

Conclusion

In the study of women writers of autobiography, I have found that they differed on certain points as compared to the autobiographical practice till then i.e. autobiographies written by men. In my study, I have found that as women and as writers they shed light on embedded and overt patriarchal ideologies and practices in family and in institutions and also outside world.

Virginia Woolf was one of the earliest women who write their lives. Although her family has a tradition of writing lives (her father and grandfather had written biographies and autobiographies) and Virginia has been an avid reader of autobiographies; it is not easy for her to claim the subject of autobiography. So, in 'Reminiscences', 'A Sketch of the Past' & in 'Am I a Snob?' she tells the story of being dragged into writing autobiography. Maya Angelou also gives the account of dragging into writing autobiography. Robert Loomis, her Random House editor, goaded her into writing autobiography teasing her with the challenge of writing literary autobiography. African-American literature relies on confirming its status as literature to accomplish its political aims. Since slaves were not treated as human, slave narrators emphasized the fact that they were human and deserved to be treated as such. Thus Angelou writes her autobiography to satisfy the contemporary criteria of 'literature' which is supposed to be one of the achievements of the highest order of human civilization. Though, Doris Lessing does not give any account of dragging into writing autobiography, yet it seems little hard for her to directly claim to be the self evident subject of autobiography. Therefore, she starts her autobiography *Under My Skin* with the description of the lives of her ancestors and then puts herself at the last.

So there is subtle nuances and differences in the way the three women writers approached to the art of writing autobiography.

I found among them that there is an emphasis on shared experiences. Virginia Woolf talks about her mother Julia, her half-sister Stella and her sister Vanessa when she talks about herself. She finds pride and pleasure in her mother and her step-sister Stella's beauty. She thinks that her mother's and Stella's beauty is the expression of their inner qualities. She admires her sister Vanessa's beauty, sensitivity and generosity also. 'Reminiscences' was addressed to her nephew Julian and written as a shared childhood account of Virginia and her sister Vanessa. She reflects over her own childhood while describing Vanessa. While talking about her childhood molestation Virginia says that she has inherited a counter instinct against molestation from the women ancestors of the past. She identifies her suffering of sexual abuse to womankind in large that helps her to alleviate the trauma of molestation. Doris Lessing talks about her grandparents and parents' lives in details before talking about herself. She traces her lineage in family tree and describes the lives of her grandparents. She talks about the suffering of her parents due to First World War. Their horrific experiences of war leave a life-long impact on Lessing and she develops distaste for war from the very young age. She talks about their lives and migration from Iran to Southern Rhodesia. She identifies herself with her parents by collective remembering and describing the shared life and experiences. Maya Angelou talks about whole black community when she narrates her story. Her voice often suddenly changes from individual to collective voice. She talks about the shared childhood of her brother Jr. Bailey and herself. They both suffer from the pain of abandonment by their own parents at the very young age. Maya greatly admires her grandmother Annie Henderson and describes her in detail. She is her guide and

role-model. Thus autobiographies by women are more relational. It is often “the other’s story”. Their stories are often refracted through the stories of others.

The mother figure is important in women’s autobiography. It is generally seen in women’s autobiographies that they trace a matrilineal strand. Often a Mother figure is found in their autobiographies from whom they derive support and wisdom as Virginia Woolf says in *A Room of One’s Own*, “We think back through our mothers if we are women.”(Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*) Woolf in ‘Reminiscences’ and in ‘Sketch of the Past’ traces her own history by describing her mother’s birth and ancestry. She describes her life in detail and describes the oppressive mechanism of patriarchal machinery her mother had to go through. Like all Victorian women, her mother was trained from the very young age how to serve men of family, how to accept whatever was told to them. Virginia’s resistance against patriarchy is grounded in her mother’s life. She relates her life with her mother. Her mother died when Virginia was thirteen years old. The image of her mother in her mind was affected to a great extent by secondary sources. She idealizes her mother and sees her as an epitome of perfectness and even attributes her literary instincts to be inherited through her mother. After her mother’s death her half-sister Stella becomes the mother figure and after Stella’s death her sister Vanessa comes into that role. They provide support for Virginia against her resistance towards patriarchal machinery. Doris Lessing traces the matrilineal strand in her genealogy with the help of a researcher. This is Lessing’s attempt to bring the repressed history of her grandmother on the surface. Lessing is trying to retrieve the life of those female ancestors that were glossed over and silenced in family history. Their contributions and roles in family were underestimated and soon forgotten since it was not recorded. Genealogy discriminates on the basis of gender and excludes women’s lives. Lessing establishes her identity in

matrilineal history. Lessing had a troubled relationship with her mother through her whole life. Her mother raised her children with strict discipline. According to Lessing her mother speaks about love but not able to love. When Lessing attains puberty her conflict with her mother deepens. Lessing feels that her mother is jealous of her body. The conflicting attitude towards natives of Southern Rhodesia is another cause of fight between both mother and daughter. Lessing's mother is not ready to give up her colonial attitude. She thinks that white women should live with proper decorum and follow some rules. Lessing breaks these rules for white women. Lessing hates her mother and don't want to be like her. Due to the quarrel with her mother, she leaves home at very young age of Even after years when Lessing's mother becomes old, Lessing sees her as a threat. It is only after her mother's death Lessing gets new insight about her mother. She realizes that she incorporates her mother's life into her own. In spite of her resolution of not being like her mother, she repeats her mother's life. Lessing accuses her mother for being rude and unable to make bond with her daughter but Lessing herself abandons her two children with her first marriage to their grandparents. She didn't show any love or affection toward her daughter. Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* her grandmother Annie Henderson plays a crucial role in her life. After being abandoned by Maya's own parents, Annie Henderson whom she calls "momma, brought her up. She is a strong woman who is financially independent and in spite of being a black woman, she is a respected personality in her locality. Angelou learns from her the survival mechanism in a racist society. There are other women also in her life who supports her in her resistance against sexism and racism. Mrs. Bertha Flower, a graceful woman inspires in Maya a love for literary book. Because of her help and guidance Maya becomes able to speak after sexual abuse. Her mother Vivian Baxter is another inspiring personality of her

life. She is different from her grandmother “Momma”. She is outgoing, exuberant city woman who lives life according to her own terms. She does not find any need to conform to the subservient country folk tradition. Angelou absorbs her personal philosophy and frequently quotes her maxims of life. Thus, mother figure is important in women’s autobiography.

The women writers view writing of autobiographies in terms of self fashioning i.e. shaping of their identities. In this process they dealt with truth in subjective manner – truth as experienced by them. Since their life was banished to private sphere, their autobiographies claim an area within which they subvert the culture’s production of the female and their relegation to the private sphere by unmasking the relations of domination reversing hierarchies of value; but by holding them within private sphere. Women’s life is trapped within the perfect weave of relationship and structures that constitute their world.

These women autobiographer while talking about their lives, lie, forget a lot, exaggerate, become confused and get things wrong yet they are revealing truth. Though these truths are not objective and don’t reveal the past “as it actually was” yet it give us the truth of their experiences. Their truth can be understood only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the context that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them. It is their version of truth. Virginia Woolf talks about her mother in superlative terms and attributes so many qualities on her. She describes an incident just before her mother’s death in which a stranger sits near her mother. She is not sure of the authenticity of this incident. Doris Lessing had a bitter relationship with her mother throughout her life and only after death she sees her differently. Doris Lessing’s infatuation and disillusionment from communism is an example of how she interprets a thing differently at different times. She dismisses her

parents' version of her childhood memory and calls it "concocted memory". Her support for Native Cause and her views on her own country's policies are her version of truth. Maya Angelou admits that at some places she has changed the truth to improve her story. Maya Angelou's version of truth is so contested that her autobiography has been called "fictional autobiography". She was consciously not writing autobiography but literature.

Interesting fact is that these women autobiographer raise question on the reliability of truth and shifting perspectives. Both Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing show awareness of the working mechanism of memory. They are self reflexive about the problem of remembering. They both describe their first memories which are implicated in sensory experiences. Emphasizing the primacy of emotional and sensory experiences is the specific strategy of writing about memory by these women autobiographers since they claim that impressions are as vital for their interpretations of the past. This claim indicates that the subjects consciously predicate their subjectivity on the emotional experiences to contest the "truth" given to them by institution of the dominant culture. Both talk about the forgetfulness of memory and shifting perspectives with changing time and situations. People remember some things and forget something. Thus memory works selectively. One cannot revoke his/her past completely. Traumatic memories are most often erased. Maya Angelou doesn't show this awareness of problem of remembering in her autobiography since she was writing autobiography as "literature".

I have observed during my research that writing autobiography serve therapeutic purpose for women. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson introduced "scriptotherapy", a term coined by Suzette A. Henke, to define the authorial intention or effect of the act of autobiography writing with reference to those suffering from

traumatic memories. (Reading Autobiography,279) They exorcise past trauma by means of writing autobiography. In my study of Virginia Woolf, I have found that she had to suffer several mental collapse during her life time. Her mother died when she was thirteen years old and two years later her half-sister Stella died. Her brother Thoby died when he was in his twenties. All these traumatic events led to her nervous breakdown. She was subjected to the sexual abuse by her half-brothers George and Gerald. Her father's death in 1904 provoked her most alarming mental collapse. She had to go through collective trauma also – the nationwide trauma of two world wars. For her writing has become a mean to come to terms with the traumatic events of her life. Virginia accepts the neurotic nature of her writing. Her artistic capacities enhances after her mother's death. She sublimates her repressed traumatic memories into artistic expression. Lessing sees the agony and misery caused by first world war since her very birth. Her parents were the victims of war. She describes the havoc caused by war in her parents' lives in detail. She has developed a great disliking for war. Her relation with her mother was also not well. But after her mother's death she suffers from guilt. She realized her mistakes and misbehaviours with her mother. She writes out all her feeling for her mother and exorcises her traumatic past. Writing autobiography provides her a way to come to terms with her traumatic past by rethinking and analyzing it. During a session with psychoanalyst, an individual attempts to reconcile his or present feelings and existence with the past which she or he may have suppressed. Besides this, Lessing had to face cultural trauma for being a third culture kid. She feels far from both the culture of her motherland and the countries she immigrates to. Identity involves in the domain of culture. When people feel worried about their identities, that is, they feel haunted by the sense of rootless and exile, their cultural trauma occurs. This feeling of belongingness to nowhere gives

her a deep thinking about cultural trauma. In the case of Maya Angelou, being an Afro-American woman, the occurrence of traumatic events are more frequent in her life. She was abandoned by her own parents. She had to face personal as well as collective traumas of racism and sexism. By writing her life, she rearranges her life, forms a sense of self and finds a meaning in her life. She herself defines her life by writing it and thus, set herself free from others' definition of who she is. She sheds her traumatic past by act of writing.

I have come to the conclusion that despite of the popular belief that autobiography springs from human aspiration for posterity, self-glorification, self-assertion or self-justification, supported by all the canonical theorists like George Misch (1907), Georges Gusdorf (1956), James Olney (1980) and others, it has to be acknowledged that the powerless often inscribe their self narratives to exorcise their past. To them autobiography is "scriptotherapy". Majority of the autobiographies by marginal communities – like women, Jews, Dalit, Blacks and many other groups serve this therapeutic purpose for the autobiographies.

The need to voice their experience is another reason why women and other marginalized group write their lives. Portraying feminine experience is one of the important aspects of women's autobiographies. There are power relations that structure all areas of their lives: the family, education, the house hold, political systems, culture, economics, sexuality and so on. Feminist discourse is directed at changing existing power relations between men and women and in society as a whole. Virginia Woolf in *Moments of Being* describes the oppressive patriarchal mechanism in family and in society that makes women the worst kind of sufferers. There are looking glass codes of society, the values of patriarchal system that are internalized by the women and they willingly subordinate themselves. Virginia had to go through this

ruthless patriarchal machinery but she recognized and uncovers its mechanism. She gives voice to the women of early 20th century. She advocates for their rights. Maya Angelou in her autobiography *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* becomes the mouthpiece of Black women. She had to fight against racism and sexism. She makes solidarity bond with women of her community and learns survival mechanism from them. She learns to fight her battle through education. She becomes aware of the power of words. She advocates for her rights and becomes the first black woman street car conductor. She becomes mother of a baby boy and get fulfillment through motherhood. Doris Lessing portrays feminine experience with full courage. She defies social conventions and pursues her ambitions. Besides being a white settler, she sublimates herself and speaks for other community i.e. black colonized people of Southern Rhodesia. She describes her gynecological history that makes her autobiography exclusively feminine. One of the striking similarities between these autobiographies by women writers is that they are rebellious towards systems of authority. Both Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing are rebellious against the suffocating and imprisoning English middle class culture and the narrow minded imperial attitude. Virginia doesn't follow the manners and etiquettes of Victorian English society. Lessing is also against the suffocating and imprisoning English middle class culture and narrow minded empirical attitude. They have a critical gaze towards authority that makes them able to see things differently without affected by them. Lessing is rebellious to such an extent that she leaves her family, her first marriage, her children, embrace communism, then leaves communism and breaks her second marriage. She is so much incredulous towards authority that she doesn't accept her parents' version of her childhood memories and calls them concocted memory. She sees injustices towards Natives and Blacks and speaks for their rights in

spite of being white. She criticizes the policies of her own country. The theme of Maya Angelou's autobiography is imprisonment and resistance. The oppression of black women by society and its resistance is the theme of Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. She breaks the norms declared for black women by society. She became the first black woman street car conductor. She breaks the stereotype of African-American mothers as breeder and matriarch and presents them as having a creative and personally fulfilling life.

One of the important questions is why these women writers chose to write autobiography when they can write fiction and other forms of literature to express their experience and feelings. The answer is that they want to get defined by themselves. Doris Lessing writes in *Under My Skin* that she writes her autobiography to prevent her life from distortion as several biographies of her were being written. Thus writing autobiography provides women a tool to prevent themselves from other's definitions of who they are. It switches them to the subject position from the object position. It provides them an opportunity to authorize their own life which is always get defined by others. Virginia Woolf disassembles the patriarchal oppressive systems of Victorian society in *Moments of Being*. She writes autobiography to consciously alter the canon of the genre to include women's lives. Maya Angelou in her autobiography gives an account of her oppression by racist and sexist society and how she overcomes it. She sets herself free from other's definition of a stereotype black woman. She recognized her worth. Maya Angelou writes autobiography to prove that she can write autobiography as literature. Since literature is a characteristics of "High culture", Maya being a member of marginalized community, took it as a challenge to prove her worth. Lessing writes her life prevent it from distortion since many biographies of her were being written. Lessing gives another

reason of her writing autobiography – to give an alternative history of the end of British colonialism. She wants to make her autobiography not only an account of her life but also of her particular period and society in which she lives. The account of giving an end of British colonialism also shows her opposition to colonialism and her wish to document her version of history which is always altered by dominant powers. History which is deconstructed as ‘His-story’ always favors the privileged – males, whites, colonizers and other dominant groups and their versions are recorded in history. Lessing, in spite of being a white and a British speaks against the colonial policy of Britain and documents the excesses committed by the colonizers on the Natives of Africa.

I have studied the various techniques used by these women writers in their autobiographies. Mostly autobiographies written by women are non-chronological and devoid of the convention of harmony and orderliness. Their narratives are mostly disorderly and fragmented. Their autobiographies are often interrupted by long apostrophizes, meditations, quotes and anecdotes. However, the chronological structure of autobiographies provides an important rhetorical resource because the authors unfold their lives and suggest the formative forces on their thinking. Virginia Woolf’s *Moments of Being* is a collection of five autobiographical pieces written for different audiences in different period of time. These autobiographical pieces don’t follow the chronological order. Virginia writes in stream of consciousness technique. She uses flashback technique also. Her narrative mode is not progressive but fragmented and disorderly. Throughout her narrative Woolf is concerned with the process of how autobiography comes to the page and with the interpretation of that process. She mentions her familiarity with the art of writing autobiography as she spends as much time speaking about autobiography as she does writing her life. This

practice sits in stark contrast to the convention of traditional autobiography. For Virginia, author's story and particular promise of selfhood are no longer the impetus behind writing autobiography. She defies the traditional convention of writing autobiography in order to set her own rules. Lessing in her two volumes of autobiography illustrates and reflects the complexities inherent in the internal structure of this genre. She discusses the nature of autobiography and the process of writing autobiography. There are strictures and canons of autobiography that govern what should be told and how. There are issues surrounding truth and shifting perspectives that do not let autobiography be a truthful and authentic account of one's life. Besides there is politics regarding gender. Maya Angelou in her autobiographies observes chronology to some extent as the character of Angelou grows from a three year old displaced child to an anxiety ridden teenager, from a courageous exciting young adult to and mature young woman. But she does not write her autobiography in a rigid, sequential and linear pattern. Yet, she employs digressions, loosely connected events, brief stories and reminiscences. She employs a scheme of associational fragmented remembering and flash-forward technique.

In my study I have found that autobiographical writings by women display a 'pluralities' of self. Woolf refutes the notion of singular selfhood and describes at many places what her memoirs would have been had they were not written in that particular circumstances. Virginia Woolf describes the self reflexive aspect of her personality which used to remain intact from present circumstances. It is "separate and detached sense of self" which she calls "the sense of spectator". It makes her feel as a spectator of her own life and upheld her high in the moments of humiliation. This aspect of her personality gives her a sense of reflection on situations without indulging in that situation. Doris Lessing is also aware of two aspects of her

personality. She has two identities – “Tigger” or “Hostess” personality and the private identity which she names “observer”. The “Hostess” personality is “bright, helpful, attentive, receptive to what is expected.” It shields and protects her private self from becoming public property.” “Tigger” is a part of “Hostess.” There was a lot of energy in ‘Tigger’ and it is bouncy, jokey, clumsy, brash and always ready to apologize and laugh at herself. “Observer” personality is opposite side of the “Hostess” personality. It is her private identity which she keeps secret from the rest of the world. We get a glimpse of this personality here and there in Lessing’s struggle to escape social constraints, in depiction of her dreams and when she tries to find her own voice as a writer. Maya Angelou’s autobiography *I Know why the Caged Bird Sings* focuses on young African-American female’s mission to know and develop herself. She displays two voices in her autobiography – the voice of Angelou when she was a child and the voice of adult Angelou. When she speaks as a child she sees herself and her classmates in the reflection of white man’s vision. She loses her sense of identity. The mirror image revealed to her by the social norms mandated by the white male society momentarily erases her identity. The second voice which comes from adult Maya Angelou is reflexive and mediates over incidents as a spectator. She re-examines her “other self” and she realizes that she was defined by society. Here we see the dual consciousness – the self as culturally defined and the self as different from cultural prescription. This division of self is a feature of women’s autobiographers. The women writers of autobiography display self-awareness regarding their lives and the acts of writing. This self-awareness characterizes their autobiographies as they deal with their experience of being women and inscribing themselves as writers of their own lives.

By writing autobiography, they also reclaim their identities with their respective communities. Virginia exposes the gender biased mechanism of Victorian society. She says that both men and women are victims of these hypocrite and cruel societal norms and codes of conducts but women are more vulnerable because they internalize the values of patriarchal system and prepared for their willing subordination. Virginia talks about the oppression of women in daily domestic lives of Victorian society. They were victims of physical, mental and emotional abuse. They were deprived from education, deprived from position of power. They were like whipping blocks for men upon whom they vent out their anger. Thus by inscribing her life Virginia identifies herself with larger womankind. Maya Angelou in her autobiography becomes the mouthpiece of her community. She often talks in collective voice and portrays the prevalent sexism and racism a black woman has to face in society. Doris Lessing was a British by birth, who spent her whole life in colonial countries. She sublimates herself and speaks for other communities than her own. She advocates for their cause. She breaks the rule for white women and identifies herself with the larger world community.

Thus by writing autobiography these women writers become the author of their own life and position themselves from object to subject.. They are no longer defined by other. All these women autobiographers raise their voice against the oppressive norms of society and battle with societal norms. Woolf expresses herself and explores feminine connections, Angelou deals with racism and sexism but find mooring with her respective community, Lessing speaks not only for self but the other communities as well. Ultimately through writing their lives they gain some agency.