

# Autobiography and the Deconstruction of Female Selfhood in Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* and Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika*

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## Abstract

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*The present paper uses deconstruction theory to critique the notion of female 'selfhood' in two autobiographical novels written by two settlers in Kenya: Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley. Lejeune's and Barthe's deconstruction theory are applied in the analysis of White settler female writing. The European settler community in Kenya traversed linguistic, religious, cultural, economic and geographical borders as they tried to construct and re-construct their identity in their new homes. The construction of the identity of female 'selfhood' by Karen Blixen and Elspeth Huxley in their autobiographical novels *Out of Africa* (1937) and *The Flame Trees of Thika* (1959) respectively blend fact and fiction, lending insight into particular migration histories within specific time periods that contributed to the formation of female 'self' identity. These novels address the ways in which individual identities are changed by their own journeys, their ancestors, and those of their community. The heroine in *Out of Africa*, who is actually Blixen, found herself caught between the ideal of European womanhood and that of the brave new world of white settlers in Kenya. The heroine in settler writing emerges with a strong, complex, dynamic, and meaningful female personality which is the product of various journeys across different boundaries.*

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## Introduction

The paper analyses the construction of 'self' by White settler female autobiography writers. Two autobiographies selected are Karen Blixen's *Out*

of Africa and Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* are analysed using Derrida's grammatology deconstruction theory. These two texts are read in a manner that reveals the ambiguities and contradictions that have made them to be misread as describing 'an autonomous unitary female protagonist.' Karen Blixen, according to Marais (2015: 131-132), was born in Rungstedlund in Denmark, where she spent her early life before moving to East Africa marrying her Swedish half cousin, Baron Bror von Blixen-Fineke, in Mombasa in 1914. They separated after a seven year marriage and she continued to manage the coffee plantation and Karen Coffee Co. which they had earlier started. Blixen had an intimate relationship with Denys Finch-Hatton who later died in a crash in his private plane and she buried him on her land at the foot of the Ngong Hills. The effects of the great economic depression on her farm and the death of her lover drive her 'out of Africa' when she goes to Europe never to return.

The story of women's involvement in the establishment of the colony had not been told prior to *Out of Africa*. Karen Blixen narrates her journey for self-discovery in this autobiographical novel. She explores her identity through relationships with the land. Karen Blixen's fictional autobiography *Out of Africa* will demonstrate the interaction and mutual influence of events in her life shape her concept of 'self'. Blixen aptly summarises her experience of living in Africa as follows, 'Looking back on the sojourn in the African highlands, you are struck by your feeling of having lived for a time up in the air' (Blixen 1937: 14). This, however, is to miss the point since Blixen uses the difference between the different racial and ethnic groups in Kenya to create a narrative which has universal wholeness and belonging.

Elspeth Huxley was born, at 22 Sussex Square on 23 July 1907. She was the only child of the Grants and this made the parents take very special care of her. In their maiden trip to British East Africa, as Kenya was then known, they left her behind in England under the care of Daisy Learmonth, one of Nellie's friends. The issue of historical facts in autobiographical is tested in the opening scene of *The Flame Trees of Thika* where Elspeth Huxley gives the readers the impression that she was present when her parents first arrived in British East Africa. This has led Nicholls (2002:2) to contend that the book is actually a work of fiction that is laced with many historically real events. Elspeth asks 'How much does one really imagine, how much does one observe?' One can no more separate those functions than divide light from air

or wetness from water. Nicholls (2002: 2) adds that it is her publishers who subtitled the work 'Memories of an African Childhood'.

Huxley's autobiographical trilogy comprises: *The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African childhood* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959); (1962) *The Mottled Lizard* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1962); *Love among the Daughters* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968). She published a further autobiographical work *Out in the Midday Sun: My Kenya* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). The present chapter focuses on *The Flame Trees of Thika: Memories of an African childhood* and how the female self is constructed in that autobiography.

The paper is a comparative examination of the autobiographical writings of Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* and Elspeth Huxley's *The Flame Trees of Thika* based on deconstruction and feminist theories. These are useful tools into the process of deconstructing the female selfhood. The writing of autobiographies had its origin in the importance of expressing one's 'self', but the expression of one's 'self' was a difficult and painful process. This process of writing symbolizes the search for identity of the 'self', self-knowledge and self-recognition by the writer. Identity construction in the settler colony in British East Africa in general and Kenya in particular was fraught with many ambiguities and contradictions. The main question that the paper grapples with is how to (re)-constitute the self, gender and social relations and culture without resorting to the linear, teleological, hierarchical, holistic or binary ways of thinking and being in female autobiographical writing. Deconstruction philosophers question the dominant beliefs.

The paper uses two autobiographical novels by European settler female writers' to deconstruct the developmental stages of the female 'selfhood' and the psychosocial factors that shape it. The imperial narrative written by the men is a story of white masculinity which is characterized by masculine adventure, power and authority in vast territory. Huxley and Blixen give women a central place in their pioneer settler stories. The colonizing women share the attributes of British masculinity; their rugged individualism depends on a contrast with colonized masculinity. (Webster, 1999: 536).

### Deconstruction of the 'Self' in *Out of Africa* and *The Flame Trees of Thika*

Two schools of thought within deconstruction are brought to bear in the analysis of the autobiographical texts under review. The first is the contract between the reader and writer as propounded by Lejeune (1989:25) contends that

The ultimate expression of truth (if we reason in terms of resemblance) can no longer be the being-for-itself of the past (if indeed such a thing exists), but being-for-itself, manifested in the present of the enunciation. It also implies that in his relationship to the story (remote or quasi-contemporary) of the protagonist, the narrator is mistaken, lies, forgets, or distorts – and error, lie, lapse of memory, or distortion will, if we distinguish them, take on the value of aspects, among others, of an enunciation, which, itself, remains authentic.

Lejeune (1975: 15) tends to dismiss the importance of a chronological order in favour of thematic patterns by which the autobiographer confers an (aesthetic) structure and a deeper meaning to his/ her own life story.

The second is the construction of the self through narration as propounded by Roland Barthes. Kim Worthington (1996: 13) asserts that:

The construction of a subject's sense of selfhood should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols. In the act of conceptualizing one's selfhood, one writes a narrative of personal continuity through time. That is, in thinking myself, I remember myself: I draw together my multiple members – past and other subject positions - into a coherent narrative of selfhood which is more or less readable by myself and others. Understanding personhood in this way [...] leaves open the possibility of revision of one's conception of self, and also acknowledges the potential for misreading and misinterpretation of the narratives of self and others

The construction of the 'self' in the autobiography cannot therefore be conceptualized as a closed process. It is an ongoing process that is continually evolving and deconstruction theory would, therefore, be the best placed to deal with the fluid nature of 'self' in autobiographical texts.

The contract between the writer and the reader form the basis of the reading of the autobiography. Lejeune (1991: 3) cites the 'autobiographical pact' which is predicated on the fact that the author, narrator and protagonist share the same name. The focus is not historical accuracy but rather a sincere effort to tell the truth. There is a shift away from the content of the text and a diminished significance is attached to questions regarding 'sincerity', 'authenticity' and 'resemblance' and a greater deconstructive emphasis is placed on the intention of the author. There is a deconstruction of the binary opposition between 'reality' and 'fiction' in the writing of the autobiography. The significant distinction between the autobiography and the novel is that whereas in autobiography there is an explicit declaration and expected correspondence between the author and the subject described in that author's writing: it is immaterial whether that subject is an 'accurate' representation of the author.

Elsbeth Huxley arrived in British East Africa in 1913 with her parents as a young girl where she was to spend most of her childhood before returning to England for further studies according to her recollection in *The Flame Trees of Thika*. According to Nicholls (2002: 8) the 'real' account is that she joined her parents a year after their arrival. This brings to question the role of childhood memories in the writing of an autobiography one may ask themselves if autobiography is a mirror of the real life. Is auto biography a product of fictional imagination? The autobiographical memory is the ability to recall events from our past. Eakin (1985: 63) contends that in reading an autobiography one has to accept that memory and imagination conspire to allow the author portray the reality or illusions of the 'self' in a manner that may not be quite consistent to reality. There is an acceptance on the part of the readers to tolerate disparity between *reality* and *fiction*, *truth* and *falsity* and *accuracy* and *distortion*. The 'self' in the autobiography is conceptualised within the deconstructive paradigm as a fluid and fragmented entity that is more or less an illusion. Damasio (1999:16) identifies three levels of 'self': *prototypical self* which we are not aware of, the *core-self* which is state of constant flux and the 'autobiographical self' that gives us a sense of identity and personhood. The '*core-self*' and '*autobiographical self*' are equated to the core consciousness and extended consciousness. In the core consciousness the organism has a sense of self in one time which is now and one place which is here. Damasio (1999: 16) adds that elaborate sense of self, as we are aware of our past, we anticipate our future and we have knowledge of the world around us. During childhood the biographer seems to be more focused on the elaborate self. This is illustrated in the two biographies under review. *The*

*Flame Trees of Thika* opens symbolically at a place of transit: The Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi.

'The oxen looked very thin and small for such a task but moved off with resignation, if not with speed, from the Norfolk hotel... We were going to Thika, a name on a map where two rivers joined. Thika in those days-the year was 1913- was a favourite camp for big game hunters and beyond it there was only bush and plain. If you went beyond on long enough you would come to the mountains and forests no one had mapped and tribes whose language no one could understand. (Huxley, 1959: 7).

The extract above describes the scene where Elspeth Huxley arrives in Kenya with her parents. Huxley deconstructs the male settler narrative by giving women a central place in this pioneering story, especially her mother right from the beginning. The earlier writings by men on the pioneer settler establishment in Kenya were dominated by males and the land was referred to as the 'white man's country'. This opening scene giving an opportunity to draw a dichotomy between Huxley the author and Huxley the narrator protagonist in *The Flame Trees of Thika* is complicated. She was not there when her parents first arrived in British East Africa as Kenya was then known. Huxley's life reveals a neat unified 'self' taking into account her birth, marriage and career in Kenya; however, there are a number of fault lines and ruptures in her life which the autobiography tries to cover.

Karen Blixen on the hand arrived in British East Africa as a newlywed bride at around the age of twenty nine years. She came to British East Africa as Kenya was then known with her husband with the idea of sharing a life of adventure in Africa. The first line of *Out of Africa* begins with the words 'I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills ... In the day-time you felt that you had got high up; near the sun, but the early morning and evenings were limpid and restful, and the nights were cold.' Blixen (1937: 13). This opening shows that unlike Huxley who starts her writing with the core self which is the here and now Blixen starts with the elaborate 'self' due the age that she starts her writing. This opening chapter of the two autobiographies show that age is an important part in the construction of the 'self' in auto biographical writing.

Autobiographical memory refers to how experiences are encoded, organized, and recalled. Mace (2010: 4) notes that autobiographical memory of who we have been physically and psychologically and who we plan to be in the future

(Something missing). These records include three different levels: first, the abstract knowledge about 'self', second, the general form of personal knowledge and finally, memory of specific events. Children's socialization environments reflect cultural background of the care giver which in turn shapes the child's developmental pathways. The care givers in their language use specific means to construct and convey a certain self-concept of the child: In the following excerpts for example, Mrs. Nimmo who is Huxley's temporary care taker, mirrors the behavior and attitude of a European woman's expectation of a well-bred child to Elspeth. The following examples serve as illustrations. Here is an excerpt

'You must eat up your milk pudding, it's good for the complexion':  
or 'You must eat your porridge, it's good for the brain.'

'I thought that was fish,' I protested.

'Well, it's fish too, dear; porridge is good for everything, it will make you grow into a big, fine girl.' But I don't want to be a big, fine girl. I want to be a jockey.' (Huxley, 1959: 83)

Elspeth, however, already has her own idea of how she wants to look and behave. She has set herself to be a jockey and if she were to be big as Mrs. Nimmo would like then her dreams would not be realised. This is because the character has decided to define her 'self' in contrast to how others define you in the process being defined by others in her life.

Elspeth had anything but a tranquil childhood, and was going through experiences that were forever remarkable. She was becoming absorbed by the African people, who had adopted themselves skilfully to adapt to the environment. Unlike many immigrant adults, she claims that she understood their thoughts. As to whether this is true or not is another question.

I began to perceive that third way lay inside and intermingled with the two worlds I already knew of, those of ourselves and of the Kikuyu: a world of snakes and rainbows, of ghosts and spirits, of monsters and charms, a world that had its own laws and for the most part led its own life, but now and again, like the rock jutting through the earth and vegetation protruded into ours, and was there all the time under the surface. It was a world in which I was a foreigner but the Kikuyu were at home.

### Female Autobiography and the Search for 'Self'

Having defined the 'self' the present section deconstructs the notion of 'self' and interrogates how female writers deal with the ambiguities that are embodied in this genre. Marrone (2000:1) asserts that "the 'self' is said to be elusive, 'identity' changeable, and 'life' incomprehensible," Women's lives have been traditionally and strongly embedded in patriarchy and social organizations dominated by men, not only families but also political institutions. Marrone (ibid) points out the essential fact that the self-discovery of female identity is based on the recognition of a significant "other", with which the self is continuously connected. The recognition of the existence and relevance of a "significant other" is extremely important for the development of a female identity, because female self is particularly connected to other people's lives. Writing is a strategy for self-definition: the writer can build her story and understand herself through the written words.

Markus & Kitayama (1992: 245) postulate that there are two models of 'self' construal: the model of a construal of the independent self-prevailing in Western cultural contexts, and a construal of the interdependent self-prevailing in East-Asian societies. The model of independence prioritizes the perception of the individual as bounded and self-contained, focuses on mental states and personal qualities in order to support self enhancement, self-expression and self-maximization. The model of interdependence prioritizes the perception of the fluidly defined individual as interrelated with others. The African sense of self is modelled along the East Asian sense of self where the self is interdependent on the others.

Markus and Kitayama (1992: 245-246) postulate that

The most significant difference between these two construal is in the role that is assigned to the other in self-definition. Others and the surrounding social context are important in both construal, but for the interdependent self, others are included within the boundaries of the self because relations with others in specific contexts are the defining features of the self. [...] The sense of individuality that accompanies an interdependent self includes an attentiveness and responsiveness to others that one either explicitly or implicitly assumes will be reciprocated by these others, as well as the willful management of one's other-focused feelings and desires so as to maintain and further the reciprocal interpersonal relationship.

Male and female autobiographies differ in their consideration of the self in its connection with significant others. What differs in male and female autobiographies is the degree of involvement of the self with significant others, that is how the male and female selves shape their lives in consideration for other people, and how these aspects are reflected in the narration. The self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other'. This recognition of another consciousness seems to enable women to write openly about themselves.

The two writers Huxley and Blixen are caught between two different cultures that have a totally different sense of self. The European concept of self is independent whereas they are living in a culture where the self is interdependent. In Africa the philosophy is *Ubuntu* which means "I am because we are and because we are I am". In the construction of the image of the self, the conceptualization of the 'other' is very important and central. The writers' conceptualized differences and exclusivity or difference and inclusivity is all a product of the culture in which they operate.

For the independent self, on the other hand, they state that

'Others' are less centrally implicated in one's current self-definition or identity. Certainly, others are important for social comparison, for reflected appraisal, and in their role as the targets of one's actions, yet at any given moment, the self is assumed to be a complete, whole, autonomous entity, without the others. (Markus and Kitayama, 1992: 247)

Webster (1999: 540) argues that theories of women's autobiography have sometimes focused on the differences between women's and men's writing, arguing that women's sense of 'self' is less ego-focused and individuated, bound up in relationship to others rather than differentiation from them. The difference between the prototypical male autobiographies and those written by women, asserting that in contrast to the self-revelatory approach of Augustine or Rousseau, "the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female 'self' is linked to the identification of some 'other.' Estelle Jelinek (1986:7) argues that male "autobiographers consciously shape the events of their life into a coherent whole," constructing "a chronological, linear

narrative... by concentrating on one period of their life, one theme, or one characteristic of their personality." By contrast she sees women's autobiographies as characterized by "irregularity rather than orderliness, not chronological and progressive but disconnected, fragmentary, or organized into self-sustained units rather than connecting chapters." The fragmentation of the autobiography is, therefore, an opportunity for the readers to bridge the gaps and reread the texts along lines that they reconstruct. *Out of Africa* and *The Flame Trees of Thika* have not been written in a linear chronological sequence but are rather fragmentary recollection whose sense of coherence emerges from the quest for self-discovery.

*Out of Africa* and *The Flame Trees of Thika* both have the search for 'self' as the predominant theme. There is no idealising or sentimentalising of the female in their novels. Given the patriarchal British colonial social structure, the woman is accorded a secondary status. She is the 'other' that confirms the subjectivity of the male but is excluded from the subject position, the importance of these women writers lies initially in delving within their self, to formulate the 'female self' as a subject in its own right. It examines how the novelists tap their autobiographical 'self' through their protagonists and fictionalise the process of the emerging empowerment within women, through their ability for reviewing self."

The experience of travelling simultaneously constructs and destabilizes the female protagonists' sense of "self" and personal identity. Soon after Karen Blixen relocates to British East Africa, she finds herself alone in a distant land with the huge task of trying to manage a thriving coffee plantation. In order to realize this, she must get to know the land and the East Africans who work for and with her. In the process, she learns more about herself. Unlike Elspeth, Blixen does not tell in great detail her arrival in Africa. The fact that she arrived in Africa as a young adult could account for her lack of a detailed recollection of her arrival. On arrival both Blixen and Huxley are quite alienated and at a loss about how to get used to the new environment.

Elspeth Huxley arrives with her parents only to find a wilderness which is quite different from the environment which she was used to in Europe. The next several years that she spends in Kenya transform her into a more mature and rounded personality. The newly established colonies give the women a break from the constraints and dictates of the society back in Britain and the women in the colony are now able to do things that they would not do back

home. Elspeth Huxley (1959) "while Juma took care of the domestic chores, she was abroad in the sunshine laying out the garden, supervising the planting of coffee seedling, marking out a citrus plantation ...paying labour in a corner store that.." Back in Europe Elspeth Huxley would be taking care of the domestic chores. The female protagonists in these two novels embody the authors desire to portray women's accomplishment and difficulty realistically. The dialectical making and unmaking of the self is mirrored in the accounts of the protagonists revealed at moments when conventional plots and perceptions give way to narrative rupture, at moments when narrative voices multiply or collapse. The development or division of the self is a crucial element of the settler colonialists travel narrative as a genre, just as it is in autobiographical genres at large. This ravelling and unravelling of the self is particularly fascinating in those texts that undertake most strenuously to represent the "outward" self as unified, stable, and organic whole. The efforts these writers make to collapse the distance between the self and the speaking author are frequently occasions for innovative experiments in that impossible straining for autobiographical realism.

Travel writing embodies the richness of physical adventure and personal self-discovery while celebrating the familiarity of the beaten path and, throughout the modern era, the pleasures of acquiring cultural capital. Sometimes the acquisition of that cultural capital has served purposes of which it is important to be critical - purposes of colonialism, conquest, and domination of different sorts.

Webster (1999: 531) argues that there is also an undercurrent in Huxley's work which claims female superiority in this masculine arena, where women outdo men in qualities of adventurousness, resilience and persistence. The contrast is especially between colonizing women and metropolitan men, the latter, like the colonized, occupying a feminine position in relation to the exemplary masculine qualities displayed by settler women. This is deconstructive reading where the female subverts the dominant male role that is assigned to male in most narratives.

Women in *The Flame Trees of Thika* are represented as practical and level-headed, capable of mocking and deflating narratives of masculine adventure. Lettice, Tilly's friend, elicits a story from her lover, Hereward, of the black buck he shot in Kashmir and its 28 inches from one end of its horns to the other, and comments: 'How proud it must have been of its masculine glory,

like a man with a magnificent moustache' (Huxley, 1959: 58-59). Tilly's distaste for those who are 'gushing', 'emotional', 'sentimental', or 'effusive' is about other colonizing women. (Huxley, 1959: 261). She is also represented as robustly practical in opposition to her husband Robin's unworkable schemes, his 'passion for inventing things that never quite worked', and his habit of covering 'scraps of paper with detailed, complicated calculations which invariably proved, beyond all question, the brilliant success of whatever plan he was hatching' (Huxley, 1959: 121).

It is particularly the quality of persistence that characterizes Tilly, who does not dwell for long on difficulties and is never deterred by setbacks. When, on the first *safari* to Thika, Robin muses on the difficulties of the journey – there are no bridges – Tilly replies briskly, 'then we must get some built' (Huxley 1959: 20). Tilly is marked out by her racial superiority, once more against a backdrop of colonised people, and especially of colonised men who occupy a feminine position in relation to her strength, and perform domestic duties as her 'houseboys' and as her porters when she goes on safari. But there are also suggestions of her superiority to white men, both as colonial settlers, and in the metropolis. This female 'self'.

### Gendered Construction of Colonialism

The narratives have been written as stories of white masculinity where male adventure, power and authority are exercised over a vast territory. The shifting positions, conditions and politics of women from various national, ethnic, and racial collectivities have been neglected. Settler state represent 'home' to a dominant group, the intransigence of settlers regarding both indigenous resistance and the metropolis or other external pressures for change complicates the transformation of the state. 'Elspeth writes the East African colonial history from a female perspective as she deconstructs the model of female identity the male writers have presented as the normative in British East Africa's settler colony literature' (Daiva and Yuval-Davis, 1995:1).

There are occasional references in Huxley's autobiographical writing to colonialism as a civilising mission. As Tilly reflects on Africans: 'We may have a sticky passage ourselves, but when we've knocked a bit of civilisation into them, all this dirt and disease and superstition will go and they'll live like decent people for the first time in their history' (Huxley, 1959: 121). Imperial expansion is the main emphasis in adventure and Kenya as 'this land of splendour and promise that offered sunshine, sport and adventure, with the

prospect of independence and the rebuilding of lost fortunes' (Huxley, 1959: 22). Free settlers were an influential and hardworking part of colonial Kenya. Women shaped and created rural towns just as much as men did. Working alongside men they also managed homes, raising children and educating families. Colonial life meant upper class women had to perform physical labour and hard work for which they were hardly prepared. Women of social standing found themselves in harsh and brutal surroundings where they had to struggle to build a life for themselves and their families. The privileges of English upper life were over.

In the construction of the 'self' both female and male white settlers share and the most common adventure known as the *safari* is one in which women participate and which serves as a symbol of their mobility and freedom. When Tilly goes on safari and shoots a lion, Robin stays behind to manage the farm. Grant's own first big game hunt is represented as a rite of passage which culminates in the pleasure of stalking and shooting buffalo (Huxley, 1959: 246).

Prior to her pursuit of farming in Africa, Karen Blixen was a game hunter. She recalls that:

Before I took over the management of the farm, I had been keen on shooting and had been out on many safaris. But when I became a farmer I put away my rifles.

The Maasai, the nomadic, cattle owning nation, were neighbours of the farm and lived on the other side of the river; from time to time some would come to my house to complain about a lion that was taking their cows, and to ask me to go out and shoot it for them, and I did so if I could. (Blixen, 1959: 22).

Blixen had perfected her skills in hunting to such an extent that few men could rival her. She describes her hunting skills as follows:

Out in the wild I had learnt to be aware of abrupt movements. The creatures with which you are dealing there are shy and watchful, they have a talent for evading you when you least expect it. No domestic animal can be as still as a wild animal. The civilized people have lost the aptitude of stillness, and must take lessons in silence from the wild before they are accepted by it. The art of moving gently, without suddenness, is first to be studied by the hunter, and more so by the hunter with the camera. (Blixen, 1959: 24)

It has been claimed that women writers subvert the autobiographical pact that they have with the readers. In contrast to this, white masculinity from home is represented as distinctly unheroic and unadventurous in the figure of Hilary, Tilly's cousin, who comes to stay on a visit from England. Hilary keeps indoors as much as possible, fussing about domestic detail, and repeatedly warning Tilly about the dangers of insects, unboiled or unfiltered water and the sun. When he ventures out, even onto the veranda, he is swathed in many layers of insect-repelling fluids and protective clothing – sunshade, goggles, spine-pad, scarves, and an enormous toupee. As a representative of 'cultured' and 'civilised' masculinity he is portrayed mainly as a comic figure. Home as 'civilised' may be the yardstick which makes Europeans what they are. Kenya, as Hilary warns Tilly, may represent the danger of becoming 'rough colonials' – a phrase which Tilly herself uses to characterise her domestic life (Huxley, 1959: 246). But home is also the domesticated place which marks them off as pioneers, away from home. In the episode with Hilary, oppositions between home and colony and the association of women with the former are reversed, in the contrast between Hilary's fussing and Tilly's much more robust approach. White (home) men are less adventurous than white (colonial) women. The contrast extends to Huxley herself, who is introduced to Hilary as a child who 'spends most of her time on ponies or missing pigeons with a 22' rifle (Huxley, 1959: 105). Not all European women are portrayed as undomesticated adventurers in Kenya.

### Narrative Strategy and the Construction of Female Selfhood

Narrative strategy is firmly linked to the notion of the individual, evolved to some extent by propelling the moment of self-recognition towards the narrative present: only at the end of one's story can it be unfurled from the beginning as a singular life course, staging the auto-biographer as subject. *Out of Africa* is structured as a fragmented recollection of stories, character sketches, description of the Kenyan white highland and the Great Rift Valley among others and the people with whom Karen Blixen interacted during her life in Kenya. The unifying theme among all these apparently disjointed incidences is her search for self-identity. At the beginning of the story, Karen arrives at Ngong as a rather timid and unsure farmer out to try her hand in coffee farming. She meets Kamante, a young son to one of her squatters, who is very sick and secluded. Prior to Kamante's move to live with Karen Blixen in her home, she also lived a rather secluded life and did not understand her native workers. Blixen begins her narration by highlighting 'the self' of the white settlers and the otherness of the Africans, Arabs, Indians and the Somali.

This otherness is based solely on racial identity. 'The Somali were cattle-dealers and traders all over the country.' 'The Indians of Nairobi dominated the big native business quarters of the Bazaar.' (Blixen, 1959: 21; 22) This helps her to situate the different characters who tell their own stories in their unique ways. Later in the autobiography *Out of Africa* ending they emerge together to form a big collective whole that they all share. Blixen's 'self' has also matured from the alienated 'self' which she had during her arrival to a more transcendental one.

Huxley's *Flame Trees of Thika*, on the other hand, is narrated in a chronological order. The novel starts with the Grants at The Norfolk where they board an ox-drawn cart to Thika. She describes the people and the new landscape that she has come to in very vivid details. "The dust and sweat combined to make us look like red Indians, with strange white rings around our nose and eyes" (Huxley, 1959:10). Huxley then proceeds to describe the smell of Africa: "one cannot describe the smell because there are no words in English to describe, apart from those that place it in a very general category, like sweet or pungent" (ibid.).

The other aspect of narrative strategy is the point of view; the placement and the relationship between the narrator and the events in the autobiography. Huxley seems to employ the first person from Elspeth's point of view in narrating the events in the autobiography. This is in contrast to Blixen who uses multiple perspectives and anecdotes in narrating her story. The resulting text in *The Flame Trees of Thika* has a constricted and tunnel perspective that doesn't evolve. Any details not seen from Elspeth's perspective are presented by Elspeth, relating them to the reader as Elspeth learns about them. The limitation makes Elspeth's character something of a mystery. Though she explains her feelings about particular events and her thoughts on some points, she tends to present more of her observations of others. This gives the reader a very limited view of Elspeth's character.

The aspect of voice as a narrative strategy is used by Elspeth Huxley as she writes *The Flame Trees of Thika* effectively. She writes in the first person singular voice. It is clear to the readers that she (Huxley) in the main character once the novel begins just in the same manner that Blixen is the main character in *Out of Africa*. The feelings and thoughts of the auto biographer are clearly expressed in the story. Elspeth Huxley gives detailed background information that allows the readers to comprehend the story. The context is woven into the



story so clearly that it gives it depth. The reader can visualise the scene that she is depicting vividly such as in chapter two where she is describing the Tana River plains and the numerous streams. "These rivers, no larger than streams had dug down through soil as red as a fox and rich as chocolate to from steep valleys whose sides were now green with millet and maize" (1959:13). The narrative technique adopted by Huxley allows the readers to get a clear mental picture of some of the locations and places where the actions that she is describing are taking place.

The use of relationships as an aspect of narrative technique is quite significant. The reader gets a clear relationship between the characters when Elspeth Huxley narrates how she gets to know her new neighbours who are also coming to start new lives as settler farmers. The main characters are Lettice and Hereward Palmer who arrive with two Pekinese dogs and the story of having left their young son behind in Europe. Hereward is a former military man and Lettice later says she was not cut out for life in Africa. Elspeth likes Lettice who gives her a pony as a gift. Lettice says that a friend, Ian Crawford, selected the pony and it is soon evident that Ian and Lettice are involved in a budding romance. When war breaks out, Lettice tells Tilly that she cannot go through with leaving Hereward in favour of Ian because she fears that Hereward might sacrifice himself on the battlefield and that his skeleton would always stand between her and Ian. As it turns out, she does not have to make that decision because Ian is killed in battle. Another of the neighbours is Mr. and Mrs. Nimmo. Mr. Nimmo spends all his time hunting, leaving Mrs. Nimmo to fill her time as best she can and to manage the farm as best she can. There seems to be an emerging relationship between Mrs. Nimmo and another of the neighbours, Alec Wilson, who believes that the best way to make his farm succeed is to read everything he can find on the subject. The sexual encounter between Mrs. Nimmo and Alec is described by Elspeth although she does it so that there is no sense of obscenity in the mind of the readers.

Blixen's perception and images of the colonial world at a time when women travelled little does a great deal to paint the effect of travel on the female self. Mobility was clearly a gendered phenomenon and women travelled accompanying their husbands or fathers but none set out on their own as Karen Blixen did to establish and manage their own farms. Pratt (1992: 160) notes that ultimately writing is a process of construction or invention of the self, which occurs dynamically in an experience that by definition destabilizes the identity by having the subject wrenched from her habitually defined space, the

home. The identity of the writer is transformed by this travel-writing process. In this sense, travel writing is a dialogue — between the self and the other, between the here and there — relations which during the traveling process may become reversed and will be constantly questioned and (re)negotiated. Coming into contact with many cultures is a constant challenge to the process of identity-construction. There is marked difference in the narratives of the 'self' as presented in the two autobiographies under review given that Blixen wrote as an adult while Huxley wrote from childhood recollection. Blixen notes 'They (Kikuyu) were making spells to prevent the Maasai from having any success in love with the kikuyu girls' (Blixen, 1959: 151).

Travelling put women concretely in another place which has different gendered roles. For the Blixen and Huxley this implies a series of elements that put into question their status in the social and cultural milieu. They are constantly in contact and comparison with the other's cultures and peoples. Blixen narrates how the Somali women were keen on learning more about the European women who they thought were a different breed of people from them.

The young (Somali) women were very inquisitive as to European customs, and listened attentively to descriptions of the manners, education, and clothes of white ladies as if out to complete their strategic education with the knowledge of how males of an alien race were conquered and subdued. (Blixen, 1959:159)

Blixen confesses that there are certain things that she had tried to learn but was not able to such as maidenly prudery which she could only learn from the Somali. This creates a bond of universal sister hood which transcends the borders of race and brings women together as they try to relate better with the men in their life.

Their travels have always constituted a metaphor for the inner road of existential development. Just as earlier male discoverers had experienced, in travel to new places there are also questions of interior and exterior exploration of the female space. Temporal and spatial distance from the home, spiritual and cultural distance from the places visited provokes a state of existential insecurity, nostalgia, loneliness, and comparisons which constitute differences to be overcome.

Visiting a new place is “reading” it, interpreting its signs according to a code that was set for another place. In this process of their biography writing, women generally try to collect and possess themselves. Karen Blixen notes that her relations with the natives on her farm helped her to grow and enlarge her vision of the world.

As for me, from my first weeks in Africa, I had felt a great affection for the Natives. It was a strong feeling that embraced all ages and both sexes. The discovery of the dark races was for me a magnificent enlargement of my entire world. (Blixen, 1959: 25)

Blixen had many roles which she played to the squatters on her farm. For example:

I was a doctor to the people on the farm most mornings from nine to ten, and like all great quacks I had a large circle of patients, and generally between two and a dozen sick up by my house. (Blixen, 1959: 29)

Blixen’s philosophical horizon was broadening through her interaction with the natives. She notes that the differences in worldview between the natives and whites accounts for part of their differences in behaviour

The Kikuyu are adjusted for the unforeseen and accustomed to the unexpected. Here they differ from the white man, of whom the majority strive to insure themselves against the unknown and the assaults of fate. The Negro is on friendly terms with destiny, having been in her hands all his time; she is to him, in a way, his home, the familiar darkness of the hut, deep mould for his root. (Blixen, 1959: 30)

During the planting season Blixen was meteorologist and the natives relied on her for an accurate prediction of the rains.

The farmer slowly turns his eyes all-round the horizon. First to the east, for from the east comes the rain, and there stands clear in the virgin. Then south, to greet the southern cross, the door keeper of the great world, faithful to travellers and beloved by them, and higher up, under the luminous streak of the milky way, alpha and beta in the Centaur. (Blixen, 1959: 82)

Blixen’s vast knowledge of astronomy makes her acquire a name amongst the Natives on her farm.

Now looking back on my life in Africa, I feel that it might altogether be described as the existence of a person who had altogether come from a rushed and noisy world, into a still country. (Blixen, 1959: 92)

Blixen also acted as a judge whenever there were disputes on her farm. This experience was rather challenging to her since European ideas of justice and African’s conceptualization of justice were at variance in her opinion. She observes that

The ideas of justice of European and Africa are not the same and those of one world are unbearable to another. To the African there is but one way of counterbalancing catastrophes of existence (Blixen, 1959: 93).

As a young European woman Blixen had to sit in councils where men were to judge and arbitrate cases. This would not have been the case if she was in Europe since she is not a trained lawyer.

With all the diversities of views, my position as a judge to the Kikuyu held a profusion of potentialities, and was dear to me. I was young then, and had meditated upon the ideas of justice and injustice, but mostly from the angle of person who was being judged; in a judge’s seat I had not been. I took great trouble to judge rightly, and for peace on the farm. (Blixen, 1959: 96-97)

The Kyama is a council of old men whose only female member is Blixen. Sitting in this council she represents not only her interest as a white farmer but also the interest of the youth and women. She remarks: “at times I grew tired of my Ancients of the Kyama and told them what I thought of them: ‘You old men,’ I said ‘are fining the young men’” (Blixen, 1959: 96).

Blixen was also a teacher to her squatters. She tried to make them better people by exposing them to western values which would later on prove to be very useful. ‘I had an evening school for the people of the farm, with a Native schoolmaster to teach them’ (Blixen, 1959: 37).

Blixen had got fully absorbed into the life of the squatters that she was an integral part and parcel of their daily life. She empathized with them and was no longer removed from their life as she was at the beginning of her stay on

the farm. She notes that 'the kikuyu made me a chief mourner, or woman of sorrows, when a great distress befell us on the farm' (Blixen, 1959: 99).

### Embracing African Custom and the Female self

The female 'self' is constructed in separateness and boundaries between the 'self' and the 'other.' The main female protagonists in the autobiographies *Out of Africa* and *The Flame Trees of Thika* go through a journey of self-discovery in which they dialogue first with themselves as they try to identify and construct their sense of selfhood. That explains why in the earlier parts of both novels the protagonists are constantly constructing the native as the other and trying to find out how different they are from the Europeans.

When both arrived in Nairobi they are keen to note and emphasize the distinctions between races in the town. Huxley starts:

The quarters of the native and of the coloured immigrants were very extensive compared to the European town. The Swaheli town on the road to Muthaiga Club, had not a good name in any way, but was a lively, dirty and gaudy place.... The Somali town was further way from Nairobi on account, I think, of Somali's system of seclusion of their women. (Blixen, 1959: 20)

She tries to segment the society in order to highlight the 'other-ness' of the different groups to the white Europeans. She even distinguishes between the immigrants as white and coloured. The various ethnic and racial groups are made to tell their own stories in their own situations. Later on as the narrative develops she then merges the groups into a whole that transcends the confine of race or ethnic division.

Huxley also notes that 'while everyone else strode about Nairobi's dusty cart – tracks in bush shirts and khaki short or riding breeches Roger Stilbeck was always neatly dressed in light worsted suit of perfect cut, and wore gold cuff-links and dark brogue shoes ( Huxley 1987: 7). In her mind at this early stage she does not include the native in her description of Nairobi just like Blixen this exclusion of the 'other' becomes very critical as she is forming her concept of selfhood and finally matures to have a transcendental concept of self.

Blixen notes that she was at home in Africa and had embraced the attitudes and culture of the Africans.

I was much at home in the Somali Village through my Somali servant Farah Aden, who was with me all the time that I was in Africa, and I went to many of their feasts. A big Somali wedding is a magnificent, traditional festivity. As a guest of honour I was taken into the bridal chambers, where the walls of and the bridal bed were hung with old, gently glowing weavings and embroideries, and the dark-eyed young bride herself was stiff like a marshal's baton, with heavy silks, gold and amber. (Blixen, 1959: 21)

### Conclusion

The present paper has traced the development of the 'self' in white settler writing using the comparative deconstructive analysis of the works of Elspeth Huxley and Karen Blixen. Lejeune's and Barthe's deconstruction has been used to show how the two writers flout the writer's pact in *The Flame trees of Thika* and *Out of Africa* respectively. Deconstructive reading of the two novels reveals that both writers have a sense of 'self' which is varied from those ladies who stayed back in Europe as well the African women. The men in the writers are also portrayed as more feminine which is a deconstructive reading. This can be attributed to the fact that women are more likely to conceive of their role as subordinate or interdependent, less driven by individual ego. The female 'self' is very fluid and dynamic and grows in response to number of socio factors some of which have been highlighted in this paper.

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