

**Maya Angelou: The Self Fashioning of the
Phenomenal W-O-M-A-N: A Feminist Perspective of
her Multiple Volumed Autobiographies**

**Thesis submitted to the
UNIVERSITY OF CALICUT
for the award of the Degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
IN ENGLISH**

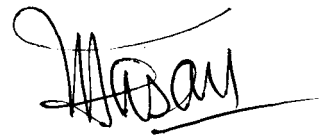
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CERTIFICATE


This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Maya Angelou: The Self fashioning of the Phenomenal W-O-M-A-N: A Feminist perspective of her multiple volumed Autobiographies” submitted to the University of Calicut, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is an original record of bonafide research carried out by V. Prathiba at the Department of English, under my supervision and guidance, and that it has not been previously submitted for the award of any degree or diploma.



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DECLARATION

I do hereby affirm that the thesis "Maya Angelou: The Self Fashioning of the Phenomenal W-O-M-A-N: A Feminist perspective of her Multiple volumed Autobiographies" has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.



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INTRODUCTION

Autobiographies, newly prominent as 'texts' have become central in wide ranging critical and theoretical debates on the status of the Self, the nature of self-representation and of the language. The serenely male approach to these questions has by now been disrupted by the serious attention with which autobiographies by women are being approached, the same method yielding more complex perspectives. When a person sits down and writes about what happened in his/her life, an autobiography results. But autobiographies are far from being transparent, lucid, accurate stories of lives.

Recent analysis of women's autobiographical writings have argued strongly that while intense awareness of Self is a striking characteristic of modern autobiography, the self awareness has not impelled female authors to glorify themselves in the uniqueness of their individuality. Rather these life writings reveal how Self consciousness in the writers exhibit their being a woman first, and individual next; an awareness similar to that of

members of other groups, in particular, of a minority inferiority. All marginal/minority people have to carve out, invent and imagine new expressive forms – forms that evolve from their particular experiences, historical struggles and victories as they negotiate their place in this world. These new creative forms are generated by the collective will of people to name and arm themselves against hostile and insensitive forces. They are against establishing a unified subject or view point.

Much of women's autobiographical works circle around themes, that have become central to feminist literary criticism. The controversial relationship between authorship and authority and the related quest for 'voice'; the bonds and division between individual woman and the community and culture around her; and the sense of a double or divided Self, common in post modern writing but especially problematic for women. The 'Self' poses a set of vexed questions for feminist theory and praxis.

Actually feminism happened when women learned to say 'I', or on gathering, what Adrienne Rich called, "the courage to say I" (1979a: 49). But feminism as a universal movement for women's rights has not achieved much under the sign of global feminism. European and White feminism failed to take into consideration the concerns of the marginalized/minority groups of women. The principal issue they tried to politicize was gender and they with their paternalistic and patronizing attitudes did not bother to take into consideration racial and ethnic differences and colonial forces, which contribute to the problem. Under the dominant mode of White Feminism, it was imagined that writing was part of an ongoing collective effort and that it might make a difference and change the world. It was naively imagined that the 'I' of the dominant feminist was 'We' as Du Plessis puts it, "We thought all women were us and we were all women"(1985: 101).But the imperialistic assumptions of the Euro-centred mainstream feminism made it difficult for marginalized groups to align themselves with this dominant form; which was claimed to be universal, but was not so in reality. Therefore, feminism had to be

pluralized by race, class, ethnicity and sexual orientation and has branched out into a set of particular movements deeply rooted in national or regional histories.

Since then, contemporary theory and experience have rendered suspect the view of personal experiences as a site of authoritative discourse and exposed the essentialist appropriative implication of saying 'We'. In the current theoretical scenario, 'Self' and 'Experience' are discredited categories. But it also remains true that stories by women about women's selves had, and continue to have enormous power in the creation of feminist consciousness. Rita Felski argues that, "the autobiographical novel continues to remain a major literary form for oppressed groups, as a medium for confronting problems of Self and of cultural identity, which fulfils important social needs" (1989: 78).

We are now passing through a time when feminism has lost much of its political edge and is undergoing assaults from all sides. Hence it is imperative that women learn to say 'I' and 'We'

again, though 'I' and 'We' are not so simple terms. As Nicole Ward Jouve suggests, it is precisely, "because subjecthood has become so difficult, has been so deconstructed, that there is need to work towards it. This is particularly so for women"(1991: 11).Jouve also speaks of:

the need to speak as a subject and as a subject bent on self-knowledge. We have lost ourselves in the endlessly diffracted light of Deconstruction. For we (especially women) have been asked to go along with Deconstruction whilst we had not even got to the Construction stage. You must have a Self before you can afford to deconstruct it (7).

In this regard Nancy K. Miller corroborates, "only those who have it can play with not having it"(1982: 52).

Now that feminism has come to seem more endangered, more cut off from a popular and political base, more threatened by conservative tendencies from without and divisions from within, as Annette Koldony urges, we need, "to take responsibility for recovering our history lest others write it for us"(1988: 464).Also

Adrienne Rich's injunction in 1979 – that we “come together telling our stories” – has a new urgency. (1979b:13). The problem with feminist movement, according to bell hooks is that it did not have:

an ongoing radical focus which addresses many people It is our task (and here when I say ‘our’ I mean any of us who are committed to revolutionary feminist movement) to work at challenging and changing the focus, the direction of future feminist movement(1990: 1).

The change that bell hooks speaks of is reflected in the writings of marginal people for whom:

the self existed in relation, was dependent on its very being on the lives and experiences of everyone. The Self is not a signifier of one ‘I’ but the coming together of many ‘I’s’, the Self as embodying collective reality past and present, family and community. . . . It is this collective voice we struggle to recover(1989: 30-1).

In writers like Maya Angelou, to say ‘I’ is to get personal, a way of centring oneself, grounding oneself, so as to articulate the relation

of that 'I' to the social and political forces that have shaped the Self in a way that makes that 'I' more personal; a way of re-envisioning the personal as political; a way of saying 'I' while also saying 'We'. About this collective implication of saying 'I', Bonnie Zimmerman rethinks experience in a way that it differentiates it from individualism:

I am not a separate being, with my own private and personal experiences, my selfhood is constructed by others . . . When I think of experience as relational and socially constructed, not as personal and individual, I can still use experience as a meaningful category on which to base my politics (1993: 118).

The thesis presented here, on the multiple volumed autobiographies of Maya Angelou is written from a feminist perspective of political solidarity with the kind of feminist inquiry discussed so far and which needs to remain linked to an investigation of the ways, in which reality is constructed. Autobiography, being one of the most important sites of feminist

debate, demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject. In the current scenario, it is politically necessary to recognize the plurality of women's lives rather than privilege one notion of woman. As Derrida says, "There is no one woman, no one truth in itself about woman in itself"(1991: 372-3). The differences of woman's lives should be taken into account, "not the differences from an assumed exemplary male life, but rather differences from each other"(Stanley 1992: 120). One should be able to imagine multiple subjectivities, which are without foundation, but located instead in particular times and places. Hence it strikes me interesting to do a reading of Maya Angelou's multiple volumed autobiographies, her speaking positions, her concerns, her conflicts and its resolutions through the self-fashioning of a black female Self.

This thesis attempts to integrate the study of texts from a view of textuality informed both by autobiographical studies and women studies. With these critical tools, an attempt is made to probe into the discourse of Self-remembering, in which

identity/female *id* of the writer is preserved. Of the ambiguities encountered in reading autobiography, perhaps the most challenging is the question of what the 'Self' is and what the writer reveals through the life writing. The multi-faceted personality that Angelou is, travels inside herself finding not confinement and enclosure, but a Self which is more extensive than anyone could have guessed. Her passionate investment is her pre-occupation with Knowing – knowing herself, other and the World. She presents, “the knower as social agent, knowing as social practice and knowledge as productive of social consequences” (Hartman 1991: 2). This entails acknowledging the knower as part of the process by which Knowledge is produced. Hite argues, “For a writer aware of the contradictions in her own socially constructed 'Self', the project of Self writing is inevitably a Self conscious one” (1989: 122). Angelou's literary significance rests upon her exceptional ability to tell her life story as both a human being and a Black American Woman in the twentieth century. Through her successive volumes of life writing, she

becomes an articulator of the nature and validity of specific female Self and female consciousness.

The introductory chapter sets out the background, focusing on the various attempts to define what autobiography is and looks into the various elements that go into the making of an autobiographical project. Autobiography is perceived to be as ineffable and irreducible as the Self it figures, "Definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible" (Olney 1972: 38). Further, the extent to which the genre of autobiography has been implicitly bound up with gender is also taken for consideration. Deliberations on how life writing becomes a part of a political process of resistance for women and how female autobiographies become sites to look for, develop and define female subjectivities, are undertaken. The new radical use of the medium of autobiography by marginal groups as the text of the oppressed, which empowers the subject through cultural inscription and recognition, is also discussed. Further black autobiography is dealt with at length as an immediate background

to bring in the significance of Maya Angelou as an autobiographer, who defines the quest for human individualists identifying the personal struggle with the general condition of blacks in America.

In Chapter 2, an attempt is made to look at autobiography as a site for negotiating and challenging the different ways meaning is given to the Self. The nature and development of selfhood and the myths of the 'Self' are questioned. Due recognition is given to the shifting sands of identity and how 'I' is multiply coded in a range of discourses. The concept of fluid subjectivity, a Self which is never complete but always in process is discussed as a backdrop to investigate the multiple volumed autobiographies of Maya Angelou. The traditional view of the integrity of the Self and of its autobiographical expression is questioned. 'I' is found to be none of the things it has conventionally been thought to be; neither first, nor personal, nor singular. The Self is not an essence, but a socially created construction – a cultural artefact fashioned collaboratively and publicly out of readymade materials.

In Chapter 3, the focus is on the repositioning of the subject through language. Language both gives a voice and takes it away. The search for origins of the Self ultimately leads to the acquisition of language. The Self is constituted by and as language. According to Terry Eagleton, arguing in favour of structuralist critique of the subject:

The confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock -language predated the individual and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it(1983: 107).

Thus in currently fashionable formulation, it is not we who speak the language but language that speaks us. The autobiographical Self is seen as bound and predetermined by the constraints of linguistic resources and narrative tropes available to the author. Again the way in which language speaks woman is found to be different and debilitating. How Angelou deals with the problem through her rhetoric of interruption and eruption through the modulation of speaking voice that also impels writing voice, is discussed in this chapter. Her narrative, lively and brimming with

repetitions, parallelism, loose sentences with dramatic pauses that build towards a climax, variations of a single pattern and a sense of talking directly to the audience close to the tone of conversation all go into the self-fashioning of the phenomenal woman. She is – a woman who has reached her full intellectual and social potential.

In Chapter 4, autobiographical writings of Chinese American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston and Aboriginal Australian writer, Sally Morgan are analysed in juxtaposition with that of Maya Angelou. An effort is made to map the space of these marginalized female writers and to explore the common thread running through their concerns and anxieties. The writings of all the three autobiographers have interrogated the ideological underpinning of autobiographical tradition and explored the possibility of difference. An understanding of differences which mark heterogeneous societies will lead to an acknowledgement that any simple dichotomous categorising carries with it mechanisms of exclusion and marginality. These writings also ask how

autobiographies can be used or read as a mode of political questioning at the very juncture of contradictory and dissonant discourses. The kind of comparative perspective employed here is intended to feed into and provoke the articulation of sameness and difference, which I believe is a most necessary function of feminist critical inquiry. Feminism's future is to be premised upon a commitment to relentless interrogation of its claims about differences and the way difference structures communities. My choice of autobiographers made here reflect an attempt to evoke a wide range of female identity – women, who portray themselves as artists, feminists, scholars, social and political activists, mothers, daughters, lovers, wives – and to assemble a selection of three of the finest storytellers and prose stylists of the century. The histories of each of the culture included - Chinese American, African American and Aboriginal Australian – are enormously rich and complex and I cannot do justice to them within the spatial constraints of this work. However, I offer a sketch of the key aspects, a sense of the context from which these works grew. I chose three writers from varying locations to reflect and

emphasise the unique histories of each one; however, their themes and their lives share a common thread in highlighting the cultural and historical contribution of specific women.

Maya Angelou, the resilient multifaceted personality that she is, never ceases to impress me. She has lived a thousand lives as an exuberant black woman making a way where there was none before. She has been an actress, an activist, a dancer, a professor, a child victim of rape, a madam, a teenage mother, a restaurateur, a poet, a prophet, and a queen. Maya has been mute and she has sung for a living, she has known poverty and life as a millionaire, read aloud in church and read her poetry before Heads of States. She has written plays, directed films and conducted an orchestra. She has been nominated for a Tony and an Emmy, won a Grammy and had streets, schools and babies named after her. Maya has known, worked with or befriended every black personality one can think of. She worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., planned strategy with Malcolm X, toured the world with dramatic actors, formed a dance duo with Alvin Ailey and fed Billie Holiday in her

kitchen. She has lived in Egypt, Ghana, Paris, Brooklyn and a houseboat as part of a California commune. Fluent in five languages, a masterful cook, a consummate hostess, a college professor and one of the top money-makers on the Speaker Circuit, she remains an inspiration. Where many would be exhausted, she is exhilarated, relishing the future and processing the past. Through the autobiographical she has provided a window on the Universal. Her many journeys have led her to seek the path of unity, where our common humanity is explicit and our differences are only melodies in the symphony. It can be assumed that Maya's self-imposed silence in childhood was the training ground for the poet, writer and speaker that she is now. Clearly she had been listening while not speaking. Her exile from words led her to enchantment with literature, diction and cadence. Language did love her back. The little black girl from Stamps who did not think much of her looks has gone on to become one of the most majestic women we've ever known – and we do feel we know her. We love her for who she has dared to be – not perfect, but grand! Her example is an invitation to liberation, creative

fulfilment and love. It is the same little black child, caught up in the cage of ugliness, who asked self consciously, “what you looking at me for? I didn’t come to stay”(1), at whom the world is now constantly looking at with awesome admiration. She has come to stay for good in the hearts of the people. This thesis derives its energy from the immensely rich talents of Maya Angelou, the Phenomenal Woman.

Chapter 1

Mapping Female Autobiographical Space

When we write of woman, everything is out of place
... the accent never falls where it does with a man

- Woolf, *Orlando*

Autobiography is etymologically and in practice the story of a person's life, meant to be shared with others. Broken down, the word auto/bio/graphy means self/life/story, the narrative of the events of a person's life. Autobiography has been recognized as a distinct literary genre since the late eighteenth century and as such, an important testing ground for critical controversies about a range of ideas including authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction.

Criticism on autobiographical writings acknowledges the interpretative division between those who take autobiography as a factual document and those who view it as much more closely connected with fiction. "Everyone knows what an autobiography is but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement (Olney 1972: 7). This statement goes to the problem of defining autobiography. The confusion generated by the ambiguities

in defining autobiography, frequently manifests itself in the categorizing and shelving of autobiographical works in libraries. Sometimes autobiographies are interfiled with biography conforming William Spengeman's observation that autobiography is a subspecies of historical biography. At times autobiographies are shelved with history conforming many of its practitioners' view that autobiographies mirror the history and culture of its subject.

Autobiography represents an attempt to fulfil the author's conscious and primary intention of recounting and asserting his/her life, thereby making the private public. What makes it unique is that it is a retrospective account of the author's life (if not the whole life, at least a significant part of it) written with avowed fidelity. An autobiographer represents his/her life story assuming his/her experiential history as a referential basis and point of departure. According to Roy Pascal, autobiography involves "an interplay between the past and the present" (1960: 11). But autobiographies are more than just a retrospective account of one's life. It involves

the shaping of the past and imposing a pattern on life to construct a coherent story of individual experience.

While writing an autobiography, memory is the source in which past is preserved and which has to be inspected at the time of writing. The materials of the past which form the experience of the autobiographer are routed through memory, and shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of the present consciousness which is devoted to the presentation of that life. But the autobiographer has no real control on his/her memory. Apart from his/her selection of past events, memory too makes its own selection. Sometimes memory may retain unimportant details and drop the all-important entirely. In some cases, it smothers the unpleasant and in other cases gives them an undue dominance. Besides being forgetful and selective, memory is also creative. After some lapse of time, memory often fills in the gaps with imaginative addition. It is probably an artistic instinct to improve, highlight and adjust the details. There is also a rationalising tendency of memory. After the event, memory creates feelings or ideas about the possible causes of

the event. The mind discovers motives for actions which were performed unwittingly. Therefore in autobiography, which depends on retrospective memory, there is evidently a dual element of fact and fiction. Since memory can be selective and untrustworthy, “the autobiographical truth thus becomes not fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation” (Eakin 1985: 3).

Truth in autobiography is a very complex question. Most critics concede that truth established in autobiography is not one that is objectively verifiable, for the autobiographer presents himself/herself not as he/she really was, but as he/she thinks he/she was and as he/she would like to have been. The autobiographer presents only the truth of life as seen from inside. Hence it is more subjective than objective. The story structure of autobiography is its mode of presenting truth. Truth in autobiography is:

not merely fidelity to fact or conformity to ‘likeness’, to the way one appears to others, but rather ‘the projection of a

story of successive self-images and recognition or distortion of these self-images by the world'; it is the story of identity, of the tension between self-image and social recognition (Shapiro 1964: 426).

The particular literary form of autobiography demands that there ought to be a truthful portrayal of the autobiographer's relation to himself and to other people – the truth of belief, the truth of his outlook and the truth of his facts. In *Design and Truth* (1960), Roy Pascal theorises that autobiography must be a presentation of truth – truth of characterization, truth of relationship to the world and the truth in point of view. Many other critics share Pascal's view, including Maya Angelou's biographer, Dolly A. McPherson (1990). Another critic, Barret J. Mandel insists that autobiographies are "limited by the writer's need to speak in the spirit of truth". He warns that the autobiographer should "never allow himself to jeopardise credibility" (1968: 224). Mandel accedes to the fact that the concept of Absolute Truth has ceased to have much meaning in

the twentieth century. In modern autobiography, the emphasis is not on accuracy of facts. As the past is reactivated in the present via memory of the autobiographer, he/she must discover a structure for his/her life. If she/he is to achieve coherence, the autobiographer must take a standpoint and that standpoint will naturally be of the moment at which she/he reviews and interprets her/his life. It is from this point that she/he can see a unity which can be reduced to an order. For Mandel, the motivation of the autobiographer determines his/her self-view that emerges in the work; and is, as a matter of fact the organizing principle of the work. Hence the critic's first responsibility is to ascertain what the organizing principle of the work is, because not until the purpose is clear to the critic, can he be sure whether the materials have been selected and arranged in a meaningful way (221).

In his *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), Northrop Frye comments: "Autobiographies are inspired by a . . . fictional impulse to select only those events and experiences in the writer's life that goes to build up an integrated pattern" (1957: 307). Actually there is

nothing in an autobiographical passage in itself to distinguish fact from fiction. A careful arrangement of incidents from one's life into a narrative may result either in a work of fiction or an autobiography. The distinguishing determinants are neither the technique nor the content, but the signals that the writer sends about the nature of his narrative. Thomas G. Couser rightly observes that, "The meaning of a literary work is to some extent genre-bound, and the writer's signals rightly determine the way a reader will take the text" (1989: 7).

Many skilful autobiographers tend to subordinate historical documentation to aesthetic values. Wayne Shumaker, towards the end of his survey on English autobiography, concludes that:

the novel and autobiography are moving towards closer similarity, the novel is becoming highly personal and the autobiography is adopting more of the techniques and tone of fiction (1954: 118).

Northrop Frye also affirms, “After Rousseau – in fact in Rousseau, the confessional flows into the novel, and the mixture produces fictional autobiography” (1957: 307). Relativists like Alfred Kazin therefore hold that autobiography is another form of story telling. According to Kazin, autobiography “uses fact as a strategy [it is a] history of self and [exhibits] concern for the self as a character” (1964: 213). Many great autobiographers have utilized all the rhetorical resources of fiction. Alfred Kazin further confirms, “Autobiography as narrative obviously seeks the effects of fiction and cannot use basic resources of fiction like dialogue, without becoming fiction” (185). The subtle difference between autobiography and fiction lies in that autobiography uses facts as a strategy to tell another kind of story – a story of the writer’s turning towards himself for the new vision of reality. Scholes and Kellog make the following observation:

The raw material of human existence remains ever the same, the moulds by which it is given significance and recognisable shape are forever being recreated by the writers of empirical

narrative and drama. The new in empirical narrative depends upon an originality of vision, a creation of new types of actuality, and not upon a flight of imagination away from the actual. If any distinction can be said to exist between the autobiography and the autobiographic novel it resides not in their respective fidelity to facts but rather in their respective originality in perceiving and telling the facts. It is in the knowing and in the telling and not in the facts, that the art is to be found (1966: 156).

Autobiography is primarily an art of juxtaposed perspectives of past and present. It is “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focussing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (Le Jeune 1982: 193). Moreover, in autobiography the subject and the narrator are literally the same person, that is, there must be “identity between the author, narrator and the protagonist” (193). This identity that Le Jeune speaks of can never really be established except as a matter of intention on the part of the author. It cannot

be presumed that autobiographical intention will always be explicit and always be consistent. The autobiographer may or may not realise what his/her real motivation is. The desire to write his/her life may arise from a need to clear certain misunderstandings and justify past actions, one may wish to confess one's misdeeds and seek to communicate the essential nature and the truth of oneself. For some, it may be the urge to articulate the historicity of the self, demonstrating their place in the cultural milieu, while for others, self-portraits might be an aesthetic artefact, or a personal account intended to convey a moral or leave a record for posterity. There can be innumerable reasons for writing one's life. Autobiographical intentions may evolve and fluctuate or refocus and redefine. The ultimate aim of every autobiography is to tell a story of recognition and attempt to align the private and the public self, the autobiographer's idea of the self and the social image by which he/she is recognized. Pascal calls this, "the contrast between the meaning of a man's work and life for us, the 'likeness' we make and his own image or idea of himself, which he calls the Life Illusion" (Preface 1960: VII).

As a recent critic of autobiography Laura Marcus has noted, the concept of “intention has persistently threaded its way through discussions of autobiography” (1994: 3). Attacked by the New Critics of the 1930s and 1940s as a fallacy, intentionality signals the belief that the author is behind the text, controlling its meaning, the author becomes the guarantor of the ‘intentional’ meaning of the truth of the text. Reading a text therefore leads back to the author as origin. Within critical discussion of autobiography ‘intention’ has had a necessary and often unquestioned role in providing the crucial link between author, narrator and protagonist. Intention, however, is further defined as a particular kind of ‘honest’ intention which guarantees the ‘truth’ of the writing. Trust the author, this rather circular argument goes, if she/he seems to be trustworthy. Hence for Pascal, autobiography depends on “the seriousness of the author, the seriousness of his personality and his intention in writing” (1960: 60). For Karl Weintraub, an autobiography can only be understood if the ‘place’ the authors themselves occupy in relation to their lives can be reconstructed by the reader. Reading an autobiography

‘properly’ means reading with an already existing knowledge of the text’s meaning. Accordingly:

This moment, this point of view needs to be recaptured for a proper understanding of the autobiographic effort; so must the motivation and intention of the author for writing autobiography at all (1978: xviii).

For these critics autobiographies are seen as providing proof of the validity and importance of a certain conception of authorship, “authors who have authority over their own texts and whose writings can be read as forms of direct access to themselves” (Olney 1972: 332) According to Le Jeune, “the author of an autobiography implicitly declares that he is the person he says he is and that the author and protagonist are the same” (1982: 202).

Autobiography has been founded upon the principles of identity. It is the narration of the story of a person’s unfolding sense of identity, the tale of becoming the world and the account has to

involve considerable self-analysis of the author. In a way, autobiographies are “Metaphors of Self” (Olney 1972). What truths we come to know in reading autobiography derives not from the facts of life truly remembered, but from the meanings the autobiographer assigns to and extracts from the representations of his/her life. The experience and memory through which it is routed are already interpreted phenomena and at least once removed from pure facticity. The autobiographer reads meaningful reality into his/her life and we are reading the readings of the autobiographer. Because of the interpretative nature of the autobiographical act, the distinction between an autobiographic narrative and fiction remains elusive. Autobiography thus turns out to be an intricate web of historical facts and fiction. The genre lives in the two worlds of history and literature, objective fact and subjective awareness. And the subject of autobiographical writing is the self, becoming conscious of itself in history. An autobiographical subject is a representation and its representation is its construction. The meaning the autobiographer reads into his/her life are historically and culturally contingent. The autobiographer negotiates the

subjectivity culturally provided to him/her through the telling of the life story. Thus autobiographies provoke fantasies of the real. It wraps up the interrupted and fragmentary discourses of identity and presents them as persons.

Autobiographies are also seen as a genre of disclosure. It is believed that autobiographic mode is an introspective and intimate one, and that the autobiographers write about their inner or emotional life. But the fact is that confessional ideal is not conformed to by many autobiographies. Neither men nor women autobiographers are likely to explore or reveal painful and intimate memories in their autobiographies. There is usually reticence on the part of the autobiographers to reveal everything.

... few autobiographers put into their books very much of that private intimate knowledge of themselves that only they can have oftener than not; they shun their own inner peculiarities and fits themselves into patterns of behaviour and character suggested by the ideas and ideals of their period and by the

fashions in autobiography with which they associate themselves. The laws of literature and human reluctance to stand individually naked combine to cheat the expectation of the readers, who hope to find in autobiography many revelations of man's true selves. (Matthews 1995: viii).

The identities and frames provided by the dominant culture establish what goes into the text as part of an intelligible or official story.

The admission of intense feeling of hate, love and fear, the disclosure of explicit sexual encounter or the detailing of painful psychological experiences are matters on which autobiographers are generally silent. Despite their reticence, autobiographers cannot entirely avoid recalling and writing about subjects that provoke uncomfortable memories. In order to deal with these memories, they use various means of detachment to protect and distance themselves from the imagined or real judgement of their unknown audience. Thus the truth any autobiography produces is always necessarily a

truth restructured and revised in its telling, a mixture of past and present, a process of self-invention in which the content of a life – the very subject of autobiography – is not impassive, but mutable. Autobiography is characterised by a particular act of interpretation. Lived experience is shaped, revised, constrained and transformed by representation. In telling the story of the self, the writer imposes order where there is chaos, structural coherence where there is memory and chronology, voice where there is silence. This is most often done by compromising between the self in real life and the self in the text. The negotiations in differences among and within the historical self, a fictitive self and a writing self constitute the production of autobiographical identity.

The subject of autobiography is not a single entity, but a network of differences within which the subject is inscribed. While the historical self may be the autobiographer's explicit subject – the story of his/her life with self-development as the structure of the text – this subject is distributed across the historical self and the textual self, both of which are versions of the person who writes.

A group of critics writing in the 1960s and 1970s deduced abstract critical principles for autobiography based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realisation, authenticity and transcendence which reflected their own cultural values. For Olney, for instance, autobiography engages with a profound human impulse to become both separate and complete. He observes:

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

By gesturing towards a shared truth which everyone can endorse, Olney establishes a particular view of the individual as transcending

both social and historical difference. According to Weintraub, man's task is like autobiography's to arrive at some form of self-realisation:

We are captivated by an uncanny sense that each one of us constitutes one irreplaceable human form, and we perceive a noble life task in the cultivation of our individuality, our ineffable self. (1978: xiii).

For these critics there is little apparent difference between realising the self and representing the self, and thereby autobiography gets drawn seamlessly into supporting the beliefs and values of an essentialist or romantic notion of selfhood. As such each individual possesses a unified unique selfhood, which is also the expression of a universal human nature. The strongest influence on the autobiographical genre has been exerted by Western culture's understanding of 'subjectivity', which for centuries was dominated by the Cartesian notion of the 'universal' subject; that is a stable, coherent essentially male subject. Autobiography understood in terms of the Romantic view offers an unmediated and yet stabilising

wholeness for the self. In so far as autobiography has been seen as promoting a view of the subject as universal, it has also underpinned the centrality of masculine – western and middle class – modes of subjectivity. Autobiography as a genre has come to be identified with master narratives of conflict resolution and development, whose hero – the over-represented Western White male – identifies his perspectives with a God’s eye view and from that divine height sums up his life. Scholars of autobiography have developed this master narrative into an interpretative grid and judged as worthy only those autobiographers who represent themselves within its limits. This traditional interpretation of autobiography takes the self as a coherent and unified producer of truth and meaning and claim that the ‘self’ is formed outside a community, as is seen in George Gusdorf’s significant article, “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography” (Olney 1980: 28-49). Also in Wayne Shumaker’s opinion, “If autobiography is to become typically a meaningful art form . . . it must accept responsibility of not only re-imagining a life, but of discovery within the life something greater than the sum total of incidents and observations (1954: 20). Such criteria are

appropriate for most autobiographies that have been written by men. They also suit most lives men have lived. This masculine tradition of autobiographical criticism legitimise only the lives of famous men as autobiography and emphasise on an autobiographical subject's qualities of universality and representation.

After World War II, two bibliographies of autobiographies were published on both British and American autobiographies. These works are silent on the many important autobiographies by women and with the exception of Gertrude Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B Toklas* (1933), only a few are given even passing mention. Even when women's autobiographies are given some scant attention in studies, social bias against the condition or delineation of their lives seem to predominate over critical objectivity. They were looked upon as frigidly sentimental chronicles. Most of the time, women's autobiographical works are categorized into fiction, thereby assuming it as a 'made-up' version, thereby refusing to accept the 'self of the autobiography. This kind of critical viewing had been

carried on till very recent times. Kate Millet's *Flying* faced a kind of devastating condemnation:

. . . a book? No, it is the personal outpouring of a disturbed lady – albeit genius – whose eclectic life is of no more interest to her than to the reader. There is no storyline, no plot, no continuity. Her writing is a frantic stringing together of words without any thought for the ordinary arrangement of noun and verb, it is hard reading . . . it is utter confusion (Alhearn 1974: 17).

The consensus among critics is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of the society. It is representative of his times, a mirror of his era. This criterion also is adequately supported by many male autobiographies, which stress their author's successful professional life and its relationship to their time. As Pascal observes:

These [male] autobiographies are conscious of their lives as representative of their times or as a reflection of their era, although the emphasis may be on what is distinctive about themselves rather than on what they may have in common with others (1960: 112).

On the other hand, women's autobiography emphasises to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, even their careers and concentrate instead on their personal lives namely domestic details, family difficulties, close friends and people who influenced them. Gayl Jones says that women autobiographers tend to deal with events concerning their family, the community, personal events that were not generally thought to be important by male writers. Thus common assumption is that female writers tend to be specific and particular, while male writers tend to select representative events for the significant events in their work. But Maya Angelou begs to differ from this view. She feels:

I think Black male writers do deal with the particular, but we are so conditioned by a sexist society that we tend to think, when they do so that they mean it representationally and when Black female deal with the particular they only mean it as such (Elliot 1989: 100-01).

Actually the very act of writing a life down constitute an attempt on the part of the writer to justify one's life and implicit in every act of autobiography is the judgement that "life is worth being written down" (Olney 1972: 57). Autobiography thus should rather belong to the people of 'lofty reputation' or people who have something of historical importance to say (Marcus 1984: 31-2). The writers whose texts have always been used as the base of an argument for what autobiography is, form a set of exemplary, literary, political and military men; they have been seen as singular figures capable of summing up an era in their name: Augustine, Rousseau, Franklin, Henry Adams. Some feminist critics have taken these writers as a homogeneous group that forms, or has been formed into, a tradition against which women write. It has now been suggested that a separate female autobiographical tradition

developed along radically different lines because women were unable to identify with universal subjectivity. As a consequence, even the earliest women autobiographers sought to establish alternate subject positions and create new modes of literary self-representation. As formulated by Estelle Jelinek (1980), men's autobiography follows patterns of coherence and unity and is characterised by a narrative that deploys the stable and autonomous 'I' as its hero. These values have been attributed to the canonical male autobiographers, through a patriarchally informed mode of interpretation. On the other hand, a feminist position grounds autobiographical form and meaning in the experiences of the women who write autobiography and looks to women's lives for the framework to understand self-representational texts. The last two decades have seen both the reclamation of the forgotten female autobiographical tradition and the suggestion that the first full-length autobiography to be written in English was actually by a woman: *The Book of Margery Kemp* (1413). Several feminist studies charting the development of a distinct female autobiographical tradition have now been published, such as Shari Benstock's *The*

Private Self: Women's Autobiographical Writing (1988) and Leigh Gilmore's *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Female Self-Representation* (1994).

In traditional studies of autobiography, both the 'self' and 'history', which forms the definitional locus of autobiography are over-determined as "male". From the intractability of Augustine's *Confessions* (1961) as a point of generic origin to the formal limits such a precursor sets, traditional studies of autobiography repeat the founding gendered premise of autobiographical subjectivity and authority. A stable and fixed perspective like Augustine's conjoins time, space and identity in a signifier of commanding proportion: the autobiographical 'I'. The mutually reinforcing networks of value which credit some and not others as authors, as persons having a story worth telling – that is possessing a life worth remembering of and of being sufficiently representative to have their tasks matter – have tended to seek a definition of autobiography in a very narrow sample: those that can be represented as identical with the unified 'I'.

Women's self-representational texts are bracketed from the definition. Many women autobiographers approaching autobiography from a profusion of positions, recognise the textuality of autobiographical identity, indeed they insist upon it. The autobiographer is tethered, even if by the most slender of lines to a discourse of self-remembering in which the identity is preserved. The recurring marks in women's autobiographies can be found in the shared sense a written record, a testimonial or a confessional document can represent a person, can stand in her absence for truth and can 're-member' her life. Indeed even in the narrowest and most ambivalent sense for a woman writing an autobiography can be a political act, because it asserts its right to speak rather than to be spoken for.

Cora Kaplan sees writing as a part of a political process of resistance, arguing that "defiance is a component of the act of writing for women" (1986: 76). Traditionally, knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if man's experiences were

normative, as if human beings meant being male. Writing for women is an effort to undermine this partial construction and to create a more fully human conception of social reality. This process of reconstruction challenges what has been defined and taught as our common intellectual and cultural heritage, in which what has been presented as an objective view of the world was selectively the dominant white male view.

Women's self-representational texts are not bound by a philosophical definition of the self, derived from Augustine and hence not content with the literary history of autobiography. Women's self-representational texts have frequently been silenced or marginalized because it has not been interpreted/named/authorised as such. Women's autobiographies are naturally the most appropriate medium to look for, develop and define a female subjectivity. Such works are understood to promote the consolidation of female/feminine self that a masculine culture has appropriated, objectified, fragmented or dispersed.

It has already been discussed how in an autobiography the author and the speaking subject are one and the same, and the raw material for writing is life itself. The reader appreciates the validity of the text and relates it to an understanding of her own life. The sequence in such a reading is from remembered reality of the author's life to the author, from the author to the reader and again from the reader to the reality of female life she shares with the author. In this paradigm, the author and reader can unite in an exploration of what it means to be female, thereby asserting a collective identity as "We Women". Here identity is not equated with individuality as in the case of men writers. The first person subject of the autobiography, becomes an urgent voice that imparts information about life, demonstrates how the "personal" can become "political" and supports an implied or overt claim to inner-directedness. Here a crucial feminist shift from 'She' who is the object to 'I' who experience myself as a subject, happens. It certifies the writer as a woman who has found the courage to use the pronoun 'I'. As Kafka observes:

And so long as you can say “one” instead of “I”, there’s nothing in it and you can easily tell the story; but as you admit to yourself, that it is you yourself, you feel as though transfixed and are horrified (1983: 53).

To know and reveal what the autobiographical subject was like is especially an imperative goal for female autobiographers, who seek understanding of woman as different from how they have been defined by a patriarchal society. They seek liberation from the earlier definitions of women and search for a unified and powerful female subjectivity that will guarantee self definition.

When marginal people tell their own story, the issue is not the story as object, but the process that the act of sharing and exchanging the story engages; telling one’s story initiates exchange. It is different from seeking truth with a capital ‘T’. It assumes partiality and particularity, while at the same time seeking honesty. And it is a process which is potentially endless. This kind of multiple levels of self-representation in fact, help to define autobiography.

Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith have argued that the marginalized subject by “deploying autobiographical practices that go against the grain can constitute an ‘I’ that becomes a place of creative and by implication political intervention” (1992: XIX). Julia Swindells has provided a more wide-ranging but similarly optimistic account of the new radical uses of autobiography:

Autobiography now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual. People in a position of powerlessness – women, black people, working class people – have more than begun to insert themselves into the culture via autobiography; via the assertion of personal voice which speaks beyond itself (1995: 7).

The idea that autobiography can become the text of the oppressed articulating through one person’s experience, experiences which may be representative of a particular marginalized group, is an important one: autobiography becomes both a way of testifying to

oppression and empowering the subject through their cultural inscription and recognition.

Critics and writers from 1970s onwards have claimed that Afro-American autobiography is a specific sub-genre providing an alternative place of self-identification based on collectivity. Stephen Butterfield, one of the first critics to write about black autobiography believes that autobiography is one of the ways that Black Americans have asserted their right to live and grow and that these autobiographies conceive of the subject as “a member of an oppressed social group, with ties and responsibilities to the other members” (1974: 2-3). The emergence of Black Feminist criticism in 1970s, which explored representation of Black women’s lives, has also posited the centrality of ‘group identity’, ‘interdependence’ and a respect for “voice-enabling tradition” (McKay 1988: 179). bell hooks for instance has argued for the political importance of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualised and to become radical subjects in order to provide texts which affirm our fellowship with each other (1992: 59). Here

we see again autobiography being turned to as a way of providing 'truthful' depictions of life, albeit now from a radical perspective.

For those outside the dominant group, identification with community is pervasive for the un-alienated self in life and writing. According to Susan Friedman, "importance of group identification repeatedly surfaces in women's and minority group autobiographies" (1989: 41). It is vital, Friedman notes, in theory as well as in practice, for it enables these individuals to move beyond alienation within the dominant culture to construct meaningful lives in writing and otherwise. Community identity permits the rejection of historically diminishing images of self, imposed by the dominant culture. It allows marginalized individuals to embrace alternate selves constructed from positive and more authentic images of their own creation. Such images, Friedman insists, came from the merging of the individual with a collective group identity and not from within the individualist isolated self.

In the case of the black male autobiographers too, the same kind of group identity or collective nature of the genre is seen. Butterfield observes:

The self of Black Autobiography, on the whole, taking into account the effect of a Western Culture on the Afro-American, is not an individual with private career, but a soldier in a long historic march towards Cannon. The self is conceived as a member of an oppressed group, with ties and responsibilities to other members (1974: 2-3).

According to Butterfield, black writers offer a model of the self, which is different from the white model, “created in response to a different perception of history and revealing divergent, often completely opposing meaning to human action” (2). Butterfield sees the Western self as an individual forging a career or reputation. For him, the other people are just rungs on the ladder of his success or reflection of his greatness. The black self is totally different from this.

The main task of autobiography is to depict the individual in the circumstance of one's time and show to what extent the society stood in one's way, and how the individual overcame it. This way autobiography has been a vehicle for black writers to share their views, to leave a record of their struggles to inspire future generation and to portray the individual life as an embodiment of the larger experience of black American life. As cultural artefacts, black autobiography reveals a continuous dialogue with the highest deals of the land in relation to the facts of individual experience. Given their social heritage of slavery, black writers use autobiography to blend dramatic individualisation with social and moral protest. Thereby they create and justify a connection between their individual present and collective past. Also they demonstrated that collectively speaking, the history of Black Americans is an intimate part of American history and is a rich body of experience one would find anywhere in the annals of American life. They write to define and redefine the self, to record the history of individual self-consciousness and to discover what was in them and their

response to life that led to their present identity. Germaine Bree calls this “becoming alive to oneself through writing” (1978: 117).

Black autobiography is one of the ways that Black Americans assert their right to live and grow – a bid for freedom, a beak of hope cracking the shell of slavery and exploitations. It is also a mirror of white deeds. They fill in many of the blanks of American self-knowledge. They help us to see what has been left out of the picture of America’s National Life by white writers and critics, how critical judgement has been limited or crippled by a blind spot towards African American culture. To read closely what they have to say is to face slavery and racism vis-à-vis, without the shield of interpretation by white historians. Being marginalized, these people had no access to the making of an autobiography and thereby to the making of history. William L. Andrews in his comprehensive study of the first century of Afro-American autobiography, reinforces Butterfield’s argument by asserting that the antebellum slave narrative provided the “rhetorical mode that would conduct the

battle against racism and slavery on grounds, other than those already accepted by pro and anti-slavery polemics” (1986: 5).

Skipping through the history of African-American autobiography, one finds the sixty years from 1901-1961 as a period of alienation and identity crisis in black writing. Every writer in this group is driven to assert the fact of his blackness as a starting point of creating a free self. As Pascal says:

While remembering itself is a creative act and writing it in order, even more so, autobiography at its best involve not only mental exploration and change of attitude but also represents a new state of self-knowledge and a new formulation of responsibility towards the self (1960: 182-3).

The assertion of black identity gave way to a conflict for the Black American, having to struggle to reconcile the two contradicting identities as a Black Person and as an American.

In the second period of black autobiography, a new dilemma was added to the already existing problem of double identity. As the individual black author succeeded in the white world, he began to be estranged from his own black masses and there was a gulf between him and his own people. At the same time, he could not wholly enter into the white mainstream because of his colour. He was ostracized from both worlds and was forced to re-examine and re-define the relationship of the Negro writer to black people and political movements. This dilemma is explained by Butterfield in the following manner:

The divided Self then mirrors the division in the world at large, he cannot harmonise the Self without becoming deeply involved in defining and changing its relation to other selves. Because the class and race division among other people are experienced internally by the black writer, he can approach the task of understanding society in the modern Imperial West with an added degree of insight (1974: 95).

Thus the history of the American Black is the history of strife, which is:

The longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self to a better and truer self. In this merging he does not want neither of the old selves to be lost . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both Negro and American without having the doors of opportunities closed roughly on his face (Du Bois 1973: 4).

The challenge for the black autobiographer was that he must attempt to develop himself as a writer without being swallowed by the Negro bourgeois and without denying his American identity. He must somehow appropriate the literary tradition of the white mainstream without being separated from the black experience and history. Thus black identity becomes the center of experience, the organising principle for the autobiographer.

A rich and varied body of African American writing has evolved in the US over a span of more than two centuries. The later stage is an exciting one in the long meaningful development of black self-expression and self-definition in literature and criticism. Today the black literary scene is far too complex and rich in polarities, as well as in individual exploration in a multitude of directions. Currently we are witnessing a new breed of black writers, who accept their blackness thoroughly, organically and naturally and have gone beyond the premises of Black Arts Movements of the 1960s. Because of their blackness and their sensitivity to its meanings, the black writers are able to use their experience as a microcosm for that of whole classes and races, without at any point lifting it out of the world of material fact into metaphysics. Their concern is with the subjective impact of historical experience and their aim remain the promotion of an authentic self-in-writing, and that self originates from a source other than the alienated self within the dominant culture.

Focussing our attention on the autobiographies of black women in America, we see that in constructing their personal narratives, black women negotiate the dangerous shoals of white male and female race and class oppression and white and black male sexism. The identity of these women is grounded “in the historical experience of being black and female in a specific society, at a specific moment over succeeding generations” (Genovese 1987: 61). The following are some of the prominent black American women writers, who have made use of the particularly robust literary genre of autobiography, to bring their past lives in proper perspectives: Zora Neale Hurston (1942) *Dust Tracks on a Road*; Daisy Bate (1970) *The Long Shadow of Little Rock*; Anne Moody (1970) *Coming of Age in Mississippi*; Angela Davis (1975) *Autobiography* and bell hooks (1989) *Talking Back, Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. These black women writers are connected to black men by history of class and race and to white women by sex and configuration of gender roles. By politics of writing from outside, they are connected to both groups. But from the beginning itself they have created unique selves-in-writing to document their individual and collective

experience. In spite of the common denominator of racial experience and other shared qualities with black men writers, their narratives diverged in content and emphasis from those of black men. After the Civil War, the rhetoric of black men's and women's narrative moved closer together, united by group efforts against discrimination and racism and the struggle to secure human rights for all black people. Even into the late twentieth century, many Black women writers continued in the tradition of autobiography centered upon their overt political activities on behalf of the black community. But there were also writers who gave prominence to gender issues and focussed on black female development and on black women's lives, thereby giving a shift from the political issue to personal. But still, group identity remained at the center of the self, emerging from contemporary black male and female personal narratives. For black woman writer, this group identification denotes a self that transcends socially imposed limits of race, class and gender. They perceive their triumphs and failures against a background of historical experience of the women who went before them. This may

be because women's life experiences themselves have been treated as historically marginal:

History consists of threads . . . selected from man's activities in war, business and politics, woven together according to a pattern of male prowess and power as conceived in the mind of man. If the woman's culture came into this pattern in any way, it is only as a blurring of the major concept (Beard 1981: xxii).

Thus being written out of history, the experience of marginality is reflected in the thematic pre-occupation of black women writers. The emphasis of telling one's story – the means to do so, the encouragement to do so and the seizure of power to do so – is precisely the acknowledgement of the process of self-legitimation for black women writers.

Since the early days, autobiography has been the Afro-American strong suit, a literary form generating maximum compassion and

indignation for victims of injustice. Maya Angelou has truly followed this tradition and has achieved a kind of literary breakthrough by bringing out her multiple volumed autobiographies. She:

accomplishes the rare feat of laying her own life open to a reader's scrutiny without the reflex-covering gesture of melodrama or shame. And as she reveals herself, so does she reveal the black community, with a quiet pride, a painful candour and a clean anger (Gottlieb 1974: 35).

Angelou uses autobiography to define the quest for human individuality identifying the personal struggle with the general condition of the Black Americans and claiming a representative role not only in relation to Black Americans, but also in relation to idea of America. She carries on the task of making the black experience resonant for all Americans. She "seeks not only to portray but to change the way, the people think about life. She writes to inform, to entertain and to elevate" (Elliot 1989: viii). She calls herself an

autobiographer but insists that what she really is about is being human. In this regard she declares:

I use the first person singular and I am talking about the third person plural all the time, what it is like to be a human being. So the person who reads my work and suspects that he/she knows me hasn't gotten half of the book because he/she should know himself/herself better after reading my work. That's my prayer (Elliot 1989: vii).

Further she adds, "I would never get on a soap box instead I would pull the reader. My work is intended to be slowly absorbed in the system on deeper and deeper levels" (153). Here the crucial substitution that autobiography finally effects is an exchange of author's self-knowledge for the reader's self-knowledge. 'I' of the writer inevitably spills over to stand in for the reader who achieves a kind of specialness by identifying with the autobiographer.

Through the device of serial autobiography, Angelou has celebrated the richness and vitality of Southern Black life and the sense of community that persists in the face of poverty and racial prejudice. She reveals these celebrations initially through a portrait of life as experienced by a black child in the Arkansas of 1930s in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970). The second volume of her autobiography *Gather Together in My Name* (1974) delineates a young woman struggling to create an existence that provides security and love in post World War II America. In *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting Merry like Christmas* (1976), she presents herself as a young married adult in the 1950s seeking a career in show business and experiencing her first amiable contacts with whites. The fourth volume *The Heart of a Woman* (1980) shows a wiser more mature woman in the 1960s examining the roles of being a woman and a mother. In the fifth volume she demonstrates that *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) to take them beyond familiar borders and to enable them to see and understand the world from another vantage point. The sixth volume *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (2002) written at the age of 74, Angelou gives an

account of her activities during the 60s when she could personally associate with Martin Luther King Jr and Malcolm X, both of whom were assassinated while still in their prime. The posterity is offered a unique perspective into the causes of the devastating riots that broke out in many American cities in the late 1960s. The poignant beauty of Angelou's writing enhances rather than masks the candour with which she addresses racial crisis through which America was passing. The sixth volume is more of a summing up than a breaking of new ground. *Rise and be prepared to move on and ever on* is the continuing theme of Maya Angelou's autobiographic cycle and the phrase succinctly sums up the story of her life. Angelou ultimately succeeds in achieving a reaffirmation of life through the emancipatory potential of writing.

Angelou constitutes herself as an autobiographical subject not as an autonomous individual but through what Arnold Krupat calls a synecdochic sense of self "where narration of personal history is more nearly marked by the individual's sense of himself in relation to collective social units or groups (1991: 52). She turns out to be a

representation of the black woman as an independent self-supporting member of their class and autobiographical narrative becomes a means to affirm the subject's identification with the values of her own people and her own native culture. Autobiography is somehow closer to real life than any other kind of writing, presumably because one need neither imagine nor invent it, it lies there intractably real, it happened. Angelou declares:

Autobiography is a question of probing yourself so deeply and then admitting what you find. You re-examine all the trust betrayed. Writing this sort of thing is painful . . . but I do like myself (Elliot 1989: 16).

She writes what she knows. She writes of race and racism. She reaches back in memory to pull out the painful childhood times trapped in an unsympathetic world. She allows her story to range in an extraordinary fashion along the field of human emotion. Her story is noteworthy for its candid description of the adjustments and struggles for life. Her work is not limited however to Black-White

issues. Instead it is expansive in its focus on universal issues. Ultimately, her work is about survival, not only the survival of African Americans, but also the survival of human race. She insists:

I'm talking about all the people that's what I know, but I'm always talking about human conditions . . . I accept that we human beings are more alike than unlike and it is that similarity that I talk about all the time. (Elliot 1989: vii, viii)

The basic theme of Angelou's work is the refusal of the human spirit to be hardened and the persistence of innocence against overwhelming obstacles. She further observes, "I believe love is what links these molecules in DNA . . . it can't be photographed. It's love that holds us together as human beings (Elliot 1989: 160).

Angelou thus moves beyond the shoreline of earlier Black autobiographies to new ground, to beat out the first contours of a new era of mind and spirit. Her passionate investment is in her pre-

occupation with the problem of knowing: knowing herself, other and the world. She travels inside herself finding not confinement and enclosure, but a self, which is more extensive than anybody could have guessed.

Chapter 2

Autobiography: The Art of Self Invention

Art and Life are not one, but should become one
in me, in the unity of my responsibility.

– Bhaktin, *Art and Responsibility*.

Autobiography inevitably is an attempt to write the self, or give the self a narrative and hence it is deeply bound up with the questions or questionings of identity. “Identity” remains one of the most urgent – as well as hotly disputed – topics in literary and cultural studies. Essentialist conceptions of identity have been subjected to strong criticism, due to the tendency to posit one aspect of identity (say, gender) as the sole cause or determinant constituting the social meanings of an individual’s experience. In fact, identities are constituted differently in different historical contexts. Contrary to the essentialist view, identity categories are neither stable nor internally homogeneous. The critiques of identity have been articulated by activist women of colour, conservative pundits, postmodernist theorists and feminists of all colours from a wide range of theoretical perspectives. As a result of the influence of

post-structuralism, the terms of debate regarding selves and cultural identities have shifted considerably. Instead of asking how we know who we are, post-structuralist inspired critics are inclined to suggest that we cannot know the self; rather than investigate the nature of self, they are likely to suggest that it has no nature. The self, the argument goes, can have no nature because subjectivity does not exist outside the grammatical structures that govern our thought; rather it is produced by those structures. Because subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification and because they constantly differ from themselves as time passes and meanings change, the self – as a unified, stable and knowable entity existing prior to or outside language – is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse. Social and cultural identities, it is argued, are similarly fictitious because the selves they claim to designate cannot be pinned down, fixed or definitively identified. Moreover, identities are not simply fictitious; they are dangerously mystifying. They are mystifying precisely because they treat fictions as facts and cover over the fissures, contradictions and differences internal to the social construct we call a *Self*. In as much as a desire

to identify ourselves and others remain complicit with positivist assumptions about a fully knowable world – a world that can be described, hierarchised, named and mastered – identity as a concept will serve oppressive and reductive ideological functions. In this view, to speak of identities as ‘real’ is to naturalise them and disguise the structures of power involved in their production and maintenance.

Recently the traditional view of the integrity of the Self and of the autobiographical expression has come under heavy attacks from various quarters. Recent developments in a number of fields like psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, cultural materialist criticism, post-colonialism, ethnic studies, feminism, queer theory and other areas, imply that ‘I’ is none of the things it has conventionally been thought to be: neither first (prior) nor personal (private) nor singular (unique). Social psychologists reach conclusions such as the following about the nature and development of selfhood:

The construction of the Self is not ... carried out by individuals in isolation, but requires complicity, negotiation and collusion – terms that all refer to relationship and not to single individuals (Gergen 1984: 100).

Thus the so-called individual is not individual, the self is not an essence, but a socially created construction – a cultural artefact fashioned collaboratively and publicly out of readymade materials. Moreover identity involves difference; because the self is contextually variable, its unity is highly problematic:

Probably most of us present different sides of ourselves in different contexts, depending on the demands of the situation, our personal goals and intentions, and so forth. For the present it remains to be seen whether various configurations of personality characteristics are sufficiently different from each other to constitute different selves in any meaningful sense. If they do this it will mean that there is no stable core to personality For most of us, our contextual selves are united by continuously running autobiographical

record: Just as we awaken in the morning knowing that we are the same person who went to sleep the night before, we are aware of the activities of our different selves In the final analysis, our personal histories provide for the continuity that is the essence of selfhood. (Kihlstrom and Kantor 1984: 13).

The Self may be an integrated whole, rather than a mere repertoire of roles. But its unity is to be found in continuity of consciousness, not in consistency of behaviour. Personal history is not a product of prior selfhood. Rather selfhood is the product of an internal autobiography; identity hangs by a narrative thread.

Nor is this “running autobiographical record” necessarily reliable since it is dependent on memory, which is not a stable static record that could ground a reliable written narrative; rather it is itself a text under continuous unconscious revision:

Events we witness do not always . . . remain unchanged in memory; we fill in missing details by inference, or alter them

in accordance with questions we are asked or suggestions made to us, and have no way of retrieving the original – and are not even aware that anything had happened to it . . . All of us continually revise our memories of our lives to harmonise with the events that had happened or are happening to us; we are unable to distinguish between what really happened and what we think now happened, since original memory no longer exists (Hunt 1982: 90).

Autobiography then is seen not as produced by a pre-existent self but as producing a provisional and contingent one. For better or worse, the overall trend has been steady retreat from the idea of the Self as an embodiment of the attributes of the first person singular pronoun:

We seem to have entered the age of the dot-matrix 'I': that crucial personal pronoun once impressed on the page by an integral piece of type, is now merely a particular configuration of the otherwise indistinguishable dots that serve to make up all the other characters . . . The tenuous

dot-matrix 'I' may stand as an emblem of the contemporary conception of the subject (Couser 1989: 18).

Autobiography is seen as a site for negotiating and challenging the different ways meaning is given to the Self. For women autobiographers, autobiography offered an alternative space, a place from which to contest their socially sanctioned position of silence and submission. The modern disillusionment with the unitary subject does not simply create a break, opening up a new critical perspective; it also casts a backward shadow, transforming how we read previous writing. As Candace Lang argues, "not only is autobiography in the Augustinian sense no longer possible, it never was" (1982: 5). It is not that a unified Self was once available and can be rediscovered in past autobiographies; there is a sense in which it always was a historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse. George Gusdorf, in an influential essay, notes that the autobiographer:

gives himself the job of narrating his own history. What he sets out to do is to reassemble the scattered elements of his individual life and to regroup them in a comprehensive sketch (1980: 35).

The text, however can never reproduce that intention since it necessarily substitutes a present reflection for the past event. Olney makes the same point when he comments:

In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world and surely it is not the same, in any real sense, as that past world does not, under any circumstance, nor however much we may wish it, now exist (1980: 241).

This idea is corroborated by Maya Angelou too when she says:

Difficulty in writing autobiography as literature is that you have to keep a distance and not imply that the person knew what she was doing from the vantage point of 1987 . . . That

difficulty is probably the horn, the unicorny horn of the dilemma from which I spin, to try to keep that distance (Elliot 1989: 195).

She further adds:

it is a strange condition being an autobiographer and a poet. I have to be so internal and while writing I have to be apart from the story so that I don't fall into indulgence. When I speak about the books, I always think in terms of Maya the character . . . it is damned difficult for me to preserve this distancing. But it is very necessary (148).

The autobiographer can never write the "image-double" (Gusdorf 1980: 40) of his/her life; instead in referring to himself/herself, he/she creates himself/herself at every moment afresh within the text. What is being stressed here is the tautological nature of autobiography. The idea that emerges is that the autobiographical self is a fictional construct within the text which can neither have its origins anterior to the text nor indeed coalesce with its creator. The notion of a pre-existing self underlying

the text and accessed by it bypasses the problem of who the subject is and how he/she is constituted. These theories interestingly engage with the idea of the past being displaced by language within the autobiographical narrative.

But it is to be noted that the writer situated in language is also inscribed in an order of sexual difference. On thinking about women and writing, many feminists have talked about the ways in which women were denied access to full subjectivity. Women's subordinate place within culture makes them less able to embrace or to be held by romantic individualism with all its pleasures and dangers. The woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself, in rewriting the stories that already exist about her, since by seeking to publicise herself she is violating an important cultural construction of her femininity as passive or hidden. She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes is produced by difference and produces difference. In order to explore those previously silent unrecorded areas of experience, she has to transgress the existing

codes of what is acceptable, to search behind the formal structure and accepted patterns. She breaks definitions, breaks down, in order to move towards a different kind of definition, one which can include hesitancy and vulnerability, which continually undermines its authority as statement. In a sense, women's autobiography is both reaching towards the possibility of saying 'I' and towards a form in which to say it. Writing is a quest, a process. "Writing means making things large. Pulling ourselves together . . . the long and never ending journey towards oneself. The difficulty of saying 'I' " (Wolf 1982: 174). For Domna Stanton:

What was at stake in women's autobiography was not the recuperation of identities, not what she dismissed as a facile 'assumption of referentiality', but the difference within women's writing: the female autograph dramatises alterity and non-presence... even as it asserts itself discursively and strives towards an almost impossible self possession (1984: 16).

The instability of her femininity is a specific instability, in eccentric relation to the construction of self-difference. But it also points to

the fractured and fluctuant condition of all consciously wilful, unified or coherent subjects. The idea that women need only to throw off their oppression for a real self to appear is oversimplified.

The myths of the Self which recent theorists have questioned may not be present for her in the same way. It is more difficult for her to believe in a Self that can exist before writing, a Self that is unified and continuous. The concept of the author was always inflected by a history, and history always had been notably different for women. As Miller argues:

Because women have not had the same historical relation of identity to origin, institution, production that men have had, they have not, I think (collectively), felt burdened by too much Self, Ego, Cogito, etc (1988: 106).

Nicole Ward Jouve too expressed a similar point when she suggested that it is premature for women to deconstruct a subject which had not yet been given a chance to instate itself. She observes, "You

must have a Self before you can afford to deconstruct it” (1991: 7). An autobiography would be able to give the woman a form of validation for herself, “an assurance and consolation that she does indeed exist in the world” (Brodski and Schenk 1988: 14).

Autobiography may self consciously exist for her as an alternative place of identification. This means that there may be a greater formal awareness in her writing, the idea of the Self as written. In writing herself the woman is also reaching into writing and her story will more obviously be informed by a dynamics of self-becoming. But there is no point of arrival. She can neither transcend herself nor attain to some authentic fullness of being. The female writer who struggles to articulate a personal vision and to verbalise the vast areas of feminine experience which have remained, unexpressed, if not repressed, is engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of the female Self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. She perceives these myths as alienating and radically other, and her aim is often the retrieval of a more authentic image – one that may not be ostensibly

'true' or 'familiar' at first, since our ways of perceiving are so subtly conditioned by our social and historical circumstance and since our collective imagination is so overwhelmingly non-female. Having no literary tradition that empowers her to speak, she seeks to elaborate discursive patterns that will both reveal the 'hidden face of Eve' and displace the traditional distinctions of rigidly defined literary genres. Hers is a dynamics of Self becoming which is shadowed by loss, which exists between loss, absence and what might be. The woman's presence encircles an absence and her writing too exists at a threshold referring back in a constant process of coming into being.

The term *autobiographics* has been offered to describe those elements of self representation by women which are not bound by the philosophical definition of the Self derived from Augustine. Here the text itself is the location where self-invention, self-discovery and self-representation emerge within the technologies of autobiography. The subject of autobiography is produced through legalistic, literary, social and ecclesiastical discourses of truth and identity. Autobiographies as a description of self-representation and as a

reading practice are concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradictions as strategies of self-representation.

Rather than approach women's difficulty in positioning themselves as writers as a question of barred access to some durable psychic state, to which all humans should and can aspire, we might instead see their experience as foregrounding the inherently unstable and split character of all human subjectivity. Autobiographics give initial conceptual precedence to positioning the subject, to recognise the shifting sands of identity on which theories of autobiographies build. It will permit us to recognise that 'I' is multiply coded in a range of discourses, it is the site of multiple solicitations, multiple markings of identity. "Subjectivity is always in process and contradiction, even female subjectivity is structured, divided or denigrated through the matrices of sexual difference" (Kaplan 1986: 227). This protean form of subjectivity confounds the notion that there is one definitive or fixed version of the Self.

It has been argued beyond doubt that the idea that the individual possesses a single fully defined true self to be either disclosed or discovered is a myth. For one thing, we often realise that we have been unaware of aspects of ourselves when they come to our attention. For another, the act of reflection, as discussed earlier, may bring new understanding of one's self and the hard thinking about one's experience, that is a necessary part of autobiography, is likely to produce new insights as to what one's self is. If a writer could carry on this process of self-examination longer or more intensely or at different times or under different circumstances, the perception and presentation of the Self might well be affected. Of all the ambiguities encountered in reading autobiography, perhaps the most challenging is the question of what the 'Self' that the writer reveals is. The writer usually seems to be presenting what is popularly called an 'identity'; a psychological construct made up of such elements as physical being, intellect and emotion, experience, behaviour and attitudes.

Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates there are many different ways of writing the subject. If women are to escape being never-endingly determined as objects, women should be guided by a political imperative to constitute themselves as subjects. This of course, is not returning to the masculine subjectivity, which saw itself as unitary and complete, but rather imagining multiple subjectivities, which are without foundation, but located instead in particular times and places. Within this project, autobiography has an important role. For Diane Elam, “the genre of women’s autobiography should be understood as a strategic necessity at a particular time, rather than an end in itself” (1994: 65). As strategy:

autobiography does not offer a universal model of subjectivity and its representation, but ‘local uses of the Self’, ways of expressing a self or a position which arises from the situation on it (Probyn 1993: 98).

Therefore in relation to autobiography, the question is recast becoming not “what is it” but instead “what does it do”. For Regenia

Gagnier, there is a pragmatics of representation where truth is less the issue than “the purpose an autobiographical statement serves in the life and circumstances of its author and readers” (1991: 4). These autobiographical forms become a way of constructing a different subject, a “subject-in-process”, to use Julia Kristeva’s term; a subject which is not fixed but “constantly called into question” (1989: 129). It opens up the question of the feminine as a challenge to the phallic or masculine position of the subject, thereby undermining the unity and confidence of the universal ‘I’ claimed by the masculine subject.

Heraclites, who according to historians of Greek philosophy was the first theoretical autobiographer, and was the first to declare that every cosmology begins in self knowledge, had long back declared that elements are in continual flux and transformation, and so also are men and that the variability or flux is internal as well as external. Like the elements, individual man never is, but is always becoming. After some twenty-five hundred years after Heraclites, C. G. Jung also came out with the notion of Self as a process rather than a settled state of being. The Self that men seek is never static

and out there, but always going on within them and always coming into being, only to settle accounts with the arrival of death. Through these earlier observations, the presumption that 'I' is always a place of self-division is substantiated and these assumptions have continued to exert an important influence on the writing and understanding of autobiography. And since mid-century, Lacanian psycho-analysis and Derridean deconstruction have furthered the already energetic dismantling of metaphysical conceptions of Self. For both Lacan and Derrida, Self is a fiction, an illusion constituted in discourse, a hypothetical place or space for story-telling. The true self can never be discovered, unmasked or revealed because there is nothing at the core. The Self has no origin, no history, since both origin and history are, like the Self, fictions. Moreover, since the Self is split and fragmented, it can no longer be conceptualised as unitary. At any given moment, the Self is different from itself at any other given moment. As Virginia Woolf remarks, "I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (1929: 4).

The liberal humanist notion of the Self as an autonomous and self-actualising agent capable of valid self-knowledge had been challenged by the later Anti-Humanist theorists. The conscious individualism of old models is replaced with notions of the subject not as the originator of meanings but as a function of discourse – a recipient site of meaning rather than the source. Agency and the capacity for rational self-determination are seen as illusory products of the subject's discursive position, as the subject is viewed as fissured and constantly “in-process”. Hence subjectivity is not single but multiple; there is not one true ‘I’ but lots of different ‘I’s. Also subjectivity is not complete and resolved, but in process never fully realised. The subject does not create the world but is the product, the effect of language and culture. The subject does not control his/her world but is subject to certain available positions in the culture. The subject is in flux. Most often it is destabilised, formed between/across the unconscious and the social. It is subject to different ideological pressures constituted in constantly varying discursive formations and oscillates between various positions.

This kind of diffusive and fluid subjectivity results in the writing and re-writing of the Self and thereby paves the way for serial autobiographies by which a set of two or more related texts reflect on, predict and echo each other, so that they are seen as parts of the whole. The writing and re-writing of the Self over a period of time through constant revisions or serial modes accounts for the developmental version of the Self. Selves in autobiography seem to proliferate and are ambiguously tethered to the over-determined autobiographical 'I'. Julia Kristeva had coined the phrase "subject-in-process" to convey the sense of the subject as incomplete, always becoming, never stable. What our culture understands by feminine behaviour is not the consequence or the product of a feminine identity; instead our understanding of a feminine identity is produced, within signification, through the repeated performance of words and actions which we code as feminine. The cultural construct of femininity is varied and disputed: there is no single feminine identity. In this sense the subject is active within the regulated process of repetition by which these norms are established. There is space for change, for the rules to be challenged or rewritten, for a

variation on that repetition. Thus the female subject becomes mobile and flexible, traversing all manner of psychological, linguistic and conceptual barriers. Along the way she embraces contradiction, ambiguity, irony and revels in her illegitimacy. Autobiography provides a stage where women writers, born again in the act of writing, may experiment with reconstructing the various discourses – of representation, of ideology – in which their subjectivity has been formed. Thus the subject of autobiography is not a single entity, but a network of differences within which the subject is inscribed. The subject is already multiple, heterogeneous, even conflicted and these contradictions expose the technologies of autobiography.

As a good case in example of the above discussed concept of a fluid subjectivity or a self which is never complete, but always in process, one can examine the multiple volumed autobiographies of Maya Angelou. There are a variety of roles and experiences which sweep through her serial autobiographies, which are six in number: *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), *Gather Together in my*

Name (1974), *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* (1986) and *A Song Flung up to Heaven* (2002). For Angelou, like an unfinished painting, the autobiographical series is an ongoing creation, in a form that rejects the finality of a restricting frame. Its continuity is achieved through characters who enter the picture, leave and reappear and through certain interlaced themes – self acceptance, race, men, work, separation, sexuality, motherhood etc. Angelou in an interview in 1977 says:

Now my problem I have is I love life, I love living life and I love the art of living, so I try to live my life as a poetic adventure, everything I do from the way I keep my house, cook, make my husband happy or welcome my friends, raise my son, everything is part of a large canvas I am creating. I am living beneath (Jellinek 1989: 46).

Throughout, Angelou lives 'beneath', recording the minutest of details in a constantly shifting environment and giving attention to the "mundane, though essential, ordinary moments of life" (O'Neale 1984: 34). Through extending the traditional one-volume form of autobiography into a serialised version, Angelou herself becomes a subject-in-process. What distinguishes Angelou's autobiographical method from more conventional forms is her very denial of closure.

I Know why the Caged Bird Sings is the first and most highly praised volume in the series. This work was inspired by her disruptive and dysfunctional childhood spent moving back and forth between her mother and grandmother and which in turn caused her to struggle with maturity. This is the story of one girl's growing up against odds. The book opens with a primal childhood scene that brings into focus the nature of the imprisoning environment from which the Self will seek escape. The black girl child is trapped within the cage of her own diminished self-image around which interlock the bars of natural and social forces. Angelou examines her childhood and responds to the problems of that childhood by creating

a persona. She has said she invented herself because she was tired of society inventing her, of distorting her personality, of turning a stereotype into reality, of bestowing upon her a label she rejected. Through the pages of her autobiography, Angelou tells not just what happened to her but the effect of these happenings upon her. She relates things she has learned, how she has grown, and how she has moved along the trail of self-discovery. Angelou's dedication to personal growth and self-evaluation comes up repeatedly and she continually modifies her ideas about herself, her environment and about black/white relationships over time. Remembering and rewriting the history of self while underscoring the intricate connection between self and others, concerns of the self and the racial or economic politics of her environment, Angelou radicalises autobiography and acknowledges the process of self-invention. Commenting on the importance of writing for Third World women, Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes that:

this process is significant not merely as a corrective to gaps, erasures and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist

history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicised consciousness and self-identity(1991: 34).

Angelou's experiences provide her with knowledge of self-determination and a confirmation of her self-worth. With the assumption of this affirmative knowledge and power, Angelou is ready to challenge the unwritten, restrictive social codes of her social milieu. The way in which she does it testifies to her reaffirmation of self-acceptance within the pattern of autobiography. Once she accepts the challenge of recovering the lost years, she accepts the challenge of the process of self-discovery and reconfirms her commitment to life's struggle. For her remembering the past and shaping it into a pattern ultimately leads to an understanding of the Self which is always in process.

This volume which begins with the humiliations of childhood ends with the birth of a child. At its publication, critics, not anticipating a series, readily appreciated the clearly developed

narrative form. In 1973, for example, Sidonie Smith discussed the “sense of ending” in *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* as it relates to Angelou’s acceptance of Black womanhood:

Maya Angelou’s autobiography comes to a sense of an ending: the black American girl child has succeeded in freeing herself from the natural and social bars imprisoning her in the cage of her own diminished self-image by assuming control of her life and fully accepting her black womanhood. . . . By the time she as autobiographer finished remembering the past and shaping it into a pattern of significant moments, she had imposed some sense of ending upon it” (1973: 374).

But in spite of Sidonie Smith’s observation, Angelou seems to have accepted the challenge of the process of self-discovery and reconfirmed her commitment to life’s struggle with the ensuing series of five more autobiographies. With the introduction in 1974 of Angelou’s second volume of autobiography, *Gather Together in my Name*, the narrator as authentic recorder of the life, indeed changes,

as does the book's structure. The second volume gives up the tighter form of *Caged Bird* for an episodic series of adventures whose so-called fragments are reflections of the kind of chaos found in actual living. When the childhood experiences of the first volume were replaced by episodes, a number of critics considered it disjointed or bizarre. Selwyn Cudjoe noted the shift from the "intense solidity and moral centre" in *Caged Bird* to the "condition of alienation and fragmentation" in *Gather Together*, conditions which affect its organisation and its quality making it "conspicuously weak" (1984: 17, 20). The second volume focuses on her experiences as a mother, a Creole cook, a madam, a tap dancer, a prostitute and a chauffeurette. Also she recounts an affair with a customer at a restaurant and her brief experience with drugs. Lynn Z. Bloom found this volume "less satisfactory" because the narrator "abandons or jeopardises the maturity, honesty and intuitive good judgement towards which she had been moving in *Caged Bird*" (1985: 5). Crucial to Bloom's judgement is her concept of movement forward, which insinuates the achievement of an ending. In this volume, Angelou shifts the emphasis from herself as an isolated consciousness to herself as a

Black Woman participating in diverse experiences among a diverse class of people. As the world of experience widens, so does the canvas. According to Annie Gottlieb:

In this second instalment of her autobiography . . . Maya Angelou accomplishes the rare feat of laying her own life open to a reader's scrutiny without the reflex covering gesture of melodrama or shame. And as she reveals herself, so does she reveal the black community, with a quiet pride, a painful candour and a clean anger (1974: 11).

Here the ridiculous and touching posturing of a young girl in the throes of growing up are superimposed on the serious business of survival and responsibility for a child. Thus the autobiographical form makes a surprising leap away from the growing pains of the sensitive child narrator of *Caged Bird* to the survival tactics of the continuation of the narrative. Despite the difference, Angelou continues to challenge the norm of the standard American autobiographies through an unorthodox altering of the growing pattern or *Bildungsroman* by way of a sequel, which surprised her

critics, many of whom never guessed that the author would transform the girl from Stamps into the loose living mother from California.

Angelou's deviation from proper conduct was a violation of autobiographical tradition. A black woman who deals with lesbians, hookers and drug addicts is bound to rock the standards used for centuries in evaluating American and European autobiography. Like Ann Moody's *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1968) and Elridge Cleaver's *Soul of Ice* (1968), *Gather Together* tries to re-invent the very notion of autobiographical decorum. These writers try to tell it like it is, without obeying the strictures of language and behaviour found in mainstream works. In her interviews Angelou had confessed her difficulty with point of view in telling her story. She felt that she was fragmented and in order to convey her personality she would have to split herself into two women, one respectable and the other improper; one the autobiographer and the other her seamier self. She creates a fictional character, an alter-ego and explains it:

[it] is writing autobiography, but carrying a fictional character along – the woman who didn't escape, so that each time I reach a crossroads and because somebody loved me I went this way and she goes that way . . . I wanted this fictional girl to do all the bad things and I was Miss Goodie Two Shoes" (Weller 1973: 11-12).

Before *Gather Together* was published, Angelou was much worried about the adverse effect her autobiographical truth telling might have on her family. So she assembled them together and read to them – Bailey, Vivian Baxter, her husband Paul Du Feu and Guy – the sections on prostitution and drugs. She offered to delete those parts from her autobiography if it offended any one of them. But her family was a strong support for her and their encouragement made it possible for her to represent a young black woman's struggle to tell the truth, even when the truth could possibly do harm to herself and others. By doing that, what she achieves is a remarkable sense of authenticity. As a straight forward record of life, she replaces the

smooth chronology of *Caged Bird* for an episodic series of fragments that mirror the kind of discord found in actual life. *Gather Together* has an expanded consciousness that enables the reader to identify with an African American woman experiencing life among a diverse class of people including prostitutes. Sandra O'Neale writes that Angelou "so painstakingly details the girl's descent into the brothel, that Black Woman, all women have enough vicarious example to avoid the trap" (1984: 32). Maya of *Gather Together* is an inspiring woman primarily because of what she dares to reveal about herself. Hers is a first person perspective so honest that autobiography becomes personal contact.

The plot of *Gather Together* is concerned with a young black woman who describes in detail the process of becoming an adult, emphasising parenting, personal development and survival. Survival in Angelou's case is defined as her perseverance in dealing with the emotional, racial, economic and relational aspects of her life. Her apprehensions about her son coupled with her recurring sense of being an inadequate mother, create a special kind of tension

repeated and interconnected as the plot is relocated from one autobiography to the next. The plot resembles a walk through the underworld, with Angelou's salvation at the end hoped for but in no way guaranteed. She is still a girl, unfinished like autobiography itself. In the process of becoming the narrator, the subject/self is "open-ended and incomplete, always-in-process" (Olney 1980: 25).

Actually it is the second volume *Gather Together* that initiates the series. Angelou was unwilling to let her first successful volume *Caged Bird* be her last word. She deviates from the conventional plot by continuing her life story. For her every ending becomes a catalyst for a new beginning. The reader of autobiography expects a beginning, a middle and an end – as occurs in *Caged Bird*. The reader also expects a central experience as is the rape sequence of *Caged Bird*. But Angelou by continuing her narrative, denies the form and its history, creating from each ending a new beginning, relocating the centre to some luminous place in a volume yet to be. Stretching the autobiographical canvas, she moves forward, from being a child; to being a mother; to leaving a child; to having a child,

who in the fifth volume achieves his independence. Throughout the episodic volumes, there are certain essential unifying elements through which the volumes are intricately related. These are the ambivalent autobiographical voice, the flexibility of structure to echo the life process, the inter-textual commentary on character and theme and the use of certain recurring patterns to establish both continuity and continuation. Stephen Butterfield had said about *Caged Bird*, "Continuity is achieved by the contact of mother and child, the sense of life begetting life that happens automatically in spite of all confusion – perhaps also because of it" (1974: 213). Moreover, in extending the traditional one-volume autobiography, Angelou has metaphorically mothered another book. The sense of "life begetting life" at the end of *Caged Bird* no longer signals the conclusion of the narrative. Instead the autobiographical moment has been reopened and expanded. Guy's birth can be seen symbolically as the birth of another text. In an interview with Carol Benson, Angelou talked about the writing of *Gather Together*, "If you have a child, it takes nine months. It took me three and a half years to write *Gather Together*, so I couldn't just drop it" (1975: 19).

Like the plot of *Gather Together*, its subject also shifts and flickers. Maya is never firmly grounded; always changing jobs, lovers, perspectives. Her life is irritating and painful. She remarked in an interview with Mary Lupton Jane, that in *Gather Together* she “wrote about the unpleasant, well not just unpleasant but the certain parts of our life that are very painful” (1997: 81). Her pain and dislocation are again alien to the spirit of more optimistic autobiographical accounts like Zora Neale Hurston’s *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942) or Nikki Giovanni’s *Gemini* (1971). Many a critic had lamented the lack of maturity, honesty and intuitive good judgement in Maya of *Gather Together* as different from Maya of *Caged Bird*. But on closer focussing, it is revealed that there isn’t much of a difference between the two. Actually the dance-obsessed mother of the second volume is merely an extension of the adventurous heroine of *Caged Bird*. Not the pre-teen who quietly reads Shakespeare, but the wild child who deliberately gets herself pregnant and who without knowing how to drive steers a car down a mountainside in Mexico. Critics haven’t paid much attention to the

summer vacation in Southern California with Bailey Sr. and his knife swinging girlfriend, Dolores. Yet in that episode which covers twenty six pages of the text, Angelou predicts the person she becomes in *Gather Together*, rebellious, risk-taking, reckless and audacious. The Maya of *Gather Together* is such a captivating narrator that Dolly A. McPherson argues that the fragmentation of character and plot in *Gather Together* is a merit rather than a flaw, since it artistically reflects the “alienated fragmented nature of Angelou’s life” (1990: 62-63). Though usually the word ‘fragmented’ is seen in a negative sense suggesting a loss of selfhood, a breakdown into atomised parts, in the above context it rather conveys a sense of incompleteness or disconnection. What Angelou does, in her multiple volumed autobiographies, is to bring out a plural personality. Operating in a pluralistic model she sustains contradictions and turns the ambivalence of her fragmented Self into multiple selves. Multiplicity is indeed more positive suggesting diversity, variety and flexibility and it emerges out as “continual, creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm” (Anzaldua 1987: 80). Angelou seems to be much

conscious about the transformative power and the moral responsibility of the writer. She considers the self-invention of a destabilised subject as an opportunity for transformation rather than for further alienation and marginalisation. Maya of *Gather Together* is a person of potential strength and moral integrity. Towards the end of the narrative Maya is able to wean out of her heroin addiction and the book closes with an experienced Maya preparing to return to her mother's protection, "I had no idea what I was going to make of my life, but I had given a promise and found my innocence. I swore I'd never lose it again" (Angelou 1974: 181). Although the reader may feel jolted by the sudden ending, this sort of high-speed projection into the future is a common element in Angelou's conclusions. Sandra O'Neale explains the dramatic sudden conclusion thus, "In this way, dramatic technique not only centralises each work, it also makes the series narrative a collective whole" (1984: 33).

Though the second volume *Gather Together* ends on a positive note releasing Maya from drug addiction and prostitution and

making herself promise to maintain her innocence, the next volume *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas* displays a sense of self-rejection that negates the previous positive ending. At the beginning of the volume, Angelou is in her twenties struggling to provide herself and her son with fundamental needs but unwilling to go on welfare. *Singin' and Swingin'* explores a variety of issues affecting Angelou's life - from motherhood, making a living, being a wife, being a grandchild.

In this volume Maya describes herself as too tall, too skinny, her teeth sticking out and her hair "kinked" (4). The self-portrait she draws here bears much resemblance to the ugly young girl in lavender taffeta dress of *Caged Bird*. The negative self-image prompts her to be distrustful of people who show an interest in her. For the lonely Maya the major escape is contemporary music. She frequently visits a record store in Los Angeles, where she is offered a sales job. Though she distrusts the white woman in the shop, she takes the job. It is here that she meets her first husband, Tosh Angelos. Though he was able to share her love of jazz music and

English literature, their marriage fails because “he wrapped us in a cocoon of safety” (27). Marriage became a prison for her and, too free a spirit to be fettered for long, she was divorced within three years and resumed her career as a dancer. Throughout this troubled autobiography, Angelou’s emotions are focussed on her son, Guy. Her achievements and failures, as a mother, conflicts with her aspirations for a career. Angelou’s conflicts are concentrated in three basic areas: her marriage, her responsibilities as a mother and her desire to experience the freedom and joy of travel and dancing and singing. Two incidents in particular contribute to the feeling of dissatisfaction that permeate the book. One is the death of Maya’s beloved grandma, Momma Henderson; the other is Angelou’s characterization of herself as someone out of tune, someone whose confusions over priorities leads her to certain regrettable errors in judgement.

The plot of this volume is not a progressive action from beginning to end, but rather a sequence of conflicts or oppositions that emerge, recede and often disappear from the text, only to be

revived pages later in a different form. This is the most complex volume of Angelou's multiple series and we find here an effective placement of opposing incidents and attitudes. Angelou's attitude towards most of the issues raised is ambivalent; a kind of affirmation/denial syndrome. Recurrent patterns of affirmation and denial protrude from this volume, sometimes advancing and at other times retarding the plot. Maya, the central character, the autobiographer, frequently demonstrates qualities of self-negation or self-acceptance as she vacillates back and forth between denying and accepting her self. This wavering of character from one volume to another is most extreme in *Singin' and Swingin'*, where Maya's personality is often ambiguous, uncertain, indefinite and unsettled. The elation implied in the title is contradicted by discordant experiences that play for and against each other in the self-invention of Angelou. Confused, uncentred Maya is forced to make a number of choices concerning her mothering, her profession and her sexuality. Her 'Self' develops as she confronts these choices which involve the people she is closest to: her son, her grandmother, her mother, her husband, her self. Mother/son conflict takes up a major chunk of this

volume. It is intensified by Maya's guilt over not being a responsible mother. Social concept of 'glorified motherhood' demands that a good mother, faithful and ever caring should sacrifice her own happiness for that of her child. But Maya, who enjoys the freedom to dance and sing every night, freedom from monotonous housework, freedom from the nagging nuisance of a small child's constant demands on her time, finds the responsibility a little too much. Maya keeps having pangs of anxiety about her son, whom she had left with her mother, although she wanted to enjoy every minute of her freedom. She explains, "uncomfortable thoughts kept me awake. I had left my son to go gallivanting in strange countries and had enjoyed every minute except the times when I had thought about him" (230). She herself had in her early childhood undergone the trauma of maternal neglect and very well knew what it is like to be a motherless child. Her genuine worries about her son catapult her back to her son, where she finds him unhappy and withdrawn. Hysterical from guilt and anxiety, she was on the verge of a suicide. But love of life and of motherhood and of dancing drove her instead to resume her life and career and the third volume ends on the

image of rebirth. In terms of self development, the mother/child conflict is an essential aspect of Angelou's growth. All of an individual's experiences fuse into her personality. She said in an interview that "the absolutely greatest thing that happened to me was my son, because I had to grow and learn not to smother him" (Toppman 1989: 144). Through her multiple volumes, she seems to be searching for the right balance: neither smothering him not slighting him. In this volume too, Angelou uses autobiography to contemplate the most painful and terrifying aspects of existence and she is able to experience life fully at the same time retaining her strong sense of a developing self.

The Heart of a Woman, the fourth volume of Angelou's continuing autobiography is also narrated from the point of view of a mother/woman who tells much the same intimate story that she told in *Gather Together and Singing' and Swingin'*. But this time there is an enormous difference. By the time she was ready to present the fourth segment of her life writing, Angelou had accumulated a multi-layered memory that affects not only what she remembers but

what readers who have followed her previous books remember. As a serial autobiographer she had to look continuously backward unveiling the various layers hidden in earlier volumes, remembering what she had already written without getting redundant and repetitive. Autobiographer Lillian Helman had named this process '*pentimento*', a term used in painting to indicate the reappearance of a design that has been covered over by layers of paint.

The Heart of a Woman covers Maya's life from 1957 to 1962. Like all of the previous autobiographies in the series, this volume begins by creating a mood or an atmosphere into which the changing narrator is re-introduced. The fourth volume immediately places the story within a racial framework with references to the military protection of Little Rock School children to the blocking of the Civil Rights Bill by South Carolina Senator, Strom Thurmond and to other pertinent examples of racist climate to which Angelou returns after a year in Europe.

As the story opens, she and Guy have moved from the security of Vivian Baxter's house to a houseboat near San Francisco that they share with four whites. Usually distrustful of white people, she is now, during the loose and free 1960s, part of an experimental gathering that she calls the 'beatnik brigade'. As autobiographer, Angelou hastily bypasses the year on the houseboat, giving the impression that it was either too unpleasant, or too embarrassing or too trivial to be recollected. While Angelou is not altogether satisfied with the integrated living situation and the communal structure of the houseboat, she is a long way from the experience of estrangement depicted at the beginning of her earlier volumes: the displaced and humiliated child of *Caged Bird*, the guilty young woman of *Gather Together*, the lonely woman who sought refuge in music in *Singin' and Swingin'*. She is able to relax on the houseboat, becomes imaginative with her hairstyle and clothing. She particularly enjoys the 'beatnik days' because her roommates neither ignore Maya's or Guy's skin colour nor do they romanticize it. Angelou's brief stay in a commune reveals her capacity for co-

operation and anticipates her later group involvements with writers, actors and civil-rights workers.

Within a year, Angelou, tired of sharing space, craves privacy. She attempts, without initial success, to rent a small house in a segregated white neighbourhood. In order to get the house, she had to seek the help of some white friends, who pretended that the house was for them and not for a black woman with a black child. The theme of racial discrimination is brought in the forefront in the early part of the book. At times, Angelou cheerfully co-exists with the whites, but at other times she encounters prejudice similar to the white dentist episode in *Caged Bird*. When Guy is accused of using foul language in front of girls on the school bus, Maya visits Guy's white school to discuss the matter and is confronted with racist attitude. She is told that, "we do not allow Negro boys to use foul language in front of our girls" (19). She realized that the teachers' attitudes were having a negative impact on her son.

Soon after, mother and son moved to a mixed neighbourhood and Guy is overjoyed to see black children playing in the street. Maya is more relaxed and turns to writing. In *The Heart of a Woman*, the texture of Angelou's life changes significantly. She travels a lot. She strengthens her public identity becoming a coordinator of the Civil Rights Movement and a professionally recognised dancer and actress. She also for the first time in the autobiographies begins her account of self as writer. She attends a writer's workshop; publishes a short story; becomes friends with John Killens, Rosa Guy, Paule Marshall and other black novelists. Most important, writing forces her into a conscious maturity, "If I wanted to write, I had to be willing to develop a kind of concentration found mostly in people awaiting execution. I had to learn technique and surrender my ignorance."(41). She did abandon her 'ignorance' for a conscious self-exploration.

A major change in Maya as a writer happened when she moved to New York with her son, hoping to get feedback from other aspiring black writers. Leaving West for the East, Angelou became

more confident in her lifestyle, her self-assurance deriving from the close relationships she is able to form with black singers, actors and writers. In the creative atmosphere, Maya starts to bloom, encouraged by talented African American friends and associates. Determined to succeed, Angelou turns writing into an act of mental discipline. She forces herself to concentrate on details and to understand the technical aspects of the craft. Through the eventual encouragement that she receives from the Harlem Writer's Guild, she grows as a writer and as a person. She meshes her character with this group of African American and Caribbean writers more experienced than she, people who like her would someday make meaningful contribution to African American literature. At the time of Maya's acquaintance, John Killens, very close to Maya personally, had written *Young Blood* (1954), Sarah Wright had written *This Child's Gonna Live* (1969), Angelou's close friend Rosa Guy was the author of *A Measure in Time* (1983) and Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brown Stones* (1959) was being made into a movie for television.

Angelou also had become a far more public person than she was in the earlier volumes. She had begun to identify herself with the emerging Civil Rights Movement, after working on the fund raiser. Eventually she becomes Northern Co-ordinator of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). She also gets committed to a women's organization, the Cultural Association for Women of African Heritage (CAWAH).

In *The Heart of a Woman* too, she strives to balance the responsibility of motherhood and the demands of her career as a professional entertainer and writer. Angelou fears for Guy's safety throughout his youth. The guilt and inadequacy she often felt in her role as a mother continue to manifest itself in the form of tension between mothering and working. Angelou despite her earlier vow never to leave Guy alone could not resist the temptation of a performance in Chicago. She trusts Guy to the care of her friend, John Killens even though by this time Guy is already quite independent and resists the implication that he needs care or guidance. One night, Killens phones from Brooklyn and informs

Maya that “there’s been some trouble”(75). In a moment of panic that recalls her fears at the Paris train station (*Gather Together*, 151-52), Angelou again imagines that Guy has been injured, stolen, “struck by an errant bus, hit by a car out of control” (75). She somehow feels that it is her fault and chastises herself for being a “capricious and too often absent mother” (106). She feels she has not been responsible enough. This indeed is an all-too familiar scenario which occurs frequently in the series. Back in New York, she learns that her son has received a threat from a local gang because the leader’s girlfriend has accused Guy of insulting her. As soon as she returns and has a chance to survey the circumstances, Angelou confronts the gang-leader directly and warns him against further contact with her son. She takes extreme measures to protect her son and threatens to shoot the gang leader’s entire family and had a gun in her purse to prove it. This confrontation reveals Angelou as a strong, aggressive, perhaps too impulsive black mother who puts aside her guilt and self-doubt in order to defend her son. In an interview with Mary Lupton Jane, Angelou had said, “I’ve always been adventurous or upto life. Even not adventurous, but when life

says, “Here you are, deal with it”, I have dealt with it or tried to” (1997: 72). Defiant, protective of Guy and his welfare, Angelou becomes in this episode a representation of maternal power. In her dealings with the gang leader, Angelou embodies a type of black woman whom Joanne M. Braxton calls the “outraged mother” (1989: 21), representing the strength and dedication of the black mother. Powerful, protective of her son, Angelou here becomes a re-incarnation of Momma Henderson. Unfortunately, no mother, no matter how strong, can keep children forever from danger. Near the end of *The Heart of a Woman*, Guy is seriously injured in a car accident. In a condensed tormented autobiographical passage, Angelou gazes at the face of her unconscious son and summarises their life together:

He was born to me when I was seventeen. I had taken him away from my mother’s house when he was two years old, and except for a year I spent in Europe without him, and a month he was stolen by a deranged woman, we had spent our lives together. My grown life lay stretched before me, stiff as

a pine board. In a strange country, blood caked on his face and clotted on his clothes. (263).

Guy gradually recovers, moving during the process of healing, towards a position of greater independence from his mother. Angelou too moves towards a separateness, much as she has predicted in *Gather Together* (163). *Singin' and Swingin'* had ended with mother and son reunited both dependent and independent. *The Heart of a Woman* ends in separation. Guy, now a student at the University of Ghana is moving to a dormitory. In the last two paragraphs we find Angelou alone. She says:

I closed the door and held my breath waiting for the wave of emotion to surge over me, knock me down, take my breath away. Nothing happened. I didn't feel bereft or desolate. I didn't feel lonely or abandoned. I sat down still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising was "At last I'll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself" (272).



Life for Angelou, whether she wants it or not, is about to offer a new freedom, a new character, a new “myself”. She is no longer the mother saved from drugs at the close of *Gather Together* or the mother prone to make false promises in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, the character at the end of *The Heart of a Woman* is as the title states a WOMAN. Defined as neither mother nor wife, Maya Angelou is at this moment simply herself. Despite Guy’s absence or perhaps because of it, she recognises an emerging new Self, a woman liberated in heart and being on the negative side. Angelou is left at the end of the fourth volume in isolation – The last word of *The Heart of a Woman* is “myself”. But the negativity is outweighed by the more “promising” aspects of being alone, the word “promising”, an echo of the resolution of *Gather Together* and *Singin’ and Swingin’*, which end in vows of innocence and of commitment. The “perfectly formed” thought at the end of *The Heart of a Woman* is Angelou’s realisation of a new “myself”, of a woman no longer primarily defined as granddaughter or daughter or wife or mother - a woman free to choose herself. The conclusion of *The Heart of a*

Woman announces yet another new beginning for Angelou and hope for her future relationship with Guy. In this sense, it follows the pattern established by the conclusions of earlier volumes. *Caged Bird* ends with the birth of Guy, *Gather Together* with the return to her mother's home in San Francisco after regaining her innocence through the lessons of a drug addict, and *Singin' and Swingin'* with the reunion of mother and son in a paradisiacal setting of a Hawaiian resort. The final scene of *The Heart of a Woman* suggests that the future will bring more balance between dependence and independence in their relationship and that both will have significant personal successes as their lives begin to take different courses. Although Guy has assumed that he has been fully "grown up" for years, they have at last reached a point where they can treat each other as adults and allow one another the chance to live independently. Many of Angelou's victories are reflected in Guy in the last scene, for although Guy is the same age as she is at the end of *Caged Bird*, his young life promises many more opportunities and rewards as a result of his mother's perseverance and her belief that life loved the person who dared to live it. Moreover Angelou shares

Guy's fresh sense of liberation. She too is embarking on a new period of strength and independence as she begins her life yet again – on her own and in a new land.

The fifth volume of Angelou's autobiography, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes* tells the story of Angelou's four year residency in Ghana from 1963 to 1966. When the narrative was published twenty years later, there was mixed response of praise and disappointment. Eugenia Collier, on the one hand, proclaimed the book to be "the apex toward which the other autobiographies have pointed"(1986: 24), while Russel Harris on the other hand told Angelou the book was too 'pedantic', too academic and that except for the quest idea, there was not much of a story line. Angelou urged him to another reading "because there are other stories in the book" (1989: 168).

The book opens by going back in time to Angelou, the mother, who anxiously waits at the hospital following Guy's car accident. Angelou, now thirty three, relates the horrifying event of Guy's car

accident that results in a broken arm, leg and neck. When asked why she repeated the accident scene, which also ends *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou gave two reasons: First, each book must stand alone, and second, it was necessary that she explain who she was and what she was doing in Africa (1997: 134). In order to infuse the African setting with a credible plot, Angelou needed to detail the causes of her lengthy stay. Gradually Guy moves out of danger and regains his strength. The Mother/Son relationship, which, like the autobiographical form itself, is constantly in flux, moves once again from dependence to independence. Maya demonstrates her increased maturity and starts to appreciate her freedom now that the burdens and responsibilities of motherhood are lessened. Aware that she must respect Guy's choices, she constantly ceases to make him the centre of her activities. She forms new friendships – with her roommates, African poets, African American writers and artists living in Ghana.

At the same time Angelou strengthens her ties with Mother Africa. In travelling through Eastern Ghana, she forms allegiance

with people whom she meets and also becomes spiritually attached to her venerated ancestors. These intimate racial, political and sacred connections with Africans allow Angelou to recognise but not resolve the dual nature of her heritage. By the end of *Travelling Shoes*, she had explored her roots, had come to terms with much of her past and had decided to return to America to begin a new phase of her life, one that assimilates the African and American elements of her character. She explains, "I think in *All God's Children* I have written about some of the complexity of returning, at one, and being unable to return [to Africa] and yet being so grateful that I had made the attempt" (1997: 142). Through much of the fifth volume Angelou continues to separate herself from Guy and to form new relationships. She shares experiences with other women, she befriends an African boy named Koko; she enjoys her contacts with the colony of Black American writers and artists living in Ghana and she continues her sexual involvements with men. The love affair which seems most vital in *Travelling Shoes*, however, is with Africa herself. In Ghana, Angelou was to some degree and quite reasonably so, caught up in a vision of Africa, similar to what a generation of

Black Americans experienced at home in the 1960s – identification with the Pan African Movement and with West African hairstyles, clothing, language, music and other manifestations of African Culture. In *Travelling Shoes* she embraced these styles, hair and dress in particular. For instance, Angelou's beautician cut her hair in such a way that she looked just like a Ghanaian. Angelou self-consciously recalls the moment, knowing that to "look like" a Ghanaian meant only a cosmetic transformation and not a genuine assimilation into West African attitudes and tradition. As Angelou admits, her view of Africa is not completely authentic. At times she romanticises her experiences, "But whether I like it or not, I am also captured by the romance of history" (1997: 144). In *Even the Stars Look Lonesome* she describes the illusion called Africa, "Despite a spate of nature commentaries and despite entire shelves of travel books, Africa remains for most of us a hazy and remote illusion" (65). For Angelou, the contradictions of race, culture and nationality are too strong to disappear and too fragile to preserve.

As in the earlier autobiographies, Maya's character in *Travelling Shoes* is tested and determined through her actual and remembered confrontations with her son, Guy. She seems to vacillate between wanting to supervise him and wanting to let him go. For instance, when she learns that Guy is having an affair with a woman a year older than herself, she is so angry that she threatens to strike him. Guy simply patronizes her, calling her his "little mother" and politely insisting on his autonomy. Shortly afterwards, Angelou travels to Germany to perform in Genet's *The Blacks*. Guy meets her return flight and takes her home to a dinner of fried chicken he has cooked for her. Then asserting his independence, he announces that he has "plans for dinner" (186). Angelou is once again left alone before a plate of chicken, as she was at the conclusion of *The Heart of a Woman* – left alone to analyze her feelings towards her son and to question the strength of their love to each other. She verbalizes her pain, the conflicting feelings of love and resentment:

He's gone. My lovely little boy is gone and will never return. That big confident strange man has done away with my little boy; and he has the gall to say he loves me. How can he love me? He doesn't know me, and I sure as hell don't know him. (186).

Here Angelou faces and records the confusions of seeing one's child achieve selfhood, universalising the pain a mother experiences when her "boy" is transformed into a "big, confident, strange man", who refuses to be his mother's beautiful "appendage". Unlike the guilt ridden mother slighting her child in the earlier volumes, she fears that it is the mother who will be slighted by the son. It is largely because of her ability to connect emotionally as a mother and woman, that Maya becomes so popular an autobiographer. She has the ability to communicate her misfortunes and make them accessible to sensitive readers, whatever their race or gender. She has the verbal power through the self-portrait of a black woman to eradicate many of the surrounding stereotypes by "demonstrating

the trials, rejections and endurances which so many Black women share” (O’Neale 1984: 26).

Angelou also draws on vivid episodes like the visit of Malcolm X to create dynamic characters. These confrontations, interspersed within her own larger narrative of self-development, read like short stories or vignettes. Most of them are focussed not on renowned world leaders but in the natives of Accra and its outskirts. Angelou’s relationships with contemporary Africans have a positive effect on her self-awareness and her personal growth. Most of Angelou’s encounters with African women and men are positive ones that contribute to her growing intoxication with Africa as she tries to learn about its heritage. She gives in to careful examination of African values, transmitted through generations, which provide her with new insights about herself as an individual and as a black American. As both the narrator and the central character in her own stories, Angelou is concerned with capturing the rhythms of Africa as they affect her reinvigorated ties with her ancestors. She discovers the inherent contradiction of being black yet American.

When she first came to Accra, Angelou wanted to nestle into Ghana “as a baby nuzzles in a mother’s arms” (19). But this fantasy soon subsides as she realises that in Africa, she is a black American in exile, that the Ghanaians are not interested in extending the embrace. She notices that the black Americans in her group share similar delusion of being loved by Ghanaians. The Revolutionist Returnees come to Africa in search of home full of desire, and hate being ignored or misunderstood in their new home. Angelou too always in search of home understands that Africa provides escape but not redemption. She realises that she must remain a while longer in Ghana if she is to uncover the fullness of spirit and depth of character towards which she strives. Her ambivalent attitude towards living in Ghana provides *Travelling Shoes* with its richness of texture and depth of analysis. Angelou invariably tries to make connections to decrease the differences between the culture of the ancestors and the culture of slaves. She examines her ambiguous feelings about “going home” and faces painful truths about slavery and black betrayal and about the joys and disappointments of living in Ghana. She is caught between identifying with things African and

using African culture as a way to acknowledge the abandoned country of her birth. Her need to underscore Ghanaian associations with African American parallels demonstrates what Dolly A. McPherson calls Maya's "double-consciousness" – a vision of her self containing both African and American components (1990: 113). Through her identification with Africa, Angelou finds the context in which to explore her selfhood.

Angelou's self-discovery is augmented when she temporarily leaves the African continent in the mid 1960s to tour Berlin and Venice to perform in Genet's *The Blacks*. In the foreign theatrical setting of Berlin, Angelou revives her passion for African American culture and values, putting them into perspective as she weighs them against Germany's history of military aggression. Although Angelou's character growth is primarily nurtured in West African setting, her encounters in Italy and Germany help shape and broaden her constantly changing vision. The mixture of fascist surroundings, black performances and Jewish survival sharpens her perceptions of African Americans at home and abroad. These

perceptions contribute to her reclaiming herself and her evolution as a citizen of the world. The universality of experience in *Travelling Shoes* anticipates to some degree the acclaimed poem, "On the Pulse of Morning" read three decades later at the 1993 inauguration of President Bill Clinton. In this powerful ode, Angelou addresses all the people of the world. The evocative poem has a worldly wise maturity to it, a wisdom that must be attributed in part to her knowledge of the countless places she had been to.

Maya clearly demonstrates her maturity as a mother in *Travelling Shoes*. Like always, she is concerned for the well-being of her son, but is also willing to let him go his own way, both in terms of his sexual options and his determination to reside in Ghana. She matures as a woman, no longer the victim of good-looking men but one who can assess mutual motives and feelings. She matures as an American, able to perceive the roots of her identity and capable of cultivating these roots into a consciousness that affects her whole personality. The ambivalent conclusion of *Travelling Shoes* involves not only her departure from Ghana but from Guy as well. Her

journey to Africa over, she waits at the Accra airport for the plane to return her to America. She parallels her departure from Africa with her departure from Guy. She becomes a seasoned mother and develops a theme of motherhood, which suggests liberation. Her initial response to Guy's announced independence that his life "belongs to me" (186) is to retreat quietly realising that her mothering is finished. She recognises that motherhood is also letting go; that they both need to be free of one another. By the time, *Travelling Shoes* ends, Guy has reached the stage of development, where as one of God's children, he has earned the right to wear travelling shoes. Those shoes will carry him away from his mother and simultaneously confirm his autonomy, his independence, yet it is not the end, for as Angelou insists motherhood is never over, "If you are really a mother you can let go. It's like love of any sort" (1997: 147). Now Guy stands apart from her, surrounded by his African friends. Angelou roots him in the culture of Ghana, thus returning him to the place of his ancestors. He is magically transferred into a newly born American African, free to continue his education at the University of Ghana, while his mother is free to

explore her potential as performer, poet, spokesperson and autobiographer, free to rediscover the special rhythms of her African American heritage. Guy has become a “young Lord” of Africa given back to the Mother Continent freely and Angelou lovingly accepts the separation knowing that “someone like me and certainly related to me” will be forming new bonds between himself and Mother Africa (209). At the threshold of the New World, Maya Angelou readies herself for departure. Without her son and without full acknowledgement of Ghanaian heritage, she stands at the airport, with the journey westward anticipated but not accomplished, with the narrative actually unfinished. Despite the feel of an ending, the structure of *Travelling Shoes* is open to a continuation of the self-discovery of the autobiographer into a sixth volume. In the final puzzling line of *Travelling Shoes*, Angelou swings the focus away from Guy towards the edge of the canvas, “I could nearly hear the old ones chuckling” (209). In this spiritual call to her ancestors, Angelou imaginatively connects herself to the Ketans and Ghanaians, to the people placed in chains, to all of God’s children who had “never completely left Africa” (209). Ironically Angelou

herself had not completely left Africa either. The rhythmic prose that concludes the fifth volume is an anticipated departure to a new world, with the narrator still at the airport. As in other volumes, the closure is thus another opening into the next narrative journey.

The much anticipated sixth volume of autobiography took a longer time to see light. Finally at the age of seventy four, Angelou came out with the sixth volume *A Song Flung up to Heaven* published in 2002. In this volume, Angelou gives an account of her activities during the 1960s. She addresses the racial crisis, which America was passing through at the time and the poignant beauty of her writing enhances rather than masks the candour with which she brings out the causes and effects. At the end of her previous volume of autobiography, the readers had left Angelou still at Accra airport all geared up for her departure. But what she did not recount there was yet another story. It involved the plane that actually arrived, the Pan Am plane that had come via Johannesburg, South Africa carrying a group of Boers [White Dutch South Africans]. Angelou reveals in an interview:

They tried their best to keep the blacks sitting together and not intruding on the flight . . . I had been away from the idea of prejudice and segregation for years. I had been in Egypt and Ghana and getting on that plane leaving my son and all, and finding myself in the atmosphere of Arkansas (1997: 147).

For Angelou, once again the joys of departure surrender to the horrors of re-entry – of much more to come. The theme of racial discrimination in association with memories of Arkansas might have re-opened fresh wounds for Angelou and prompted her to deal once again with racial crisis in her sixth volume.

A Song Flung upto Heaven, begins with Maya Angelou's departure from Ghana in late 1964. After many years in Africa, Angelou was returning to U.S. to work with Malcolm X, who she had met during his trip to Ghana. She wanted to take a position as Co-ordinator for Malcolm X's organisation of Afro-American Unity.

Shortly after arriving in San Francisco, to spend a month with her mother and brother, Bailey, Angelou was visiting a friend when she received a phone call about the assassination of Malcolm X. Malcolm X was brutally killed in the Audubon Ballroom in front of his wife and children. Stricken with grief, and confused about what to do and where to go, Maya's brother, her lifelong rescuer, once again saves her by finding her a nightclub gig singing in Hawaii. The work was easy but she enjoyed only limited success. She discovered that a "real singer" (Della Reese) was packing them every night at another club.

Realising that she wasn't that successful a singer, Angelou decided to give up her job, and returned to California – this time to Los Angeles. There she found a job canvassing residents in Watts, where she got to know the neighbourhood, and indirectly the people. She saw the devastation that joblessness and the lack of education created, and felt the futility and anger of the black men who lived there. So the Watts Riots in 1965 were no surprise to her. It was not hard for her to understand why people burned their own homes and

looted community stores. However the enormity of the riots and the press reaction to them did stun her. She remembers talking to a French journalist who insisted that the French never had slaves, His persistence stopped when Angelou reminded him that France had ruled Haiti, Guadeloupe and Martinique – “None of the African went there on Ile de France”, she said, “They were taken there on slave ships”.

Things quietened down in Los Angeles for Angelou when her bombastic lover from Ghana – who she refers to as “the African” – arrived to take her back “home”. But Angelou had ever-present allies close at hand in San Francisco. She called her mother and Bailey for help and once again they came to her rescue, somehow diverting the African to Mexico and then back to Ghana, while Angelou eventually landed in New York City.

Sometime thereafter Maya writes, Dr. Martin Luther King sought her out to get her to work for him on his Poor People’s March and campaign. As he explained it, “I need someone to travel this

country, and talk to black preachers . . . I need you, Maya". She couldn't turn down the offer, She was preparing to travel South when she learned that Dr. King had been shot. Angelou became despondent and reclusive for a time. It wasn't until, her friend, James Baldwin invited her for dinner at the home of the cartoonist, Jules Feiffer that she finally came out of the hibernation. The dinner somehow motivated in invigorating Angelou's passion for writing, and it was there that she was encouraged by her friends to first write about her life. She moved to Stockton, California, and while there, in a quiet moment, she wrote the first line of what would eventually become *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The sixth volume is more of a summing up rather than a breaking of new ground. Angelou seems to have come full circle of her autobiographical series which are statements of profound faith and hope. On the whole, the sixth volume is a worthy addition to what she originally set out to accomplish; to examine the quality in the human spirit that makes it continue to rise despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. "Rise and be prepared to move on

and ever on” is the continuing theme of Angelou’s autobiographical cycle and the phrase succinctly sums up the story of her life. Angelou, through her series of autobiographies, tells a story of tragedy and triumph, well stated and clearly stamped by her own unique blend of Afro-Americanism. She is able to carry the music of the Caged Bird throughout. Maya Angelou has led many lives and she could successfully face whatever challenges life threw in her path. It is indisputable that Angelou’s contribution to the autobiographical form in America remains unsurpassed. Her unique probing of the interior self, her distinctive use of humour and self-mockery, her linguistic sensibility, as well as her ability to balance the quest for human individuality with the general condition of Black Americans distinguish her as a master of this genre. She also uses her maturing understanding of family and community to project an individual’s attempt to forge and maintain a healthy sense of self within a group that is undergoing a cultural transition. Angelou demonstrates how she has always striven towards a self-empowering identity, one which can be seen as an inspiration for women all over the world.

Angelou enjoys the multiple form of serial autobiographies, the stretching required in going from book to book, “I pray that in each book I am getting closer to finding the mystery of really manipulating and being manipulated by this medium, to pulling it open and stretching it” (Kay 1989: 195). The continuous fluctuation of the serial form allows the writer the freedom to explore the protean form of self which is in constant process of evolution.

Dominant in Angelou’s multiple autobiographies is the exploration of the Self – the self in relation with intimate others: the family, the community, the world. Angelou does not simply relate these experiences just because they happened, but because they represent stages, stages of her spiritual growth and awareness. Throughout her autobiographical writing, she adopts a special stance in relation to the Self, the community and the world. As an autobiographer, she is concerned with recapturing her growing awareness of her environment and her response to that environment. The mature autobiographer, looking back on her

childhood and adolescence, has no doubts about her connections to the community and defines herself sometimes against, but always because of the group identity that provides her frame of reference. The interplay between Angelou the individual and the group is neither so rigidly structured that her individual experience is stifled, not so casual that she can forget that her roots are placed firmly within the group. The individual of course, is the essential base from which the autobiographer builds relationship to community and family. Throughout Angelou's multiple volumed autobiography, one finds variations on the common theme of interplay between the individual and the group. Central to the configuration is the discovery that the individual self is really a series of selves evolving around a core of values, opportunities and experiences. Angelou's multiple autobiographies demonstrate how an understanding of the evolving self leads to a feeling of kinship with humankind. Her significance as an autobiographer is most apparent in the fact that her movement towards the Interior Self is constant throughout the six volumes of autobiography. Through her serial autobiographies, Angelou emerges as a woman not to allow herself to be involuntarily

restricted by feminine roles, as prescribed by the social codes of patriarchy. Angelou's quest for self-identity manifested through self-assertiveness and the self-expression that came not only from her careers as a dancer, singer and writer, but from being very good at these endeavours. As she matures through the process of her autobiographies she becomes more and more of her own person. Her enjoyment of the freedom, mobility, independence and acclaim that success makes possible is evident from the zestful assurance with which she writes her autobiographies. And one could do nothing but agree totally with her when she writes in one of her most enjoyable poems, "And Still I Rise":

I'm a Woman

Phenomenally

Phenomenal Woman

That's me (14).

Chapter 3

Language: A Site for Self Location

The autobiographical perspective has . . . to do with
taking oneself up and bringing oneself to language

– Janet Verner Gunn, *Autobiography*.

The question of language and its political implications have engaged writers, philosophers and social theorists throughout the intellectual history of civilisation. Speech and writing have been credited with a malign power to regulate human social relations in ways we are not aware of and to disguise important truths in a cloud of misleading rhetoric.

Language is not a transparent carrier of meanings, but a medium which imposes its own constraints on the meanings which are constructed. Language is seen very much as a social phenomenon. People mean a great many different things when they refer to language. It is so pervasively and intimately bound into the ways that human beings do things together, that

language can be viewed as an emblem of allegiance, as an emotive symbol that creates intimacy, solidarity or distance. We often tend to view language simply as a tool or as a vehicle for ideas, rather than a material entity which may in fact shape those ideas. As David Lee states:

Given that language is an instrument for the assignment of the phenomena of human experience to conceptual categories, it is clearly not simply a mirror that reflects reality. Rather it functions to impose structure on our perceptions of the world. Language is ... highly selective and in this sense . . . the process of linguistic encoding involves a significant degree of abstraction away from 'reality' (1992:8).

Today we inherit the idea that language is a weapon used by the powerful to oppress and silence their subordinates. It also can be seen as forms of representation that shape, facilitate, but also sometimes challenge group stereotypes and a sense of "us" and "them". It is an unevenly distributed mode of communication that include, develop and privilege some people while excluding and

disadvantaging others. In fact, far from providing a neutral vantage point, language does establish an ideological enterprise by which it influences our perceptions of realities of gender, ethnicity and race. Language indeed “contributes to the domination of some people by others.” (Fairclough 1984: 4).

Language does not just positively reflect reality, it also goes a long way towards creating a person’s understanding of their world and it houses the values by which (either willingly or through force) we live our lives. It forms our world views by cutting up and ordering reality into meaningful units. “Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world”(Thiong’o 1986:16).

Prompted by insights of psychoanalysis we can say that language is not only neutral but also not totally in our conscious control. We ourselves are created and structured as social beings by learning a language. As some theorists are of view this

language “speaks us”, rather than we speak it. But women and men relate differently to language. For feminists the interesting implication of the idea is that language may “speak” women and men differently. Some feminist theorists have suggested that femininity means in a sense being outside the language or marginal to it.

Attempts to appropriate the resources of language and knowledge about language from the monopoly of the powerful, by the other side had been on the road for quite a long time. In the early part of last century, women writers like Virginia Woolf and Dorothy Richardson debated the question of the “woman’s sentence”, searching for a literary language that would fit the female experience they sought to express. Though feminism has moved on since, towards greater awareness of diversity and difference among women, the same questions on language are asked more insistently and clearly. Today feminists do not consider language a side issue or luxury but an essential part of

the struggle for liberation and empowerment. Language has become central to feminist practice.

Women have an ambivalent relationship with language. On the one hand, women are regarded as highly verbal, on the other, language is one of the means through which women have been oppressed. Language structures discriminate against women. Women's use of language is disparaged. A major feminist concern about language is its inherent sexism. The words and meanings made available to talk about people tend to marginalize women. A lot of lexical gaps – absence of words to refer to women's experience have been identified. Language's relation to gender was at the centre of discussion from the beginning of feminism's second wave. Dale Spender in a path-breaking book claimed that "males as the dominant group have produced language, thought and reality." (1980:21). The preponderantly male mainstream of language gave way to a much popular and useful term, "male stream".

The view of language as a vehicle for the perpetuation of subordination of women was prevalent in the 1980s. Writers gave attention to the sexism implied in language that contains purportedly generic use of masculine terms, especially the supposedly neutral 'man' and male pronouns. One question raised was whether concerted attempts to avoid sexism in speech might themselves constitute a feminist advance or whether language's working to women's detriment is merely a symptom of existing power relations. On the assumption that language can be a site of oppression in its own right, some argued that women's enfranchisement - whether as political subjects or knowledgeable beings - required women to find a distinctive voice. The use of language as it is passed down to her can seem to falsify a woman's experience and present an obstacle to discuss it authentically. Women have been described as silenced. Silence is a symbol of oppression, while speaking out is liberating. Women struggling to reinterpret the world have noted that language does not in itself guarantee communication and the words, male stream words, are often inadequate. Women have been alienated from language.

Language is a powerful resource that the oppressor has appropriated and it becomes crucial for women to reclaim her language:

Language becomes “one’s own” only when the speaker populates it with her own intention, her own accent, when she appropriates the word, adopting it to her own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation, the word does not exist, in a neutral and impersonal language . . . but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions. . . Expropriating it, forcing it to submit to one’s own intentions and accents, is a difficult and complicated process (Holquist 1994: 119).

If a language in and of itself, silences and marginalizes women, then transforming that language is in and of itself, a political necessity. Women must smash linguistic continuities and apocalyptically rename the world, women must revolutionise the word. The implication of women’s linguistically marginal position on their literary creativity is positive. Women are in a position to

create new and different forms of linguistic expressions. By making alternative discourses available in the culture, they may even change the culture itself.

A great deal of theoretical work has been predicated on defining the female/feminine in terms of lack in relation to male/masculine. Most theorists have focussed on description of the female sentence alone, as if the male sentence were an implied norm. This practice of placing the male at the centre of theoretical models and assuming that 'male' is in fact co-terminus with human, whereas describing things associated with women as if they were deviant from male norm can be termed phallocentrism. As Monique Wittig says, "There are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the masculine not being a gender. For this masculine is not the masculine but the general" (1983: 2).

A longstanding debate within feminist literary analysis is concerned with whether women writers produce texts which are significantly different in terms of language from those of males.

Virginia Woolf had asserted that there was a sentence which women writers had developed which she termed “female sentence” or the “sentence of the feminine gender” (1929 [1966]). For Woolf, certain women writers crafted a new type of sentence which is looser and more accurate than the male sentence. She states:

It is still true that before a woman can write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with there is the technical difficulty – so simple apparently; in reality so baffling – that the very form of sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by man, it is too loose, too heavy, too pompous for a woman’s use. . . And this a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes and that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing it. (Cameron 1990: 37).

Here Woolf is prefiguring Dale Spender’s statement that language is literally ‘man-made’; that somehow women cannot fit their ideas and expressions into a language which had been constructed according to the needs of males. Woolf at other points in her writing suggests that the best type of writing is androgynous; not

sexless, but bisexual writing, which is very close to the position of Helene Cixous. Though the French feminists work within a different theoretical framework, they have still reached a position similar to Woolf's. Many French feminists work in the tradition of and in reaction to Jacques Lacan's theoretical work. As Anne Rosalind Jones remarks:

Lacanian theory reserves the 'I' position for men. Women, because they lack the phallus, the positive symbol of gender, self possession and worldly authority around which language is organised, occupy a negative position in language. (1985: 83).

Feminists such as Helene Cixous consider that this negative position in language can be celebrated and term this position *écriture féminine*. Cixous reacted against the Lacanian idea of women as lack and asserted women as plenitude, turning qualities assigned to women by society, such as hesitation and irrationality into virtues. She stresses the multiple physical capacities of women: gestation, birth, lactation etc, and she has also elaborated the notion of a specifically female writing which reflects this

multiplicity. In French feminist theory and psychoanalytical theory, language becomes a key issue. Language is perceived as the medium through which Self is formed and which shapes the way that we think about the world. According to this view, analysis of language can thus tell us a great deal about the production of the Self or subject. Language is always a means of problem solving and of interaction with the world.

Language and thought grooves are inextricably interrelated, are in a sense one and the same. When we talk about human beings as a Self, it means that they are beings of the requisite depth and complexity to have an identity or to be struggling to find one. Ego/Self enters psychology and sociology in another way. That is to say people have a self-image which matters to them, they strive to appear in good light in the eyes of others as well as their own. Self is partly constructed by its self-interpretation. But the self's interpretation can never be fully explicit. Full articulation is an impossibility. To know who you are is to be oriented in a moral space, a space in which questions arise about

what is good or bad, what is worth doing and is not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.

To answer the question who am I one requires:

an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good or valuable or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose (Taylor 1989: 127).

Autobiography represents a self-examination that is at the same time private and public; for the interaction of personality and collective life that autobiography embodies, is reflected in the author's personal appropriation of the language of the times. "To study persons is to study beings who only exist in, or are particularly constituted by a certain language" (Taylor 1989: 33). A language only exists and is maintained within a language community. And this indicates another crucial feature of the Self;

one is a Self only among other selves. A Self can never be described without reference to those who surround it. One cannot be a Self on one's own but only in relation to other interlocutors. In one way in relation to these conversation partners who were essential to an achievement of Self-definition and in another way in relation to those who are crucial to the Self's continuing grasp of language of self-understanding. A Self exists only within webs of interlocution:

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself to another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness . . . To be means, to communicate . . . To be means, to be for another, and through the other, for oneself . . . I cannot manage without another, I cannot become myself without another. I must find myself in another by finding another in myself, in mutual reflection and mutual acceptance.(Emerson 1929: 287).

Psychoanalysis, through Lacan in particular, demonstrates that 'I' is always another, first grasped as an image, that Self knowledge is a mirage and that it is not easy to say 'I'. The subject thus is problematised in manifold ways. Lacan's description of identity as taking place in language, resists solidifying and essentialising selfhood in any terms and perhaps especially in terms of gender. What I am and what I am able to imagine myself are linguistic features, because they take place entirely in language. Selfhood is arbitrary, unfixed, unstable and contingent as the language in which it is expressed. The word 'I' thus becomes multiple.

Similarly the Russian critic Michael Bakhtin has proposed that language must always be understood as a process of making meaning. Language, for him, is not a closed system, but rather a series of gestures towards meaning directed at another – the reader or hearer, of writing or speech. As such it is a site of contradictions and struggle. Writers/speakers always communicate in a contingent way. Their meanings are never fixed or final, since their audience are always heterogeneous and heard

or read in terms of their difference. For feminist theory these ideas are important in that they open up fissures in the apparently closed systems by which patriarchal thought dispossess women. Bakhtian Thinking had been adopted by feminist theorists like Kristeva, who further developed and modified it. For Kristeva, following Lacan, the speaking subject is always a split subject, divided between unconscious and conscious motivations. Kristeva's concept of the split speaking subject maps onto her insight that any text is polyvalent, polylogical, plural, unfixed. The reader/critic has to read the pluralities of both text and speaking subject. Like the text, subject also cannot be fixed. The subject is not only split but also in process. The subject is always in process in that s/he is not fixed, but always developing. But also the subject is always in process because s/he is always on trial, being tested against the various contexts in which s/he has his/her being. The idea of processive subjectivity is attractive to feminist thinkers because of its inherent resistance of the fixity of sexual or gendered identity which can trap women in the feminine mode.

Language is the medium through which women's vitality, integrity and strength will travel. Women and language can be placed in a kind of kinetic history that we can nevertheless map. During the past few years feminist critics have approached writing by women with an "abiding commitment to discover what if anything makes women's writing different from men's and a tendency to feel that some significant differences do exist"(Koldony, 1975:78). In 1972, Robin Lakoff published an article entitled "Language and Woman's Place" in which she claimed that women and men talk differently and that differences in women's and men's speech are the result of – and support – male dominance. Over the following years, there developed a separation of these two claims into two different conflicting paradigms – what came to be called the 'difference' and 'dominance' approaches. Those who focussed on differences proposed that women and men speak differently because of fundamental differences in their relation to their language, perhaps due to different socialisation and experiences early on.

Those who were associated with dominance framework generally argued that differences between woman's and man's speech arise because of male dominance over women and persist in order to keep women subordinated to men. Lakoff had made it clear that issues of differences and issues of dominance were inextricably linked. Women's experiences differ from man's in profound and regular ways. Critics using this approach find recurrent imagery and distinctive content in writing by women, for example, imagery of confinement and unsentimental descriptions of childcare. The other main explanation of female difference posits a 'female consciousness' that produces styles and structures innately different from those of masculine mind. One of the most fundamental and most innovative feminist political activity, consciousness raising was essentially a linguistic practice in which women talked to one another about their experiences. When women came together to articulate personal experience, they discover common threads and come to perceive what they had thought of as personal problems and inadequacies to be shared conditions determined by social structures, where personal

became political. The process of consciousness raising requires woman to pay close attention to language and find new ways of talking about things. It is liberating to be able to put into words experience which had previously seemed nebulous and vague or else shameful and unmentionable; it is empowering to see other women sharing, understanding and collectively re-interpreting such experiences. The need to communicate to bridge the gap between women is a constant theme of feminist writing.

The drift of feminist philosophy of language has been affected by the change of agenda of feminist academic work since the early days. Feminists have moved from the material to the symbolic – from sociological understanding of patriarchy to exploration of the contingencies of gendered identities. Following this change there has been work concerned with the need for female subjectivity to become symbolised. Conjoined with the question of gender of language is the post structuralist question about language as a referential system; a conveyor of meaning, a medium for ‘truth’. If language refers to little more than itself, if it conveys only itself, if

it is the medium only for itself, then 'woman' is little more than the Nietzschean metaphor for an important quest for certainty. Inevitably for the feminist critic, the question of language becomes involved with that about sexual difference. Feminist critics search through language for revelation of difference and for the signifiers of femaleness that may flow beneath and below various cultures, societies and temperament.

Again using insights from psychoanalysis and linguistics, Catherine Belsey explores the construction of the individual through and in language. In Belsey's opinion 'I' am not an autonomous fully formed individual who decides periodically to use language as a tool to express 'my' view about the world. On the contrary, the subject is constructed in language and discourse; language makes 'me' rather than 'I' make language. For Belsey, the subject is also a 'subjected being' who submits to the authority of the social formation. Kristeva too explores this sense of accountability on the part of the subject – indeed both use a legal metaphor – when she writes that our identities are constantly

called into question, brought to trial overruled. For Kristeva the speaking subject is a kind of text. But the meaning of an individual person, like the meaning of any text, is not a fixed point. Because people are born into cultural and historical specificities of which they have both collective and individual experience, since they are members of groups, as well as individuals separate from those groups, they are texts overwritten with traces of other texts or contexts. They bear the marks of these traces and have their meaning in their intersection. They cannot be simply be explained; and if they could, it would be tantamount to being explained away, having their individual subjectivity removed from them. It is for this reason that Kristeva resists ideas such as 'feminine language' and argues instead that women, overwritten by the traces of a dominant masculine culture must analyse that culture from within. She does not believe that a feminine language would dissolve the sexed inequalities of human existence. The system has to be dealt with in its own terms. One has to analyze the so-called universal truths to show that they are neither universal nor true, and that analysis has to take place in a

process that both uses and questions the terms that already exists. Nonetheless, although she resists the idea of feminine language, she focuses on female bodies, and their relationships with languages and institutions. She is interested not in a woman as a philosophical explicable totalising category, but as a real woman who has relationships with men, with other women, with children; relationships which are not the same as every other woman's relationships, though they may share something in common too. Her appeal is individualistic rather than the traditionally communal position of liberal feminism, since her focus is on the individual speaking subject. The language that appeals to the communal, the universal explains the speaking subject away, and leaves no space for her in the system. Hence the subject one seeks is not the isolated achiever of bourgeois ideology but a collective subject, constructed through relationship.

The totalising gestures of feminism by which feminist thought seeks to speak for all women, and to create sisterly solidarity between all women, disguise differences between women that

actually matter a great deal. These differences have historically been one of the major blind spots of academic feminism and various explanations have been put forward for the failure to view the differences between women. For Barbara Smith, the excision of Black voices from the authorised version of feminist theory is simply the racism that comes when white critics know no Black women, a not-knowing that renders them unable to imagine and value Black woman's identity. White feminist critics do not value Black women's writing as literary since they are blind to the social/economic circumstances that condition a Black woman's choice of image, metaphor and plot (Smith in Showalter 1986: 108-185). For bell hooks the reason has to do with the silencing of Black Women's voices by the sexism and racism of whites and by the sexism of Black men. Smith argues elsewhere that racism is the issue that feminism has to confront because of what feminism is supposed to mean:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of color, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbian, old women – as well

as white, economically privileged heterosexual women. Anything less than this vision of total freedom is not feminism, but merely feminist self-aggrandisement.(Hull et al 1982: 49).

Given that Black women have been the most underprivileged groups within both white and black societies, the development of a Black feminist literary theory may not seem to be their most pressing need. Where people are hungry, they do not need to analyze their hunger and its causes, they want to be fed. But Barbara Smith persuasively argues that political theories are a vehicle for raising the consciousness of oppressed groups; knowing the terms of one's oppression is the prerequisite for changing it. Moreover, because literature is itself one of the terms of privilege, claiming the status of literariness for Black women's texts in a highly charged political act that helps to claim value for the Black women's lives that Black women's writing usually represents.

Once a tradition of Black women writing has been established, then Black feminist criticism sought to read it differently and to rewrite the meaning of literary value, so that Black women writing were shown to have it. Instead of being viewed as merely a minority interest group, Black feminist criticism focussed its attention on the context of Black women's writing, on its mediated reflections of experience, but also on the forms, images, metaphors and plots that this writing expressed. This emphasis involves viewing Black women's writing in the context of Black women's writing rather than measuring it against some apparently universal standard, or reading it as a mere adjunct to the writing of Black men or of white women. Having a tradition of their own and fostering a familiarity of that tradition would, argued Barbara Smith, allow black feminist critics to dissect thematically, stylistically, aesthetically and conceptually. Black women writers manifest common approaches to the art of creating literature as a direct result of the political, social and economic experience they have been obliged to share. One can also find a specifically "black female language" to express their

experiences and an emphasis on the oral tradition which are brought into the realm of the literary. In the nurturing readings of a Black female literary tradition, these forms and themes can be celebrated rather than criticized. (Smith in Showalter 1986: 174). In turn, Black female languages find their way into the discourses.

Black women writers express the experience of their own identity in what and how they write, often with a sense of urgency and excitement in the communications of truths understood. Female identity is a process and primary identity for women is more flexible than for men. The self is defined by the total potential range of all possible variations of the individual which are compatible with its primary identity. The formulative that female identity is a process stresses the fluid and flexible aspects of women's writing often does not conform to the generic prescriptions of male canon. Hence, scholars conclude that women's autobiographies tend to be less linear, unified and chronological than men's autobiographies. As a result of their

different developmental experience, women writers recreate female experience in different forms. The female author is engaged in a process of testing and defining various aspects of identity chosen from multiple locations. The process of self-definition is a continuous one. This self-fashioning can be a positive, therapeutic experience; learning to experience oneself, while simultaneously learning to experience one's creation as other, as a separate writing self. A woman's sense of her gender, her sexuality, and her body may assume a different, perhaps a more prominent shape in her conception of herself than those factors could be for a man. Women writers interpret the alienation between outer and inner selves in various ways. The female Self seeks to define itself in the experience of creating art. A sense of fully valued and congruent female identity may form in the continuing process of give and take that re-creates both self and the other in a supportive community of women. The problem implicit in autobiographical accounts is that the women have to claim themselves that they are worth representing. They have to feel that they have intrinsic value.

How Maya Angelou did claim her intrinsic value, and how she accepted the challenge of the process of self-discovery and reconfirmed her commitment to life's struggle are the issues under consideration now. Her genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of its idioms, its idiosyncratic vocabulary and its process of image-making. The imagery holds the reality, giving it immediacy. She chooses to recreate her past in its own sounds and accepts the past and recognising its beauty and its ugliness, its assets and its liabilities, its strengths and its weakness. Here we witness a return to and final acceptance of the past in the return to and full acceptance of its language – the language a symbolic construct of a way of life. Ultimately, Maya Angelou's style testifies to her reaffirmation of self-acceptance, the self-acceptance which she achieves within the pattern of autobiography.

As the first person narrator, Angelou is able to tell her unique stories while at the same time, sharing the contributions of black

writers who came before her. From the first moments of *Caged Bird*, she establishes communication with earlier African-American art forms with the poetry of James Weldon Johnson; with the Negro-spiritual; with the slave narrative of Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs. Thereby in connecting with others, her point of view became a collective one, the voice not only of a single autobiographer but also of the African-American literary community. Dolly A. McPherson (1990) views the collective ties with the black community as a central theme in Angelou's autobiography. The *Caged Bird* is constructed juxtaposing disparate incidents within an episode and episodes themselves arranged and organised undermining the chronology of her childhood story and juxtaposing the events of one chapter with the events of the preceding and following ones so that they too comment on each other. Angelou had never denied the principle of selection in the writing of autobiography and had shaped the material of her childhood and adolescent life story in *Caged Bird* to present Maya's first sixteen years, much as a *bildungsroman*

would, as a progressive process of affirming identity, learning about words and resisting racism. Pierre Walker, draws:

an attention to the formal strategies Angelou uses to emphasise what the book expresses about identity and race, reveals a sequence of lessons about resisting racist oppression, a sequence that leads Maya progressively from helpless rage and indignation to forms of subtle resistance and finally to outright and active protest.(1995: 80).

The narrative style in *Caged Bird* is rich, humorous, intense and engaging. Sometimes Angelou's language is frightening as in the camel metaphor used when she writes about the rape she suffered from her mother's boyfriend in St. Louis. She describes the horrible violation with reference to a biblical passage, "The act of rape on an eight year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can't. The child gives because the body can, and the mind of the violator can't."(76). The biblical language and reference connects this horrifying episode to a spiritual text revival she attended in Stamps. She relates, "Hadn't He Himself

said it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter heaven?"(92). This connection seems impossibly contradictory. One act is of violation and oppression that results in Mr. Freeman's death and five years of fearful silence for Maya. The other act involves redemption and affirmation of life everlasting. At times Angelou uses vicious language as in the white dentist's remark that he'd "rather stick [his] hand in a dog's mouth than in a nigger's" (160). Angelou's use of the tabooed and inhuman word 'Nigger' is meant to emphasise the clash between the dentist's presumed profession as healer and the low nature of his language and attitude. Yet another feature of her style, evident in the same dentist's statement about the dog's mouth is the use of sharp and direct dialogue to convey the distinctive language of a character. Dialogue is a stylistic feature throughout Angelou's entire autobiographical series. It seems most dynamic though in *Caged Bird* because of the string of wild-speaking characters like Sister Monroe and Mrs. Cullinan.

Angelou's most valued technique as a stylist may be the precision with which she describes objects and places; a precision so sharp that the readers carry the description with them, even after reading is finished. Her observations are sensual and keen to the essences of smell, sound and sight. Her writing resembles a series of photographs or fragments of music, snapshots taken from many angles, notes played from a variety of instruments. Her skilful use of metaphors is also worth mentioning. The dentist's refusal to put his hand in Maya's mouth, the discussion of Maya's rape all look closely at the use of metaphor to communicate overpowering rejection and pain.

The various episodes which form the structure of *Caged Bird* are crafted much like short stories and their arrangement throughout the book does not always follow strict chronology. One of the most important early episodes in *Caged Bird* comes much earlier in the book than it actually did in Angelou's life; the scene where the 'powhiterash' girls taunt Maya's grandmother takes up the book's fifth chapter, but it occurred when Maya was about ten

years old (23), two years after Mr. Freeman rapes her, which occurs in the twelfth chapter. Situating the episode early in the book makes sense in the context of the previous chapters; the third chapter ends with Angelou describing her anger at the “used-to-be-sheriff” who warned her family of an impending Klan ride (14-15) and the fourth chapter ends with her meditation on her early inability to perceive white people as human (20-21). The scene with the ‘powhiterash’ girls follow this (24-27) indicating how non-human white people can be. But if that was all that motivated the organization of her episodes, Angelou could easily have followed the meditation on white people’s non-humanity with the episode where Maya breaks the china of her white employer, Mrs. Cullinan. What really organises chapters three through five is that Angelou presents the futility of indignation and the utility of subtle resistance as ways of responding to racism. The humiliation and anger Maya feels in the scene with the ex-sheriff is well reflected in the language she uses to describe it:

If on Judgement Day, I were summoned by St. Peter to give testimony to the used-to-be-sheriff’s act of kindness, I

would be unable to say anything on his behalf. His confidence that my uncle and every other black man who heard of the Klan's coming ride would scurry under their houses to hide in chicken droppings was too humiliating to bear (14).

So does the scene with the 'powhiterash' girls causes Maya to react with the same helpless anger and humiliation; but through the response of her grandmother Henderson to the girl's rudeness and crudity, Maya learns there can be a better and more effective way to respond. At first Maya's reaction to the 'powhiterash' girls are rage, indignation, humiliation and helplessness. When the girls ape her grandmother's posture, Maya weeps, thinks of getting her uncle's rifle and wants to throw lye and pepper on them and to scream at them "that they were dirty scummy pecker woods" (24-25). When they leave and Momma politely calls good-bye to them, Maya's rage peaks:

I burst. A firecracker July the fourth burst. How could Momma call them Miz? The mean, nasty things. Why couldn't she have come inside the sweet cool store when we

saw them breasting the hill? What did she prove? And then if they were dirty, mean and impudent, why did Momma have to call them Miz? (26).

But once the girls leave Maya realises that her grandmother has achieved something. "Something had happened out there, which I couldn't completely understand . . . whatever the contest has been out front, I knew Momma won" (26-27). Angelou's ten-year-old self could not fully understand that there had been a contest of wills and that her grandmother had won it. Though the young Maya could not comprehend the nature of the contest, Angelou the writer seems to insist that readers should comprehend it. Angelou's description of the 'powhiterash' girls emphasizes their dirtiness. They are "grimy, snotty-nosed girls" (23) and "the dirt of their cotton dresses continued on their legs, feet, arms and faces to make them all of a piece" (25). In contrast to this, Maya's household is a model of cleanliness. The first thing Momma tells Maya after the 'powhiterash' girls have left is to wash her face. The chapter had begun, "Thou shall not be dirty", "Thou shall not be impudent" were the two commandments of Grandmother

Henderson upon which hung our total salvation” (21). And indeed Maya and Momma demonstrates that unlike the white trash girls, they are neither dirty nor impudent and that is where the victory lies. It does allow them to be proud of themselves. By demonstrating their own cleanliness and politeness, Maya and Momma establish their respectability in the face of racism and subtly throw the attempt to degrade them back on their oppressor. Furthermore Momma proves that there is a more effective strategy for reacting to racism and segregation than rage and indignation, a strategy of subtle resistance, what Dolly McPherson calls “the dignified course of silent endurance” (1990: 33). Angelou subsequently shows that this kind of subtle resistance serves as a base from which Maya can later move to actively protesting and combating racism. This chapter becomes more than just a narration of bigoted behaviour and Momma’s and Maya’s responses to it. “Such experiences”, says McPherson “are recorded not simply as historical events but as symbolic revelations of Angelou’s inner world” (43).

Angelou takes the title of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* from Paul Lawrence Dunbar's 1986 poem, "Sympathy", a poem about a caged bird that beats his wings against the bars. Elizabeth Fox Genovese writes eloquently about Angelou's image of the cage:

Unbreakable bars closed black communities in upon themselves, denying both the communities and the individuals who composed them access to the surrounding white world. . . the cages constrained but did not stifle them (1990: 221-22).

The Caged Bird, a symbol for the chained slave frequently reappears in Angelou's writings especially in *The Heart of a Woman*.

Angelou's autobiographies tend to derive their form through the interaction of characters rather than through a dramatic line of action. In the mutually reflective realms of life and art, and in the linked concepts of individuals and their individual use of

language, the sense of the other in relation to the self is accorded striking affirmation as a formative influence. As Bakhtin says:

A single person remaining alone with himself cannot make ends meet even in the deepest and most intimate spheres of his own spiritual life, he cannot manage without another consciousness. One person can never find complete fullness in himself alone (Emerson 1929: 177).

As the requisite to dialogical interaction in the territory of art as well as life, the other assists in the ongoing process of determining the Self, which also means determining the word of the Self. The other is formative of the self in the sense that one is not able to know oneself without the interacting presence of the other. The choice of one's language to express a point of view is indeed as distinctive as a set of fingerprints or signature. One's distinctive use of language is thus a critical sign of oneself. It is what makes one other to all others and an individual to the Self. One creates oneself through one's own use of language – but so is the other's language formative of the Self, since an utterance is formulated

only in the light of another's speech. What it means is that the other serves as a prism through which the world is refracted for the Self; however that same prism affords the 'I', in turn, its only refracted vision of the Self. In her book, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973), Sheila Rowbotham argues that a woman cannot experience herself as an absolutely isolate Self, a unique entity as her social acculturation constantly makes her aware of how she is being defined by the dominant male culture. Autobiography is a cultural mirror hall before which an individual woman stands but the mirror does not reflect back an individual isolated Self. Susan Stanford Friedman advances Rowbotham's argument further and adds a collective dimension to it. The mirror of autobiography, to quote her, "projects an image of WOMAN, a category which is supposed to define an individual woman's identity" (38). Angelou's autobiographical works are more than an account of a person's life. It is a powerful commentary on the life of the black American and their culture. Gerhard Stilz states:

the primary aims of autobiography, viz., to define one's personal identity is paradoxically directed towards coming

to terms with the world. Yet the repeated correlative of these two unknown quantities in the elliptic venture of autobiography writing promises an approximate solution at least. The Self emerges through resistance, or in other words the Self is the thing which ultimately does not dissolve in the description of the world (1995: 162).

The process of the Self coming to terms with the world without and finally emerging in all the glory, pursued by the fires of life, is inscribed authentically in Angelou's works. Angelou's struggle is not the struggle of the individual alone but the struggle of the entire race of black women. What makes Angelou's works compelling reading is the way in which there is admirable heroism in the life that is lived and the way it is told. Her prose virtually sings as she pours out her turbulent story into words, at once lucid, frank and enchantingly simple. Word and thought blend in such perfect harmony that music spurts out of the fusion. The language is simple, directly addressed to the heart devoid of artifices and tinged with the flavour of life lived in raw. Rather than a unique cycle perpetuated only within her family, Angelou's

individual story presents a clear pattern commonly shared and passed along to next generations continually. In fact, she identifies her own situation and the threat of displacement she feels as a common condition among black families in America and acknowledges the special responsibility of the black mother.

Angelou writes a rich and classical prose in a language that is not exactly her mother tongue. Angelou grew up in the American South during the Depression and learned to read and write in a very religious community where the language of the Bible was familiar to all. For her, to acquire a personal style was to combine the English literary tradition with old-fashioned Southern idioms, biblical phrases and rural as well as urban dialects. Unlike the other black writers who choose to express themselves in dialect only, Angelou makes a conscious political decision to master “The King’s English” in order to reach a wider audience but also as she recognises honestly, because “insecurity can make us spurn the person and traditions we most enjoy” (1976: 64). Sandra O’Neale (1984) claims that Angelou, for the most part avoids a

stereotypical black vocabulary and that her style reflects the rich language of her literary models like Poe, Dunbar and Doestovsky. But what she dispenses with on the level of language, she recuperates in the mythic dimensions of her narrative, which becomes a vast historical and allegorical fresco of the lives of black American woman. She enchants the readers drawing on Southern speech patterns such as Momma's saying, "didn't cotton to" (39) or "he gonna be that kind of nasty" (164). The narrator of *Caged Bird* projects a youthful exuberance as she harvests one figure of speech after another from her fertile imagination. The use of an eighteenth century picturesque model which she succeeds in subverting with humour and irony is a distinctive feature of her style. She appropriates traditional patterns to her own distinctive ends, thus modifying our perceptions of what constitutes both 'autobiography' and 'fiction' in Black-American literatures.

The attack on the common sense conception of the Self as an essence preceding or transcending context and language has been even more aggressive in the study of literature than in social

sciences. Thus it is not surprising to have a prominent critic of autobiography, Paul John Eakin, assert that the search for the origin of the Self ultimately leads to the acquisition of language as the decisive generative event, “it is not the question of language endowing a hitherto mute self with the capacity of self-expression, but quite possible of language constituting the Self in its very makeup”(1985:195). Terry Eagleton also has economically rendered the counter intuitive thrust of the structuralist critique of the subject :

The confident bourgeois belief that the isolated individual was the fount and origin of all meaning took a sharp knock: language predated the individual and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it. (1983: 107).

Thus it is not we who speak the language, but the language that speaks us. If the Self is inherently a function – even a fiction – of language, then autobiography is doubly so; after all it is a literary capitalisation of the ‘I’. Structuralism and post-structuralism suggest that autonomy is found not in individuals but in the

working of linguistic codes. Autobiography then is not seen as produced by a pre-existent Self but as producing a provisional and contingent one. Indeed that Self is seen as bound and pre-determined by the constraints of the linguistic resources and narrative tropes available to the author.

While Angelou writes her autobiographical works what she is doing is finding a place inside herself which is also outside the roles offered to her by her society. Her language evokes sensations. Memory works upon consciousness by dissolving or fragmenting it into indeterminacy, loosening the boundaries between past and present. She becomes a subject in process and the time of writing is lost in a non-teleological structuring of past and future. Looking backwards she also looks forwards expectantly; she creates an intense internal space, with its own interior dynamic for her writing. Helene Cixous had talked about woman having “an open memory that ceaselessly makes way” (1981:54). This important phrase characterizes a movement which

is simultaneously forwards and backwards, outwards and inwards. It suggests the way memory can become self-creation.

Jose Rabesa has advanced the proposition that “discourse is violence” (1987: 132). For Angelou, the act of writing is a breaking of silence that becomes embodied within the narrative itself. The idea of breaking silence; in the case of Angelou, the self-inflicted silence after her rape, underscores the implicit violence in the act of writing. Angelou internalises the violence of the rape and turns herself into the source of violence rather than its victim. In an embodiment of Rabesa’s formulation that “discourse is violence”, Angelou fears that speech is an inherently aggressive act. Her speech has killed one, and could do it again. She now voluntarily assumes the silence that Mr. Freeman has imposed on her when he forbade her to reveal the rape to anyone else. She internalises a hegemonic definition of women as sexual and therefore dangerous. Angelou had felt compelled to lie because the crowd in the court expected her to say Mr. Freeman had not touched her before the rape. Having to lie about these events forces her to accept an

image of herself as poisoned and made poisonous by her encounter with adult sexuality. The rape and its effects make breaking the silence a dangerous and violent act. The text enacts a dialectic between 'discourse as violence' and silence as the narrator retreats into muteness. Angelou does not represent herself as entirely a victim, however, in that she sees herself as the potential source of a "flood" of violence that would engulf the world if she were to let it go:

I could feel the evilness flowing through my body and waiting, pent up, to rush off my tongue if I tried to open my mouth. I clamped my teeth shut. I'd hold it in. If it escaped, wouldn't it flood the world and all the innocent people?
(72).

The "flood" finds its analogue in the release of urine with which the autobiography opens as Angelou runs peeing from the church. *The Caged Bird* begins with the possibility of language as 'coerced speech' – Angelou is forced to recite a memorised text in front of a church congregation. To speak, to break the silence, becomes in this context fraught with anxiety. Dramatizing her own

ambivalent position as writer of an autobiographical text, Angelou begins with a moment of failed speech in which memory eludes her. She cannot remember the lines she is supposed to recite and flees from the church in embarrassment. In the opening pages of the autobiography containing or holding back the figurative violence of speech becomes a more Self-violating option than letting it go:

I stumbled and started to say something, or maybe to scream, but a green persimmon, or it could have been a lemon, caught me between the legs and squeezed. I tasted the sour on the tongue and felt it on the back of my mouth. Then before I reached the door, the sting was burning down my legs and into my Sunday socks. I tried to hold, to squeeze it back, to keep it from speeding, but when I reached the church porch, I knew I'd have to let it go, or it would probably run right back upto my head and my poor head would burst like a dropped watermelon and all the brains and spit and tongue and eyes would roll all over the place(3) .

Speech, sexuality and violence are all figuratively invoked and connected in the passage. The violence of the rape is prefigured in this passage by the violent force that “squeezes” her between her legs. The coerced speech of the courtroom scene is prefigured in the symbol of the lemon. Speech is forced out of her. However to contain the force is also to ‘burst’ and turn the violence inward on her own body fracturing her identity into a decomposed mass of spit, tongue and eyes. Angelou therefore represents her involuntary eruption into speech as a liberation from the internalised violence of her enforced silence. “I laughed anyway, partially for the sweet release; still the greater joy came not only from being liberated from the silly church but from the knowledge I wouldn’t die from a busted head” (3). The release of speech/urine is therefore a liberation from oppressive forces. The ‘sweet release’ is also a response to the symbolic violence of growing up as a poor black woman in the South. Angelou’s knowledge of her position adds to the bitterness of the situation. Her alienation from the life of Stamps makes her doubly victimized, “being aware of her displacement is the rust on the razor that threatens the throat”

(3). *Caged Bird* records not only the literal violence of the rape, but also the symbolic violence of a white cultural hegemony that metaphorically threatens Angelou's intellectual as well as physical existence.

Angelou escapes from silence by turning existence in *Stamps* into an autobiographical fiction and conferring value on her experience in terms of its relation to the literary. Mrs. Flowers, a literate and educated woman whom she admired and who helped her to overcome her silence after the rape is described as, "She appealed to me because she was like people I had never met personally. Like women in English novels. . . Like the woman who sat in front of a roomy fireplace, drinking tea incessantly from silver trays" (79). Angelou organizes the fifteenth chapter, the one about Mrs. Flowers in a tight fashion, interrelating the themes of racial pride, identity and the power of words that run throughout. The positive effect that the attention of the elegant Mrs. Flowers has on the insecurity and identity crisis of young Maya is obvious. Mrs. Flowers made Maya feel liked and respected and contributed

to her affirmation of her identity, “she made me proud to be Negro, just by being herself” (79). She feels that Mrs. Flowers “threw me my first lifeline” (77).

The power of words is a theme central to African American autobiography; from the slave narratives to Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1954) and beyond. The importance of power of words, in themselves and in poetry, and by implication the importance of literature run throughout *Caged Bird*. *Black Boy* demonstrates the negative power of words each time Wright is abused for not saying the ‘right thing’ (12). Yet the book concludes on a positive note when Wright realises that he can harness the power of words to his own artistic and political ends. Much the same thing happens in *Caged Bird*. Maya refuses to speak because she fears he potentially fatal power of words, but throughout the second half of the book, she acknowledges that the imagination can harness the power of words to greet ends. One of the high points of this realisation comes at the end of the graduation scene when James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” is sung by a

white guest speaker (155). Maya realises that she “had never heard it before. Never heard the words, despite the thousands of times I had sung them” and this leads her to appreciate African American poetic tradition. Because Johnson’s words, like Angelou’s story, are gathered “from the shift of the black experience, with its suffering and survival”, to use Kenneth Kinnamon’s words, the singing at the end of the graduation ceremony “is a paradigm of Angelou’s own artistic endeavour in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*” (1986: 132-33).

It was Mrs. Flowers who laid the groundwork for Maya’s appreciation of the power of poetic word by explicitly stating the lesson of the positive power of words in her conversation with the ten-year-old Maya. Mrs. Flowers tells Maya:

Language is man’s way of communicating with his fellow men and it is language alone that separates him from the lower animals. . . Words mean more than what it is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning(82).

Mrs. Flower's speech and her reading from Dickens make Maya appreciate poetry. "I heard poetry for the first time in my life" (84), she says about Mrs. Flower's reading. The chapter begins with a description of Mrs. Flowers and her elegant command of standard English, which contrasts in their conversation with Momma's heavy black dialect. The importance of words is emphasised at the end of the chapter too. When Maya tells her brother, "By the way Bailey, Mrs. Flowers sent you some cookies . . .", Momma threatens to beat her granddaughter since saying "by the way" was in Momma's view blasphemous (85-86). For Momma "white folks' mouths were most in general loose and their words were an abomination before Christ" (86-87). This episode anticipates the affirmation later in the book of the strength blacks find in the careful use of words.

Angelou juxtaposes the chapters in *Caged Bird* in a very effective manner. She follows the Mrs. Flowers chapter with its lessons on the power of words and an identity with the sixteenth chapter where Maya breaks Mrs. Cullinan's dishes because the

white employer neglects Maya's own name and calls her different names, which affects Maya's identity seriously. The chapter comments, on the previous one by showing Maya, acting on the basis of what she has learned in the previous chapter about the importance of words and about affirming identity. This chapter is followed by three chapters, seventeenth to nineteenth, each of which depicts subtle black resistance to white oppression. The active resistance and outright protest to white oppression is seen in Chapter 34. Other instances which explore the line between subtle but passive resistance and active open protest are evident in the graduation scene (Chapter 23), the dentist scene (Chapter 24) and the Daddy Cidell's friend tells of double crossing a white con man (Chapter 29). Thus through the skilful interweaving and juxtaposition of chapters and fine narrative style in which a twist of lyrical imagery is mixed with a touch of realism, Angelou achieves an aesthetically satisfying autobiography.

In *Gather Together in My Name*, the title remains elusive and perplexing like the titles of the rest of the series. According to

Sandra O'Neale, it seems to relate to a New Testament passage that calls to the "travailing soul to pray and commune" (1984; 33). Angelou perhaps wanted the title *Gather Together* to the same point of view inherent on the autobiography – the narrator wanted her gathering of readers to know what had happened to her so that other young people in similar situations could avoid the same pitfalls. Angelou achieves a remarkable sense of authenticity in this work. As a straightforward recorder of life, she replaces the smooth chronology of *Caged Bird* for an episodic series of fragments that mirror the kind of discord found in actual life. Angelou recounts her work and sexual experiences in a rhythm familiar to many young black people, who like her, have been excluded from high-paying careers or elegant housing. *Gather Together* has a musical structure in which several melodies are played simultaneously by different instruments. Angelou recalls a series of discordant episodes or chords, scenes so dissimilar in texture that they give the work a chaotic or fragmented quality. The layering of narrative elements resembles polyphony and creates the kind of ordered chaos that characterizes Angelou's

style and themes. The fragmentation of the character that Maya is, is well evident in the fluctuating narrative. Just like the narrative Maya the narrator also flicks and shifts. Her pain and dislocation can be observed in the style of writing and Dolly A. McPherson argues that the fragmentation of characters and plot in *Gather Together* is a merit rather than a flaw. Since it artistically reflects the “alienated fragmented nature of Angelou’s life”. (1990: 62-63).

Due to the provocative sexual nature of *Gather Together*, Angelou’s writing in this volume is a mixture of mature prose mixed with the language of low-life characters for whom “refees”, “trick” and “pimp” are major words in their vocabularies. At times Angelou seems to sink along with her troubles to the very depths of the earth; she describes the “slimy world” of prostitution with a sensuousness that exudes the feel of a “man’s zipper” on her thigh, the feel of Lysol irritating her throat (140-41). Even when she writes with eloquence, her topics tend to be grim. Only rarely do we find an elated Maya soaring high. She is most ecstatic when

she is on stage, with the movement of the dance pushing her towards freedom and letting her forget the “crushing failures in my past” (100). In one splendid passage, Angelou in an exultant style describes the dancing narrator, “The music was my friend, my lover, my family” (112). In a series of comparisons, she writes that dance, music is a bright day, a happy song, poetry recited in “warm bath” (112). Much of her style, though, reflects a negativity of moods and cadences. She describes the heights of a love affair, only to fall; she depicts the uncontrollable laughter that comes from smoking grass, only to crash. After she is fired from interfering in a boxing match, her language vividly records her depression. Guy’s smile no longer moves her. She has lost her strength and courage. Her marijuana is all gone. She feels defenceless for the very first time (175). The negativity of Angelou’s style near the end of the book, immediately before she meets Troubadour Martin, suggests that Maya is looking for a way out, probably through drugs. Her style is slow, measured in preparation for the trip to the lower depths that ends the volume. Maya is weaned away from the turmoil of drug addiction with the

help of Martin Troubadour and she regains her footing and vows to change the course of her life.

In *Singin' and Swingin' and Getting' Merry Like Christmas*, Angelou becomes more dynamic, more open. With the use of flashbacks and flash forwards, she moves up and down the narrative scale. The narrator's memories of her enterprising family members serve as connective threads, helping to create a sense of unity among the individual volumes of the series. The plot of the volume is not a progressive action from beginning to end, but rather a sequence of conflicts or oppositions that emerge, recede and often disappear from the text, only to be revived pages later in a different form. Through Angelou's care for language and style, she imaginatively renders the black experience from the perspective of a mother who is also a daughter. The very title, which in its complexity of language, reflects a multitude of meanings related to the text. The title is composed of what might be assumed as positive words: "Swingin'", "Swinging'", "Merry" and "Christmas". But on closer inspection singing and swinging

are words that depict Angelou's career, words that at times signify success but at other times create such a vast distance and separation between herself and her son that when she returned home from Europe she contemplated "killing herself and possibly even the child" (234). Although "Merry" and "Christmas" initially reflect happiness, ironically it is seen as expressing the opposite meaning. In the title, Angelou intentionally changes the -ing endings that indicate the present participle in standard English. In transforming this standard spellings into the slangy Singin' and Swingin' and Gettin', she jazzes up the verbs and creates the sense of the black vernacular. Angelou shows a talent for using images to explain and clarify feelings and in employing her descriptive powers to mundane incidents very vivid. In recording her reaction to her grandmother's death, Angelou's style shifts from its generally more conversational tone and becomes intense, religious, emotional:

Ah Momma. I had never looked at death before, peered into its yawning chasm for the face of the beloved. For days my mind staggered out of balance. I reeled on a precipice of

knowledge that even if I were rich enough to travel all around the world, I would never find Momma. IF I were as good as God's angels and as pure as Mother of Christ, I could never have Momma's rough slow hands pat my cheek or braid my hair. Death to the young is more than that undiscovered country, despite its inevitability. It is a place having reality only in song or in other people's grief (41).

In this passage of moving farewell, Angelou creates a funeral song which relies on the Black Gospel tradition, on the language of Bible stories and on certain formative literature texts. Words like 'chasm', 'precipice', 'angels' and 'beloved' have Sunday School overtones, a kind of vocabulary Angelou more typically employs for humorous effects, as in the well-known portrait of Sister Monroe in *Caged Bird* (32-37). The gospel motif so predominant in the passage, seems directly related to Angelou's rediscovery of the Black Spiritual. The moving farewell is not typical of Angelou's writing. Her words here betray a conflict, as if she is trying hard to compensate her feeling of guilt at having forgotten Momma for a while. The three-paragraphed passage is a funeral elegy, a prose

poem cemented within the narrative. Angelou devotes over half the book to describe her European tour. The European travel sequence has a great effect on both plot and character as Maya's absence generates a tug-of-war between Guy at home and his mother in Europe. Travel is a magnet that contributes to the overall tension of the narrative, a tension that momentarily ends with Maya's return to her son. In the last pages of *Singin' and Swingin'*, Angelou vows to Guy that she will never leave him. Using words that are both simple and oppositional, "If I go, you will go with me, or I won't go" (232). The volume closes in a sentence that highlights through three nouns the opposing tensions of Angelou's temperament, "Although I was not a great singer, I was his mother and he was my wonderful dependently, independent son" (242). The dialectical construct is apparent. I/you; Singer/mother; dependent/independent; mother /son. This sentence effectively concludes the first three books in its thumbnail summary of the major contradictions in Angelou's character. At the same time it alludes to similar mother/son patterns in future volumes too.

The structure of *Singin' and Swingin'* is related to musical composition. By looking at the doubling of plot lines (Maya the mother and Maya the bar girl) as being associated with Angelou's use of oppositions, it is possible to see that Angelou uses certain kinds of music. Such music is polyphonic where more than one line works in opposition to another. In *Singin' and Swingin'*, certain perplexing issues touch each other and disconnect so that the overall effect recalls a jazz composition. Angelou's narrative is constantly playing certain discordant or polyphonic tones.

Angelou achieves her powerful effects in *Singin' and Swingin'* through a use of literary devices. First is her use of repetition. She uses the current time period the 1950s to reflect on earlier events repeating certain details in order to enhance the style. Another stylistic technique she puts to excellent use is the simile. Although there are several similes in *Singin' and Swingin'*, several deserve special attention. First is the explosion of images surrounding her religious conversion. In a further reference to the theme of music,

she describes the Negro spirituals as “sweeter than sugar”. Angelou further expands the straightforward simile into an elaborate image of her connection to the oral tradition of black culture. Angelou’s connection to her oral heritage is through what she tastes. She praises the spiritual she heard during her conversion, “I wanted to keep my mouth full of them” (28). When Angelou returns to San Francisco near the end, she also expresses her confusion through the use of simile, “Disorientation hung in my mind like a dense fog” (232). The fog is contrasted with occasional moments of clarity, “Clear as the clink of good crystal” (233). Contrasting elements are expressed in the images of clear crystal and fog. Through these two comparisons, Angelou is exposing a confusion strong enough to make her hastily consult and then reject a prosperous loving white psychiatrist. Angelou’s writing in the third volume is brilliant, its strength deriving in part from the way in which she duplicates the actual conflicts underlying the plot, characters and thought patterns.

The title of her fourth volume, *The Heart of a Woman* comes from a poem that was written during the Harlem Renaissance by the poet Georgia Douglas Johnson. Once again here, Angelou is in search of her identity and place. Although working within the groove of autobiography, Angelou adapts elements from both fiction and fantasy on numerous occasions in her earlier volumes. She has employed what has become a rather personalised autobiographical style, a method which integrates ingredients from diverse modes of writing and gracefully crosses over traditionally static generic lines. In the fourth volume, she combines fiction and fantasy with the more standard biographical or historical mode to capture the subtleties of her relationship with her son and to emphasise the apparent similarities between their lives.

Examples of fictionalisation in *The Heart of a Woman* are quite varied. They range from rather common techniques such as representational detail in description and reconstructed accounts of actual dialogue, to more specialised devices used to create a

sense of history beyond the individual life story and to include other narratives from folklore within her own narrative. Each fictional technique contributes to the overall completeness and credibility of the autobiographical text.

Through a multilayered point of view, the narrator repeats and improvises on earlier motifs. Still this volume is more uplifting than its predecessors and there is a significant new direction in Angelou's story. Angelou enlarges the scope of autobiography in both form and content providing it with a fourth dimension. She is able to offer a woman's perspective as she reveals her concerns about her self-image and the conflicting feelings about her lovers and her son. In this volume Angelou is engaged in the Civil Rights Movement, in political protest, in feminism, yet she is also at her most introspective, *The Heart of a Woman* is an open revelatory book; where Angelou's feelings dictate the form. According to Dolly A. McPherson, *The Heart of a Woman* is an intensely truthful volume, "Her writing here,

describing her longings, doubts and shortcomings, is raw, bare honesty” (1990: 98).

Like all other narratives by Angelou, the structure of *The Heart of a Woman* is based on a journey from place to place, from house to house, from coast to coast. To emphasise the theme of movement, she opens the text by quoting from a spiritual that repeats the same line: “The ole ark’s a moverin’”. The repeated reference to Noah’s ark, an allusion to the Biblical narrative and Angelou’s secret pursuit of Christianity in *Singin’ and Swingin’*, also heralds the motif of the journey. By implication Maya Angelou is a new Noah in the quest to survive. *The Heart of a Woman* involves a voyage into the Self as Angelou discovers the power of her language. *The Heart of a Woman* begins by creating a mood or an atmosphere into which the changing narrative is introduced. The idea of indecision that Angelou skilfully inserts into the beginning of her text diminishes as the story continues. As she moves from one setting to the next, staying nowhere for long and nowhere for certain, Angelou orchestrates the journey,

moving the action back and forth in a spiral pattern with herself at the centre. Like Noah, she has the stamina to stay afloat.

Of the many stylistic techniques that recur in *The Heart of a Woman*, two in particular give the volume a special power; the dynamic portrait and the literary allusion. Although Angelou uses the technique of portraiture in all the volumes, it is not until the fourth volume that she perfects it. This device is also called a descriptive portrait or vignette – a leisurely ornamental description used to depict character, a technique especially appropriate to autobiography, which takes the plot-driven intensity of the novel. Exciting but short descriptions of celebrities include Angelou's references to musicians Max Roach and Abbey Lincoln, writers James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry, Martin Luther King Jr. and other prominent African Americans. These portraits strengthen the development of Angelou's story by introducing figures of great interest who are subordinate to the main narrative of the narrative. The second more complex portrait relies on compactness of style in offering a condensed description

designed to capture the subject's mannerisms and quirks as well as leave a lasting impression on readers. At their most successful, Angelou's vignettes are character studies of famous African Americans who emerge as intensely realised characters, people who, because of her involvement in show business and politics, Angelou has had chance to scrutinise. Men or women whom readers might have adored from afar are drawn so near that Angelou is able to expose their wit, imperfections, nastiness and benevolence. The two most notable vignettes are of Billie Holiday and Malcolm X. In *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou deliberately tries to capture the individual conversational styles of her relatives and friends.

Since memory is not infallible, fictionalisation comes into play whenever an autobiographer reconstructs or perhaps more correctly recreates conversation. While the autobiographer relies on invention, she creates the illusion of an infallible memory that records exactly the feel of a place and the words spoken there, Thus when Angelou narrates Billie Holiday's visits, she takes care

to imitate her rather flamboyant verbal style. In addition to using fictional techniques in the reconstruction of dialogue, Angelou turns to fictionalisation to create a sense of history larger than the story of her own life. In her description of her meeting with Malcolm X, Angelou combines the recreation of credible dialogue with historical references that go beyond her individual life. Her use of Malcolm X's portrait as a stylistic device continues into the fifth volume *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, where he is again singled out in a vignette.

The second distinctive stylistic technique in *The Heart of a Woman* is the literary allusion, which Meyer H. Abrams explains as a "reference, without explicit identification to a person, place or event or to another literary work or passage" (8). Angelou enriches her text by connecting it to significant people and places within African American traditions. One such specific literary allusion is to the Georgia Douglas Johnson poem from which *The Heart of a Woman* is named. The influence of Georgia Douglas Johnson and other African American women on Angelou's writing is discussed.

Johnson's "The Heart of a Woman" is an eight-line lyric poem in which a woman's heart is compared to a caged bird crashing its bars. There are other literary allusions too. The opening reference to Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* connects Angelou's theme of journey to Kerouac's restlessness. Angelou makes reference to the Black folk figure Brer Rabbit, in a story she recalls to herself in Cairo as she gathers courage for her new job on *The Arab Observer*. Her use of Brer Rabbit connects her to the oral traditions of Africa and America. But it is in the allusion to Johnson's title, to the repeated "WOMAN" of both poem and autobiography that one discovers a more woman centred Maya Angelou.

Just as her experiences as a Black American in Africa called to her mind Brer Rabbit on occasion, so she recalls the stories of several slave heroines, while attending an informal gathering of African women in London. Her stories about Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tabman, enlarges the scope of Angelou's autobiography and brings certain historical points of reference to the story of an

individual. Readers come to understand *The Heart of a Woman* not only through the avenues of her life opened in the text but through the samplings of folklore that are included as well. Angelou also uses elements of fantasy to illustrate disappointments and defeats she has experienced in life and to reveal the complexity of her relationship with her son.

The Heart of a Woman ends in the Western African country of Ghana. Ghana marks the end of *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, as well. In these two volumes, Angelou has settled down, has moved from without to within. As in *Singin' and Swingin'*, in *The Heart of a Woman*, Angelou remains in a state of flux, continuously open to changes in her life even when these changes involve her divorce from Vus Make and her suffering over her injured son. As she faces these problems she continues the process of redefining herself.

In *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, the fifth volume of autobiography the narrative point of view is again

sustained through the first person autobiographer in motion. She moves from journey to journey, propelling the story from one place to another. The appearance of the word 'travelling' in the title is not mere accidental. The volume begins with Maya's and Guy's travel to Ghana and ends with her departure to America in the concluding lines. As in all other volumes, here too the title contributes to the plot and to the thematic impact. It comes from a spiritual about walking in Heaven, "I got shoes/you got shoes/All of God's children got shoes" (1997). The travelling shoes that belong to the narrator and to all children of African descent restate the journey motif.

In *Travelling Shoes*, Angelou makes superb use of language in recording moments of emotional intensity. At the beginning of the narrative, she describes going back and forth from the hospital, emerging from the cool interior into the bright sunlight as she herself drifts in and out of her son's pain, which is also her pain. During the summer of 1962, she feels "gobbled" down. The days remind her of "fat men yawning after a sumptuous dinner"

(4). Later she records the horrors of slavery as she travels through Western Ghana. Angelou imaginatively captures the agony of being a slave. She observes the now quiet forts and envisions bloody people silently enduring their chains, "They lived in a mute territory, dead to feeling and protest" (97). The potency of the passage is reinforced through simple language and repeated images of silence, an image Angelou has used in other volumes. Her use of the word 'mute' emphasizes the silent misery of the slaves and Angelou's connection to them and their agony. Angelou's language in capturing the final separation from Africa of her ancestors has an awesome potency, a feeling of loss. But she does not allow the book to end in a desolate note, choosing instead to create, in the last full paragraph, a praise song that stands apart from the softer more subtle style. In an extremely condensed history of slavery in America, she evokes the blues, the dance, the gospel as they were carried through the streets of Massachusetts and Alabama, changed but still African; for Africa is still in the body and in the hips in a "wide open laughter" (209). This passage which represents the author at her most jubilant is followed by

one simple concluding statement, “I could nearly hear the old ones chuckling” (209). In a book that constantly alternates between African and African American voices, Angelou gives the last words to the “old ones”, to her Ghanaian ancestors, but filtered through her own experiences and the rich tradition. Yet her identification with the oral tradition of West Africa is not a permanent choice. For Angelou recognises at the end of *Travelling Shoes*, that if she is to become a contemporary writer she has to put on her travelling shoes for the long journey home.

Henry Louis Gates Jr. applies the term ‘signifyin(g)’ to the functions of black speech patterns as well as the process of echoing earlier African American traditions, motifs or figures of speech within a particular text. Angelou who is familiar with the term “signifying”, uses it to describe the way in which older black women use words and speech patterns to assert their verbal power. One might attribute Angelou’s abundant verbal punning in the autobiographies to her signifying Self to her verbal power as she portrays the power and duality of her relationships. In

Travelling Shoes, Angelou reiterates certain familiar patterns of African American slave narrative – the journey, the quest for freedom, empathy for the horrors suffered by slaves. Angelou's outrage against slavery repeats the condemnation of slavery recorded by articulate slave narrators of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. Maya Angelou, as both narrator and central character in her own story is concerned with capturing the rhythms of Africa as they affect her reinvigorated ties with her ancestors. Angelou draws on vivid episodes like the visit of Malcolm X to create dynamic characters. These confrontations interspersed within her own larger narrative of self-development, read like short stories. Angelou's self-discovery is augmented when she temporarily leaves the African continent in the mid 1960s to tour Berlin and Venice. The rhythmic prose with which she concludes the fifth volume is an anticipated departure to a new world. Angelou's genius as a writer is her ability to recapture the texture of the way of life in the texture of its idioms, its idiosyncratic vocabulary and especially in its process of image making. The imagery holds the reality, giving it immediacy. That

she chooses to recreate the past in its own sounds suggests to the reader that she accepts the past and recognises its beauty and its ugliness, its assets and its liabilities, its strengths and weaknesses. Here we witness a return to and full acceptance of its language. Ultimately Angelou's style testifies to her reaffirmation of self-acceptance that she achieves within the pattern of autobiography.

Thus through her serialised multiple autobiographies, Angelou makes possible a meeting of 'writing' and 'selfhood', a coming together of method and subject matter. What begins on the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction. George Gusdorf has argued that, "the appearance of autobiography implies a new spiritual revolution: the artist and the model coincide, the historian tackles himself as object" (1980: 31). According to Shari Benstock the meeting of Self and writing, between referential 'I' and the textual 'I' is always deferred because such writing actually reveals gaps, not only between the Self and Social, but more

significantly between the presumption of Self knowledge that initiates autobiography and its end in the creation of a fiction. The notion of a pre-existing Self underlying the text and accessed by it bypasses the problem of who the subject is and how she is constituted. For Domna Stanton, the female autobiography dramatises alterity and non-presence “even as it asserts itself discursively and strives towards an almost impossible self-possession” (1984: 16). Autobiography has been one of the most important sites of feminist debate precisely because it demonstrates that there are many different ways of writing the subject. In Angelou’s autobiographical works, there is this political imperative to constitute herself as subject so as to escape being never-endingly determined as object.

In the graphing or writing of her life, one can find ways of expressing a Self or a position which “arises from the situation as it comments on it” (Probyn 1993; 98). She utilises “local uses of the Self, imagining and inventing multiple subjectivities which are located in particular times and places. For her autobiography is a

strategy, “ a conjectural document of the Self and of the times” (Probyn 1993; 98). In conclusion it can be said that for Angelou autobiographical textuality is neither deterministic of a life nor a complete invention; Certainly the writing is crucial and replete with fictive elements and strategies, but without a life that contains fractures, silences, secrets, elisions, excisions, neither would writing about that life contain these elements. These features are not solely created by writing; autobiography writing is not a mechanical process that by itself creates change in a life in particular and the body politic in general. Angelou once again proves that in autobiography graph is predicated upon bio, writing upon life, and not the other way about.

Chapter 4

Joys of Commonality and Pangs of Difference

“If you can’t locate the other, how can you
locate yourself?”

–Trinh T. Minha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*.

Shared histories provide significant ways of understanding the world. Even in our world of printed facts and impersonal mass media, we consciously and unconsciously absorb knowledge of the world and how it works through exchange of life stories. The significance of these exchanges in clarifying social realities and challenging hegemonic oppression has been often profound for women. These exchanges and the knowledge they impart become part of our reality.

Traditionally, knowledge, truth and reality have been constructed as if men’s experiences were normative, as if human beings meant, being male. Generalisations based on this elevated truth and reality became norm, which were rarely challenged for their failure to consider/explain exceptions. Such generalisations

served to control data, control irregularities of human experience and ultimately controlled what constitutes knowledge. In this connection, Simone de Beauvoir says, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men: they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth"(1997: 175). What had been prescribed as an objective view of the world was selectively the dominant white male view. What was accepted to be normative was recognised as being the limited and limiting perspective of a particular gender, class and race.

The fact that human experience is gendered is central to the radical implications of feminist theory. The recognition of the impact of gender and an insistence on the importance of female experience has provided the vital common ground for feminist research and thought. Feminist theory emerges from and responds to the lives of women. The recovering and interpretation of women's lives have been central concerns for feminist scholarship from the earliest pioneering works to the present. Listening to women's voices, studying women's writing and learning from woman's experiences

have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world. Since feminist theory is grounded on women's lives and aims to analyse the role and meaning of gender in those lives and in society, women's personal narratives are essential primary documents for feminist research. These personal narratives or life stories presenting and interpreting women's life experiences illuminate the course of life over time and allow for its interpretation in its historical and cultural context. The act of constructing a life narrative forces the author to move from accounts of discrete experiences to an account of why and how the life took shape as it did. This why and how – the interpretative acts that shape a life narrative – need to take a high place on the feminist agenda as the recording of women's experiences. Women's personal narratives embody and reflect the reality of difference and complexity and stress the centrality of gender to human life. They are therefore critical to the understanding of humanity and to a reconstruction of knowledge that admits the facts and values of difference in its definition. In other words, women's autobiographical

works provide immediate, diverse and rich sources for feminist versions of knowledge.

The very word feminism is anti-totalising. It does not have one catch-all, all-or-nothing meaning, but many meanings which depend on contexts, subject positions, languages, the material worlds we inhabit, and our own psychic spaces; all mixed up together. And one of feminism's meanings has precisely to do with overstepping boundaries, defying limits and refusing to be contained in or by readymade systems of signification. The plural form, feminisms, disrupts the notion that 'feminism is a single category, with clear limits fixed in a single semantic space. The plural form rewrites the category as something potentially transgressive or subversive.

The assumption that womanhood is a universal condition, that contradicts the reality of difference in women's lives, has blinded feminism to some of its most important responsibilities. Coming out of a common history of subordination and repression, women are supposed to have developed a sisterhood that offers a transformative

model for society as a whole. At the core of the notion of sisterhood lies the affirmation of the solidarity and similarity of all women. This vision of sisterhood was based on the idea of common oppression, which was a false and corrupt platform disguising and mystifying the true nature of women's varied and complex social reality. The assumption that all women have been more united by gender than divided by class or race and that white women could speak legitimately in the name of all women have alienated many lower class and women of colour, who see their primary oppression as deriving from their class/race. The experiences of these women most sharply challenge the notion of a universal female experience. Women are divided by sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege and a host of other prejudices. Sustained woman bonding can occur only when these divisions are confronted and necessary steps are taken to eliminate them. According to bell hooks, women cannot develop sustained ties of political solidarity using the model of sisterhood envisioned by bourgeois white women liberationists. As per their analysis, the basis for bonding was shared victimisation and hence they emphasised on common oppression. This concept of bonding

directly reflects male supremacist thinking. Sexist ideologies teach women that to be female is to be a victim. This meant that women had to conceive of themselves as 'victims', in order to feel that feminist movement was relevant to their lives. Bonding as victims created a situation in which assertive, self-affirming women were often seen as having no place in feminist movement. They cannot afford to see themselves solely as victims because their survival depends on continued exercise of whatever personal powers they possessed. It would be psychologically demoralising for these women to bond with other women on the basis of victimisation. Instead they bond with other women on the basis of shared strengths and resources. This is the woman bonding that feminist movement should encourage and it is this type of bonding that is the essence of sisterhood. To build a political mass-based feminist movement, women must work harder to overcome the alienation from one another. There has to be inter-relationship between multi-ethnic groups of women by learning one another's cultural codes and respecting differences. Respecting diversity need not necessarily mean uniformity or sameness, rather it gives rise to a feeling of

sense of community of sisterhood. Divisions will not be eliminated by wishful thinking or romantic reveries about common oppression. Despite the value of highlighting common experiences all women share, individual experiences are varied even among those women who share common ethnic backgrounds.

By mapping out various strategies, the diversity is to be affirmed while working towards solidarity. If we are to develop political solidarity, women must explore various ways to communicate with each other cross-culturally. Feminist movement suffers when individual concerns and priorities are the only reason for participation. When we show our concern for the collective, we strengthen our solidarity. Women need to come together in situations where there will be ideological disagreement and work to change so that interaction and communication occurs. This means that when women come together, rather than pretend union, we would acknowledge that we are divided and must develop strategies to overcome fear, prejudices, resentment etc. When women actively struggle in a different way to understand our differences, to change

misguided perspectives, we lay the foundation for the experience of political solidarity. To express solidarity, we must have a confluence of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite, to build sisterhood. Solidarity requires sustained ongoing commitment. In feminist movement, there is a need for diversity, disagreement and difference, if we are to grow. In this regard, Audre Lorde comments:

Institutionalised rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy which needs outsiders as surplus people. As members of such economy, we have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to handle that difference in one of three ways – ignoring it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate(1984: 115).

In fact, women need not eradicate/ignore differences to feel solidarity. Women are enriched when we bond with one another taking differences in the stride.

This practice of sisterhood through sharing experiences provide a psychological space within which women could come to know themselves through knowing one another. This helps women to break out of the walls of silence and to forge a common language with which to express themselves – a language which will provide a new vocabulary for the female anger and thus open paths through which women might turn natural aggression outward rather than upon themselves. Anger always has been a taboo emotion which women have been taught to repress or to redirect against themselves, or other women. To discover the creative potential of anger, in life and in art, women need to break the silence. Sisterhood will afford a network of mutual support for women. They can invent non-unitary plural subjectivities as illustrated in “Between Ourselves” where Lorde writes: “and we each wear many changes/inside of our skin”. Yet she stipulates that until we recognise these many faces as our own and “stop killing/the other/in ourselves/the Self that we hate in others”, we remain blinded by our own self-denial and unable to create alliances among people of diverse backgrounds. (1976: 114). Connecting with each other across

boundaries indeed helps women to identify the decisive features of their social, economical and political vulnerability and to build foundation for their political strength. According to Nancy Chodorow:

Sisterhood has contributed to the creation of political female beings by freeing women from the continual replay of psychodramas, by freeing women from the necessity of continually reproducing their own childhood and even their own narcissism(1978: 76).

Globally speaking, women are so diverse and live in such varied cultural, radical and economic circumstances that we cannot possibly pretend to speak in a single voice. It is by listening to a plurality of voices from various corners of the planet and across centuries that women can strengthen their ability to resist demeaning power structures. It is the foregrounding of difference which can ultimately unite women as a powerful source of resistance against all repressive systems of ideology. In the face of women's life stories, the search for Truth requires truths – a symbolic as well as

semiotic revolution – by which we can challenge and reconstruct the traditional definitions of reality.

Studying women's autobiographies in relation to one another can reveal insights unavailable when autobiography is treated in isolation or read in the context of men's autobiography. Without arguing that features common to several women's autobiographies stem solely from the author's sex, it can be seen that patterns and themes emerge in how these women autobiographers respond to the changing positions and status of women and how these women writers from different locality grapple with problems common to all autobiography. As an exercise in support of the above detailed presumptions, an exploration of Maya Angelou's autobiographical works in juxtaposition with similar life writings of Asian American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston and the Aboriginal Australian writer, Sally Morgan, would yield as testimony, as to how autobiographical occasions become a site in which cultural ideologies intersect and dissect one another in contradiction, consonance and adjacency. In the making and unmaking of autobiographical subjects in a global

environment, a look at other modes of story telling, and other explorations of traditions would be worthwhile. The dimensions of plural truths, the truths of experience, history and perceptions embodied in these personal narratives are being looked at from a comparative perspective. Multiple truths of life are revealed by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms that guide them and the relationship that produce them.

In this connectivity of reading women's life writings, there is a proclamation of an 'I' in each individual woman's identity. At the same time it is a testament to the collective power of women. It represents both unity and diversity and the human need to be heard, listened to and understood. It echoes the West African saying, *I am because we are and we are because I am*. The individual and the collective are mutually dependent on both their sameness and difference. It contributes to the belief in the rich diversity of human expression. The diversity reflect the complexity of living with and struggling against the forces of racism, sexism, classicism, xenophobia and homophobia. The differences make problematic any

attempt to place women with varying views comfortably under one rubric. Each ethnicity descends from a history that has its own unique tradition, worldviews and ways of naming the past and present. As Shirley Geok Linn observes of Asian culture in the introduction to *The Forbidden Stitch*, “We do not share a common history, a common original culture or language, not even a common physique or color” (1989:10). The differences confronting these Black American, Asian American and Australian Aboriginal women writers, namely striking differences in socio-cultural background at first appear to divide them, more than their shared identity as women unite them. The differences across racial lines need to be taken into account when we read and examine the life writing by these people. We must understand them not as a homogeneous group but as one governed by the dynamics of difference. But a mere focus on difference can also take us too far from the fact they also share deeply rooted commonalities. The sense of belonging to specific African, Asian and Aboriginal culture has positioned them as ‘other’, as a ‘minority’, sometimes ambiguously inside and sometimes threateningly outside dominant society. This reality constantly

confronts them in shaping their worldviews and their identity. They had to carve out, invent and imagine new expressive forms – forms that evolve from their particular historical struggles and victories as they negotiate their place.

These autobiographers have a built-in safeguard against self-indulgence. For them, Self has to be retrieved from colonial hangovers, memories and actualities before it can be liberated into free-ranging memoir, nostalgia, reminiscence, recall. Self is recalled, explored and asserted as part and reflection of a larger complexity of racial/gender issues. What they have in common is their attempt to foreground the particular problems and lives of women, the forms of marginalisation or dispossession experienced by women. They operate in an overlapping private and political space, showing how family patterns, traditional power structures and conventions, and male authority have worked hand in hand with colonial politics to disempower women. For them, life writing became a vicarious adventure within which they could throw off their chains and achieve some degree of autonomy and self-expression. As well as

offering a feminist cutting edge to critiques of power structures, a comparative reading of these writers demonstrates a weaving together of the disparate lives of women, a quilting of literary inheritance that demonstrates a shared commitment even as it calls attention to diversity.

These autobiographers articulate a vision of the future founded on individual and collective solidarities, respectful of cultural specificities and oppose to all rigid essentialising approaches to questions of race, class or gender. Though belonging to widely different cultural backgrounds, they are seen to share a profound concern for the rhetoric of selfhood, for the processes of self-reading and self-writing as facilitated or impeded by the styles and languages in which they write. Each of these writers have a different relationship to her chosen medium of expression, the language in which she writes as well as to the style and mode of discourse, she chooses to adopt within the broader generic configuration of autobiography. In other words, language is problematic to all of them, not simply because no one ever has a

transparent relationship to a given linguistic frame of reference, but more specifically because their frames of reference are culturally worlds apart.

In the creation and reproduction of the Self, gender is a fundamental dimension in all societies. Dynamics of gender emerge more clearly in the personal narratives of women than in those of men. Certainly, men are affected by the social construction of gender, but for men, gender has been an unmarked category. Women's personal narratives are among other things, stories of how women negotiate their exceptional gender status both in their daily lives and over the course of a lifetime. Generally, it is assumed that one can understand life only if one takes into account gender roles and gender expectations. Whether she has accepted the norms or defied them, a woman's life can never be written taking gender for granted. Thus women's personal narratives are especially suitable documents for illuminating several aspects of gender relations; the construction of a gendered self-identity, the relationship between the individual and society in the creation and perpetuation of gender

norms and the dynamics of power relationship between men and women.

Taking into consideration the case of the three women writers discussed here, it is seen that, reflecting a cultural diversity, they represent well-defined gender roles and issues of resistance to hegemony. But perhaps because of the various difficult circumstances, they have faced in their lives, they do not make gender or gender roles the single key element in their autobiographies. The importance of gender is not exaggerated. Women's roles as daughter, lover, wife, mother etc are not devalued, but neither is gender identified as the core of selfhood or an essential handicap. Rather the experience of being a woman is represented as part of a longer more complex human story. Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical masterpiece, *The Woman Warrior*, with its theme of diverse cultural realities, reminds us to be careful about embracing a universal notion of what it means to be a woman. At the same time, however, the book raises the possibility that an important link not for all, but for many women is the disjunction

between female identity and the other aspect of cultural heritage. Though it sounds good when we listen to euphoric statements like the one made by a character in Virginia Woolf's *The Three Guineas*, "as a woman I have no country. . . As a woman my country is the whole world"(1938:62), which stands testimony to a global women's culture, we know that it is impossible to speak of women's culture without understanding its variation by class and ethnic group. One can see agonising contradiction between allegiance to gender and fidelity to some other dimension of one's cultural background namely race/class/ethnicity, a commonplace of the female experience. Looking at Sally Morgan's *My Place*, one feels that from within the framework of conventional Western autobiography, Morgan makes many discoveries about the loss of her "place" in Aboriginal life. While these are often personal discoveries that help her to redefine herself, they also weave a web of communal connections with families, kinship, groups, traditions, lands and stories that have little to do with her as an individual woman. Similarly, the sequential books written by Maya Angelou tell not just what happened to her but the effect upon her of these happenings. She

relates things she has learned, how she has grown and how she has moved along the trail of self-discovery. Her stories seem to tell themselves and from them emerge the exposition of her themes. Angelou's dedication to personal growth and self-evaluation comes up repeatedly and she continually modifies her ideas about black/white relationships over time. Three familiar themes of black autobiography are found in Angelou's works: repeated triumphs over obstacles, a search for identity and the value of literacy and learning. Angelou examines her childhood and various stages of growing up and becoming an adult by creating a persona. She has said she invented herself because she was tired of society inventing her, of distorting her personality, of turning stereotype into reality, of bestowing upon her a label she rejected. Her stories can be aptly called testimonials. She testifies not only for herself but also for her community. She seems to speak for black consciousness. Her voice as a writer is the voice of the people. What her community endures she endures. She writes about what she knows – the black experience. The universals contained in her works serve to underscore her

frequently expressed thesis – that as people, we are more alike than unlike.

Feminist critics have long recognised that what constitutes female experience is not biological gender or a specific female psyche but the constraints and limitations felt by women as a result of the cultural constitution of gender and the phallogentric organisation of society. To write socially and politically as a woman is therefore to question the truth, status and ostensible ideological neutrality of cultural norms and institutions. The feminine text according to Cixous, “shatters the framework of institutions” (1981:43). Kristeva too has similarly argued that women’s writing should, “reject everything finite, definite, structured, loaded with meaning, in the existing state of society” (1985:112). The subversion of the institutions and cultural norms that Cixous and Kristeva call for in women’s writing are goals for all marginal and oppressed groups. Marginal groups have little investment in concepts of unity, coherence and universality because their own political efficacy depends upon forcing a recognition of the value of difference and diversity upon the dominant culture. Third World feminists have in

fact challenged the pre-supposition of feminists who speak in the name of a singular womanhood and whose own analyses are blind to racial difference. What is politically important for women and racial minorities is not to frame correct definitions of female and ethnic identity, but to question all such definitions. Above all it means to reject the concept of a stable and autonomous Self upon which such definitions depend. Exactly that is the kind of works undertaken by Kingston, Morgan and Angelou in their autobiographies.

Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is a collection of 'memoirs' of her experiences of growing up in an immigrant family in California. She reveals the squalor and poverty of Chinatowns, the endemic racism, the traumas of acculturation in a hostile environment, and her own attempt to subvert gender hierarchies by imaginative identification with the Woman Warrior. But although Kingston writes polemically against the subjugation of women and the racial hostility experienced by Chinese Americans, she does not do so from a position of stability or unity. Bhaktin's privileging of the dialogic rests upon an awareness of the dangers of unified thinking and the

liberative potential of dialogic subversions. Dostoevsky the exemplar of dialogic thinking succeeds not by creating a single consciousness at the centre of the text but by presenting a, “whole formed by the interaction of several consciousness, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other”(Bakhtin 1984: 94). Dialogic thinking is based on inter-subjectivity. It celebrates the otherness of language, the potential of words to always carry echoes of other words. That is why feminist critics are increasingly beginning to use Bakhtin’s theories as sites of women’s resistance and women’s voicing. Dialogic subversions are used as emancipatory strategies in women’s writing. *The Woman Warrior* is a sustained subversion of cultural, racial and gender definitions and an affirmation of a radical inter-subjectivity as the basis of articulation.

Articulation itself is a complex issue in the text. The very act of speaking involves breaking through the gender and race barriers that suppress voicing from the margins. But the voice Kingston speaks through is not isolated and autonomous. It refracts echoes and is creatively conjoined with the numerous voices with which it

interacts. This undefined basis of narration dramatizes Kingston's determination not to create singular definitions of ethnic identity in order to combat the impoverishing stereotypes to which Chinese Americans are subject, not to postulate the foundations of a new hierarchy.

The Woman Warrior is a personal unconventional work that seeks to reconcile Eastern and Western conceptions of female identity. Kingston eschews chronological plot and standard, non-fiction techniques in her memoir, synthesising ancient myth and imaginative biography to present a kaleidoscopic vision of female character. The narrative begins with Kingston's mother's brief caveat concerning No Name Woman, young Maxine's paternal aunt, whose disrepute has rendered her unmentionable. Left in their village by her émigré husband, No Name Woman became pregnant – perhaps by rape – and was forced by villagers to drown herself and her baby. The unnamed narrator thus begins her recollections with the act of listening rather than speaking. A secrecy oath is imposed on her by her indomitable mother – “You must not tell anyone”(3). A

moral is also drawn from the story – “You must not humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born”(4). Kingston is aware of the temerity involved in the very act of her writing. She opens with the historiography of the No Name Aunt told to her out of necessity as a cautionary tale, when she began her menstruation. To articulate herself, she had to break through the barriers that condemn her to voicelessness. The story establishes the denial of expression women are condemned to in patriarchy and the cultural stranglehold the narrator must fight in order to express herself. The tale is used by Kingston to measure how her life crosses with that of the aunt, her “forerunner”. She acknowledges, “unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (8). Her first significant act through autobiography is to tell that about which she is told, “you must not tell anyone” (3). She on telling the ostracised aunt’s story also opens the book with the act of breaking the silence. “Silence is certainly one locus of a text’s potential resistance to hegemony. However the act of writing a text, as a means of breaking the silence is inextricably bound up with the very forces it wishes to oppose.”(Kalogeras,1991:66). For all the three

autobiographers discussed here, the act of writing is breaking of silence that becomes embodied within the narrative itself – For Angelou, the self-inflicted silence after her rape, for Kingston the silence enjoined on her by her culture and family, for Morgan the adamant silence of her mother, grandmother and others who prefer silence to speech with regard to their aboriginal past. The vivid accounts of being tortured by silence are metaphors for the particular limitations that marginal writers must overcome in order to be heard. In Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, the eight-year-old Angelou is first fondled and later sexually assaulted by her mother's boyfriend. Angelou testifies at the man's trial, but she chooses not to tell the whole story and later after he is murdered by her uncles, she retreats into silence afraid that if she ever speaks again, the evil that she speaks would once more do someone injury. For Angelou, silence is representative of guilt, the guilt that she feels in not telling the entire truth, from the guilt of being unable to free herself from the fear that she is responsible for a man's death. Angelou could find her only solace in silence.

Maintaining silence becomes a way to preserve her world. "The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey" (73).

She used silence as a refuge and as a way to create an interior world. Angelou escapes from silence by turning her existence in *Stamps* into a novel and conferring value on her experience in terms of its relation to the literary. It is clear in her ability to write of her life that Angelou has found a way to banish silence and to put pretences of the past behind her.

In Sally Morgan's *My Place*, it is the astute silence of her mother and grandmother when asked about their aboriginal past that obstructs Morgan's need to know about herself and her people. Their silence is prompted by the fear of racism and oppression by the colonial government. Through their experiences with white society both women have learned to fear the government and its ability to disempower Aboriginal people. Afraid that the system will apprehend their children and take their house, the two women resolve to maintain their family by denying their ancestry through silence. Morgan's book is about the overcoming of that fear,

understanding it and accepting the family's aboriginality. Morgan, in her search for identity, her own as well as the aboriginal community's seeks to expose the injustice and exploitation meted out to the natives by the rulers. She delves into the past with its untold stories and thick silence about the dispossessed and violated. Her narrative rewrites and reveals attitudes and living conditions of aboriginals which are not found in official records of history. As aptly converged by Morgan:

There's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows what it was like for us. A lot of our history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything . . . There are all sorts of files about aboriginals that go way back and the government won't release them . . . And they don't like letting them out, because there are so many instances of police abusing their power when they were supposed to be protectors of Aborigines. . . our own government had terrible policies for Aboriginal people. Thousands of families in Australia were destroyed by the

government policy of taking children away. None of that happened to white people. (161)

Through her narrative, Morgan makes an attempt to open up the silences and reverse the denials. She indeed makes use of technologies of autobiography, a mainstream mode to expose the lives of the forgotten without compromising the integrity of the history.

In the case of Maxine Hong Kingston, an additional impediment impairs an easy reference to the ancestral heritage. In fact Maxine's case is aggravated by her double bind caused by both ethnicity and gender. The silence that she confronts is the product not only of the orientalist construction of Asians in American culture, but also because of the Chinese patriarchal strategy of sealing women's experiences. The device of foot-binding is metaphorically mentioned by the narrator when she asserts, "Even now China wraps double binds around my feet"(48). This feeling is aggravated when the young girl repeatedly hears with her growing up, statements like, "Feeding girls are feeding cowbirds . . . There is no profit in raising girls. Better

raise geese than girls”(46).“When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls”(52).It is through the medium of her mother’s memory and ‘Talking Stories’, that Kingston explores her past in order to relate to her present sense of ethnic identity. *The Woman Warrior* narrativizes the movement from perceptions of community and tradition – “the China I made up”, as she says in *China Men* (Kingston 1977/1980: 87) to individuation through the act of writing the Self. In terms of the text, the movement is from the inherited myth of Fa Mu Lan, “the China given me by my mother (20) to the evolved myth of T’Sai Yen: “Here’s a story my mother told me . . . the beginning is hers, the ending mine” (206).

Kingston’s narrative delineates the conflicting images of womanhood handed down to her by her mother. The stories are illustrated by the myths of heroic women that stand in sharp contrast to the long standing system of female oppression in China. The story of the ‘No Name’ Aunt is followed by a tale about Fa Mu Lan, the mythical Warrior Woman. This talk story repeatedly chanted by Brave Orchid and her daughter told of a girl taken to the

mountains by a magic bird, who trained herself to become strong in self-discipline and magic and later returned to wreak vengeance on her family's and country's enemies. Kingston jumps from these stories to the central history of her mother in China, then to the tale of another aunt, Moon Orchid, a delicate and giggling old woman who emigrated and ended in madness, broken by the U.S., which Kingston's mother had survived.

For Kingston, the story of Fa Mu Lan, offers an emotional alternative to threats and dangers that accompany adolescence. The Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan becomes a role model to Kingston to help her feel a sense of her own worth in a culture that frequently emphasised the worthlessness of girls. When Kingston juxtaposes the legend of Fa Mu Lan against the story of No Name Aunt, her purpose is to tell whether her culture's myth about a heroic woman who defends her village will provide a way for Kingston to transcend the degrading female social role and yet be loyal to the community. Kingston retells the story casting herself as the Warrior Woman, who through magic and self-discipline is trained to bring about

social justice while at the same time fulfilling her domestic obligations. In Kingston's universe it is through mastery of language that a warrior is created. Kingston had been raised to experience and requires a powerful identification with family and community. Yet as a woman, she simply cannot accept a place in a culture which calls people of her sex, "maggots", "broom and dustpan", "slave". These words sting her and hence for a time she is unable to find the right voice to express her own point of view. She is rendered nearly voiceless for much of her youth. She speaks inaudibly or in a quack. The confused child faced with two languages, with the "weight and immensity of things impossible to explain" (171) seeks refuge in silence and remains totally voiceless during the first three years of American schooling. When she realises that silence at school is also what afflicts her sister and other Chinese American friends, she concludes that it "had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). She manages in her early school life to flunk her KG Class and to obtain a zero IQ, leading the American schoolteacher to recommend speech therapy. But no remedy is likely to stop her faltering, cracking voice produced by a crippled throat. She progressively realises that she is

her own therapist and that the only avenue to salvation is a reconstruction of the past followed by a breaking of the silence.

In order to achieve a clear perception of her own Self and where she stands in the muddle, the narrator attempts to reconstruct her past by investigating into that of a network of mythical, ancestral, historical and actual female figures who have shaped her character. She pursues her investigation to establish an independent identity despite the ongoing messages she receives about her worthlessness as a woman. She explores her past in order to relate it to her present sense of ethnic identity. By writing a collective autobiography with a decentred authorial 'I', at once visible and invisible, she offers space to the silenced or forgotten, actual or legendary female voices with whom she enters in a dialogical relationship.

The importance of the re-appropriation of the past remains a key theme in writings of gender and ethnic self-assertion, and is emphasised by Toni Morrison through the landmark statement, "I know I can't change the future, but I can always change the past"

(Marshall 1992: 180). Kingston's work revolves around the function of the word, the vehicle of the past contained in the collective memory. For Kingston, "the reporting is the vengeance, not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (53). Her book underlines the association Kingston establishes between voicelessness and victimisation by giving voice to wronged women. The young Maxine fails however in her attempt with her mute schoolmate in an episode that serves to measure the dimension given to alienation in the book. Brutalizing a mute girl into impossible speech, she pinches and hits screaming appeals to talk, "Because if you don't talk, you can't have a personality. So talk, please talk" (180-81). In this moving episode, Kingston reflects her own anxiety with speechlessness, which determines the decision she later makes to pour out her grievances with her mother as an attempt to solve her conflict with her. And among the items which are granted the highest priority in her list is her mother's early act of cutting her frenum, misinterpreted as an attempt to tamper with her speech, "The first thing my mother did when she saw me was to cut my tongue" (164). And the questioned mother over and over repeats, "I cut it so that

you would not be tongue-tied” (164). The sceptical girl does not cease doubting the truthfulness of the statement. On the contrary she includes the act among what requires reporting to relieve the pain that constantly builds in her throat under the heavy pressure of prohibition and silence. For Kingston, voicelessness is not only a sign of victimization but also of insanity. Kingston draws the link by telling the story of her other aunt, a dominated and submissive wife, abandoned in China by a free-willed husband who emigrates to America and remarries. Encouraged by her sister in America to trace him back, she is made to travel to California and to confront him. But a stare is sufficient to silence her and she can only, “open and shut her mouth without any words coming out . . . He looked directly at [her] the way the savages looked . . . She shrank from his stare; it silenced her crying” (152). The wronged but silenced aunt becomes mad and then eventually dies, leaving her American niece to conclude that, “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” (186). She then resolved to become a “female avenger” (43) fighting with the word to denounce silence. Kingston fulfils that resolution when her character becomes a

storyteller at the end of *The Woman Warrior*. She in fact, devotes the last page of her book to the story of a historical female figure, T'Sai Yen which she introduces as follows, "Here is a story my mother told me not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, ending is mine" (206). The three-page story of T'Sai Yen closes the book as significantly as the 'No Name Woman' opens it. T'Sai Yen is another ravished and impregnated woman, who gives birth on the sand but who eventually returns to her people. But the most interesting feature of the story is the woman's articulation of her pain during captivity through the improvisation of poetry which sings to the flute music of her capturers. By such means Kingston firstly validates her own artistic expression and gives it a healing dimension. Secondly, what she also infers is the enriching value of cultural hybridization conveyed by both the shared nature of T'Sai Yen's songs and the shared nature of the story she's co-telling with her mother. The story becomes a metaphor of Kingston's reconciliation with her mother and thereby to her past. She has resolved her conflict by articulating a personal word, a combination of her two cultures; an

acknowledgement of the direction that her present draws from her past. In one episode at the end of the book, she justifies to her mother her decision of leaving her, "I've found some places in this country that are ghost-free. And I think I belong there . . . Here I'm sick so often. I can barely work. I can't help it Mama" (108). And she further confesses, "I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing things" (204). She begins to make sense of herself as neither Chinese nor American but as a Chinese American Woman when she escapes the stranglehold of her mother, but keeps her teaching in memory to benefit the newly-shaped identity which she defines as follows, "we belong to the planet. Now Mama . . . wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot" (107).

One can immediately trace overtones of the same sentiments and similar attitudes in the autobiographies of Maya Angelou and Sally Morgan. All the three autobiographers illuminate the experience of everyone who has ever felt the terror of being an emotional outsider. In the vivid particular ties of each one's

experience and with the varied resources of techniques of autobiographical writing, these writers reach out to the universal qualities of female condition. Read collectively, the life stories of those women writers' commitment to shape a more inclusive global community may stand as correctives. As documents of moral and political courage, they contradict those feminist theorists who interpret women's lives as plots of victimisation and women themselves as essential cripples, passive and silent conditioned to stay put on the sidelines of oppressive history. The patterns of political and emotional courage in these writer's lives hardly cancel out the evidence of wasted talent and lost opportunities in women's experiences to which many feminists have borne witness. In their own hybrid voices – Chinese American, African American, Aboriginal Australian – these women have been witness to lives far more complex than are dimensional stories of gender experience. Their ethnic heritages are often infused with different cultural traditions which can profoundly mark a woman's sense of herself and the world. It is evident that many layers of the past history and the present circumstances shape each writer's primary experience

and written story. What the autobiographical genre makes clear is that without context – the specific time and place and people whose influence on a writer is crucial – there is no individual character, no core Self. Thus autobiography functions as the linguistic bridge between the Self and its full human heritage.

The story of an immigrant's emergence, legitimation and empowerment within the hegemonic culture through an autobiographical text marks the endorsement by that culture of a subject's successful acquisition of what Paul John Eakin terms "second language" (Eakin, 1985; 237). Needless to say this second language concerns the production of a testimonial, a personal narrative of the subject's relation to the social discourses and paradigms, that sustain the hegemonic culture and what the culture sanctions. Consequently the socio-cultural integration as well as the integrity of the subject is emphasised. As Nietzsche pointed out, "integrity is what every individual must possess 'if he is to become the subject of [any] system of law, morality or propriety'" (White, 1987: 36). Sally Morgan in *My Place* is seeking integrity and

identification as an aboriginal. She speaks out the problematics of defining Aboriginal identity as a fair-skinned woman who do not fit into the public image of who and what an Aboriginal woman ought to be. Sally had lived for a period totally unaware of her Aboriginality, the truth of which was conveniently kept away from her by her mother and grandmother. And even when she found out that she was an Aboriginal, she with her light skin could have easily chosen to conceal it and live the same kind of life she had been used to till then, claiming a convenient non-aboriginal identity. Indeed that was the approach her mother, Gladys had taken by telling her children they were Indians, a well-thought out strategy to safeguard them from the social stigma attached to Aboriginal Identity. But Sally wanted to break out of the secret of her aboriginal heritage and her firm decision to embrace and explore an Aboriginal identity is an important political decision that she makes. When she applied for an Aboriginal scholarship she desperately wanted to “do something to identify with . . . [her] new found heritage” (134). But in the initial stages of her search she herself had her own doubts regarding her claim as aboriginal. She had been raised in ignorance

of her ancestry, she was speaking English as her mother tongue and aboriginal experience was in no way within the reach of her knowledge and experience. She asks herself:

Had I been dishonest with myself? What did it really mean to be an Aboriginal? I'd never lived off the land and been a hunter and gatherer. I'd never participated in corroborees or heard stories of the Dreamtime. I'd lived all my life in Suburbia and told everyone I was Indian. I hardly know any Aboriginal people. What did it mean for someone like me?

(52)

But inspite of all her doubts, something inside her wanted her to go on with her "tentative identification" with Aboriginal ancestry. She decides to "hold on to the fact, that someday, it might all mean something". Consequently she decides to write a book about her family history so that she can uncover the truth of who she is and why she had been denied her identity as an Aboriginal Woman.

My Place begins with Morgan tracking the experiences of her own life growing up in Suburban Perth in the 50s and 60s through

memories and images of her childhood and adolescence, vague hints and echoes begin to emerge, hidden knowledge is uncovered and a fascinating story unfolds – a mystery of identity complete with clues and suggested solutions. With the publication of *My Place* in the 80s, it raised issues that had not been raised before. It made people reassign their view of Australia as a nation, with its motto of “fair go” for everyone. Aboriginal people could never enjoy that “fair go”. Appearing just before Australian Bi-Centenary celebration, the book *My Place* foreshadowed and exploited the rising interest in Aboriginal works in a culture that has traditionally given it neither recognition nor access to white means of production. *My Place* made a lot of indigenous people reassign the values of the nation in terms of how much those values had been applied to Aboriginal people. It brought down a lot of barriers and brought a lot of people together and opened up more understanding between the different groups. In an interview talking about the success of *My Place*, Sally Morgan says:

What was good about the success of *My Place* was that it focussed on human rights, on issues to do with indigenous

people in Australia. If people could relate to the book and the ordinary people in it, it marked the issue to do with Aboriginal people, human issues in a human rights context, especially in terms of what happened with Aboriginal people belonging to the stolen generation. A lot of Australians did not have a knowledge about what had happened and were very shocked to find out the extent to which Aboriginal families had been separated. . . it also helped lots of other Aboriginal people to find the courage to really know about their families.(2000: 99).

However, Morgan could write a book like this because of the advantage of her dual position. She is empowered by her access to information, since she had been assimilated into white society. As a result of a work like *My Place* there began a groundswell movement amongst ordinary Australians for the support of Aboriginal culture, giving way to a socio-cultural integration by opening up a different view about the world and about race.

An acceptance and celebration of cultural diversity, a need to value our differences while recognising that we are all human beings with shared rights and needs, are revealed through a collective reading of women's personal narratives. Fundamental truths are embedded and reflected in women's experiences as revealed in their life stories. These truths, decidedly a plural concept, are meant to encompass the multiplicity of ways in which women's life stories reveal and reflect important features of their conscious experience and social landscapes, creating from both, their essential realities. These truths inform our own realities and are necessary to our lives. Taken collectively they suggest different ways of seeing, thinking and being.

Morgan's *My Place* is a deeply moving account of a search for Truth into which a whole family is gradually drawn, finally freeing the tongues of the author's mother and grandmother, allowing them to tell their own stories. It is a journey into the past to expose the silence of the marginalized. Morgan travels backwards into history to expose the way her grandmother and other Aboriginal relatives

were treated by the whites. She wants to announce to the White Australians the pain and sufferings of the Aboriginal people. The book explores the history of Sally Morgan's family in the wider context of Australian history. Sally records her childhood as a time of difficulty. The family often run short of money. Her father, a veteran of World War II suffers pain, illness and dies, while Sally is a young girl. Her mother, Gladys has a variety of cleaning jobs to make ends meet. Sally spends most of her young life with her brothers and sisters, and her grandma, Daisy. During the course of her youth, she realises that she is not always regarded by others in the same way as white children. On pressing her mother about their family background, she is told that she is an Indian. However she learns later that it is a lie and she is instead descended from Australia's Aborigines. When she realises this, the search for her roots, her identity, her home begins. She sets on a determined quest to discover the hitherto hidden Aboriginal branches of her family tree. Her mother and grandmother are reluctant to talk about their pasts, but gradually Sally pieces together a story of her Aboriginal inheritance. This involves her travelling to places where her mother

and grandmother grew up and meeting Aboriginal people, whom she had no idea existed, as well as tape recording the voices of other Aboriginal members of her family, which she transcribes and includes in her autobiography.

Her travelling back to her grandmother's birthplace started out as a tentative search for information about her family. However it later turned out to be an overwhelming emotional and spiritual pilgrimage for Morgan. She was confronted with her own suppressed history and with fundamental questions about her identity. After a series of emotional meetings with her Aboriginal relations, she came to feel inside her what she calls a "proud Aboriginal consciousness".

My Place offers a corrective to historical representation of Australian history. As Sally reflects:

There's almost nothing written from a personal point of view about Aboriginal people. All our history is about the white man. No one knows about what it was like for us. A lot of our

history has been lost, people have been too frightened to say anything (163).

The writings of Australian history privileges the white and the male. In opposition to this, Morgan's narrative calls attention to the experiences of women and records the exploitation of Aboriginal people by white settlers, who often broke up Aboriginal families and employed Aboriginal women as domestic servants without paying them a wage. The text evidences the double colonisation of women on many occasions, as many characters find themselves subservient to colonialist and patriarchal values. It exposes how Aboriginal women could become objects of sexual desire for white men who compelled them to have intercourse and cared little for the devastating effects this could have on them, particularly as concerning pregnancy. Children fathered by white men were taken away from the Aboriginal mothers and forced to grow separately. *My Place* enables a feminist critique of patriarchal values enshrined in historical representation of Australia and in the institution which impacted devastatingly on many women's lives. Morgan is concerned

about the history of slavery, under development, exploitation, grief and pain that the Aborigines have undergone.

Morgan's *My Place*, a powerful autobiography of three generations is one of the most significant milestones in Aboriginal literature. Like Angelou and Kingston, she also writes about domination and subjugation, of survival in the face of adversity. Domination was not only physical but also a subtle psychological one that was being perpetuated on Aboriginal people by being regimented, de-humanised and brainwashed by the dominant white ideology. Morgan like her counterparts, Angelou and Kingston, is concerned about those unpleasant aspects of human life and writes about them. She gives us scenes, taking up slices of day-to-day life for observation and awareness. Deeply committed for the cause of Aboriginal people, Morgan focuses on how they have had a raw deal, how their defences have been undermined in various ways and how they have been subjected to physical, psychological and sexual harassment. The problems of accessing and representing the

consciousness of doubly colonised women, otherwise silent in received historical representations are central to *My Place*.

The very term, 'autobiography' is immediately problematized when it is used in an aboriginal context. In many cultures, autobiography did not exist at all in the past and exists now only as a cultural transplant – quite unlike traditional white male autobiography depending on a strong sense of Self, for aboriginal women writers, the genre provides an ideal platform from which to reveal the fragmentation of the subject and of the culture, that has occurred as a result of these women's displaced cultural situation. Rules of authorship, ownership and authority are so differently understood by aboriginal people. Aboriginal autobiography is passionately polemical in its impulses. Within aboriginal culture, telling one's own story is a very complicated process that is heavily controlled by taboos and other traditional constraints. Bell Diane explains:

the way in which Aborigines have made sense of the past century is not in terms of an event-person oriented

chronology. They have asserted continuity and found it in the dogma of the immutability and omnipresence of the Dreamtime law . . . the past has been encapsulated in the present, the present permeates the past.(1983: 46).

In order to locate herself and her people, Morgan had to break the age-old silence, which had been a strong defence strategy for her mother and grandmother to keep up appearances of non-aboriginal identity. Morgan, sensing her own obsessive desire to get things straight, decides to tell her story overcoming all the taboos and traditional constraints. Similarly, in the case of Kingston too, retelling her aunt's story, she breaks her mother's injunction to silence, and subverts the authority by offering several versions of the tale. So did Maya Angelou realise that her own identity and sense of place have been inscribed by her community and that the silence that is demanded of a traumatized young girl child should give way to speech; as bell hooks says, "the right speech of womanhood" (1989: 6).

These women's writings should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed geographical ethnical or national bound category of writing. In cross cultural, transnational perspectives, their writings redefine identity away from exclusion and marginality. For Angelou, particularly in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, home is migratory, sometimes joyful but generally a difficult space which she must eventually leave in order to grow. So is Africa for her in the subsequent work, *Heart of a Woman*. During Angelou's visit to Ghana which she describes in *All God's Children need Travelling Shoes*, she had been overenthusiastic viewing Africa romantically as a home, heaven and a mother. But soon she doubts about the possibility of connection as she finds herself isolated from the people of Ghana. She says, "I doubted if I or any Black from the Diaspora could really return to Africa." (76). The concept of home has got a shifting meaning to black women. The contradictory meaning of home is expressed thus:

For black women, there is an inherent contradiction in the very word, "home". Where is home for starters? Can you call a country which has systematically colonised your countries of

origin, one which refuses through racism in its institutions, media and culture to even recognise your existence – can you call this country “home” without having your tongue inside your cheek?(Davis 1994: 96).

Attitudes towards black people in their own homes challenge the myth of security that accompanies home. The dreams of a nostalgic home back in the old country is beset with problems, for “back home” becomes an idealized romanticized place of origins which often turns out not so glossy when the migrant returns. However, repressing the disillusionment and alienation she experienced on the continent and unwilling to depict Africa as a bad dream, Angelou manages to maintain her romantic image of Africa.

The issue of unbelongingness and displacement is a central theme in Kingston too. *The Woman Warrior* is perhaps one of the most well known of the writings that engage the question of home and identity. In the beginning Kingston makes the sort of equations that set up China as other and allies herself totally with Western culture. Eventually, however she rejects the plastic society of the

West, but at the same time she also rejects Orientalism. She realises that she understands little of Chinese legacy. But now instead of exoticising it so much, she longs to discover her culture from which she had been uprooted. She knows now that to fix one particular image of a culture is to falsify it. She is open to fluid interpretation which allow and appreciate cultural differences. Though she said she never wanted to go to China, she ultimately changes her mind and plans a visit as she continues to sort out what was real and what was imagined. She realizes that her Chinese heritage is not neatly compatible with her American culture; the two cultures can only touch, each must stand separate, its difference accepted rather than stigmatised as other. She is free to find a meaning in a cultural heritage that has a vital presence in her life.

Moving over to Sally Morgan's *My Place*, it is seen that the emphasis and significance of home, loyalty and roots is linked to Morgan's sense of origins and her sense of connection with her community. Through this sense of belonging she is speaking for a definable 'people'. Her autobiography is not simply an account of the

transition from a white to black perception of herself. It is the record of a conscious process of re-entry into a culture whose traces had repeatedly erupted in inexplicable ways into her comfortable suburban life without ever adding up to anything coherent until she found out about her Aboriginal origins. The significance of the concept of “place” in the title is one that is central to Morgan’s ideas – the longing for, the realisation of a place from which to speak. Morgan makes many discoveries about the loss of her “place” in Aboriginal life. While these are often personal discoveries that help her to redefine herself, they also weave a web of communal connections with families, kinship groups, traditions, lands and stories that have little to do with her as an ‘individual’. Her newfound ‘place’ as an Aborigine provides the possibility of being an insider, being at home from those who are ostracised as racial outsiders. According to Ferrier:

In the light of a history of Aboriginal people having been often forced to know their place in the white coloniser’s scheme of things . . . finding a place within the dominant

institution from which to speak and resist become one strategy of opposition.(1992: 213).

Morgan's book had been open to criticism for the adoption of a white mode of story telling. But it is important to consider that Morgan was brought up in a family environment which protected from her the knowledge of her Aboriginality almost until she reached adulthood. She therefore had no choice but to use the forms she knew, and she placing herself in the dominant society and using the strategy of white mode of story telling, does engage in the act of speaking, resisting and opposing and raising public awareness enormously.

The emphasis on individualism as a necessary pre-condition for autobiography is actually a reflection of privilege; one that excludes from the canon of autobiography those writers who had been denied by history the illusion of individualism. Isolate individualism itself is an illusion. A white man has the luxury of forgetting his skin colour and sex and can think of himself as an individual. Women and minority have no such luxury. Quoting Greg Simmel, Lynn

Sukenick emphasises the significance of group identity for women's consciousness of Self:

If we express the historic relationship between sexes crudely in terms of master and slave, it is part of the master's privileges not to have to think continuously of the fact that he is the master, while the position of the slave carries with it the constant reminder of his being a slave. It cannot be overlooked that the woman forgets far less often the fact of being a woman than the man of being a man.(1997: 28).

Women's sense of collective identity however is not just negative. It can also be a source of strength and transformation. As Rowbotham points out, cultural representations of woman lead not only to women's alienation, but also to the potential for a "new consciousness" of Self. Not recognising themselves in the reflections of cultural representations, women develop a dual consciousness – the Self as culturally defined and the Self as different from cultural prescription:

But always we were split into two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another.

From this division, our material dislocation came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other, which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, were always in-transit immigrants into alien territory . . . The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as a historical being – Woman(1973: 31).

The description of women's double consciousness directly parallels W.E.B. Dubois' identification of dual consciousness for blacks living in a dominant white culture. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois wrote:

The Negro is gifted with Second Sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, the double consciousness, this Self of always looking at one's Self through the eyes of others; of measuring one's

soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness. (1968: 30).

Du Bois's and Rowbotham's metaphors of reflection, invisibility and silence are useful in understanding the process of alienation in the identities of any group existing at the margins of culture – Women in Man's world; Blacks in a White world, Aboriginals in a non-aboriginal world and so on. Like Du Bois, Rowbotham says that women can move beyond alienation through a collective solidarity with other women – that is,, a recognition that women as a group can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience. She insists:

People who are without names, who do not know themselves, who have no culture, experience a kind of paralysis of consciousness. The first step is to connect and learn to trust one another... Solidarity has to be a collective consciousness which at once comes through individual self-consciousness and transforms it (29).

In taking the power of words, of representation into their own hands, women project onto history an identity that is not purely

individualistic. Nor is it purely collective. Instead, this identity merges the shared and the unique. In autobiography, specifically the Self created in a woman's text is often not a "teleological entity", an "isolate being" utterly separate from all others, as Gusdorf and Olney define the autobiographical Self. Nor is the Self a false image of alienation, an empty play of words on the page disconnected from the realm of referentiality, as a Lacanian and post structuralist critic of autobiography might say. Instead, the Self constructed in women's autobiographical writing is often based in, but not limited to group consciousness. Alienation is not the result of creating a Self in language. Instead alienation from the historically imposed image of the Self is what motivates the writing, the creation of an alternate Self in the autobiographical act. When Angelou says, "I decided many years ago to invent myself, I had obviously been invented by someone else – by a whole society – and I didn't like that invention" (Elliot 1989: 115), she is exactly reflecting the above expressed sentiments. The conceptualisation of collective alienation, consciousness and formation of new identities through reclamation of language and image provides a richly suggestive framework for

approaching the individual life stories in autobiographies by women and minorities. In "In Search of the Black Female Self", Regina Blackburn argues that black women autobiographers use the genre to redefine "the black female self in black terms from a black perspective" (1980: 147). Maya Angelou writes what she knows, she writes of race and racism. Her work is about the survival of African Americans and at the same time the survival of human race. Bernice Johnson Reagan identifies black women's autobiographical writing as "cultural autobiography", because the story of a black woman's selfhood is inseparable from her sense of community. She writes, "We are, at the base of our identities, nationalists. We are people builders, carriers of cultural traditions, key to the formation and continuation of culture"(1982: 81).

Angelou talks about the pervasive feeling of dislocation among Black Americans who are burdened by a cultural carry over from slavery. One can also find in Angelou's works a feeling of being trapped in a heritage, a feeling of entrapment which is due in part to an innate desire to remember and hopefully pass on the black

heritage. She balances beautifully the quest for human individuality with the general conditions of Black Americans. Hers is an individual's attempt to forge and maintain a healthy sense of Self within a group that is undergoing a cultural transition. Relying on her experience of Black Culture, Angelou unrelentingly protest against racial injustice, which she records throughout her volumes. Maya's struggle demonstrates the tensions inherent in belonging to a group that values family/community as a unit of resistance to the oppressive system outside, while living in a larger society that devalues such notions. This cultural dichotomy resulted in a double consciousness, an oscillation between her intrinsic Afro-American and the imposed Euro-American cultural identities.

When autobiographical mode is appropriated by oppressed groups to narrate their life stories, the genre, "opens out to shared experience that is of ritual significance to the contests on hand. It is the typical and not the exceptional that is of interest"(Tharu 1996: 2020). Lots of critics have commented upon and demonstrated the palimpsestic multi-voiced narrational strategy used by Sally Morgan

in *My Place*. According to Jody Brown, an Aboriginal critic, there is a “preponderance of historical and political issues in the text [*My Place*] (1992: 25). Sally Morgan’s whole work, her involvement in the community is imbued with the spirituality of her culture. Morgan is a witness for Australia’s future and she plays a vital role in helping the indigenous people around the country to record and reclaim their history and in doing so she helps people define their own cultural identity. The experiences of Morgan and her people in *My Place* are in general common experiences of all indigenous people. In her search for truth, Morgan includes the autobiographies of her mother and grandmother, so that the various narratives reveal a complex network that the white imperialists have burdened the Aboriginals with. Morgan’s self-discovery leads to confrontation with suppressed history, culture and community. The sense of communal life that is evoked through the individual story, to consolidate and re-establish links with Aboriginal community is the defining drive behind the writings of Aboriginal autobiographies. Such narratives are deeply concerned with present and the future and they look backwards not just to preserve their history but with a more urgent need to justify

their demand for revision of all Australian history to incorporate crucial Aboriginal histories into ways of reading the contemporary world. Aboriginal autobiography is passionately polemic in its impulses. The defining of a non-white identity in terms of difference from the white creates a narrative that presents the rage of identities in the process of self-definition. Placing a range of histories, familial and cultural subjectivities ushers in an assault on the politics of the centre/dominant. The emphasis and significance of home, loyalty and roots are linked to Morgan's sense of origins and her sense of connection with her own community. Like Angelou and Kingston, Morgan too arouses sensitivity to racial discrimination through her writing. The book acts as a locus for exploring the difficulties of dialogue between the white imperialists and the Aborigines. Exploitative white policies and realities of racism underlie Morgan's narrative – it draws heavily upon the realities of Morgan's existence, of the existence of those around her, in an effort to expose the ills of racism.

In the same way Kingston's work progresses under the context of American racial identity politics from the point of view of the Chinese American Community. As a writer from marginal community, she too inevitably focalises the life of the community in the very act of articulating her personal experiences. Her work was lauded as "a genuine, sensitive and gendered portrayal of the crisis of Chinese female immigrant identity caught in the double jeopardy of Oriental patriarchy and Occidental prejudice"(Cheung 1992: 163). It is surely legitimate from the diasporic insider's point of view to look upon acts of writing the community as forms of cultural projection or ethnographic construction. It is often seen that "hyphenated" identities tend inevitably to politicize their own fragility. As Nasser Hussein has said in an essay on Salman Rushdie's *Shame*:

Hyphens are radically ambivalent signifiers, for they simultaneously connect and set apart; they simultaneously represent both belonging and not belonging. What is even more curious about a hyphenated pair of words is that the

meaning cannot reside in one word or the other, but can only be understood in movement.(1990: 8).

Writing the diasporic experience is an epistemological act precisely because the diasporic text mediates between public and private spaces as it attempts to reconstruct the problematized Self. Kingston's 'Talk Stories', which indeed is shared community knowledge, seek to devise new narrative paradigms through counter-discursive strategies that implicate configurations of community and communication other than those mandated by Western discourses and Western models of legitimacy and order. In a decentred, multi-perspectival form, Kingston describes her attempt to make sense of her family's story as reported in her mother's 'talk story' and to relate it to her present status of Chinese American and thus solve her double ambivalence to assert a new self-image. By making the character of her mother Brave Orchid, "who funnels China into [her] ears" (76), more important than her own, Kingston underlies the importance of the stories of the past to shape her present identity. Blending fact with fiction, autobiography with folk tale elements, Kingston maps out the contradiction

between two distinct cultures. As a Chinese American she refuses to portray her identity as unified. She refuses to dismiss the complexities generated by the clash between cultures. Instead she weaves these contradictions into her text to arrive at a more expansive although precarious inscription of identity. Kingston's work constitutes an alternative system for organising experience, an activity directly related to the inscription of identity. Further this alternative model addresses specific feminist concerns that spring from an awareness of the contradictions inherent in the discourses that structure female identity. Kingston foregrounds her activity as a story teller/writer producing a text that has an independent existence from her but also indicates that her own identity and sense of place have been inscribed by her community.

The dimension of plural truth, the truths of experience, history and perceptions are embodied in the personal narratives of Angelou, Kingston and Morgan. Multiple truths of life are revealed by attending to the conditions which create these narratives, the forms that guide them and the relationship that produced them. The

truths revealed are not abstract generalizations about life but specific truths in specific conditions, specific experience. Focussing on the links between these women's perspectives and the juxtaposition of alternate truths, one is able to challenge the deceptive generalizations that close off certain questions of differences and assume partial reality to be the whole story. At the same time the truths that these women's voices express are not regarded as merely subjective, that is pertinent only to a single individual. They are truths revealed from real positions in the world through lived experience in social relationship. They recount efforts to grapple with the world in all its confusion and complexity and with the normal lack of omniscience that characterize the human condition.

It is precisely because of their subjectivity –their rootedness in time, place and personal experience that we value them. The lives reinvented in these autobiographies, the primary lived experience, expose as a worn-out fiction the perception of women's experience as essentially private, divorced from the making of history. Through

the connectedness and juxtaposition of these three writers from diverse locations, a sense of human solidarity is achieved and the Self and others experienced as a part of a single web of life. These writers seem to accept the political responsibility and prioritise social justice over individual aggrandizement. And they ultimately achieve a reaffirmation of life through the emancipatory potential of writing with admittedly varying degree of optimism and triumph. All the joys of commonalities and pangs of differences that ensue from a reading of Angelou, Kingston and Morgan can be conveniently summed up in the following statement by Robin Morgan, "Nothing so sentimental (or arrogant) as ignoring differences, nor so cowardly (or lazy) as over-emphasising them."(1996:73).

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Frantz Fanon had titled the last chapter of *Black Skins, White Masks* “By way of conclusion”. I would like to borrow this approach and offer by way of conclusion a few final remarks concerning the ideas and critical strategies I adopted in this thesis. In fact, to offer any kind of “conclusive” resolutions to the issues and questions detailed in this thesis would result in a trivialisation of the ongoing fundamental political questions which are to be continually addressed through further explorations and fresher analytical tools.

My investigation here has been primarily concerned with the politics of racial/ethnic/sexual identity brought to light through the technologies of literary autobiography, which deconstructs the mimetic illusions of Western representational systems. In the resulting space created thus, differences are not sublimated and the ethnocentric self does not establish itself by selectively defining an ‘other’ to be assimilated and subjugated. Rather specificities are

valorised and allowed to come into play engendering a new mechanics of relational patterns, a new collective identity.

Historical Self-explanation, philosophical Self-scrutiny, poetic Self-expression and Self-invention are some of the procedures available to autobiography. Contemporary autobiography dismisses the assumption that a substantial Self precedes and governs individual experience and may be discerned through that experience. The notion of autobiography as issuing from, determined by and referring to a pre-existent Self had enabled historical autobiographers to explain, philosophical autobiographers to search for and poetic autobiographers to express the absolute Self behind their conditioned actions; whereas in fact, the Self is continually reshaped by efforts to explain, discover or express it.

The idea that the individual possesses a single fully defined 'true Self' to be either disclosed or discovered has proven to be a myth. This traditional view of the integrity of the Self and of its autobiographical expression has come under heavy attack from

various quarters. Contemporary critique of the subject has challenged the apparently distinctive features of the first person singular, thereby eroding one basis of the genre's special privilege and validity. The view of autobiography as a historical true record of an antecedent set of phenomena, with one-to-one correspondence between the objects of the world, the words in a language and the concepts in our heads has been shown to be much problematic. At a time when identities are nomadic, national borders are being redefined and the parameters in naming women's differences are shown to be part of the instrumentality for maintaining these differences, holding on to autobiography's fixation of stable subjects would be nothing less than a hypocritical stance.

The Self which is not an integrated whole, but a repertoire of roles is to be sought in continuity of consciousness, not in consistency of behaviour. Personal history is not the product of prior selfhood but rather selfhood is a product of an internal autobiography. For Maya Angelou, 'I' is multiply coded in a range of discourses and 'I' become for her a set of multiple solicitations and

multiple markings of identity. Her developmental version of the Self takes the form of a subject-in-process through her multi-volumed autobiographies. Her denial of a closure prolongs the process of Self-invention, thereby subscribing to the idea that the Self is socially constructed and continually variable.

The idea that writing does not express a single prior Self but somehow produces a provisional one may at first seem inconsistent with the concept of individual autonomy and may challenge our sense of individual originality. But in reality, it is not anti-individualistic. The structuralist and post-structuralist views of the Self as a linguistic construct, results in autobiography rendering not authors, but authorial conventions. When they strongly assert that language always precedes and exceeds any individual subject and that identity hangs by a narrative thread, one can never think of a 'true selfhood', but only a metalepsis, a rhetorical figure that fills the empty space within discourse. But there is also an other side to this notion of Self depending necessarily and helplessly on language for its creation. It is that the vast repertoire of language gives the Self a

high degree of freedom and flexibility. Resources of the language are vast and our selves are perhaps more enabled than constrained by their linguistic dimensions. Just as the Self may be artifactual without being artificial, autobiography may be fictive without becoming fiction. In Angelou's autobiographical works, she accepts the challenge of the process of Self-discovery through locating the Self via language. On many occasions in the course of her multi-volumed autobiographies, she creates a fictional character, an alter ego. In order to convey her fragmented personality, she had to split herself into two women, the truth of which she herself had acknowledged in her interviews.

She makes maximum use of fictional techniques to centralize each volume of autobiography and to make the series narrative a collective whole. The continuous fluctuation of the serial form allows Angelou, who is endowed with exquisite linguistic sensibility, the freedom to explore the protean form of Self, which is in constant process of evolution.

But in Angelou's autobiographies, the linguistic elements may precede the formation of Self, but they do not entirely interpenetrate one another. The autobiographical moment becomes the occasion for the meeting of 'writing' and 'selfhood'; a coming together of method and subject matter. Her Self-fashioning is not just a passive product of language. Her Self-exploration is neither a model of pre-existent Self as textual referent, nor the structuralist model assigning autonomy to the linguistic system. She proves that without a Self, one cannot write, but whatever one writes will be about the Self it constructs. The Creator of the work is in fact the Creation. In the symbolic act of Self-creation, the creator is everywhere present, everywhere hidden. For Angelou, autobiography is a kind of playground, or battlefield on which the Self struggles to establish its presence and to consolidate its power.

Angelou is the autobiographer engaged in a dynamic struggle for authority. Authority is located neither in correspondence to an extratextual reality nor in the Self determining agency of language, but in the engagement of contending parties and voices in the world.

The authority of the autobiography never resides exclusively in the text or the Self, or even in the correspondence between the two. Rather it is something negotiated and re-negotiated between the autobiographer and others – collaborators, editors, critics and lay readers. Dominant in Angelou's autobiographies is the explorations of the Self, the Self in relation with intimate others – the family, the community, the world. Throughout her multi-volumes she adopts a special stance in relation to the Self and others. As a mature autobiographer looking back towards the past, she has no doubts about her connections to the community and defines herself sometimes against, but always because of the group identity that provides her frame of reference. The inter-play between Angelou the individual and the group is neither so rigidly structured that her individuality is stifled, not so casually lest she forgets that her roots are placed firmly within the group. Saying 'I' provide the condition of a new kind of contract, the chance for a vividly renegotiated sociality and an enlivening cultural criticism. Central to the configuration is the discovery that the individual Self is really a series of selves evolving around a core of values, opportunities and experiences.

Angelou's multiple autobiographies demonstrate how an understanding of the evolving Self leads to a feeling of kinship with humankind. Hers is not a search for that lost, pure, true, real, genuine, original authentic Self, but she prefers to explore how individual, Self-reflection might translate into the building of political collectivity. Thus 'I' allow individual expression, at the same time it posits that expression in collective terms.

Again, connectedness achieved through a sampling of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Sally Morgan's *My Place* and juxtaposing them with Angelou's autobiographical works paved the way for putting these various books in dialogue with one another, both within and across geopolitical boundaries. The attempt was undertaken not to romanticise in a fantasy of feminist homogeneity but to stimulate debates around key concepts like subjectivity, individuality, location, resistance, collusion and the like. For all the three autobiographers, coming to writing and autobiographical inscriptions coincided with or resulted from oppression and genocidal acculturation. Having focussed on the

various strategies which these writers use to translate the creative tensions of their plural realities, I also scrutinised the organising patterns that generate the polysemic meanings of the texts. These works can help us imagine a future that integrate positive images of the past while encouraging critical and non-sectarian participation in the conflicts of the present. In spite of differences of ethnicity and location reflected in these narratives, one can trace a common note of irreverence. Each writer tells her story in a distinctive confident voice, disciple to no pre-ordained school of thought. Convinced that memories contain the map of identity and that it is important to bring them back. Staging their collective interference at rigid and unholy boundaries and separatism, these narratives dramatise finally a deeply inclusive spiritual consciousness reminding one of the truism that autobiography is the most democratic province in the republic of letters. Indeed what we can learn from these autobiographical writings is a new way of listening for the relational voice of the Self, a genuine way of perceiving difference while emphasising similarities in the process of cultural encoding from which none of us can escape. Marginal stories thus allude to an

empowered past, irreducible outside collective narrative and a resulting sense of identity caught between flux and flight. In a century brutalised by totalitarian aggression, visions and strategies of creating a wider peaceful existence is brought out through the writings of Maya Angelou and other female writers like her. Through their stories of varied responses to the chaotic modern world, the daunting polarities of our century are brought to focus. These are differently told and differently heard stories.

Admittedly there are constraints on Self-life writing. Indeed one currently fashionable view is that one can no more write one's life autonomously than one can live it completely independently – that autobiography is impossible. Yet autobiographies continue to be produced and consumed at an astounding rate. Oblivious to its own impossibility, the genre has taken a life and momentum of its own. Far from lacking authority altogether, it engages in a constant struggle to negotiate its authority in novel ways. Acts of Self-portraiture like that of Maya Angelou, Kingston and Morgan bear testimony to the diversity and richness of tradition that subtend

their innovative narrative projects. And the study of autobiography leads us to engage with some of the most intractable and important cultural questions of our time.

Lives transformed into literature widen our consciousness of common grounds and wonderful differences. Defined by a transformative and visionary dimension, by the conviction that writing matters and that narratives have the power to transform the readers, we join in the writer's retrospective journeys and discover that we do not exist separately from one another, that every life story, including our own counts. Through a rebuilding of female connections between personal and political, between commonalities and differences, between writers and readers – we participate in the broadening and enlivening and politicising of feminist scholarship and feminism itself. Charting the significance of these life stories and recognising the writers' essential gesture as social beings, their sense of responsibility and willingness to take risks that might help change the form of the genre as well as relation to power in society,

my sincere hope is that feminism may have powers of adaptation and resistance that will enable it to continue as a force in history.

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