CHAPTER II

THEORIES OF AUTO/BIOGRAPHY

Men attend to and treat as significant what men say and have said. The circle of men whose writing and talk have been significant to one another extends back in time as far as our records reach. What men were doing has been relevant to men, was written by men about men for men. Men listened and listen to what one another say. A tradition is formed, traditions form, in a discourse of the past with the present. The themes, problematic, assumptions, metaphors and images form as the circle of those present draws upon the work of those speaking from the past and builds it up to project it into the future.

(Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* 18; emphasis added)

The “circle effect” is in fact a closed circle. It supports the claim to universality by suppressing difference. When difference is interpreted as inappropriateness, instances of difference can be distanced and failed to be recognized. Even sometimes placed at the periphery and forgotten. Opening this area of discussion –positioning, the lack of correspondence between women’s accounts of lives and the generic standard can be interpreted as a fault or inadequacy of female autobiography, which can then be dismissed. This is the method of reading patriarchy.

The projection of maleness to universality pervades the literature on autobiography. Critics confess an intense interest arising from a sense of connection between themselves and the autobiographical subject. Roy Pascal notes that autobiographer and critic are drawn into the same orbit (1960). A conscious identification with the subject plays a significant role in the works of James Olney, a senior critic in the field of autobiography. On the whole Olney
is interested in why men write autobiographies, and have written them for centuries, and in why, after the lapse of those centuries, we continue to read them. He further states from autobiographers, we learn “what man has been, what forms have proved possible to humanity, which is a knowledge that one seeks with the intention more particularly of knowing what man is” (Metaphor, xx; emphasis added).

Olney chooses to study all men. Olney’s gendered discourse illustrates the powerful hold masculinity has on the genre, and the surprising blindness of respected scholars to issues of gender. The one-sidedness apparent in the critical literature on autobiography has a biasing effect on scholarship. Innovation in autobiography is incidental to the quest to inscribe the female subject. Feminist critics like Smith Sidonie have spotlighted the intersection of gender and genre, viewing autobiography as a generic contract that reproduces the patrilineage. (A Poetics, 82).

However, the politics of publication and posterity are apparent in the history of published autobiographies of women. Early autobiography has “disappeared”, permitting male scholars to assert their nonexistence. Some of the most commendable autobiographical works of women have been known to prior ages, and have only become “invisible”.

The impression that a women’s autobiographical tradition does not exist is readily driven out as Patricia K. Addis has published an extensive annotated bibliography of American women’s autobiographical writing. Activity in women’s history, in literature, and in the social sciences has, over the past twenty years, overturned this impression of absence to the female subject. Knowing women’s lives thus requires a revisionist method of reading that is open to a broader range of narrative.
In analyzing auto/biography, in the present chapter the stress is on its disposition of institutionalized masculinity. The generic/male subject nests within a masculine canon built upon commentary from male critics. Male experience is foundational. Correlatively, in almost all cases males are selected to typify knowledge, culture and history. A mutual exaggeration operates among this element that acts to naturalize the hegemony of the male subject and the male canon. The same critical processes that elevate the male subject disadvantage the female.

Therefore, the female autobiographer, starting into the mouth of the canon, confronts a number of out-of-the-way difficulties. First, the invisibility of women’s autobiography is a barrier to women’s self-writing. Women’s writing does not appear in the canon, is not held out to aspiring writers as exemplary literature, and is not apparent as the standard to be met or extended.

As Joanna Russ observes in *How Suppress Women’s Writing* (1983), women denied access to the feminine literary tradition carry the heavy burden of having to reinvent it in every generation (63). A second, related difficulty is the painful awareness that there are no “great” woman writers. The conviction is paralleled in literature, social science, and behavioral science. A third is that women’s writing is pushed to the periphery of every tradition, and its content devaluated.

Thus, the buoyant effect of the masculine tradition constitutes a fourth problem: male models cast an undeniable shadow over women considering, attempting, or struggling to write their own lives. Fifthly, female autobiographies suffer consequences, in the form of penalty at the hands of male critics.
However the evaluation of women’s autobiography and its possibilities for publication and of inclusion in the canon are affected by its failure to fit the gendered template of the genre. The sixth consequence of masculinized autobiography is the perpetuation of faculty scholarship. Biased citation practices in favor of male autobiography ensure that work on woman fails to become more acceptable over time.

Nevertheless, *Personal is Political* writing her life drives the female subject into the realm of genre with all its institutional effects. Her “personal narrative is inextricably bound up with the dynamics of power: through her “private” writing the female subject engages the forces of patriarchy. It is absolutely true that for women autobiographer, *Personal is Political as* the strategies they deploy are framed by the gendered arrangements of institutional autobiography.

The focus is on the concept of ‘Gynocentric’ orientation of gender difference which can be used to understand women’s autobiography. Personal will remain political as it is supported by the ‘feminist thinking’ which upholds “difference” as the key term. In this light of gender theory the thesis undertakes to re-read the auto/biographies of Nehru women.

**The Evolution of Male Auto/biographical Theory:**

The attempts to ascertain a theory of autobiography are fairly recent despite the long history and great variety of the subject. In 1981 Albert E. Stone could still describe the study of autobiography as “an important new field for scholars and critics” (1). Only two years later, however, in 1983 Avrom Fleishman contested that, “No one can tell what autobiography is, yet that has not dispelled a surge of recent efforts to define it” (53). These
efforts, of course, draw more questions than answers, and the growing struggle of voices, soon became the subject of criticism.

The rationale in this chapter is a comprehensive attempt to explore ‘auto/biography’ as a genre and how it became a contested area for both men and women auto/biographers respectively. This section is neither a complete survey of theories of autobiography, nor a particular study of one critical approach, but rather an exploration of how this growing field reflects the larger academic study of literature as well as history.

The opening round is to look for the origins of auto/biography as a genre. However the course of interest in the study of autobiography that marks the final decades of the century is then explored in the context of evolving critical theories about the different ways to define or construct the meaning of ‘self’ and ‘subject’. The shift in critical agenda from the identity crisis of postmodernism and deconstruction to the politics of race, class, and gender is finally seen to have influenced, if not demanded, the current interest in and need for theories of autobiography.

The word “autobiography” was invented in 1797 by a linguist who perceives the need for a common term in English to cover the many different accounts that authors make of their own experience. The creation of a new word from classical roots was typical of the 18th century with its special concern for dictionaries, but the story of how and why “autobiography” was coined into English was not told until 1976 when Thomas Cooley reported how the word was first used in a work of professional criticism, and why the creator of “autobiography” was concerned about the new word sounding rather “pedantic” (3).
While other labels such as “memoir” and “life” continued to be favored by authors well into the 19th century, editors and scholars began to adopt the word “autobiography” to designate this genre of writing about the self. A field of study then started to emerge as different examples of autobiography from past centuries were brought together under the new label. The first appearance of “autobiography” in a title was for an 1832 edition of The Autobiography of Thomas Shepard. When this Puritan minister wrote the account of his life in the 17th century, he merely called it “My Birth and Life,” but two hundred years later an editor could decide upon the more formal title. In the same way, the memoirs left by Benjamin Franklin were becoming known in the middle of the 19th century as his Autobiography.

Thus, a word that did not exist during the life of either gentleman became a common label for their different records of personal experience. The invention of “autobiography” as a critical term marks the birth of a genre— which goes back at least as far as Augustine, but in theory which has been called forth by the act of definition. Once the terms and attitudes were in place to consider autobiography as a particular kind of writing, the time had come to recommend the genre as a crucial form of evidence for the study of social and cultural history.

Correspondingly like any other branch of literature, even ‘Biography’ has passed through a long process of evolution. Such a process has necessarily varied from country to country, and from age to age. Its forms have been many and varied to suit the changing concepts of the age and sources of patronage behind the literary—cum-historical venture. The classification of biography is, thus, found to have been applied indiscriminately to extensive objects—mythological, religious and even legendary, presented in an utterly informative manner. It took many years for the proper attributes of biography to emerge and
develop. The “Golden Age” of English biography emerged in the late eighteenth century, the century in which the terms “biography” and “autobiography” entered the English lexicon.

Commonly, ‘Biography’ is a written account of the life of a particular person from birth to death. It attempts to elucidate the facts about the person’s life and actions and draws a coherent picture of a self, personality, or character. A Biography can be identified with a literary text which provides a powerful understanding of the ways in which society works. In the past few decades, it has become a topic of central interest for literary and cultural theory. Biography has evolved from the genre of novel and hence it is considered as another form of genre.

However, the writers of medieval biography mainly branded as hagiography, the recounting of saints’ lives. They were less concerned with detailing the events of a life or even depicting an actual person than with presenting an exemplary model of human piety. Whether it took a saint or a ruler as its subject, medieval biography often relied on legend and was intended to make a moral point rather than to represent and examine human life.

Not surprising, the Renaissance ushered in a new focus on the individual, and it became far less common for biographers to turn their subjects into illustrations or exaggerated human types. Seventeenth century England witnessed not only the birth of the detailed secular biography but also the birth of biography as term. John Dryden, who first used it in 1683, defined biography as the history of particular men’s lives.

The classic works of the period were Samuel Johnson's *Critical Lives of the Poets* (1779–81) and James Boswell's massive *Life of Johnson* (1791). The
complexity and popularity of biography as a literary genre, however, increased most markedly during the eighteenth century of England. James Boswell made Johnson the subject of his 1791 *Life of Johnson*, thought by many to be the greatest biography of all time. By using concrete details and examples to flesh out a character and his ways of thinking and feeling, Boswell helped establish the authenticity of biography. He also helped establish essential freedom of the biographer to reach out and examine anything that might facilitate or deepen the reader’s understanding of the subject.

The Boswellian approach to biography emphasized uncovering material and letting the subject "speak for itself." While Boswell compiled, Samuel Johnson composed. Johnson did not follow a chronological narration of the subject's life but used anecdotes and incidents selectively. Samuel Johnson wrote fifty-two biographical studies, including lives of the poets Milton, Dryden, and Pope. Johnson rejected the notion that facts revealed truth. The romantic biographers disputed many of Johnson's judgments. Much of late 19th-century biography remained standard. During the subsequent Victorian period, the view of biography as a revealing and critical endeavor had to contend with the implied notion that biography should not shake the public’s faith in its great men and women. Thus what was suppressed before in the interest of ethical or historical coherence became therefore, by the end of the twentieth century, the very rough-edged core of biography.

In the age of Freud, biographers used psychological insights to turn marble into flesh, and sometimes into weak flesh. As Marc Pachter in *Telling Lives: The Biographer’s Art* (1979) remarks:

Life—writing, in the aftermath of Victorianism, took on some of the aspects of expose. It was a period of anti heroism, of the
destruction of the public myth. At his least pleasant, the new biographer was a smug practitioner of oneupsmanship, who bled a life dry of its vitality and authority. (12)

Thus, the development of psychoanalysis led to a more penetrating and comprehensive understanding of the biographical subject, and induced biographers to give more emphasis to childhood and adolescence. Clearly, psychological ideas were changing the way Americans read and wrote biographies, as a culture of autobiography developed in which the telling of one’s own story became a form of therapy. The conventional concept of national heroes and narratives of success disappeared in the obsession with psychological explorations of personality. Marc Pachter affirms:

Modern biographers are far less likely to “expose” a life, to treat its public ideals and manners, its perfected sense of self, as an ironic backdrop to the true inner drama of character. The biographer is less the judge or debunker: He is far more willing to accept as valid and revealing, if not as literary true, an individual’s improved presentation of himself before the world. (13)

This new school of biography featured iconoclasts, scientific analysts, and fictional biographers. This wave included Lytton Strachey, Gamaliel Bradford, André Maurois, and Emil Ludwig among others. Strachey's biographies had an influence similar to that which Samuel Johnson had enjoyed earlier. In the 1920s and ’30s, biographical writers sought to benefit from Strachey's popularity and imitate his style. Therefore the trend in literary biography was accompanied in popular biography by a sort of "celebrity voyeurism." in the early decades of the century.

Ongoing efforts in a variety of disciplines to bring out the centrality of ‘autobiography’ and ‘biography’ have located these genres in an
interdisciplinary context; one in which categories of experience, identity and subjectivity are reworked. As Robert M. Young has written, in an article this argues for biography as ‘the basis discipline for human science’, a ‘key to epistemology in action’:

One of the things I like most about biography is that it celebrates…. The history of ideas, narrative, will, character and the validity of the subject’s subjectivity. In biography at its best, these are combined with structural and epochal causation and the historicity of the construction of the subject and subjectivity. (108)

The interest in biography and autobiography of which this is an example recalls many of the themes of the turn-of-the-century discussions in which these forms of writing and cognition were central to the constitution of the ‘human sciences’. The German historian and philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) was the key figure in this process. Thus from this point this chapter shall pursue the contour of approaches from Dilthey and his disciple Georg Misch through to the existentialist Georges Gusdorf and to historical approaches to autobiography in.

In the theories on auto/biographies Dilthey’s emphases is on historicity as a medium shared by all and auto/biography as a mode of understanding, of self and other. This inclusive, rather than exclusive, concept of historical consciousness is central to recent work on women’s history and life histories. Both biography and autobiography are central to Dilthey’s project in at least two ways. First, these genres form broader forms of history, and to some extent providing their foundations. Secondly, one of the ways in which the rather undifferentiated category of ‘life’ becomes concretized is through an essentially biographical concept of the life-course or life-as-lived.
Dilthey’s remarks on biography and autobiography are primarily contained in his *Drafts for a critique of historical reason*, part of a collection published in 1910. Dilthey views biography as a development out of autobiography within conceptions of the self and history; the biographer makes the crucial move from self-understanding to understanding of an other. Autobiography is the literary expression of this reflection by the individual on the course of his life. When, however this reflection on one’s own life is extended to the understanding of another existence, biography arises as the literary form of the understanding of another life. One of the most frequently quoted statements in autobiographical criticism stated in *Wilhelm Dilthey: Selected Writings* (1976) is Dilthey’s remark that “In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life” (214).

Dilthey, however, also views biography as a development out of autobiography within conceptions of the self and history; the biographer makes the crucial move form self-understanding to understanding of an other. Autobiography is the literary expression of this reflection by the individual on the course of his life. When, however, this reflection on one’s own life is extended to the understanding of another existence, biography arises as the literary form of the understanding of another life.

In Dilthey’s system of classifications, ‘Biography’ is also viewed as having a more difficult and demanding relationship to history-writing than autobiography, not because it involves a different kind of ‘truth’, but because it requires a ‘double focus’, thus presenting the biographer with a perhaps insuperable problem: the difficulty of maintaining a focus both on the individual and on ‘contemporary history’. In other words Dilthey asserts, “the art form of
biography can only be applied to historical personalities, for only in them is the power to make up such a centre” (250).

The broader context for Dilthey’s arguments is the issue of whether biography can claim a “scientific” status equivalent to that of history-writing. However Dilthey’s theories have been read as a powerful valorization of the autobiographical form and of individual subjectivity as a central principle. All the above observations qualify Dilthey’s statement that “In autobiography we encounter the highest and most instructive form of the understanding of life” (214)

Again at the beginning of this century Georg Misch was almost alone in devoting his scholarly life to the study of autobiography. Misch choose to emphasise the radical heterogeneity of autobiographical forms. As he asserts in *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (1950) that autobiography is unlike any other form of literary composition:

> Its boundaries are more fluid and less definable in relation to form than those of lyric or epic poetry or of drama. Autobiography is one of the innovations brought by cultural advance, yet it springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting the sympathetic understandings of others; or the need for self-assertion. In itself it is a representation of life that is committed to no definite form (4)

For Misch the importance of subject/object identity is most important. As discussed in *A History of Autobiography in Antiquity* (1950) Misch is more concerned with the “fundamental - and enigmatical - psychological phenomenon which we call consciousness of self or self-awareness….In a certain sense the history of autobiography is a history of human self-awareness”( 8). The terms ‘self-revelation’ and ‘self –awareness’ can be seen as
synonymous with ‘self-assertion’ in Misch’s approach to autobiography. There are points in Misch’s introduction in which he calls even more plainly on the language power; for example, in defining the forms of relationships with the world manifested in autobiographies, he states that “among the special relationships in life it is chiefly the self assertion of that political will and the relation of the author to his work and to the public that show themselves to be normative in the history of autobiography” (14). Misch’s views reveals the extent to which the auto/biography is bound up with the issues of power and powerlessness.

Literature and history become interchangeable when all writing is interpreted as a form of power. Any work of literature is then a social and political act; any description of the past appeal to such narrative concerns as point of view, selection of detail, and concept of audience. The critical study of autobiography explain how any personal statement could be viewed as a political act, and conversely how all forms of social and political discourse both disguise and promote definitions of self.

Following Dilthey’s and Misch’s theory three principal lines of development took place. The first is the autobiographical theory of the existentialist phenomenologist Georges Gusdorf, which became influential through his essay “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie” (1956). The second is represented in autobiographical criticism by Roy Pascal’s Design and Truth in Autobiography (1960) and Karl Weintraub’s The Value of the Individual (1978)—both strongly influenced by Dilthey’s and Misch’s writings on autobiography.

Autobiography is itself a fundamental form of narrative inquiry, as there exists a valuable opportunity for examining the conditions and limits of
narrative study. Georges Gusdorf’s “Conditions et limites de l’ autobiographie” was originally published in a Festschrift in Germany, reprinted in Lejeune’s _L’Autobiographie en France_ (1971) and translated and reprinted in James Olney’s _Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical_, which set the terms for many of the debated about autobiography, in the 1980s. “In the beginning, then, was George Gusdorf”, Olney asserts in the overview of autobiography and autobiographical criticism with which he introduces _Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical_: “It is only with Gusdorf’s essay….that all the questions and concerns—philosophical, psychological, literary, and more generally humanistic—that have preoccupied students of autobiography from 1956 to 1978 were first fully and clearly laid out and given comprehensive, if necessary brief, consideration”(8).

Georges Gusdorf’s “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” however, provides a particularly informative, as well as provocative, treatment of the birth of autobiographical understanding as well as that of the elusive being called the self. It proved to be milestone in the history of critical literature of autobiography, his concept is based on the model of a self that is Western and individualistic.

Gusdorf further emphasizes that the man who takes delight in thus drawing his own image believes himself worthy of a special interest as he states: “I count, my existence is significant to the world, and my death will leave the world incomplete. In narrating my life, I give witness of myself even from beyond my death and so can preserve this precious capital that ought not to disappear” (Gusdorf 29). Thus the ‘conditions’ for autobiography are, in Gudorf’s view, historical and cultural: “the genre of autobiography seems limited in time and space: it has not always existed nor does it exist everywhere” (29). Both historical consciousness and individualism are essential
preconditions: “at the cost of a cultural revolution humanity must have emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachings and must have entered into the perilous domain of history” (29-30).

Nevertheless the importance of historic personage emerges in biography, which becomes established as a literary genre. But, Gusdorf asserts:

> Biography provides only an exterior presentation of great persons… The appearance of autobiography implies a new spiritual revolution: the artist and the model coincide; the historian tackles himself as object…Our interest is turned from public to private history…. This conversion is late in coming insofar as it corresponds to a difficult evolution – or rather to an *involution* of consciousness. (31-32)

To the “light clear space” of exteriority and the public world, Gusdorf contrasts the “shadowy nature of interior space”. As he remarks whereas biography is a straightforwardly achieved enterprise, legitimated in the public sphere, autobiography involves “the complex and agonizing sense that the encounter of a man with his image carries” (32). The discovery of self is both difficult and perplexing. Gusdorf relates the emergence of autobiography to the invention of the mirror, while “autobiography is the mirror in which the individual reflects his own image”. Thus Gusdorf’s account of mirroring has been taken as a simple assertion of autobiography’s ability to reflect the self “as it is”, he in fact emphasizes that “the narrative of a life cannot be simply the image –double of that life” (40).

Thus in Gusdorf’s account, autobiography is both a historically situated manifestation of “self-discovery” and the means by which the anxieties arising from this self-encounter, which “Nature did not foresee” (32) are appeased through the autobiographical assertion of self-identity and unity across time. However, it is also important for Gusdorf’s later arguments in the essay that the
difficulty and complexity of the ‘original’ self-encounter be stressed. Gusdorf does well to describe the view of personhood that is generally associated with the mythical worldview:

Throughout most of human history, the individual does not oppose himself to all others; he does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. No one is rightful possessor of his life or his death; lives are so thoroughly entangled that each of them has its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere. The important unit is thus never the isolated being—or, rather, isolation is impossible in such a scheme of total cohesiveness as this….Each man thus appears as the possessor of a role, already performed by the ancestors and to be performed again by descendants. (29–30)

The humanity Gusdorf is referring to is distinctly pre-autobiographical. The reason is straightforward enough, according to Gusdorf: “Autobiography is not possible in a cultural landscape where consciousness of self does not, properly speaking, exist” (30). Gusdorf opens himself up to a number of possible criticisms in this context. It can be argued, for instance, that the “isolated being” that emerges out of the socially cohesive, interdependent web of human relations itself bespeaks a mode of existence problematically disconnected from others.

Autobiographical scholars tend to agree that Saint Augustine invented autobiography as a form, at the turn of the fourth and fifth centuries, with his Confessions, although Rousseau’s similarly named Confessions written in the 1760s established it as a modern genre of literary expression. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Confessions is usually held up as the first example of autobiography as a celebration of unique individualism. Rousseau tries to retrieve a sense of uniqueness by an obsessive search for his real self, without reference to the
transcendent. The true object of his *Confessions* (1953) he explains, is to “reveal my inner thoughts” to narrate “the history of my soul” (262). To write the history of the soul, he continues, “it is enough if I enter again into my inner self, as I have done till now” (262).

Autobiography, in the hands of Rousseau, is also a means to project an idealized self, filtered through the device of memory, for only the best and most significant aspects of his personality find a ground for expression. In both Wordsworth and Rousseau self-expression thus means a celebration of the powers of the individual soul to expand and reach out to the external world so that it is in tune with the cosmic harmony. But while following the footsteps of his predecessors, he chooses the journal form to show the gradual stages of realization whereby he comes into contact with a higher reality.

As, critics claim the advent of a shift from a God-centered universe to a man-centered universe, furnished a different context for autobiography in America. Benjamin Franklin, considered to be America’s first great man of letters, changed the course of autobiographical writing in America by structuring it on secular and utilitarian lines. James M. Cox comments: “With Franklin came consciousness, total consciousness in the form of autobiography — a history of a self-made life written by a man who made it” (19). In his autobiography, the conversion of the inner self/private self into a social and political self is principal.

Franklin dramatizes the liberation of the self from prior adherence whether in the family or in religion. While promoting individual prosperity, he suggests that while pursuing it, the individual is also participating in a national pattern. Personal history is thus equated to national history. Franklin’s story is
held up as a model; his individual history becomes identical with the values, mission and destiny of the nation.

Self-examination in Franklin, unlike the soul-searching of the early religious autobiographers, was to convert his private emotions into a public one, so that future generations could benefit by his revelations. Like the early writers, Franklin too rendered his life as typical and ideal. Self-liberation, self control, individual-freedom, social order — these were some of the values he tried to reconcile in his work. With him autobiography emerged as a self-conscious art form away from the traditional and theological framework of Puritan and Quaker autobiographies.

Franklin’s autobiography is a fitting example of the typical male autobiography. In the introduction to his *Autobiography* (1771), Benjamin Franklin writes to his son:

Now imagining it may be equally agreeable to you to know the Circumstances of my Life, many of which you are yet unacquainted with; and expecting a Week’s uninterrupted Leisure in my present Country Retirement, I sit down to write them for you…. Having emerged from the Poverty and Obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a State of Affluence and some Degree of reputation in the World, and having gone so far through Life with a considerable Share of Felicity, the conducting Means I made use of, which, with the Blessing of God, so well succeeded, my Posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own Situations, and therefore fit to be imitated. (226-27, capitalization as in original)

It is apparent upon observing Franklin’s autobiography that the purpose of writing his story is to create a document of his life, so that others can follow his example. At some point, it is understood and it is implicit that the world would be much better if this man would share his story.
Even, Montaigne and Goethe, established new, and still more internalized, dimensions of autobiographical understanding. In the case of Goethe’s (1994) autobiography, *From My Life: Poetry and Truth*, the situation is somewhat different. There is the recognition that in trying to understand and write about oneself one cannot attain the same degree—or, perhaps more appropriately, the same kind—of objectivity as is possible in history or in biography. Even Weintraub (1975) comments on definitional issues related to autobiography can be useful in this context:

The essential subject matter of all autobiographic writing is concretely experienced reality and not the realm of brute external fact. External reality is embedded in experience, but it is viewed from within the modification of inward life forming our experience; external fact attains a degree of symptomatic value derived from inward absorption and reflection. . . . Autobiography [therefore] presupposes writer intent upon reflection on this inward realm of experience, someone for whom this inner world of experience is important. (822–823)

Reference to the work of Roy Pascal, is one of the central strand of European nineteenth – and twentieth century thought, running across the whole political spectrum from Marxist socialism to Fascism. Described by William Spengemann’s in *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980) as “the first extended theoretical work”(182) on autobiography in the English language, Roy Pascal’s *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (1960) has been an influential text in the field of contemporary autobiographical studies, as well as literary criticism more generally. Many of his formulations are familiar from earlier criticism, but they appear here in a more comprehensive form. Pascal states that:

autobiography proper….involves the reconstruction of a moment of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it
was lived. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that, in give and take with it, the personality finds its peculiar shape. But ‘reconstruction of a life’ is an impossible task…….It imposes a pattern on a life, constructs out of it a coherent story…in every case it is [the writer’s] present position which enables him to see his life as something of a unity, something that may be reduced to order.(9)

Pascal also reinforces the perception of autobiography as an essentially European form which transcends national boundaries: “of all literary forms,[autobiography] is the one least affected by national characteristics and most indicative of a common European culture”(180). Nonetheless Pascal argues that whereas the great autobiographies of the classical age achieved a synthesis between individualism and awareness of historical circumstance, modern autobiography reveals a lack of relationship between self and history, inner and outer, ‘personal and social being’: “I do not think one can evade the conclusion that the supreme task of autobiography is not fulfilled in modern autobiography” (160).

The American historian Karl J. Weintraub’s approach to autobiography is that of the intellectual historian and he seeks to establish two lines of historical development: firstly, the emergence of an ‘historical consciousness’ in Western culture, and secondly, the growth of individuality as a value. In his essay “Autobiography and Historical Consciousness”, Karl J. Weintraub argues that autobiography as a genre developed its full potential only when Western man acquired a thoroughly historical understanding of existence.

Weintraub’s The Value of Individual: Self and Circumstance in Autobiography (1978) focuses on the issue of ‘representative’ nature of autobiographical texts. He discusses the ‘lessons’ of autobiography for contemporary society in overtly political terms, rather than remaining with
discussions of the development of the genre: “Our lives seem beset by the implications of social theories. Thus, the study of autobiography might provide some insight to help us cope with our problems” (378).

Actually, the approaches to autobiography in critical movements located primarily in France and North America, with a particular focus on questions of subjectivity. The interest in autobiography was also substantially inspired by a reaction against the so-called “bloodless formalisms” of North American New Criticism in the 1940s and 1950s. Thus, while the study of autobiography grew in the 1980s with several monographs about different types of personal narrative, often with particular attention to race and gender, that the nature of the genre remains debatable is evident from the publication of essay collections which are designed to reflect, if not to bring together the long opposed critical views.

Two volumes edited by James Olney, for example, focus on the task of rethinking the past and future of critical theory pertaining to autobiography. The first, Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical (1980), includes a translation of an early essay by George Gusdorf on the "conditions and limits" of autobiography, and the second, Studies in Autobiography (1988), has essays which explore personal narrative in terms of race, class, and gender. However the contradictions and limits of autobiography are thus expanded to be a sign of the growth of critical trends throughout the decade. James Olney a strong promoter of ‘autobiographical studies’ revealed strong association to phenomenological criticism and to the work of Georges Gusdorf in particular. In his introduction to Autobiography: Essay Theoretical and Critical, “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment”, Olney asserts that Gusdorf’s “Conditions et limites de l’ autobiographie” (1956) marked the beginning of critical and theoretical interest in autobiography.
In his influential collections of essays, *Autobiography: Essay Theoretical and Critical* (1980), James Olney writes: “autobiography, like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts; it refuses, simply, to be a literary genre like any other”(24). James Olney’s first study of autobiography, *Metaphors of Self* (1972), is also concerned with autobiography as a mode of consciousness rather than of writing. He alters the argument away from the history and form of autobiography in order to explore what he calls its “philosophy and psychology” (viii).

Olney is less interested in defining autobiography as a literary genre, a task he dismisses as “not particularly desirable or significant” (39), than he is in establishing how and why a writer creates a self in terms of metaphor. Analyzing a writer's motives (the psychological aspect), and discussing the nature of reality generated by self-images (the philosophical aspect), Olney goes well beyond the New Critical dogma that implied a separation of texts from ideas of intention or empowerment.

Although Olney sees a “vital impulse to order” inherent in the act of writing, and describes autobiography as “a metaphor of the self at the summary moment of composition”(35), for him the text is not a separate artifact that can be understood apart from the author, but rather a “monument of the self,” and the world is no longer a neutral object to be viewed scientifically, but instead something created through perception: “One creates from moment to moment and continuously the reality to which one gives a metaphoric name and shape, and that shape is one's own shape” (34).

The study of autobiography entered the 1980s with a growing need to make clear where it stood amidst the competition of new and different critical
voices. William Spengemann’s *The Forms of Autobiography: Episodes in the History of a Literary Genre* (1980) traces the forms of autobiography according to “changing ideas about the nature of self” which he sees in terms of history, philosophy, and poetry (xiii), each of which he defines as a stage in the development of the genre. First type is “historical autobiography” which assumes a kind of self-knowledge based upon a true and stable account of the past. This form, of course, predates most questions about “true” and “self” which render problematic the separation of author and history. The second form is “philosophical autobiography” which reflects a changing self determined by a mixture of present and past circumstance. The final type is “poetic autobiography” which occurs when the self can be represented only through the performance of symbolic action.

Nevertheless Albert E. Stone as the editor of *The American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1981) describes autobiography as “simultaneously historical record and literary artifact, psychological case history and spiritual confession, didactic essay and ideological testament” (2). The list of claims is familiar enough, but the word “simultaneously” now has special value. Autobiography is defined as a series of paradoxes: fact and fiction, private and communal, lessons and lies. Instead of attempting to resolve these contradictions, Stone is content to describe the genre as the sum of its many critical definitions. If the nature of self is challenged by either psychological or linguistic theory, Stone asserts that the self revealed in autobiography is “both actor and author” (2).

Such a critical compromise makes a virtue of necessity, and allows Stone to argue that autobiography is relevant to “most of the compartments of public and private experience which in western cultures have been organized into the social sciences and humanities” (2). The universal claim voiced by Dilthey
more than a century ago-autobiography is “the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life confronts us”—thus finds an unexpected echo in the words of a contemporary editor like Stone who embraces the contradictions in theory to form an all-encompassing canon for the study of autobiography. The extent to which Stone is reluctant to abandon either of these earlier claims can be seen from his observation that “the study of autobiography is a participant-observer science or art, like anthropology” (9).

Today, what concerns critics are such questions as: who benefits when autobiography is written, published, and accepted by readers and scholars? How are various claims for social and cultural advanced by the retelling and analysis of life stories? What power is granted when examples of autobiography are nominated for the canons of literature, cultural history, and criticism? Such questions, of course, all illustrate how the growing interest in autobiographical study continues to mirror the larger convergence of history and literary criticism.

The way that power relationships are placed at the center of the present attempt to define and describe the nature of autobiography is also well represented in a 1991 collection of essays, American Autobiography, Retrospect and Prospect edited by Paul John Eakin. The attempt to “offer a comprehensive picture of the state of the field today” (15) results in a volume of essays with considerable emphasis upon the cultural diversity and pluralism of autobiographical practice. Separate chapters are devoted to autobiographies by women, immigrants, Afro-Americans, and Native Americans.

The categories into which autobiographical criticism is grouped thus follow directly from the politics of race, class, and gender. “One model for the history of the genre,” suggests Eakin, “might well be the ongoing interplay
between dominant and marginal texts” (10). The study of autobiography in such a postmodern society is, more than ever, a mirror of critical value and method.

There is no way round the fact that the discourse of the growth of human individuality, from classicist Greece through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, is lastingly masculinist. What autobiographical discourse has traditionally offered is a way of ordering or even constructing conceptions of human nature drawn from culturally desirable models, which rarely if ever included women. The actuality is women did write, and in many cases publish autobiographies, from the Middle Ages onwards, secular and religious, but these rarely achieve full canonical status. It is of course enormously important to re-examine these texts, and thus to redress the historically well-established difference.

However to rework the history and theory of autobiography also requires a theoretical approach which would explore the gender connotations of individualism.

The Female Autobiographical Tradition:

Mapping the history of female autobiographical writing is vital to define the groundwork and specific characteristics of the autobiographical corpus. Autobiography as a genre and as an interdisciplinary field of study has become a subject matter of increasing interest for scholars and theorists in the last two decades. As discussed in the earlier section historically, men alone have had access to the public voice and the political arena, areas of exposure and empowerment. Just as patriarchal values and structures have informed social arrangements, so too have male views and values defined literary practice, even to the seemingly most personal of domains or genres of literary production.
Men have constructed language that reflects their power. By creating the standards to be met as individuals both public and private, men have been sanctioned to propagate their self-constructed importance through the genre of autobiography. Women, denied access to public life, were thereby denied access to the standards for recognition and success created by men. Women were denied access to the autobiographical mode because it was presumed that they had no experience worth writing, let alone reading, about.

Women's work was commonly received as fiction, albeit autobiographical fiction, whether that was their intention or not. When canonical and gendered expectations of the autobiographer determine appropriate starting and ending points, the woman who does not ‘identify’ feels compelled to fit her written self to the template. Personal transformation is traditionally seen as heroic, desirable, and central to the autobiographical project. Yet feminist readings of autobiography have shown how inappropriate such a model often is to women.

Lately, autobiography or self-life writing has seen a flourishing of critical interest. Feminist literary critics have responded to the overwhelmingly gendered theories of autobiography which have conventionally been expounded. For the longest time it seemed that a male canonical template for autobiography dominated, and even where women did write their lives, they did so by challenging the template or making it their own, often at some cost.

Feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter paved a way for critiquing women’s writing, not from the traditional male-perspective, but from the alternate female-perspective. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in her article, “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), Showalter coins the term “gynocritics” to describe literary criticism based on a feminine perspective. Showalter explains,
In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adopt male models and theories. Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture. (“Towards Feminist” 131)

She further explains that the goal of gynocritics is not to erase the differences between male and female writing; rather gynocritics aims to understand the specificity of women’s writing as a fundamental aspect of female reality. Showalter’s concept of “feminist-poetics”, in 1979, stimulated the feminist critical thinking about women’s autobiographical writings. For the last three decades feminist critics of women’s autobiographies have been invariably working towards proposing and propounding various theories in order to understand different patterns of women’s writing.

However female autobiographical writing marked its entrance into the literary world as an independent segment of literature only in 1980 with the publication of Estelle C. Jelinek’s first anthology of essays, Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism (1980). The first book published on women’s autobiography. Rather the first major academic feminist theorizing of autobiographical writing. Its editorial approach emphasizes the existence and importance of women’s autobiographies in the face of a refusal to ‘see’ them on the part of many writers about autobiography, and also draws crucial connections between autobiography and other forms of life-writing. However, Jelinek’s Women’s autobiography, as its prime task had to insist upon the re-evaluation of women’s lives and experiences as important and worthy of serious study. The title of the book parallels and responds to Olney’s. A critical inquiry
into women’s experience as the basis of their autobiographical practice was the focal point in the essay, “Women’s Autobiography and the Male Tradition” (1980).

So, it raised two central questions of feminist autobiography theory: ‘narrative form’ and the ‘fragmentation of the self’. Jelinek calls for diverse kinds of analysis to be brought to reading women’s autobiography: “the historical, the social, the psychological, and the ethnic”, as well as “rhetorical, post structuralist, and Jungian” (10) analysis.

In her collection of essays, Jelinek points out differences in the autobiographies of women and men. She argues that at the level of content men distance themselves in autobiographies that are “success stories and histories of their eras” (Jelinek, “Women’s” 10) and remain focused on their professional lives, while women’s life writings emphasize personal and domestic details and describe connection to other people. She further argues that at the level of writing life narrative, men aggrandize themselves in autobiographies that “idealize their lives or cast them into heroic molds to project their universal importance” (Jelinek, “Women’s” 14-15). Women by contrast, seek to authenticate themselves in stories that reveal “a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding” (Jelinek, “Women’s” 15), employing understatement to mask their feelings and play down public aspects of their lives.

While suggesting a contrast at the level of temporality, Jelinek argues, men shape the events of their “lives into coherent wholes characterized by linearity, harmony and orderliness” (“Women’s” 16). Irregularity, however, characterizes the lives of women and their texts, which have a “disconnected, fragmentary… Pattern of diffusion and diversity” (Jelinek, “Women’s” 17) in
discontinuous forms because “the multidimensionality of women’s socially conditioned roles seems to have established a pattern of diffusion and diversity when they write” (Jelinek, “Women’s” 19). At the same time marks that women have been and still are prolific writers of diaries, journals and notebooks, in contrast to many more men who write in large majority what she terms “autobiography proper” (19).

Jelinek links women’s use of these forms with the fragmented nature of women’s selves and lives. As she give emphasis to the fact that “From earliest times, these discontinuous forms have been important to women because they are analogous to the fragmented, interrupted, and formless nature of their lives” (19). Jelinek points out that while fragmented narratives are also written by men, they are fragmented in different ways and for different reasons. This means that a pattern of discontinuity consistently characterizes women’s autobiography just as it marks their lives. This establishes the notion that the formation of the women’s autobiographical corpus is coterminous with the division of female authors from the traditional autobiographical genre that identifies the autobiographer as ‘male’.

Mary G Mason, in her essay, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers” (1980), addresses the issue of differing agendas for women versus men who write autobiographically. To strengthen her argument, Mason given examples of four women autobiographers – Julian, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet. Mason states that nowhere in women’s autobiographies do we find the patterns established by the two prototypical male autobiographers, Augustine and Rousseau; and conversely male writes never take up the archetypal models of Julian, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish and Anne Bradstreet (“Other Voice” 210). Instead, she tells us that an element, however, that seems more or less constant in women’s life-
writing and “this is not the case in men’s life-writing, [it] is the sort of evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity”. (Mason, “Other Voice” 231)

Mason’s study of these four early women autobiographers establishes a radical difference between men’s and women’s autobiographical writing. She argues that women recognize another consciousness in their search to establish their own identity; “the grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems, if we may judge by our four representative cases, to enable women to write openly about themselves”. (Mason, “Other Voice” 210)

By using phrases such as, “the merging of her private consciousness with her collective consciousness”, “evolution and delineation of an identity by way of alterity”, “the double focus writer”, Mason emphasizes that women’s autobiographical writings do not merely reflect the individual. Alterity, the act of defining themselves in relation to the other, provides a clear distinction between the traditions of female and male autobiographical writers.

Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her article, “Selves in Hiding” (1980), highlights this trait of women’s autobiographies and searches for the roots of such a tendency in the socio-cultural patriarchal set up; finally concluding her article with the finding that this is a typical female strategy. In autobiographies by famous professional women too, we find that work life is conspicuous by its absence. Most women refer to their careers only indirectly. Writer of twenty famous novels, Ellen Glasgow, in her autobiography, The Woman Within (1954), does not mention her successful public career as a writer.

Mainly, a split female self, wavering between ‘public’ and ‘private’ worlds and finding it difficult to inhabit both, is a familiar characteristic of women’s autobiographies. Often work life is only indirectly referred to while
charting out ups and downs in a woman’s life for the benefit of future generations. Elizabeth Candy Stanton states in her preface to *Eighty Years and More* (1898):

> The story of my private life as wife… A housekeeper… Mother of seven children may amuse and benefit the reader. The incidents of my public career as a leader in … the emancipation of woman will be found in “The History of Woman Suffrage”. (V)

This emphasis of women on their personal relationships rather than on their work life, professional success or connectedness to current political, religious or intellectual history, contrasts with the contents of male autobiographies and established criterion of the canon. Certain autobiographers, mostly women and marginals, have refused to reveal their identity to the world in writing their autobiographies. This has been done to keep their “selves in hiding” due to the fear of being victimized by the dominant group.

Next on the scene of academic feminism was *Women’s Personal Narratives: Essays in Criticism and Pedagogy*, edited by Leonore Hoffmann and Margo Culley that was published in 1985. Culley through her essay “Women’s Vernacular Literature: Teaching the Mother Tongue” tries to establish an even broader category in subsuming traditional autobiography under a moral general heading of “women’s personal literature of the self” (13). Concurrent with their openness to nontraditional forms, Hoffmann also emphasizes the importance of reading texts by women who are not professional writers: “The focus is not the achievement of prominent women but on the modes of verbal art practiced by most women who use language to give shape and meaning to their experiences….Each text constructs a self and tells its story to a real or implied audience” (1).
However, the construction of the self is then an integral part of the personal narrative project. Moreover, personal narrative also establishes a connection between the narrator and the reader; it is addressed to an audience even if that audience is oneself.

Estelle Jelinek’s collection, *Women’s Autobiography : Essays in Criticism* (1980), had a significant impact over theorizing and analyzing women’s autobiographies after eighties and many feminist critics claimed women’s autobiography as a field of socio-psychological or/and cultural studies and went on to extended studies of the field or of particular autobiographers.

Thus these feminist critics of women’s autobiography have tried to retrieve such invisible or ‘lost’ texts. By making this literature visible, these critics have also created space for the women of lost generations. Consequently viewed as constructions of the self through conversation, women’s narratives become inseparable from their relationships to others. This constituent factor of women’s selves existing in interrelationship with others become more fully integrated into definitions of women’s selves and consciousness in the later critical works.

Domna Stanton too disdains the traditional definitions of autobiography: she includes essay on letter-writers and diarists in her book: *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century* (1984). Although the main part of her title deliberately avoids the term “autobiography”, states in her preface argues that theorizing in women’s autobiography should not simply invert the exclusionary logic of the dominant tradition, but, instead, map women’s dialectical negotiations with a history of their own representation as idealized or invisible.
The theoretical stance of Domna Stanton’s *The Female Autograph* is very different. Stanton generally takes a poststructuralist approach to the problem of gender and genre. Some of her subject headings play upon titles and expressions by Derrida, Lacan and Foucault. Both her essay, called “Autogynography : Is the Subject Different?” (1984) and the essay by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, titled “Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Female Grandmatologies and the Female Autograph,” evoke Derridian terms, specifically “difference” and “grammatology.” Two subsections of the book refer to Foucault and Lacan respectively. They are: “Toward and Archaeology of Pre-Texts” and “Agencies of the Letter in the Seventeenth Century.”

Yet Stanton is more focused on the importance of the act of writing itself – of the interconnections between the writer and the reader. So, Domna Stanton, in “Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?” (1984) emphasizes the binary opposition such as “private/public, inner/outer dichotomies that mark generic differences in our symbolic system” (137). Such dichotomies also associate female with personal and intimate concerns, and the male with professional achievements.

Despite Stanton allusions to Derrida, Lacan and Foucault, Stanton supports Spacks views on “selves in hiding” and further explains that some feminist critics define the personal in women’s autobiographies as a primary emphasis on the relation of self to others. However, this “relatedness was traced to the dependence imposed on women by the patriarchal system, or then it was upheld as a fundamental female quality” (Stanton 138). Stanton also argues that in a patriarchal set up that defines woman as an object, writing “autogynography” becomes therapeutic, as it gives her a chance “to constitute female subject… creating the subject, an autograph gave the female “I” substance through the inscription of an interior and an anterior” (139).
Patricia Meyer Spacks highlights this element of female “I” in women’s autobiography in her essay aptly called ‘Selves in Hiding’ (1980). She discusses five most successful women’s autobiographies and shows how these autobiographies are the “stories of unusual female achievement” but nevertheless “the narratives convey singular absence of personal satisfaction in achievement” (132). All these five great women of public accomplishment; Emmeline Fankhurst, the English Suffragist; Dorothy Day, a founder of the radical ‘Catholic Workers’; Emma Goldman, the fiery anarchist; Eleanor Roosevelt; and Golda Meir make the personal more important than the public. In Spack’s observation, even great achiever women “use ‘autobiography’ paradoxically as a mode of self-denial” (132).

Evading an assertive self in public in favour of a passive, private self in Spack’s analysis is a narrative strategy which reflects “both a female dilemma and a female solution” (132). The impulse to speak of the self must find forms for its fulfillment; literary conventions provide categories of interpretation. In women’s autobiography the operation of social convention could be seen in purer form. Thus according to Patricia Meyer Spacks, society makes women dwell in a state of internal conflict with necessarily intricate psychic consequences. It is like a double positioning of women between public and private, between their own expectations and those of others.

The nature of ‘public’ and ‘private’ selves is for women, in some ways the reverse of what it is for men. The experience that women share gives to their account of themselves often a characteristic subterranean tone and status. One hears a single note of complaint and feels the bitter tensions of passivity; a social condition, a fate, embodying the concealment rather than absence of force. Moreover, the impact of gender-based oppression on women’s views of
themselves and later on their ways of representing themselves in writing is to be best found in the life narratives of women, than in any other form.

Thus, Stanton also emphasizes that, in writing autobiography, men and women have different functions to narrate, as decided by gendered differences. In projecting the differences, Stanton also evokes Elaine Showalter’s theory of “gynocritics” and the concept of “poetics of difference”, which she propounds in her essay, “Feminist Criticism in Wilderness” (1981). This theory brings a U turn in feminist thinking as Showalter believes in fighting patriarchy by creating women’s tradition of sharing intimate information. Rather than criticizing and competing with men, or complaining against them, the shade of feminism professed is all inclusive.

However, Stanton seems to walk the line between American feminist theory as represented by Showalter and French poststructuralist theory. Showalter identifies four models of difference as reflected in men’s women’s autobiographical writings. These models of differences are biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural:

Psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism locates the difference of women’s writing in the author’s psyche and in the relation of gender to the creative process. It incorporates the biological and linguistic models of gender difference in the theory of the female psyche or self, shaped by the body, by the development of language and by sex-role socialization. (Showalter, “Feminist Criticism” 193-94)

Based on Showalter’s gender theory of difference, many feminist critics view that the nature and “difference” of women’s writing is there in its troubled and even tormented relationship to female identity. Gilbert and Gubar, in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), view that the woman writer experiences her own
gender as “a painful obstacle or even a debilitating inadequacy” (50). Both the critics explain the creative procedure of women writers as an altogether a different phenomena as compared to their male counterparts. Gilbert and Gubar observes:

The loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors coupled with her need for sisterly precursors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience altogether with her fear of the antagonism of male readers, her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention – all these phenomena of “inferiorization” mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. (50)

However, Stanton in her essay ““Autogynography : Is the Subject Different?” (1984) sees in the construction of women’s selves a threat to phallocentricism: “The female ‘I’ was thus not simply a texture woven of various selves; its thread, its life-lines, came from and extended to others. By that token this ‘I’ represented a denial of a notion essential to the phallocentric order: the totalized self- contained subject present-to-itself” (15).

In “Autogynography : Is the Subject Different?” (1984), Domna C. Stanton asks a series of questions about the writing woman and her autobiographical practices, proposing that the splitting of woman’s subjectivity must be understood in the context of her “different status in the symbolic order”. Stanton concludes,

Autobiography dramatized the fundamental alterity and non-presence of the subject, even as it assets itself discursively and strived toward an always impossible self-possession. This gendered narrative involved a different plotting and configuration of the split subject. (20)
Sidonie Smith begins her book, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* (1987), with a critique of the androcentric autobiographical theories Stanton dismisses out of hand. In her introductory chapter, she explains: “But I am not writing here of autobiography in its broadest sense, or about letters, diaries, and journals or oral histories. Each of those forms urges the critic to ask different kinds of questions in addition to the common ones. I confine this exploration of the relationship of gender to genre to formal autobiography as it emerged in the West over the last five hundred years” (19).

The history of the traditional autobiography reveals that the genre emerged as a cultural discourse that secured the male-centered conception of selfhood and the definition of woman as the other in the patriarchal economy (Poetics 39). The patriarchy’s fear of destabilizing the androcentric order of the genre either precluded women writers from entering the canon or demanded their appropriation of the male self. Effacing their true voices, female autobiographers had to negotiate the paternal narrative—the only available cultural discourse of autobiography (Poetics 19).

Smith asserts the fact that historically absent from both the public sphere and modes of written narratives; women were compelled to tell their stories differently, and had done so, at least since medieval autobiographer Margery Kempe’s time. Here, Smith declares that any theory of female textuality must recognize how patriarchal culture has fictionalized “woman”. And, in response, how women autobiographers have challenged the gender ideologies surrounding them in order to script their life narratives. Smith specifies the double-voiced structure of women’s narratives as it reveals the tensions between their desire for narrative authority and their concern about excessive self-exposure. As she states:
Since the ideology of gender makes of woman’s life script a non-story, a silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture, the ideal woman is self-effacing rather than self-promoting, and her “natural” story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life but around the fluid, circumstantial, contingent responsiveness to others that, according to patriarchal ideology, characterizes the life of woman but not autobiography. From that point of view, woman has no “autobiographical self” in the same sense that man does. From that point of view, she has no “public” story to tell. That situating of the autobiographer in two universes of discourse accounts for the poetics of women’s autobiography and grounds its difference. (50)

Like Smith, Carolyn Heilburn confines herself to traditionally-structured narratives. Her brief study, *Writing a Woman’s Life* (1988), speaks to both autobiography and biography, as well as to fiction and life experience. Heilburn states: “There are four ways to write a woman’s life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman’s life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process” (11).

Heilburn discusses all of these ways, except for the fictional. Like Jelinek, even Heilburn employs a historical perspective, but regrettably, since she does not consider forms such as letters, journals or oral histories, she does not see a very long successful history of women’s personal narratives. Heilburn instead draws a line between what she calls “the old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual significance” (12), and the “new narratives” (37) by which women “might assume power over-take control of –their own lives” (17).
However, here Heilburn differs from other feminist autobiographical theorists in two ways. First, she believes that what matters are not lives themselves as models, but that women’s stories (stories told through texts) are self-informing. The other theorists portray the mutually influential relationship between self and form by giving primary emphasis to the structure of women’s selves as informing their writing; that is, they attribute the nature of women’s self-writing; to the construction of women’s selves. The second point which Heilburn particularly stresses more than any of the others is the dynamics of power and control evident in writing one’s own life. By exploring only conventional narratives, however, Heilburn overlooks an earlier tradition, and thus her argument that only recently did women really begin writing their own lives may be a misjudgment on her part.

Shari Benstock’s collection, *The Private Self* (1988), offers psychoanalysis of women’s autobiographies. In her introduction, Benstock challenges those definitions of autobiography that excluded autobiographical writings (diary, letter and memoir) (2). Various essays in the collection examine a wide range of women’s narrative forms and contextualize as well as theorize female subjectivity in very different ways. In the same collection, Susan Stanford Friedman, in her essay “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice” (1988), discusses “relationality” in women’s autobiography as an expression of the “fluid boundaries” they experience psychologically. Moreover, in her own essay “Authorizing the Autobiographical” (1988), Benstock, like Jelinek, Smith, Stanton and others, also locates the nexus of autobiography “at the crossroads of ‘writing’ and ‘selfhood’” (11).

Using French psychoanalytic and poststructuralist ideas, Benstok challenges the traditional theoretical hypothesis of an autonomous self consciously writing an autobiography. She recognizes that the instability of the
subject opens a space for an analysis of women’s autobiography: “The self that would reside at the centre of the text is decentered- and often is absent altogether-in women’s autobiographical texts” (20). The only problem, according to Benstock, is determining whether what she calls these “fissures of female discontinuity” can be ascribed to functions of gender more than to those of class, race, and sexual preference (20).

Relatively, Benstock advocates a Lacanian reading of women’s textuality. Therefore she looks to psychoanalysis for a way to address the doubleness of self at the heart of autobiographical writings by women. Benstock elucidates Jacques Lacan’s model of the “mirror stage” to explain the complexities involved in writing autobiography. Instead of seeing the self as a unified entity whose depths can be plumbed and whose essence could be transmitted through carefully crafted prose, Lacan views the self as fundamentally divided between the “I” that one sees reflected back from others.

By explaining this fundamental split, Benstock argues that Lacan locates the individual’s awareness of this split at “the mirror stage”, the moment when the child first recognizes her own reflection, and realizes that “I” is from another perspective – also an “other”. This developmental moment occurs during the stage in which the child also acquires language. In Benstock’s view language is both internal and external, and written as well as spoken words come to represent the slippage, the gap between the two selves. To the autobiographer, language is the “… symbolic system that both constructs and is constructed by the writing subject” (Authorizing 150). Benstock builds, upon Lacan’s abstract and universalizing theory, a notion to think in terms of individual social development and lived experience.
Thus Shari Benstock offers an explanation for the fragmentation in women’s autobiography. She argues that traditional male autobiography denied its fragmentation for the purpose of appearing complete. Perhaps this approach to autobiography was driven by the “values” of Structuralism that demanded unity and organization. However, this does not necessarily mean that these texts did not contain gaps.

Benstock asks: “On what authority can we ascribe certain forms of discontinuity to the female rather than to the male, assigning them as functions of gender rather than of social class, race, or sexual preference?” Clearly, the male tradition of autobiography portrayed an “untruthful” unity, so this fragmentation cannot be attributed to women only. Benstock argues that, because of Western thinking, this traditional understanding of autobiography later became the “model” for the genre. The gaps in traditional texts were simply overlooked for the purpose of cohesion and to maintain Western values and ideals. Benstock asserts that it was Modernism’s cultural changes and Freud’s “discovery of the unconscious” that exposed this constructed unity. In response to this, women were made more aware of their own fragmentation and their need to challenge the traditional model of autobiography.

While Benstock relies on Lacanian theory, the second essay in her collection by Susan Stanford Friedman, “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,” takes an approach to the question of writing, consciousness and self commonly found in Anglo-American literary criticism. For Friedman, women’s selves are not so much “de-centered” as they exist in relation to others. Friedman bases her theory of the self on theories by Sheila Rowbotham and on Nancy Chodorow’s relational model of female selfhood: “Application of their theories of women’s selfhood to women’s autobiographical texts-particularly those by woman’s who also belong to racial,
ethnic, sexual, and religious minorities –illuminates the unfolding narratives of women’s life writing and thereby revises the prevailing canons of autobiography” (35).

Friedman also refers to Mary Mason, who used a similar Chodorowian model. Mason observes that “the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other.’ This recognition of another consciousness ….this grounding of identify through relation to the chosen other, seems ….to enable women to write openly about themselves” (210).

Throughout a large part of its history, autobiography theory has fostered a model that conceives of the self as an autonomous entity. Such an individualistic approach, is based on Georges Gusdorf’s ground breaking essay from the 1950s, ‘Conditions and Limits of Autobiography’, the self is perceived as ‘separate and unique’ (Friedman, 34). According to Gusdorf, autobiography is a product of the Enlightenment and can only be found in the Western hemisphere.

In her prominent essay “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice,’’ Susan Stanford Friedman observes that the concept of individuality based on the assumption that the self is a fixed, discrete, and stable entity has served as an organizing principle of autobiography (72-3). Friedman observes that [f]or Gusdorf, the consciousness of self upon which autobiography is premised is the sense of ‘isolated being,’ a belief in the self as a discrete, finite ‘unit ’of society.
Paradoxically, Gusdorf claims that it is within ‘social space’ (Gusdorf, 32) that the human child develops a sense of his or her individuality: approximately at the age of six months, ‘the infant […] distinguishes that which is without from his own within he sees himself another among others’ (Gusdorf, 32). Yet here, the community within which a person becomes a self only serves as a social ‘mirror’ (Gusdorf, 33) against which a person can recognize his individuality and does not shape or influence the self in any other way.

Historically, predicated on the self as a privileged, “isolated being,” individualism discarded women and minorities’ life writing from the genre for their interest in collective identities. Isolated individualism is an illusion. It is also the privilege of power. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin color and sex. He can think of himself as an “individual.” Women and minorities, reminded at every turn in the great hall of mirrors of their sex and color, have no such luxury […] The emphasis on individualism as the necessary precondition of autobiography is thus a reflection of privilege, one that excludes from the canons of autobiography those writers who have been denied by history the illusion of individualism. (75)

Most famously, Friedman’s article ‘Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice’ (1988) subjects the Gusdorf model to a feminist critique and notes that the individualistic concept underlying Gusdorf’s autobiographical self raises significant ‘theoretical problems for critics who recognize that the self, self creation, and self consciousness are profoundly different for women’ (Friedman, 34). Friedman also extends her concept of women’s relational identity to ‘minorities and many non Western peoples’ (Friedman, 34).

Friedman puts forth two arguments to suggest that the individualistic model of the self is fundamentally inapplicable to women: first, the prominence
that is given to individualism ignores the ‘importance of a culturally imposed group identity for women’ (Friedman, 34); and second, it neglects ‘the differences in socialization in the construction of male and female gender identity’ (Friedman, 34). Since women’s individuation process is different, women tend to develop ‘collective and relational identities’ (Friedman, 35) rather than autonomous ones.

Friedman therefore concludes that due to their upbringing, ‘women’s sense of self exists within a context of a deep awareness of others’ (Friedman, 34). She capsizes Gusdorf’s argument, there by establishing a model that does account for female subjectivity: To echo and reverse Gusdorf once more, this autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to others, does not feel herself to exist outside others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community. (Friedman, 56)

Susan Stanford Friedman, in “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice” (1988), fuses Chodorow’s concept of women’s interpersonal relationship with Sheila Rowbotham’s politically grounded concept of the importance of female community for women’s self-definition. By involving examples from African American and lesbian women autobiographers, Friedman poses the significance of her argument for a “difference” theory of women’s autobiography:

“[a woman’s] autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community”. (“Autobiographical Selves” 79)
Friedman’s emphasis on women’s “relationality” and community has remained pivotal in understanding women’s autobiographical selves. However, it is also significant that the term such as female ‘relationality’ promises theorists of women’s autobiography a more comprehensive model for exploring and revaluing women’s experiential histories as innate to women’s experience. Friedman ascertains that female autobiographers paved their way into the genre by taking control over representation. Even Jeanne Perreault defines it as “to speak for, to speak about, and, most troublingly, to speak as” (6). Asserting the power of self-representation enables women writers to inscribe a new history of women as a category into autobiography, thus validating a gendered group identity, or what Stanford Friedman calls a “group consciousness” (76).

Analyzing the configuration of the subject in female life writing, Susan Stanford Friedman reminds us about the asymmetry of power relations that condition the female autobiographical subject. Unequal power relations do not let the female self forget about her condition as gendered and racialized subject.

This process goes hand in hand with the creation of the female self alternative to the cultural category woman that is essentialized by the androcentric discourse. This female self is built upon shared female experience, which the patriarchy made invisible. The access to representation allows women autobiographers to craft a narrative of female experience that warrants the creation of women’s history, which is the project of refuting male experience as the norm.

All the above mentioned theories of women’s self-writing come to terms in one way or another with the issues of gender, self and consciousness. Whether explicitly or implicitly, they propose a definition of women’s selves that is distinct from men’s. While Benstock sees in poststructuralist and
Lacanian theory a definition of the self that allows for what she calls gender-determining “fissures of female discontinuity,” most of the others rely upon the psychological studies by American feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow. Nancy Chodorow’s book, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, has had repercussions far beyond the social sciences. In her study, she observes how the effects of mothering affect the personality development of the sexes:

Woman and men grow up with personalities affected by different boundary experiences, and differently constructed and experienced inner object-worlds, and are preoccupied with different relational issues. Feminine personality comes to be based less on repression of external relationships. From the retention of preoedipal attachment to their mother growing girl’s come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries…. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate. (169)

Similarly, Carol Gilligan expands on Chodorow’s theories in her study of women’s ethical development, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*.

As one more landmark *Life/ Lines: Theorizing Women’s Autobiography*, a collection of essays edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck that appeared in 1988, continues to elaborate the interconnections between women’s lives and the forms of their personal narratives, relying on a relational model of selfhood. Its advent as a postmodern text posited that male autobiography “assumes the conflation of masculinity and humanity, canonizing the masculine representative self of both writer and reader.” Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck challenge at the outset both the traditional theorists’ assumptions of a unified self and probe the more recent equation of the fragmentation of women’s selves with the postmodern male crisis of the self.
Autobiographical criticism, argued Brodzki and Schenk, has been based implicitly upon a masculine representation of self, and the notion that men’s lives are exemplary and authoritative ones, and does not present models that are adequate for the interpretation of women’s lives. Instead, they claim, female-authored texts use displacement of the subject in order to frame their self-narrative, constructing the self according to a complex strategy of relationality, combining self and other much more.

Other book-length studies of female-authored texts followed, all spurred by the idea that traditional autobiographical criticism is based upon, as Leah Hewitt (1990) states “a metaphysics of the conscious, coherent, individual subject” and the assertion that “the cultural discourses shaping men’s and women’s gendered social roles have certainly inflected their writings, as well as how they are read.” (3)

Hence, the Collection, Interpreting Women’s lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives (1989) goes even further in broadening the scope of women’s autobiographical writings. It takes an interdisciplinary approach to the topic: the editors include essays by historians and, most notably, social scientists. Accordingly, the focus is not so much on literary autobiography as on how women of various ethnic, racial, and class groups have expressed themselves, on how individual women create their own personal narratives. The authors encompass all genre forms in their definition, including letters, journals and traditional autobiography as well as life histories – stories told to others who record them on tape or write them down.

The term “narrative forms” as opposed to “genre” was used when writing about the various modes of women’s self-writing so as to avoid completely all of the traditional baggage associated with genre as a model, as a structure to be
limited (99). Equally important, they view the study of personal narratives as essential to any theory of gendered self-identity:

Since women’s biographies, autobiographies, and life stories all recount a process of construction of the self, these narratives are potentially rich sources for the exploration of the process of gendered self-identity. Such a venture will probably not settle the argument concerning the location of the self: whether it is there to be discovered or uncovered and relatively stable, or whether it is a construction of the mind and continually shifting. Yet because personal narratives are verbal reconstructions of development processes, they can well serve feminist psychologists interested in exploring the links between the evolution of subjectivity, the acquisition of language, and the development of a feminine identity.(5)

Rather differently, Francoise Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture* (1989), crystallizes many of the issues raised by feminist autobiography theory in the 1980s such as writings by women of color, different types of texts, poststructuralism and its relationship to feminist theory, and the emphasis on reading as an integral part of feminist autobiography theory. Lionnet approaches autobiographical writing from a different direction than the earlier critics discussed previously. In her book *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self Portraiture*, Francoise Lionnet analyses works by three marginalized and colonized French-speaking women writers (Marsye Conde, Marie Cardinal and Marie Therese Humbert) and by two African American women autobiographers (Maya Angelou and Zora Neale Hurston). This leads Lionnet to factor race into her arguments more thoroughly than the previous critics.

Nevertheless, Lionnet put forward how marginalized subjects voice their lives. Lionnet argues that as historically silenced subjects, women and colonized peoples create “braided” texts of many voices. She views women’s
autobiographical writing as a multi-voiced act. Lionnet asserts that not only new subjects, but new kinds of subjects are emerging, and that “traditional” autobiographies can be read differently as well. Since the idea of Western autobiography rests upon the shared belief in a commonsense identification of one individual with another, all “I”s are potentially individual autobiographers. For the postmodern critics, not all are “I”s, i.e., not all are individuals. Some are the “i”s who have a collective identity.

In this light, autobiographical writing becomes a strategy of self-representation that uses the discursive plane of the narrative to inscribe the author’s selfhood into the text. Thus, the relationship between writing as linguistic exercise and narrative as continuity of the self in time and space is fundamental for delineating subjectivity. In contrast to a male author, a woman writer produces her autobiographical enunciation not only in terms of constructing a coherent self but also of enacting her gender, race, and ethnicity along new lines.

Thus it could be summed up that the primary difference between male and female narratives is in the structure: men’s autobiographies are linear, continuous, and chronological while women’s are fragmented, digressive, and discontinuous. The traditional male autobiography asserts that the androcentric point of view is the only identity position that allows the right to interpret history and establish the truth.

As a result both the self and history are over determined as male in the critical discussion of the autobiographical genre. Similarly in the introduction to their influential critical anthology of works on women’s autobiography Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader (1998), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point
out that the development of a women’s autobiographical canon went along with a vigorous revision of the theories of genre (8).

Critics revisited the body of theories already in place in the light of feminist, psychoanalytical, poststructuralist, postcolonial, and postmodern theories attempting to reclaim the place of women’s writing in the autobiographical canon.

Therefore the focus of emerging critical discussions of female autobiography reside on the theory and praxis of women’s self-representation and writing of the female self into history. Gaining the power of self representation in concurrence with creating a female narrative of history has reinforced the emergence of women’s autobiography as a distinct canon. Consequently fighting back the invisibility and marginalization of the female experience, and introducing a new vision of the self along with a growing critical discussion of the specificity of women’s writing built a premise for theorizing the female autobiographical subject.

Women writers’ engagement with patriarchal discourses along with their search of alternative discourses reveals that female autobiography not only shapes a distinct female self but also, giving it a political charge, converts that self into a feminist one.

Based on the discussed theories of women’s autobiographies it may perhaps be summed up that it is essential to have a historical perspective on the definition offered by post structuralism; though it may appear at this point that men and women are close to being in the same place in terms of self-development, but they got there by very different routes. And because of their separate histories, there is difference.
Therefore, only by confronting both the traditional and the poststructuralist male-dominated hierarchy, can there occur an opening of the definitions which will allow for the inclusion of women’s writing in the center of the autobiographical tradition, rather than only on the margins.

Early women’s autobiographies typically employed the forms of the diary and religious journal. The early forms of the diary and spiritual journal were followed by so many different ways of writing about the self. Of course, the diary and journal still have their place in the female tradition because their very forms symbolize women’s fragmentation in that they are short, often un-related entries telling the story of a woman’s life. These forms rarely cater to telling the “whole” story of a woman’s life. Rather, they often cover only a short span of time whether it is a woman’s childhood, adolescence, or a brief event in her life. The forms that women use to represent themselves shed greater light on who they are and how women differ from the traditional writing style.

The traditional form of autobiography invalidates women’s writings. Then why else would women need to develop a different mode of writing? Obviously, one of the many answers to this question is perhaps because women see themselves as more communal than men. However there are apparent differences between traditional and women’s autobiography.

Interestingly, the English translation of Georges Gusdorf’s “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” outlined certain rules for writing an autobiography. In his article, Gusdorf discusses the rules of writing the story of the complete self. He writes, “Autobiography properly speaking assumes the task of reconstructing the unity of a life across time . . .” From this argument the specific intention of autobiography and its anthropological prerogative as a
literary genre is clear: it is one of the means to self knowledge thanks to the fact that it recomposes and interprets a life in its totality.

Rather than primarily discussing women’s lives in the public sphere, much of contemporary women’s autobiography depicts women’s private lives and inner-most thoughts. That is the content of women’s autobiography is more self-conscious and self-aware than traditional male autobiography.

Traditionally, autobiography tells the story of a man who is considered extraordinary due to his service in the public realm. In his article, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” Georges Gusdorf gives criteria for male autobiography, asserting: Memoirs admirably celebrate the penetrating insight and skill of famous men who, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, were never wrong . . . The autobiography that is thus devoted exclusively to the defence and glorification of a man, a career, a political cause, or a skillful strategy presents no problems: it is limited almost entirely to the public sector of existence. (Gusdorf, 36). The exceptions to this rule, according to Gusdorf, are spiritual or intellectual men. He names Montaigne and Rousseau, saying that “in spite of their lowly station on the stage of the world, [they] considered their destiny worthy of being given by way of example.” (Gusdorf 31).

By extending authority only to men in the public realm, this excluded half of the human race. Women were generally not offered access to the public realm, so this kept them from being considered important. In fact, it set women up for being erased; their histories were ignored and disregarded as uninteresting and too ordinary. It has only been recently that theorists have begun breaking down these restrictions and rethinking new definitions.
First, in order to change our thinking, society had to provide women with access to the public realm. After all, they never would have been published if this had not happened. By offering women greater access, this helped, to some extent, to reduce their rigid positions in the private realm also. For example the most of the surviving autobiographical writings of the 17th century period were written with publication or manuscript circulation in mind, and were made possible or necessary by a variety of circumstances which, while specific in each case, reveal interrelating patterns.

An important source of women’s autobiographies in 17th century published pamphlets of radical sectaries. Acting from what they believed was direct contact with God, many were led to engage in public preaching and the disruption of church services: activities that frequently resulted in their arrest and imprisonment. It therefore comes as no surprise to find that a good number of Quaker pamphlets, and some Baptist ones, published in the 1650s and 1660s were written from prison, and that their autobiographical element is strong, women explaining the origins of their behaviour and describing the events that preceded their conversion and/or imprisonment.

Many of these activists’ tracts, like Anna Trapnel’s Report and Plea (1654), have a direct political purpose, aiming to influence the reader’s understanding not only of their personal behavior, but also of the wider social implications of accepting their messages as God’s. Others, like Katharine Evans and Sarah Cheevers’s A Short Relation (1662), not only argue for their release from goal but also aim a particular message at the like-minded reader: ‘a child of wisdom may understand’, they say (120). It was not only resistance to the church and government that produced the need for such appeals. Later in the century A Vindication of Anne Wentworth (1677) also reacts against oppression. Commanded, Wentworth says, by God, she has had no choice but to describe
her eighteen years of suffering at the hands of her husband; God told her to leave her husband and church when they opposed the ‘public meaning’ of her work: that she represents a class of the oppressed, her husband a class of oppressors. Such texts, then, are not the personal anatomizing that we might expect to find in autobiography.

They are public documents, with a social purpose, and Anna Trapnel tells us that her Report and Plea is based in part on the stories told her by others, not the sole product of her own (and God’s) ideas. In this public, social dimension they are closely linked to another central source of autobiographical writings of the day, the conversion narrative. The published conversion narrative recording a spiritual and profane development became a popular woman’s or man’s form during the ancient skills, as well as to publish polemics defending female ability and (near) equality with men.

Relationships between women and men in the seventeenth century could be defined by reference to a whole complex of interlocking and interdependent ideas, definitions, conventions, and statutes, whether concerning law, religion, society, philosophy, or nature. Ideas from each category were seen to reflect and reinforce the others, for all were based on notions of order or hierarchy, and all were concerned to ascribe men and women to their rightful places within these hierarchies. Women, within these orders, were subject to men.

This assignment to the domestic is problematic because women were not given a choice. Furthermore, because the public realm was equated with importance, the domestic was considered unimportant and insignificant. Subsequent we had to rethink our definitions of the domestic realm and begin telling the “other” side of the story as equally important to cultural history. This
meant that women would need to write their histories, whether they were centered in the domestic or public.

The tradition that emerged appeared quite creative in its form and not surprisingly private in its content. Because women’s lives have for so long been grounded in the domestic, their stories often center around the family, body, and a sense of self-awareness. It is no wonder, then, that their autobiographies would reveal stories based on these subjects.

Content focused in the domestic often includes women writing about their homes, families, and especially other women who influenced them. Interestingly, these influential women are often measured by how much nurture they provide the autobiographer. Many autobiographers attempt to subvert their positions in the domestic. In fact, all women autobiographers subvert their ascribed roles simply by choosing to write. Although they are still very much a part of the domestic sphere in various ways, they do not want to be rigidly confined there.

In addition to discussing the domestic in their writing, women’s bodies are another private, yet popular subject. This content often includes women telling stories of how they first got their periods, their opinions on their anatomies, disclosure of their sexualities or sexual relationships, and so on.

By doing this, it seems that women break down phallocentrism because they illustrate that their bodies are important to their individual identities. Fragmentation is another expected content feature of women’s autobiography. When women attempt to force unity upon their lives, it seems that they are relying too heavily upon the traditional male form as a model. Clearly, the
mimicking of a separate tradition seems quite untruthful. Female autobiographies hold in common a lack of coherence to their stories.

As mentioned before, this perhaps occurs because women do not generally see themselves as fixed or stable individuals. Rather, they are fluid, their identities comprising many variables. Therefore, when women write about themselves, their stories may appear disjointed, rarely telling anything that represents completion.

This deliberate “fragmentedness” makes their works so extraordinary. Because they are unable to tell a complete story, they can be more creative and are less restricted. In fact, it often seems that they can write their autobiographies in almost any form they choose, using whatever content they deem their own. Instead, women show that the form and content of their writing must mirror the nature of their actual lives. It is no wonder, then, why the genre of autobiography has undergone such a transformation.

Women’s autobiography is different from the understanding of traditional men’s autobiography in that women do seem to pose themselves with and against others to find their own identities. In her own text, Miller attempts to collapse the distinctions between autobiography (typically written about the self) and memoir(s) (typically written about others), arguing that there is no way to write about yourself unless you write about others. Nancy K. Miller discusses women’s identities as being relational in her autobiography Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death. 1996. She writes,

As a reader of autobiography, I perform an awkward dance of embrace and rejection: He’s just like me, she’s not like me at all. As I write myself into and out of other stories . . . scenes from my personal history take on new significance. Can my story—or
yours—ever be more than that: a dialogue enacted with other selves? (x).

For Miller, both her parents are crucial to her understanding of herself. She cannot attempt to guess at her own self without first looking to them. She argues, “. . . memoirs are documents about building an identity—how we come to be who we are as individuals—and a crucial piece of that development takes place in the family.” (Miller, xi) This interconnectedness is obviously true for Miller. But, she conceives this for all women’s autobiography.

Miller doesn’t seem to suggest that writing about others threatens women’s writing in the genre. Rather, she implies that when these “others” are members of the autobiographer’s family, perhaps they are so closely connected to her that she must position them with and against herself in order to write about herself.

In her article “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” Mary G. Mason discusses the autobiographies of Julian of Norwich, Margery Kempe, Margaret Cavendish, and Anne Bradstreet, asserting that:

. . . the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some “other.” This recognition of another consciousness—and I emphasize recognition rather than deference—this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems (if we may judge by our four representative cases) to enable women to write openly about themselves. (210)

Mason suggests that this “other” may be God or a husband. Tracing the lives and works of these women, she claims that they write themselves by looking at others. This does not imply that this is the only means of self-
identification these women have. Rather, by looking at others, they seem to more clearly represent themselves. Mason credits Margaret Cavendish’s *True Relation* for being the “first important secular autobiography by a woman,” and she shows how Cavendish identifies herself by discussing her husband, the Duke of Newcastle. (211).

Thus women must write about others in order to write about themselves seems to hold true. This isn’t to suggest that women also do not see themselves apart from others; rather, as Mary G. Mason suggests, writing about others allows women to see themselves more clearly. Thus many feminist theorists such as Rowbothom and Chodorow believe that a woman’s identity-formation is rooted in the “collective identity” as defined by the dominant group. Revising the psychoanalytical objects-relations theory from a feminist perspective, Chodorow, in *The Reproduction of Mothering : Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), notes, “The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (169). She further adds,

Masculine personality, then, comes to be defined in terms of denial of relation and connection [and denial of femininity], whereas feminine personality comes to conclude a fundamental definition of self in relationship. (169)

By analyzing women’s autobiography on the relational model of female selfhood, based on Chodorow’s concept, we can anticipate finding in women’s texts a consciousness of self in which “the individual does not oppose herself to all others” not “feel herself to exist outside of others”, but very much “with others in an interdependent existence” (Chodorow 170).
In Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World (1978), Rowbotham argues that a woman cannot experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined by the dominant male culture. To describe the development of women’s consciousness Rowbotham uses the metaphor of mirrors. But the mirror is the reflecting surface of cultural representation into which a woman stares to form an identity. This sense of collective identity, however, can also be a source of strength and transformation, and lead not only to alienation, but also to the potential for a “new consciousness” of self. There is always this dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription, as Rowbotham notes:

But always we were split in two, straddling silence, not sure where we could begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strong, foreign and cut-off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity… the manner in which we know ourselves was not variance with ourselves as an historical being – woman (31).

Thus, the concept of separate selfhood is inapplicable to women due to socio-political, biological as well as psychoanalytical reasons. Dr. Ranjana Harish, “In the Cultural Hall of Mirrors: Issue of Gender Genre Incompatibility of Women’s Autobiography” (1996) observes:

When such a person who doesn’t possess the proverbial isolated self which would reside at the center of the text, holds the pen to write her autobiography the product is going to be different both in form and content. (29)

As discussed earlier, in this chapter, the form and content in women’s autobiographies are different from that of men’s. There is an orderliness that can be seen in the writing of men who are socially conditioned to pursue single goal of a successful career. On the contrary, women’s autobiographical writings tend
to be irregular, often disconnected, fragmentary or organized in a self sustained
unity rather than connecting chapters in a chronological order. Patricia Meyer
Spacks argues that women’s autobiographies hardly mirror the establishment of
history of their own time. They tend to concentrate on their personal rather than
that of exorcism and glorification.

Spacks, in “Selves in Hiding”, argues that the autobiographies written by
women suggest some female problems of self-presentation. In writing of
themselves, these women of public accomplishment implicitly stress
uncertainties of the personal, denying rather than glorifying ambition, evading
rather than enlarging public selves. This tendency of women autobiographers, to
impose private self over the public self, is a narrative strategy, which, according
to Spacks, reflects both a female dilemma and female solution. For instance,
Golda Meir, the former President of Israel, in her autobiography *My Life* (1975),
informs her readers that when faced with her first conflict between private life
and social responsibility, she chose to fulfill her duty to husband, home and
child rather than to pursue the public life that she “desired”. She recalls, “Not
for the first time, and certainly not for the last. I realized that in the conflict
between my duty and my innermost desires, it was my duty that had the prior
claim” (Meir 98).

Whether such habits of camouflaging “innermost desires” derived from
socialization, from nature, or from the one intensified by the other; they prevail
in the writings of almost all the women autobiographers. Women never keep
themselves in the center of their writings, especially in autobiography; like men,
but remain on periphery. And since, they focus more on private life; they
attempt to detach themselves from the public events. Thus, those periods which
are commonly regarded by the historians as the turning points in the human
history are not necessarily the same for both men and women. Dr. Ranjana Harish observes,

Locally woman’s autobiography which projects an image of private strength and public passivity doesn’t mirror the establishment history of the autobiographer’s times and thus the belief that a good autobiography is always representative of its time and mirror to the era also doesn’t hold true in relation to women’s life narratives. Very often their autobiographies turn around personal lives, domestic details, family difficulties and the people [especially men] who have influenced them. (30)

Therefore, the emphasis by women on the personal and the placing of the other person at the center of their experiences clearly contradicts the established standards about the content of autobiography. In glorifying the ‘other’ the women writers camouflage certain aspects of their experiences that remain obscure in their writings. According to Rowbotham, it is the result of the identity formation in women. In the act of forming identity women develop dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. Based on the cultural notions of forming identity, the postmodern critics have attempted to interrelate the psychological model of women’s autobiography.

With the similar perspective, Nancy Chodorow in her book *Psychoanalysis – and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) studies the psychological of “sexual difference” conveying the reformulations of what it means to be “woman”. Nancy Chodorow examines the psychology of gender socialization and suggests that the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to woman as they have, in her view, a relational identity and fluid ego boundaries which mark their orientation to self, from that of men. Looking at the psychoanalytical theory from a feminist perspective, she argues that: “The basic feminine sense
of self is connected to the world; the basic masculine sense of self is separate.” (41)

Nancy Chodorow in her book *Psychoanalysis – and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), takes existing analyses of the “basic sex differences in personality” (44) between girls and boys and postulates that “feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. Thus a woman forms her identity in relation to others. The socio-cultural set-up of the patriarchy intensifies her traits of rationality and finally she emerges not as an individual but as a person with collective identity constantly aware of the society’s prescription for her female self. In psychoanalytic terms, women are less individuated than men and have more flexible ego boundaries” (44).

Chodorow’s notion of “relationality” offers long term implications for theorizing female subjectivity in autobiography. Nancy Chodorow pursues the differentiating process of ego development before the oedipal stage that Sigmund Freud has described as formative of the male autonomous individual. She argues that the mother identifies differently with her boy and girl children. Because she is “a person who is a woman and not simply the performer of a formally defined role” the mother “identify[ies] anticipatorily” (Chodorow 47) with her daughter and therefore confounds for the daughter the process of separation and individuation. By contrast, the boy child turns away from the mother to the father in an identification that is positional rather than personal. Chodorow writes:

Feminine identification is based not on fantasized or externally defined characteristics and negative identification, but on the gradual learning of a way of being familiar in everyday life, and exemplified by the person with whom she has been more involved.
It is continuous with her early childhood identifications and attachments. (51)

Chodorow’s theory of difference, the psychoanalytic framing of difference is persuasive for the critics of autobiography who are trying to define perceived differences in men’s and women’s narratives because, as Smith and Watson explain, it “offers a foundational category informed by depth psychology and language acquisition theories” (Smith & Watson, *Women Autobiography* 17).

In order to understand autobiographical subjects to be a “woman” it is indeed significant for a critic to have base of “relational” theory. The research in women’s identity formation in the Indian context by the psycho analysts like Sudhir Kakar, Indira Parikh and Aashish Nandy supports the theory of women’s collective selfhood. According to these psychoanalysts, instead of obstructing their growth such a collective trait strengthens their personality. To possess the recognizable isolate self that could reside at the centre of the text is an illusion for women. Thus, when she holds a pen to write her autobiography, the product is going to be different both in form and content. One can anticipate finding in women’s texts a disinterred self defining itself through the age-old feminine strategy of denial of public acclaim, a story of self-denial rather than self-glorification, of personal rather than the political aspect of life.

On the same line of thought Susan Stanford Friedman, in “Women’s Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice” (1988), fuses Chodorow’s concept of women’s interpersonal relationship with Sheila Rowbotham’s politically grounded concept of the importance of female community for women’s self-definition. By involving examples from African American and
lesbian women autobiographers, Friedman poses the significance of her argument for a “difference” theory of women’s autobiography:

“[a woman’s] autobiographical self often does not oppose herself to all others, does not feel herself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much with others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community”. (“Autobiographical Selves” 79)

Friedman’s emphasis on women’s “relationality” and community has remained pivotal in understanding women’s autobiographical selves. However, it is also significant that the term such as female ‘relationality’ promises theorists of women’s autobiography a more comprehensive model for exploring and revaluing women’s experiential histories as innate to women’s experience.

Citing Nancy Chodorow and Sheila Rowbotham, Stanford Friedman shows how this interdependence works for women’s autobiography. However, Rowbotham’s theories seem to be more culturally relevant to both women and minorities. Based on her ideas, women’s identities are, in fact, constructed around their cultural communities, and these constructions are a response to culture rather than because “she” is “essentially” woman. Surely, then, when women write their histories through autobiography or memoir, they are bound to write themselves as more fluid than traditional male autobiographers.

But, the history of women’s autobiography (even in the most contemporary women’s memoirs) depicts women’s interconnectedness by ‘telling’ their stories through others (particularly family members), through their mothers (or mother-figures), through the lack or loss of others (in particular, the loss of parents), and through their communities and cultures.
Although psychoanalytically based models of feminist criticism can now offer us remarkable and persuasive readings of individual texts and can highlight extraordinary similarities between women writing in a variety of cultural circumstances, they can not explain historical change, ethnic difference or the shaping force of generic or economic factors. To consider these issues, we must go beyond psychoanalysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women’s writing which places it in the maximum context of culture.

For women autobiographers parents, act as their immediate community, around which they create their own identities. Cultural communities offer larger and more extensive grounds for creating identity. They write themselves into the collected stories of their people. Unlike men, who consider their identities distinct and separate, women and minorities are more communal and fluid due to the way they respond to their given cultures. Consequently, they write these “plural lives” into their autobiographies, employing various “others” as a means of telling their own stories. Women, in particular, look to their families and immediate families to begin guessing at their own identities. And, when there is a break in their family chains, their understanding of themselves is deeply affected and altered. By searching for the lost pieces of their stories and piecing the fragments together, they attempt to answer the question of the self.

Outside of their immediate families, they may also look to their communities and cultures as mirrors, reflecting an image back to them that is never completely themselves in an individual sense, but an image that is a part to the whole.

Thus women’s identities do seem to be constructed by looking through, as Rowbotham suggests, a “cultural hall of mirrors.” Rather than seeing themselves as distinctly unique, they establish their identities in relation to
others. On similar lines in her article “Authorizing the Autobiographical,” Shari Benstock offers an explanation for the fragmentation in women’s autobiography. She argues that traditional male autobiography denied its fragmentation for the purpose of appearing complete. Perhaps this approach to autobiography was driven by the “values” of structuralism that demanded unity and organization.

Obviously, because of women’s cultural making their autobiographies look much different than the traditional male form. Although their subject matter had always been criticized for its “ordinary” and “personal” characteristics, this is exactly what they often chose to write about. What emerged, though, looks not at all ordinary, but quite extraordinary. Rather than telling the history of an “extraordinary” person in an ordinary way, women’s autobiography tells the “ordinary” cultural history of women in an extraordinary way. Women revised both form and content to create a new tradition portraying texts that are fragmented and self-conscious.

Conventional autobiography only offered one version of the ‘truth’—an androcentric version that was essentially unattainable for women writers because it suggested a coherent self. Women’s autobiography disrupts the norms of traditional autobiography and renders truth as a construction. This new mode of writing seems to question all theories of truth. It shows the impossibility of telling the truth about a “whole” self, because, for women especially, this is impossible given that their subjectivities are fragmented. This fragmentation makes it impossible to write the whole self because women do not see themselves as rigidly defined.

In her article, “Construing Truth in Lying Mouths: Truth telling in Women’s Autobiography,” (1990) Sidonie Smith asserts that women have
redefined truth. When applied to women’s autobiography, truth no longer maintains its traditional meanings. Smith writes:

At its simplest perhaps the question of truth telling asks us to ponder the relationship of the autobiographer’s text to her experience . . . This experience is of two kinds, the specific lived experience of the actual woman, the autobiographer whose name appears on the title page, as well as the shared experience of a commonality termed “women.” Since that experience has been culturally silenced in patriarchal culture the task of the autobiographer is to give voice to the “truth” of that great unspoken through the text. “Experience” is the “truth.” And sexual “difference” itself is the core of that “experience.” (145-63)

There is no one “I” for women. Rather, there are various roles and identities subscribed to and claimed by them. Throughout history, men have had the privilege of creating their own identities. In contrast, women were forced to accept the identities subscribed to them, and only recently in our cultural history have they been given space to form their own. If women were to attempt to write a whole self, that self would surely appear even more false. They must make the concept of truth their own, rewriting it to fit their own identities and histories.

For women, truth appears when their and the genre’s ‘constructedness’ is revealed. Since that experience has been culturally silenced in patriarchal culture the task of the autobiographer is to give voice to the “truth” of that great unspoken through the text. Even, Leigh Gilmore in the article “Policing Truth: Confession, Gender, and Autobiographical Authority” clearly, states the fact that “she” is a woman creates a distinctly different experience. Women’s autobiography no longer upholds the traditional definition of truth (telling the whole truth about a man’s life); rather, truth becomes a woman’s experience.
This aspect of precision gets to the problematic binary of fact/fiction or non-fiction/fiction. Women writing their own autobiographies render this binary false because they expose the underlying problems of truth. Hence places both non-fiction and fiction as opposites. Thus non-fiction cannot be fiction, and fiction cannot be non-fiction. But in women’s autobiography, we realize that women attempt to blur the distinctions, showing that it is impossible for autobiography to maintain its traditional definitions of truth because autobiography’s very nature requires construction. In fact, women argue that truth is in the construction.

In his article “Autobiography and the Cultural Moment,”(1980) James Olney acknowledges the findings of the French critics Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, and American critics Jeffrey Mehlman and Michael Ryan, who state that it is the discursive act itself that is important. Olney reports that in the act of writing:

. . . [T]he text takes on a life of its own, and the self that was not really in existence in the beginning is in the end merely a matter of text and has nothing whatever to do with the authorizing author. The self, then, is a fiction and so is the life, and behind the text of an autobiography lies the text of an “autobiography”: all that is left are characters on a page, and they too can be “deconstructed” to demonstrate the shadowiness of even their existence. (22)

Olney suggests that it is in writing that the life (that the autobiographer is writing about) and the self take form. It is in this discursive practice that the “true” self exists; therefore, for Olney, the actual writing of experience is the truth. Olney would argue that the “I” on the page is the self and that the self did not exist prior to the writing. Perhaps his claim is too extreme. It seems that for
women (or any marginalized people) there must be some importance given to the author as well as the self she creates in her writing.

Sidonie Smith attempts to find this balance. She revises Olney’s claims, suggesting that the written self is an approximation:

The autobiographer is the self-historian, autobiography representation. Asserting to reflect upon or re-create the past through the processes of memory, autobiography is always, multiply, storytelling: memory leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story; experience itself is mediated by the ways we describe and interpret it to others and ourselves; cultural tropes and metaphors which structure autobiographical narrative are themselves fictive; and narrative is driven by its own fictive conventions about beginnings, middles, and ends. Even more fundamentally, the language we use to “capture” memory and experience can never “fix” the “real” experience but only approximate it, yielding up its own surplus of meaning or revealing its own artificial closures. (Olney 34-35)

According to Smith, the “I” in the writing and the self from the past do correspond. Unlike Olney, she believes that the experience of the past self is important to the written self. Truth, for Smith, lies in a woman’s experience and in how she chooses to interpret and understand that experience.

Certainly, Gusdorf’s position on truth in autobiography is more closely aligned with traditional autobiography, which typically claims to tell the whole truth about a man. Of course, he recognizes that, in telling one’s story, a person must rely on memory, which is slippery and inevitably requires construction in order to recreate. Gusdorf asserts that men are capable of reshaping themselves as unified beings:
The author of an autobiography gives himself the job of narrating his own history; what he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch. The historian of himself wishes to produce his own portrait, but while the painter captures only a moment of external appearance, the autobiographer strains toward a complete and coherent expression of his entire destiny. (Gusdorf, 35)

Women’s autobiography, on the other hand, exposes the impossibility of a unified being or a unified story. Women tend to illustrate both that the self and the story are constructions. The autobiographer disrupts the facts of the life, sabotaging any possibility for a “true” life story. Women’s autobiographies, then, more closely represent that of the painter’s portrait, a fragmented sketch of numerous brush strokes. Women do not see themselves as unified beings; therefore, they cannot write themselves as such. Furthermore, often when women write autobiography, they reveal that non-fiction must use construction and that construction often employs lying. Thus, women confess their lies as a means of showing the impracticality of telling the complete truth.

Thus for women, lying becomes the mode of telling, so autobiographies are purposefully crafted with lies. We cannot say this of traditional autobiography. Even Gusdorf questions whether these lies really matter, wondering how they affect the “truth”? He claims that “... in autobiography the truth of facts is subordinate to the truth of the man, for it is the first of all the man who is in question. The narrative offers us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of a being in dialogue with itself, seeking its innermost fidelity” (46)

Although Gusdorf argues that these unintentional errors are not of primary importance to the autobiography, women autobiographers show that
these inconsistencies are quite significant. They are consistent with truth in that they depict reality more truthfully than any claim of a “complete” self. This is why many women intentionally lie in their own writing. Women attempt to redefine them in their own ways. While some women lie because they feel they must in order to create a good story, others feel that lying is the only way they can truly portray themselves.

Truth, then, becomes something metaphorical. For some women it is how they wish to be understood in their narrative; it can be the shared experience or the experience shared; or it can be the truth they find in uncovering the vagueness of truth. Women wish to blur the two and disrupt their placements on opposite ends of the spectrum. Finally, it could be claimed that for women autobiographers Personal is Political, in view of the fact that it is impossible to tell the “truth” (in the traditional sense of the term) as it requires construction.

**The Biographer’s Art: Defining Women’s Biography:**

Biographical writing has emerged from two traditions of academic inquiry: the historical and the literary in its simplest sense. The genre of biography (and also autobiography) represents a life; an urge to tell the self and to offer an explanation of the sociological and historical landscapes of that life and the significance of these external forces to the processes of self-construction. So, ‘Biography’ is generally defined as that form of narrative life writing which is produced by someone else other than the subject, while autobiography is a narrative produced by a person writing about her or himself.

The fundamental difference between biography as a branch of history and biography as a branch of literature is in the construction of biography. James
Clifford argues that biography should conform to the guidelines of ‘craftsmanship’ or history as an ‘objective science’, if taken to be seriously:

Is writing a life a narrow branch of history or a form of literature? Or may it be something in between, a strange amalgam of science and art? The difference between a craftsman and an artist is obvious. The one knows exactly what his product will be. He works with specific materials and uses traditional techniques. His skill comes as a result of serious study and long practice. The other works intuitively, evolving each move that he makes, and not certain until the end just what his work will be. Originality and genius are more important than practice. Is the life-writer one or the other, or both? (ix).

Despite the fact that there may be conflicting views as to whether the construction of biography is a form of literature or a branch of history, there is likely to be less controversy regarding the assertion that biography is also a form of ‘cultural’ production. According to theorists ‘Biography’ is a form of literary production, but it is also a form of cultural production as biographical texts reflect social reality and also help create it.

The dominant canonical variety of biography has its origins in nineteenth-century high positivism—the professionalization of biography and the connected concern with the tracking down and presentation of fact about the subject. The genesis of traditional biography takes a leap into olden times referring to Plutarch, a historian who sought the meanings of great lives as a form of moral philosophy; and to Boswell, forerunner, a artifact of modernity. Amongst other Froude and John Foster, who wrote on Goldsmith, Landor, Dickens, Swift etc, represent the first full-flowering of the professional biographer. However there are other strands within biography, some very different indeed. For instance, there is psychoanalytically-influenced biographical writing such as Sigmund Freud’s *Leonardo Da Vinci* (1947). A
smaller and presently less influential strand also exists, of what Ira Bruce Nadel in *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (1984) calls ‘meta-biography’; as well as a more analytical although minor strand of sociological biography that includes Steven Lukes, David McLellan.

Thus, canonical ‘Biography’ is seen as a kind of science or at least as having many of the attributes of science. As the critics further add, certainly many of the practitioners—at least in public—seem to see themselves as sensitive scientists who write with style; and the leitmotif of professional biography remains the concern, apparently expected by both readers and writers, with accuracy, objectivity, and detail.

As stated by Ira Bruce Nadel, in *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form*, (1984) Biographers recover the society and culture of the subject in their narrative through the textualization of events: “In this way biography embodies the discourses of a culture, preserving (but also rewriting) a past culture while enacting a new one through certain choices of style, valuation and presentation. A biography cannot isolate its subject from its culture; the conventions of birth, education, career, and death” (Nadel, 74). Thus, biography and biographers can, indeed, highlight the society and culture of their subject and can emphasize specific cultural experiences.

Nevertheless, a feminist approach to “auto/biography” stresses a critical response to the conventional pieties and assumptions in the form of a developed theory of biography influence by ‘cultural politics’ and ‘feminist theory’. Within this, as within the poetics of autobiography, the author, here the biographer, would be firmly located as an active, indeed a determining, presence at biography’s centre. The key is the argument; cultural politics refuses the conventional discipline boundaries that slice up contemporary academic life.
into bite-sized chunks. Its appeal is strong: it draws on ideas and analyses from a wide range of sources, including feminism, Marxism, literary theory, psychoanalysis theory, history and sociology, and uses them in radical and insightful ways. In all this it echoes the voice of contemporary feminism.

This section of the chapter brings into frame work the epistemological, theoretical and technical issues of biography; a suitable ground for a feminist cultural political analysis to be built on. As already discussed in the introductory section, Auto/biography, as a term, encompass all forms of life writing and also the ontological and epistemological links between them.

Autobiography has distinct features which distinguish it from biography. Autobiography pertains to the narrative account of a person’s life that she/he has personally written, whereas biography refers to the narrative account of a person’s life, as written by another, reconstructed mainly through interviews, in the case of deceased subjects, through records and archives.

Historically, women’s writing emerged from those forms in which a woman could write about ‘herself’ for personal satisfaction and self-discovery. Letter writing, for example, was a medium where women could declare their psychological being relatively freely. Feminist historians claim that letters were a vehicle where a woman’s relationship with language could be given expression. Letters, as with diaries, however, can be misleading and are not always the most reliable proof of ‘fact’. They can give impressions of a passing mood and aid a biographer in the construction of a psychological profile, but it is also important to identify alternative sources of information. However letters have frequently supplied authors with material for biography and they can also provide a valuable and interesting insight into the life and times of a previous era.
Other primary sources included unpublished sources such as: correspondence, reports and newsletters. Published sources included newspaper and magazine articles about the subject and after her death, several obituaries. Other media sources such as television documentaries and radio interviews were also useful ‘documents of life’ sources. Documents of life are invariably excellent sources for women’s history and biography and autobiography.

Judy Lensink, in her article “Explaning the boundaries of criticism: the diary of female autobiography” (1987) for example suggests that rich sources for autobiographical texts reside in ordinary women's diaries. Other documents of life may include: diaries, letters, personal experience stories, personal histories, existing autobiographies and biographies, obituaries, videos, films, photographs, postcards, family trees, official records and oral histories.

Similarly the construction and analysis of biographical texts involve the collection of data documenting an individual’s life and describing various ‘turning-point’ moments in that life. The biographer, whether in consultation with the subject or not, can choose to include material that reflects the underlying reason and motivation for the research or she/he can make a decision to exclude material that seems irrelevant or unnecessary. The guiding feature of biographical delve into is that it attempts to suit its method to a purpose. The specific purpose of the study will be the analysis of a particular life or lives for some chosen reason.

The present study sought to explore the various motivational factors which underpinned her (the biographical subject’s) choices and it also sought to contextualize her life within a cultural, historical, social setting as well as personal. From the onset the evaluation projects an individual’s life experience.
However, the key focus is on one individual and her conceptualization of her life experiences and the various life paths she undertook.

The biographical method allows considerable scope for analysis due to its inherent narrative module. According to Tierl Thompson, as stated in Dear Girl: The diaries and letters of two working women 1897-1917, (1987) Biographical methodology is an appropriate form to look over into women’s lives. Biographical study is a valuable method for making visible the interplay between women’s experiences and social structure and exposing the “production of obscurity” (Thompson, ii). The line of argument is that women’s lives tend not to get the same attention as men’s lives do.

The gendered distinction between public and private underlies the classification of women’s lives as “notable” and “obscure”. The literary traditions present us with the question, why have there been no great women artists/writers/philosophers? Women’s biography gives a means to reconceptualize the question. The seeming paucity of women subjects is a manifestation of gender dynamics, for the shortage of female subjects is manufactured by the social production of obscurity. It is this social production of obscurity that renders women’s lives invisible, unintelligible, and /or insignificant.

In every age, women geniuses have gained access to the academy, the platform, or the printing press. They have created work that could guarantee them fame in time without end. But great women have been listed in every epoch, and their great works mislaid. As the generations turn, as records are kept or discarded, as work is attributed or appropriated, as reputations and contributions are assessed, as critics speak—and others, perforce, fall silent—women were erased from history. The historical studies were needed to
demonstrate that the invisibility of women results from an active process of omission operated by human judgment and human agency. Understandably, history has restored mainly notable women, leaving the great majority unknown and undocumented. Thus instead of taking obscurity as the product of an active process of exclusion the need is to examine its dynamics.

**Theory of Women’s Biography:**

Gender has a crucial bearing on the research component of this thesis. The key difference with reference to feminist research and other types of research is that ‘gender’ is always present as a facet of feminist research. Thus the exploration into the ‘personal’ is one of the great strengths of both feminist and biographical research which is one of the textual concerns of the present study. The central focus as been laid is to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of women’s auto/biographical narratives, as literary genres. In view of the fact that life experiences of an individual or individuals are the subject matter of the auto/biographical technique. The present section focuses on the theory of women’s biography and their representational issues.

Fundamentally, Biographies rest on stories, narrative accounts of how something happened. They take the forms of texts which can be studied and analyzed. They consist of narratives with a plot and story line and they contain a set of justifications or reasons for its telling. The biographical method can be defined as the telling and inscribing of stories by creating literary, narrative accounts and representations of lived experiences. However biography written from a feminist perspective, whatever that theoretical perspective might be, is also concerned with locating the subject’s life within a broader social, political and intellectual context.
Traditionally the genre of biography has been practiced and developed by male writers. Like other literary genres, unfortunately, there was a very little room for women in this male tradition. In order to rescue from historical oblivion the women who had been agents of change, the first generation of modern women’s historians had spent years restoring to record the deeds and accomplishments of notable women.

Feminism has revolutionized the genre of biography by bringing women into the forefront of history. In the beginnings of 1970s Feminism, women historians enforced a new understanding of the construction of all history. Only thus could the exclusion of half of humanity from the historical record be explained and remedied. This “postmodern” enterprise as an issue forced the traditional historians for “a return to narrative.” As in a penetrating essay “Why Biography?” (2009) Kessler-Harris discusses the traditional historian’s view of biography as too limited and tied to the needs of narrative. She urges that an “individual life might help us to see not only into particular events but into the larger cultural and social and even political processes of a moment in time.” Thus pose gender as a central dimension of life experience.

The feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, led to a radical rethinking around the gendered female self. Throughout this second-wave of feminist consciousness-raising the ways in which social institutions, practices and discourses defined women was examined and the traditional supporting role of women was challenged. Biography, with its built-in storytelling from birth to death, fell into the center of these disputes as feminist historians of the 1980s formulated the radical deconstruction of this genre as well.

In the 1970s, feminist historians discovered that all but a few women had been quietly eliminated from the formal and informal stories of past. Even the
choice of subject for a biography posed questions for feminists. The elite and educated, those designated as “women worthies,” had long been preferred, but feminist historians now hoped to go beyond the “exception” and to chronicle the lives of all women.

Gerda Lerner, who wrote on black and white women in the United States, and later on feminism in Western culture, divided and set the tasks. Using the histories of Europe and North America as her model, she identified “compensatory history” as the first step: the stories of exceptional women, like queens, the wives of presidents, regents, and women exercising male political power. The next step, “contribution history,” told the stories of the reformers, such as Florence Nightingale, Josephine Butler, and Jane Adams. In retrospection even the suffragists would probably be included here, as Lerner defined the women of this type as those who affected men's history. They functioned within a male-defined framework, choosing and acting on men's not women's terms. In *The Female – Experience* (1977), historian Gerda Lerner notes:

The periods in which basic changes occur in society and which historians commonly regard as turning points are not necessarily the same for men and women. This is not surprising when we consider that the traditional time frame in history has been derived from political history. For example, neither during or after the American Revolution nor in the age of Jackson did women share in the broadening out of opportunities and in the political democratization experienced by men. On the contrary, women in both periods experienced status loss and restriction of their choices as to education or vocation, and had new restraints imposed upon their sexuality, at least by prescription. Thus, the traditional political and military chronology is largely irrelevant to the history of women (XXIV-XXV).
So, canonically, essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework: oppressed, victimized by standards and values established by men. However, Gerda Lerner so evidently and emphatically further states in her essay “Placing Women in History,” (1979) “the true history of women is the history of their ongoing functioning in that male-defined world [but] on their own terms”(117).

However still a question is raised with a view: What were women doing while men's history went on its way? What was the same and what different when seen from women's perspectives? Women's biographers, even if not feminists, have participated in this “recovery history,” as it is sometimes called today. Firstly, they broadened the definition of the extra-ordinary. Although they may have chosen women prominent in another time, they have not been well known in the present. Still vast majority of biographies of women added to history.

Biography, by tradition, if not by definition, has been about the extra-ordinary person, a particular individual who in some manner did something deemed noteworthy by the conventional canons of significance. Even those women who questioned the long-standing constraints on women’s activities, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, asked for a man's education, for the end of women’s exclusion from aspects of what were in their era men’s worlds.

James Field Stanfield’s Essays on the Study and Composition of Biography (1813), the first book-length study of biography in English, consolidates a psychological interest in biographical writings. For critics concerned with biography as art, its focus is on the techniques of biographical writing, many of which continue to be upheld as good biographical practice. Stanfield’s concerns include narrative coherence, the necessary integration of
‘private’ and ‘public’ elements in the representation of a life, impartiality combined with empathy on the biographer’s part, the importance of the individual’s early years and the essential biographic task of keeping the biographical subject in view at all times, rather than submerged by anecdotal detail and historical ‘context’.

An English historian Carolyn Steedman describes the invisibility of women’s history in her book *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan* (1990) stating that women suffered “some form of historical neglect.” (6). Many practitioners started recovering women’s history by writing biographies of women and their individual stories. For example, Nina Rattner Gelbart reconstructed the life and worlds of the eighteenth-century midwife, Marguerite Le Boursier du Coudray, a woman of national significance in the history of French maternal health. Natalie Zemon Davis a Canadian and American historian of early modern period gave life to late seventeenth-century “women on the margins,” outside the mainstream of their societies.

According to Natalie Zemon Davis as stated in *Women on the Margins: Three Seventeenth-Century Lives*, (1995) women biographer gave form and substance to the life of a woman and, by inference, of women in similar circumstances. Each life is presented as in some way indicative of women's choices more generally: acceptances, accommodations, compromises, and rejections. They wish to lead and give the missing half of history. Even Steedman on the same line explains in *Childhood, Culture and Class in Britain: Margaret McMillan* (1990) that these are the stories of the self formed by a historicized world, lives told by biographers steering a route between these two principles of causation, the internal and the external. These women are all portrayed as active agents, not passive victims, however constraining or limiting their circumstances. These are not simple stories of “power” and
“powerlessness,” but rather complex examples of how these supposed poles of experience can co-exist in the same moment of a life. (Steedman, 1990 247)

Even Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, as the editors of an early anthology on feminist biography *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (1992) clarify “When the particular becomes female, the universal can no longer be male.”( 1-15)

Just as the choice of subject and the recovery of forgotten women's lives took history away from male elites and their politics. Kathleen Canning's, a modern German Historian in her article, “Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historicizing Discourse and Experience,”(1994) questions the basic definition of what is considered “history”, so “the linguistic turn” challenged the construction of that history whoever or whatever the subject might be.

For women biographers, “post-structuralism” raised many questions, all of which challenge the very essence of “biography” as the authoritative teleological narrative of an individual's life. Soon after Feminist historians resolved these post-structural sensitivities to language and identity. It became their second contribution to the making of biography. Angela V. John's introduction to her biography *Elizabeth Robins: Staging a Life*, (1995) of Elizabeth Robins—the actress, novelist, and feminist activist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—describe two of the most important difficulties: those of self “representation” and the “transparency” of sources. Robins kept diaries, but she often wrote multiple versions of events, destroyed others, and presented herself differently yet again in her public discourse and appearances. Therefore, Angela V. John subtitles the biography “Staging a Life” and organizes her narrative around the different personae Robins highlighted at
the successive “stages” of her career. The pun is intentional and reminds the reader of both the theatrical life and the theatrical creation that was Elizabeth Robins.

Liz Stanley, the English feminist scholar, desired to make the whole art of biography transparent. Liz Stanley employed the kaleidoscope image as a useful method for thinking about themes in women’s lives and how these themes interrelate and overlap in her book *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography*, (1992). However Stanley's desire to reveal that all “modern biography is founded upon a realist fallacy.” In the chapter “Biography as Microscope,” Stanley converse about the “accountable feminist biography” to demonstrate the competing versions of lives and types of evidence, the increasing complexity of the relationship of biographer to subject, of “the power divisions” usually constructed between the writer and her readers, and the blurred lines between fact and fiction and between biography and autobiography. (Liz, 22- 30).

Stanley's fierce clarity about her own goals for feminist biography calls all historical authority into question. Stanley elaborates on this view: “the past is not 'there' to know; knowledge about it is the product of particular minds creating a symbolic account supported by scraps of evidence.” (Liz, 86)

Such critiques have led feminist biographers to focus on “sites” and on “representations”, rather than the identity of an individual woman, her choices, her actions, or even the context of her life. As an example of the most extreme form of this approach, Mary Beard, in her life of the early twentieth-century Cambridge academic and classicist, Jane Harrison, *The Invention of Jane Harrison* (2000) describes any biography she might write as “myth”; her aim is “not to replace one mythic version with another, an old story with my own
brand-new, and necessarily better one.” Instead, she produces the biography of this woman's archives and how she, as an author, uses them, thus revealing the procedure by which a Jane Harrison is “invented.” (Mary, 8–11)

Thus biographical research and feminist research are relatively attuned. Both rely extensively on the in depth, structured or semi-structured interview, both oppose a rigid view of methodology and research techniques and both are committed to rigorous analysis. Feminist scholars have been mindful that traditional research within the social sciences was systematically male biased and inappropriate for feminist research. The key difference about feminist research and other types of research is that gender is always present as a feature of feminist research. For feminists of all theoretical persuasions, gender is the issue. It is rightly stated by James Clifford(1986) “Revealing the nature of gender relations and reconceptualising them are key concerns of the feminist project”(18). Thus, Biographical research, when informed by a feminist theoretical perspective, gives a voice to women’s lives, lives which have previously been obscured in sociological research.

Theorists state that literature is normally used to refer to a body of texts that are perceived to have certain aesthetic qualities. As literature has the unique capacity to set into motion man’s total being. Thus literary texts provide a powerful understanding of ways in which society works towards the images of both women and men. According to the study of feminist thinkers’ literature as a cultural practice can offer special insight into the ways women are represented in the literary texts. The textual focus of the present study is to find how literary representations of women are gendered in biographical works.

The thesis aims at an exploration of how society view women (that is the public view of women as represented in literature) and what mental conception
of a woman a writer tends to have (the biographer’s private understanding of a woman as an individual and also a member of society). Literature is said to be the reflection of society and a biographer plays a major role in the depiction of society in its truer sense. Thus, even the under-representation of women by the biographer also contributes to their oppression.

Biographers do not aspire to literary criticism. Their approach is exactly the reverse, searching the work for clues to the life. But by what right they search at all? Public lives are not lived in isolation; they have impact far beyond their immediate circle and therefore invite a response. If certain lives have the power to touch or to transform our own (quite literally, in the case of the political world), to exalt or terrify us, then we, with the biographer as our representative, have the right to make sense of those lives, to their innermost nature. (Pachter 6)

Studying what biographers say about their work extends our understanding of the possibilities of the narrator’s role. However issues just about ‘representation’ are valuable in highlighting both the experiences of the ‘individual subject’ and the social structure in which she/he lives (d) and also those of the ‘biographer’. Representational considerations also highlight tensions within the dominant constructions of gender, race and class. Thus the way the biographers, male and female choose to represent their subjects is complex. Typifications about masculinity and femininity, for example, are central to the biographer’s edifice.

The misrepresentation of women by men has, through the centuries, been one of the main means of sustaining and justifying women’s secondary position. Early feminist critiques of the representation of women within popular culture generally identified that most women tended to be represented through stereotypes of femininity and such representations needed to be redressed by making more ‘realistic’ representations of women available. Nevertheless social
movements such as feminism throughout the world, the civil rights movement in the United States, employed a reflective model of representation which demands a more accurate reflection of society as a whole. Such a model also encompasses the underrepresented: the working-class, lesbian and gay communities and peoples of color.

Women’s willingness to do work on themselves, to bring themselves into the frame, has made possible a new kind of understanding. Studying women’s way of knowing. Biography and the use of personal narratives are empowering methods for telling the everyday histories of 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.

AnaLouise Keating suggests the narratives produced in the biographies of women of color and third world women do not focus exclusively on the development of a unified, individual self, but instead notions of collective selves are articulated which include socio-political and historical memories and generally, a spiritual dimension. Potentially, such narratives are transformational for identity politics. The act of writing, of engaging with language that affirms and revitalizes, opens up possibilities for change.

Biographical writing has the potential to position its subject, on that threshold where a pluralized self can evolve. A pluralized self-identity is, as Keating (1996) suggests, capable of interacting with many worlds. Writing a biographical subject as a flexible, evolving identity assumes complex speaking positions enabling points of similarity and difference among readers of diverse
backgrounds. As stated by Leon Edel, one of the tasks of a biographical narrative is to sort out themes and patterns, as opposed to mundane calendar events and dates. Such a task results in a struggle between a biographer and the subject to locate the concealed self and the revealed self, the public and the private and to work with these tensions with delicacy and skill.

Thus, Biographers can draw from those devices which have given narrative strength to fiction, such as flashbacks, retrospective chapters, summary chapters, jumps from childhood to maturity, and forays into the past. A biographer fashions their subject out of words utilizing powers of observation and imagination. Language and writing style are thus crucial elements in the creative process of constructing biographical texts. While language and writing style are imperative to the textualization process, language is more than a mode of communication. Thus, language can be viewed as a social discourse and culture. A gender specific use of language and narrative alter biography from a fact-neutral to value-interpretative text.

As long as the language in which we speak, communicate and think does intend to remove biased notions of women and constantly attempt to rework and reinforce the prejudiced opinion against women, women cannot become efficient to realize their full potential in the pursuit of productive and rewarding occupation. The misread portrayal, turning facts into fictions of women by the biographers can project them appear as threatening to other women. Thus, paints a negative picture of women turning their life stories into ‘cautionary tales’. But a biographer’s impartial laying bare facts as facts, has a tremendous influence in building a positive unbiased image of a woman.

Therefore Biography from this perspective not only partakes in, but becomes a form of cultural discourse. Biography can also illustrate ways in
which the power of social values can either entrap or free the individual. One of the strengths of biographical research of women is that it provides a context for different voices to dialogue with such issues as authenticity and identity. Despite the potentially debatable issues of authenticity, biographical and autobiographical writing gives voice to the subject, substantiating and validating the lived experience. Still the need for a forum to voice these and other concerns is vital.

Bring the Corpse to Life: The Discourse of the ‘New Biography’:

The ‘new biography’ as a genre 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. The present study looks 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 advent of ‘the new biography’ in the early twentieth century in Britain was a part of the desire of the literary ‘moderns’ to mark their absolute difference from their Victorian predecessors. The failure of ‘Victorian Biography’ is one of the themes that dominate discussion of ‘the new biography’. Biography is partially figured, in the discourse of ‘the new biography’, as an autobiographical project. As a resultant autobiography appears to be of secondary importance in this project, although a number of discussions of autobiography from the first decades of the twentieth century are of interest.

The biographer is perceived by a number of critics and practitioners of biography not as a neutral, objective reporter, but as having an active, and, in psychoanalytic terms, even a ‘transferential’ relationship to the biographical
subject. In this sense, the biographer he/she is said to be in part narrating his/her own story, real or fantasized. The biographer’s awareness of the complexity of the self is often viewed in this period as a consequence of autobiographical self-awareness, or at least awareness of the difficult of knowing and grasping the self. “Consider one’s own life”, Virginia Woolf wrote in her essay “The New Biography”(1966):

> We can assure ourselves by a very simple experiment that the days of Victorian biography are over. Consider one’s own life; pass under review a few years that one has actually lived. Conceive how Lord Morley would have expounded them; how Sir Sidney Lee would have documented them; how strangely all that has been most real in them would have slopped through their fingers. (Vol, iv)

The failure of Victorian biography, a theme that dominates discussion of the new biography, is very aptly stated. Andre Maurois uses the same strategy when arguing that the self is irreducible to a ‘scientific’ knowledge of its parts; Think of your own life,’ he enjoined the audience of his lectures in 1928, subsequently published as Aspects of Biography.

Virginia Woolf appears to have coined the term ‘the new biography’ in describing experiments in biography in the 1910’s and 1920’s in particular, those of her contemporaries Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson. Woolf characterizes ‘the new biography’, in her essay of that title, by its more concise form and by a new relationship of equality between biographer and subject; ‘he preserves his freedom and his right to independent judgment’ (“New” 231). In Woolf’s words, the biographer “chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become an artist” (“New” 231).
Woolf stresses the newly democratic relationship between the biographer and his subject; “he is no longer the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero; whether friend or enemy, admiring or critical, he is an equal” (“New” 231). In her critique of Victorian ‘Great Man’ biography in “The Art of Biography” (1981), Woolf extends the issue of democracy to “whether the lives of great men only should be recorded”, while still apparently retaining a sense of the need for heroes:

Is not any one who has lived a life, and left, a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious? And what is greatness? And what smallness? He must revise our standards of merits and set up new heroes for our admiration. (“Art”125)

‘Biography’ was seen, in Richard Altick’s words, as “the literary emblem par excellence of Victorianism, a product faithful to the old era’s habit of misapplied and exaggerated hero worship, with all its attendant hypocrisy and evasiveness”( 289). Even Andre Maurois defined the biographer’s essential task as a search for the thematic unity and harmony of the life he recounts, calming that this is not an imposed but a natural aesthetic. The life of an individual, he asserts, in ‘naturally’ made up of motifs and metaphors which constitute its unity. In his highly romanticized biography of Shelley, *Ariel: a Shelley Romance* (1924) Maurois locates a ‘water motif’ and water imagery; Shelley’s life is, in addition, a ‘wonderful natural composition’, being grouped around two women, each of [whom] corresponds with a different stage in Shelley’s ethical development.( *Ariel* 51)

Woolf described Nicolson’s *Some People*, a study of biography and autobiography, real and imaginary portraits, as one of the most successful example of the new biographical writing. However Woolf praised Nicolson’s *Some People* as the most successful example of the new biographical writing, in
part because Nicolson achieves self-portraiture under the guise of biography: ‘Each of the supposed subject holds up in his or her bright diminishing mirror a different reflection of Harold Nicolson … It is thus, he would seem to say, in the mirrors of our friends, that we chiefly live.’(“New” 233) But it was, however, Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* (1918), with its ‘debunking’, satirical approach to historical figures and its emphasis on biography as an art, in which the selection and shaping of ‘facts’ is all-important, which was the greater influence by far.

‘The new biography’ stood for modernity against the previous century. The significance of Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* - created a revolution in biography and still seen as marking the break between old and new - is above all that its critique of Victorian values, institutions and ‘personalities’ is inseparable from its critique of nineteenth-century biographical discourse. *Eminent Victorians* was marked as an ‘emblematic’ work. The prime argument is for aesthetics of biography from part of a larger debate about the disciplinary affiliations of biographical and autobiographical writing in the early twentieth century.

Along with Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson too focused on the new element of satire. Lytton Strachey in *Eminent Victorians*, as epoch-making book, altered the outlook of a whole generation of English biographers. Strachey focus was on the subjective nature of the interpretation of the ‘facts’ about an individual, and on the necessary shaping and selection that goes into biographical portraiture, led to an emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of biography. He erased the similarity between the novel and biography. However, Strachey’s technique implicated the presentation of ‘stream of consciousness’, the use of interior monologue, the detailed tracing of the freakish association of ideas, and an allusive style were the chief weapons
which attempted to write from within the mind of the character. From the exploitation of these techniques there developed a subjective novel of a type previously unknown leading to the birth of new biography.

Virginia Woolf was another pioneer to use the technique of ‘streams of consciousness’. In her essay, “The Lives of the Obscure”, she wholly rejected her father’s approach to biographical methods. In “The Lives of the Obscure” Woolf exploits the metaphoric relationship between lives and books to the point where the terms collapse into one another; “the obscure sleep on the walls, slouching against each other as if they were too drowsy to stand upright”. The reader, however, opens up the ‘nameless tombstones’ and brings the dead to life:

It is one of the attraction of the unknown, their multitude, their vastness; for, instead of keeping their identity separate, as remarkable people do, they seem to merge into one another, their very boards and title-pages and frontispieces dissolving, and their innumerable pages melting into continuous years so that we can lie back and look up into the fine mist-like substance of countless lives, and pass unhindered from century to century, from life to life. Scenes detach themselves. We watch groups. ("Lives" 118)

However, ‘the new biography’ is defined as much by its reaction against Victorianism as by any positive identity of its own. Laura Marcus in Auto/biographical discourses: Theory. Criticism. Practice, (1994) provides a detail analysis of how critics and reviewers from early in the century were expressing their criticisms of the expansive, panegyric form of ‘Victorian biography’ to those of the new biographers:

They are scathing about the ‘journeyman’ approach to biography as a form of extended obituary notice or funerary monument, unremittingly eulogistic in tone. This suggests that Victorian biographical discourse is not as uniform as some critics, the ‘new
biographers’ included, have assumed. More specifically, the Victorian critique of the expansive, eulogistic ‘official’ biography, intended to immortalize the achievements and virtues of the deceased, may well have been motivated by a concern that too many biographers of purely domestic and familial interest were circulating in the public literary sphere. In other words, there is concern not only with intrusion into the private sphere and the display of the private in public, but also with the inflated publicity given to private lives of little general interest and hence of the encroachment of the private into the public.(93; emphasis added)

The above stated facts formulate very clearly that Victorian biography was a form of extended obituary notice or funerary monument. Very aptly said by W. H. Epstein in Recognizing Biography (1987) that the “cultural function of biography is, to turn life into text and text back into life” (27). In his Principles of Biography (1911) and The Perspective of Biography (1917/18), Sidney Lee combined his reactions against Victorian biographical panegyric and hero-worships which expects the subject of significant biography must be a personality of ‘magnitude’. Lee also defines biography existing to satisfy a natural instinct in man—the commemorative instinct “the universal desire to keep alive the memories of those who by character and exploits have distinguished themselves from the mass of mankind” (7). Further, he states that an unfit biography is the career of mediocre. He also observes that death is a part of life and no man is fit subject for biography till he is dead. Thus in Lee’s account textual completeness is dependent on the closure of the life and is imaged by implication as a body whole and complete.

The dreadful aspects of this metaphor emerge- knowingly or otherwise – in Woolf’s description of Victorian biography as, in “The Art of Biography”, “like the wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street—effigies that have only a smooth
superficial likeness to the body in the coffin”(“Art”121). Here, the biographical and the funeral have become so intermeshed that the biographical subject becomes identical to the dead, and soon to decompose, body in the coffin, from which the imitation was patterned.

Thus, Woolf opens up dominant metaphors in biographical criticism, metaphors which cover over some of the most problematic aspects of biographical representation. These include the biographer’s relationship to his or her subject, the place of the body in biography, and the temporality of the life as lived and narrated.

Harold Nicolson’s *The Development of English Biography* (1927) provides both a chronological account of English biography from the fifth century to the present, and a ‘theoretical’ approach to the definition of pure biography. Nicolson explains how ‘Pure’ biography is distinguished from ‘impure’ biography by its emphasis on historical truth and skilful construction, while ‘impure’ biography comes about as a result of “either an undue desire to celebrate the dead, or a purpose extraneous to the work itself, or an undue subjectivity on the part of the biographer”(10).

Nicolson is very indifferent of autobiographical writing. He remarks that the wholly objective approach to personality required for ‘true’ biography cannot or has not yet, been attained in autobiographical writing: “creative biography necessitates something more than diagnosis: it necessitates a scientific autopsy; and this sense of a rigorous post-mortem is just what the autobiographer has always found it impossible to convey”(*English Biography* 15).
Thus, the transition from the funeral bier to the dissecting-table as a metaphor for biography reveals the extent to which the ideal of a stern science has entered the literary philosophy of a bellettrist like Nicolson. Metaphors of dissection and anatomizing tend to appear in nineteenth-century criticism as a means of expressing shock and disgust at intimate revelations about ‘private lives’. The private self is imagined as a literal bodily interiority, damaged and diseased, stripped not only of its clothes but of its flesh by the biographer’s scalpel. Thus Nicolson obviously mobilizes the metaphor of autopsy for different ends; the biographical ‘corpse’ is contained inside science, while the biographer’s relationship to the subject is surgically cleansed of affect or desire.

In “The New Biography” Woolf refers to the new equality between the biographer and biographical subject; in *Orlando*, she opens up the issue of the biographer’s desire for his/her living subject. This is also indicated by Andre Maurois, in a series of lectures, published as *Aspects of Biography* in 1924, which were in large part a response to Nicolson’s *The Development of English Biography*. Maurois uses the example of his own biographies of Shelley and Disraeli to explore the question of the biographer’s identification with the subject:

> Biography is a means of expression when the author has chosen his subject in order to respond to a secret need in his own nature. It will be written with more natural emotion than other kinds of biography, because the feelings and adventures of the hero will be a medium of the biographer’s own feelings; to a certain extent it will be autobiography disguised as biography (*Aspects*125).

In the discourse of biography, the truth of self or identity is conventionally imagined through the body, especially as clothed/naked, thus making the issue of private/public a question of decency/indecency. Satirizing these representations, Woolf’s *Orlando* (1992) raises two key questions. Firstly,
what is the place of the body in biography and, secondly, what is the relationship between truth and (in) decency for the moderns?

Woolf also remarks on the gender differentiation of metaphors, as well as the gendering of genres. In *Orlando*, Woolf uses the mirror-image in part as a way of representing the lures of femininity for women themselves and hence, in the manner of de Beauvoir, of the way ‘one’ becomes a woman. Actually *Orlando* is a fantasy or dream-text, overtly transgressive of the laws of space and time, as well as the logics of conventional biography. It is definitely not a new model biography, but rather a desire to renew biography suggests, in Woolf’s terms, it might be capable of representing a ‘life’ worth the living.

**Women, Feminism and Auto/biography: Is there a Feminist Auto/biography?:**

Feminist publishing houses and imprints have increasingly feature biography and autobiography in their lists. However, the relationship between feminism and these auto/biographies of a mixed range of women is a complex and interesting one; and it raises questions concerning whether a distinct ‘feminist’ auto/biography exists.

Biographers seek to grasp and communicate the subjectivity of the subject and, often, their own as well. As, Clifford point up in *Biography as an Art* (1962): In biography the subject “speaks to” the narrator- and the narrator. Sometimes the narrator speaks directly to the reader. With biography defined as the intersection between the personality of the subject and that of the biographer, two subjectivities are recognized (2). Thus the biographical act results from the narrators’ response to the subject and the commitments that she makes.
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.

However, is the fact that a text is feminist authored or about a feminist subject sufficient to define it as feminist auto/biography? Is the form or structure of what is written as feminist auto/biography, not just the subject who forms the bones of its content, actually different from any other auto/biography?

The question of a distinct genre of women’s autobiography is related to but not synonymous with the question of whether a distinct feminist auto/biography exists. Certainly there are biographies and autobiographies written by feminists, such as Cathy Porter’s biography of Alexandra Kollontai (1980), Jill Liddington’s of Selina Cooper (1984) and Judith Okely’s of Simone de Beauvoir (1986); and autobiographies by Liz Wilson (1982), Ann Oakley (1984) and Carolyn Steedman (1986).

According to critics the autobiographies just mentioned self-consciously and self-confidently mix genres and conventions. Within them fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, biography and autobiography, self and others, individuals and networks, not only co-exist but intermingle in ways that encourage, not merely permit, active readership. The boundaries between conventional dichotomies are traversed here and shown to be far less challenging than generally supposed.
These feminist autobiographies challenge the boundaries of conventional autobiographical form, indeed play with some of its conventions such as the ‘autobiographical pact’ of confessional truth-telling, a narrative that moves unidirectionally from birth/beginning to maturity/resolution/end, and the insistence on a unitary self.

This feminist challenge to autobiographical form and thus to genre convention has a history which encompasses Kate Millet’s *Flying* (1974) and *Sita* (1977). Millet’s experimental autobiographies depart from form by treating autobiography as part diary, part free form writing, part ‘stream of consciousness’ depiction in narrative form. It is clear that many reviewers and critics found its unconventionality deeply offensive, for by writing in this way Millet’s textual life encompasses many aspects of actual life typically omitted, excised, from ‘the life’ that is autobiography.

This includes not only the ‘trivia’ many critics commented upon but also the embarrassing inclusion of the agonizing – and soon boring – development and conclusion of Millet’s sexual and emotional dependence on Sita. Not only this, but Millet’s form of writing abandons a temporal narrative sequencing, or rather this is multiply cross-cut with other writing forms.

However, more recent feminist autobiographers such as Steedman and Chernin have taken a different route away from the conventions of autobiography, not least because of their decentering of self. Millet centers self in order to foreground its fragmentation, while these feminist autobiographers position self as an interactional process as well as product.
The feminist biographies are very different from these innovative and experimental developments in feminist autobiography. Reconstructing feminism from them, a reader would conclude that apart from the interest in female and/or feminist subjects, feminist biography is in many respects conventional and indistinguishable from the best products of the mainstream, following the conventions of genre rather than challenging them.

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.

It appears, then, that biographical form is much less easy to subvert, to extend, and to play with, than autobiographical form because it is founded upon and makes central use of positivist foundationalist and realist assumptions and rhetorical stances. However, as a mainstream and a set of conventions, biography also contains an avant-grade and iconoclasms. Liz Stanley affirms that a distinct feminist auto/biographical form do exist but with its own departures from the biographic conventions, as stated in her book Auto/Biographical I:

Three interesting departures from biographic conventions are: non- or even anti-spotlight approaches…meta-biographies, that include the biographer and the process of researching biography ….and anti-realist biographies that subvert or flout foundationalist principles and practices….There is of course a fourth departure, of fictitious biographies; that is, writing which is published as biographies and intended to be read as such, but which are later
discovered to be fakes, fictions dressed to deceive rather than entertain. (I, 249)

Thus the theorists believe that the baseline of a distinct feminist auto/biography is the rejection of a reductionist spotlight attention to a single unique subject. This is not to suggest that women’s or feminists’ lives are innately different from those of men in this regard: no ‘difference’ argument is proposed or intended here. It is however to propose that one of the defining principles of feminist biography— and whether its subject/s is/are women or men—should be an attention to social location and contextualization and in particular to subjects’ position within, not apart from, their social networks.

Founded upon this social rather than individualistic approach, a distinct feminist biography textually recognizes that its facts and arguments are contingent. That is, it recognizes that biographical as any other writing is produced from a particular and socially located viewpoint. As Liz Stanley in *The Autobiographical I* states:

The most revolutionary departure from biography’s mainstream is thus writing which explicitly and in a number of ways (not just that of the contingency of authorial voice) departs from realist principles and practices. The most thorough going example of this is Virginia Woolf’s Orlando (I, 252).

Virginia Woolf, it has been variously and contradictorily noted by critics, wrote no autobiography, wrote diaries and letters that exist in lieu of an autobiography, wrote autobiography in several of her works of fiction, wrote autobiography in the memoirs published in *Moments of Being* (1978), and produced her true autobiography in *A Room of Her Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Howsoever ‘autobiography’ is defined, it is clear that claims can be made for the existence of an autobiographical corpus in Woolf’s writings
existing largely outside of the conventional form that autobiography takes, and haunting much of her ‘other’ writing.

Virginia Woolf’s claims as a biographer are more definite, more focused, but perhaps more revolutionary. There is the anti-realist *Orlando* (1928), *Flush* (1933), a fictional biography of Elizabeth Barrett’s spaniel that contains much illuminating factual material about the poet herself – a biography of her ‘from below’. And then there is *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940). Reading Woolf’s letters and diaries over the period of the preparation, writing and publication of *Roger Fry*, it is clear she experienced boundaries and confinements unlike with any others of her books. At points in exasperation she curses ‘the letters’ and ‘the facts’, feeling constrained to work within limits set by ‘the evidence’ and ‘the proprieties’, and thus unable to craft new limits which would take her closer to the truth about her subject as she experienced it.

**Biography as Microscope or Kaleidoscope? Case Studies:**

In women’s biography the exclusionary lines drawn by genre theory have been especially problematic, marginalizing it in relation to dominant literary discourse. However, biography has the potential to represent the female experience by bringing women from the margins to the centre of analysis.

Liz Stanley and Kathleen Barry are two of the leading theorists of women’s biography as well as writing biographies on women themselves. In connection with some of the biographical work she has carried out, Liz Stanley has constructed a feminist biographical method that incorporates three key elements influenced by feminist epistemology and feminist sociology. In her work *Auto/Biographical I* (1992) writes, the first element she argues that biography should be treated as being composed by textually located ideological practices and that these practices should be analytically engaged with. In
Stanley’s biography, (with Ann Morley) of Emily Wilding Davison (1988) the ideological practices of feminism are both textually located and analytically engaged with. As the first feminist biography of Davison, it also provides a commentary on the various histories of the Edwardian feminist movement.

In Stanley’s second element of what might constitute a feminist biographical method she stresses the importance of the labor process of the biographer as researcher in reaching the interpretations and conclusions she/he comes to. Stanley calls this process “intellectual autobiography” (I, 17) and again it is evident in the biography of Emily Wilding Davison as she outlines why and how the book was written.

Stanley’s third element suggests that the informal organization of feminists through friendship can be as important as formal feminist organization in understanding the dynamics and complexities of such women’s lives. In Emily Wilding Davison’s biography, this element is apparent in the way her patterns of comradeship and her closest colleagues are traced out. Similarly, in Stanley’s work on Olive Schreiner, feminist social networks are also apparent. Rather than the spotlight approach which focuses on one single person, Stanley views the concern with groups, networks and collectives of women as being one of the most interesting and exciting directions that biographical writing could move in.

After completing Susan B. Anthony’s life story, Kathleen Barry, a feminist scholar developed a theory of women’s biography which moves in a progression from the phenomenology of daily life to the structure of history. This theory is meant to force the anomaly distortions and eclipses of masculinized history into a new clarity. As Barry recommends, the feminists must look at history from a woman’s perspective and create a subjective history
which privileges women’s lives and looks at women’s documents such as letters and diaries. Subjective history for Barry begins with the life story and a return to narrative and then moves from narrative into interpretation. Discussing her biography of Anthony, Barry (1992) states:

Anthony would have remained a distant object, a model with whom I identified but did not know, until I went one step further and began to interpret the facts of her life by deriving the actual meaning she attributed to those facts. The research into her papers and documents allowed me to reconstruct the objective conditions of situations in Anthony’s life. From them I was able to interpret the meanings that she attributed to her interactions both with herself and others (226).

Barry asserts that only when the object of a biography has become a subject, someone that the biographer is ‘involved with’ and has come to ‘know,’ can true biographical work and interpretation begin. Verification of that interpretation is vital to this process:

As I progressed in my involvement with Anthony as a subject, I began to find myself almost automatically predicting her response or her course of action in particular situations; from the information in her letters or other documents, she would verify my interpretations. This is what sociologists call saturation when studying collective life histories; it is the point that one reaches when a certain predictability intervenes and becomes verified (27).

Finding and revealing a woman’s subjectivity differs from identifying with her, and Barry suggests the biographer must transcend personal identification with her subject. Identification, Barry claims, is a kind of heroine worship and ultimately an objectification of the other which denies that inter-subjective interaction is possible. Although I was able to transcend personal identification with Betty, we certainly acknowledged aspects of a common identity and I was able to maintain an inter-subjective interaction where I was
'involved with' and 'came to know' Betty at a level which allowed for the possibilities of interpretation beyond the superficial.

However women’s biography must be a new reading of history, which demands the rewriting of all history. Barry notes: In lifting women’s biography from its imbeddedness in essentialism, women’s history can be found through biographical interpretation. This enters into the historical complexity and multidimensionality of women’s lives that has been made all the more complex by their exclusion from history (33).

Implicit in Barry’s view of what constitutes feminist biography is the complete rewriting of history as ‘her-story’. Lori Williamson (1999), while sharing Barry’s view that feminist scholarship needs to remain aware of the impact of a patriarchal past on women’s lives, also urges a more fully integrationist approach to life stories. She suggests women biographers need to celebrate the diversity and complexity of their subjects, allowing ‘lost’ voices to be heard in a manner which promotes an inclusive gender studies integrating women into the mainstream.

As Williamson points out, the emphasis on female repression ensures the perpetuation of the ‘them versus us’ dialectic which has characterized much feminist scholarship in the past, and it is counterproductive to present women’s history in terms of what they could not/did not/were not able to achieve because of men. Rather, it would be more worthwhile to emphasize what women have achieved in spite of men and, in some cases, alongside men. Writing women’s biography from a feminist point of view enables a critical view of society that asserts the historical meaning of women’s struggle toward becoming fully developed individuals and cannot overlook the vision and revision of woman’s condition in history.
In *A Room of One’s Own* Virginia Woolf (1929) explicitly asks for a vision and a revision of woman’s condition in history when she states: "Let us imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say" (1929/1988, 46). Woolf’s vision was that women would be given the space and opportunity to write and the intellectual freedom of which great literature is born. In the life of Judith, Shakespeare’s fictional sister, she describes women’s historical past and sketches out futuristic possibilities:

Shakespeare had a sister, but do not look for her in Sir Sidney Lee’s life of the poet. She died young alas, she never wrote a word. Now my belief is that this poet who never wrote a word and was buried at the cross-roads still lives. She lives in you and in me, and in many other women. She lives; for great poets do not die; they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us in the flesh. If we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think, then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare’s sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born (*Room*, 108; emphasis added).

Women have been defined as ‘Other’ to a white, middle-class, male norm, (de Beauvoir, 1953). As Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1996) argue, ‘Otherness’ has been projected on to women by, and in the interests of men, with women being constructed as inferior or abnormal. One of the key focal points for women’s attributions of Otherness is the maternal body and its reproductive capacity. Such a focus constructs Otherness only in terms of gender and obscures the various dimensions of how women have been othered. The uniform category of ‘Otherness’ render invisible the divergence and varied experiences of women.

Thus Auto/biographical writing by or about women aimed at raising the visibility of the lives and work of women. Accordingly, ‘Auto/biographical’
texts of women represent both the individual and the group and are sites for politicizing the individual/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. 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, the thesis also puts forward the premise that auto/biographical texts can be viewed as a literary extension and accordingly these literary genres are ideal methods for writing about the life histories and experiences of women. Very interestingly, the gender of the biographer is found contributing to the complexities of the genre, after viewing the biographical female self with specific gender specific priorities. As a result biography of the same person written by a male and a female biographer unfold different dimensions, which make such a study fascinatingly gender-specific.
Works Cited


