CHAPTER IV

Personal is Political: Nehru Women’s Autobiographies

…..Six “structural conditions” that shape women’s reality: (1) within a male-centered “social construction of reality,” women take on the role of “the other”; either their experience is considered deviant, or it remains invisible, resulting in women's silence; (2) of necessity, women have habituated themselves to the private sphere of domestic labor or housework, which is repetitive or cyclic, contingent and interruptible; this has repercussions for the ways they experience time and space; (3) women's work, traditionally valued and consumed primarily by the family rather than exchanged for money, has provided a vehicle for women's creativity; (4) shared physiological experiences—menstruation, childbirth, breast-feeding—give women the sense of being bound to a reality outside their own control; (5) responsibility for childrearing requires women to subordinate their own will and goals to those of others; and, finally, (6) women's mode of moral reasoning, unlike men's, which draws on abstract rights, depends primarily on establishing and sustaining connections to other people.

(Josephine, Donovan. “Toward a Women's Poetics” 98- 109; emphasis added)

Conventions of subject, point of view, audience, and plot are common, even necessary, to all autobiography, men’s and women’s. Through the common strands of women’s experience as girls, daughters, wives, and mothers, that is, through thematic content, female autobiographers distinguish themselves from male. A feminist optic, such as that provided by the feminist literary critic Josephine Donovan, unquestionably helps bring women’s themes into focus.

Without necessarily judging all otherness or subordination a consequence of male oppression of women, one can use Josephine Donovan’s categories as a
raster for scanning the text for the presence of recurrent themes and, especially, the silences about various themes. For it are often the silences that reveal the full character of women’s reality and expose underlying tensions.

Women’s autobiography in India is largely defined with reference to the traditional patriarchal set up in which it grew. However the consciousness enshrined therein often strikes a familiar chord among women elsewhere occupied with the definition of the “I”. Far from being a well defined, isolated “I”, women’s autobiography springs from an awareness of a collective identity. A woman does not write her autobiography as an isolated being, but carries a whole tradition of women’s writing within her.

As discussed in the first chapter, canonical theories are of very little help in critiquing women’s autobiography writing due to certain reasons. However, facts of their gender identity influence the genre a great deal, in both form and content, making women’s autobiography discontinuous in form and ‘personal’ in content.

The present chapter, attempts to re-read the autobiographies by the Nehru family women, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nayantara Sahgal and Krishna Hutheesing. As stated earlier the thesis attempts to a re-reading of Nehru women’s autobiographies from the Gynocentric point of view; as gynocritics aim to understand the specificity of women’s writing, as a fundamental aspect of female reality. The prime focus is to study Nehru women’s autobiographies projecting an image of private strength and public passivity. Furthermore, the strategies they adopt as the “self” to be projected is in a double positioning, between public and private, between their own expectations and those of others. Since the ideology of ‘gender’ makes of woman’s life script a nonstory. Thus her “natural” story shapes itself not around the public, heroic life but around the
fluid, circumstantial, contingent responsiveness to others. And since, they focus more on private life; they attempt to detach themselves from the public events. This ideology, purely patriarchal characterizes the life of woman but not autobiography.

The focal point is to examine predominantly the narrative strategies used, that multiply the voice of the autobiographer, thus resisting the singular “I” upon which the genre has traditionally been based. In general these autobiographies project an image of private strength. But in commonality these autobiographies emphasize to a lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives – domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and especially people who influenced them.

Categorized under women’s writing, the present chapter also attempts to analyze the notions of *Personal is Political*, concentrating on the autobiographies of Nehru women. This ultimately directs towards the inquiry regarding why there is emphasis by women on the personal, especially on other people, rather than on their work life, their professional success, or their connectedness to current political or intellectual history?

The chapter illustrates how Nehru women’s autobiographies endorse the differences, a ‘gender’ differential projection of ‘self’. In other words, the effect of ‘gender’ (a socio-cultural ‘construct’) as well as sex (a biological ‘given’) in writing ‘self’. The chapter substantiates the hypothesis that ‘gender plays an important role in the creative process of writing ‘self’: the gender-boundness of the genre’. 
Krishna Nehru Hutheesing (1907–1967) was the youngest sister of Jawaharlal Nehru and Vijayalakshmi Pandit, and part of the Nehru-Gandhi family. Hutheesing, was married to Gunottam (Raja) Hutheesing, was well known in India's elite social circles and was a household name in India throughout most of the 20th century. Krishna and her husband fought for India's independence and spent a great deal of time in jail while raising their two young sons, Harsha Hutheesing and Ajit Hutheesing. Krishna Nehru Hutheesing was a natural raconteur who lectured widely, making many appearances in the United States.


We get a pointer of Krishna Hutheesing’s impulse and the elemental motivation for writing her autobiography With No Regrets published in the year 1944 through the foreword written by Sarojini Naidu for the book. Sarojini Naidu reviews, Krishna’s With No Regrets as a personal narrative woven into the fabric of the family history of the Nehrus. And also speaks Krishna’s mind:

She undertook this book she tells us to solace the loneliness of those long anxious months following on the black Sunday last August that saw so many national workers, including almost her entire family, in prison. (V)
The desire to define one’s life, and to document it, has a fundamental attraction. For a woman, however the autobiographical impulse in on a collision course with decorum. Familial and personal purposes can be melded in the justification of self writing. Thus, voices a practical motivation for telling her life. Given the realities of social arrangements in which lived Krishna Hutheesing (Nehruvian dynasty), her existence might well be obscured & her posterity denied if she failed to write her life. To an uncritical eye, *With No Regrets* sounds as a political book, but Amiya Chakravarthy in the introduction comments how personal and political notions are intertwined in the autobiography. As he states:

Strangely enough, this is not a political book even though, in a sense, it is nothing but that. This is so, perhaps, because politics when it becomes one with our creative being ceases to be merely political. It cannot then be viewed apart, or given a doctrinal or eventful significance. Of events and incidents there are plenty in this book; act by act they unfold even as India’s destiny is enacted on the stage of our national civilization. But they are never related extraneously; occasions which have shaken the whole country seem to appear inevitably in the setting of this chronicle. When millions are sharing an epical existence and heroism is a daily event, political sensationalism and dire threats are shamed into consequences. This is particularly true of a family in which dedicated lives have accepted uttermost trials and responsibilities, both individual and national, as part of a daily prerogative. (x; emphasis added)

Amiya Chakravarty, who represents the Male Censorship further comments as an analysis that:

The reader will be grateful that this book of living lines, with the warm-tinted impressions of an artist who cares less to be competent than expressive. The writing, therefore, carries an air of improvisation, and an asymmetry which is never quite removed from living things. Arguments have not been drilled to precision
angles; they are indeed, there by implication. Neither has all available material been collected or scheduled. The story carries the rhythm of an inner adventure, the scenes shift from one page to another, and the method of reminiscent reflection seems entirely adequate for enjoyment. How delightful that she can tell us of her wanderings in Europe; her work and escapades and artistic hobbies; that she can write about her husband’s self-effacing life of service, giving us the sense of a secret shared together. For all this and more, the reader of this autobiography will grateful. (xii; emphasis added)

“Telling it Natural”: Krishna Hutheesing’s With No Regrets:

Krishna Hutheesing very candidly discloses the actual objective behind this literacy venture of hers, makes it clear in the very first page that the derivation of her book lie in the loneliness she had to undergo during the days of India’s freedom struggle. The immediate reason was her dear husband Raja’s imprisonment in 1941, which forced her to seek an outlet in this book:

During all these months of chaos and loneliness many memories have come crowding into my mind. Just to keep my mind occupied I started scribbling them down and gradually these memories and reminiscences have taken the shape of a book. Writing I have re-lived many of the days of my childhood and onwards. They have been pleasant memories and sad ones, and I have laughed as well as wept over many an incident of days gone by. They have given me some pleasure, a great deal of peace and often a little headache. (Krishna, 5)

These words, at the outset itself prepare us to know that women’s autobiographies do not break the pattern of patriarchal binary thought in which a woman’s identity remains relational.

While the pages roll, we come to know how the content of Krishna Hutheesing’s autobiography is more self-conscious & self aware. It attests the female tradition of autobiography writing with its curious form which is
analogous to the fragmented, interrupted and formless nature of her life as a woman. The autobiographies of other Nehru women dealt later, are also fragmented rather than structured, and lacks chronological order.

Moreover, for women, depicting their private lives and innermost thoughts is primary. In their autobiography telling the “other” side of the story is equally important to cultural history. This predestined that women would need to write their self histories, whether they were centered in the domestic or public. The tradition that emerged appeared quite creative in its form & not surprisingly private in its content.

Female autobiography is not autobiography as usual. Because women’s lives have for so long been grounded in the domestic, their stories often center on the family. Krishna Hutheesing uses “others” as a means of writing herself more clearly. It could be said that for Krishna Hutheesing, family members are perhaps so closely connected to her that she must write their stories in order to tell her own. So her autobiography tends to be more personal and self-conscious in nature. It also means that women must write others into their works in order to write themselves in. Because women are more relational, they preserve more fluid egos. The point to establish is that the personal is often rooted in the domestic, which frequently centers on family.

Hence woman requires strategic calculation: how to have the satisfaction of self-expression while avoiding the penalties for self-assertion. Krishna Hutheesing uses a narrative strategy of, “telling it natural”. It opens new possibilities to understand the means for “evading an assertive self” in public in favor of a passive, private self, as a narrative strategy which reflects both a female dilemma and a female solution.
On first reading, *With No Regrets* perhaps astonish readers with its honesty, but it challenges us to see the slipperiness of the genre and to begin redefining & rethinking our preconceptions. Written with a nostalgic longing for the old happy times of family togetherness it is no wonder that *With No Regrets* concentrates more on the dear ones than on the Krishna’s own personality. In fact the content of the book give an idea about that out of the fifteen chapters of the book eight are devoted to eight different individuals like Krishna’s father, mother, brother, husband, etc. Thus, in short, *With No Regrets* is more a biography of the great Nehru family than Krishna's autobiography.

From the very first page, Krishna Hutheesing converse about various members of her family. To an extent that she defines herself by others, but this does not necessarily answer why she writes so. The rationale is stated by Mason (1980):

[...]

the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence & 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 to enable women to write openly about themselves.

(210)

Krishna’s, a personal narrative in form slowly turns into the stories of her family and political upheavals to tell her own story. Interestingly, there is never a realization that “I” is Krishna, as the “I” always assume different roles. Perhaps she is saying that she is both I and we, both an individual & an individual as part of a greater culture & community. Every autobiography requires a coming to terms with the past and a revision of family history. When ‘others’ are members of the family, perhaps they are so closely connected to Krishna that she must position them with and against herself in order to write about herself.
Born in 1907, Krishna was the youngest child of her parents Pandit Motilal Nehru and Saruparani Nehru. Her childhood was full of worldly comforts but was rather a lonely childhood with clock-life regularity. As Krishna states:

I had a strange lonely childhood with few playmates. Adhering to strict rules and regulations, every minute of my life was planned out from the minute I woke up to the time I went to bed. I resented it very much, more so because other children I knew were allowed more freedom by their parents and had no governess to lay down hard and fast rules. I resented the authority which my governess exercised over me and very often I disobeyed her, for I was not only stubborn, but had rather a wild temper a wild temper which more often than not got the better of me….To be punished, locked up alone or be deprived of my supper was a frequent occurrence with me with it rarely happened to my sister. She was always obedient and docile, most probably because it was less troublesome to obey than to disobey. (11-12)

Krishna narrates how she grew up from a lonely child to an awkward, shy girl, longing to be made much of, hungering for knowledge, but never attaining it except by the beaten track as she “had learnt at an early age the “children should be seen and not heard, and being inquisitive and asking too many questions was a sign of bad manners” (13). “My parents remained more or less strangers to me” (14) recollect Krishna. Later in the book, in the chapter devoted to her mother, the Krishna tells that to her, her mother seemed to be “an exquisite and rare flower to be loved, cherished and protected from all harm and from the petty worries of life”. (144)

As a young girl, Krishna had a tendency of revolting against anyone who was held in awe and respect by the family. She notes two of such incidents. In 1912, at the age of five, little Krishna came to know that her bhai was to return from England after the completion of his studies there. She had heard a lot about
bhai from each and everyone of the family. Now she found that the whole house was agog, busy preparing for bhai’s arrival. She found that her mother was too busy even to have any time or thought for the little one. This hurt her.

She writes, “It irritated me sometimes beyond measure that my mother should dote thus on a mere son! Today I understand so well how she felt at that time even my sister flitted about the house with an air of eager expectancy which was most exasperating to me, I made up my mind to dislike Jawahar thoroughly” (15-16). On his arrival, despite his sweet ways, she managed to exhibit her indifference to him though within almost no time he had won her over. Krishna narrates how their house turned into a “Nehru Wedding Camp” as Jawahar was getting married.

Krishna often carved to go to school and study with other children, but her father had never approved of the idea. Motilal was a patriarchal figure at home. He ruled the household with an abundance of love but permitted no challenge to his authority. Krishna verbalizes Motilal’s mind and states:

He though it was the correct thing to have lesson in solitary grandeur with a governess. The necessary qualifications for a young lady in those days were to learn how to play the piano or some other musical instrument, and be able to carry on a conversation and mix well in society (17).

Krishna gives her first hand information about how the national politics entered their lives with the advent of Gandhiji launching the Satyagraha Movement in 1920. How everyone got caught in the whirlpool of events that were to change the very face of the country. She recalls:

Something new happened everyday to change my once dull and monotonous life of strict routine into an ever-changing and exciting day to day existence, never knowing what was going to happen next. Jawahar wanted to join Gandhiji. My father wanted to think over all the pros and cons before he took the plunge….Father
did not take to Gandhiji’s ideas quickly … He did not then see any sense in going to prison and neither did he like the idea of Jawahar courting arrest. The pilgrimage to prison had not yet begun… For many days a conflict took place in both Jawahar’s and father’s minds…. These were most unhappy days for all of us, especially for mother and Kamala, who could not bear to see father and son torn by politics and endless arguments. The atmosphere was tense all the time and one hardly dared to utter a word for fear of rousing father’s anger or irritating Jawahar.(21-22).

After 1920 the family led a life of uncertainty, of sacrifice, of heartache and sorrow for India’s freedom struggle. As Krishna recalls “Father and Jawahar had been sentenced to six months’ imprisonment the first time. Since then going in and out of jail became an incurable habit with the members of the family” (29). In 1926, Krishna went abroad for the first time to join Jawahar and his family in Switzerland.

The female ‘self’ is conditioned to accept the prescribed notions to live accordingly and negation could be claimed as insubordinate. Krishna very candidly reveals her experience:

I had never been away from home without my family nor had I travelled alone. So father did not know what to do, to let me go alone to Europe or to cancel my passage also…. Mother was most distressed and annoyed at father for having allowed me to decide on such a step myself. She thought it highly improper for a young woman to travel all alone to a strange country. She tried to dissuade me from going. I did not wish to hurt her but I wanted very much to go. After a great discussion I sailed for Europe unchaperoned for the first time in my life—a little afraid and a little excited at the prospect of the new life before me. (33)

On return from Europe, Krishna wanted to take up a job. The job was easy to get but she states “I had forgotten that I would have to reckon with my father” (52). When she made bold enough to declare her decision to take up a job, her parents got the shock of their life. This turned out to be an issue which
made Krishna realizes that in spite of her father's broad outlook he was a traditionalist at heart. Under the pretence of protection, Motilal allowed Krishna to act as a sort of secretary to him or Jawahar, but disagreed her earning on her own. Krishna outrageous comments:

Away went my dreams and my hopes of being a working girl. I loved father too much to defy him, but for the first time I deeply resented his authority. I held my peace and tried to figure out ways and means of getting father to change his mind, a thing he did not do easily. I tried to enlist mother’s help. She too refused, having her own reasons for doing so. She wanted me to get married and to settle down. If I took a job my chances of marrying would become even more remote. (53)

However much ahead of his times in his outlook, Motilal Nehru simply discarded Krishna’s plea to take up a job. A job did not appear on the list of womanly activities as Krishna’s mother apparently declared. Recollecting the hard times she had in convincing them Krishna writes, “I had hardly had my say when the storm broke, as I knew it would. Father did not mind my working, but he wished it to be honorary work” (53). Girls of respectable families did not work for money in those days. Krishna was luckier in having a brother like Jawaharlal who took her side. It was only with the help of Jawaharlal that she was finally able to obtain permission to take up a paid job as a teacher. She worked for one and a half years before giving it up in favor of her political activities.

Krishna joined as a volunteer and involved herself in activities like picketing foreign cloth shops, drilling, organizing processions and doing such other work allotted by the Congress authorities. To go to jail for India's freedom was one of the cherished, dreams of each Nehru and Krishna was no exception. Motilal did not like the ideal of Krishna, Kamala and Vijayalakshmi Pandit join the party work and go about all days in the scorching sun. Krishna recalls that
“He refused to remonstrate with us and he never forced any of us to give up the work we were doing.”

Krishna excitedly looked forward to be arrested and sent to jail. Finally in 1930 her wish was fulfilled when she was arrested for her participation in the freedom movement and was sent to jail. However, she was released within twelve hours, even before she could get a feel of jail life. On her return she was offered a warm welcome by her friends and co-workers. Arriving home with hands full of flowers and a heart full with the compliments, she found a short note lying on her table. It was from her brother Jawahar, who too, was in jail at the time — a note scribbled off in typical Jawahar style. It read:

I understand that you are getting caskets and addresses. What exploits are they meant to celebrate? Surely a few hours in jail do not deserve an epic: Anyway don’t get a swelled head or perhaps, it is better to have a swelled head than at all. (62)

In 1931, Krishna once again went to jail. This time it was for one complete year. *With No Regrets* describes her experiences of the other women prisoners with a touch of deep humanity and love. As she states:

Jail life had not been pleasant but it had been a great experience. I for one was very glad to have been able to make friends with some of those convicts who were considered menace to society, but who were far better specimens of humanity than many of the people we came across in our daily life. I was glad to be going home, but it hurt to know that these poor creatures were left behind for many long years and when released they would have no home to go to, no shelter, no helping hand to guide them to a new life….Little do we know, living a life of ease and surrounded by the care of those who love us what temptations our less fortunate sisters are faced with….It was strange how sensitive, affectionate and understanding most of these girls were whom society considered a menace….It made me a little sad to leave these new found friends of mine behind. I felt ashamed of having so many of the good things in life when they had nothing. (85-87)
On her release from jail Krishna joined her elder sister Vijayalakshmi Pandit and her family on their trip to Bombay. This was going to be an important trip for her. Krishna came across Raja, a quiet, handsome, Gujarati barrister from Ahmedabad in a party during her stay in Bombay. Krishna describes her first come across Raja very interesting. She writes “…one of the first things I noticed about Raja were his hands; sensitive and artistic they seemed to speak volumes for their owner who was exceptionally quiet” (95). Raja had recently returned from abroad after completing his study of law. Krishna had a good time with this young barrister talking about books as both of them enjoyed intellectual discussions and time seemed to fly when they were in each other’s company. However Krishna had some notions about Raja as these expressions illustrate:

Though I knew he must be liking me enough to spend so many hours with me daily, I did not know if he cared for me as he hardly gave any indication of his feelings. This was yet one more reason for which I liked him. I had been used to a fair amount of attention, and I took it for granted that people should like me. This was merely because I did not see any reason for them to dislike me and not because it was my due. Raja’s indifference rather piqued me at first and so may be I went out of may way to break the crust which he seemed to build around him. We were together many hours each day. We just talked endlessly and never seemed to be bored with one another.(96)

Krishna was rather surprised when suddenly one day Raja asked her in an absolutely casual manner, “When shall we get married, my dear?” Her surprise was not entirely baseless for until then, they had never talked about personal things and now here was Raja, suddenly proposing to her. She records her state of being and writes “I his cool, quiet manner, Raja assured me that I was in love with him though I may not be aware of it and would I please say “Yes”, I did not’’(97). Krishna just did not know how to respond to the proposal. She asked for some time and returned to Allahabad.
On returning home Krishna shared her excitement of this rather unusual proposal with her elder sister. Owing to the ill health of their mother, Jawaharlal had been released unconditionally from jail and so he, too, was there at Anand Bhawan. Krishna persuaded her sister Vijayalakshmi to tell Jawaharlal about Raja. She ponders on her decision for choosing Raja:

It did not seem unnatural for me to have chosen my future husband without consulting my people as I had always had freedom to do as I pleased. I did not dream of defying or going contrary to the wishes of my mother, brother and sister; but I know that they would not be unreasonable unless there was a very good reason for it. They knew nothing at all about Raja, but I was sure that they would not withhold their consent, for my happiness came first with them. (98 emphasis added)

As an elder brother and a responsible head of the family — Motilal had died a year before that — Jawahar wanted to know about the future husband of his youngest sister. He said, “Well, my dear, I hear you are contemplating marriage? Could you enlighten me somewhat about the young man?” (98). He asked Krishna about his name, profession, education, family background etc. and discovered that she was just blank about everything. The only thing she knew was that though his initials were ‘G.P’. He was named Raja by everyone. Jawahar got annoyed by Krishna answers and walked away in anger. That night the annoyed Krishna wrote a strong letter to Raja narrating the incident to him and telling him how foolish she had felt while admitting to her brother that she knew next to nothing about the man she wanted to marry.

Krishna received a formal application for her hand in marriage as a response to her letter. The last lines of the letter reads “This is an application—a presumptuous one, may be—to ask Miss Krishna Nehru to agree to be married to the above person in October 1933” (99). In response to the application permission was granted and, as desired by the applicant, in October of 1933, Gunottam Hutheesing, i.e. Raja, married Krishna.
After marriage Krishna made Ahmedabad her home for a few years. Krishna views Raja’s family as a newcomer and judges the lifestyle she happens to be a element. The joint family set-up is not new but the adjustment for Krishna was difficult and long. Raja was always very politically minded, and he found it increasing difficult to remain a distant spectator and so “succumbed to politics” (105) states Krishna. Later, as Raja gave up his law practice for the freedom struggle, the couple moved to Bombay. For Krishna life was different as she reveals:

We had a flat of our own. It was small but ultra-modern and I loved it. I had very little experience of house-keeping and found it rather puzzling and at times difficult. On the whole, however, it was fun to run a home of one’s own. Having lived a great part of my life in a large house with lavish arrangements, it was quite novel experience... I found the days a little lonely while my husband was at work....Being quick at making friends; it was not long before I made many acquaintances and quite a few friends. Life was happy and contented. (109)

Politics was the backdrop in the lives of all people in India during that phase of history. However for Krishna “politics” has its own undertones. As she comments:

I knew only too well what politics meant, uncertainty, change, prison and long separations. I had had thirteen years of it and did not wish to lose my newly acquired contentment and peacefulness. I did not wish to take active part in politics as my sons were very young. I had seen how Jawahar and Swarup’s children had suffered from infancy from having no family life, no settled home or routine. So I did the little I could but Raja longed to throw himself into the struggle wholeheartedly and I did not think it right to attempt to hold him back. Once again after a brief spell of happiness I prepared myself for the usual separations caused by arrests and imprisonments. (111; emphasis added)

Krishna felt lonely at times and desired to do some work. She writes “As the days hung heavily on my hands I took up some social work and joined
various women’s organizations” (112). Krishna gives the indication of Indian feminism and her own opinion. She states “In India we have no suffragette movement. There are certain women’s organizations which have mostly concerned themselves with social reforms. But the great impetus to be free and equal with the menfolk came from the National movement. The technique of the non-violent struggle was such that women could play their part shoulder to shoulder with their men” (136).

Krishna gives explanation for her lack of involvement in the real freedom struggle. She narrates in detail how Raja got arrested in 1940 Satyagraha. Even Krishna asked Gandhiji to offer Satyagraha herself, as she felt it was irksome to be out of the fight. But Gandhji rejected her thought as she states “he refused to allow me as my children were young and needed looking after. I had no alternative but to abide by his decision” (139). Krishna was left with no choice and had to await Raja’s homecoming and pours out her anguish in the following words:

Raja and I had never been parted before this for more than a fortnight or three weeks and I missed him sorely. We were allowed an interview once a fortnight and could write each other at given periods. Nevertheless, though I had many good friends around me, I often felt a little lonely. My sons too missed Raja a great deal but young as they were they understood and were proud of him. Sometimes after we had an interview they got rather worked up and a few tears rolled down their cheeks though they tried hard to keep them back. This time there are no interviews granted and it has created bitterness and resentment even in the hearts of little children. (139)

The book ends with Indira's wedding and the imprisonment of the dear ones — Raja, Jawaharlal & Vijayalakshmi — in 1942. In the last pages Krishna presents two contrasting pictures of Anand Bhawan— first a cheerful abode of happiness at the time of Indira's wedding and second, a dark, deserted, cold
place without any of its people, just after one year of Indira's wedding. When she reaches Anand Bhawan she states “Though the passing of the years had wrought havoc in the home that was full of happiness and peace, it was still good to be back (153). She returns from such an Anand Bhawan to Bombay wondering what she would find there on her next visit. When returned to her small flat she exclaims:

Our little home is home no longer because Raja is not with us and life though it needs must go on, is not happy or contented…. From the time I was born until 1919 life was smooth, tranquil and happy. The first disturbing feature in my placid life was the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh and it had set me thinking about certain things which I had never bothered about before. It was the first upheaval and later on came many more, each one larger than the last. From 1920 onwards, life was hardly normal for any of us, but our family remained intact and that was a great thing. In 1931 father’s death not only left a big gap in our lives but seemed to be the beginning of more misfortunes. In 1936 Kamala died and two years later mother passed away. Financially too, we were not very well off. Life was not either happy or smooth for any of us, but I think the younger generation suffered more than we did, because of it. Constant partings and other misfortunes both big and small have at times been a sore trial and have almost made me despair. (159)

Krishna concludes her autobiography with a note of hope and faith saying:

Yet in spite of all the misfortunes that have come my way—and perhaps they are a little more than one bargained for, in spite of the sufferings that have been and the trials that still may come, in spite of the turmoil that has been a constant companion throughout my life, I can still look back on all that has happened with no regrets. (159)

Krishna Hutheesing adds two more chapters called “Two Sisters” and “Memories” as postscript to the book. They are, to quote her, “the sheaf of memories that will always haunt me”. With No Regrets is an excellent record of the family history of the Nehru’s. Across the landscape of the Nehru family
history falls the bright lights and the half lights, the dimmer and the deeper shadows of the India's freedom struggle inseparable from human destiny.

*With No Regrets* as an autobiography, fails to project the individual identity, the “I” is replaced by a dotted “i”. ‘Relational Identity’ becomes the theme of Krishna Hutheesing’s *With No Regrets* and the strategy to reveal is “telling it natural”. Clearly, her identity appears more shared and fluid with the people surrounding her. She tells the stories of her parents, brother and sister, and so on as if their stories are her own stories. Given that feminine personality comes to define itself in relation and connection to other people more than masculine personality does. Nonetheless, feminine in its tone the autobiography is a real record of incidents and events of great political and historical significance.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit (nee Swarup Kumari Nehru), an Indian political leader and diplomat, was one of the world’s leading women in public life in the twentieth century. A sister of Jawaharlal Nehru, she was eleven years younger to him. A member of the Nehru family, Vijayalakshmi’s involvement in India’s independence movement and politics seems to have been a part of her destiny. She married a promising lawyer of the Kashmiri Brahmin community, Ranjit Sitaram Pandit in 1921 but lived most with her family in Anand Bhawan, the home of the Nehru’s in Allahabad.

Vijayalakshmi’s participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 brought her in association with Mahatma Gandhi and other leaders of India’s freedom struggle. She became an active worker in the Indian nationalist movement and was imprisoned three times by the British authorities in India. She entered elective politics in 1937 by winning a seat in the United Provinces legislature. She had the distinction to be the first Indian woman to hold a cabinet
post from 1937-39. Her husband died in 1944. In 1946, she was elected to the Constituent Assembly.

In her individual capacity, Vijayalakshmi Pandit led an “unofficial” delegation to the San Francisco Conference where the Charter of the United Nations was drafted in 1945 and proved more appealing than the official British-Indian delegation. In 1953, she was elected the first woman president of the UN General Assembly. After Indian independence, Vijayalakshmi served in several countries, including the erstwhile USSR (1947-49) and the USA (1949-51), as an ambassador. Vijayalakshmi served as the Governor of Maharashtra from 1962 to 1964. From 1964 to 1968, she was a Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) and represented her brother’s constituency after his death. She did not take an active part in the Indian politics after 1969. In 1978, Vijayalakshmi was appointed the Indian representative to the UN Human Rights Commission. She was 78 when she wrote her autobiography *The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir* (1979). At any point in time, female autobiography is not autobiography as usual. The autobiographical impulses cannot be separated from the assessment of external and social constraints on women’s self-writing.

The public/private split is a fundamental trope for the gender system. Therefore the need is to understand the sources and the vicissitudes of the autobiographical impulses in women. A woman’s desire to write her life may be inspired by the desire to document her life, to make sense of it, to celebrate it, to assert her unique subjectivity. One of the elemental motivations for women’s self-referential writings is self assertion or self-celebration. Sometimes an autobiography reflects a woman’s desire to express herself and leave a mark. An individual who takes pleasure in herself, her life, and her subjectivity may seek to extend that subjectivity beyond her lifetime.
Sometimes the writers’ sheer exuberance demands an audience. Vijayalakshmi Pandit in the preface to The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir clears her yearning for such a self-referential writing. As she states:

For many years my daughters have been urging me to write this book. I have hesitated partly from the laziness but mainly because I lacked confidence in my ability to do so. Or perhaps the time had not come? Even after I began I might never have reached the end but for the help given to me by my eldest daughter, Chandralekha Mehta….My daughter Nayantara Sahgal made time from her busy schedule of work to edit the manuscript.(xiii; emphasis added)

Writing a woman’s life involves a pointed inversion of the conventional relations of public and private, and symbolizes a fundamental challenge to gender relations defined in these terms. And these contradictions provide the context for female autobiography. So recording her life plunges the woman into a dilemma that is not of her making.

The Scope of Happiness: A Personal Memoir by Vijayalakshmi Pandit begins with an event that shocked the whole nation and made headlines all over the world—the declaration of a state of Emergency by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi in 1975. At that time Vijayalakshmi Pandit and her daughter were in London. She immediately decided to return home and on her journey home her mind dwelt over the events of immediate past which resulted in the declaration of Emergency. Her return to India under the Emergency was a claustrophobic experience. It is only after dwelling upon the topic of Emergency that Vijayalakshmi Pandit starts the story of her life in the third chapter which begins with the words:

A STORY SHOULD BEGIN at the beginning, but when there have been several beginnings, one’s entry into the world is the least significant. The day one is born has meaning for one’s family but it is the beginnings one makes for oneself that are important and they come a long time after one’s birth. I was born in the
ancient city of Prayag, now known as Allahabad in the state of Uttar Pradesh, on the 18th of August, 1900. The code word to my father, then in Paris, announcing my arrival, was “Tempest”. No one has ever told me why this word was chosen, but I am sure it played a part in influencing my character, which has all the qualities of the tempest! (24; emphasis added).

We have already discussed in the previous sections how female autobiographers display quite a different orientation towards the self and the others than the male counterparts. The critical theories established by the male tradition, however, tend to misread and marginalize women’s autobiography-writing. Finding a language or form of expression which protects women from accusations of unwomanliness was a problem for early women autobiographers. While the act of writing challenged contemporary conventions and stereotypes of womanhood. To avoid criticism, women frequently claimed that they were writing for unselfish reasons – not for themselves by for other women or for the common good, and in some cases tell the truth about her life and loss of faith.

Women writers were thus denied narratives and plots by which they were able to create their own texts and thereby take power over the narrative of their own lives. But as a spark, feminist approach took towards an uprising, very suitable lead to the contention Personal is Political.

“Telling it Straight”: Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s The Scope of Happiness:

In sequence Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s autobiography can be read and examined in two ways. Basic component to identify the ‘author’ is either as ‘witnesses or representative’. In the case of witness, as descriptive analysis the text becomes a source of and is used to extract information about people, place
and events. In case of representative, as perspective analysis, the text supplies information about the perspectives of certain social grouping.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s autobiography may possibly be understood at a number of levels as the memories of a woman, a pre-independence freedom fighter, minister and an eminent politician. It informs about her prison life, national fame at almost the first attempt, followed by insecurity, and final contentment in her later years. At another level, the autobiography offers an insight into many of the themes which were of central concern to the Nehruvian, political and intellectual elite, particularly those at the progressive end of the political spectrum.

Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s autobiography also depicts the particular perceptions of a woman in the forefront of early and political and cultural life. It enables us to reflect on Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s interpretation of life in her own times, the range of activities that she could become involved with. The autobiography ought to be counted as a valuable addition to women’s history, as well as illuminating the cultural concerns of independent India. Vijayalakshmi wishes to put to on record her definitive views about her life and times, range of knowledge, influence and achievements and her enormous capacity for handwork and activity.

Thus, the shaping of her autobiographical account is a mixture of personal narrative, serious discussion of contemporary ideas, and description and criticism of political and cultural figures scene, underpinned by her wish to be seen to be “telling it straight”. The narrative strategy Vijayalakshmi Pandit adopts to project her ‘self’ is “telling it straight”, bringing her experiences from the periphery to the center.
The required task is a particular strategy of reading, which enables to read the female dialect.

Vijayalakshmi’s reflections on her life are at the same time, consciously selective and artfully random, thus giving credence to Jelinek's notion of the ‘auto fallacy of self revelation’. However ‘tell it straight” also means exploring evidently painful experiences, which Jelinek asserts, most autobiographers, whether male or female leave out.

Women’s autobiography, from its earliest beginnings, has revised the definitions and standards of the genre. The critical theories established by the male tradition, however, tend to misread and marginalize women’s autobiographical writing. Feminist critics vehemently oppose these theories and create a poetics of difference. The binary oppositional terms like dissociation/association; political/personal; confidence/consciousness; uniform/form generate the difference between male and female autobiographies very apparent. The first of the pair stands for male trait while the second for the female one.

As a matter of fact what matters to women’s autobiography is portraying “themselves” as they wish to be understood. Such an approach changes the content of conventional autobiography. Traditional autobiography claims to tackle the facts of an essentially male subject’s life, one that is generally public. Women’s autobiography, on the other hand, tends to be more personal and self-conscious in nature. Here, I mention that the personal is often rooted in the domestic, which frequently centers on family. The ‘content’ aspect needs to be mentioned repetitively, because of its obvious connection to ‘personal content’.

Critics have noted that the autobiographers consciously shape the events of their life into a coherent whole. The autobiography is unified as a
chronological linear narrative by concentrating one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality. But the criterion of orderliness, wholeness or a harmonious shaping is often not applicable to women’s autobiographical writing. Irregularity rather than orderliness is seen in women’s autobiographical writing. In *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, Estelle C. Jelinek notes that “the unidirectionality of men’s lives is appropriately cast into such progressive narratives”. (17)

Vijayalakshmi’s autobiography is a conscious selection, which tends to be irregular, often disconnected, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters. Vijayalakshmi’s *The Scope of Happiness* begins with the emergency, followed by elections and then comes her childhood. This indicates that Vijayalakshmi has consciously written her autobiography in a particular manner. One may not recognize *The Scope of Happiness* as uniform with the male traditional autobiographies, but it also can not be condemned as formless for it does have a curious form of its own which is analogous to the autobiographies of Margery Kempe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anais Nin and Maya Angelou. The form of *The Scope of Happiness* is also similar to the fragmented, interrupted and formless nature of their lives as women. Vijayalakshmi’s autobiography attests Estelle Jelinek’s “continuous female tradition of discontinuity” (29). The orderliness is missing in Vijayalakshmi’s *The Scope of Happiness* due to the ‘multidimensionality’ of Vijayalakshmi’s socially conditioned roles. It offers a specific account of an individual which provides background and elucidation to Vijayalakshmi’s work and an illuminating cultural standpoint.

The mind constitutes to the self-conscious nature of women’s autobiography. Here, I assert that women’s autobiography is typically self-conscious in that it is often aware of the self under construction. This self-
awareness is usually playful and involves the author constantly questioning her own claims and deliberately upholding her own fragmentation. The male “unity” of form is quite untruthful and less “real” than the disjointed narratives women choose to write. An evasively mediated practice of self-referential writing is understood to be the narrative site for making sense of the “Self”. Its major function is to construct a coherent self out of the heterogeneous socio-cultural positioning. This sense of coherence is achieved through the articulatory practices of the genre, that is, through the narrative device of emplotment. Thus I shall focus on the analysis of the dilemma of a relational identity which all the Nehru women’s narratives illustrate as their central theme.

Nehru Women see their identity through their relationships to with other people around them. They do not draw a sharp boundary between their self and the others. Autobiography of Vijayalakshmi Pandit works both as means of entry into private lives and a lens through which to view those lives as part of a broader socio-historical milieu.

Traditionally, language and history have excluded women because women’s stories were thought too trivial and personal to be important. Women’s autobiography, from its earliest beginnings, has revised the definitions and standards of the genre. Once attaining the opportunity, women began recording their lives. Interestingly, these histories bore little resemblance to the traditional form of autobiography. What, then, did this “new” tradition look like? How was it different from the conventional style? For starters, conventional men’s autobiography tells the reader who the subject is. It states the identity of a man, which is understood as fixed and solid. On the other hand, women’s autobiography constantly questions who the writer is. It finally comes to the conclusion that there is no such thing as a fixed or stable identity. Rather,
women’s autobiography asserts that women are fluid, simultaneously employing various identities.

“Separate selfhood is the very motive of autobiography creation”, asserts James Olney. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, in her autobiography *The Scope of Happiness*, seeks her individuality through an intense association with her father. The ‘I’ is not isolated rather is relational and representative of a class. As she states:

He was severely criticized for his preference for the Western way of life. When he sent his only son to Harrow there was a great deal of hostile comment, but when I was allowed the same freedom as if I were a boy, many heads were shaken in sorrow and in anger. I remember one incident when I had just returned from a ride and went into Father’s study to greet him. I found him in a state of great amusement…. Father had just won a lawsuit for him that was a cause celebre in the province, and the old gentleman looked upon Father as a personal friend as well as a legal adviser. He was very old-fashioned and did not believe in freedom for women. I was the subject of the conversation…. Why is she being educated according to foreign standards and being given so much freedom? Do you intend to make her into a lawyer like yourself? This last remark had been the reason for my father’s amusement. As I entered the room Father asked me if I would like to read law. (35-36; emphasis added)

She elaborately discusses the various sides of her father’s character – the tenderness he showed to his family and his interest in the smallest experience of the youngest member, his exquisite courtesy, his biting sarcasm, and his wrath when he was aroused. The patriarchal set-up was never challenged because there was no need for it. But the fact remains that the socio-cultural set-up of the patriarchy intensifies her traits of relationality. Here, Vijayalakshmi Pandit emerges not as an individual but as a person with collective identity constantly aware of the society’s prescription for her female self. Given that she
comments on the status of women, especially Nehru family women with private strength. As she states:

Mother’s horizon did not extend beyond her family. Her philosophy of life was simple and her mind uncluttered by doubts. She accepted the background and traditions that she had inherited and was content to function unquestioningly within that framework. She was religious and in this too she followed a set traditional pattern. Devotion to husband and family, which is deeply rooted in Indian women, was strongly developed in her, and she gave my father unswerving loyalty in all things.

No two people could have been more unlike each other than my parents. The only things they shared in common were their children, and even in this my mother did not get her fair share, for I was my father’s child in all respects. He was the dominating influence in my life. I loved him deeply and he was my ideal of all that was great and good and honorable. Even his fits of anger, which shook the whole house, passed me by. He was a loving and too-indulgent parent and I never remember a harsh word from him even when my own conduct had distressed him. His outstanding quality was his love of life and of his fellowmen, and it is my good fortune to have inherited these. I have been in love with life since I was born. I get the most out of every experience, and living to me means involvement with the human race and its problems. (39-40; emphasis added)

Vijayalakshmi’s “relational identity” in a straight line associates herself with brother, Jawaharlal Nehru. She confesses that her unreasoning love for her brother did her considerable harm in her political life. She, however, notes that it was ‘Bhai’ who encouraged her to discuss things, read Shaw and Poetry. He made her write essays and brought into her life topics that had not until then had much meaning for her. Vijayalakshmi’s views on how a brother is the “protector” of his sisters and in many cases the hero. She comments:

My unreasoning love for my brother did me considerable harm in my political life. I have a mind of my own and have always been able to use it whether in small matters or larger decisions. But gradually I found myself accepting Bhai’s views without any
questioning. It is one thing to implement a policy or carry out instructions of one’s party leader but quite another to shut one’s own mind and abandon one’s judgement in favour of that of someone else, however loved and able. This was also unfair to Bhai, who never tried to bring pressure on anyone. His way was to lead you to the threshold of your own mind and let you do the rest. (51; emphasis added)

Vijayalakshmi Pandit also seek to find her individuality through an intense association with others, especially women – female bonding. Vijayalakshmi tells about her grandmother; Indrani, known as “Jiyomaji”, a remarkable woman, a matriarch. Women like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu filled her with the ambition to be like them, “To be an Orator, to be able to sway people with my words, this was my great ambition” (59) she notes. The first time Vijayalakshmi attended a women’s meeting was the one organized by her cousin, Rameshwari Nehru, at the Mayo Hall of Allahabad University, to publicize the South Africans’ issue, to persuade women to leave their homes for one afternoon and go out to her other women speak. Vijayalakshmi tells her account through the sketches of other women of her family:

My cousin Rameshwari Nehru (Bijju Bhabi) had started a woman’s magazine called *Stree Darpan, The Woman’s Mirror*, which was the equal in content of any modern woman’s magazine published in America or the United Kingdom…. When the British government appointed a committee to fix the age of consent for girls, Rameshwari Nehru was the only woman invited to serve on it and did so with distinction. She was ahead of her time in many ways, knew Hindi and Urdu well and some Persian and Sanskrit.... (31)

There is a strong ‘female bonding’ between Vijayalakshmi and the female members of the family, especially with her daughters Chandralekha, Nayantara and Rita. However, her autobiography moves towards “straightening”, means to move women’s experience from periphery to the center. Vijayalakshmi’s autobiography seems to defy the belief that there is always a man at the centre
of a woman’s autobiographical writing. The first half of her autobiography, *The Scope of Happiness* may create an impression that first Motilal Nehru and then Jawaharlal are at the centre and Vijayalakshmi is in the periphery; but the second half of her autobiography disapproves this notion very strongly and she projects herself as much stronger a character and very much at the centre of each and every incident.

Still, Vijayalakshmi’s autobiographical ‘self’ signify the conviction that for women individuation lies in associating themselves with others. The “Chocolate Cake” (108) incident presents her as a very strong character and an imaginative mother. As the president of All India Women’s Conference, she passed resolutions demanding immediate codification of the Hindu Law giving Hindu women the right to inheritance and divorce. It is to be noted here that women’s autobiographies, to a striking degree, refrain from emphasizing their own importance, though the genre values self-assertion, self-display and self-glorification. So, the projected self is an “acceptable self”, by adopting an ideology of self-subordination, which implies among other things, a suppression of narrative about the self. They tell of lives led by others’ values and based on others’ assumptions than their own. For women the immediate community is their family or neighbors.

Though politically important, Vijayalakshmi tend to ignore her political achievements in public domain to project her ‘feminine self”—a trait which is highlighted by Patricia Meyer Spacks in her renowned article entitled ‘Selves in Hiding’. As a group all the three Nehru women autobiographies prove to be inscriptions of selves in hiding.

The patriarchal view of history is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of history; it is representative of his times, a mirror to his era. This criterion is adequately
supported by many male autobiographers. As already stated, even Wilhelm Dilthey, asserts that autobiography is “a genre which form one end of a spectrum running through to broader forms of history”.

But, women’s autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment of the history of their times. They tend to concentrate on their personal rather than public lives and we are given domestic details, family problems, close friends and the people who influenced them. Vijayalakshmi Pandit was one of the world’s leading women in public life in the twentieth century. The associations that really developed her personality are the ones with the female members of the family. This is seen even in the case of women whose political life is their claim to fame. This is because, for a woman personal is political. Vijayalakshmi Pandit goes through a moral dilemma despite her political representation. She remarks that in her case the personal problem outweighed those created by jail life:

A year is a long period of time, and the inner resources that came to our rescue in later imprisonment were still undeveloped. In my own case the personal problem outweighed those created by jail life. During the excitement of public meetings and arrests there had been no time for quiet thinking. I had not allowed myself a moment to consider whether my decision to take a more active part in the struggle would be harmful to my children’s interest. One knew, of course, that prison was the inevitable result of political work and that prison terms could extend to two years or more, but the emotional wave which was sweeping the country had me in its grip. I was swept along with the tide, a willing victim. It was not possible to think logically. (109-110; emphasis added)

It is said that women’s autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment of the history of their times. *The Scope of Happiness*, at the first reading seems to contradict this for it provides us with details of the Indian freedom struggle and the role Vijayalakshmi played in it. However, when we compare her autobiography with Jawaharlal’s *Autobiography*, we realize that most of the
time Vijayalakshmi’s prime concern is with the personal rather than the political aspects of life. Whereas, Nehru’s Autobiography, documents historical events, outstanding contemporary personalities, world movements and the contribution of all this to the civilization.

In The Scope of Happiness, Vijayalakshmi details, the minutest, personal details of the Nehrus. She elaborately describes her grandmother, her parents and the other family members. She put in the picture, distinctiveness of the Nehru’s in relation to the males, their quick but short-lived temper. She also tells us an amusing story of their ancestor, Pandit Mansa Ram Nehru, about their special trait, being Nehru’s. As she proudly states:

My father’s pride in his family was tremendous, a feeling he passed on to each of us. The Nehrus, he seemed to convey without actually saying so, were better than other people, they did certain things but others were just not done. We grew up guided by this unwritten code of behavior. In our small community we stood out. We were different because the family was more progressive than others and our way of living was foreign oriented. Besides this, the Nehrus were amply endowed with “charisma” – a word not in use at the time – and quite a few Kashmiri families thought us arrogant. (31-32)

There is an elaborate description of Jawaharlal’s marriage in The Scope of Happiness and a detailed sketch of Kamala Nehru. She states:

Her whole approach to life prevented her being able to enjoy the situation in which she was surrounded as well as the westernized way of living were foreign to her and she did not fall into the pattern easily. There must have been many conflicts in her mind in those early days in which she did not even have the opportunity of being alone and coming to grips with her problem because she was surrounded by the family and, to what any normal young woman must have seemed a madhouse, with streams of guests always coming and going…. The fact that a few years later the freedom struggle demanded long separations and hardships did not make
life any easier for her. But it brought her the opportunity of emerging as a person in her own right, giving meaningful leadership. Even in the early years of her illness she continued her participation and inspired those with whom she worked….(56).

Vijayalakshmi Pandit also tells us how her own birth was described as the “tempest”. Besides this, the way she describes her home and the Embassy residence gives her autobiography a typical feminine touch:

The Embassy residence had deteriorated a great deal by the time I went to London. The Chandeliers alone were unaffected by time and neglect. Everything else required attention, especially the beautiful paneling, which was dirty, and the parquet flooring, which needed expert polishing…. a woman, I think, is quicker to notice such things than is the average man. (288)

Jawaharlal’s Autobiography provides us with the public aspects of his life and the affairs of the world. He seldom concentrates on his personal life – the domestic details and family details. While Vijayalakshmi, concentrates on her personal life. Here is a story of “unusual female achievement” but nevertheless, in the words of Patricia Meyer Spacks, “the narratives convey singular absence of personal satisfaction in achievement” (1980, 132). Vijayalakshmi very honestly confesses:

I wrote frankly because I have never quite forgiven myself for that first jail term which broke up my home when my children most needed its security and comfort. To stay at home and look after them would have been dull. Perhaps I was envious of my friends who had broken away from their ties and placed the burden of their personal responsibility on others. Whatever the reason, I am now sure that I acted selfishly, thinking in vague terms of personal political achievements rather than the satisfaction I could have gained through domestic duty honestly performed. Any one of or all these reasons together may have driven me towards the final choice, but I had no argument to still my conscience in
those long dark hours in prison when sleep would not come. (110; emphasis added)

This emphasis by Vijayalakshmi, on the personal rather than the political aspects of her life clearly contradicts the established criterion about the content of autobiography. This is perhaps because, for Vijayalakshmi personal is political. But, keeping in mind the theoretical parameters the Gusdorffian concept of autobiography is premised on a model of the self that starts dissociating oneself from the others and tends to think of himself as the centre of a living space, he thinks that his existence is significant to the world and that his death will leave the world incomplete. The autobiography, thus, projects a self-image of confidence and determination.

According to Jelinek, men tend to idealize their lives to make it seem heroic and often desist from revealing crisis in their childhood. They are more likely to relate adult-crisis, usually turning points in their professional lives. The self-image, thus, projected is of confidence. Similar to Vijayalakshmi, even Jawaharlal Nehru played an active role in the freedom struggle and the prevailing social conventions enables him to project the image of confidence in his autobiography, which again was a model for others. Both were brought up in the same family, were witness to the same freedom struggle but Vijayalakshmi projects an image of self consciousness instead of self-confidence and determination.

The self-image projected in men’s autobiographical writing is of confidence and determination. While the self image projected in women’s autobiographical writing is just the opposite. It reveals self-consciousness. As Rowbotham notes in Women’s Consciousness Men’s World (1973), a woman can not experience herself as an entirely unique entity because she is always aware of how she is defined as a woman. Women autobiographers are confined
to the social order that limits them. To transform the private ambition into public record is always difficult for a woman. There is a particular relation between women and convention. A woman is demanded by the society to be timid, meek and apologetic. She is confined to follow the social order that limits her. Motilal Nehru paid a lot of attention to the academic career of Jawaharlal. He was sent to Harrow and Cambridge for his studies. However, very little attention was paid to the studies of Vijayalakshmi – a daughter. Vijayalakshmi notes that her father did provide opportunities but there was no supervision and plan. She further notes that she almost developed a complex about her lack of a formal education:

A PARADOX ABOUT MY FATHER was his championship of women’s rights but his disregard for his daughters’ education. He provided opportunities but there was no supervision and no plan. Studies were haphazard, and because there was no competition they were also rather dull....I am always conscious of what I missed. I envied my girl cousins who went to school and college, won prizes, and took degrees.

A constant stream of distinguished men and women passed through our home. Women like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu filled me with the ambition to be like them. To be an orator, to be able to sway people with my words, this way my great ambition. Sarojini Naidu was not only poetess and politician, she was a close friend of the family. Our home was hers and she was beloved by every single member of it. I met her elder daughter, Padmaja, for the first time ... I developed a complex about my lack of a formal education, and a university degree symbolized for me a passport to opportunity. (45; emphasis added)

Vijayalakshmi further notes that her unreasoning love for Jawaharlal did her considerable harm in her political life. Nancy Chodorow’s psychology of gender socialization – that the concept of isolate selfhood is inapplicable to women, thus, they form their identity in relation to others. Vijayalakshmi very consciously notes:
society makes women dwell in a state of internal conflict with necessarily intricate psychic consequences, notes Patricia Meyer Spacks. A woman is almost tangled between her own expectations and those of others. Vijayalakshmi, in her teens, had become attached to a young man, Syed Hossain. Since the Nehru’s had close muslim friends, she thought it would be natural to marry outside her religion. But she was persuaded that “this would be wrong” (65).

Vijayalakshmi’s mother felt that her western-oriented upbringing encouraged her in ‘unorthodox’ ways and Vijayalakshmi was sent to spend a little time with Gandhiji in his famous ashram. Inspite of her political and diplomatic achievements, we feel that there is always a consciousness that she has not performed well the role prescribed to her – a woman’s role, by the society. Vijayalakshmi regretfully notes that her first jail term broke up her home, depriving the children of much needed security and comfort. After the imprisonment of sixteen months when she came back to her children, Rita, the youngest, did not even recognize her:

It was good to see the children again. Rita, the youngest, had completely forgotten me in the sixteen months of our separation. Lekha, being older and having had more experience of the national movement, had adapted to life away from home. But Tara was a child who needed a home and parents, and she had been the unhappy and had fretted constantly for me. I was shocked to see how she must have suffered, and now I suffered because of what I had done to the children. To this day I cannot forgive myself. (114)

In Patricia Meyer Spacks’s view, account of such ‘moral dilemmas’ is a frequently found element in public women’s autobiography. 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).

Vijayalakshmi also faced the same dilemma as the other public women but she did not sacrifice her desire for her domestic duty; however, such a choice did leave behind a sense of guilt in her. In spite of her guilt for ignoring her domestic duties, she continued taking an active part in public life. She recalls how Nationalism was rising as a tide and the whole country was in its grip. “I participated actively in Congress work and was for some time joint secretary, with Lal Bahadur Shastri, of the City Congress Committee. Non-cooperation at this time meant breaking any law and courting arrest” (86). She states the process of the execution of the Congress Committee and her role in it:

The Congress Committee had arranged a panel of names by which an arrested “leader” was immediately replaced by the next name on the list. These were known as “dictators” ....A “dictator” therefore had full powers to issue orders for non-cooperation activities and all congressmen and women obeyed such commands. On January 26, 1932, I was the “dictator” of the Allahabad City Congress Committee and was to preside at the meeting where the Independence pledge was to be taken. (87; emphasis added)
Vijayalakshmi contested for the Municipal Board membership in Allahabad and was elected. During that period she was also elected as the Chairperson of the Education Committee of the Board. In that capacity she worked for about 18 months and gathered considerable experience of the civic and educational life of the people around. She states:

I was elected chairman of the Education Committee, a position held much earlier with great success by my cousin, Uma Nehru. This committee was controlled by the conservative elements that had a vested interest in it. I came to my first meeting full of enthusiasm and bright ideas, but soon discovered that wherever else my ideas might have been needed, it was not in the Education Committee. A more narrow-minded, backward group of men I had never met before. Hindu and Muslim alike all belonged to a feudal age. Their ideas on education were vague, and one and all they disapproved of the education of girls though they could not, under the rules, abolish the few existing primary schools….(120)

Vijayalakshmi after holding the position of the chairman of the Education Committee stood as a candidate for the Provincial Assembly of the United Provinces from Kanpur constituency in the General Elections of the year 1937. It was not an easy entry into the mainstream politics. She confronted a new domain and learnt to remain in the same. As she details:

At the A.I.C.C. meeting held in Delhi…. The Socialist party of the Congress had recently been formed, and though I was not a member I often voted with it. On this occasion Achyut Patwardhan asked me to second the resolution opposing the official one. I believe, though I am not certain, that Jayaprakash Narayan was to move it. When my turn came I saw many eyebrows go up, but I was so intent on what I wanted to say that it made no impact. Bhai was presiding – he was again Congress President that year – and I felt he treated me rather unfairly, ringing the bell even before my time was over. But I stuck to my guns and said what I had to say. Turning around I saw it was Rajaji. He said, with one of his mischievous smiles, “We shall make you eat your words!”(132; emphasis added)
Women are socialized in such a manner that asking for reasoned consent to a power which remains rarely invisible makes little sense. Psychoanalysis has shown that the unconscious, one’s very self-identity and personality, are structured by patriarchy and are thus sites for political struggle. No crevice of female existence seems to remain free from the tentacles of male power, and so every dimension is politicized.

Vijayalakshmi recalls how she was greeted when she was appointed as the first woman Cabinet Minister, head of the Local Self-Government Department, covering Health and Sanitation. Her entry into the male domain challenged the public/private dichotomy and consequently the reactions are in view of the same. As she speaks:

The portfolios of Local Self-Government and Medical and Public Health were allotted to me. ...I had frequently cried myself to sleep, wondering if I would be able to do credit to the family and the country. Bhai, who was traveling at that time, had sent me a telegram on my appointment, but there had been considerable delay in its reaching me because the telegraphic employees could not believe that their respected leader, Pandit Jawaharlal, would send his sister such a strange message when he should have been so proud of her becoming the first woman Cabinet Minister. Bhai’s message was:

Remember the Chinese philosopher with four sons. The first was clever and trained to be a poet. The second was brilliant and learned and arts. The third went into the army. The fourth was the despair of his famous father who consulted many friends. Their advice was that the boy’s intellect was limited so he might do well as a cabinet minister. Love and good wishes.

JAWAHAR

As I look back to earlier days I am struck by the fact that no matter how our fortunes fluctuated our sense of humor remained, helping us to see things in perspective. This was an anchor that kept us, especially me, in safe harbor. (133-134; emphasis added)
The character of Govind Ballabh Pant is almost symbolic of the power of patriarchy. Vijayalakshmi calls him “the kindest person imaginable” (135). He was very caring, but also kept a vigilant eye on her way of living. Pantji did not like Vijayalakshmi’s having male friends and asked whether Ranjit knew the men who visited her. According to Pantji, Vijayalakshmi was too good looking to be living alone. Vijayalakshmi, assuring him that there was absolutely no problem between Ranjit and herself, notes:

I ended by assuring him on my word of honor that I would never do anything to betray his trust in me or to degrade the name of Indian women. This last, of course, was important, since our view on women differed. Instead of melting his heart my words had hardly any effect on him.

“Well”, he said grudgingly, “we shall see, but you are too good-looking to be living alone.” To my response that I was nearly thirty-eight years old he merely replied, “I do not think I shall be happy about letting you live alone even when you are sixty-eight!” Pantji lived to be proud of me and paid me what, to him, was the highest tribute—that I had upheld the name of Hindu womanhood! (137; emphasis added)

Patriarchy, thus, intensifies a woman’s tacits of rationality and finally she emerges as a woman whose identity is formed in relation to others. Vijayalakshmi details how novel and intricate it was to work and manage her Ministry. A realization often becomes visible that the public domain had been in possession of by men. So, a woman has to face a new front. Even with her political backdrop, Vijayalakshmi tends to project the image of self-consciousness. She is seen constantly aware of her role as woman in a male dominated society. Thus in a typical feminine tone she notes:

This was the first time a woman had been given the position of Minister and had to work with men as her subordinates and colleagues. It is natural, I suppose, for a relationship tinged with
chivalry to have developed. I can remember so many instances when Kher would work far into the night doing some research for a speech I had to make, or explaining matters….I have seldom worked as hard as I did in those days. There were many things I had to learn to understand, and this stood me in good stead later on. (139)

Vijayalakshmi had an illustrious political and diplomatic career, and then too she fails to project the self image of confidence, she is always conscious of her ‘failure’ to perform well the role prescribed to her- a woman’s role. The autobiographical intention of Vijayalakshmi, we feel, is to convince the readers of her self-worth and to authenticate her self-image. Vijayalakshmi gives the credit of her success to the other women all over India. And also promise to work for them. She illustrates an incidence to make her ideas clear:

Large numbers of women used to bring me their problems, and one day, when I received an appeal signed by several women calling my attention to the action of the Lucknow Municipal Board in ejecting them from their homes,…Kher said, “This matter can be looked into by one of us, there’s no need at all for you to go”. I said that as this was a matter pertaining to women and the appeal had been made to me as a woman, I should look into it myself. Kher’s next argument was the Pantji would object.

“How does Pantji come into the picture?” I asked. No reply but the atmosphere seemed to get icy. I announced that I would go the next morning. (125; emphasis added)

The mother-daughter relationship is apparent in the autobiographies of Nehru women. It is still a debatable issue for the psychoanalyst to resolve whether father’s or mother’s influence is stronger in shaping the personalities of men as well as women. Vijayalakshmi Pandit’s role as a ‘mother’ of three daughters, give a special angle for reading the codes; rather reading patriarchy. In her book, Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), Rich delves deep into the intricacies of a daughter’s biological
connection with the mother. For Rich, it is the mother who transmits to the daughter, the strategies of female survival in a patriarchal world – “a knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other” (220). Rich calls this unexplored territory of relationship as “the great unwritten story” (226).

Vijayalakshmi, regardless of her limitations, with a determining might decides to send her daughters for further studies to U.S.A; a period when Indian freedom struggle was on its peak. At that time Ranjit was arrested and was in jail. Vijayalakshmi writes about the effect of the freedom struggle and jail experience at length in her autobiography. She narrates:

A week later Lekha was released from prison as there was “no incriminating evidence against her.” I took this opportunity to discuss the question of her going away from India and entering Wellesley College in the U.S.A. She did not want to leave India, but, finally, when I told her how much Ranjit and I wanted her to have wider opportunities than were possible in India at that time (she would not have been able to continue her studies without giving a guarantee to abstain from political activity), and how much better she could serve the country if she had a good education and came in contact with people who were doing things, she agreed to go. I decided to send Tara also. She was young but had the necessary credits. (166-67)

There was no home-coming for Ranjit as his health deteriorated in the jail and he died in 1944. On her husbands death Vijayalakshmi had the bitter experience of the sad plight of an Indian widow. She writes “As the widow of a man who died intestate and was a member of a joint Hindu family, and because I had no “offspring”, meaning son, I was not entitled to any part of the joint immovable property” (178). This first hand experience of the Hindu widow’s position convinced her that the legal rules of inheritance must be altered. The
incident struck head-lines providing an added impetus to organizations like All India Women’s Conference to put up a strong battle for the Hindu widow’s right of inheritance. After Ranjit’s death Vijayalakshmi made a new beginning. She recalls:

Back in Calcutta after Ranjit’s death, I joined forces with Dr. Shyama Prasad Mukerji, who was working in famine areas, and our workers cooperated with one another in the district where, by now, severe cholera epidemics were sweeping the countryside in the wake of the famine. My bands of workers were wonderful, dedicated young women from several parts of India. One of them, Dr. Phulrenu Dutte, was a well-known social worker and leader in allied fields. She was a great support to me, and we toured together all over Bengal. It was at this point that I thought of starting a Save the Children Fund on a national basis (169).

Her presence at the U.N. continued to surprise people who could not equate her and the position she held with their firmly established view of an Indian woman. Vijayalakshmi was also the first woman to hold the office of the U.N. President. At a press conference in the U.N. Building following the election, her answer to the questions asked by reporters projects her as an individual asserting female rights – female space. When asked: “How would you describe the sari you are wearing?” She replied: “Did you ask my predecessor to describe his suit?” (276). At one point in her autobiography Vijayalakshmi reminisces the past and talks about the political/public domain she has entered and established her own account very consciously as she is constantly aware of how she is being looked upon as: “the daughter, sister, wife of great men” (177). As she comments:

The early days of political work during the national struggle were a challenge in more than one way. My capacity to adjust to changing situations and enjoy them, to extract something from each happening, has stood me in good stead, and the Congress
work into which I was plunged was interesting and demanding. For this reason I threw myself into it with enthusiasm and did well. As a Minister of the Uttar Pradesh Government I brought new ideas to the work and was able to see some of them implemented in the short period during which the Congress party remained in power. I had had no training for the work I was called upon to do, but being eager to succeed, I taught myself a great deal by reading. Also, I was not too proud to learn from others….My main qualifications are, I think, the ability to make friends, to build bridges, to be able to contribute to the easing of tensions. These qualities are needed in diplomacy and proved of value to my Government, so I feel my record was not wholly undistinguished. (303; emphasis added)

Despite her political achievement and contribution in the freedom struggle of the country, the private side of her life stress uncertainties of the personal. She is not able to break the pattern of patriarchal binary thought in which a woman’s identity remains relational. Since the woman is always held responsible for the future of her children. Vijayalakshmi the mother of three daughters often finds herself in a predicament, as her gender conditions her certain roles to perform. Throughout the autobiography, a sensible reader can read the code and comprehend the moral dilemma Vijayalakshmi often finds herself in, a feeling of being failed as a “woman” in the Indian sense. At times the anguish germinates as a complaint but ends on the note of reconciliation. As she states:

My children were born in a period of uncertainty, and, in spite of our efforts, there was little security in their lives. Growing up in a home that was also the center of the country’s political activity, they were subjected to ideas that helped them to mature at an earlier age than if they had led a more normal life. They were toughened, it is true, but they also lost much of the tenderness that every child has a right to receive. Often when they wanted guidance there was no one there. Sometimes when a loving word was needed, the one to say it was absent, and emotionally they suffered. But the other side of the medal must not be forgotten.
They learned very early in life the meaning of certain words – **loyalty, integrity, courage.** (305; emphasis added)

After working at different places like Russia, United States and U.K., when she returned to India after fifteen years of absence, she realized that she did not have any home of her own. Then she rented a flat in Bombay and went to make a home there. She speaks about an incidence which made her realize her capability but had to abide her Bhai. As she states:

I was leaving London there had been talk in various circles about the possibility of my becoming Vice-President, and that there had been indications that **my name would be acceptable.** That night after dinner Bhai took me to his study. He told me right away that **he would like me to be Vice-President but that he was looking carefully into the matter.** I said I had no desire that he should do anything that might lead to public criticism of him; as he was Prime Minister, my appointment as Vice-President could **cause him embarrassment**….Bhai was unusually silent. As we left the dining room he linked his arm in mine and said, “Come to my study for a moment.”…I asked what he wanted to say to me. His reply, given almost apologetically, was, **“I have decided not to offer you the Vice-Presidency.”** I went round to where he sat and kissed the top of his head – my usual practice when I wanted to reassure him. “What’s bothering you about it?” I asked. “I know there was some feeling against it, and you have done the right thing.” On the contrary,” he replied, “there was far more pressure in your favor than against, but I think we should have a Muslim in that position.” (295; emphasis added).

According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, this act of giving credit to male counterpart, suggests some female problem of self-presentation. That is in women’s autobiography writing capital ‘I’ which is reduced to the dotted ‘i’ is on the periphery, collective, relational and representative of a class. As the above talk between Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Jawaharlal Nehru reveals; added emphasize of personal over the professional. This tendency of women’s
autobiography to impose private self over the public self is a narrative strategy which reflects both a female dilemma and female solution.

This brings us to the hypothesis that gender plays a decisive role in women’s life narratives. For the female autobiographers’ lives, social positions and relationships are all formed by it. Women do not possess the proverbial isolate self that could reside at the centre of the text. 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.

The preceding sections titled “Telling it Natural” and “Telling it Straight” actually began by examining the sources of Nehru women’s autobiographical impulse, and the narrative strategies, these women adopt in telling their lives. But, in point of fact women do not write their lives in a vacuum. Women’s ‘self’ writing germinates and takes its shape in a social and symbolic world that fails to welcome female subjectivity.

Therefore, achieving a woman – centered understanding is a perquisite for reading women’s auto/biography. Emily Dickinson articulates this approach in a poem that speaks to a female audience ‘Tell all the truth, but tell it slant’. Impression of this line intrigues a tension, in women’s articulateness. However women readers respond to the poem with instant comprehension. For some the idea of “telling it slant” relates to the social constraints under which communication takes place. For some, another way of “telling it slant” is to write fiction rather than autobiography. Even use of denials and disclaimers, self- deprecating disclaimers are another means of “telling it slant”.
As already discuss in the theory section, the autobiographical act for women involves encounter with an alien masculine world and conscious transgression against the set norms of female conduct. However, the invisibility of women creates the problem of “voice”. So, premise of silence is pervasive in women’s autobiography. Doubts and splitting up assail a woman seeking to tell her own life, who has as models only male autobiographers, and who is challenged to resonate with male history, theology, social history, and philosophy.

“Telling it Slant”: Nayantara’s *Prison & Chocolate Cake/ From Fear Set Free:*

The youngest of the Nehru’s taken up for the study is in the group of Nehru family women is Nayantara Sahgal. Nayantara Sahgal is the second of three daughters of Ranjit Sitaram Pandit and Vijayalakshmi Pandit.

There is always a connection between a writer’s life and his/her literary work; in the case of Nayantara Sahgal this connection happens to be far more intimate and deep than it ordinarily is, for her work ranges from factual and autobiographical to fictions. A study of the early influences on her life is of particular relevance in her case for they helped mould her political and social attitudes. Politics entered the life of the Pandit girls (Chandrasekha, Nayantara and Rita) very early and they accept many unusual happenings as matter of normal occurrence. Nayantara Sahgal belongs to one of the aristocratic and elite families of India. Her parents, her maternal uncle, her maternal grandfather were all men of letters and wealthy debonair. But they shed all pomp and devoted themselves to the struggle for freedom of India, with Mahatma Gandhi. She has seen the turmoil both before and after the independence in 1947.
Sahgal’s literary canon consist of eight novels, as well as some short stories, two volumes of autobiography *Prison & Chocolate Cake* (1954) and *From Fear set Free* (1962) and some six books of non-fiction. Her work has been acclaimed both in India and abroad through such literary honors as the Sinclair Prize in 1985 for *Rich Like Us*, the Commonwealth Writers Prize Eurasia the same year for *Plans for Departure*. As literary critics claim, in all the works of Sahgal there is a juxtaposition of two worlds: the ‘personal’ world of man-woman relationship and the impersonal world of ‘politics’.

Both the autobiographical works of Nayantara Sahgal are accounts of the larger vision she acquired through personal experiences in the political arena of India in the 1930s and 1940s. The very jacket of Nayantara Sahgal’s *Prison & Chocolate Cake*, in describing the author as ‘Mrs.Pandit’s daughter—Nehru’s niece’, underlines the fact that she hails from one of the foremost political families in the country. Nayantara herself contributes to this initial highlighting of her heritage of political culture in the opening pages of the book.

The readers expect a thoroughly political book with a thin story of the author’s life in this autobiography of Nehru’s niece. As the narrative unfolds the reader discovers that it is a rare combination of the personal and the political. The political details which she gives are not for the sake of documentation. It has a direct bearing on her life and personality. This volume of her autobiography gives details regarding the people who influenced her the most during her formative years. Nayantara understood this life-writing, just when she came back as a graduate from Wellesley, U.S.A. Thus, the autobiographical ‘self’ that she portrays is still in the process of identity formation.

Nayantara’s second volume of autobiography *From Fear Set Free*, published in 1962, eight years after the first volume, also drives its title from her
exposure to political ideologies, especially Gandhiji’s ideology of non-violence. Despite its recording of the contemporary political happenings, the book is written in the ‘literature of their own’ tradition. Thus she constructs a feminine woman as the subject of her discourse. The sole preference is given to the ‘personal’ over any other aspect of her life. What matters the most to her is her personal life – domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced her; and not the national politics or Gandhiji’s ideology of non-violence of which there is just a mention in the preface. This volume is in total contrast to the earlier one. *From Fear Set Free* records the ten years of her life following the completion of her studies abroad, a period during which she fell in love, got married, bore two children and finally set up home as a housewife. *From Fear Set Free* picks up the thread of her life at the point *Prison & Chocolate Cake* left it. It was published in 1962 eight years after the first part was in print.

Along these two autobiographies another book titled *Relationship: Extracts from a Correspondence* works as a means of communication in code. It is a collection of letters exchanged between Nayantara Sahgal and E.N. Mangat Rai, two public figures who break their self-imposed silence for the first time. The letters speak of a growing and passionate involvement, of the authors’ joy and pain at discovering an intellectual companionship while at the same time being forced to face the realities of their own lives and positions. They reflect on the dilemmas and compulsions that bind men and women into particular relationships, and the exigencies of public life and its implications for the private sphere.

Honest and clear these letters provide the reader an insight into the life and thoughts of one of India’s most successful writers, and one of the most distinguished civil servants of his generation. The correspondence highlights
one woman’s endeavor to remain true to herself, her writing, her ideal and relationships, both within marriage and outside it. As Nayantara Sahgal states “How one woman reacted under stress, what she thought, felt, did, and may interest other women in what is still a man’s world. But ultimately sharing these letters is a celebration of the relationship they brought to birth” (viii).

Thus, the woman writer/subject relies on her reader to validate the experience she struggles to express. As a result the reader is essential for the completion of the author’s communicative act, whether it may be letters or life-writing.

In “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), Showalter traces the history of women’s literature. Based on it there are three different categories under which women’s writing are classified as—‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ and ‘female’. Elaine Showalter redefines these three categories or phases of women’s writing as ‘imitative’ ‘reactive’ and ‘self-fulfilled’ or ‘muted’, ‘eloquent’ and ‘articulate’ (“Feminist Criticism”) Basically during the ‘Feminine’ phase of writing, as Showalter states “women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalized its assumptions about female nature”(137). In other words, women imitated the powerful and projected an acceptable self image. Thus, the ‘feminine’ group in Showalter’s view is characterized by the faith in dominant culture and its acceptance of the marginality of their own existence. Consequently, a ‘feminine’ autobiography projects a stereotype of shy, helpless, submissive, male worshipping femininity to win chivalrous protection from male culture and to win acceptance from the patriarchy.

Both the volumes of Nayantara Sahgal’s autobiography Prison and Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Fee project a typical ‘feminine’ self being
dominated by **domesticity**. The publication of *Relationships Extracts from a Correspondence* on the surface level doesn’t alter the interpretation of her autobiographies. But the policing truth in both her autobiographies is found ‘Lying so near the truth’, if correlated to her *Relationship*. In this process of policing truth, we find Nayantara underplaying her real self and creating two different and also opposite selves.

In *Relationship Extracts from a Correspondence*, Nayantara Sahgal unfolds her feminine image but no longer because of her domestic themes but because of the way her inner life was camouflaged, the way the real self was eroded in order to win acceptance in a particular climate. Nayantara in the introduction to *Relationship: Extracts from a Correspondence* clear up:

The **woman**, a writer, sought no advantage from a family in power, and was soon to become, as a political commentator, a forthright critic of its misuses of power. But as a **woman** she was vulnerable to publicity, particularly any that adversely affected her marriage. A childhood of upheavals and partings during the national struggle for freedom, when her parents were never certain what tomorrow would bring, had given her a craving for continuity and permanence, and she believed this was what marriage should mean. Fun, laughter and affection had been her experience, as of nature and of right, in her parents’ home, regardless of national upheaval or personal disagreement.

When she found the health of her marriage seemed to depend on the woman’s devotion, submission and nurture, she gave it all these, not only because she had a natural propensity for devotion, and submission in the cause of a structure built to last seemed worthwhile, but because this was what women were expected to do, and she had a woman’s instinct to cherish and preserve. And if **submissiveness was at odds with her own upbringing**, it had, in any case, been the **men of her family who were feminists**, the women fulfilling their potential and achieving personal, social and (in this family) political stature as a result of the atmosphere and **opportunities at home.**
In her own very different circumstances, she, on the contrary, **went out of her way** to compensate for the openness of her upbringing and her American college education, by accepting the traditional male-dominated culture which her marital environment took for granted. So this **relationship**, as it developed, became a testing ground of courage, and a battleground of value. (vii; emphasis added)

After reading the above extract from the letters written by the same person/woman Nayantara Sahgal, the venture is to interpret Nayantara Sahgal’s autobiographies *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* from a gynocentric point of view, the notion of *Personal is Political* and to understand why she camouflages her real self? What strategies she adopts to construct an acceptable self.

However, both the autobiographies of Nayantara Sahgal had been published before the letters published in *Relationship: Extracts from a Correspondence* had been written – the first in 1954 and the second in 1962. The ‘self’ that she constructs in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* requires strategic calculation. Therefore, the narrative strategy Nayantara Sahgal adopts to project her ‘real self’ is “Telling it Slant”. It works as a key to the problem of How to benefit from the contentment of self-expression while avoiding the consequence for self-assertion?

Furthermore, discussion is based on the analysis of theorists of women’s autobiographies – Estelle Jelinek, Shari Benstock, Patricia Meyer Spacks, Elaine Showalter, Susan Stanford Friedman, Felicity Nussbaum discussed in detail in the first chapter – as each and every one acknowledged the difficulties experienced by women in the projection of ‘real self’ in the patriarchal set up. Theorists attest the fact that the problem of fact and fiction for women autobiographers is of greater importance because of the social **prescription** and
the expectations from society to project an acceptable self. Basically women’s autobiographies, like their real lives, are dictated by gender consciousness. Every autobiography is designed to tell certain truths and conceal certain others.

According to Andre Maurois “it is impossible, to retrieve the past; it is impossible not to change it unconsciously, and further, it is impossible to change it consciously” (149). Such are the obstacles which interfere with the authenticity of autobiography. According to Shari Benstock in women’s self-narratives “the self that would reside at the centre of the text is decentered – and often is absent altogether” (20). The concept of an individual identity – an ‘I’ that is central to any text to be about the ‘self’ – raises different issues for women than it does for men. Nancy Chadorow’s influential study of The Reproduction of Mothering stresses the relationality of women’s self or their ‘I’. “The very requirements of the genre are put into question by the limits of gender” (20) concludes Shari Benstock.

Male autobiographers scarcely touch on their intimate or domestic relations, only some cursory references are found regarding their wives or children in their writings. While women writers focus on the personal more than anything else. So, Nayantara was just a recent graduate from Wellesley U.S.A., when she undertook the book Prison and Chocolate Cake. From the very first page of the autobiography it could be marked that she keeps herself on the periphery of her autobiography. Everything/ Everyone except she herself – Politics, Mummie, Papu, Mamu, Bapu, Sisters are discussed in great detail by her. Nayantara belonged to a family fully involved in freedom struggle and that influenced molding of her life to a great extent. In the course of the autobiography, she narrates the incident of her childhood from which she later derived the title of her autobiography. The incident is narrated by her as under:
When I was about three years old, we had chocolate cake for tea. It was a treat, because ordinarily we had bread and butter. It was a rich dark cake, chocolate through and through, with chocolate swirls on top. While we were at tea, a group of policemen arrived at the house. When Lekha asked why they had come, mummie explained that they had come to take papu to prison but that it was nothing to worry about, because he wanted to go. So we kissed him good-bye and watched him leave, talking cheerfully to the policemen. We ate our chocolate cake and, in our infant mind, prison became in some mysterious way associated with chocolate cake (34).

In women’s autobiographies, the ‘other’ may function in a variety of ways, relationships with several others may give rise to a series of episodes were each section is centered on a particular person. Nayantara is ‘seeing through others’ to understand her own self. Most importantly Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Nayantara’s mother, overshadows her both autobiographies to a great extent especially *Prison and Chocolate Cake* which is full of Nayantara’s recordings of her mother’s views on various subjects. The image Nayantara depicts of her mother is of complete women as she states “A career, especially a political one, is proverbially said to rob a women of much of her femininity. It has never had this effect on my mother…And she continues to be the most feminine woman I have ever met, dainty and petite, with the time and inclination to look fresh and lovely no matter how heavy her work” (41).

*From Fear Set Free* portrays Nayantara in the rather mundane role of a housewife of a family with business culture. Here, we find her constantly trying to lose the share of self and giving importance to trivial matters like servant problems. Half of the book discusses servant problems endlessly. House-care, child-care and servant problems become the dominant theme of the book after her marriage. Household servants like Sunder, Sukhlal, Meghram, Ramlal, Arbloo and Angeline, presented insurmountable problems to her and she is found always solving them than her own.
The self constructed in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* and *From Fear Set Free* by Nayantara continuously affirms her feminine role, adhering to which makes her less threatening and more acceptable to the male culture. This may even be looked upon as a strategy of women to make themselves acceptable to the male culture. Nayantara when aspired to write her autobiography *Prison & Chocolate Cake* was not an average girl, as she herself says “Certainly we were in no sense average, if one took the word to mean representative of the whole of India” (30).

As one of the Nehru’s their lives were inextricably intertwined with Indian history. This could be the reason for her projecting an acceptable self to the society in which Nayantara lived. While constructing the self-image in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* Nayantara’s ideal is a naive, innocent, helpless girl who confronts problems but is somehow saved. In *From Fear Set Free* Nayantara’s ideal is a passive, docile, selfless woman. In the very first page of *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Nayantara projects her potential as a woman:

I have grown up since then, married, and had children of my own; yet the older I grow the less able I am to answer that question. I am quite certain that I could never send my children away from home so confidently and fearlessly in such circumstances. Perhaps it is because I have not had the training in courage and discipline that my parents had. (17)

The image of a docile housewife projected in *From Fear Set Free* is supported by this dialogue between Nayantara and her American friend Max:“You really should have married a man much older than yourself”, he began.“Oh Max!”“And been an ornament to his home. Every woman should”.“I’d love to be an ornament ….” (110). In *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, Nayantara gives a typical feminine portrayal of herself when she was at
Wellesley which is in total contrast to the letter unfolding her affair and pre-martial sexual experience abroad. As she states:

We arrived in saris, feeling strangely out of place among the casually clad throng of young women. The girls in the campus house to which I had been assigned were surprised that I did not smoke or use lipstick and that I never been out on a “date”. (158-159)

Nayantara deals with Gandhiji’s non-violence ideology in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* in great detail. She was so much influenced by him that her autobiography would provide information to any foreigner about Gandhiji than about the narrator herself. In *Prison and Chocolate Cake*, she writes:

Gandhiji’s teachings summoned men and women of courage to interrupt the humdrum routine of their lives and take part in the battle for freedom. His jain-going programme was devised as a means of peaceful non-co-operation with the Government. Going to jail was a procedure carried out with the utmost simplicity, dignity and courtesy. When Gandhiji launched a non-co-operation movement, his followers were in duty bound to defy certain specific Government laws or bans …… I can only speak for ourselves and say that for us it created a whole new world of values in which to believe and by which to live. (33)

However it is only in *Relationship* that she admits that she had not cared for Gandhiji until 1959. She writes: “I don’t know of any influence stronger in my life than Gandhiji’s non-violence, as a way of resisting wrong. But I took no interest in it as an actual approach to living until 1959 when in my devastation” (90). This lays the fact bare that Nayantara uses Indian politics, Gandhian ideology and other things other just as a means to project herself as a daughter of a leading political family, the Nehru family.

Women, very well know how to channel strong feelings appropriately, how at once to use and to disguise aggressive impulse, how simultaneously to deny and achieve personal striving. Their experience of surviving as a marginal
teaches them all these strategies – This is how Robin Lakoff explains the specificities of women’s language in her book *Language and Women’s Place*.

Nayantara in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* writes how Krishna Hutheesing, Nayantara’s masi, while parting gives her a typical feminine piece of advice that should stand out as a typical feminine trait for playing safe in man’s world: “the thing to remember is to look helpless but be efficient. Then everybody gives you a helping hand and if they don’t you can take care of yourself in any case” (18).

Nayantara in both her autobiographies stay away from giving information about certain formative experiences of her life which may have revealed a total different picture of her personality. Maintaining silence over socially unacceptable aspects of female life, diminishing a self which may threaten the male culture, evading events which may lead to controversy, has been an age – old secret and at the same time a strategy of survival in a male dominated world. Nayantara in *Prison and Chocolate Cake* gives minute details about her four years stay in America. All her American friends are discussed but she conceals her affair with an artist and her pre-martial sexual experience. Only many years later she dares to bring up the topic in her correspondence with her lover. Concealing such experience for the fear of public unacceptability is not new. In fact, like Nayantara, her mother Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit also thinks it proper to maintain silence about her infatuation with a Muslim man when she was a teenage girl in her autobiography *The Scope of Happiness*. This kind of public assertion is difficult for many women. A woman may wish to record her life, yet shrink from the presumption that imply.

There are several social and economic reasons for deviation from the normal expectations in women’s writing. When they were discarded, locked
into an uncompanionably marriage, treated as sex objects or otherwise deprived of intellectual stimulation, they found themselves without class consciousness. There is an increasing disparity between what women are told they should be and the life as they are actually experiencing it. The society did not require and therefore did not value productivity within the home; the qualities needed to serve the family were not looked upon as a skill.

Nayantara when returned to India after obtaining a degree from America, followed the same path ordained by society for an Indian girl i.e. of marriage. But she was never fully at home in this life of affluence, as is related from an incident in *From Fear Set Free* when the young Nayantara went to meet Gautam Sahgal’s parents in their house, she found a veritable army of servants there. Gautam assured her, you’ll have a maid servant too when we get married’. When she protested, ‘whatever for?’ the answer was, “to look after you … Fold your clothes and all that sort of things. My sisters have them too, so does my sister-in-law”( 35)

Nayantara found her sense of being split because for her childhood memories were of adults who gave up steady jobs to participate in the struggle for independence and went to jail. She was keenly aware of the difference between the Sahgal home and the politically charged atmosphere of the Nehru home. She mentions it in *From Fear Set Free* as under:

Returning from his sister’s home to the taut atmosphere of my uncle’s house, I felt caught between two opposing currants. A part of me, deeply enmeshed in political consciousness, strained every nerve in automatic response to what went on in India. This part was emotionally involved with India’s future, and belonged to my uncle’s house at this moment. The other part struggled to pull free and build a life as near normal as possible for myself. Long after I was married the tug-of-war continued. (31)
On the previous night of Nayantara’s marriage, when her palms were being decorated with ‘mehendi’ someone asked her casually ‘Are you happy?’ Like a typical Indian bride she looked down and blushed, but her heart was full of all sorts of apprehensions. Recording her thoughts she writes:

My anxiety was not for myself or my personal happiness but for the life I should be entering, for which I was in no way fitted .... Life would be different for me henceforward, and not only as it is different for any newly married woman. From the smallest detail to the overall picture, it would be strange. I should shift from orange juice to the cocktail circuit. (81)

Nayantara fails to speak; rather she is unable to speak. In her autobiographies we find her stumbling over words with a feeling of fragmentation. A ‘self’ as ‘fragmented’ indicates a loss of selfhood, a breakdown into parts under the pressure of socio-cultural expectations of the patriarchal society. As mentions the known linguist of Women’s Language, Robin Lakoff such ‘Silence’ and ‘Fragmentation’ are women’s strategies to play safe in men’s world. They “tell all the truth but tell it slant”.

Though we find Nayantara assertive and articulate in her thinking, she manages to retain the feminine qualities which they magnify by deploring the non-feminine qualities and maintaining silence over certain manageable problems as a strategy. This aspect of the women autobiographers reminds of one of Patricia Meyer Spacks, who looks on the projection of public self-representation of weakness and passivity in spite of private strength and assertion by women autobiographers as a strategy. As she says, this “dichotomy between public passivity and private energy” (Imagining a Self 89) dominates women’s lives and life-writings.
Nayantara while policing truth in both her autobiographies is found “Lying so near the truth”, if related it to her *Relationship*. In this process of policing truth, we find Nayantara underplaying her real self and creating two different and also opposite selves. In one of her letters in Relationship she writes:

It may be the twentieth century for you. For me it’s still the Dark Ages and men and women are still in caves … How dangerous this situation is for me, as a bird caged too long that can’t fly properly again. I think some part of me actually prays for blindness and deafness again, for solitary confinement, for not being able to think or feel. It goes against my grain, too, but I can submit to it, as I have done. Frankly, I wonder what’s left of me (22)

Despite a deep feeling of claustrophobia often expressed in images like caged bird and a fish out of water, the ideal that dominates Nayantara’s psyche in her autobiography *From Fear Set Free* is that of a “Gruh Laxmi” or of Virginia Woolf’s “angel of the house”. This image is deep down in Nayantara’s conscience as this passage from *From Fear Set Free* illustrates:

Marriage was inestimably more important for a woman than for a man. A single woman had no status in society. The ancient law-giver, Manu, had decreed that she belonged first under her father’s protection, then under her husband’s, and if fate condemned her to widowhood, she must lean on her son. Manu, to whose laws Hindu society owes its astonishing continuity and stability despite the repeated conquests and invasions that have swept India, holds a venerable place in history.

My father, a historian and scholar, was willing to give him due credit, but he and Manu disagreed on some vital points, their outlook on womankind being chief among these. “If we’re going to hark back for an example, let’s hark right back to the beginning,” he said, preferring the Vedic concept of woman, when the wife had been her husband’s equal in the home and the state. We knew our own marriage would be by choice, carrying their own rewards and anxieties. … (51; emphasis added)
Nayantara later on append about her own marriage and comments:

Had my marriage been arranged, I should not have married Gautam. We should, in that case, have married partners from our own province and caste, eliminating at the outset as many seeds of potential conflict as is humanly possible to foresee. The need for a common background is particularly significant in a country where provincial differences range over dress, food, language and customs. Marriage by choice is according to the more conservative among our elders, too often a peril, an embarking on a sea of differences with no anchor. But choice in any sphere is a peril, and the basic division of peoples is of those who believe in choice and those who mistrust it. (52)

Here, a note of regret is to be marked in her decision for getting married to Gautam. But what led her to this decision is nowhere to be found in the autobiography. Secrecy, in this kind of writing, has the significance of permitting self-expression without fear or penalty. An honest account requires a private and protected means of expression. Nayantara through her autobiographies seek self-in-sight, as a product of self-writing. However the issue of ‘fact and fiction’ becomes curcial at this point as the real ‘self’ is depicted in her letters. These letters give out her heart’s inner most longings, her desire to share secret and also her frustrations. In few such letters she writes:

It seemed to me I should tell Gautam about this man [artist] …. I told him there had been this episode, a part of my growing up … And then Gautam could not endure the knowledge of the other man and the long torture began. It became a sort of inquisition for me. Day and night I was a prisoner on trail. The questions never stopped. Why? Where? How? And above all Why, Why. (32 - 33)

Gautam must be protected from the truth if the truth concerns me. I must enter his world and stay with him. Then I am free intellectually. And other kind of freedom he is not prepared to tolerate or discuss (7).
About these facts, there is no mention in her autobiography *From Fear Set Free*, which covers her married life. On the contrary the life-writing presents the author as a carefree, happy woman, an “ignorant lady of the house” who did not even know how much to pay for a dozen oranges. Nayantara got married to Gautam Sahgal and the couple moved to Kanpur as Gautam had been posted there. Instead of setting up a home there they decided to live in a hotel as the bride knew quite well that with her limited abilities as a housewife she would not be able to run a household.

It is surprisingly strange that not her autobiographies but her letters show the internal turmoil Nayantara underwent. Some letters like the one given below tell the reader the unmixed truth:

> All my efforts at discipline so far, anything I have achieved in this line, will not be put to the test, and will have to stand me in good stead now. It is strange, too, to live a ‘double’ life which I am now doing. It needs qualities I’ve never possessed. It is a strain. My mother has always felt I create melodrama about myself and it may be true in her eyes. That is, she sees the drama, but doesn’t realize I didn’t create it (71).

In *From Fear Set Free*, the word “thrashing” is used by Gautam and Nayantara but in the context of a student’s fast. Gautam said “one thrashing in a public place and there would never be a student row again” to this Nayantara said “A thrashing in a public place would not be democratic” (203). But there is no mention of the physical torture experienced by her in marriage in the autobiography. It is through one of her letter and not her life-writing we come to know about such a ‘thrashing’. She writes “Gautam caught up with me and I was dazed and stunned with his blows across my face. I hardly realized his hitting me again and again till I fell down”( 73).
The assertion of subjectivity can also be camouflaged by means of subject positioning. Female autobiography can be disguised by concealing it within or around another type of narrative. For instance, Nayantara’s view on marriage are stressed much in the autobiography *From Fear Set Free*, but the social taboos resist her to present them as her own. Thus she positively adopts the strategy of “telling it slant” to put her point on her own marriage:

For my elders marriage both by law and tradition had been indissoluble, a choice once made irrevocable. For my grandchildren, who would grow up in a greatly changed India, it would, in all probability, be a more flexible and less stable institution, yielding more and more to the pressures of personality and society. For me it would fall midway between the two, the law eventually facilitating divorce while tradition and sentiment were still ranged against it. It would not be the impregnable institution it had once been….

Marriage was something that took place in due course, like learning to walk, chicken-pox, and puberty. You neither rebelled against it nor showed undue emotion at the mention of it. You had heard it spoken of since babyhood, when a fond grandmother or elder of the family described the beautiful clothes and jewels you would wear as a bribe and the fine young bridegroom who would come and fetch you away if you were a good little girl and drank all your milk. Later you would have powdered orange peel mixed with milk rubbed daily into your skin to make it clear and glowing and you more marriageable – or another of the numerous beauty treatments every Indian household has in its repertoire. (47-48; emphasis added)

Nayantara Sahgal, tries to underplay the real self but still, in the last part of *From Fear Set Free*, a hint is given regarding the inner turmoil underwent by the author. She writes:

As I delve into my thoughts, the issue of peace in the world narrows in this quiet dinning room to peace of mind, and in particular to that most private harmony, a peaceful relationship between two people living under the same roof. In the end of this
is the peace that concerns us most from day to day and its destruction the one that most poignantly affects us. (237)

She herself desires a change, as she says “In my own small sphere too change was evident” (240). Then again suddenly she diverts the topic and ends the autobiography with a somewhat unpleasant domestic scene. This is her strategy to distance herself from the intimate details about her life. As Showalter aptly observes ‘denouncing female assertiveness’ has been one of the strategies used by women of the ‘Feminine’ culture to atone for their social role.

Autobiography is a distinct literary genre, representing an attempt to fulfill the author’s conscious and primary intention of recounting and assessing his or her life to date. Men of course had more educational opportunities than women and access to a wider range of experience. The superiority of males simply was not questioned. Because of the old traditions of order and female subordination were still workable within the social context, women not only accepted their subordination but actually found it a positive virtue, one which they could constructively work to achieve.

Nayantara Sahgal in her autobiographies, instead of using the cause ultimately to enlarge the sense of self, seems to diminish the self. The omissions and the inclusions of the incidents alike offer clues. Nayantara adopted the feminine solution of evading a self which was unacceptable to the socio-cultural set-up and more so to the family set-up.

In her autobiography From Fear Set Free, we find a total submission to the ideal of Indian womanhood. As this passage illustrates,

Born within and nurtured by a joint family, a girl grew up with the certain knowledge that, plain or beautiful, talented or unremarkable, she would marry. Her place in her husband’s family which assure her of recognition and respect in the community… In
her old age the young would care for her and deem it their duty privilege to do so. Her life would be cushioned against the shocks of chance, the fear of loneliness. (99)

In *Prison & Chocolate Cake* once while having a talk with Mamu, Nayantara said “I wonder if I shall ever do anything worthwhile”. The same point is repeated in the second volume of her autobiography *From Fear Set Free*. She writes “Now that you are home, have you thought about what you want to do? I haven’t thought, I admitted. There is so much to be done. I know you will not sit idle. I was, I realized, the only person in the house who had no occupation” (29). The self projected in *From Fear Set Free* by Nayantara accepts her subordination to her husband and to the interest of others. A systematic self-depreciation can be noticed here. This point could be supported with Nayantara’s own views “For me life resembled a rock garden full of unaccountable small crevices and obstructions. How could I enter his world or he mine? We would make a new one, said Gautam. He envisaged no problems. He concentrated on the particular” (35).

We find Nayantara affirming the feminine trait of helplessness to win chivalrous protection from male culture. Nayantara projects Gautam as very sensible in his approach and herself confused. As this passage illustrates:

We are going to be very happy”, said Gautam. It was not a passing remark. It was a statement, positive, confident, determined. Two people alone, as we were, in the moonlit garden might be, I thought, as we walked up and down the drive to the gate and back. Two people isolated from other bonds, from families, backgrounds and personalities. But marriage meant all these things too, and then would we happy? The crevices and obstructions of my rock garden loomed large, as they always did when I started to think the matter over. (36 – 37)
All this emphasize her unwillingness to make verbal claims for herself. Nayantara herself denies space for her own self. In *From Fear Set Free*, after marriage her world is as she writes:

I knew only a narrow section of it wherein interest inevitably was confined to husband’s jobs and conversation revolved around pills, talcum powder, insecticide or whatever your husband’s firm might be engaged in manufacturing and marketing. (163)

As Patricia Meyer Spacks remarks among all women autobiographers “Although each author has significant, sometimes dazzling, accomplishment to her credit, the theme of accomplishment rarely dominates the narrative” (“Selves in Hiding” 113). The same path is followed by Nayantara, who in the course of her life-writing rarely emphasizes her professional life. There is just a hint regarding her writing a book in *From Fear Set Free*. When women cannot deny their use of the pen, they can disavow its significance, via trivializing language if need be. But what we find is that Nayantara lays less emphasis on this public aspect of her life making it sound trivial. As this passage illustrates:

I shepherded them [children] to school and came home soaked in sweat to sit on the edge of my bed with a writing block on my knees, trying to get on with a book I had started to write in Delhi. “What are you trying to do?” asked Gautam, coming home for lunch. “Writing a book”, I mumbled. “On your knees? I am getting a writing table made. And I’m buying you a typewriter”. The table and the typewriter arrived soon afterwards, but the book was finished on my knees. I wish you’d organize yourself a little better”, said Gautam. Method to Gautam included a writing table – at any rate, not one’s knees – and preferably a filing cabinet as well with every scrap of paper scrutinized and laid in its appropriate drawer. “you’d run the house better if you got yourself organized.(190)

The bitter pill of subordination is not sugar-coated with protection, attentiveness, and the self-respect that goes without the knowledge that one is
making a positive contribution to the functioning of the household. In Nayantara’s autobiographies, the ‘self’ is constructed as subordinated one; just to make it acceptable to the patriarchal set-up which hardly allows any space to women.

It is striking that the self appearing in autobiography studies is presumed to exclude the body. The mind/body split is reproduced through the public/private, outside/inside, male/female categories that order perception and experience and is derived from a way of knowing which cannot account for the knowledge of the body. Indeed, until feminist criticism, predominant ways of knowing defined the body’s knowledge as that which is unknowable. The self has functioned as a metaphor for soul, consciousness, intellect, and imagination, but never for body.

The ‘feminine’ subculture reveals the doctrine of a total concealment of female sexual life from their self-narratives. Nayantara Sahgal strictly follows this doctrine in her autobiographies. Autobiography as a form is a public document. As a woman it is difficult to reveal secrets regarding female body. In one of Nayantara’s letter to E.N. Mangat Rai, details regarding her pre-marital affair are revealed. It was possible in letter not in autobiography to talk about female body’s experience because, Nayantara herself believes as she states in the introduction to Relationship:

Letters are more personal and more revealing, especially of the immediacy of raw emotion, than perhaps any other form of writing, written as they are with the complete confidence of privacy. (V)

Again she writes:

I had just returned from college in America. Towards the end of that four-year period I had become entangled, as they say, with a
man, an artist, much older than myself. Seduction is a silly – sounding word. It also puts all the responsibility on him, and I certainly would not have accepted this interpretation of the event at the time, or for a long time afterwards. I thought, in fact I had done part of the seducing myself. I know now how small that part was, and that no young girl as unsophisticated as I was in the ways of the world, is a match in this respect for a much older and experienced man …. He belonged to a society that does not place a high value on virginity and he did not think how as doing me any harm. (32)

Nayantara very safely conceals the past. There is no hint regarding the affair in *Prison & Chocolate Cake* which covers her whole stay in America. In the very first chapter of *From Fear Set Free*, she talks about her friend Max, who understood her well as she says, “Both in Allahabad and Bombay …. in neither place had I met anyone quite like Max … His kind of heart, his generosity and his affection for us as a family had made him our firm friend during our stay in America” (7). We can relate Max to be the artist referred to in the letter by Nayantara. However the only mention of this sought he receives in *From Fear Set Free*: “I don’t know why I thought particularly of Max when I returned to India in October, 1947 – two months after partition” (11).

Women’s lives where more restricted than men; they lived in a world where men made the rules for centuries. So, women were bound much more oppressively by tradition and prescriptions for behavior. Even biologically their lives were less under their own control. Sex within marriage meant pregnancy, after pregnancy, a life of “female troubles” and very possible death from puerperal fever; sex outside marriage meant all these things and severe social stigmatization to boot; the alternative was celibacy. On every social level, however unfree the men were, the women were more unfree.
Prison & Chocolate Cake, which covers Sahgal’s life up to her return to India in 1947, does not mention Nayantara’s affair with the artist or hint at pre-marital sexual experience. From Fear Set Free does not give the slightest inkling of the marital disharmony and violence caused by Gautam’s possessive nature. Nor does she discuss the deep feeling of claustrophobia which constantly overwhelmed her during the years of their marriage, the torture that she had to endure, her attraction for another man in 1956, and the serious consideration of divorce – none of these find a place in her autobiographies. The main reason behind hiding the facts of some of the most formative experiences of her life from her autobiographies is that she wanted to present an ‘acceptable self’ to the patriarchal climate and for which she sacrificed the truth.

Truth is never doubtful, and without freedom you may not have it, except in ways that twist and distort it. In Prison & Chocolate Cake, Nayantara makes an affirmative claim to have held the truth by saying “I grew hot and embarrassed and deplored my inability to tell a lie. My brain does not work rapidly enough, so the truth, whatever it is, must be out” (172). However, whatever her claims may be, after having a close analysis of her autobiographies Prison & Chocolate Cake and From Fear Set Free and relating it to Relationships, we can conclude that Nayantara’s inner self has been camouflaged, through the process of her life-writing the real self has been eroded in order to win acceptance in a patriarchal setting.

Separate selfhood is the very motive of autobiographical creation, but Nehru women seek individuality in association with others. The commonalities we come across in the autobiographies of Krishna Hutheesing, Vijayalakshmi Pandit and Nayantara Sahgal are, their dotted ‘i’ is on the periphery, collective, relational and representative of a class. The autobiographies of these Nehru women clearly support the theory that women focus on their personal rather
than the public life in their portrayal of self. In spite of an unusual achievement of these Nehru women in public life, their autobiographies relegate these public achievements to the personal/domestic affairs.

A significant thing about the autobiographies of Nehru women is that they disclose an essentially ‘feminine’ personality which illustrates the typical tendency of women’s subculture, a culture which looks on men’s culture as the main culture and takes pride in conforming to its requirements. Narratologically, Nehru women’s autobiographies read like a typical female text—lacking a well-knit architectural perfection. But, the ‘self’, as revealed through their autobiographies is, a ‘feminine’ self which, despite all its abilities and attainments loves to bask in the reflected glory of their men’s success. For Nehru women maintaining silence over socially unacceptable aspects of their female self, diminishing a publicly successful self which may threaten male culture, evading events lead to controversy.

The camouflaged reality of Nehru women’s life is a pointer to the feminine dilemma of a dual self- the dilemma of living with two different, even opposite selves. Thus, denouncing female self-assertiveness is one of the strategies used by these Nehru women of ‘feminine’ culture, to a large extent in concurrence with their own ‘personal’ or ‘political’ self.
Works Cited


