Autobiographical Practices
Women Writers and their Fictional Self-Images

A PhD Thesis in Literature

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اسم الطالب: جينى رضوان عبد الحليم علي

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ومن ناحية المحتوى المتبقي

أجازت لجنة المناقشة هذه الرسالة للحصول على درجة الدكتوراه في الآداب الإسلامية

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بتاريخ 22/2/1393

باستيفاء جميع المتطلبات

اللجنة

التوقيع

الاسم

الدرجة العلمية

(1) نورا عبد الله

(2) عائشة عبد الله

(3) طلعت عبد الله

(4) طه بلال
To my baby girl Lena

May she have a strong voice to tell her own stories
“If writing is a locus for the construction of new identities, then it will become a field of conflict over the meaning and nature of reality itself”.

(Elsadda 153)
Chapter One

Autobiographical Practices . . . Searching for a Voice in Three Cultures

“[To] find a voice . . . through which to express what cannot be expressed in any other form”.

(Arab Women’s Lives Retold xxvi)

Introduction:

Surges of interest in the genre of autobiography parallel the various transformations from the 17th century up till the 20th century, for example, the Enlightenment, Romanticism and Individualism, Victorian Darwinism, the Industrial Revolution and Freud’s psychoanalytical theories. However, it was the German philologist Georg Misch (1878-1965) who started the first wave of modern criticism, advocating in his History of Autobiography in Antiquity (volumes published between 1907 and 1969) that “Western History can be read in the representative lives of the leaders who participated in this achievement of civilization” (qtd. in Smith, Reading Autobiography 113). To him, an autobiographer has to be an enlightened individual whose behaviour should become an inspired choice of the culture (121). Although Misch’s criteria (based on the German tradition of “Geistesgeschichte” or the spirit of the historical moment) have been influential in shaping a canon of great books of autobiography, it was later seen as restrictive, for it excludes other forms of life narrative, such as, letters, diaries, journals, memoirs or simply autobiographies of common people (114). His criteria also ruled out women and the formerly
enslaved or colonized. On the other hand, New Critics (from the Anglo-American literary scholarship) simply excluded life narratives from the canon of poetic and narrative texts on the allegation that the former are a mode of “trivia” or “personal” writing which reflects its writer’s flawed notions about his/her artistic work (118).

According to Barbara Johnson in *A World of Difference* (1987),

The problem of the female autobiographer is, on the one hand, to resist the pressure of masculine autobiography as the only literary genre available for her enterprise, and, on the other, to describe a difficulty in conforming to a female ideal which is largely a fantasy of the masculine, not the feminine, imagination. (qtd. in Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* 4)

Early feminist critics pointed out to the fact that various modes of autobiographical writings can be traced throughout the centuries in the forms of what was regarded as a “marginal” form of writing, such as, diary¹, memoir and journal. With critics’ definition of autobiography as unquestionably male, white and Western, women’s autobiographical writings were misidentified and dismissed.

The 50s and 60s saw a change in the cultural scene when several memoirs telling hitherto unspoken female experiences by women became bestsellers. In addition, an archive of women’s writings was built by historians and bibliographers through recovering earlier texts. All this led to one of the earliest
calls to read women’s narratives as a separate genre: in Germaine Brée’s 1976 essay “George Sand: The Fictions of Autobiography”, she wanted to reclaim women’s lives and voices, ending their state of otherness (Smith, *Women, Autobiography, Theory* 7-8). Another milestone was the publication of excerpts from British and American women’s autobiographies in 1979: *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women* edited by Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green, hence, the beginning of a new canon. This was followed in 1980 by the publication of the first anthology of essays in the field: *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* which called for the establishment of an alternative canon or the expansion of the existing one. Starting from the late 80s, the number and variety of women’s autobiography increased to include writings representing different social classes, cultures, modes, times and fields.

**African American Women’s Autobiographical Writing:**

G. Thomas Couser defines autobiography as “A retrospective account of a [person’s] whole life (or a significant part of a life) written as avowed truth for a specific purpose by the [person] who lived the life” (*American Autobiography* 6). On the other hand, Couser admits that most “autobiographers tend to subordinate historical documentation to aesthetic values”, for to them, manipulating the “facts” of history is a way to achieve a correspondence between the narrative and the “truth” of history (7). In the *Encyclopedia of Women’s Autobiography*, Boynton and Malin argue that unlike men who presume an “authoritative stance” in a patriarchal society, “women
autobiographers must seek and/or challenge such authority to ensure that their stories will be heard”. Thus, the latter’s autobiographical writings pose a challenge when compared to male autobiography, for their approaches are characterized by being:

- oblique, open-minded, subdued, and ruminative . . . Introverted rather than self-aggrandizing, collective rather than solitary,
- fragmented rather than totalizing, reflective rather than progressive.

Yet, and prior to the twentieth century in America, those above mentioned approaches put women’s autobiographies in the face of a dilemma: the very nature of the artful approach placed into question the truthfulness of the autobiographical content when compared to a seemingly guileless text perceived as more reliable because of its lack of craft (54).

Black women’s autobiographical writing in America has been shaped by a rich literary inheritance that is rooted not only in written literary models, but also in the

African American oral tradition of spiritual narrative and bearing witness, in traditions of protest, in work song and blues, in Anglo-European aesthetic and linguistic models, and in rich and subtle variations of diverse and creolized origin. (Braxton)

After being produced in England in the eighteenth century, and with the controversy over slavery in the early 19th century echoed in literary works², slave narratives³ became a mainstay of African American literature⁴. To refute
the disparaging caricatures imposed upon them by the hegemonic society, enslaved African American women were attracted to the form of autobiography and slave narratives as a method of resistance. According to Patricia Hill Collins,

During the antebellum era, the most powerful recourse a slave had against the racist hegemony was her personal narrative. Getting one’s story on paper and transported beyond the plantation region gave slaves an opportunity to expose carefully construed facades of happy, willing slaves that southerners promulgated in the North to hide the inhumane and treacherous conditions of slavery. Some slaves’ accounts were recorded by white Northerners, who then sold the personal narratives to raise funds and generate support for the abolitionist movement. The intended audiences and publishers were almost always white because few blacks had the money or education to buy, read, or publish the narratives. Also, only white audiences possessed enough political agency to affect substantive change in the social order.\textsuperscript{5} However, receiving help from the Whites and depending on a white readership limited their abilities to define themselves and strengthened the idea that Blacks completely relied on the Whites. On the other hand, autobiographies were a proof that Blacks possessed the same intellectual capabilities of the Whites. A crucial difference between male and female slave narrators is that the former
stress the importance of achieving literacy and demonstrate their need to achieve independence as men in their society while the latter have to convince their readers that they are neither stereotyped victims nor fallen women, stressing their kinship with their white and black counterparts (Morgan 89).

The popularity of slave narratives was due to their use of horror scenes which gratified the readers’ appetite for sensationalism, their religious touch, their interesting depiction of life in the South, and the ability to use them as propaganda weapons during the abolition and Civil War (Campbell). Thus, slave narratives carried the influence of “the Bible, Pilgrim’s Progress, abolitionist oratory and sermon rhetoric” (Couser 51). They could be broadly categorized into three distinct forms. First, the tales to inspire the abolitionist struggle were the most famous because they carried strong autobiographical motifs, especially after the mid-1820s and the introduction of fictionalized dialogue. Examples of abolitionist slave narratives include *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth, A Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (1850) by Sojourner Truth\(^7\) (ca. 1797-1883), renowned for her work as an itinerant preacher and public speaker. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself* written by Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-97), and published in 1861 under the pseudonym Linda Brent, narrates the struggle for freedom by female slaves and gives an account of the sexual abuse\(^8\) they endured. Her slave narrative records resistance struggles where “black women confront and overcome incredible barriers in the quest to be self-
defining” (hooks, *Black Looks* 47). Like religious writers of the period, Jacobs writes about her quest for freedom through her various relationships with other people. Jacobs’ reliance on narrative strategies shows that she assumed that her primary audience/readers of Northern, white, middle-class women have difficulty accepting, much less understanding, her experience (Morgan 86).

Another abolitionist slave narrative is Annie Burton’s (1858?–?) *Memories of Childhood’s Slavery Days* (1909). Secondly, the tales of progress concentrated on progress more than on freedom, sometimes giving a sentimental account of plantation life. Examples are Elizabeth Keckley’s (ca. 1818-1907) *Behind the Scenes; or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House* (1874) and Lucy Delaney’s (ca. 1830-after 1891) memoir *From the Darkness Cometh the Light, or, Struggles for Freedom* (1891) which recounts her mother Polly Berry's struggle for her own and her daughter's freedom from slavery, as she was freeborn. Thirdly, the tales of religious redemption, from the 1770s to the 1820s, generally gave an account of a spiritual journey leading to Christian redemption, featuring the authors as Africans rather than slaves. One of the few documents that detail the life of a free black female in the antebellum North is *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké: A Free Negro in the Slave Era* (first published in 1968) written by Charlotte Louise Bridges Forten Grimké (1837-1914), an anti-slavery activist, poet, and educator. Contemporary slave narratives are now written by ghost writers on behalf of former slaves. Neo-slave narratives, on the other hand, are sometimes classified as novels and are

Many of the distinctive qualities of American autobiography are derived from the Puritan culture which “encouraged personal literature in theory and limited the freedom of the autobiographer in practice” (Couser, *American Autobiography* 10). Puritan literature, in general, was characterised by: theological content to urge cultural values upon the community; a didactic, plain style to avoid distraction while communicating the Puritan mission in America; and an allegorical technique that sees history as part of a divine plan. Thus, the early American form of autobiography was closer to biography and history than to diary (10-11). More development could be traced during the American Renaissance (ca. 1876-1914)12.

The only African American woman to publish a memoir of her wartime experiences (she was the first black army nurse) was Susie Baker King Taylor (1848-1912); her *Reminiscences of My Life in Camp with the 33rd United States Colored Troops, Late 1st S.C. Volunteers* was privately published in 1902. Journalist and newspaper editor Ida Bell Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) started writing her autobiography about her family, work and social activism, *Crusade*
for Justice (1928), after her retirement but she died while in its midst. Activist Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) published her autobiography *A Colored Woman in a White World* in 1940. In 1942, Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960), who was a folklorist and author during the Harlem Renaissance, published her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* which reflects her political views.

Another prominent Harlem Renaissance figure is Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935)—a poet, journalist and political activist from the first generation born free in the South after the Civil War—who published *Give Us Each Day: The Diary of Alice Dunbar-Nelson* (?).

The 60s saw the publication of more autobiographies written by African American women. *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black: An Informal Autobiography* (1969)—based on the Off-Broadway play, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, which ran in the 1968-69 season—was adapted from playwright Lorraine Hansberry’s (1930-65) writings and published posthumously. Another example is *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (1960, released 1968) by Anne Moody (1940- ).

Not only did Moody consider herself more of an activist than a writer but critics also, and for many years, tended to focus less on the autobiography as a work of literature, instead, it was regarded as an exposé of racism in the South and a social commentary of its time. On the other hand, called “America's most visible black female autobiographer” by scholar Joanne M. Braxton, Maya Angelou (1928- ) is best known for her series of six autobiographies that focus on her childhood and early adulthood experiences, illustrating the ways in
which racism and trauma can be overcome by a strong character’s love of literature. The first, most highly acclaimed, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) focuses on the first seventeen years of her life. Angelou uses hyperbolic extravagance—to suggest an independent, active subject—and meiosis (understatement and belittling) to suggest how that subject is dominated by others both physically and psychologically, consequently, reflecting her two selves: an imagined version of a white, privileged, female movie star and a black girl degraded in society. By using the traditional conventions of the realist novel, Angelou also exposes that style’s inability to encompass the female condition (Buss 97-112). *Caged Bird* was followed by: *Gather Together in My Name* (1974), *Singin’ and Swingin’ and Gettin’ Merry Like Christmas* (1976), *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986) and *A Song Flung Up To Heaven* (2002). Challenging the common structure of the autobiography by critiquing, changing, and expanding the genre, while discussing themes like identity, family and racism, there is no wonder Angelou was heralded as a new kind of memoirist, and one of the first African American women who was able to publicly discuss her personal life.

During the 70s, politician, educator and author Shirley Anita St. Hill Chisholm (1924-2005) highlighted the importance of the early education her parents gave her in her 1970 autobiography *Unbought and Unbossed*. Moreover, four poetesses had their memoirs published during the 70s: Toi Derricotte’s (1941- ) *The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey* (1971); Nikki

As a literature of resistance, confessional narratives by black folks were didactic. More than any other genre of writing, the production of honest confessional narratives by black women who are struggling to be self-actualized and to become radical subjects are needed as guides, as texts that affirm our fellowship with one another . . . Even as the number of novels published by black women increase, this writing cannot be either a substitute for theory or for autobiographical narrative. Radical black women need to tell our stories; we cannot document our experience enough. (hooks, *Black Looks* 59)

Alice Makseior Walker’s (1944- ) *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) is a combination of 36 essays, articles, reviews, statements and speeches all written between 1966 and 1982, many of which have an autobiographical nature. Marita Golden’s (1950- ) first book *Migrations*
of the Heart: An Autobiography (1986) recounts her coming of age during the 60s, her political activism and her four years spent in Nigeria with her Nigerian husband. Anna Pauline (Pauli) Murray’s (1910-85) autobiography Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage was published posthumously in 1987. Reporter Itabari Njeri’s (?) Every Good-Bye Ain't Gone: Family Portraits and Personal Escapades (1989) is about her childhood in the 50s through which she explores, exposes and “conjures up her history and, in doing so, goes a long way toward making it stirring, heartbreaking and, perhaps most important, visible” (Wolitzer).

The 90s saw the publication of Gayle Pemberton’s (?) The Hottest Water in Chicago (1992) which has 16 provocative autobiographical essays on family, race, time and American culture, expressing the ironies of growing up black in a white America. Elaine Brown (1943- ), prison activist, writer and singer, wrote her memoir A Taste of Power: A Black Woman’s Story (1992) after experiencing the sexism and patriarchy of the Black Panther Party:

A woman in the Black Power movement was considered, at best, irrelevant. A woman asserting herself was a pariah. If a black woman assumed a role of leadership, she was said to be eroding black manhood, to be hindering the progress of the black race. She was an enemy of the black people. (qtd. in Griffin)

> What did I learn from this extremely thrilling, challenging, and ultimately liberating experience? How was I changed during this period in my life? In what ways did my personal life and the filming of the book connect?

The autobiography, therefore, unveils its author’s pain and joy at seeing her work take on a surprising life of its own. Feminist intellectual bell hooks\(^{14}\) (1952-) wrote two autobiographical works, in the first, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (1996), hooks uses the form of the memoir to present a powerfully intimate account of growing up in the South and a strong-spirited child’s journey toward becoming a writer. According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “*Bone Black* . . . is a canvas of vividly impressionistic splashes of growing up young, gifted, black, and female”. According to Shockley’s article on hooks, *Bone Black* falls into the categories of both autobiography and memoir, for
As a sub-genre of autobiography that focuses on the selected events of a life, the memoir underscores the agency of the author, freeing her from the constraints of the conventional chronological structure of autobiography. Thus, the writer of a memoir has more control over the representation of her life, and so it is not surprising that hooks—for whom control emerges as a crucial issue—chooses this form in which to tell her story.

A detailed analysis of hook’s *Bone Black* will be carried out in Chapter Three. In 1997, hooks published a sequel to her autobiography, *Wounds of Passion: A Writing Life*, where she reveals her passion for poetry, feminism, and the man with whom she spent fifteen bittersweet years of her life. As in *Bone Black*, hooks moves from first to third person, allowing the reader to eavesdrop on her innermost thoughts and hear of her bisexuality and flings with white men. Many of hooks’ articles, moreover, carry autobiographical streaks.

With such a flourishing movement of autobiographical writing, the publishing market has been changing. After a decade of paying attention to a small group of iconic black women writes, notably Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, and making a reputation based on “patronage and critical notice of an elite White audience”, came Terry McMillan’s (1951- ) 1992 novel *Waiting to Exhale* which shattered conventional notions about the reading habits of Black folks and unquestionably established that a ravenous of Black book
buyers—most of them women—was clamouring for stories that reflected their lives or the lives of their sisters, daughters, mothers and friends. (Whitaker 36)

Thus, not only did Waiting to Exhale sell 1.75 million copies and was on the New York Times Best Seller List for twenty-four weeks, but it also became a phenomenon that has opened the eyes of editors at major publishing houses who realized the potential of such a long-neglected audience\textsuperscript{16}. Such a black fiction boom is compared by Whitaker to the literary outpouring during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black power movement in the 60s and early 70s, however, this time, the majority of black writers getting published were women. Aiding such a publishing boom have been: the frequent choices of the Oprah Winfrey Book Club that aim at empowering women readers, the expansion of the black middle class whose income can support the hobby of book buying, and the Network of Black Bookstores who keeps the books on their shelves for longer periods. Ironically, when compared to their female counterparts, male black writers tend to have less works published, for according to literary agents, “Black men do not read like Black women”. However, this does not mean that black women writers will find it easier to get published, for nowadays, publishers are more interested in writers that already have a name as a way of guaranteeing a high number of sales; they are less interested in finding new voices (38). Moreover, the publishing industry, in general, is suffering because of the recession and the movement of going green\textsuperscript{17} (Roden).
Women’s Autobiographical Writing in Egypt:

The road towards Egyptian women publishing their writings—encompassing autobiographical writing—has been preceded and aided by the movements calling for their liberation and the need to their direct participation and influence in society starting from around the end of the 19th century. Some of the major steps were: women’s education in schools and later in universities; the founding of women’s associations; literary salons; the emergence of women’s magazines, newspapers and periodicals especially by Syrians living in Egypt; the publication of biographies focusing on famous women’s lives; the publication of Qasim Amin’s *Tahrir al-mar’a (The Liberation of Women, 1899)*; and the campaign launched by the Association for the Advancement of Women in Egypt in 1908 calling for women writers to use their real names instead of pseudonyms.

If women’s fictional writings have been usually criticized on the basis of their real or imaginative autobiographical streaks such as emotional or sexual allusions, their autobiographies have been criticized for more than the suspected morality. Egyptian women’s autobiographies have been often accused of a limited outlook based on personal experiences due to: their inability to break free from or overcome their selves, their supposedly limited imagination, or their limited experiences that originate from their imprisonment at home and their fewer interactions with the outside world when compared to men (Elsadda 150). Fully aware of the expected attitude, women writers have had different