



Reconstructing Identity: Gender, Society, and Literature in Female Autobiographies

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Abstract: *This research paper explores the life stories of four female auto biographers: Annie Ernaux, Maya Angelou, Emmeline Pankhurst, and Kamala Das. The goal is to show how these authors have each used their autobiographical writings as a platform or textual space to challenge gender discrimination. Critical analysis of the ways in which subjects that are gendered, classed, and raced are formed in the various sociocultural and political contexts of Britain, America, India, and France has been the focus of this study. By sharing their life stories, these auto biographers have challenged gender stereotypes. The authors have several opportunities to pinpoint universal feminine ambitions in these life essays. These stories highlight women's animosity and rejection of, in addition to giving voice to their repressed thoughts and desires.*

Key Words: *Life writings, female autobiographies, gender discrimination, liberation, and identity.*

When reading an autobiography, one often reflects on why an author chooses to write about themselves. Brownley and Kimmick (1999, XI) suggest that this act is both a form of “voyeurism” and a journey of “self-discovery.” Through exploring the life of the autobiographer, we gain valuable insights into our own experiences. Every individual holds a story within, and it is through writing that these personal, often hidden aspects of life are shared with the world. As with any life, the beginning of an autobiography starts at birth, the point from which the autobiographer's narrative unfolds. The four female autobiographers examined here—Emmeline Pankhurst in *My Own Story* (1914), Maya Angelou in *The Collected Autobiographies* (2004), Kamala Das in *My Story* (1988), and Annie Ernaux in *A Man's Place* (1992)—all had remarkable beginnings. Their childhoods were marked by sensitivity and courage, as each faced numerous challenges, yet they persevered with determination and strength.

These autobiographers have used their life stories as a medium to challenge gender inequality. One can argue that, like other literary forms, autobiography provides a powerful platform to address gender issues. It offers a unique glimpse into women's inner lives, transforming their private struggles into public narratives. These life writings not only highlight common feminine aspirations across cultures but also give voice to women's long-suppressed feelings and desires. Furthermore, they foreground the rejection of social injustices, the search for identity, and the need to break free from patriarchal constraints.

In *My Own Story*, Emmeline Pankhurst speaks out against the unequal status of women, striving for political equality by advocating for women's suffrage, aiming to improve the marginalized position of women in society. Similarly, Maya Angelou, in *The Collected Autobiographies*, condemns the menial and degrading roles assigned to Black women, becoming a powerful voice of resistance within a deeply patriarchal, racist society. Kamala Das, in *My Story*, critiques the traditional roles imposed on women. Her own life illustrates the trauma of early marriage, where she is reduced to a mere object of physical gratification, hindering her ability to pursue her desires and aspirations. Likewise, Annie Ernaux, in *A Man's Place*, critiques a class-based society that prevents individuals from living authentically. Her rise through education allows her to confront the realities of the world and ultimately leave behind the restrictive environment of her family.



The concerns of these autobiographers extend beyond their personal or national contexts, addressing issues of gender discrimination on a global scale. Their life stories not only represent individual struggles but also contribute to a broader conversation about gender inequality across different cultures and societies.

The selected autobiographies come from diverse socio-cultural contexts and present various perspectives on feminism. They address issues such as women's exploitation, girls' rights, gender discrimination, relationships, marriage, and working-class women's struggles. Pankhurst, Angelou, Das, and Ernaux each represent different feminist approaches, united by a shared goal of women's emancipation. Pankhurst was radical in her activism, Angelou took a more liberal stance, while Das boldly explored female sensibilities. Ernaux, on the other hand, is considered a Marxist feminist, critiquing race and class divisions in society.

Gender discrimination was a key concern in these women's lives, influencing their experiences from birth through adulthood, marriage, and professional life. Angelou, Das, and Ernaux provide deep insights into the challenges of gender inequality in their life narratives. Angelou often sought male companionship but found marriage and affairs ultimately disappointing, concluding that a self-reliant, fearless woman can create her own place in a male-dominated society. Likewise, Das and Ernaux rejected traditional marriage, defying patriarchal norms to pursue their desires, challenging, and exposing the institution of marriage in their societies.

All the autobiographies demonstrate similar patterns of resistance, as the authors challenged social, sexual, racial, and class prejudices to reshape their marginalized identities into empowered ones. These texts explore representation, expression, and intention, reflecting the close connection between autobiography and reality. Gender roles, shaped by race and class, are central in Angelou and Ernaux's works, while in Pankhurst's *My Own Story* and Das's *My Story*, gender is the primary focus.

This research not only delves into the autobiographers' personal motivations but also their socio-cultural contexts and historical circumstances, allowing for comparative analysis. Each writer addresses patriarchal oppression, gender discrimination, and the exclusion of women from political and social spaces, offering an insider's view of deeply gendered societies. Their autobiographies serve as platforms to challenge patriarchal constructs.

Historically, women were confined to traditional roles and excluded from many fields, including writing. Today, women's writings are recognized as integral to literary tradition, capturing the nuances of their experiences. This study highlights how these autobiographers tackle common themes like gender, identity, class, and race.

Through their narratives, these women expose injustices and discrimination. Pankhurst wrote *My Own Story*, while Angelou, Das, and Ernaux wrote extensively about desire, gender, class, and race. Ernaux's concept of "autosociobiography" brings a cross-cultural dimension to the research, emphasizing the interplay between self and society. The socio-political realities of Pankhurst, Angelou, and Das are crucial to understanding their life stories and the struggles they faced.

The female autobiographers have been examined chronologically in terms of their stages of growth in life as depicted in Emmeline Pankhurst's *My Own Story*, *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*, Kamala Das's *My Story* and Annie Ernaux's *A Man's Place*. Their life journey starting from their birth until the point where the autobiographies end, has been considered via critically examining their childhood, adolescence, pre- and post-marriage life, motherhood, challenges posed by their families and society, their unswerving struggle to overcome patriarchal and societal hurdles, and finally a formal but open-ended closure of their lives.

Keeping in mind the above stages, the research paper has been divided into four parts. The first part discusses autobiographers' initial stage of growth and the second part analyses the second stage of their development wherein they prepare themselves to face the challenges in life. In the third part, the researcher examines the third stage in which the narrators after facing the challenges succeed in carving a space for themselves in the patriarchal society followed by the last part which expounds on the last stage of their growth ascertaining what they could achieve in their lives and at what point do they decide to end their life narratives.

The societies these autobiographers lived in were divided by gender, class, and race. Britain, America, India, and France each had unique socio-political challenges. These women faced gender discrimination early on, limiting their growth and opportunities. In *My Own Story*, Pankhurst saw how her brothers had more freedom. Angelou, in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, grew up in a racist, neglectful environment. Das, in *My Story*, suffered under male dominance and limited education, while Ernaux in *A Man's Place* lived under strict class-conscious parents. As they matured, Pankhurst fought for women's suffrage, while Angelou, Das, and Ernaux navigated personal and societal challenges shaped by patriarchal oppression.

These autobiographies examine gender discrimination and the challenges women face under patriarchy. Pankhurst fights for women's voting rights in *My Own Story*, uniting marginalized women. Angelou, an unwed mother at 16, takes on tough jobs to survive, as detailed in *Gather Together in My Name* and *The Heart of a Woman*. Kamala



Das, in *My Story*, struggles with a stifling marriage, while Ernaux, in *Cleaned Out* and *A Frozen Woman*, becomes aware of class barriers and seeks independence.

Each woman confronts societal constraints, becoming self-aware and determined to carve out independent identities.

The research highlights how the autobiographers—Emmeline Pankhurst, Maya Angelou, Kamala Das, and Annie Ernaux—carved spaces for themselves in restrictive socio-cultural contexts by challenging patriarchal norms. Each discarded traditional behavioral codes, subverting patriarchal stereotypes by expressing their inner selves.

Pankhurst rallied women in her fight for voting rights, while Angelou established herself as an independent Black woman despite systemic racism. Das, rejecting her role as a subservient wife, explored themes of exploitation, and Ernaux navigated class barriers, breaking free from societal constraints to pursue her desires.

In the final stage of their narratives, these women emerged victorious in redefining their identities. Pankhurst achieved recognition for her role in women's suffrage, while Angelou's journey reflects empowerment, culminating in her message that personal effort can lead to transformation. Das and Ernaux similarly pursued their ambitions, rejecting patriarchal restrictions.

Overall, the study showcases how these women exposed patriarchal oppression and reshaped their lives through resistance, offering a new perspective on female autonomy and cross-cultural struggles against gender inequality. Their autobiographies serve as platforms for personal growth and societal critique, revealing the power of self-expression in confronting gender politics.

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