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Social Responsibility and the Female Self in Women's Autobiography: Emecheta and Angelou

(pp. 200-224*)*

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Abstract: There is a general neglect of autobiographical narratives by women in African literary scholarship. This neglect is rooted in the overall traditional perception of the woman as an appendage, the other that completes the man but who cannot be on her own. From this conception, the woman is because the man has been; after all, it is assumed, she exists and derives her value in a man's world. But of recent very few women have taken to the pen, the instrument of power in the hands of the man, and wielding it to account for the female self. In these accounts we witness not only a projection of the female self, a woman's individuality, and a conscious recognition of the uniqueness of self, but recognition that she is answerable to society; that a sense of self imbues on her an authority to act and to decide independently. These core concerns of re-writing the female self, of freeing herself from "the danger of the single story", to recall Chimamanda Adichie, animates the autobiographical accounts of Buchi Emecheta and Maya Angelou. We will explore these concerns by focusing on the representation of the inter-relationship between social responsibility and the female self in *Head Above Waters* and *The Heart of a Woman*. The discussion is organized in four main sections. It begins with the background account on real stories of women trapped in the discourse of patriarchy. This is followed by the enunciation of the feminist theory of reclamation as a tool for re-writing the story of the woman and freeing the female self. This is followed by practical acts of re-writing the female self and her acts of social responsibility in Emecheta's *Head above Waters* and Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*. Ultimately, the autobiographical works of Buchi Emecheta and Maya Angelou challenge patriarchal discourses by reclaiming the female self through self-representation. Their narratives highlight autobiographical writing as a powerful tool for women's empowerment and social change.

Key words: Social responsibility, female self, reclamation, re-writing, autobiography

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INTRODUCTION

On the 14th of April, 2014, 276 schoolgirls were abducted from their hostels by members of the Islamic sect, Boko Haram, in Chibok, Borno State Nigeria. Also on the 4th of July, 2016, DSTV broadcast a documentary based on an incident of gang rape in Kibera Slum in Nairobi, Kenya, on its ED Channel 190. Unlike other such incidents of rape in the Nairobi slum, the victim in this incident which occurred in 2005 was an Australian lady on holiday in Nairobi. She had sued for justice against the six members of the gang that raped her. After eight years of frustration under a lopsided judicial process in Kenya, the six culprits were merely sentenced for robbery and not for rape.

These two incidents, one of female abduction and the other of the gang rape of a woman, may look unconnected given the distance and time that separate them. But the stories of the Chibok Girls and the audacious rape of a woman, and in fact other women and girls, in a Nairobi slum, demonstrate how endemic and ubiquitous sexism and female objectification are in the Nigerian and Kenyan societies and sub-Saharan Africa. The story of the Chibok girls, their abduction, their silence and their condition as bait for potential political amnesty request by their Islamic sect captors is a classic case of how sexism dissipates the woman's capacity for reproduction and for freedom. The Kibera Slum rape incident came into focus because, according to the documentary evidence on the DSTV channel, for the first time a woman could go to court to sue for justice. She gained solidarity from other women and girls in the slum who suffer under a blanket of silence. Sexism which is prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination typically against women, on the basis of sex, is so pervasive that it is taken to be the natural order of things. It is pervasive and natural, that the women are interpellated into it, live and practice it without recognizing its presence. This seeming invincibility has compelled Ahmed (2015) to describe sexism as "a problem without a name" (p.5). It is a problem women live through in all spheres of life in sub-Saharan Africa and yet it is taken as the natural way of things.

The Chibok Girls' saga is a reminder of a problem Nigerian society and most African societies have not even acknowledged fully as a problem. This is the everyday sexism that grows like water hyacinth weed all through the fabric of society- in corporate boardrooms and corridors, institutional faculties, communities and homes and in the popular media. Equally worrisome is how women both young and old promote the reproduction of sexism that operates around them. And in spite of modernization and increased access to political rights and freedom the pervasive sexism has rendered women in sub-Saharan Africa and even in the African Diaspora trapped in "point zero" to recall the title of the novel by the Egyptian writer and activist, Nawal El Saadawi. This "point zero" is rationalized and maintained at two levels of universalism.

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The first level of universalism is rooted in traditional society which is mainly patriarchal in nature especially in the domination of society by males. Derived from the Greek "rule of the father", patriarchy describes the authority and control exercised by men on social institutions to the disadvantage of women. In the context of the relation between literature and social life, patriarchy finds eloquent expression in literary discourse. In the African context it manifests as the conscious creation of a dominant male perspective from which we can understand the world. This male perspective is animated by a type of social apartheid rooted on sex. This social apartheid animates Achebe's creation of rural society in *Things Fall Apart*. In this novel, some of the female characters are relegated to minor and essentially inconsequential roles. This marginalization is in contrast with the historical roles for which women are known among the Igbos especially in agricultural production and in the family. Apart from the celebrated narrative of the Chibok Girls, sexism manifests in other forms such as girl/women adoption, girl-child marriage, domestic violence, female genital mutilation and the subtle promotion of professional sex workers by non-governmental agencies. These forms of sexism share one thing in common which is the denial of agency to the woman and her ability to reproduce herself and attain her potentials. This denial of agency in turn objectifies the woman and obliterates her ability to reproduce herself and attain her potential. In their wake these forms of sexism have spurned a univocal narrative of the woman as weak, and as a victim.

Within the context of anti-colonialism, also, the process and consciousness of decolonization were not gendered. As such the African experience was articulated from the male perspective and the discourse of African Personality was essentially male in its orientation. In spite of its significance in the struggle for nationalism in Africa and the West Indies, Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* considered to be the paean of anti-colonial struggle, spoke in a monolithic gendered voice that is basically male. Beginning from the days of anti-colonial struggle, therefore, women's story continues to be told from the perspective of men.

Women's desire to overcome traditional constructs in the Caribbean and the United States should be apprehended against a backdrop of slavery and the struggle to affirm the dignity of Black people. Autobiographical writing by Black people in the Americas began with the slave narratives which were produced to show the humanity of Black people. But the slave narratives served other functions. They were produced to show that slaves were indeed human and endowed with the same qualities as their White masters. In addition, the slave narratives helped Black people define for themselves a sense of identity.

According to Maduka (2001), African feminism has woven a different narrative about the woman. In this regard African feminism has been accused of engaging in

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"fanciful unsubstantiated, emotive generalizations rooted in extra literary criteria …" (p.227) These features are blamed on what Maduka sees as the African feminist critics' lack of "interest in developing rigorous aesthetic criteria for formulating their views on texts" (p.227). Besides, this lack of interest in developing the relevant aesthetic criteria is rooted in the continued perception of the African woman as a victim. This vision of the woman as victim rather than doing the woman any good has becomes a trap. This is because rather than enabling the woman to "begin to see and name [her world]", as Rich (1993) has put it, she is produced as an essence that is juxtaposed against the man (p.167).

One way this has manifested itself is in the reading of African woman's "victimage" (her condition as a perpetual victim) from the perspective of positivistic sociology. In African feminist criticism this slant to sociological positivism is exemplified in Chukwuma (1982). This slant to positivism is not merely convenient. But underlying this strategy is a translation of canonical African male-centered critical discourse to a reading of works by a woman. While male critics have adopted sociological approach and have represented the African world from a unitary male orientation, the female critic uses the same tool in order to project a feminine orientation. In spite of its elegant argument, Chukwuma's positivistic feminist approach is not farfetched from Irele (1981) functionalist sociological criticism. And in assessing Chukwuma side-by-side with Irele, the frustration of Showalter (1985) comes to mind. Showalter (1985) laments against western feminism thus: "it is disheartening to find feminist critics still anxious for approval from 'white fathers' who will not listen or reply" (p.247). This seeking for approval from the male canon rather than renaming the subjectivity of the woman as an interrogator and interpreter of tradition, a self that renames her world manifests in the use of the infinitive in the representation of the woman. Udumukwu (2006) has argued in *Signature of Women* that the predominant use of the infinitive form in African feminist discourse is indicative that African feminism is trapped in the essentialism of patriarchy. Udumukwu further recommends that African feminism must eschew its positivist leanings in order to fruitfully engage in retelling the women's story (p.15).

In practical terms, this celebration of the African woman as victim is at the core of the campaign to rescue the Chibok Girls which bears the hash tag, #BringBackOurGirls. On the surface this is mere agitation, a backlash at what is already given, that is sexism. It is driven by a semantic realization that the girls are already victims, objects carried away by their captors. This is not libratory enough because their captors are animated by a hyper level of sexism that perceives the girls as objects to be carried away. In other words, the #BringBack OurGirls campaign, in spite of its emotional appeal, is trapped in the same essentialism that animated the girls' captivity in the first place. Besides, why is it that the

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Nigerian federal government and the media never allow the rescued girls access to tell their own story?

They are simply paraded before the viewing public and tucked away behind a wall of silence. The foregoing background is meant to show that for African women and their counterparts in the Diaspora to function as agents of action that can take responsibility of their lives and their world, they must tell their stories differently from the canon. Adichie (2014) asserts that: "Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize.Stories can break the dignity of a people,but stories can also repair that broken dignity" (p.5 para. 31). In relation to the Igbo language Adichie reminds us of how an Igbo word such as *nkali* or *nkari* in Imo Igbo conveys an intention to manipulate in order to deceive and control. This word is a noun, she says, that loosely translates as "to be greater than another." Its significance crystallizes in the rabid drive for power, for conquest and for domination. And so a word like *nkali* thrives in our mother tongue not because we are inherently foolish and drunk for power, but because our thought system has become socially irresponsible. For women to attain the process of *re-storying* they must free themselves from the "danger of the single story" animated by sexism. One way women can liberate themselves from the tyranny of sexism and the absolutism of the single story is to appropriate the autobiographical genre in order to rewrite our story to "empower" and to "humanize" the African woman. Just as stories were told to "break the dignity" of womanhood autobiographical narratives have been mobilized by female authors to "repair the broken dignity of women". We have emphasized the thoughts of Adichie here because as we will argue later in the discussion her views agree with the vision of Emecheta that writing in the hands of the female author is essentially therapeutic in nature.

Critics acknowledge the contribution of autobiography by African American women in the quest for civil rights in the United States while obscuring its anti-sexist agenda within the Black community. In spite of the long list of autobiographical writings of a range of African liberation intellectuals, nationalist leaders, and cultural activists a doubt exits within the western enlightenment tradition on whether Africans write autobiography. If this is the view about autobiography written by African male authors, the African woman as a writer of autobiography seems to be an aberration and is never or hardly talked about. In a sense, autobiography by African women is comparable to the multiple incidents of rape in the Kibera slum which remains covered in a tick blanket of silence. Accordingly, the autobiography by women remains obscured in a politics of gender that is patently sexist in its orientation.

In order to achieve our overall goal in this study which is to show how women are appropriating the autobiographical genre in order to dismantle the hegemony of the single

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story in Africa and the African Diaspora, we will study two works namely, Emecheta's *Head above Water* and Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman*. This study will closely examine how Buchi Emeheta and Maya Angelou as representative voices of women from sub-Saharan Africa and the African Diaspora have keenly combated an age long sexism by adopting the autobiographical genre in order to recreate their world, taking ownership of their lives, and asking the fundamental question of where the woman is in the world. We will show that such recreation is indeed anchored on the problem of representation and as such autobiography in its emphasis on the knowing "I" is the veritable tool through which these women have come to terms with *self* in order to position themselves in their world. In addition, we will show that it is through this projection of woman as a *self* and a subject that autobiography by women combats sexism. This core aim will be realized through the following set objectives, namely: to explain how *Head above Water* and *The Heart of a Woman* are representative of attempts by women in African and the Diaspora at agency and social commitment.

Reclaiming the Narrative: Second Wave Feminism and the Empowerment of Women's Autobiography

What has given impetus to the foregoing, providing a pedestal for women to retell their story is the project of reclamation, a second wave feminist agendum. Second wave feminist project of reclamation was important because it exposed the long-term sexist myth of women as "second-class citizens". Although second wave project has been criticized for essentializing the very category of "women" or "female", by replacing "male" with "female", Godrej (2011) has argued that feminist reclamation operates at two levels. These are the public sphere of explicit verbal discourse, and the private sphere of the interior female consciousness (p.111). While the public sphere provides the semantic authority to the meanings ascribed to women under patriarchy its consciousness of sexism, the private sphere is the domain of private consciousness which remains in a state of colonization by patriarchal discourse. Godrej's distinction is crucial for women's autobiography and its overall project of reclamation. This is because the private sphere is the domain of autobiography because it is the basis for narrating the liberation of the individual private consciousness of women. It is within this background of feminist reclamation that we can understand the main title of this paper, "agency, responsibility, and the female self in women's autobiography". In the face of sexist tyranny against women and girls, female authors have arisen to the occasion to dismantle the traditional structures used to exclude women. Driven by the sense of agency and responsibility, these women have put themselves on the line by adopting the autobiographical genre in order to change the story of defeat. While male writers use autobiography to tell the (single) African story from the

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point of view of the leaders who are not only male but who continue to build a world picture driven by sexism, these women have appropriated the genre to tell the woman's story.

Accordingly, the autobiography by women remains obscured in a politics of gender that is patently sexist in its orientation. Olney (1973) has categorically asserted that Africans do not write autobiography. Olney's perception has to be understood in the context of his overall approach which is functionalist-structural anthropology. As Berger (2010) has observed, Olney's view is in agreement with other Western theoretical postulations not only on African autobiography but of the genre itself. In his more recent contribution, Berger provides a viable alternative to defining African autobiography. He maps the path to decolonizing African autobiography on the basis of the contention of Spivak (1990) that "anyone who asks the question 'Who am I?' -- that is, anyone with consciousness-- has a problematic self". And autobiography thrives on the recognition of self as its defining subject matter. Besides, Fox-Genovese (1988) has argued that strategies of representation which in Euro-Western perspective is anchored on the white male as the key to apprehending autobiography must dialogue with "conditions" or "interlocking structures of gender, class and race" (p.67) when thinking about a possible tradition of black women's autobiography. She argues in addition that the "death of the author", which captures the crisis of consciousness for the white male subject may not apply to the less privileged both in postcolonial Africa and the Americas, the subaltern, to use Spivak's phrase, such as women. Thus, Fox-Genovese (1988) affirms: "There remain plenty of subjects and author who, never having had much opportunity to write in their own names or the names of their kind, much less in the name of culture as a whole, are eager to seize the abandoned podium" (p.66). Following from the foregoing there is no doubt that African women do write autobiography; they are ceasing the abandoned podium of feminist aesthetic in order to ask the fundamental question, "where is the woman in the world today?" In spite of the women's renegotiation of the condition of the African woman through autobiography African feminist critics have consistently shunned these women's act of revision.

Women's autobiography from Africa and the Diaspora narrates the fundamental opposition between the Black self that knows (*cogito ergo sum*) and the female self that acts, chooses, and decides. There are two key words here, namely: self and agency. But these two key terms must unite with a third set of terms, choice and decision. As synonyms choice and decision imply judgment which in itself is about responsibility. More than this, the word, "decision" conveys a particular sense of value that is at the root of the autobiographical narrative. This value is implicit in the Latin root of the word itself. Thus, *de* in Latin means to "from" while *caedera* means "to cut". Thus the decision to be a self,

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means a commitment to achieve result and then to literally cut oneself off from any other possibility (Robbins 1991).As we will see, Emecheta's decision to keep her "head above water" implies a commitment to cut herself from other possible entanglements that may likely drown her*self* in the ocean of silence. It is important to foreground these set of words.

This is because they do not only form fundamental variables in the constitution of autobiography as a genre. In addition, autobiography by women projects the female voice and self both as agent and also as a voice of change. Change, because by telling the experiences of the woman as subject it reiterates the optimism of Rich (1993) that when "we dead awaken" narrative or the pattern of representing the world changes as well (p.167). Rich (1993) asserts that " a change in the concept of sexual identity is crucial if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself..."(p.167).The political order referred to here is that of patriarchy and its sexist ideology. This parallels the view of Achebe (2002) on "the balance of stories". According to Achebe, "until the lions produce their own historian, the story of the hunt will glorify the hunter" (p. 73). It may seem out of place to place Rich and Achebe side-by-side. But the background of Achebe's account is the project of "reclamation of the African story" and the process of "re-*storying* peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession" (p.73). Implicit in this account by Achebe is a relationship between the lion and the hunter. That relationship is secured on the ground of the hunt. But this is a ground enunciated and related through the story. Story is used here to represent the essence of narration. And the major feature that is foregrounded here is that of telling or *diegesis*. Even though the lion may be physically stronger it turns out to be the object since it lacks the mastery or the authority to tell the story. Thus, even though the hunter may be physically weak, his control of narrative secures his subjectivity. And the result is a deliberate attempt to glorify the hunt from his perspective. Autobiography by women indicates that "women have arisen", to recall Rich (1993) again, and such awakening projects them as agents with defined sense of responsibility. A major factor in this "awakening" is that of the female self.

Self is used to describe the individuality of a person and as such it is regarded as the person's nature. But the insight from psycho-analysis reveals that self is more complex in nature. Jung (1990) reveals the three levels of self. These are the personal consciousness, the personal unconscious, the anima/animus, the shadow and the mask. Beyond the psychoanalytical typology of self, what is paramount for us is how autobiography by women has appropriated the concept of self. Unlike in other forms of narrative the story in an autobiography is about, and by the autobiographical self that is the *bios* at the centre of the narrative. As Eakin (1999) has argued the notion of storied-self implies that the self and its experiences and how it is represented in a text should be foregrounded. The notion of "storied-self" he argues, marks a shift from the conception of self in psychoanalysis. Even

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though our goal in this contribution is not to interrogate the difference between the conception of storied-self and the psychological self in psychoanalysis it is nevertheless not out of place to bear it in mind since we are interested in how the female self manifests in women's autobiography. Self in the work of Jung is about the empirical individual *self* and the levels of its composition including its relation to the collective unconscious. The empirical quality here underscores its factuality, the fact that it is the self of a real historical individual in the present. But the stories of autobiographical narratives generally derive their authority not in the present but in the past. Thus, every story becomes a recall of the past. It is an invocation to the years of childhood from the point of adulthood. Secondly, the self in the autobiographical text is not the empirical self of Carl Jung but the *textual self* that is , a representation of the self. Besides, as Eakin (1999) has underscored "the self and its experiences may somehow be represented in a text" (p.99). Eakin advises that in our consideration of self in autobiography there is the need to "be as expansive and inclusive" as possible. This allows us to include other media forms of representation such as photography and film. In terms of how to account for the self in autobiographical text, Eakin recommends the adoption of a modified version of U. Neisser's fivefold model of self-experience "as a possible comprehensive account" (p. 102).

Emecheta's *Head above Water*: Writing as Cure

Our study of Emecheta's *Head above Water* will explore her appropriation of the notion of subject as it acknowledges both the relations of power, identity, and the efforts of the female subject to elude the constrains against her. Understanding the relations of power for Emecheta is the first task in the project of reclamation. Ordinarily, power means ability or capacity. For Emecheta that ability must first manifest the female subject's use of language especially to express herself, her potential and her vision of her world. The expression of self begins in the use of the first personal pronoun *I* and its forms. The important fact here is that we are presented with the first person I which manifests as a woman. Emecheta begins the "Introduction" to *Head Above Water* thus: "For someone who has previously published more than ten books..." (p.1). This "someone" is I, an author wielding the pen to write an autobiography. But that "someone" is also me who has written novels. It is I who has peculiar set of experiences which I am going to share. Furthermore, she tells us:

> Nonetheless, **I** am going to make the attempt, though not in the manner of many autobiographies, on a day-to-day basis. If **I** had to write of all **my** forty or so in full, the way **I** experienced them... **I** will therefore write episodically, touching lightly here and there on those incidents which **I** have dwelt in depth in **my** books... (p.1)

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Observe the repetition of the first person pronoun "I" in the passage above. It is used about five times. Evident here is what Leech and Short (2007) have described as "expressive repetition" (p. 199). Repetition becomes expressive when it underscores an emotive heightening or stress to the repeated meaning (p.199). What animates the repetition of the first person pronoun here is its juxtaposition with an individual experience, which is "the way I experienced them". Here the juxtaposition of "I" with experience is in agreement with traditional definition of autobiography as a form of narrative. According to Adams (1994) "autobiography is a form of narrative characterized by a desire both to reveal and to conceal an attempt at reconciling a life with a self, as a result its power comes from the paradoxes ... of its sense of reference to the world" (p. 483). And for Olney (1973) autobiography is "loosely described as the writing of a life by the person who has lived it" (p. 212).

In order to authenticate her experience Emecheta begins her narration within a network of relations with other women whom she represents as her "mothers". Thus she recounts her unique experiences with her biological mother and her father's elder sister identified as her big mother. In a sense this great aunt takes over the role that would have been presented by the father. By situating her "self" within a background, Emecheta demonstrates that self for her is not a metaphysical given but a product and embodiment of its social context. If we recall the case made by Aboulafia (2016) consciousness of self develops when individuals interact with others and play roles (web). The self that arises in relation to a specific generalized *other* is referred to as the "Me". Self reflection begins when I recognize myself as "Me", a distinct individual who is not habitually repeating the roles assigned by the generalized *other*. But "I" becomes "Me" at that point of epiphany when I as self comes to self-reflection. This moment of epiphany marks the beginning of the autobiographical impulse. In women's autobiography, as Lionnet (1998) has noted, this moment crystallizes in the urge to "interrogate the socio-cultural construction of race and gender and [thereby] challenges essentializing tendencies that perpetuate exploitation and subjugation..." (p. 325)

For Emecheta this moment of self-reflection begins with the appropriation of writing not simply as a skill but as a tool to achieve a cure. For her writing is therapeutic. And it is in this capacity of realizing a cure that we can understand the interconnectedness between agency, responsibility and the female self. The act of writing is generally perceived as a process of putting experience down on a piece of paper either through the use of pen, ink or pencil. People write mostly for preservation. They do so in order to safeguard some idea or experience. This preservation could either be on a culture or on an identity. When people write to preserve their identity, it is done in an attempt to immortalize themselves, so even when they are long gone, they would forever be

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remembered. Same also is applicable for culture. When people write, it is in an attempt to communicate who they really are; to be known; to correct a notion and bring about change.

Furthermore, through writing an individual's identity is realized. Identity could be personal or cultural. Personal identity refers to the way one perceives oneself through those elements that portray one as a person such as looks, character, and career, among others while Cultural identity is an identity formed by a society. Cultural identity, therefore, is an identity perceived based on one's membership to a group such as nationality, ethnicity, or religion.

As a noun the word "cure" means "something that corrects or counteracts" or "an agent used to restore health". Likewise when used as a verb, it means "to rectify an undesirable or unhealthy condition; make better, correct, heal, relieve, improve, remedy, or redress a situation". Cure in the medical field means a drug or course of medical treatment used to restore health. However, it also means anything that corrects or relieves a harmful or disturbing situation. Further, it means the act or process of preserving a product. As a process of preservation, it means to undergo a change, to become different or for something to lose its original nature.

Given these points, how then can writing be seen as a cure? In short, writing can be said to be a form of cure in the sense that through writing, a writer tends to preserve an idea which probably would have been lost if it had not been documented. Also the writer corrects or redresses an issue by providing a solution to things that pose problems to the society or the individual. Finally, writing is a cure as it shows the process of change from something old to something new. Norris (1987), while discussing the ideas of Jacques Derrida, has affirmed that "writing also is a form of cure" (p. 30). He says writing is a cultural advance since with it humans can build up a documentary of their memory (p.30). What this means is that humans through writing immortalize their thoughts, making it available to be transmitted through reading even after the person is long gone. Hence, writing serves as a medium to save a memory which should have been lost with time.

Emecheta sees writing as therapeutic. A therapy is a remedy to diseases. What Emecheta emphasizes then is that writing has healing powers. However, she does not mean therapy in its medical sense nor does she see herself as a doctor. Rather, therapy (cure) for her signifies consciousness, freedom and liberation. In the same light, Emecheta argues that if writing is therapeutic, autobiographical writing which is about oneself is also a form of cure for it provides one a kaleidoscopic view of one's life. The term kaleidoscope is a tube containing mirrors and pieces of coloured glass or paper, whose reflections produce changing patterns when the tube is rotated. Just as this tube produces a changing pattern, autobiographical writing produces different reflections of a self. In other words, autobiographical writing shows the growth of a person from ignorance to knowledge, from

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unconsciousness to consciousness. Thus, the portrayal of opposites in autobiography entails binarism.

In the first place, the title *Head above Water* shows the relationship between agency, voice, and language. 'Water' is not seen here in its ordinary sense but it is symbolic for domination, trouble, challenges, and so forth. 'Head' can be used to refer to an individual person; it also means a leader or an expert; also it is the part of the body of a human or animal which contains the brain, mouth, and other sense organs. The head as the part of the body that contains the brain suggests that the person is able to reason and for one to be able to reason means that the person has consciousness. It is this consciousness that makes the person an autonomous being, a self, one who has freedom to define oneself as a subject. In this case, the self with 'head above water' is a woman. The head nevertheless contains the mouth which contains also the voice used to produce sounds. The woman's voice hence defines her identity, more so proclaims her as a 'self', a self that is conscientized and has the ability to take actions. 'Head above water' as a phrase implies the struggle to survive hard times and consequently, this struggle further exaggerates the act of taking an action. This action is geared towards the survival of domination, oppression in an environment that tends to suppress the woman. This 'self' Emecheta, makes use of language as an instrument to assert herself into history and to redefine herself as a subject of action that has been liberated through writing for as she asserts, writing produces cure. This self as a subject is a woman who has gained consciousness and has the ability to take action through the use of voice and language. The female subject does not drown rather writes herself into freedom.

Similarly, we also see this relationship manifest in the excerpt below, showing an individual with a sense of self who is able to act to liberate herself:

> …, yet I knew even that, like my parents, I was trapped in this New Thing. But of course to me and my friends at the Methodist Girls' High School, it wasn't a New Thing anymore. It was becoming a way of life… However much I admired the village life, I knew that for sheer survival I had to make a go of the education the school was offering me-free, when almost all the girls in the school were paying. (p.16)

Remarkably, after the death of Emecheta's father, her education was going to be sacrificed in order for her younger brother, Adolphus to be educated. Emecheta as a subject with consciousness could not come to terms with this. She could not let herself be denied of education being fully aware of the merits of being educated. So she flung herself into action by partaking in a scholarship examination. Thereby showing herself as a subject, who has an identity of her own. Through her voice, we realize her identity as a student. She also portrays herself as one capable of taking decisions that would have an effect on her future.

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Hence, challenging the traditional patriarchal domination of the woman on the basis of inequality. Through voice which manifests also in form of writing, Emecheta emphasizes the importance of education. When the result came out, she gained scholarship into the Methodist Girls' High School and this takes her into a new identity. Identity is what someone is known for and for Emecheta, education was becoming a way of life to her.

Therefore, education was becoming a part of her identity. Emecheta thus sees herself as an agent who is a woman with consciousness and who has an identity ready to liberate herself from ignorance to knowledge through the act of gaining education. For education to her is a means of survival. This however reminds us of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave", as he describes humans who have been bound on their neck and legs to the wall in a cave with just a reflection of light shooting into the cave displaying their images. Plato argues that if one of them is taken out of the cave, at first the individual's sight would be blurry until the eyes gets accustomed to the light and the individual begins to recognize those shadows as they exist in life. If taken back into the cave, the individual's duty would be to educate or enlighten others, moving them from ignorance to knowledge. In this case, Emecheta is the agent whose duty is to liberate herself from ignorance by acquiring western formal education. Language here is denotative because it talks about the experiences of an agent (Emecheta) who lived. This language manifests itself through the use of pronouns. Emecheta in the course of her narration moves from personal pronoun to possessive pronoun. Still, through her language, we see a mixture of cultures which she terms 'New Thing'. This 'New Thing' refers to the Western formal education which leads to the assimilation of language and culture. This assimilation provides for a new identity (a hybrid self) which is a mixture of both the Igbo and the White man's culture and language as with Emecheta. Indeed, with the above relationship, Emecheta asserts herself as a 'self'.

Additionally, this incident depicts Emecheta as a self. This is seen in the occurrence where she narrates of her application for a sociology degree:

> When I put in for a Sociology degree, I was made to understand that it would be a formidable task. I thought then that it was an unnecessary attempt to scare me off by the Head of Studies, Mr. Ashton. But after a few months I realized that what he said was an understatement, Sociology was proving impossible for me to understand… Maybe I was clever as a child, but I never overrated myself. I knew where my power lay. It lies in the written word (p.50).

Words, clauses, phrases and sentences to interpret in analyzing the relationship between agency, voice and language are 'When I put in for a Sociology degree' representing her moment of agency; 'I thought' and 'I realized' representing her ability to reason and take decision; 'Maybe I was clever as a child' and 'I knew where my power lay representing self-consciousness, 'it lies in the written word' representing voice (identity)

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and 'I' and 'me' representing language. However, in the above incident, agency comes into play through Emecheta's decision to apply for a Sociology degree. Emecheta as a subject who is an agent engages in action by studying with much younger people who do not have responsibilities on their head in order to gain a degree. She further establishes herself as an autonomous being, one free to reason and decide for herself what to do by not taking hid to the warnings by the Head of Studies on the study of Sociology as being a formidable task. Emecheta represents herself as being self conscious by telling us that though she might have been clever as a child, she is aware of her ability and where it lies. Through voice which manifests through writing, Emecheta paints herself as one with an identity as she portrays herself as a writer. Language is denotative for it narrates a lived life. She moves from first-person subjective case 'I' to first-person objective case 'me'. Through the use of these pronouns, Emecheta affirms herself as a subject who is a woman, who possesses consciousness and has a voice which permits her to perform an action as an agent.

In the same way, Emecheta redefines herself as an individual, a human, a self in the excerpt below:

> I could hear the voice of my chi saying, 'As long as you keep writing and producing books, just as you used to make babies, you'll never be pregnant…' This may sound outlandish to readers but a contraceptive pill had never passed my mouth, I don't even know what they look like. It is very possible not to regard sex as the main reason for our existence. Women are capable of living for so many other reasons. That afternoon, those first copies of *In the Ditch* made me aware that probably one of my reasons for being here is to write. And because writing that comes from one's inner-most soul is therapeutic, it could also probably be contraceptive. (p.70)

Emecheta as a subject functions as an agent whose duty is to inform the ignorant woman through her own experience as she says, it is possible to regard sex as not the main reason for our existence as there are so many reasons one can exist for. Emecheta gives herself as an example saying one of her reasons for existing is to write. Through the use of 'our', a first-person possessive plural pronoun, Emecheta refers not just to herself but to all other women in all cultural backgrounds. Hence, through her narrative she challenges the traditional notion that sees the woman to exist solely for the purpose of pleasing the man. Emecheta says that the writing that comes from the inner-soul is therapeutic, if so, she says it could also be contraceptive. Just as her chi would tell her that if she continues to write and produce books, just as she makes babies, she will never be pregnant. Pregnancy here is not to be seen in its natural sense rather it means Emecheta will never be able to conceive or take in any form of ill, suppression or domination. Writing as contraceptive means, just as contraceptives are used to remove or avoid unwanted seeds, so is writing.

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Through writing, Emecheta purges herself of all forms of oppression. Silence as a form of voice is used here through the use of elliptical marks '…' and through this the reader is given an opportunity to fill in the blank space. Through her voice, she portrays herself as one with consciousness who goes into the act of writing to proclaim her identity and provide a cure for herself and others. For without language, there will be no identity. Emecheta's therefore makes use of language figuratively as she likens writing to cure. Her language makes use of the pronominal as well as the rhetorical question. Through the use of language therefore, Emecheta presents herself as a subject and an agent who has a voice and is able to take actions to cure herself form all forms of colonization. Colonization as a form of domination manifests from the Western world as well as the patriarchal tradition that emphasizes the rule of male to the disadvantage of the female. Her letter to the ILEA requesting for grant:

> …, I poured all my bad words into a letter and sent it to the ILEA. I wanted a grant, and I had by now learnt from Social Theory that the grant was my right, since I had paid full tax for six years. But I posted mine. I accused them of persecuting me because … I was still young, and because they were all heartless, brutes and slave drivers and I hoped God would condemn them to an everlasting fire where all the African jujus would make sure they roasted forever. I got a reply within four days. And … I got a full grant, back paid. I marched to my nearest garage and bought a car for £300 and used it to learn to drive (p.55)

The subject is self-conscious in the sense that she knows her powers are in her written words as she uses it to get what she wants. She represents herself as one who is enlightened and not as one who is ignorant as she tells us that the grant is her right for she paid complete her tax. So she went into action as an agent to cure herself form all forms of suppression through her letter. She accused them of being unjust, bringing out elements of racism (… I was black) and inequality (… I had no husband). These bracketed phrases show that she knows the situation of women in her society. She probably would have received the grant earlier if she were a white or if she had a husband. Her language is bilingual as she mixes the Igbo word 'juju' with English words. Also there is a mixture of culture which manifests in the mixing of traditional religion and Western religion as she combines her hope of condemnation from God introduced by the white missionaries and the African jujus on the ILEA for not letting her have her right. Thereupon producing a hybrid self. A self that has attributes of both languages and cultures. Language also manifests in the use of the pronoun 'I'. Through Emecheta's voice, we realize her identity. That she is a young black mother without a husband, that she is a student as well as a writer. Through Emecheta's action of writing which is geared towards a goal, came her reply. For before the new semester began she got a full grant, back paid. With the raise in her financial situation,

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she went into action of getting herself a car worth £300 which she used to learn to drive. All these, define her as an assertive human. Finally, we see embedded in this excerpt the portrayal of liberated self:

> I got home at seven. My family had already called the police. I don't think those policemen understood that I love my family very, very much, but that I needed time to escape. If not, I would have drowned. Doing things like that, rather impulsive to them, kept me afloat. Kept my head above water. (p.184)

The subject is a woman, who has consciousness that she would drown if she did not take a little time away from her home to relax. Thus, she initiated an act as an agent to liberate herself in order to survive. This action is what led to a new found identity as a free woman as she proclaims her freedom by saying 'I sometimes stay two long nights … all by myself'. Language hence functions denotatively for it tells us the period in which the event took place which is in the 1980's. These qualities of truth we see in the form of facts, histories and experiences manifest through the use of pronouns 'I, my, myself'. With the relationship between agency, voice and language shown above, Emecheta portrays herself as a 'self'.

Emecheta's work departs from the tradition of African autobiography in two ways. Unlike the traditional African biography by male authors within which the African experience was articulated from the male perspective and the discourse of African Personality was essentially male in its orientation, Emecheta strikes a different tone in outright acceptance of Western values. For example she narrates the circumstance of her birth in a Westernized type of medical services instead of traditional pattern of child delivery. Also, she does not condemn her parents' westernized marriage arrangement nor does she condemn her early training and socialization in western formal education. Unlike Achebe, for example, she accepts the British value system. But in accepting the British value system she projects a different orientation that is not only female but also underscores her subjective struggles to thrive within that alien system as a woman. It is from this perspective we can read her autobiography not simply as the process of her assimilation into British culture and tradition, but more importantly, of her individualized reclamation of those values in order assert herself. Remarkably, she does this through a neat and fine woven account of the generally mundane activities she engages herself in. These include: hunting for a flat, studying for university degree, deciding on what to wear to graduation ceremony, attending an interview, going on vacation and eventually buying a house. But apart from these mundane activities she equally narrates some less ordinary events in her life such as writing and publishing her novels.

Accordingly, *Head above Water* is propelled by the desire to convey the "little happenings that helped to mould and shape [her] into a prolific writer" (1). But we should

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see these "little happenings" as forming part of her steady but difficult assimilation into (white) British social life. As such her image of the metaphoric head above water is the narrative of her personal struggle through hardship and her persistence to rise from her humble beginnings to become a world class writer. The climax of this rise is when she becomes a homeowner in London which is an example of her heroic triumphalism. The purchase of her home signifies that she has not only entered into British society but she equally acquired British identity as a woman.

Angelou, the Black Female Self and the Fight for Freedom

The word 'fight' conveys a lot of meanings. It means a hostile encounter such as battle, a verbal disagreement such as in an argument. It also means a struggle for a goal or an objective. Again, it means strength or disposition for fighting. We have underlined the last meaning of the word "fight" due to its specific importance for Angelou's narrative. For her "fight" for the African American woman is the result of an inner strength. It is this inner strength in the heart of the Black woman in America that enables her to fight for her rights and for freedom and indeed for her life.

The word 'fight' could be used negatively or positively. The negative aspect is used to cause trouble while the positive is used for a good cause. Be it as it may, our concern is on the positive aspect of fight. Fight as a struggle for a goal in order to resist all forms of wrongs and bring about change. In the post-colonial era, fight represents the assertion of, dignity. People who engage in a fight do so in order to bring forth change. To gain their independence or freedom from something which holds them bound. Fight however involves those activities that people engage in to bring change to themselves and to the society. These activities not withstanding are performed to eradicate enslavement of any form. Such acts include writing, singing, demonstrating, among to others. An example of one who has demonstrated one of such act of fight is Fredrick Douglas in his various works and speeches, one of which is his first autobiography *The Narrative* where he talks about his experiences as a slave and this narrative is geared towards achieving a goal which is to attain freedom. This opposition of slave and freedom therefore implies *binarism*. Binarism as Aschroft et al have explained shows the distinction between the superior and the inferior. It generally shows the duality of things. The main aim of the 'fight' is to be identified as a self autonomous on its own. To the post colonial woman nonetheless, the fight for self realization is double-edged. What this means is that they are not just fighting for a course rather their fight is first, against imperial domination and second, against patriarchal domination in the African American context. Having explained the word 'fight' and reasons why people fight which is to attain freedom, it would only be proper if we had also a clear understanding of what freedom is.

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Freedom is used here to imply liberation, independence, exemption, and rights. Freire (2005) suggests that freedom inevitably requires the rejection of forms of stereotypical images and their replacement with autonomy and responsibility. Also, "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift so it must be pursued constantly and responsibly. It is a quest for human completion" (p. 47). What this means is that the quest for freedom emanate from conditions of incompleteness and contradictions. Freedom then is testimony of liberated self, who is made new, independent and endowed with the rights to perform actions or take decisions.

What then do we mean by fight for freedom? Simply put, the fight for freedom is the set of struggles or activities in which people engage in so as to combat all forms of oppression. Freedom forthwith could be perceived as being personal or general. A personal freedom is a fight for an individual interest. An act performed to attain independence of a self, which is autonomous on its own while a general freedom is a fight channelled towards attaining liberation for a group of people. Example of the general freedom is the struggle of the Blacks for their identity especially in the context of the Civil Rights Movement. Women's fight however, in the post colonial era is on the struggle to attain both forms of freedom. Women because they are seen as inferior, the subaltern, they yearn for freedom. Again if we recall Freire (2005) the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed [in this case woman] is to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well in order for their struggle to have meaning (p.44). This implies that for a struggle or fight to be seen as being meaningful, the oppressed have the duty then to liberate themselves and their oppressors by not in turn becoming oppressors of the oppressors in their attempt to be complete.

The title *The Heart of Woman* suggests an independent self, a woman with a heart of her own. A woman is used to refer to a lady, girl, or female. But generally, when the word 'woman' is said, it is used to refer to a person who is mature usually one who is married or has come of age to be married. The word 'woman' refers to an individual person and also it refers to the identity of a person, that is, what a person is known as or for. A woman is therefore known through the attributes and features she possesses. The traditional notion describes the woman as being fragile, weak, and inferior, among others. The heart on the other hand means not just the part of the human body, but these different words according to the context in which it has been used: emotions, feelings, soul, love, affection; compassion, sympathy, humanity, tenderness, understanding, kindness; enthusiasm, eagerness, spirit, determination, resolve, purpose, courage, nerve, will power, guts, and so on (p.384).

What then does Angelou mean by 'The Heart of a Woman?' Does she mean it on its surface level meaning as a woman who has a part of a body called a Heart? No, rather she means it to be a woman who is determined, courageous, who has the nerve or the guts

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to challenge notions that see her to be an inferior being or as invisible. The woman as a person who is courageous implies the woman is a person who is capable of taking actions that is, capable of agency as a subject. In the post colonial era, women are however eager to fight against the racist society and the patriarchal nature of the society which keeps the woman subdued in order to gain their freedom. Women therefore take up various acts in order to liberate themselves to an autonomous being. Hence, the title contradicts the traditional stereotypical images of women as weak. Through Angelou's title, she has represented the woman as being assertive, strong, courageous, and all other attributes which were never previously related to the woman which is why she made reference to Althea Gibson, the first female (black) who had the guts to challenge whites in a game of tennis and won the U.S. Women's Singles (1). The language of her title is denotative for it talks about facts 'woman', any one with the feminine attribute in existence. Henceforth, through these relationships that exist between agency, voice and language, Angelou has been able to redefine herself as a self autonomous on her own.

Furthermore, another incident that proves Vivian Baxter a self as represented by Angelou is when Angelou tells her mother she wants to travel to New York and her mother in turn lets her in on her own plan:

> "You're right. It is only two weeks. Well, let me tell you about me. I'm going to sea."
> "To see, see what?"
> "I'm going to become a merchant marine."
> I had never heard of a female merchant seaman.
> (p.30)

This excerpt is very significant to this study. It shows the struggle for freedom not just for an individual but for a collective. Through Angelou's conversational method, she quotes exactly her mother's words. Hence, the subject moves from her to her mother. The individual with the intentions of going to the 'sea' is a woman. She is a subject and she acts as an agent of action to liberate herself and other women in other cultural background by challenging the racist tradition which hinders Negro women from going to the sea. Vivian Baxter's statement 'I'm going to the sea' shows a decision that has already been finalized upon. This shows her as an agent who is capable of taking actions and it is through this action that her voice is known. First, she is a mother and a grandmother. Angelou further reveals Vivian's identity as a surgical nurse, a realtor, a barber and a hotel owner. Yet, Vivian still has the courage and the nerve to want to become a merchant marine not minding the rough life style of seamen. This action shows truly 'the heart of a woman'. It should be noted that her decision is mainly to challenge the racist nation for it was a bet she made to prove that a black woman as well can be a merchant marine. Also, her decision to

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go to the sea is to create an avenue or to open a door for women of all colours to go to sea. To Vivian Baxter, attaining this height is gaining a level of freedom for her. To become a merchant marine is a way of overcoming racial segregation and inequality. Without language, there will be no identity nor action. Language here is denotative, telling us facts about Vivian Baxter. The language makes use of rhetorical question and also pronouns. Through the use of the pronoun 'I' and 'me', Vivian asserts herself as a self who is capable of making decisions and taking actions. Therefore, through these relationships that exist between voice, agency and language, Vivian is presented as one with a sense of self.

Another key event that shows Angelou as being bold is the incident in which she confronts Jerry, a gang leader to warn him against hurting her son:

> "Jerry. I'm Miss Angelou. I'm Guy's mother." He closed his lips and the smile died.
>
> "I understand that you are the head of the Savages and you have an arrangement with my son. I also understand that the police are afraid of you. Well, I came around to make you aware of something if my son comes home with a black eye or a torn shirt, I won't call the police."
>
> His attention followed my hand to my purse. "I will come over here and shoot Susie's grandmother first, then her mother, then I'll blow away that sweet little baby.
>
> I showed the borrowed pistol, then slid it back into my purse.
>
> For a second, none of the family moved…, so I just kept my hand in the purse, fondling my security.
>
> (p.96)

First, the subject who makes a confrontation is a woman. She is a woman who gets scared easily, but on hearing of the trouble in which Guy, her son has run into automatically she summons enough courage and confronts the gang leader. This explains 'the heart of a woman', although they are fragile, they are also strong. This subject acts as an agent of action to keep her son away from danger. Even though the group was described as being very dangerous to the point that the police are scared of them, Angelou still summoned the guts to challenge him. Through this action, her voice is known first as a mother; second as a fearless woman. Her action however is channelled towards a goal which is to liberate her son and we see that in order to achieve this goal, she goes to the lent of borrowing a gun which one is not sure if she knows how to use it and she flaunts it before Jerry and threatens him to kill every moving thing close to him if her son is hurt. The language here is conversational and denotative. It functions denotatively as it tells of the experiences of a black woman and it manifests through the use of the pronoun 'I', and 'my'. Through the

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relationship which we see manifest in the event, Angelou asserts herself as an individual with a sense of self.

Finally, another incident that promotes Angelou's subjectivity and her indebt sense of self autonomy is seen in the following passage.

> A car horn honked outside. Guy opened the door and called. "Come on in. I'm ready." Two Ghanaian young men leaped on the porch, shouting, and blustered into the room. When they saw me, they composed themselves.
>
> I offered them a drink, a beer, some food. I wanted to delay the departure. All refused. They had to return the car to their uncle, and Guy had to begin his new life.
>
> … Guy gave me one more squeeze, then they piled into the car and drove away.
>
> I closed the door and held my breath. I sat down, still waiting. The first thought that came to me, perfectly formed and promising, was "At last, I'll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself" (p.324).

The subject who awaits breakdown in health is a woman. Because she feels that her son as part of her life, leaving will make her ill, she tries to delay him. But when she realizes it is not going to be possible to keep him longer, she has to let him go. After he leaves, she waits for something bad to happen to her but to her surprise, the first thought that came to her is ' At last, I'll be able to eat the whole breast of a roast chicken by myself'. This statement which came to her thought shows her inner wish for freedom. 'By myself' is her proclamation of a new identity independent of herself. Free from her son's daily needs of provision, protection and all, free from the bondage of patriarchy in the hands of Vus Make whose wish is to turn her into a proper African woman who obeys the bidding of the man without questioning the authority. And the word 'At last' shows it is a desire long hoped for. Finally getting her freedom, she is going to enjoy it to the fullest. Therefore, with the above explained, we can say that Angelou presents herself as a woman, a subject, who has been liberated and has a voice which proves her as an autonomous being.

With its emphasis on the *self*, autobiographical narrative is a potent tool for re-writing and reclaiming the experiences of women in Africa and the Diaspora. This study has focused on the work of women who have taken to the pen, the instrument of power in the hands of the man, and have wielded it to account for the female self. In these accounts we have witnessed not only a projection of the female self, a woman's individuality, and a conscious recognition of the uniqueness of self, but recognition that she is answerable to society; that a sense of self imbues on her an authority to acct and to decide independently. These core concerns of re-writing the female self, of freeing herself from the monologic male orientation, animate the autobiographical accounts of Buchi Emecheta and Maya

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Angelou. We have explored these concerns by focusing on the representation of the inter-relationship between social responsibility and the female self in *Head above Waters* and *The Heart of a Woman*. The discussion is organized in four main sections. It began with the background account on real stories of women trapped in the discourse of patriarchy. This was followed by the enunciation of the feminist theory of reclamation as a tool for re-writing the story of the woman and freeing the female *self.* This was followed by practical acts of re-writing the female self and her acts of social responsibility in Emecheta's *Head above Waters* and Angelou's *The Heart of a Woman.*

Conclusion

This paper has discussed social responsibility and the female self through the analysis of the autobiographies of Buchi Emecheta and Maya Angelou in the "Head Above Water" and "The Heart of a Woman" respectively and will show how the two texts present new ways of portraying women's autobiographies against the patriarchal lens. It is critical to understand that the exclusion of women's autobiographies in African literary analysis is as a result of previous Eurocentric patriarchal perceptions that relegated women to the background, rendering them as inferior to men. Even so, modern works of female authors such as Emecheta and Angelou, have started to break down these traditions. The women's own accounts redeem their stories as sexual and personal histories, constructing a positive image of the female self that challenges oppressed or stereotyped discursive constraints and creating a unique and assertive consciousness of selfness. This is achieved mainly through the use of personal pro-nouns and identifying the self as a subject and an agent within her social frame work as evident in Emecheta's 'Head Above Water'. Her narrative is a good example of how autobiographical writing can be employed as a means to personal and social transformation, thus affirming the female self in its fight with socio-cultural oppressions and at the same time honoring its written self.

In the same vein, Angelou's "The Heart of a Woman" also evokes the topography of liberation as a constant fight against the oppressions of the racially and sexually enforced regimes. She shares her story, embodying the feminist's struggle for freedom; thus, it is important to understand that individual liberation and collective protest intersect in forming an independent self. What is more, Angelou defines the strong connection between personal subjectivity and the system of values and culture, representing the importance of autobiography as a narrative that reflects the challenges of a black female subject. Emecheta and Angelou are part of a larger project of reclaiming women's voices in literature to insist on the significance of women's autonomous narration and the importance of the first-person genre for women. Their art defies existing order which identified women as inferior to men and provides the viewers with new perspectives on the relations between

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the individual and the society. Thus, their autobiographies do not only expand the existing discussions on the African and African American women's literary canon but also evidence how self-narrativization aids in producing social transformation and emancipation. This study therefore supports the argument that women's autobiographical writing is not just an exercise in personal storytelling, but a forceful tool with which to change the world. By presenting the readers with the life-stories of female subjects whose identity is constructed through their experience of motherhood and social activism, Emecheta and Angelou contribute to the advancement of both the postcolonial and the feminist literary canon.

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