

Dr. Tidita abdurrahmani
 Shkolla e lartë "hëna e plotë "bedër
 tabdurrahmani@bedwr.edu.al

The postmodern female autograph in american literature:Black female autobiography in between literary experimentation and cultural strangulation

Abstract

Based on a qualitative analysis of the American literary canon of the 1980's, early 21st century. This paper aims to identify and highlight the position that women –of –color occupy in this canon, the status enjoyed by autobiography in such a society and the degree to which writing one's self for black female autobiographers meant revealing one's innermost subjectivity rather than living a lie to oneself and to others. Considering the female quest for a voice in the mainstream American literature autobiographical canon as a claiming for at least a niche of one's own, this paper correlates the peak periods of autobiographical productivity for women to the 1890 WWI era and the late 1960s and 1970s, as time frames characterized by an ever increasing participation of women in the public service. Delving deep into the differing texture of the male and the female discourse, the paper considers that while male writing held a privileged place in the canon, female writing held a marginalized devalued position in the outskirts of society. While, even after the postmodern decision that the author is dead, males feel free to express the truth in the corpus of their writing; women's autobiographies posit their Selves as a way of establishing their own Selves. Though the majority of critics still persist in either erasing the woman's story by relegating it to the margins of the critical discourse or uncritically conflating the dynamics of male and female selfhood, they agree that female autobiographies share the use of understatement and fragmentation, and tend to be more truthful while writing outside the guise of fiction.

Viewing America just as a shattered mirror mistakenly reflecting the sense of oppression, discrimination and alienation that the blacks go through, this paper considers the need for handling black autobiographical texts by developing culturally specific ways. While the early black autobiographies were mainly conversion narratives focusing on the spiritual development and emancipation of the individual, the black autobiographies of the 1980s started to regard the genre as a site of formal revisionism and free play of signification, adopting a new agenda of exploring the genre and developing new ways of dealing with texts and traditions. While the slave narratives articulated the ideals of selfhood, and the emancipation autobiographies

celebrated the personal triumphs, the post-WWII autobiographies assisted the task of full definition by adding denominators such as race, sexuality, class and religion.

Revisiting the tenets of postmodernism for establishing a bond between the genre of autobiography and the postmodern condition the paper regards the postmodern autobiography as the one challenging the traditional concepts of a completeness of the Self and revolutionizing the narrative practice, by offering new patterns of meaning which reject completeness, linearity and order in the name of randomness and chance. By delving into some of the autobiographies of the time the paper reveals how feminist politics and postmodern aesthetics become inextricably linked, abandoning the presence of a single, reliable narrative voice in favor of the postmodern blurring of the boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth

Keywords: *postmodernism, female autobiography, female narrative voice, cultural experimentation*

I. INTRODUCTION

In *A Room Of One's Own* (1929) Virginia Woolf speaks about women being reserved the right place in society. As far as the society is made to be shared by men and women, let women be assigned a room of their own without interfering in the so-called men's world. While Virginia Woolf, a white woman, claims for a room of her own, black women would by rule, be asking for at least a "niche" of their own, but female autobiography mirrors pretensions much more challenging than that.

The earliest first-person narratives were the accounts of travel and travail through which male Europeans mapped their encounters with the projections of new geographies, new peoples, new experiences and new identities. From the women's point of view, it was a time when marriage was considered an economic necessity and public anonymity, the mark of God-given identity. Autobiographical forms like that of the poetry of Anne Bradstreet (1630), the captivity narratives of Mary Rowlandson (1682), the diaries of Sarah Kemble Knight (1704), and the spiritual testimonies of Quakers like Elisabeth Ashbridge (1774), provide an intimate vehicle through which colonial women responded to the unsettling experiences and to the challenges to their sense of subjectivity.

By the late 18th-early 19th century, heterogeneous autobiographical forms circulated through the vast space of a now New Republic. "The Cult of True Womanhood" emerged as the prevailing ideology affecting white bourgeois women and the narrative testify to the cultural pressures of such femininity. Autobiographical writings of the period include Lydia Sigourney's *Letters of Life* (1866), Jane Addams' *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910), etc. The post-bellum narratives of Anna Julia Cooper and Elisabeth Keckley, on the other hand, shift the emphasis to the representation of women as independent Selves desirous of participating in the Franklinitian myth. By the early decades of the 20th century, large numbers of immigrants swelled the population of the urban centers leading to the flourishing of autobiographies like Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*(1915), and Lillian Wald's *The House on Henry Street*(1915) which negotiate the multicultural identity and the ethnic assignments. The involvement of women in public activism, the migration and immigration processes, and the emergence of the United States as a world power led to the development of the autobiographical form. Included here are writers like Emma Goldman—*Living- my Life* (1931), Ida B. Wells—*Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*(1932), and Gertrude Stein—*The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1937).

In the last half of the 20th century, the civil rights and feminist movements influenced contemporary autobiographical practice in developing multiple strands and helplessly getting involved in the discovery of a true Self. Contemporary autobiographical writers include Maxine Hong Kingston—*The Woman Warrior* (1977), Audre Lorde—*Zami* (1983), Gloria Anzaldúa—*Borderlands /La Frontera* (1987), and Adrienne Rich—*Of Woman Born*(1976). Heading into the 21st century, America is still in turmoil and transition, a country in the making.

The peak periods of autobiographical productivity for women have been during the Progressive Era (1890 to WWI), an era of unprecedented public service by women, and during the late 1960s and 1970s. In her introduction to *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Woman's autobiographical writings* (1988), Shari Benstock speaks of women situated in conflicting and constricting roles, women faced with the rigid distinctions between man's world and women's domain, and women seeking freedom from bourgeois definitions.

There is a growing body of critical material that argues that women have developed a separate tradition on the autobiographical genre, one in which selfhood comes out as a mediated entity influenced by the male discourse. In *A Poetics of Woman's Autobiography* (1987), Sidonie Smith has explained "the autobiographical inscription as the result of the interaction of the women's marginality with the self-authorization that comes in writing their life stories. As a result, the genre, she argues, "is characterized by a 'double' voice." (qtd. in Culley, 1992:65). Women's unique perspective is a consciousness of alterity that enables them to recognize the importance of the Other in the creation of selfhood.

As Shari Benstock emphasizes in *The Private Self* (1988), "for white American women, the Self comes wrapped in gender, or rather gender constitutes the invisible, seamless wrapping of the Self." (Benstock, 1989:73). So, in order for a woman to be an "I" at all, she has to be a Self, to belong to a gender.

2. THE FEMALE AUTOGRAPH:

Differences Between The Male And Female Discourse In Autobiographical Writings

Besides the differentiation between the black and the white texture of the autobiographical discourse, there are also the distinctions between the male and the female texture. The criticism revolving around the differences between the male and the female autobiographical discourse includes theorists who consider that the two are interchangeable, others who believe that the differences between the two outnumber the similarities, and some who agree on some points of contact. There are several critics that, while analyzing the male and the female discourse, become aware of the interchangeability of the two and, thus, become less attracted by the respective differences. As Mary Mason states in "The Other Voice: Autobiographies by Women Writers" which can be found in *James Olney's Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (1978), women's autobiographies often involve the positing of the Other through which the female autobiographer establishes her own Self: "The tradition of autobiography and of autobiography criticism has been a masculine and andocentric one. It is a story of male selfhood rendered representative and representable." (Mason, 1980:146).

French theorists of writing and sexual difference—Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Helene Cixous—interrogate the complacency with which Western discourse has described and valued sexual difference in male and female writing. Using the

psychoanalytic theory as a basis for a deconstructionist reading of autobiography, Willis R. Buck, Jr., considers that the poetics of autobiography remains by and large an andocentric enterprise. Sidonie Smith, on the other hand, argues that until the twentieth century women could only represent themselves in scripts male discourse had constructed for them and female writing enjoyed a marginalized, devalued position. This is the reason that leads her to further claim: "Therefore, women's true autobiography has yet to be written, since women writers have, until recently, reinscribed male writing and thereby produced a text, which either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women." (Smith, 1987:18). Thus, women's Selves exist through merging with others rather than differentiating themselves from them.

A second stand is adopted by Smith and Miller while trying to highlight the differences between the two discourses without paying much attention to the points of contact. According to Smith, women are caught in a double subjectivity: "being at once protagonists and narrators of their own stories." (Smith, 1993:124). Considering the postmodern decision that the author is dead does not necessarily hold for women. Nancy Miller searches for the real truth of her life in the corpus of her writing rather than in her body: "the historical truth of a writer's life lies in the readers grasp of her intratext, the body of her writing and not the writing of her body, and this makes it essentially different from the man's autobiography." (Miller, 1994:69).

Nevertheless, critics and representatives of different schools of thought generally agree on the following: 1) women's self-image is projected by a variety of forms of understatement; 2) irregularity rather than orderliness informs the Self portraits by women, the narratives of their lives are often not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters; and 3) whereas the male protagonist is inclined to be passive, sensitive and shy, the female protagonist tends to be stalwart, spirited and fearless. Such tenets of female discourse make women sound more truthful when presenting their lives under the guise of fiction than when offering them up as unembellished truth.

2.1. Shattered mirrors in the "Promised Land": Representation in the Black Autobiography

The reason why I have entitled the heading in this way is because America was supposed to be the land promised by Moses, the land of freedom, equality and opportunity, the country in which the beacon of liberty, democracy and unyielding hope would be burning brightly, but it turned into a shattered mirror for the African Americans who could see there just a distorted image of themselves: oppressed, alienated, discriminated and endlessly fighting for their rights.

As William Andrews states in his introduction to *20th Century Autobiography* (1990), autobiography holds a position of priority among the narrative traditions of black America. African American autobiography has witnessed the attempts of people of color to actualize the promise of their American birthright, while articulating their

achievements as individuals and as persons of African descent. Moreover, it has provided a “forum for addressing the socio-political and cultural obstacles to the black integration.” (Spengemann, 1982:508). Debates have been rising concerning the appropriateness of evaluating black American autobiographies according to the standard frameworks of western autobiography. If, in the western discourse, the dominant myth is that of the individual forging a career, reputation, a business or a family out of the raw communal material; in black autobiography, the unity of the personal and the collective voice remains a dominant tradition.

The most influential African American autobiographies were the slave narratives, the secular autobiographies and the spiritual autobiographies. As personal accounts the slave narratives flourished from 1760 to 1865, focusing as much on the individuality of the slave as on the institution of slavery. At the time it was thought that the best way for the slave narrator “to cover his flank while firing his guns.” (Andrews ed., 1997:368), was to write those accounts in a simple, direct style and a calm, controlled voice. This would lead to little sense of the narrator’s individuality coming through the 19th century slave narratives. Classics of the slave narrative genre were in particular: *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845) and *Harriet Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Female slave narratives revised the one-dimensional perceptions that black men held of them and reflected basic hints about the position they held in society. The woman’s slave narratives appeared either as amanuensis or as fictionalized accounts.

The Africans who were brought to the Americas in slave ships viewed man, nature and God as distinct but inseparable aspects of a sacred whole. Thus, although the first African American autobiography “*A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* (1760), basically describes the physical perils of Briton Harmon’s thirteen year sojourn at sea, the narrative concludes on a distinctly religious note. The same also happens in *The Narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789) where the author adopts religious posture and the moral language of a biblical prophet while analyzing chattel slavery as one of the basic problems of Western society.

The spiritual autobiography developed mainly in the 19th century. Its most classic form emerges in the work of George White as he chronicles his journey through the institution of the Methodist Church of the time. *Nancy Prince’s Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1799), and *Sojourner Truth’s Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) chronicle an American life of activism and spiritualism. The decline of the spiritual autobiography in the half century after the Reconstruction, the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the Depression Era emphasized the development of the slave narrative in the form of the post-bellum narrative.

Since World War II, autobiography in the hands of persons as different as Malcolm X, Audre Lorde and Itabari Njeri has turned to exploring such dimensions as sexuality, religion, class and family in view of full self-assertion. *Mary Burgher’s “Images of Self and Race in the Autobiographies of Black Women”* (1979) and

Regina Blackburn's "In Search of the Black Female Self- African American Women's Autobiographies and Ethnicity" (1980) outlined for the first time the thematic range of black women's autobiography while they paved the way to the development of the idea of "black autobiography as a site of formal revisionism and the free play of signification." (Eakin, 1992:82), thereby leading to a fresh examination of texts and traditions. The reconsideration of the African American texts through the lenses of language, history and culture lead to the coining of the term autho-ethnography by Lionnet.

The contemporary black autobiography theory is voiced by hooks who overscores the importance of postmodernism to the shaping of the African American Self. In "Postmodern Blackness" (1990) hooks claims that, not only is postmodern theory relevant to African American experiences and culture, but "the overall impact of postmodernism is that many other groups now share with black folks a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding even if it is not informed by shared circumstance." (hooks, 1990:27). Her proposed alternative is that of incorporating the voices of the displaced, marginalized and oppressed in view of having a wider image of society.

2.2. White and Black Female Autobiography Compared.

Black women who write autobiography show their determination to take control of their lives without submitting either to the racism of the whites or to the sexism of the black and white men taken together. While the writings of the black autobiographers in general are renowned for their impersonal traits, the female black narratives take into consideration extra-textual conditions and inscribe their ideas into the culture. Their autobiographies constitute a running commentary on the collective experience of black women in the United States. Yet in the framework of what Sidonie Smith holds: "much of the autobiographical writing of black women eschews the confessional mode--the examinations of the personal motives, the searchings of the soul-- that white women autobiographers so frequently adopt." (Smith, 1993:63).

Thus, women seem torn between exhibitionism and secrecy, self-display and self-concealment. Domna Stanton in turn seems to surrender in this war of discourses and coins the term autogynography to refer to the black female autobiographical writings reflecting gender constrictions. In her "In Search of the Black Female Self" (1980), Regina Blackburn argues that "black women autobiographers use the genre to redefine the black female Self in black terms from a black perspective." (Blackburn, 1980:147). Even Bernice Johnson Reagan focuses on the construction of the black female Self while identifying black women's autobiographical writing as cultural autobiography, and regarding selfhood as inseparable from her sense of community.

No matter the fact that women, black or white be they, are motivated into surging for their own rights and against roughly the same forms of repression and discrimination, there are several differences to be outlined between the black and the white female

autobiography. Firstly, the consideration of black women's autobiography forces careful treatment of extra textual conditions. Secondly, while all autobiographers confront the problem of readers, black female autobiographers confront the problem in an especially acute form. Thirdly, as Sidonie Smith suggested, while for white American women the Self comes wrapped in gender; for the Afro-American women, differentiation between Self and Other is almost impossible. Fourthly and lastly, to write the account of one's Self is to inscribe it in a culture and to stick to impersonation. This is also asserted by William Andrews in his *African American Autobiography: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1993) where he states that: the "Afro American autobiographical statement is bereft of excessive subjectivism and mindless egotism and presents the Afro American as reflecting a much more impersonal condition." (Andrews, 1993:25).

3. Literary experimentation and cultural strangulation: autobiography as a collage of Postmodern life

3.1. Postmodernism and the Status of Autobiography

The origin of the term postmodernism remains uncertain, though we know that Frederico de Onis used the word "postmodernism" in his *Antologia de la Poesia Espanola Hispano-Americana*, published in Madrid in 1934, and Dudley Fitts picked it up again in his *Antology of Contemporary Latin-American Poetry* (1942). As suggested in *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (1994), edited by Kathleen Ashley, Leigh Gilmore and Gerald Peters, "postmodernism results from a second wave of loss of belief in the twentieth century, prompted especially by the Cold War, the McCarthy hearings, the Vietnam War, and other events of the 1950s and 1960s which suggested the breakdown of traditional systems of meaning." (Ashley, Gilmore, Peters, eds., 1994:59). More profound and pervasive than the first loss, the second claimed that everything was dead to this generation: traditional values, social institutions, and even the novel and the author were proclaimed dead. On the other hand, while attempting to make a picture of the traits characterizing postmodernism as a movement and as a discourse, Warhol and Hendel state that postmodernism lacks a disciplinary or scientific stability and engages two divinities at once: sameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiations and revolt." (Warhol, Hendel eds., 1993:66).

A glance at the history of autobiography studies reveals that at the end of the 1970s the study of autobiography was being remade. Two collections of essays published in 1980 inaugurated a new wave of interest: *Women's autobiography: Essays in Criticism* by Estelle C. Jelinek, and *Autobiography: Essays Critical and Theoretical* by James Olney. Jelinek's collection situated feminist criticism in relation to autobiography, and Olney's collection examined autobiography through a range of merging post-structuralisms.

According to Leigh Gilmore in his "The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography and Genre" (1994), postmodernism runs counter everything that is conventional and the concepts of Self and identity bear this influence more than anything else. In his own words: "Postmodern autobiography challenges

the concepts of Self and identity underlying conventional autobiography, offers new patterns of meaning which oppose traditional concepts of completeness of Self, and queries its narrative practice and revolutionizes it.”(Gilmore,1994:39). If autobiography traditionally features a first-person autodiegetic narrator who retrospectively recounts the story of his/her life using a two narrative level (that of the narrator, and that of the character), in the postmodern autobiography the narrator can use different verbal persons for him/herself, can employ another person to act as a focalizer, or invite several narrators with their own stories. In postmodern autobiography identity is never given a priori, it is never complete. According to Mike Featherstone in his *Undoing Culture: Globalization, Postmodernism and Identity*(1993): “The shifting boundaries of identification, involve an illusory image of presence, a sign of absence and loss.”(Featherstone,1993:69).

3.2. *The Woman’s Autobiography and Postmodernism*

Postmodern feminism is anteceded by the publication in 1949 in post war France of Simone De Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxieme Sex* (*The Second Sex*). Asserting that the woman is made and not born, De Beauvoir investigated how woman has historically functioned as the culturally constructed and conditioned Other of the man. To follow the feminism development trend, a second generation response titled the *New French Feminism* furthered the concerns raised by De Beauvoir. In contemporary times, postmodern feminism has relevantly developed to refer to the second generation of French Feminists. Recognized in North America as the postmodernists, these feminists: “aimed to expose the internal contradictions of metaphysical discourse privileging the subject of certainty, the cogito, a disembodied and male-identified consciousness.” (Taylor ed., 2003:142).

A prominent voice of postmodern feminism is that of Helene Cixous. In appropriating Derrida’s concept of *différance*, she coined the term *l’écriture feminine* (feminine writing) and analyzed its difference from canonized masculine writing (*littérature*). The largest departure from mainstream feminism is the argument that sex itself is constructed through language. The most notable proponent of the argument being Judith Butler in her 1990 book *Gender Trouble* whereby she criticizes the approaches of Beauvoir, Foucault and Lacan and the distinction drawn between biological sex and socially constructed gender. The same orientation is advocated by Mary Joe Frug who regards human experience as located inescapably and as helplessly entrapped within a system of meaning produced by language: “cultural mechanisms encode the female body with meanings.”(Frug, 1992:1047). While privileging the autonomous or metaphysical Self, the autobiography valorizes individual integrity and separateness and devalues personal and communal interdependency.

Another way of looking at postmodern feminism is by having a look at the intertwining of the dimensions of feminism and postmodernism. As asserted in *Women’s Lives into Print: The Theory, Practice and Writing of Feminist Auto/Biography*, (1999) edited by Pauline Polkey, postmodernism wavers between integrity and annihilation, wholeness and separatism:

While postmodernism's usefulness for feminism is debated in conference rooms and scholarly journals, the term postmodernism itself has become a catchphrase for any discourse that questions and subverts accepted notions of reality. Postmodernism's varying impulses range from the playful to the nihilistic to the polyphonic to the inarticulable. (Polkey ed., 1999:103).

This is the reason why postmodern writing experiments with such formal elements and textual practices as genre closure, narrative shift, and nonlinearity. This experimentation sometimes called meta-fiction or deconstructive fiction was primarily associated with white male writers from the 60s and led to the assumption that there are no postmodern women writers.

The disruption of postmodernism by 20th century realism placed writers such as Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes in the background. This problem was referred to by Betty Friedan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as the problem that has no name. Resultingly, novels such as *The Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1970) by Sue Kaufman; *The Bell Jar* (1963) by Sylvia Plath; and *Fear of Flying* (1973) by Erica Jong; and successively autobiographies of writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa exemplify a postmodernism more thematically and stylistically innovative than that of male writers.

What seems to reconcile feminist politics and postmodern aesthetics is the abandoning of a single reliable narrative voice in favor of multiple narrators and shifting points of view for stable entities. The connection between the genre and the cultural ideology is brought forth by many postmodernist ethnic writers like Maxine Hong Kingston and Audre Lorde. While the former blurs the boundary between fiction, art, and history by revisiting Chinese myth and talk story to connect the dead ghosts of the cultural and familiar past with the live ghosts of the present world; the latter blurs the boundaries of biography, autobiography, and mythology to express in a daring way her activism, individuality, and even her lesbian inclinations. Reformulated in Smith's words, postmodernist female writers "refuse the univocal, fixed subjectivity in the name of the multiplicitous, polyvocal, fragmentary and contradictory." (Smith, S., 1987:184).

There are many points of contact between feminism and postmodernism, but there are some differences between them as well. The main issue, according to Jessica Dallow, is: "the bridging of feminist activism and postmodernism's deconstructionism." (Dallow, 2007:170). Postmodernists attempt to deconstruct many of the categories that feminists have placed at the centre of their theories and deny the presence of any essential core in any of the subjects. In Eileen Schlee's words: "there is no essential core natural to us, and so there is no repression in the humanist sense." (Schlee, 1993: 13/2). Feminists are pointed towards their oppressive categories and forced not only to answer for them but to destroy them.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we may state that autobiography is a form of communication that unites inner and outer worlds, past and present individuality and collectivity. Autobiography does not communicate raw experience; it presents rather a metaphor for the raw experience. As an author translates his life into language he creates for himself a symbolic identity and sees himself through the mirror of language. In a world of others, the subject who claims to be himself is just lying while trying to present a false image in front of the community. Autobiography lies in the domain of the intransitive, shifting from reality to fiction and vice versa.

In the mobile, multicultural environment of the contemporary United States, autobiographical storytelling becomes a means of simultaneously unfolding convergences and divergences. The majority of autobiography critics still persist in either erasing the woman's story, relegating it to the margins of the critical discourse, or uncritically conflating the dynamics of male and female selfhood and sexuality. But women and mostly female autobiographers are never easy to be challenged, denied, or-- even worse--erased. The female autobiography is to be regarded as a matrix where gender and identity meet, a site where subject positions converge to produce what we call the female Self.

The truth is that women are there, part and parcel of society, and will continue to fight to get a say in the rumorous, multicultural and multiracial reality of the United States. While African American female autobiographies are formally written self-reports that intertwine objective fact and subjective awareness, their agenda develops from the ideals of selfhood at the time of slave narratives, to the personal triumphs after emancipation, and to the task of full definition in the time of WWII. Black female autobiography forces are such that they impose careful treatment of extra textual conditions, bring the Self as wrapped in gender, and inscribe culture by sticking to impersonation

One of the beliefs rejected in postmodern autobiography is the concept of identity characterized by completeness, causality, linearity and order. Instead it is shown that we are subjected to randomness and chance. Unlike many other theories that tend toward a definitive closure, postmodernism develops toward openness flexible enough to allow diverse, heterogeneous and contradictory elements to cohabit, emerge and merge without final resolutions. So the postmodern approaches merge in the face of the modernist search for authority, progress, universalization and rationalization and involve a radical questioning of the grounds upon which knowledge claims are made.

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