

Autobiography as Social Commentary Gendered Perspectives in African Literature – A Multi – Text Study of Emecheta and Soyinka

Akinyeye, Clara Olajumoke¹, Oladosu Charity Toluwani²

¹Department of English, University Of Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria

²University of Ilesa, Osun State, Nigeria

Received: 11.06.2026 | Accepted: 06.07.2026 | Published: 09.07.2026

*Corresponding Author: Akinyeye, Clara Olajumoke

DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.21272903](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21272903)

Abstract

Original Research Article

This study examines autobiographical mode through a comparative and multi – text analysis of Buchi Emecheta and Wole Soyinka. Focusing on *Second Class Citizen*, *Head Above Water*, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, and *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*, the study interrogates how gender, historical context, and narrative form shape autobiographical representation. While existing scholarship has largely treated these authors independently within feminist and postcolonial paradigms, this study advances a comparative framework grounded in African feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and life – writing theory. Methodologically, the study employs close textual analysis supported by a continuum model of autobiography – experiential, reflective, and reconstructive – to examine how selfhood is narratively constructed across differing socio – cultural conditions. The findings reveal that Emecheta’s autobiographical discourse is characterized by embodied constraint and survival – oriented narration shaped by gendered and racialized marginalization, whereas Soyinka’s autobiographical writing foregrounds interpretive reflection, cultural memory, and historical reconstruction. These differences are not oppositional but represent complementary positions within a broader spectrum of autobiographical practice. The study concludes that African autobiographical representation functions as a mediated and performative discourse through which personal experience is transformed into social knowledge and cultural critique. By demonstrating how life writing articulates issues of gender inequality, education, and structural disparity, the study underscores its relevance to wider socio – developmental concerns, particularly those aligned with global framework on gender equity, inclusive education, and social justice. In essence, the study contributes to African literary scholarship by proposing a progressive autobiographical structure that bridges gendered and epistemological differences in autobiographical expression.

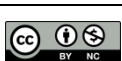
Keywords: African autobiography; Life writing; gender; Postcolonial identity; Narrative continuum; Social commentary.

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Introduction

Autobiography has become a central mode of expression in African literature, functioning not merely as personal recollection but as a form of

collective reflection through which lived experience is transformed into narrative meaning. Within postcolonial contexts, life writing operates as a mediated discourse that negotiates identity, memory, and historical consciousness. As Sidonie Smith and



Citation: Akinyeye, C. O., & Oladosu, C. T. (2026). Autobiography as social commentary: Gendered perspectives in African literature – A multi-text study of Emecheta and Soyinka. *GAS Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences (GASJAHSS)*, 4(7), 37-51.

Julia Watson observe, autobiography is a discursive practice in which identities are constructed and interpreted, rather than a transparent record of events. This understanding provides a critical foundation for examining how African autobiographical texts express broader socio – cultural realities. This study focuses on the autobiographical and semi – autobiographical works of Buchi Emecheta and Wole Soyinka, specifically *Second Class Citizen*, *Head Above Water*, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* and *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*. These texts provide a productive basis for comparative analysis as they offer distinct yet interconnected approaches to self – representation shaped by differing socio – historical conditions. Emecheta’s narratives foreground embodied experience and survival within gendered and racialized structures, while Soyinka’s autobiographical writings emphasize interpretive reflection, cultural memory, and historical reconstruction.

Although scholarship on these authors is extensive, it has largely developed within separate analytical traditions. Studies on Emecheta have predominantly employed African feminist and womanist frameworks to examine gender inequality and migration, while Soyinka’s works have been approached through postcolonial and cultural – historical perspectives. As a result, there is limited comparative research that brings these authors into a shared analytical framework, particularly within the domain of life writing. This study addresses that gap by advancing a comparative approach grounded in African feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and life writing theory. Methodologically, the study adopts close textual analysis, guided by a spectrum of autobiographical representation – experiential, reflective and constructive in order to examine how selfhood is narratively constructed across differing socio – cultural contexts.

Beyond its literal focus, the study also engages with wider socio – developmental concerns by situating autobiographical writing within the context of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), (United Nations, Nassbaum). The narratives examined in this study intersect with key

global issues, including gender inequality, access to education, and structural disparities. Emecheta’s representation of constrained female agency aligns with SDG 5 (Gender Equality), while the emphasis on education in both authors’ work reflects this concern of SDG 4 (Quality Education). In addition, their engagement with race, class, and postcolonial conditions resonates with SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and Soyinka’s reconstruction of cultural memory contributes to discussions related to SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). In this regard, autobiography emerges as a form of knowledge production with interdisciplinary relevance, capable of illustrating the lived dimensions of global development challenges. By bringing together gendered experience, narrative form, and historical context, this study demonstrates that African life – writing provides critical insight into the ways individuals interpret and respond to complex socio – political realities.

Accordingly, the study seeks to (i) examine autobiography as a form of social commentary in the selected texts, (ii) analyze the role of gender in shaping narrative structure and epistemological orientation, and (iii) contribute to African literary scholarship by proposing a layered autobiographical structure that bridges differences in life – writing expression.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with African autobiography has evolved significantly, moving from early descriptive approaches to more theoretically grounded analyses that situate life writing within broader frameworks of gender, postcolonial identity, and narrative form. To begin with, James Olney early foundational work in *Tell Me Africa* established that African autobiography differs from Western traditions in its communal orientation. To Olney, African writing often “moves outward from the self toward the group” (Olney 14) thus emphasizing collective identity over individualism. This insight is crucial for understanding works like Soyinka’s *Ake: The Years of Childhood* and *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*, where personal memory intersects with communal

history. In the same vein, Abiola Irele contends that African autobiographical narratives often function as cultural testimony, documenting historical transitions and ideological struggles (Irele 89). Soyinka's autobiographical writing therein exemplify this by preserving cultural memory while interrogating colonial modernity.

Suffice it to say that eminent critics have attended to Buchi Emecheta's feminist perspectives. Florence Stratton in *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* (1994) opines that Emecheta's works expose the systemic marginalization of women within both traditional and colonial frameworks (Stratton 5). Similarly, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi introduces the concept of African womanism, emphasizing survival, motherhood, and community as central concerns in African women's writing (Ogunyemi 72). This framework is significantly relevant to *Second Class Citizen*, where the protagonist's struggles reflect intersecting oppressions. More recently, Susan Andrade's scholastic submission highlights how Emecheta's narratives in her autobiographical works challenge dominant literary paradigms as she centres female subjectivity and agency within postcolonial discourse (Andrade 95). Andrade argues that Emecheta's autobiographical mode blurs the boundary between fiction and life writing, reinforcing the idea of autobiography as a continuum.

Critical scholarship on Buch Emecheta has consistently foregrounded questions of gender, migration, identity, and self – representation. Early studies largely concentrated on her fictional works, particularly *Second Class Citizen*, examining the Intersections of patriarchy, racial discrimination, and female agency within diasporic contexts. For example, Cynthia Ward explores the relationship between Emecheta's lived experiences and her fictional constructions of motherhood and female subjectivity, demonstrating how personal experience informs her literary Imaginations (Ward 83 – 97). More recent scholarship has increasingly turned attention to Emecheta's explicitly autobiographical writings. Delphine Fongang examines *Head Above Water* as narrative of diasporan subjectivity and

empowerment, arguing that the autobiography chronicles the author's struggles for self – definition within the intersecting pressures of race, gender, migration, and economic hardship. Fongang's study highlights the ways in which autobiographical narration functions as a strategy of resistance and self – affirmation in the face of systemic marginalization (Fongang 43 – 44).

Likewise, Jiang Chunsheng focuses on processes of identity reconstruction in *Head Above Water*, emphasizing the role of memory, resilience, and self – reflection in the author's negotiation of personal and cultural identity. The study demonstrates how autobiographical writing enables Emecheta to reinterpret difficult experiences and transform them into a coherent narrative of selfhood and achievement (Chunsheng). Comparative approaches have also emerged within Emecheta scholarship. Abdou Sene examines *Second Class Citizen* and *Head Above Water* together, identifying perseverance and determination as central themes that connect the fictionalized and autobiographical narratives. By tracing recurring experiences of adversity across both texts, Sene underscores the continuity between Emecheta's lived experiences and their literary representation (Sene 127). Also, Okyere Darko and Tetteh investigate autobiographical traces linking Emecheta and her fictional characters, demonstrating the fluid relationship between life experience and literary creation within her Oeuvre. (Darko and Tetteh 94).

While these studies provide valuable insights into Emecheta's representation of identity, migration, empowerment, and resilience, they primarily focus on individual texts or on the relationship between autobiography and fiction within Emecheta's corpus. Meanwhile, the relationship between fiction and autobiography has been widely discussed in life – writing studies. Paul John Eakin argues that autobiographical truth is not dependent on factual accuracy but on the construction of a coherent self – narrative (Eakin 24), a perspective which legitimizes the inclusion of *Second Class Citizen* as part of Emecheta's autobiographical project. Sidon Smith and Julia Watson on the other hand emphasis that

autobiography is shaped by cultural scripts and narrative conventions rather than being a transparent reflection of reality (Smith and Watson 10). Their work supports the present study's conceptualization of autobiography as a spectrum of self – representation. Scholars often focus on Soyinka's engagement with culture, history, and identity. Biodun Jeyifo, among others, contribute to such critical discussion in his argument that reflect on Soyinka's works as a “dialectic between tradition and modernity”, thus positioning the autobiographer as both a cultural nationalist and a global intellectual (Jeyifo 45). Similarly, Ato Quayson's interpretation of Soyinka's narratives as archives of cultural memory, emphasizing their role in preserving and reinterpreting African tradition, (Quayson 105) is very germane. This perspective is particularly relevant to *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*, where autobiography extends into historical reconstruction.

Despite these contributions, there is limited scholarship that provides valuable insight into African autobiography which this study aims to address: limited comparative studies that examine male and female autobiographical writing within the same analytical framework; insufficient attention to multi-text analysis, especially the continuity of autobiographical discourse across an author's works and more importantly, a tendency to treat autobiography and fiction as separate categories, rather than as interconnected forms of self – representation. This study addresses the gaps by integrating four texts across two authors; examining autobiography as a continuum and foregrounding gender as a structuring principle. By so doing, it contributes to ongoing scholarly conversation about African life writing, offering a sophisticated understanding of how autobiography functions as socio – political critique. The study thus proposes a fluid autobiographical framework that integrates feminist, postcolonial and life – writing theories.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Theory and African Women's Autobiography

African feminist criticism provides a critical foundation for understanding the autobiographical

fiction works of Buchi Emecheta. In particular, Molaria Ogundipe – Leslie's concept of “Stiwanism” (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) offers a useful analytical framework for situating women's experiences within broader socio – political and historical contexts (Ogunyemi Leslie 36). Stiwanism moves beyond Western feminist paradigms by emphasizing structural transformation rather than mere inclusion, foregrounding the ways in which African women negotiate intersecting systems of patriarchy, colonial legacy, class inequality, and cultural expectation. Emecheta's diasporic experience in Britain, as represented across her autobiographical and semi – autobiographical narratives, exemplifies this theoretical orientation. Her depiction of racial discrimination illustrates how personal experience becomes a site of socio – political critique. In works such as *Second Class Citizen* and *Head Above Water*, Emecheta transforms lived hardship into narrative resistance, exposing the structural violence of patriarchy, racism, and economic marginalization. With this framework, autobiography is not merely self – representation but a form of social intervention, consistent with Stiwanist's emphasis on transformative engagement.

Similarly, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's articulation of Womanism provides another essential interpretive lens. Ogunyemi conceptualizes African Womanism as a framework that prioritizes survival, communal solidarity, cultural rootedness, and pragmatic resilience over abstract ideological confrontation (Ogunyemi 72). From this point of view, African women's writing is not only an expression of resistance but also a negotiation of endurance and collective identity. Emecheta's narrative practice aligns closely with this womanist paradigm. Her textual representations repeatedly foreground oppressive marital structures, limited female autonomy, and the struggle for educational and economic self – determination as pathway to empowerment. In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah's lived reality reflects systemic gender subordination, yet her determination to pursue education and authorship signals an insistence on self – definition. This is further reinforced in *Head Above Water* where writing itself becomes a symbolic and practical strategy for survival and self – assertion.

Emecheta's famous articulation of writing as a means of "keeping my head above water" encapsulates this womanist ethic of endurance and agency (*Head Above Water* 134).

Thus, Emecheta's autobiographical and fictional texts converge within Ogunyeni's theoretical framework, presenting life writing as both a personal testimony and a collective articulation of struggle. Her narratives resist being submerged within the "muddy waters" of racialized and gendered oppression by asserting authorship, voice, and narrative authority. In this sense, Emecheta's work not only reflects African feminist theoretical concerns but actively extends them by demonstrating how autobiography can function as a transformative tool for articulating female subjectivity within postcolonial modernity.

Soyinka, Postcolonial Identity, and Autobiographical Consciousness

While African feminist theory provides a productive lens for reading Buchi Emecheta, the autobiographical works of Wole Soyinka are more comprehensively illuminated through postcolonial theory and cultural memory studies. Soyinka's autobiographical project, particularly, in *Ake: The Years of Childhood* and *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* demonstrates how self-writing becomes a medium for negotiating colonial modernity, cultural inheritance, and intellectual formation. From a postcolonial theoretical perspective, Homi K. Bhabha's concept of cultural hybridity is particularly relevant. Bhabha argues that colonial encounter produces a "third space" in which identity is neither purely indigeneous nor entirely colonial but emerges through negotiation and translation (Bhabha 112). Soyinka's autobiographical narration reflects this hybridity, especially in his depiction of early childhood experiences where indigeneous Yoruba cultural frameworks coexist with Western education systems. In *Ake*, for instance, the young narrator's intellectual curiosity, "I am going to school" (Ake 23), signals the emergence of a consciousness shaped by dual epistemic systems. However, unlike Emecheta's focus on structural oppression and survival, Soyinka's autobiographical stance is

marked by relative cultural mobility and intellectual exploration. His narrative voice does not primarily emerge from deprivation but from interpretive engagement with a complex socio-cultural environment. This distinction is crucial, as it positions Soyinka's autobiography within a framework of cultural negotiation rather than existential struggle.

Again, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial subject formation of *Black Skin, White Masks* provides additional insight into the psychological dimensions of Soyinka's autobiographical writing. Fanon argues that colonialism produces a fractured consciousness in which the subject is compelled to negotiate imposed identities (Fanon 36). In Soyinka's *Isara*, this negotiation is not depicted as psychic fragmentation but rather as reflective reconstruction, where memory becomes a tool for recovering and reorganizing cultural history. The narrative shifts from individual recollection to collective remembrance, particularly in his reconstruction of generational histories and communal tradition. This transformation aligns with Abiola Irele's assertion that African literature often function as a "repository of cultural memory" that preserves historical consciousness while reinterpreting it for contemporary contexts (Irele 89). Soyinka's autobiographical method exemplifies this archival function, as his reanimates familial and communal histories not merely as personal memory but as cultural documentation.

In this sense, Soyinka's autobiographical practice can also be understood through Ato Quayson's conception of African narrative as an "archive of experience" where storytelling becomes a means of preserving and reorganizing historical knowledge (Quayson 105). The movement from *Ake* to *Isara* reflects an expansion of narrative scope, from the immediacy of childhood perception to the broader reconstruction of ancestral and communal identity. Unlike Emecheta's womanist-inflected narrative of survival and resistance, Soyinka's autobiographical discourse is characterized by intellectual retrospection and cultural synthesis. His engagement with colonial education, Yoruba cosmology, and familial history produces a layered

narrative structure in which memory operates as both personal reflection and cultural interpretation. Thus, autobiography in Soyinka's work functions less as testimony of suffering and more as a philosophical inquiry into the formation of identity under colonial modernity.

Consequently, when read alongside Emecheta's Stiwanist and Womanist framework, Soyinka's postcolonial autobiographical model reveals a productive tension between embodied struggle and epistemic reflection, between survival – oriented narration and interpretive reconstruction. This theoretical juxtaposition enables a more comprehensive understanding of African autobiography as a gendered and historically situated discourse that operates across different registers of experience, memory, and cultural meaning.

Life Writing Theory and the Autobiographical Spectrum

Beyond feminist and postcolonial frameworks, this study is grounded in life – writing theory, which reconceptualizes autobiography not as a fixed genre but as a fluid spectrum of self – representation. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that life – writing is a cursive field in which identities are performed, negotiated, and reconfigured” (Smith and Watson 10). Autobiography in this sense, is not a transparent record of truth but a culturally mediated narrative practice. This theoretical position is further elaborated by Paul John Eakin, who asserts that autobiographical truth is not factual accuracy but the coherence of self – narration across time (Eakin 24). Eakin's formulation is particularly relevant to African life writing, where authors frequently move between fictions, memoir, and essayistic forms. In this study, autobiography is conceptualized as a three – tiered spectrum: experiential autobiography as embodied in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, reflective autobiography as seen in the retrospective self – analysis of *Head Above Water*, *Ake* and collective / reconstructive autobiography that *Isara's* cultural and generational memory projects. Within this trajectory, Emecheta and Soyinka occupy different position but remain interconnected through their shared engagement with self – representation as

a socially embedded act.

Synthesis: Gender, Memory, and Narrative Positioning

When these theoretical strands are brought together, a clear structural divergence emerges. Emecheta's Stiwanist and Womanist framework emphasizes embodied survival and gendered constraint, while Soyinka's postcolonial framework emphasizes cultural negotiation and intellectual reconstruction. Life – writing theory, however, mediate between these positions by revealing autobiography as a flexible structure rather than a fixed category. As such, African autobiography emerges not as a unified genre but as a multidimensional field of gendered, historical, and epistemological negotiation.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in literary analysis. It relies primarily on close textual reading as its core analytical method, enabling a detailed examination of language, narrative structure, and thematic construction in selected autobiographical and semi – autobiographical texts. The primary texts analyzed are *Second Class Citizen*, *Head Above Water*, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, and *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"*. The study is situated within a comparative literary framework, focusing on how autobiographical narratives construct subjectivity across gendered and socio – historical contexts. Rather than treating the texts as isolated productions, the analysis reads them relationally in order to identify patterns of convergence and divergence in autobiographical expression.

The analytical procedure is guided by a life – writing framework of narrative selfhood, which conceptualizes autobiography as operating across three interrelated modes: experiential, reflective, and reconstructive narration. This model provides structured lens through which the study traces the

movement from immediate lived experience to retrospective interpretation and essentially, to broader cultural and historical reconstruction. In addition to this framework, the study draws on African feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and life – writing theory as interpretive tools. Data for the study consist of primary literary texts, supported by peer – reviewed secondary scholarship drawn from African literary criticism, feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and autobiography life – writing studies. The study also incorporates a critical interpretive approach which allows for a deeper engagement with how autobiographical representation texts function as social commentary, identity formation, and historical reflection. The selection of autobiographical and semi – autobiographical texts enable the study to trace shifts from experiential narration to reflective reconstructive self – representation, thereby supporting the layered autobiographical structure adopted in this analysis.

Finally, although the study is primarily literary, its analytical framing acknowledges the broader socio – cultural relevance of the texts, particularly in relation to global concerns such as gender equality, education, and inequality, as articulated in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, these frameworks are used as interpretive context rather than empirical measurement tools.

Second Class Citizen (1974)

Second Class Citizen is a semi – autobiographical novel that follows the life of Adah, a young Nigerian woman who faces gender discrimination as she determines to obtain a means of life empowerment through formal education. Her marriage to a supposedly educated man and eventual migration to Britain does not ease her ordeals as female. In London, her ordeals increase as she does not only suffer as a woman but also has to atone for the sin of being black. Adah perseveres and becomes not only the family bread winner, but also an epitome

of a resilient woman who survives personal hardship in postcolonial Britain.

Head Above Water 1986)

This is Buchi Emecheta’s autobiography which intimates the reader of her journey from childhood in Nigeria to her emergence as an internationally recognized writer. Her reflection on her experiences of poverty, education, migration, marriage, single-motherhood and literary development serves as an eye opener to what self – development entails. Emecheta describes the difficulties of balancing childcare, economic survival, and creative ambition after relocating to Britain.

She recounts episodes of marital conflict, financial instability, racial prejudice, and professional rejection while simultaneously documenting her determination to establish herself as a writer. The autobiography presents writing as both a means of self – expression and a strategy for survival. Through retrospective reflection, Emecheta reconstructs her life as a narrative of resilience, highlighting how perseverance and self – belief enabled her to overcome personal and structural obstacles. The text serves not only as a record of individual experience but also as a commentary on gender, migration, and the challenges facing Black women in the diaspora.

Ake: The Years of Childhood

This is Wole Soyinka’s first autobiographical writings that focuses on his childhood in the town of Ake in Southwestern Nigeria during the final decades of British colonial rule. The curious and intelligent narrator uses the memoir to chronicle his early encounters with family, school, religion, politics, and community life. His vivid portrayal of his mother (Wild Christian) as well as the cultural environment of his origins portray the influence of his background on his intellectual endowment. Through humour, detailed description, and reflective commentary, Soyinka captures the complexities of growing up in a society that is politically resistant to

colonial authority. His detailed account of childhood adventures, educational experiences, observations of social and political events give a valuable record of Nigerian social history.

Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay" (1990)

Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay" is centred on Soyinka's father, whose initials "S. A" makes him to be popularly nicknamed as "Essay". He belongs to the generation of educated Nigerians who came of age under colonial rule. The autobiographical narrative does not focus on Soyinka, but the work reconstructs the lives, friendships, aspirations, and experiences of a group of intellectuals known as the school mates of his father, popularly addressed as "Ex – Essay" circle. Through memories, anecdotes and historical reflections, Soyinka explores questions of education, modernity, community, and historical change in colonial Nigeria. The narrative moves between personal recollection and collective history, *Isara* thus functions both as family history and as a broader reflection on colonial and postcolonial transformation.

Textual Analysis

Having established the theoretical and methodological foundations of the study, attention now shifts to the textual analysis of the autobiographical and semi – autobiographical narratives by Buchi Emecheta and Wole Soyinka. The analysis examines how each text constructs selfhood through memory, narrations and socio – historical experience while simultaneously transforming personal history into broader cultural and ideological reflection. Rather than positioning Emecheta and Soyinka with a rigid binary of female survival and male reflection, the study approaches both writers as complex practitioners of African life writing whose narratives negotiate identity, history, power, and belonging through distinct but interconnected modes of self – representation. While Emecheta foregrounds embodied struggle, migration, and gendered resistance, Soyinka's autobiographical discourse extends beyond reflective recollection into cultural interpretation,

intellectual formation, communal memory, and historical reconstruction. Consequently, the textual analysis explores not only differences in gendered experience but also the diverse narrative strategies through which African life writing mediates personal consciousness and collective history across experiential, reflective, and reconstructive dimensions.

Embodied Constraint and Narrative Fracture in Emecheta *Second Class Citizen*

In *Second Class Citizen*, Buchi Emecheta constructs Adah's experience through vivid scenes of domestic struggle, racial exclusion, and emotional resistance that transform personal hardship into social critique. The narrative's descriptions of overcrowded London apartments, financial deprivation, and exhausting domestic routines make immigrant marginalization materially visible, while Adah's restricted movement within the spaces reflects the broader limitations imposed by patriarchy and economic dependency. Through these scene – specific representations, Emecheta foregrounds the intersection of gender, race, and migration within everyday life. The novel further intensifies this critique in scenes involving housing discrimination and institutional rejection which expose the racialized realities confronting Black immigrants in postcolonial Britain.

In *Second Class Citizen*, in the novel, the declaration "she was a second class human being" (*Second Class Citizen* 94) operates as more than a statement of social position, it is a discursive collapse of subjectivity into structural designation. These syntactic simplicity of the sentence masks its ideological density. The use of the third – person pronoun "she" indicates a fragmented self – perception, suggesting that Adah is positioned outside full subject recognition even within her own consciousness. Read through Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Womanist framework, this moment registers the internalization of systemic oppression as lived psychology. However, what is crucial is not only oppression but the narrative effect it produces. Adah's subjectivity is rendered liminal, suspended between agency and erasure. Again, Adah's

experience in the London apartment symbolizes both physical confinement and social exclusion. The recurring imagery of over growing and economic strain reflects the intersection of racialized immigrant existence and patriarchal control.

This fragmentation is intensified in domestic scenes where creative expression is evidently interrupted. The destruction of Adah's manuscript is not merely symbolic of patriarchal control, it is an enactment of epistemic violence against female autonomy. The domestic space, ostensibly private, becomes what Molaria Ogundipe – Leslie would describe as a site where structural patriarchy is reproduced at micro – levels of everyday life (Ogundipe – Leslie 36). In life – writing terms, this stage represents the experiential level of the autobiographical spectrum: immediate, embodied, and unmediated by reflective distance.

Narrative Reclamation and Reflective Autobiography in *Head Above Water*

In *Head Above Water*, Buchi Emecheta shifts from the immediacy of experiential struggle toward a more retrospective mode of life writing reconstruction in which memory becomes a means of reclaim, voice, agency, and narrative authority. Unlike the fictionalized urgency of *Second Class Citizen*, the text revisits scenes of poverty, migration, marital instability, and single motherhood through reflective consciousness, allowing emotional suffering to be interpreted within a broader lens of endurance and creative self – fashioning. Emecheta's recollections of balancing domestic labour with academic aspiration and literary ambition create a textured portrayal of survival in which ordinary routines – childcare, writing late into the night, financial anxiety, and social isolation – become emblems of the burdens placed upon Black immigrant women in postcolonial Britain.

Particularly significant are scenes in which the novelist reflects on the repeated rejection, misunderstanding, and instability surrounding her literary career. Her descriptions of writing amidst exhaustion and emotional strain foreground authorship not merely as artistic production but as an

act of self – preservation and resistance against erasure. Similarly, the narrative's movement through spaces of displacement – temporary housing, welfare systems, and unstable domestic environments – creates an atmosphere of uncertainty that mirrors the precariousness of immigrant existence. Yet the retrospective tone of the autobiography prevents these scenes from remaining solely tragic; instead, memory transforms suffering into reflective insight, enabling Emecheta to reconstruct her personal history as a narrative of resilience, intellectual autonomy, and reclaimed selfhood.

In *Head Above Water*, the same lived conditions are reconfigured through retrospective narration. "Now I am really going to keep my head above water, all from writing..." (*Head* 154). The metaphor of "water" here is not static, it suggests continuous immersion in overwhelming structural pressure. The ellipsis introduces a pause that signals retrospective construction rather than immediate recollection. This is a key marker of transition from experiential autobiography to what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson describe as reflective life writing, where the self is actively reinterpreted through narrative form (Smith and Watson 10). Crucially, "keeping my head above water" reconfigured survival into narrative agency. The subject is no longer submerged within oppressive structures but positioned above them through the act of writing. This reflects a Stiwanist logic in which, as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie argues, transformation is achieved through conscious engagement with structural realities rather than escape from them. Thus, autobiography here becomes a technology of survival and reinterpretation, moving from lived constraint to narrated resistance.

Hybridity, Observation and Epistemic Formation in Soyinka's *Ake: The Years of Childhood*

In *Ake: The years of Childhood*, childhood perception is filtered through sensory detail and communal observation, allowing Soyinka to reconstruct colonial Nigeria not as static history but as lived cultural experience. His descriptions of ritual, school life, and public encounters create a stratified narrative voice in which private

recollection merges with collective memory. His consciousness is grounded in early intellectual curiosity, where he insists that “I’ll always ask: is this thing true, is it not true?” (Ake 52). This investigative impulse is reinforced by his reflection that “there was neither justice nor logic in the world of grown – ups” (Ake 87) indicating an emerging critical intelligence shaped by observation and questioning rather than passive acceptance. Soyinka’s autobiographical voice is constructed through perceptual curiosity rather than material deprivation. “Things do not always happen as one plans. There are many disappointments in life” (Ake 36) signals a foundational epistemic posture: the child – self is positioned not as oppressed subject but as interpretive observer of social complexity.

“It is time to commence the marital shifts for admittance to yet another irrational world of adults” (Ake 91) also signals a foundational epistemic posture: also signals a foundational epistemic posture: the child- self is positioned not as oppressed subject but as interpretive observer of social complexity. Unlike Emecheta's fragmented subjectivity, Soyinka's narrative self emerges through cognitive expansion. Within Homi K. Bhabha's framework of hybridity, this curiosity reflects the emergence of a subject formed within intersecting cultural systems. The "adult world" is not singular but layered comprising indigenous authority structures, colonial education systems, and familial hierarchies. The narrative thus operates within a third space of interpretation, where meaning is continuously negotiated rather than simply endured (Bhabha 112). A particularly significant dimension of Ake is its detailed depiction of institutional spaces such as school and church. These are not merely settings but epistemological battlegrounds, where language discipline, and knowledge production are contested. The child narrator's attention to ritual, discipline, and linguistic instruction reveals what Abiola Irele identifies as the African text's function as cultural testimony (Irele 89). However, unlike testimonial suffering, Soyinka's narration foregrounds interpretive mediation, marking the beginning of what life - writing theory would classify as reflective - autobiographical positioning.

Memory, Reconstruction, and Collective Identity in *Isara*.

In *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*, Wole Soyinka extends autobiographical narration beyond individual recollection into a reflective reconstruction of communal memory, cultural transition, and historical consciousness. Through richly textured scenes of social interaction, travel, ritual, intellectual exchange, and everyday life in colonial Nigeria, Soyinka reconstructs the lives of the father’s group (“Ex-Essay”) not simply as personal reminiscence but as a wider meditation on generational identity and social transformation. The narrative’s movement between anecdotal memory and historical reflection allows private experience to merge with collective history, thereby positioning memory as a dynamic process through which cultural memory is preserved and reinterpreted.

Also, notably important are Soyinka’s detailed portrayals of communal gatherings, school experiences, and encounters with colonial modernity, where humour, irony, and reflective commentary combine to reveal tensions between indigeneous values and imported colonial structures. His descriptive attention to speech patterns, social rituals, and interpersonal relationship gives the narrative a layered cultural texture that transforms remembered scenes into sites of historical interpretation. Consequently, the autobiography does not merely recover the past; it reconstructs a shared intellectual and cultural environment through which questions of identity, belonging, and historical continuity are critically negotiated.

In *Isara: A Voyage Around “Essay”*, autobiographical form expands beyond individual memory into collective reconstruction. In addition, the narrative does not simply recount events; it reorganizes them into a genealogical and cultural framework. This shift corresponds to Ato Quayson's notion of African narrative as an archive of experience (Quayson 105), where memory becomes structured cultural knowledge rather than personal recollection. In *Isara*, Soyinka's reconstruction of familial and communal history transforms

autobiography into what can be termed reconstructive life writing. The narrative voice increasingly moves from "I" to collectively referentiality, indicating a shift from individual subjectivity to communal epistemology. This mode differs fundamentally from Emecheta's autobiographical trajectory. While Emecheta moves from fragmentation to narrative survival, Soyinka moves from observation to historical synthesis, where memory becomes an organizing principle of cultural identity.

Comparative Close Reading: Gendered Epistemologies of Experience

A critical comparative tension emerges between the two authors' narrative strategies: The intentional statement of Emecheta "There was no room for dreams, only survival" (*Head Above Water* 101) and Soyinka's "Memory becomes a form of understanding (*Ake*: 42) reveal fundamentally different epistemological orientations. In Emecheta, dreams are negated by material constraint, producing a narrative dominated by necessity. In Soyinka, "memory " is elevated into an epistemic tool for interpretation. From a feminist point of view, this divergence reflects what Florence Stratton identifies as gendered asymmetries in access to narrative space (Stratton 5). From a life - writing perspective, it demonstrates the movement across different positions within the autobiographical spectrum: experiential deprivation versus reflective reconstruction.

Narrative Authority and the Politics of Voice

Across both authors, narrative authority is not pre - given but constructed through differing relations to experience. Emecheta's authority emerges from embodied struggle transformed into writing, while Soyinka's emerges from intellectual retrospection and cultural mediation. In both cases, autobiography becomes a domain where subjectivity is not merely represented but actively produced through narrative form.

Discussion

Autobiography Beyond Genre: Toward a Gradational Model of Autobiographical Discourse

The preceding analysis demonstrates that African autobiography cannot be adequately understood within rigid generic boundaries, Rather than functioning as discrete categories--novel, memoir, or historical reflection-- the texts examined reveal a continuum of narrative positioning in which modes of self-representation shift according to temporal distance, social location, and authorial intention. What distinguishes this gradation is not merely form but degree of mediation. Emecheta's writing tends toward immediacy, grounded in lived experience and constrained subjectivity, while Soyinka's moves toward abstraction, where memory becomes a tool for structuring historical understanding. This distinction confirms that autobiographical discourse in African literature is structurally fluid, aligning with life- writing theory's emphasis on narrative construction rather than factual transparency.

Gender as a Structuring Principle of Narrative Form

One of the most significant implications of this study is that gender does not simply influence autobiographical content - it fundamentally shapes what kind of narrative is possible. The divergence between the narrative trajectories of Buchi Emecheta and Wole Soyinka illustrates how access to social, intellectual, and material resources determines the scope of autobiographical expression. Emecheta's narrative form is conditioned by structural limit that prioritize survival, thereby producing a compressed, urgency- driven mode of storytelling. Soyinka's by contrast, reflects a broader intellectual range, allowing for reflection, reinterpretation, and cultural synthesis. The implication here is that narrative distance itself is a gendered privilege, not merely a stylistic choice.

From Personal Narrative to Social knowledge

Another key shift revealed in this study is the transformation of autobiography from personal narrative into social knowledge production. Both writers move beyond individual experience, but they do so differently. Emecheta's narratives convert lived hardship into a critique of systemic inequality making visible the intersections of gender, race, and class. Soyinka's writing, on the other hand, transforms memory into a means of understanding cultural and historical processes. In both cases, autobiography operates as a method of knowing, rather than simply a record of experience. This suggests that African autobiography functions as a form of interpretive discourse where meaning is generated through narrative structuring rather than explicit argumentation.

Reconfiguring Narrative Authority

The study also reveals that autobiographical authority is not inherent but constructed through different relationships to experience. Two distinct but complementary models emerge: experiential authority and interpretive authority grounded in Emecheta and Soyinka respectively. These models highlight that authority in autobiography is produced through how experience is narrated, not simply through the experience itself. This distinction is critical for understanding the broader implications of life – writing within postcolonial contexts.

Patterns of Convergence and Divergence in the Selected Texts

The comparative reading of the selected texts reveals that the autobiographical and semi – autobiographical narratives of Buchi Emecheta and Wole Soyinka are connected by a shared commitment to transforming personal experience into broader social and historical reflection. Across *Second Class Citizen*, *Head Above Water*, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, and *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"*, memory functions not as passive reflection but as a narrative strategy through which identity, history, and social realities are interpreted. Both

writers situate the self within larger postcolonial structures, revealing how autobiography in African literature frequently negotiates tensions between individual experience and collective history.

However, the texts diverge significantly in narrative orientation and modes of self – representation. Emecheta's narratives are shaped by immediacy, material struggle, and embodied experience, producing a form of life writing grounded in survival and testimonial recovery. Soyinka's autobiographical mode, by contrast, privileges reflective distance and cultural interpretation, allowing memory to function as intellectual and historical reconstruction. This divergence suggests that autobiographical narration is deeply conditioned by gendered and socio – historical access to agency, mobility, and interpretive authority. While Emecheta's narrative voice emerges through resistance to structures of domestic and racial marginalization, Soyinka's develops through reflective engagement with cultural formation and historical consciousness.

The comparison also highlights formal differences within the range of African life writing. *Second Class Citizen* occupies a fictionalized autobiographical space shaped by experiential urgency, whereas *Head Above Water* offers retrospective narrative reclamation. Similarly, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* reconstructs childhood consciousness through reflective observation, while *Isara: A Voyage Around "Essay"* extends autobiographical narration into communal and historical memory. These variations reinforce the study's continuum model by demonstrating the fluid movement between fictionalized selfhood, memoir, and historical reconstruction within African life writing.

Theoretical Implications

In summary, these insights reinforce the need to approach African autobiography through an integrated theoretical framework. Feminist theory explains the structural constraints shaping Emecheta's narrative, postcolonial theory accounts for Soyinka's engagement with cultural hybridity

and life – writing theory provides the conceptual bridge that situates both within a shared continuum. The result is a more comprehensive understanding of autobiography as a multidimensional discourse, where identity, memory, and power intersect in complex and historical specific ways.

Findings

The study establishes that African life writing functions as a significant mode of social commentary through which personal experience is transformed into broader reflections on gender, colonialism, migration, inequality, and historical consciousness. The analysis further reveals that autobiographical representation in the selected texts operates along experiential, reflective, and reconstructive modes of narration, thereby supporting a continuum – based understanding of African autobiography and life writing. The study also finds that gender significantly shapes narrative orientation, as Emecheta’s autobiographical discourse foregrounds embodied struggle and survival, while Soyinka’s writings emphasize reflective interpretation and cultural mediation.

Additionally, the study demonstrates that memory in the selected texts functions as a selective and interpretive process through which identity and history are reconstructed. Education equally emerges as a central instrument of empowerment, self – definition, and intellectual mobility with the narratives. Finally, the study establishes that the concerns represented in the texts resonate with broader socio – developmental issues associated with gender equality, quality education, reduced inequalities, and social justice, thereby underscoring the interdisciplinary relevance of African life writing within contemporary critical discourse.

Conclusion

This study has argued that African autobiography is most productively understood not as a stable literary genre but as a continuum of narrative practices shaped by gender, history, and

intellectual positioning. Through a comparative engagement with *Second Class Citizen*, *Head Above Water*, *Ake: The Years of Childhood*, and *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay*, the analysis has shown that autobiographical writing in African literature operates across experiential, reflective, and reconstructive modes, each corresponding to distinct forms of subject formation and narrative authority. Within this continuum, gender emerges as a decisive factor in shaping both the conditions of experience and the possibilities of narration. The works of Buchi Emecheta foreground a form of autobiographical consciousness grounded in material constraint, where subjectivity is negotiated through survival, resistance, and the gradual reclamation of voice. In contrast, the autobiographical writings of Wole Soyinka articulate a mode of self – representation oriented toward interpretation, cultural mediation, and the reconstruction of historical memory. These positions are not mutually exclusive but collectively illustrate the range and flexibility of autobiographical discourse within African literary traditions.

By integrating African feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and life – writing theory, the study has shown that autobiography functions as a mediated and performative practice, through which personal experience is transformed into social meaning. In this sense, autobiographical writing in both Emecheta and Soyinka operates as a form of critical engagement with structures of inequality, identity formation, and historical consciousness, rather than as a mere record of individual life. The significance of this study, therefore, lies in its demonstration that African autobiography provides a conceptual and analytical framework for understanding broader socio – cultural processes, including gendered experience, educational access, and cultural memory formation. It is this capacity of autobiography to translate lived realities into structured narrative knowledge that underscores its relevance beyond literary studies and situates it within wider conversations about social transformation and human development.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, there is a need for greater scholarly engagement with African autobiography as a multidimensional form of social commentary capable of illuminating intersections between gender, memory, identity, and historical consciousness. Future studies should further explore comparative approaches to African life writing across gender, geography, and generation in order to expand understanding of autobiographical diversity within African literary traditions.

The study also recommends increased critical attention to autobiographical texts written by African women, particularly within educational and literary institutions, as such narratives provide important insights into the lived realities of patriarchy, migration, racial marginalization, and economic inequality. Integrating these texts more substantially into literary curricula may contribute to broader conversations surrounding gender equality, empowerment, and inclusive education.

Furthermore, scholars of African literature and life writing should continue to adopt interdisciplinary frameworks that connect literary studies with wider socio – cultural and developmental concerns. The alignment between autobiographical narratives and issues reflected in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals affirms the relevance of literary discourse to contemporary debates on social justice, educational access, and inequality reduction.

Finally, the study recommends the continued development of theoretical models capable of accommodating the fluid and evolving nature of autobiography in African literature. The multidimensional framework proposed in this study may, therefore, serve as a basis for future research examining the shifting boundaries between fiction, memory, testimony, and historical reconstruction in African life.

WORKS CITED

Primary Text

Emecheta, Buchi *Head Above Water*. Heinmann, 1986.

_____, *Second Class Citizen*. Allison & Busby, 1974.

Soyinka, Wole. *Ake: Years of Childhood*, Oxford Up. 1981.

_____. *Isara: A Voyage Around Essay*. Oxford Up, 1990.

Secondary Sources

Andrade, Susan Z. “Rewriting History, Motherhood, and Rebellion: Naming an African Women’s Literary Tradition. *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 21, no. 1, 1990.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.

Eakin, Paul John. *Living Autobiographically: How We Create Identity in Narrative*. Cornell Up, 2008.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Chrls Lam Markmann, Grove Press, 1967.

Fongang, Delphine. Diaspora Subjectivity and the Dynamics of Empowerment in Buchi Emecheta’s *Head Above Water*. *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* vol. 6, No. 1, January 2013, pp. 43 – 54.

Gilmore, Leyh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. Cornell Up, 2001.

Irele, Abiola. *The African Imagination: Literature in Africa and the Black Diaspora*. Oxford Up, 2001.

Jeyifo, Biodun. *Wole Soyinka: Politics, and Postcolonialism*. Cambridge Up, 2004.

Jiana, Chunsheng. “Buchi Emecheta’s Identity Reconstruction in *Head Above Water*”. *Collected Papers of the xxiii Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA)*, 2022.

Katrak, Ketu H. *Politics of the Female Body: Postcolobial Women Writers*. Rutgers Up, 2006.

Nassbaum, Martha C. *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach*. Harvard UP, 2011.

Newell, Stephanie. *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*. Oxford UP, 2006.

Ogundipe – Leslie, Molar. *Recreating Ourselves: African Women Critical Transformations*. African World Press, 1994.

Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English”. *Signs*, vol. 11, no. 1, 1985.

Okyere – Darko, D., and U. S. Tetteh. “Autobiographical Traces of Bond Between a Novelist and Her Characters: The Case of Buchi Emecheta”. *African Journal of Applied Research*, vol. 3, No. 3, 2016.

Quayson Ato. *Strategic Transformations in Nigerian Writing: Orality and History in the Work of Rev. Samuel Johnson, Amos Tutuola, Wole Soyinka, and*

Ben Okri. Indiana UP, 1997.

Sene, Abdou. “The Determination to achieve one’s Goals Facing Adversity in *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *Head Above Water* (1986)”. *GNOSI: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis*, Vol. 4, No. 2, (2021).

Smith, Sidonie, and Juha Wotson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*. 2nd ed, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, Routledge, 1994.

United Nations. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. United Nations, 2015.

Ward, Cynthia. “What They Told Buchi Emecheta: Oral Subjectivity and the Joys of “Otherhood””. *PMLA*, vol. 105, no. 1, 1990.