law has been kind to women, other vehicles of ‘social control’ have not. Patriarchy, as an ideology, held men superior and responsible for those under their care. Society remains controlled in ways that favor men and disfavor women in the competitive race.
However female biographers credit Indira Gandhi as a mono androgynous personality (a single unitary personality type that embodies the best prevailing masculine and feminine gender traits,) suggesting she was both aggressive, initiative, competitive and at the same time tender, compassionate, and sensitive. Katherine Frank describes Indira as the heroine of the Pakistan war.

Indira was now elevated to god-like structure/She was praised in Parliament as a new D’urga, the Hindu goddess of war, and likened to Shakti, who represents female energy and power. Even the foreign press viewed her in grandiose terms as the new Frank writes, a 1971 American Gallup Poll “Indira was rated the most admired person in the world”. ..in the coming days and weeks, thousands of female babies born all over India were named Indira. ..(343).

4. The thesis upholds the researcher’s conviction that such a study of biographical study, works as a consciousness raising tool so that women autobiographers’ experience of subtle discrimination can seek public recognitions. When an entire culture and society sees a woman only as a ‘uterus first and a person second’ articulating expression in not only showing it out as a fact, in fact, as some feminists said articulating is a first step towards overthrowing it. As already mentioned earlier the life story of great woman leader, Mrs. Indira Gandhi will only be read as a cautionary tale as facts about her life are masked into fictions which appear as threatening to other women. Such a misreading will discourage the other women from emulating her as a role model. As aptly stated by Pupul Jayakar:

A “woman” so closely tuned to the country and its people; so complex, so skilful, so far seeing, so concerned, so capable of an insightful listening, so moved by beauty; and yet, at times, so primeval, so obsessive, so brittle, even trivial – a “woman” who refused to be measured, who laid her own ground rule.(399; emphasis added)
More specifically the qualities deemed masculine – for example, independence, rationality, assertiveness, physical strength and protectiveness—place men in relation of power over women, who are constructed as dependent, emotional, passive, weak and in need of protection. Even cultural studies and researchers opine that masculinities are sustained and enacted not only by individuals, but also by “groups”, institutions and cultural forms, corporations, workplaces, and the state which are the important sites of action. Collective struggle and the reshaping of the institutions are as necessary as the reforming of individual life. This study attests the fact that the postcolonial construct of ‘new woman’ has only reshaped the gender bias resulting in all kinds of exploitation and discriminatory practices.

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To conclude, this study of Nehru women’s auto/biographies propounds the hypothesis, stated in the ‘Introduction’, that the *Personal is Political* for almost all the auto/biographical female selves universally. How and why the *Personal is Political* is discussed in immense detail in the thesis. It is the socio-cultural prescription, intended for ‘feminine gender’ which commands their life and life-writings and prompts them to use strategies of hiding the political/public under the ‘personal’. With the change in the educational and social scenario, one may look forward to times when such hide and seek strategies will be no more needed. Concluding on a futuristic note one may dream of strong, successful achiever women who would not underplay their ‘self’, as the Nehru women do. However successful Nehru women had have been their auto/biographies do not break the pattern of patriarchal binary system. This area of auto/biographical study holds promising research possibilities as it encompasses all the components of life writing.
Works Cited


