

**Negotiating identities: A thematic analysis of autobiographies of selected women political leaders**

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**Abstract**

Autobiographies provide a chance for writers specifically women to share their life experiences and sufferings. This paper explores the autobiographies of three women politicians, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, Mary Robinson, and Benazir Ali Bhutto from Liberia, Ireland and Pakistan, with a focus on how they craft and negotiate their personal, social, religious and gendered identities through their life stories from a feminist perspective. Through thematic analysis (NVivo Pro12), this research throws new light on the narratives of the female leaders by recounting their portrayal of selves accomplishing different roles and duties in their situational dynamics and constraints. The findings of the study contribute to feminist literature by providing insights into the struggles of ‘accomplished’ women in their respective societies that transcends any geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries.

**Key words:** Identity, politics, feminism, autobiographies, thematic analysis

**1. Introduction**

Being an important tool of communication, language has been recognized as a cognitive or psychological property of human beings (Carnie, 2013), as a tool of constructing social reality (Fairclough, 2001; Hymes, 1972; Said, 1978) and as integrally and discursively productive of identity and society (Burck, 2011; Norton, 2014; Pennycook, 2004).

Autobiographies have been used for an exchange of ideas about a variety of everyday subjects that implicate the self (Elarem, 2015, Yerg, 2016). Autobiographies provide the chance for writers—and women in particular—to raise their voices, to share their experiences and to narrate the pains and toils they suffered (Moor, 2015). In addition to this, they reflect the detailed accounts of the writer’s life. The autobiographies by the individuals in power provide a glimpse of their journey to the higher echelons in their relevant societies (Khan & Malik, 2016). Power, in this modern era, is most associated with the domain of politics (Khan & Malik, 2016).

Politics is still a male-dominated domain and not women-friendly (Oni, 2014). The tradition and practice of politics in Pakistan and Africa does not accommodate women in the governance for several reasons including colonialism, religion, culture, and preconceived ideologies which preserve the exercise of power only for males while women are supposed to stay at homes and take care of their families (Bhutto, 1988, Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009). This practice in the domain

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of politics is not much different from a global perspective. In European societies as well, politics is a male-dominated sphere and women faced difficulty accessing the exercise of power in the highest echelons of the society (Stockemer, 2008). Therefore, studying women in power, helps readers to understand their difficulties, pains, struggles and sufferings in their journey to higher positions such as presidents and prime ministers.

This work studies autobiographies of the presidents and prime ministers because these are the highest positions in any society and to get there for a woman is not an easy task in a male-dominated society. Consequently, it becomes inevitable to explore how these leaders narrate their emotions, experiences and the realities of their lives and also to highlight how they negotiate their identities in various roles, under preconceived ideologies of their relevant societies. This work is an innovative attempt as it brings to light the viewpoints and experiences of three women leaders from three different contexts: Asian, African and European. It also provides the chance to understand the prevalent social norms, cultural values, religious identities and the political climate of these regions and highlights the distinctions between their prevalent ideologies and social structures. From a feminist perspective, this analysis paves the way for other women who have been fighting their battles in their families, communities or societies and for women who have been struggling to construct their identity specifically. Through the significant themes, obtained from the selected autobiographies, this work provides interesting insights about different types of subjects and identities, their constitution and representation in the text, as well as different styles of (self)representation.

### ***1.1. Objectives of the Study***

This study has been carried out with the focus on core objectives of this paper. They are:

- To explore the significant and recurring themes in the three autobiographies
- To draw out similarities and differences, encapsulated in these themes from the autobiographies of the selected women
- To analyze how often each woman talks about each theme

## **2. Literature Review**

Feminists consider the development of womanhood because of a social process instead of a biological property (Warren, 1990). This implies that a woman's identity is constructed over a life span while she adopts different roles, such as, a daughter, a mother, a wife, and a woman (Hoffman, 2006). The individual's development of identity has had the impacts of the history, culture, and social norms as it is a mutual process between the individual and others (Erikson, 1980). Identity is not something fixed or unchangeable and it is not a property that an individual achieves (Erikson, 1980) but is an ongoing process within an individual during a lifetime and the process of identity formation embeds in many different elements of an individual's life. For Giddens (1991), identity formation is a biographical approach which again is a matter of time.

According to these viewpoints, identity is a constant process of one's searching for a point of reference through accepting and altering certain identifications while rejecting others (Jakubowska, 2010). Accepted identifications are transformed, since their importance, as perceived by an individual, changes with time (Giddens 1991). Therefore, events that occur in an individual's life are like benchmarks in the human life cycle (Cho et al., 2015).

The process of identity formation is based on lifelong development and this is a key feature of autobiographies too that they develop in time (Jakubowska, 2010). The autobiographies are called the discourses on identity as they describe the life of the author by creating his/her

specific personality and identity (Eakin, 2004). They reflect the narrator's emotions, actions, personal relations, and experiences of various life events and then result in a narrative of numerous plots (Jakubowska, 2010). But for women particularly, autobiographies provide a chance to express their perceptions, pains, struggles and their accounts of managing those barriers which typically impede a woman's development. From a feminist viewpoint, "women's personal narratives 'tell on' the gender arrangements of their society" (Long, 1999, p. 9) and reflect power structures (Sands, 1997). They reflect how and why the women run into political opportunities, why they made certain political decisions and how they faced opposition from other constituents or colleagues (Neely, 2012). Through autobiographies women get the chance to portray their side of the story by incorporating that information which is not available on other public forums.

Theoretically, this work incorporates the key themes of liberal feminism which are also found in the autobiographies of women. The liberal feminists John Stuart Mill (1869), Sen and Grown (1987) and Bunch (1990) called for the equal rights of the women including education rights, property rights, divorce laws, health care, safe legal abortions and distribution of economic resources equally (Warren, 1990). The liberal feminists emphasized that women like men are human beings and therefore have equal individual freedom, so the sex at birth was no longer a legitimate basis on which to discriminate against women. The most important discussion was on women's identity in private and public spheres particularly in the political arena (Warren, 1990). Thus, liberal feminism emerged as one of the most dominant ideologies of women's movement.

The notion of identity and the process of identity formation has been a central concern for many decades, in the works of social theorists such as sociologists (Berger and Luckmann, 1991; Giddens, 1991), cultural theorists and social psychologists (Gergen, 1991) with a focus on psychological aspects of identity processes (Sinclair, 2011). The focus of these studies was to investigate how people constitute and maintain their identities through their life spans. Some researchers have applied identity concepts to explore questions of how selves are intricately crafted, performed, and play out in organizations (Karreman and Alvesson, 2004; Kondo, 1990). There is some research (Ely, Ibarra and Kolb, 2011; Ely and Rhode, 2010; Nadeem, 2015) on leader's identity and few (Neely, 2012) addressed women's efforts to obtain higher positions through descriptive analysis. The current work is innovative in its approach of exploring the autobiographies with a different approach, that is, thematic analysis

### **3. Methodology**

This paper adopts a qualitative thematic analysis of autobiographies with an interpretive approach to reveal the themes and broader patterns more fluidly. Qualitative paradigm allows researchers to adopt unique steps and deploy diverse designs for the analysis of the data (both texts and images) by aggregating the data into codes, categories and ultimately themes which are usually limited to five to seven (Creswell, 2013). A theme is a 'patterned response or meaning within the dataset' (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 82). Thematic analysis is a way of seeing; making sense of seemingly unrelated material; analysing qualitative information; observing the data systematically and quantifying the qualitative data (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4—5). Thematic analysis is used to explore data for the meanings produced in and by people, situations, and events (Aronson, 1995; Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clark, 2006; Patton, 2001; Riessman, 1993).

Due to the great flexibility of thematic analysis, it has been applied in physical sciences (Swap et al., 2003), medicine (Gabriel et al., 2001), mathematics (Rooney, 1998) and social sciences (Braun & Clark, 2006). For this work, thematic analysis is carried out through a software

NVivo Pro 12 because it contains a set of tools which helps the researchers to analyse the qualitative data (Ishak & Bakar, 2012).

### 3.1. Data

In this paper, three autobiographies have been selected: *The Child will be Great* (2009) by Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, *Everybody Matters: A Memoir* (2012) by Mary Robinson, and *Daughter of the East* (1988) by Benazir Ali Bhutto. Sirleaf and Robinson served as the first woman presidents and Bhutto was the first woman prime minister within their respective countries: Liberia, Ireland and Pakistan. These three countries share a sense of inferiority of being post-colonial states. This background can help to understand the struggles of these woman leaders to construct their identity and its (re)presentation to others (Ybema et al., 2009).

## 4. Data Analysis

For the analysis, this paper incorporated thematic analysis, which is an examination of non-interactive data that exists independent of the research (Hesse-Biber and Levy, 2005, p. 228). The texts were read to identify general patterns and to highlight initial codes. Each book was imported in the NVivo Pro 12 separately to obtain the codes. Initially nodes and sub-nodes were created which reflect the patterns from the books, aligned with the objectives of this study. These preliminary 19 categories were nineteen which were then reduced to four broader patterns or potential themes: identity in roles, personal values and passions, religious and social identity, and tackling discrimination against women. Each theme and its relevant category have been defined under the light of the literature review and theoretical framework, deployed in this paper (see Appendix A). The list of references for each theme and category from each book was extracted with the help of NVivo Pro 12 which quantifies how often each woman discusses each theme and category (see Table 1). Furthermore, the word query list (see Appendix B) with 50 most frequent words in each book, was also produced to validate these references to increase the robustness of the results.

**Table 1:** References for each theme and category from each autobiography

	Themes	Everybody Matters: My Memoir	Daughter of the East	This Child will be Great
<b>1</b>	<b>Identity in Roles</b>	<b>128</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>197</b>
1.1	As a daughter	29	73	45
1.2	As a wife	25	27	36
1.3	As a mother	14	9	34
1.4	As a female in a male-dominated society	21	13	23
a1.5	As a prisoner in jail	0	46	22
1.6	As a president & prime minister	39	19	53
<b>2</b>	<b>Personal Values &amp; Passions</b>	<b>103</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>169</b>
2.1	Courage & risk taking	12	25	20
2.2	Empathy & kindness	3	6	16
2.3	Fairness & equality	10	7	18
2.4	Selfless & sensitivity	11	14	17
2.5	Stewardship & strength	23	48	50
2.6	Love for country	44	27	57
<b>3</b>	<b>Religious &amp; Social identity</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>115</b>	<b>56</b>
3.1	A taboo subject	5	10	12

3.2	Religion a key role	21	49	15
3.3	Sense of othering	2	10	8
3.4	Social practices	13	46	22
<b>4</b>	<b>Tackling discrimination against women</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>54</b>
4.1	Finding my voice	35	11	16
4.2	Horrorific accounts of violence	16	37	31
4.3	Women pay price in a male-dominated society	28	19	7

The potential themes reflect how the selected women describe their developing skills, dispositions, passions and interests that enable them to successfully navigate politics, a field dominated by men (Neelay, 2012, Oni, 2014). Through the storytelling process, each woman selects certain anecdotes to explain how she became one of such a small group of people or the only woman, to lead her nation. These stories expose a sense of ideological commitment, of civic responsibility and entitlement to participate (Neelay, 2012). Further detailed analysis is under the heading of each theme.

#### 4.1. Identity in Roles

Here, this theme denotes six roles including a daughter, a wife, a mother, a president/prime minister, a prisoner and a female in a male-dominated society. Autobiographies exhibit family details and community stories which reflect the “socially embedded nature of the author’s life” (Gagiano, 2009, p. 261). The focus on her relationships such as mother, daughter, wife etc. brings to light a woman’s capabilities or more clearly her objectification (Piiro, 1998; Richards, 2014; Monnier, 2016, Were, 2017).

##### 4.1.1. As a daughter

The parents usually played an influential role in the identity formation of a leader as they have had influential positions in society (Neely, 2012). Bhutto was attached with both parents but the relationship with her father was closer and deeper. She learnt her religious rituals and ethics from her mother (Bhutto, 1988, p. 31), but her father was the person behind her education abroad and her involvement in politics because he was the prime minister of Pakistan in 1973 (p. 51, 64).

Robinson’s parents were doctors and she aligned herself with both of them. She was inspired by her mother’s inner self, her sense of popular fashions and her support during the presidential campaigns. Similar to Bhutto, she aligned herself more to her father (but lesser than her) as she writes, “Growing up, I identified more with my father—and of course I admired him greatly (Robinson, 2012, p. 12)”.

Despite of having a political background from her father, Sirleaf aligned herself more with her mother. Her father was a national representative and her mother was a religious preacher. Sirleaf believed the praying power of her mother even after her death during her presidency campaign (Sirleaf, 2009, p. 272).

##### 4.1.2. As a wife

Bhutto described her wifhood slightly different from the other two politicians. She entered an arranged marriage with Asif. Her sole concern was to marry a man who can understand her dedication to her father’s purpose of serving the people of her country. Robinson married Nick, a protestant because she found him loving, caring and supportive partner. They had a great relationship together as described by her, “one of Nick’s great qualities is that he is prepared

to give way on his own strong preferences when he knows how deeply I feel about something (Robinson, 2012, p. 244)". Sirleaf had a love marriage with Doc at the age of seventeen when her friends were getting an education (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, 29). Initially, the relationship was good but later on, it turned first into verbal abuse and then physical violence and then came to an end when Doc put a gun on Sirleaf's head to blow her head off (p. 41).

#### **4.1.3. As a mother**

Each of these women politicians had an experience of motherhood. During her pregnancy, Bhutto used to travel far and wide to fight against military region for the welfare of the people. Moreover, she joined office after five days of her first son's birth which shows her dedication and commitment with her purpose to serve the country. Robinson described her experience of being a mother and a grandmother at more length. Sirleaf had four children (boys) from her marriage. She was separated from her boys first for her education and then after her divorce (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 322). Apart from personal level, they were identified as mothers of their respective nations as Sirleaf and Robinson used the word "nurturing" for their countries. According to Lewis et al., (1999) the elected women use their identity as mother of the nation as a political capital to align themselves with the public (Richards, 2014, Were, 2017).

#### **4.1.4. As a female in a male-dominated society**

Bhutto faced oppositions from the leading Muslim scholars at that time. She stated, "The fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami party is trumpeting that leadership by a woman is un-Islamic" (Bhutto, 1988, p. 324). Robinson faced discrimination at various forums as a barrister, as a president and at the United Nations. She was titled, "A curse upon our society" and "the great white witch" (p.217) because she called for the basic rights of women in the chauvinistic Western circuit. For Sirleaf, the conflict surrounded the decision either to wear, or not to wear African clothes (Monnier, 2017). She writes, "A woman, by definition, could not be that strong person, they maintained (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 260)".

#### **4.1.5. As a prisoner**

Bhutto's identity as a prisoner reflects her courage, patience, and endurance. She passed nine years in jails, sub-jails and home detentions, with poor sanitary conditions, poor food and no human voice. Sirleaf was kept in a house arrest and in jail as well during the military reign (p.126). During her imprisonment, she became aware of terrible conditions of prisoners in the jail: they have been served food once a day, the cells had sand as a toilet and the prisoners were treated inhumanly (p. 127). Robinson has never been to jail and this makes her different from the other two politicians.

#### **4.1.6. As a president/prime minister**

When she campaigned for President, Robinson used her innate ability to be "nurturing" as a difference Ireland needed, and managed to win the election. Robinson narrated a separate chapter on her role of president with the name, "A president with a purpose" (p. 121).

Being the first woman prime minister in Pakistan, Bhutto represents the women in a male-dominated society (Syed, Tabassum & Afzal, 2015; Yousaf, Adnan & Aksar, 2017, Dar & Masroor, 2019). She served two terms as prime minister and she brought changes in policy and social morals particularly for the women: "I appointed several women to my Cabinet and established a Ministry of Women's Development" (Bhutto, 1988, p. 398).

Sirleaf introduced laws, made reforms and provided equal opportunities to women in education and work, launched economic programs for them and encouraged women's participation in decision making. The women of Liberia were her "constituency" or what she calls her "secret weapon (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 277, 264)". The steps taken for the participation of women

in education, health-care, social stimulation and electoral politics and other public institutions aligns these politicians with the core theme of liberal feminism, that is, the public participation of women can be beneficial for the whole society (Warren, 1990, Rudy, 1999).

## **4.2. Personal values and passions**

Personal values and passions, in this project, refer to the characteristics the women possessed, and passions denote their behaviour of exercising their attributes. According to Piirto (1998) personal attributes and values (courage, risk-taking, empathy, kindness, selflessness etc.) are required to bring out the talent.

### **4.2.1. Courage & Risk-taking**

Bhutto was a courageous woman as compared to the other two. She endured all the tortures at jails with great courage (Bhutto, 1988, p. 5, 144). Sirleaf used to speak about the cruelties whenever she felt, "I once again had to speak out (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 111)". Robinson raised voice for divorce laws, the ban on the use of contraceptives, and the criminalisation of homosexuality and suicide (Robinson, 2012).

### **4.2.2. Empathy & Kindness**

Bhutto had sympathy with other prisoners and party members who had been assassinated. She used to make additional prayers for other prisoners. Sirleaf narrates the painful disregard of human life and humanitarian crisis in Liberia during the military reign before she elected. Robinson was kind to the people since childhood when she used to visit the patients with her father.

### **4.2.3. Fairness & Equality**

Robinson's fairness could be seen in her approach to "address the imbalances, unfairness and the trade barriers for developing countries" (Robinson, 2012, p. 81) and in her idea of putting light in the window of president house for the emigrants (p. 144). Bhutto showed her concerns more on the plight of the poor people, emigrants from India, Pathans and Muhajirs (Bhutto, 1988). Sirleaf went out in the streets of Liberia to see what is going on there with the people (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009).

### **4.2.4. Selfless & Sensitivity**

Bhutto showed her grief over the barbarity of the military reign and the deaths of her people. She discusses, "I shared their suffering, their pain, their defiance (Bhutto, 1988, p. 207)." Like Pakistan, Liberia was under military reign before Sirleaf get elected. Sirleaf narrated how the military men slaughtered the women, infants, old peoples and children and this was a painful realization for her. Robinson weeps while holding a Somalian baby. Similarly, she was sensitive to the killings of humanity in Gaza, the Rwandan genocide of 1994, child marriage, genital cutting and other horrific instances of violence.

### **4.2.5. Stewardship & Strength**

The people of Pakistan were a source of strength to Benazir whether she was in jail or she came back Pakistan. The people gathered like a 'giant carnival' (Bhutto, 1988, p. 268). Sirleaf's strength lies in her interconnectedness with women and with different job roles at the higher echelons including Citibank, UNDP, Equator bank and Liberian bank of Development (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009). For Robinson, her strength lies in her family, support from her husband, her friendships, and professional relationships (Robinson, 2012).

### **4.2.6. Love for country**

Bhutto described her love for her country, as “Home meant the length and breadth of Pakistan” (Bhutto, 1988, p. 264). Sirleaf aligned herself with the people of her country even when she was not in Liberia. She expresses her affiliation at several points, “my heart was there, with my country (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 214)”. Robinson narrated her concerns for Ireland and the people of her country as shown, “I wanted the Irish people to feel that I was representing them and making them proud, but that I was from within, one of them” (Robinson, 2012, p. 135).

### **4.3. Religious and social identity**

From a feminist perspective, this theme brings to light the similarity in their style whether they talk about the domination of religion or discuss the plight of women, chained in social practices.

#### **4.3.1. A taboo subject**

Bhutto discussed that the women in her family did not get married to protect the property. She also talks about *rajm*, the practice of throwing stones on women till death. Sirleaf climbed the ladder of her success after getting divorced which is a taboo subject in a male-dominated society, but she did not let this taboo to become the barrier in her path (Were, 2017). Robinson discussed the taboo subject of single mothers in her book. She also narrated how the taboo has been broken when she visited Queen of England as well as Northern Ireland.

#### **4.3.2. Religion as a key role**

Bhutto talks more about the religious rituals, for instance, ‘religious obligation to bath and recite verses over the dead body’ (Bhutto 1988, p. 5), talking about purdah (p. 14, 28, 136) the instances from Prophet Muhammad’s life (30, 225) and preferring halal meat in a non-Muslim country (221). She also narrated how fundamentalist mullahs (preachers) narrowed down the true interpretation of Islam (Bhutto, 1988, p. 261).

Robinson used to go to the church with the family, but she had some questions about it. She could not take it for granted (Robinson, 2012, p. 30). Earlier, she wanted to become a nun only for the welfare of the people but then she found other ways to serve them. Like Bhutto, Sirleaf believed in the power of prayer and her belief played an important role in reinforcing Sirleaf’s religious identity (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009).

#### **4.3.3. Sense of othering**

Bhutto’s first experience of this was as an international student in the United States which signified an eye-opening moment and made her established her identity as a woman of colour in a white political world (Bhutto, 1988, p. 74). Sirleaf also faced sense of othering as a, “Red-faced, stupid woman! Congo woman! (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 124)”. Robinson experienced some basic issues of equality at home and then at college, at law school, in the church and many other occasions (Robinson, 2012)

#### **4.3.4. Social practices**

Bhutto talked about the prevalent social practices in Pakistan like ‘sanctity of chador and char divari, the veil and the four walls’ (Bhutto, 1988, p. 96), forced family marriages, holding Holy Quran over the head of the bride etc. She also writes, “In our male-dominated culture, boys had always been favoured over girls and were not only more apt to be educated, but in extreme instances to be given food first while the mother and daughters waited” (p. 29)

The social practices of Irish society made Robinson to question, “Why did only boys become altar boys? Why did I have to wear a scarf in church when my brothers did not? (Robinson, 2012, p. 28). Sirleaf also outlines the prevalent traditions including polygamy, extended family system, male dominance and most importantly men beating their wives to “keep a firm hand



on wives (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 36)”.

#### **4.4. Tackling discrimination against women**

The three politicians raised voice against the violence, the pain, and the discrimination of the oppressed in their relevant contexts.

##### **4.4.1 Finding my voice**

Robinson, being a lawyer, president and UN high commissioner played a more crucial role in tackling discrimination against women. She did this by proposing law reforms for family planning (Robinson, 2012, p. 62). She raised voice for the economic contribution of women. Bhutto started a campaign against the terrorism, violence, and assassination of the people in Pakistan. Like Robinson, Sirleaf had diverse experience of work with national and international organizations. She served as a vice president at Citibank (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p.114) and as a vice president of Equator bank (p. 165). From the job of sweeping floor to the presidency, she endured many challenges which let her feel the challenges of other women (p.245).

##### **4.4.2. Horrific accounts of violence**

Robinson brought to light the extra-judicial killings, torture or violence against women, genital cutting and other harmful traditional practices including rape and sexual violence, around the globe. She also raised voice against the child marriage in Africa and South Asia, launching a global forum named, ‘Girls Not Brides’ (Robinson, 2012, p.283). Bhutto herself faced terrible incidents of violence like tear gas, having scars on the body, beating, torture in the dark cells of the jails. She also brought to light how women were molested during the military reign in Pakistan at that time (Bhutto, 1988). Sirleaf witnesses the domestic violence, killings of people in Liberia, genocide in Rwanda and many other incidents during her lifespan (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009).

##### **4.4.3. Women pay price in a male-dominated society**

Bhutto paid the price for her voice against military reign in the form of detentions as she describes her pain, “after all that had happened to me in the last seven years, even the good things seemed unreal” (Bhutto, 1988, p.207). Sirleaf sacrificed her family most importantly her children for the people of her country. She challenged the military reign by putting her life into danger several times. In this regard, she says, “to be a great leader means to get to a place where personal considerations and needs become secondary” (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 323). Robinson was being criticised for talking about contraceptive laws and for being involved with the owners of pharmaceutical chains (Robinson, 2012). She narrates, “If you speak out for something you believe in, and take on these harmful traditional practices, you have to be willing to pay a personal price” (Robinson, 2012, p.73).

## **5. Discussion**

The analysis has helped to synthesize several observations. This work agrees with existing literature that autobiographies serve as mirrors for writers to reflect their own images (Elarem, 2015; Jakubowska, 2010) as the selected women portray their ‘selves’, be it social, biological, religious or cultural. It also confirms that autobiographies reflect the preconceived ideologies and power structures of the society (Long, 1999; Sands, 1997) as the selected women politicians discuss the religious, social and cultural practices of Pakistan, Liberia and Ireland.

This work also provides useful insights from feminist perspective and aligns with previous literature on women’s identity in private and public spheres particularly in the political arena (Warren, 1990). This is expressed through the constant struggle in which these women leaders

stay engage to defy the structures that put barriers against their free will or undermine their efforts as a responsible social human being. Lastly, this work agrees with previous research that autobiographies focus on the stories about author's family, relationship, and community. The autobiographies, despite being accounts of struggles as a politician, are extensive storied accounts of their communal selves.

This research has added to the limited, but growing scholarship regarding the woman politicians' written political autobiographies. This research provides an original contribution to the field based on the unique combination of three political leaders (Asian, African & European context) and the thematic analysis by providing orientations for each theme along with word query list which increases the robustness of the results. The thematic research allows for an in-depth examination that reveals recurring themes consistently presented within all three writings. The previous studies (Richards, 2014; Monnier, 2017; Were, 2017) on thematic analysis of autobiographies of women political leaders are limited to a few aspects of their lives with a focus on limited themes. With the help of NVivo Pro 12, this research examines the whole texts and obtained 300 codes which are reduced to four themes with 15 subcategories. The in-depth findings thus obtained (as presented in table 1) contribute significantly to the previous literature on thematic analysis of autobiographies. Furthermore, the relevance of each theme: identity in roles, personal values and passions, social and religious identity and tackling discrimination against women became clearer as they were positioned within the contexts of the umbrella topics of liberal feminism including the voice for equal rights in education, property, health care, divorce and economic resources, the voice for discrimination against women and voice for women's identity in both private and public arenas (Rudy, 1999; Warren, 1990).

This study is exceptional in its approach of showing the similarities and differences in the approach and style of the selected women politicians. Despite their cultural and geographical disparities and individual socio-political agendas, each politician discusses the important roles of their lives including family, friends and professional colleagues. They also talk about the prevalent religious and social practices of their respective countries which confirm that autobiographies reflect the power structures and ideological constructions of societies (Long, 1999; Sands, 1997). Yet the disparity lies in their path to be the leader and in those specific causes which motivated them to enter politics. For example, Bhutto comes from a political background and she joins politics to keep her father's purpose alive. Her fight of justice for her father turned into the fight against violence for the people. Robinson does not have any political background but her passion to serve people and bring social change drew her in politics. Sirleaf got married at an early age despite having a political background. Later in her life after four children, she listens to her inner voice, "a struggling housewife with no future" (Johnson-Sirleaf, 2009, p. 33).

Lastly, the study contributes to the previous literature in enunciating how often each woman describes each theme. The discussion of different patterns in their autobiographies provides a glimpse of the prevalent identities in their respective societies. For example, Robinson more often challenges the taboos whether related too religion, society or humanity and faced opposition and criticism. Sirleaf and Benazir discuss at more length their fights against the military regimes by confining themselves within their social norms. Robinson and Sirleaf discuss their professional roles at more length even after becoming presidents whereas Bhutto's autobiography does not provide details about her professional roles. Overall, the selected politicians faced a series of obstacles in their journey to become presidents and prime ministers and their fight against them emphasized the main agenda of liberal feminism that women like men are human beings and therefore has equal individual freedom (Rudy, 1997; Warren, 1990).

## Conclusion

Due to the marginalised status of women and their symbolic and rare presence in every section of society, this research shows that the selected women experience added mental and physical challenges. These women navigate their ways to the highest echelons of society despite social challenges and unfavourable cultural settings. This analysis brings to light the useful insights from the life stories of selected politicians from three different parts of the globe. For example, it indicates how they narrate their experiences, pains, constraints, and challenges and how they negotiate their identities as a daughter, mother, wife, leader and a woman in a male-dominated society despite their different geographical and cultural contexts. For this reason, the current study becomes important because it highlights the sufferings of these politicians which led them to fight for the sufferings of other women.

In so doing, it has aimed to illuminate the complexities of women's political advancement in local politics and to contribute to the theorization of women in politics around the globe. At least, this article may constitute a first step towards appreciating the contextual complexity of women's varied experiences with their decisions and strategies while generalizing the conditions, processes and outcomes of women's pursuit of political office. From a feminist perspective, this analysis paves the way for other women who have been fighting their battles in their families, communities, or societies and for women who have been struggling to construct their identity specifically.

## Recommendations

This work has opened new dimensions for future researchers. The model, applied in this research, could be applied to the autobiographies of other politicians (both men and women). The future researchers can draw a comparison between autobiographies written by men and women by exploring similarities and differences through thematic analysis.

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