Mother-Daughter-Relationships in American Literature:
- Life Writings in Kim Chernin’s Works

Diplomarbeit

zur Erlangung des akademischen Grades
einer Magistra der Philosophie
an der Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz

vorgelegt von
Julia Elisa Melcher

am Institut für: Amerikanistik
Begutachter: Prof. Dr. Mag. Walter Hölbling

Graz, 2010
# Table of Contents:

1. **Introduction** ...................................................................................................................................... 4
   1.1 Feminist Writings ..................................................................................................................... 4
   1.2 The Author: Kim Chernin ........................................................................................................... 5
   1.3 Life Writing .................................................................................................................................... 7
   1.4 Life Writing in the Context of the Family ............................................................................... 10
   1.5 Memory and Writing ................................................................................................................. 11
   1.6 The Interpretation and Analysis of Chernin’s Texts ................................................................. 12
   1.7 Identity and Life Writing ........................................................................................................... 14

2. **Theoretical Approaches** .................................................................................................................. 16
   2.1 Life Writing – Crossing Generic Borders in Writing Identity .................................................. 16
   2.2 Women and Identity – Women Writing Their Lives ................................................................. 19
   2.3 The Mother-Daughter-Bond .................................................................................................... 22
   2.4 Food – My Mother/My Body ..................................................................................................... 29

3. **In My Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story** .................................................................................. 35
   3.1 The Structure of the Book ........................................................................................................ 35
   3.2 Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition ................................................................................. 37
   3.3 Content Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 39
      3.3.1 Rose’s Stories .................................................................................................................... 40
   3.4 Kim Chernin’s Stories .............................................................................................................. 44
      3.4.1 The adult writer’s identity ................................................................................................ 44
      3.4.2 Memories from childhood ................................................................................................ 47

4. **In my Father’s Garden: A Daughter’s Search for A Spiritual Life** .................................................. 52
   4.1 The Structure of the Book ........................................................................................................ 52
   4.2 Content-Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 54
      4.2.1 Prologue: In the shadow of a falling flower ...................................................................... 54
      4.2.2 My father and I .................................................................................................................. 56
      4.2.3 Lynn and Marcie ............................................................................................................... 60
      4.2.4 Root and Branch .............................................................................................................. 60

5. **The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness** .......................................................... 62
   5.1 The Structure of the Book ........................................................................................................ 62
   5.2 Content Analysis ...................................................................................................................... 64
      5.2.1 Acknowledgements & The Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition ................................... 66
      5.2.2 The Hunger Song – An autobiographical Poem ................................................................. 67
      5.2.3 The Obsession .................................................................................................................... 73

6. **The Hungry Self – Women Eating and Identity** .............................................................................. 77
1. Introduction

1.1 Feminist Writings

“Why are we never satisfied? Why the incredible importance taken on by our fat thighs and small breasts, why can we think only of our faults and so rarely take pleasure in what is fine or beautiful about us? Why the displacement of attention from our selves to our bodies – as if that is all we are?” (Friday 1977: 114)

Indeed, the questions Nancy Friday asks here, are questions with which women today are often concerned. It seems as if this self-doubt, the preoccupation with the female body and women’s over-concern with physical beauty rather than with their psychological identities, is considered as ‘normal’, or ‘natural’. Magazines that are labelled ‘Women’s Magazines’ and aim at a female readership, are filled with beauty-tips, diet-recipes and body-workout schedules. Indeed, it appears normal and typically female, this concern with the body and its shape.

Why does Nancy Friday, an acclaimed feminist writer, mention this issue in a book about her mother. A book in which she explores her identity as a daughter and as a woman? How does this issue of body and identity relate to that of the relationship of mother and daughter? Why should it be of concern for feminist writers? Anita Johnston offers a possible explanation to the question, why women’s concerns over their bodies are matters of critical interest for feminist writers:

The epidemic of disordered eating among women is clearly a consequence of the imbalance between the feminine and the masculine within our society and within ourselves. Many women are experiencing the despair and alienation that comes not only from the suppression of the feminine in the world we live in, but also from the rejection of their inner feminine nature. By ignoring our feminine voice time and time again, we run the risk of losing it or finding it buried in the muck, just like the people in the story. (Johnston 2000: 13)

The imbalance between the feminine and the masculine within patriarchal societies is the essential feminist issue and it is inherent in the question about women and their bodies. Women’s uncertainties over their bodies have resulted in this epidemic of eating disorders. Anita Johnston’s
words help to explain Nany Friday´s quote from the beginning of this chapter. She refers to the loss of the feminine, the loss of the authentic voice, which accompany women’s uncertainties about themselves as women, and their uncertainties about their bodies. How are women able to regain their authentic voices? How could they dispose themselves of their uncertainties over their female bodies? One possible way of expression, in which an authentic female voice could be explored and acquired, is the literary medium, through which women seek to create their own voice, a public voice as well, with which they make themselves heard. Nancy Friday published hers, when she wrote *My Mother/My Self* in 1977, a book in which she illuminates the issue of mothers and daughters from a new perspective. However, the issue of eating disorders does not occur within her narrative. A year before Nancy Friday published her work, Adrienne Rich already discussed the mother-daughter issue in her book *Of Woman Born*, in which she discovers practices of female oppression and patriarchal ideological hostilities towards women’s bodies, due to their child-bearing abilities. Here, we find two strong female literary voices that speak out for women and aim to raise a new awareness about women’s roles and maternal role models. The issue is of concern for contemporary writers as well and they address the questions of female identity in their writings.

1.2 The Author: Kim Chernin

Kim Chernin, in her more recent publications, has provided possible answers to many of these questions. The Jewish Russian-American writer, who is also a psychotherapist has written several books on the issue of female identity during the last two decades. In her works, she does not only develop the issue of the complex mother-daughter-conflict further, she also includes the problem of eating disorders in women into her literary texts. These texts explain the socio-cultural dimension of the central conflicts, women, who suffer from an eating disorder have to solve: it is the struggle against their own female bodies, their struggle for separation and independence within the mother-daughter bond and the struggle to gain an authentic identity within a patriarchal society in which the social expectations towards women and mothers diminish their individual development. The texts Chernin writes are not presented in the form of theoretical or scientific abstracts. She uses the medium of literary expression in order to convey her message. The works I am going to deal with in this thesis are autobiographical writings, which tell stories from the author’s life in an individual manner that is unique for Chernin. She created herself an autobiographical literary voice that sounds authentic in the thematic context of her writings.
Kim Chernin herself experienced the complexities and difficulties that cause a mother and a daughter much sufferings in their relationship. The story of the reconciliation between her and her mother Rose Chernin is told in *In My Mother’s House*, an auto/biographical account of both women’s lives. Chernin’s mother Rose is, also historically seen, an interesting figure. Rose Chernin was a Jewish-Russian immigrant and she was a confessed Communist throughout her life, even the experience of being arrested during the McCarthy era made her not betray her convictions. Chernin did not come from a harmonious family background when she started her career as a writer. This influenced her in her professional work, to the same extends as it has influenced her in shaping her identity. Reflections on the process of identity-formation within the context of her family are retold in *In My Father’s Garden* as well, an autobiographical narrative on her quest for a spiritual self as a daughter and a woman.

When Kim Chernin was seventeen years old, she began to suffer from an obsession with food that she could neither understand, nor control for a long time. After twenty years, after becoming a writer, she decided to set out for a literary quest in order to find answers to the reasons for her mysterious disease. Her findings and the process she went through are retold in *The Obsession – Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* and *The Hungry Self – Women, Eating and Identity*. There, she also explains why mostly women, as daughters and mothers, suffer from a neurotic relationship to food. These books also depict the author’s journey of her recovery. A recovery she partly gained through writing about her obsession. In the foreword to *The Obsession*, Chernin mentions the healing function of her conscious (self)-investigations and writings during the process of her recovery.

Although these four books comprise an autobiographical content, they are neither written in the form and style of conventional autobiographies, nor as conventional memoirs. Parts of Chernin’s texts comprise memoir writings in the sense of a personal memoir, in which a private, personal experience is retold, and the narrator includes her reflections and thoughts about them into the narrative. Chernin’s books comprise a literary hybrid form, which cannot be categorized under established categories of literary genre. They contain collections of various kinds of texts, a stylistic and generic collage, rather than a conjunct narrative structure. At this point, one encounters the problem of generic categorization, when dealing with her texts within the subject of literary studies. Literary, artistic genres are subjects of constant change and redefinition. They develop in
accordance with the cultural and ideological changes within a society. Reflecting on the temporary developments and problems of a society, literature also functions as an artistic documentation of the spirit of a time, even if the story narrated is entirely fictive.

Departing from this point of view, one could argue that a genre like autobiography has a more realistic and documentary claim than a novel or a poem. However, besides the fact that the genre itself is in a process of generic redefinition, even the fictionality of autobiographical texts must be taken into consideration when analyzing its content in relation to the socio-cultural dimensions it covers. Robert Smith writes in his book on Jacques Derrida: “It is as if autobiography has become the site of an intellectual event, diverse and fecund: it has itself become open to surprise, and therefore to its own multiple singularities which, in so far as they are singular, are truly autobiographical” (Smith 1995:69)

How do these arguments relate to the investigation of feminist autobiographical writings then? Feminist literary criticism provides possible answers to generic changes as it focuses on the difference between male and female texts, the difference between a male dominated literary canon and the writings of women: “Alongside this work of revision, an enterprise of scholarly research aims to establish a women’s tradition of writing which can be set beside the male-dominated canon of ‘masterworks’. The forgotten and neglected writing of women throughout history is being rediscovered, reassessed and made available, to a wide readership, often for the first time.” (Morris 1993: 51) Female writers have produced a variety of texts throughout history that were never included in the literary canon (apart from a few exceptions), because they were not taken seriously, nor considered worth of being labeled literature. These were, for example, diary entries, journals, letters, poems or memoirs, mostly writings with an autobiographical content that deviated from the normative pattern of the generic definition of autobiography.

1.3 Life Writing

“How complex activities are all scripted whether in knitting pattern books, computer program manuals, or in cooking recipe books. Credit for an intervention depends upon filing a written patent while credit for a scientific achievement depends upon publication. And our place in heaven or hell, we are told, depends of what is written in the Book of Life.” (Olson 1994: 1)
The theoretical basis for the treatment of the literary texts that will be analyzed in the course of my thesis, are the recently emerged studies in life writing as they consider individual texts that do not conform to the conventional pattern of the literary genre of autobiography, but cover autobiographical content. Life writing studies, as a new category of critical literary approach, investigate texts apart from narrow generic borders and limitations. Life writing includes autobiographical poems as well as journals or even other media than literature, like film or tape recordings and does not have to consist of entirely non-fictional autobiographic narratives, as Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir argues in her book *Borderlines: Autobiography and Fiction in Postmodern Life Writings*: „Life writing can be said always to contain both autobiographical and fictional aspects, but an awareness of the problematics involved means the writer has constantly to negotiate the way in which the autobiographical and the fictional aspects of the writing process interact in the text.“ (Gudmundsdóttir 2003: 5) In addition, the context of feminist writing, this form of writing offers women a chance to establish their own, female, authentic literary voice. In addition, Chernin´s texts are written by a woman, intended for a presumably female (implied) readership, as they deal with issues primarily aimed at women. However, the question that arises from this perspective is that of feminist writing within a still mainly patriarchal system of literary conventions. Life writing is one solution to this problem, if female writers, who write about their lives, do not want to conform to a male dominated discourse of narrating the `self´ any more. Thus, feminist scholars like Susan Bell, write the following:

> We have welcomed these singular expressions of self-expression in a conscious attempt to broaden the arena of life-writing, not only for the sake of abolishing arbitrary boundaries, but also and especially so as to include the texts of those whose gender and/or class and/or ethnicity would, in the past, have provided unconscious criteria for exclusion. (Bell 1990: 5)

The problem of authentic narrative, is a problem of the female voice, or identity within the patriarchal literary discourse. In this vein, Tzvi Howard Adelman argues in an essay entitled „Self, Other and Community: Jewish Women´s Autobiography“:

> Autobiography is the presentation of one’s self. The self however, cannot be understood in isolation; it must be explored in relation to others. Writers can take their starting point either as members of a community, for whom self-discovery is based on the realization of how one’s self differs from that of other members of the community, or as individuals exploring how their selfhood is similar to others. (Adelman 2004: 116)

And similar to Adelman, Mary Currie writes in her book about *Postmodern Narrative Theory*:
At first it is that identity is relational, meaning that it is not to be found inside a person but that it inheres in the relations between a person and others. According to this argument, the explanation of a person’s identity must designate the difference between that person’s and others: it must refer to the inner life of the person but to the system of differences through which individuality is constructed. In other words, personal identity is not contained in the body at all; it is structured by, or constituted by, difference. (17)

A woman in general and a woman as a writer specifically is, as Currie says, defined by difference, by being different from male. The female, in a patriarchal society is conceived as different from the normative male, or the male defined norms. In the field of literature this norm is represented by generic conventions that have been established within a male dominated literary canon. “The woman who writes herself a life beyond convention, or the woman whose biographer perceives her as living beyond conventional expectations, has usually early recognized in herself a special gift without name or definition.” (Heilbrun 1989: 96) Why should a woman, who lives and writes herself beyond convention not abandon the conventions of literary genre? Would not the narrative of her life thus become more authentic, in the sense of Phillipe LeJeune’s autobiographical pact: „Eakin’s own approach accepts and extends the model of Philippe LeJeune’s autobiographical pact, which proposes as the decisive generic criteria the writer’s stated intention to produce a work based upon one’s personal history, with the presence of one’s real name in the text and on the title page as guarantee of its authenticity.“ (Bell 1990: 4)

According to this pact, it is not necessary that the narrative text follows the prescribed patterns of autobiography, as it was established by Augustine and his Confessions and later pursued by other male autobiographers; where the literary voice is a mature narrator, who refers back to his life from the beginning to the present. It would also not necessarily have to take the form of a memoir, as a memoir in the classical sense would rather exclude personal experience and reflection from the narrative strain. A “work based on personal history” could take any shape or form, as long as its content refers to the personal history of the narrator:

As a result, autobiography becomes both the process and the product of assigning meaning to a series of experiences, after they have taken place, by means of emphasis, juxtaposition, commentary, omission. The play of seeking, choosing, discarding words and stories that suggest, approximate, but never recapture the past is what Elisabeth W. Bruss calls the ‘autobiographical act’: an interpretation of life that invests the past and the ‘self’ with coherence and meaning that may not have been evident before the act of writing itself. (Smith 1987: 45-46)

Considering this quote by Sidonie Smith, even the content of an autobiography may be chosen
arbitrarily, due to the aims of an autobiographer. Why not change the shape of the tale itself? Autobiographical narration will always be subjective, the outcome of a person’s subjective fiction about his or her past and present self. Referring to LeJeune once more: “The interest of LeJeune’s posture here is that it dramatizes the operative force of the notion of the complete subject in the performance and reception of autobiography even as it contests it: willing to concede the fictive status of the self, he nevertheless insists on its functioning as experiential fact.” (Eakin 1992 :25) If the content of a text may be shaped on purpose or be chosen arbitrarily in order to create a certain effect, why should not the arbitrary choice of its form achieve the same effect? It would, thus, achieve more authenticity in its subjectivity.

Furthermore, I would like to argue that the term ‘shaping’ or the metaphor of the ‘shaping of a literary text’ is, an interesting metaphor when read in the context of women’s writings about their issues with identity, their bodies and food. Additionally, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim argues in her article „Embodied Memory and Memoir“ that writing memory and writing a woman’s life is closely connected to a sense of ‘embodiment’ of the author within the text:

We expect an embodied relationship between memory and the person remembering; the story is already imprinted indelibly, even before it is voiced or inked, in the synapses of the teller, waiting for the appropriate moment to be made visible to another. Unlike fiction, we expect with the memoir genre not invention and novelty but real life and old events re-narrated, the past under threat of extinction re-membered. Thus, writing a memoir implies re-living a past. (Lim 2003: 442)

Women, who outgrow these personal crises and start writing about them are women, who are not concerned whether their bodies fit into conventional aesthetic ideals. Why should they be concerned then, whether their autobiographical writings would fit into the conventions of genre? While this comparison may seem a bit far-fetched, it is in line with the tenor of Chernin’s writing.

1.4 Life Writing in the Context of the Family

As I have already mentioned above, a woman narrating her life will always narrate the story of her self and her identity in relation to the other people in her life and how she came to define her self through personal relationships. It is then obvious that such a narrative will comprise the story of one’s origin as well, in other words, the story of one’s family. The family is the social realm where the narrator comes from, the primal social community to which an individual belongs and that shapes
the development on one’s personality. Developing a sense of individuality or establishing one’s identity also happens in the context of assimilation with and differentiation from the context of the familial bonds. A mature sense of self will develop, if the separation process succeeds. If it does not, the individual will end in the continuous struggle for identity formation or in an identity crisis.

In contrast, each of the women autobiographers of studied here has seen herself from childhood to maturity in a light that is very positive to her, though very different from the prevailing views of society, and sometimes at variance with the perspectives of her parents, spouse, and friends, as well. The twentieth-century woman autobiographer has a strong counter-normative sense of herself as an intellectually, sexually, economically, strong, independent, unique person. (Brown and Olson 1978: 325)

To a certain extend Cheryl Brown´s argument may count for a majority of twentieth century female autobiographers. However, there are still many conflicts within families that inhibit the female development towards a mature, independent and self-assured female self. Nancy Friday´s autobiographical recount of her mother-daughter relationship is one case, in which the author describes her quest for this self assurance and independence; establishing her sense of self as an independent and adult woman. Adrienne Rich writes in *Of Woman Born*: “As women our relationship to the past has been problematical. We have been every culture´s core obsession (and repression); we have always constituted at least one half, and are now a majority, of the species; yet in the written records we can barely find ourselves” (70). Thus, women writers face a cultural dilemma in their roles as writers and a dilemma with their past identities as daughters, when being confronted with their personal history. Mary Jacobus further explains this in more detail:

A woman writing thinks back through her mothers’”; thinking back through the mother becomes a gesture at once of recuperation and of revision. The rediscovery of a female literary tradition need not mean a return to specifically “female” (that is, potentially confining) domains, any more than the feminist colonizing of Marxist, psychoanalytic, or post-structuralist modes of thought necessarily means a loss of that alien and critical relation which is one aspect of women´s inheritance. Rather, they involve a recognition that all attempts to inscribe female differences within writing are a matter of inscribing women within fictions of one kind or another (whether literary, critical, or psychoanalytic); and hence, that what is at stake for both women writing and writing about women is the rewriting of these fictions – the work of revision which makes “the difference of view” a question rather than an answer, and a question to be asked not simply of women, but of writing too. (Jacobus 1986:39-40)

1.5 Memory and Writing

It is language, once more, that speaks first. For me, everything is first of all experience. Then there is an
The recount of past events will always have to rely on the capacities of human memory. These memories, retold at a moment in time when the experiences are long over, will always be told from a subjective point of view. Shirley Lim writes: “Writing a memoir does preserve memory; but, like canning, the process of preservation changes the original materially.“ (Lim 2003: 443) The recollection of memory and stories that are told from the memory, thus, raise questions of epistemic quality. The experiencing ‘I´ experiences the moment from a subjective point of view. It memorizes this moment according to its subjective perception of this moment. The memory that will later be recalled, will also depend on who the, present narrating, ‘I´ has become. The narrator and the experiencer are not the same person. This is a problem of autobiographical narratives, when their level of fictionality and authenticity comes into question. Autobiographical narratives rely on human memory, in whatever form they may be written. However, if the level of fiction within autobiography is discussed, one could never assume that the human memory is a reliable source of literary output. Gudmundsdóttir explains this as follows: “Writing an autobiography signals a drive towards remembering, but I maintain that the autobiographical process must also involve forgetting, as the writer chooses one memory and discards another, writes one version of that memory at the cost of another, probably equally valid version.“ (Gudmundsdóttir 2003: 12) The reader of an autobiographical text always has to consider its inherent fictionality that belongs to the choice and selection of events within the text, the rendering of events through the subjective recollection of memories and the difference of the identity of the experiencer of the event and the identity of the narrator who resumes a memory.

1.6 The Interpretation and Analysis of Chernin´s Texts

The following paragraphs will delineate the structure and content of my thesis. At the beginning, in the Theory Chapter of my thesis I introduce the theoretical approaches that I apply in the course of the analysis of Chernin´s works. As I have already mentioned at the beginning of my introduction, I will rely on the theory of Life Writing as a literary approach to the text of the books. In the first part of the theory chapter, I will thus explain the concept of life writing in a feminist literary context in detail, and I will explain why life writing is an important form of literary expression for feminist writers, like Kim Chernin.
Apart from this literary approach, I will take two cultural stances on the texts as well. I will take feminist theoretical views, as writers and theorists such as Nancy Friday, Adrienne Rich or Nancy Chodorow have outlined in their respective works about mother-daughter-relationships, as a point of departure for my analysis, as well as cultural and psychological theories on the development of eating disorders in contemporary Western societies. The feminist approach I take will serve to explain the complexities of the mother-daughter-bond; why this bond inhibits women´s development through the establishment of stereotypical, gendered role models of daughters and mothers, and how in fact the insufficient separation process between mother and daughter leads to female identity crises and the development of eating disorders. The theories about the role of food in family and education, especially within the mother-daughter-relationship; the emotional significance of food as a substitute and the metaphorical meaning of a disordered behavior of eating are important to understand in advance, before dealing with Chernin´s texts *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self*.

In the subsequent analysis, I refer to the structure, each book comprises first, in order to sustain my argument of considering Chernin´s texts as life writings. Then, a detailed analysis of the book´s contents follows regarding the mother-daughter issue that is raised within each of the books. The issue of eating-disorders as a female and cultural problem is addressed by Chernin only in the last two books, thus a detailed analysis of this matter is given in the respective chapters of my analysis. However, in order to show the relevance of this issue in the context of Chernin´s life history, I will add a case study of Chernin´s life at the end of the analysis´ last chapter in which I am going to analyze Chernin´s autobiographical texts about her family – *In My Mother´s House* and *In My Father´s Garden* – in comparison to her autobiographical books on eating disorders. By means of this biographical and psychoanalytical approach of interpretation, I want to merge Chernin´s life stories that are told through all of the books. Together, they present an autobiographical narrative, even if they deviate in their form from conventional modes of the genre of autobiography, that includes several of the author´s life stages. Thus, the books belong together, they depict the writer Kim Chernin, or more precisely, various facets of one and the same person. By uniting the narratives of the books I want to emphasize how they belong together.

The narrating ´I´ is in none of the books the same. Experience has changed the writer and, thus, her narrating voice. Within this change of the narrator´s attitudes and reflections, the personal
development of the author can be traced. In *In My Mother’s House*, it is the reconciliation with her
mother that changes her, in *In My Father’s Garden*, it is her spiritual quest. In *The Obsession* and
*The Hungry Self*, it is her conscious concern with her own problem through the processes of self-
investigation and writing the self that changes her. The chapter, in which I summarize and analyze
the life history of Kim Chernin aims explain Chernin’s work in the context of this thesis. Chernin
herself integrated several literary case studies into her autobiographical narrative in order to explain
the issues she was reflecting upon. I want to make use of this device as well in order to explain how
family history may influence the development of an eating disorder and how conscious self-
investigation and the writing of a new identity may contribute to the recovery from an eating
disorder.

1. 7 Identity and Life Writing

In how far can a literary text represent what the writer defines as his or her identity? A few years ago,
an author has provoked a scandal with his autobiographical work, now known as the „James-Frey-
Littele Pieces*, which he called a memoir and in which he narrates stories from his troublesome past
as a drug-addict and criminal. It was the first book ever, in the category of non-fictional books, that
was chosen by Winfrey as the autumn read 2003. However, the American investigating Website *The
Smoking Gun* discovered a year later that James Frey’s book consisted of entirely fictive events that
had never occurred in his life. His description of his past as a criminal and drug addict, for example,
were pure inventions. Investigators form *The Smoking Gun* were able to prove this by disclosing his
criminal recod on the media, showing that he had never been registered or arrested for the crimes he
claimed to have committed in his book. It was a scandal. Was he allowed to call his fictive life story
a memoir? Had he betrayed his readers? Nevertheless, his book was a national bestseller. When
reading autobiography or autobiographical texts, we always have to consider the question of fact
versus fiction, truth versus lie. As I have already mentioned in the above chapter on life writing, a
subjective truth always remains part of a personal fiction, which somebody constructs about his or
her identity, his or her life and how he or she has become the person he/she is. However, it is a
fiction that is an essential part of one’s identity and for the individual itself this subjective truth
represents reality.
As a feminist writer and a psychoanalyst, Kim Chernin offers in her literary works some detailed reflections and insights into the various problems of female identity. Besides dealing with her personal family relationships in *In My Mother’s House* and *In My Father’s Garden*, she depicts the problematic patterns within women’s lives that emerge in the process of growing up as a girl in a patriarchal society. In two other books written by her, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* and *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity*, her analysis of the relation between female identity, the mother-daughter-separation-struggle, the female body and food, moves from recollections of her own life to a broader social sphere, including the life stories of many women, who had to face these struggles throughout their lives. She includes biographical analyses of women from the past, for example, of the life of Ellen West, and she retells several of the stories of her patients, as quasi case studies, in order to exemplify the issues she raises in her writings.

Kim Chernin’s texts fall into the category of life writing as a personal recount of one’s life. They cross generic borders and the literary conventions of classical autobiographical narration. As she is a feminist writer, sometimes writing as a spokeswomen for her contemporaries who are struggling for a female identity within a patriarchal society, she has to find new forms of writing and expressing herself as a woman artistically. She has to break with traditional strains of narration in order to voice a new spirit of a female concept of self and womanhood. In the 1920s, Gertrude Stein, did something similar when she created a poetical work in which she opposed the conventions of “‘patriarchal poetry’ – that is orderly, hierarchal, rule-based poetry” (Baym 1998: 1092), by making use of words and language in an entirely new form, a female/feminine form.

The texts, operating as both a means and a reflection on a quest for female identity, contain the voice of an individual who aims to communicate her personal insights to her readership and share these insights with the individuals of her audience. She deals with the problem of female identity within patriarchal societies, the problem of the female body in this context and how this relates to the epidemic of eating disorders among women in Western societies. Additionally, she explains how these problems relate to the mother-daughter-separation-struggle. I take the feminist and the psychoanalytic theories as bases for exploring the contents of *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness*, and *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* in greater detail, in the chapters of my analysis. Chernin demonstrates how writing identity, female identity, could be achieved in a completely new way through her texts. The analysis and interpretation or her texts
will show, in which ways life writing may serve to create a new form of literary discourse, and in some ways offers a variety of extended possibilities for a writer for creating an authentic voice or writing identity in autobiographical accounts of his or her life.

2. Theoretical Approaches

2.1 Life Writing – Crossing Generic Borders in Writing Identity

Writing autobiography always starts with the question: “Who am I, the narrator? How am I going to narrate the ‘story’ of how I became the person I am now?” This way of questioning implies that there has been a process of personal development and identity formation which the writer is going to recount. How fictional is the conception of identity and how fictional is the subjective memory of how this identity had been shaped through experience? How fictional is the perception of experience? Memory, experience and perception are always closely connected with the momentary concept of self; they are in a constant flow of exchange and redefinition. “Philippe Lejeune writes about fiction and autobiography: “Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy. In spite of the fact that autobiography is impossible, this in no way prevents it from existing.” (Eakin 1992: 24) What Lejeune implies here is that an author, who writes an autobiographical text about certain events in his or her life, might retell the story of same events from a different angle and recalls the memory from a differently colored subjective point of view at a later point of time in his or her life. Then, the story about one and the same event told by the same person may sound entirely different. The story about a person’s life is never (re)told with the same words Experiences change the attitudes of a person towards his or her past and thus, experience changes memory. The concept of the self is constantly redefined and corrected. What this means in the context of autobiography, is explained by Paul Eakin, in his book *Fictions in Autobiography*:

[...] I shall argue that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure. I seek to identify the fictions involved in autobiography and the sources – psychological and cultural – from which they are derived. (Eakin 1988: 3)
In line with Eakin’s argument, identity is not stable, or fixed. It is subject to constant redefinition through experience that depends on subjective perception and is remembered later from a different point of view. This fact, makes it difficult to claim that autobiography represents a true story because it is always a very subjective truth that is narrated. At least, the patriarchal model of ratio that seeks universal (scientific) answers, would tell us so. However, there may exist an intuitive, emotional level of knowledge in which subjective truths would count as such as well, a kind of knowledge that cannot be expressed through rationalized and conceptualized rules, but is experienced as true. In a patriarchal system of knowledge, which honors and prefers rational truths, emotional truths might be ignored because considered less scientific, even ridiculous. Still, this rational system of knowledge might not be able to provide all the answers we are seeking.

Autobiography has always been subject of discussion regarding the fictionality of the text it comprises. The question of fictionality in this case is not simply a question of literary definitions but is an epistemic one. If a person is writing his or her life, he or she will include his or her subjective view of the world, moreover, his or her subjective – fictive – conception of self into the text. “Autobiography describes the textual space wherein the culturally constructed and historically changing epistemology of the self finds particular expression. Pressured all around by textuality, the autobiographical self owes its existence to the system of representation in which it evolves and finds expression.” (Leigh 1995: 85) Hence, the question of fiction within autobiography is a question of how fictive the conception of the writer’s self, his or her life is and how fictive his or her perception of the world is in general. It is indeed, a rather philosophical question.

Our paradigms on the notion of ‘truth’ may have to shift, or newly defined in order to provide a satisfying answer to the question in how far autobiography is entirely fictional or not. What is the autobiographer doing by harking back to personal memory and retelling the story of his/her life, the becoming of his/her momentary self? The autobiographer is partly (re-) inventing himself/herself as the protagonist of his/her story, but maybe also inventing himself/herself – his self, her self – newly by finding proper words to express it (the self).

Paul Eakin writes in the introduction to his book *Fictions in Autobiography*: “[...] that self-invention refers not only to the idea that the self or selves they seek to reconstruct in art are not given but made in the course of human development. “ (Eakin 1988: 8) Again, I would like to argue here that
self-invention in autobiography is mirroring the self-invention we constantly perform in the course of our lives. Thus, the question of fictionality (lie and truth) in autobiography is an epistemic question indeed: “I view the rhythms of the autobiographical act as recapitulating the fundamental rhythms of identity formation: in this sense the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self conscious self-consciousness.” (Eakin 1988: 9) The question of fictionality in autobiography would therefore become the question of the fictionality of our lives and thus, as I have already mentioned, turn into a highly philosophical subject of discussion.

Regardless of the reliability of autobiographical writings concerning their fictionality or truth, what surely is acknowledged, is the idea that autobiographies function as pieces of literature that recount and mirror historical and social situations, even though they illuminate them from a subjective point of view. However, the counterargument would be that, for example, realistic novels would do that as well, although the characters and the world that are narrated are fictional. Author-biographical and psychoanalytical approaches to such texts would analyze the narrative in comparison to what is known about the author´s life in order to locate the author and his voice as well as his personal life story within the fictional world. The works of the psychoanalyst Alice Miller contains such examples, as the analyses of some of Kafka´s and Hesse´s works. (cf. Miller 1983/1990) She demonstrates very clearly that fiction can represent the personal history and psychological reality of an author although it is not narrated `directly´ through the form or genre of autobiography.

Further, this assumption would imply that a novel, even if counted as fiction, using the language of metaphors and symbols, narrating a fantasy, could retell a part of a personal reality and include autobiographical (masked) contents. If the abstraction of language does not play a role in this argument, the same would be true for poems that cover autobiographical contents. Sigmund Freud saw the dream as the golden path to the human subconscious world (cf. Freud Über Träume und Traumdeutung,1971), which is an essential part of the human self. The `language´ of dreams is highly symbolic. The subconscious communicates its messages with images that come from an associative, metaphoric, fantastic level, nevertheless they carry meanings, often very important meanings. If the abstraction and symbolization of human language would be seen in a similar way, as a matter of art that serves to express a personal, human condition and that would, thus, lead us to the essence of this human´s experience and identity, we could count every sort of text that deals
with human experience as some sort of autobiographical recount, even if it uses a language as abstract as in poetry. As the term autobiography itself has strict generic definitions and describes a specific kind of text, we have to find a new `term´ under which this new concept of writing the self, of writing experience could be subsumed: life writing.

In the preceding paragraph I have demonstrated that the boundaries of self-conception and identity are not stable throughout a human´s life. The boundaries are flexible and open to constant redefinition. Thus, the narrative account of a human´s life, an account of the process of the person´s cultural and psychological identity-formation might take on various forms of telling, narrating and writing. “[...] the future of autobiography itself is at stake,” writes Paul Eakin in *Fictions in Autobiography* (1988: 182); and will be, if not the borders of the genre and its definitions become flexible as well, in order to be a sufficient mirror of an individual, living in a Western society, being conscious of psychological realities of our time. (cf. Bruss, Elisabeth 1976) According to Sidonie Smith, the generic definition of autobiography and the concepts of literary accounts of personal lives is in a current state of theoretical negotiation and redefinition:

Ironically, or inevitably, as more and more critics talk about autobiography, the sense of its generic conventions, even its very definition, has begun to blur, until some now question whether autobiography exists at all. “Autobiography´, suggests James Olney, ´is not so much a mode of literature as literature is a mode of autobiography – and not by any means the only possible mode. ´(Smith 1987: 3)

This view on generic definitions becomes especially important when discussing female writers and their literary, autobiographical voices. For a long time, female writers have not been taken seriously in the male dominated world of literary discourse. What the breaking and expanding of the (male-generated) laws of genre means for female writers today, and how the concept of life writing aligns with feminist ideas of women´s writings, will be the issue of the following chapter.

### 2.2 Women and Identity – Women Writing Their Lives

“Women will starve in silence until new stories are created which confer on them the power of naming themselves.” (Cross and Heilbrun 1989: 33)

Female writers, reflecting on their social conditions and their experience as women, start their
literary expression from a different perspective than men. For a long time ignored by the patriarchal order of the literary canon, or not taken seriously in their works, they were, and are still, aiming to find their authentic female literary voice, without subjecting their work under the dominant male order or having to defend their work as important or intellectual enough to be taken seriously and acknowledged within a still male dominated world.

The world women experience and write about, is often a more personal, emotional world, one that focuses on relationships to other people, family members, their roles as mothers and housewives, the domestic sphere. The forms in which women in former times expressed their literary accounts were often letters, diaries, journals or poems, rather than novels (and I use the term `literary´ in this context on purpose). The dominant discourse claimed for a long time that these forms of writing were not to be taken seriously; that they were not `literary enough´ in order to be perceived as honorable pieces of literature. What would have been literary or intellectually revealing about a woman´s life, a woman, who `just´ cared for the children, the household, her husband? The emotional, inner world of a woman is regarded as some sort of ridiculousness: “In any case, most recent theories of what autobiographies are and how they function are skewed in favor of male models, privileging certain forms of life writing and casting different self-expressive models beyond the generic pale.” (Benstock 1989: 192) Writing, as an act of voicing identity as a woman, has always been challenging within a world that drafts women in such categories. This is an inevitable aspect we have to consider, when dealing with the theories and practices of women´s life writing.

The difference between traditional female roles and male ones make a difference in female writing. Even if a woman wishes to demonstrate her essential identity with male interests and ideas, the necessity of making the demonstration, contradicting the stereotype, allies her initially with her sisters. And the complex nature of the sisterhood emerges in the books it has produced. (Meyer-Spacks 1976: 6)

And Pam Morris expresses this thought similarly in her book Literature and Feminism:

Finding their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form gave and continues to give many women, some for the first time, a sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, that their suffering was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in women’s collective strength to resist and remake their own
Taking these arguments as a point of departure, it becomes clear that female writings and female self-conceptions within a text cannot be the same as male ones. If women would conform to `male´ forms and styles in their writings of self-hood and identity, would they not read as inauthentic, somehow even unreliable? There are female writers, whose works are considered to be more `male´ in their style than others whose writings are labelled `female´. This categorization of texts written by women are categories that are built on a normative view on gender roles present in Western society. Within this distribution of roles, women were not seen as those, who shaped history, who were powerful and engaged in the important processes of social and cultural development. Why would it be important then to read a woman´s reflections on these societal matters? It is important because women are part of this society, even if they are `excluded´ from it (cf. McAfee 2007)

One such distinguishing pattern is related to the restrictive male view of history. The consensus among critics is that a good autobiography not only focuses on its author but also reveals his connectedness to the rest of society; it is representative of his times, a mirror of his era. […] On the other hand, women´s autobiographies rarely mirror the establishment history of their times. They emphasize to a much lesser extent the public aspects of their lives, the affairs of the world, or even their careers, and concentrate instead on their personal lives – domestic details, family difficulties, close friends, and especially people who influenced them. (Jelinek 1980: 7-8)

My argument here is that these attitudes towards these ´women´s´ issues have to change. This often negative attitude towards the parts of our society that are assigned to the lives of women: the lives of mothers and daughters within their homes, with their familial bonds, their emotional world and their longings for love and recognition. Women themselves have to begin to take themselves serious, their issues, the central themes of their lives and then voice them in their own words and in their own modes of writing. Would women wait for the recognition from a patriarchal society, there would neither be a theoretical nor a practical progress within the art of writing and re-creating identity:

But women dominate their own experience by imagining it, giving it form, writing about it. Their imaginative versions of themselves as supporters of the social structure, guardians of the species, possessors of wisdom unavailable to men – versions derived partly from the arrogance of anger – in effect re-create the “mighty female deity”. In their exact recording of inner and outer experience they
Thus, I would like to emphasize here once again that life writing is a concept within recent literary theory that seems to me as the only appropriate category or medium in which women would be able to find an authentic autobiographical voice. Regarding the content of works of female life writing that recreate and retell the identity-formation of a woman, the next two chapters will deal with the major themes that play an essential role in the process of this forming of a female identity: the mother-daughter-bond, the female body and how it is viewed within a patriarchal world, the different conceptions of motherhood and femininity within patriarchal societies and the relationship women have to their bodies and to food.

2.3 The Mother-Daughter-Bond

“The reproduction of mothering begins from the earliest mother-infant relationship in the earliest period of infantile development.” (Chodorow 1978: 57)

“Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other – beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival – a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other.” (Rich 1976 220- 221)

“And yet, the truth is that when one woman gives birth to another, to someone who is like her, they are linked together for life in a special way. Mother is the prime love object, the first attachment for both male and female infants. But it is their sex, their sameness that distinguishes what a mother has with her daughter. No two people have such an opportunity for support and identification, and yet no human relationship is so mutually limiting.” (Friday 1977: 20)

Why do women write about their relationships with their mothers, or better: why is this relationship so significant in the life of a woman that she needs to integrate it into her own story? Why are mother-daughter relationships subject of literary and theoretical feminist writings? How did they become subject of scientific, psychoanalytic and sociological investigations? What is it that makes this relationship so special? And why has this issue become so prominent within feminist discourse over the last few decades? Considering the works of the most important women writers and
theorists, who offered explanations and answers to all these questions, the subsequent chapter will give a summary of these matters.

I would like to start this chapter by discussing the two quotes above by Adrienne Rich and Nancy Friday. Rich and Friday, both, address the uniqueness of the mother-daughter relationship, as well as its constraints. The notion of two human beings who are linked to each other through a physical and psychological bond, who closely share each other’s feelings and thoughts, may appear romantic, harmonious and positive at first. It is this romantic notion we have of the symbiosis between infant and mother, no matter which biological sex the baby has; the symbiosis a human child needs during the first months and years, in order to survive. However, what will happen to the romantic image we prefer in our view, if this symbiosis never ends? What if the child grows physically but never stops clinging to her mother and vice versa, the mother never stops clinging to her daughter? Here, the romantic notion of the symbiotic, life-giving relationship between mother and daughter expires. The harmonious image of the nurturing mother-infant relationship is replaced by a realistic stance on a tension-loaded clasp of two human beings who are unable to let each other go.

Why is it so difficult for mother and daughter to separate? In order to find an acceptable answer to this question one has to look at the images patriarchal society has of femininity and motherhood. I do not simply mean the image of motherhood that is common have today. Understanding this contemporary image of motherhood one needs to know first about the development of the “social institution of motherhood” (as Adrienne Rich called it in her book *Of Woman Born*) within patriarchal society. How did it emerge throughout the history of our culture and how does it influence the way in which we look at mothers today? This chapter aims to highlight some core issues that will explain the complexity of the mother-daughter bond within patriarchal society.

The domestic sphere, the household, including house work, the rearing of children and the preparation of food have always been, and still are, primarily the job of women in Western culture. This role was/is seen as a natural, ‘God-given’ constituent of women’s life. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering – Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Nancy Chodorow dedicates a whole chapter to the question of: „Why Women Mother“. By discussing biological and socio-psychological theoretical models of female mothering from a feminist perspective, she tries
to show that assigning the role of the primal caregiver to women, is another patriarchal practice to keep women dependent and, therefore, less powerful. While men are able to participate in the public sphere and define themselves as independent, self-responsible individuals, women are still bound – through child-rearing responsibilities – to the less valued domestic sphere, and their work is taken for granted. Chodorow argues that neither theories that are built on female biological factors (pregnancy, lactation and physical ‘weakness’), nor the role-training argument from social-, behaviorist psychology (children learn their gender roles mainly by identification and imitation of adults, and thus, girls learn maternal behavior from early on, by imitating their mothers and playing with dolls) would prove the general assumption that women are better suited to stay at home and care for children. Chodorow explains her theory as follows:

However, women’s mothering is tied to many other aspects of our society, is fundamental to our ideology of gender, and benefits many people. It is a major feature of the sex-gender system. It creates sexual asymmetries which reproduce the family and marriage, but leave women with needs that lead them to care for children, and men with capacities for participation in the alienated work world. It creates a psychology of male dominance and fear of women in men. It forms a basis for the division of the social world into unequally valued domestic and public spheres, each the province of people of a different gender. (Chodorow 1978: 218-219)

Adrienne Rich, in of Of Woman Born, as well as Nancy Friday in My Mother/My Self deal with the question of “why women mother” from a less psychoanalytical (but similar angle) than Chodorow. Rich focuses on the role of society and patriarchal ideologies that still force women to take on the maternal role of primary childcare (by ‘forcing women’ I mean the naturalization of the thought/ideology that women are the primal caregivers. Because this seems so natural as a choice of life, Rich argues that many women do not even think about different models of life or family roles, and are not even aware about their possibilities of choice). She distinguishes between the terms “institution of motherhood”, which she sees as an ideological concept, including a set of social, behavioral norms and expectations towards women as mothers and “mothering”, which is the experience of bearing and rearing children, defined by women through their bodily and psychological experience as mothers, defined by themselves. The institution of motherhood as ideological concept, forces several expectations on women concerning their childbearing ability and their maternal role: First, the definition of femininity through the maternal and the reproductive bodily functions of women; including the idea that a woman only reaches her full femininity (or
what society wants to see as that) through becoming a mother: “The physical organization which has meant, for generations of women, unchosen, indentured motherhood, is still a female resource, barely touched upon or understood. We have tended either to become our bodies – blindly, slavishly, in obedience to male theories about us – or to try to exist in spite of them.” (Rich 1976: 291)

Secondly, women who become mothers are expected to be equipped with ‘natural´ maternal instincts that guide them to the ideal, perfect nurturing behavior for their babies, and above all, feel ultimate joy and fulfillment in performing their ‘maternal duties´. In contrast, reality proves that women often do not feel the bliss of motherhood at all when they are confronted with these everyday ‘maternal duties´. As a result they feel guilty about being ‘bad mothers´, who are unable to care for their children properly. These feelings of guilt or the feeling of being not good enough as a mother are produced by the image society has of motherhood. Rich argues that “mothering” as an experience would allow women to have these feelings of anger or distress towards their children, without feeling guilty and that mothers did not struggle with themselves in order to conform to the image of the ideal mother, they would not feel overburdened with their role as mother.

Mothers are expected to be self-sacrificial. The female body was regarded as men’s property for a long time (and mostly still is in Western cultures, on an unseen, subliminal level of political and media discourse), or as Shirley Lim argues still is subject of subordination to male powers in several cultures:

Instead it points to the globalization of a patriarchal visual culture in which women's bodies and appearances are homogenized and fetishized as childlike or waif-like, subordinate, vulnerable, and thus easily regulated. Even where it would appear that health is the motivation for a concern with weight, the overt and covert messages are that thinness is good for its own sake. Thus, an international California fitness corporation in Hong Kong advertises itself in giant billboards all over the city declaring in English and Chinese: "WHEN THEY COME THEY'LL EAT THE FLABBY ONES FIRST. […] It is in the realm of the symbolic that colonial patriarchy has maintained, even strengthened its power over women's bodies and minds. (Lim 2000: 25-30)

The force of procreation was considered as a feature of male power (over women and their bodies). Even women today, still do often not have a sense of ownership towards, or physical awareness of their bodies (this issue will be discussed in greater detail in the subsequent chapters). This lack of bodily awareness leads to a missing sense of ‘self´ in women. Because of their undefined state of female identity and the maternal roles that are assigned to them and labeled ‘feminine´ by the powerful discourse of Western society, women tend to define themselves in terms of motherhood.
This becomes evident in Claire Buck’s assertion:

The figure of the mother has long been a central locus of most theoretical accounts of femininity regardless of ideological persuasion. The maternal role defines the nature of femininity for all women, both in accounts which reduce femininity to the functions of reproduction and nurturing, and in feminist interrogations of the relationship between femininity and maternity. (Sellers 1991: 64)

As a consequence, many women dedicate their whole lives to their children, and their children are what gives meaning to their lives. Not seldom, mothers try to compensate their loss of self though defining themselves through their children. Personal success and self esteem are defined by how well children behave at home and at school, if they do not, mothers feel like they have failed as mothers and as women in society. (cf. Winterhoff 2008: 113-123). Such a form of maternal role conception limits women’s self-conception. The mothers’ isolation from the rest of the world, creates family constellations in which narcissistic projections and dysfunctional separation processes produce immaturity and dependence, especially in daughters for whom the mother functions as a female role model. The self-sacrificial attitude is a feature of motherhood that is regarded as a norm within Western society and which is confirmed by the image of mothers that is conveyed through the media: “A final relevant feature of the childrearing job itself is that mothers are obliged to subordinate their personal objectives and practice ‘selflessness’ - putting the needs of others first, devoting themselves to the day-to-day well-being of other family members, loving and giving ‘unconditionally.’” (Treblicot 1984: 35)

Another problem in the discrepancy of feminine identity and motherhood is the image of the mother as a desexualized woman. Nancy Friday discusses in My Mother/My Self this desexualized maternal image in great detail, as a problem regarding the identification of daughters with their mothers:

She retreats and entrenches herself in the cramped female stance of security and defense. The position is fondly hailed as the mother protector. It is the position of fear. She may be only half alive but she is safe, and so is her daughter. She now defines herself not as a woman but primarily as a mother. Sex is left out, hidden from the girl who must never think of her mother in danger: in sex. It is only with the greatest effort that the girl will be able to think of herself that way. (Friday 1977: 21)

Daughters often do not have a sexual role model when they seek to define themselves as adults, which means, as sexually active women. Again, the female body is the common battleground of an unresolved bond between mother and daughter because, as Friday points out, the daughter will
always struggle with the internalization of the desexualized image of womanhood she absorbs in the relationship with her mother. A patriarchal society creates a dichotomy between woman as a sexual being and woman as a mother. The best example would be the religious image of the Virgin Mother Mary. For many girls, sexuality still carries the connotations of ‘danger’, ‘risk of pregnancy’ and ‘rape’ and sexual liberation still belongs to men. Sometimes, a woman who freely expresses her sexual desires and demands them, whether she explores her own body through masturbation, through promiscuity, or demands sexual fulfillment in her relationships with sexual partners (men), she is still regarded as behaving against a social norm. This situation for women has changed since Nancy Friday has written her book in 1977, however, the mainstream media, beauty magazines and at least mothers often still convey a shameful image of female sexuality to young girls. (cf. Johnston 2000: 136-148) Advertisements for sanitary towels, for example, convey the message that the menstrual blood is something ‘dirty’ and the woman has to use the right products to keep herself clean. Pregnancy tests are called “My Private Secret”, as if there was something shameful that has to be hidden.

According to Friday, women regard themselves as sexually seductive and active, until they find a man, who re-stages the symbiotic bond (independent man, standing for the omnipotent mother and the emotionally dependent woman regresses into a state of helplessness again, giving her life into the hands of her husband) with them and later impregnates them, so that the symbiosis can shift from the sexual partner to the child or daughter. Pregnancy is intended to be the purpose of sexuality, and as soon as women have reached this goal they would model their female self-definition after the conventional desexualized ideal of the self-sacrificial mother, who defines her femininity through the maternal role.

Daughters do not have to be taught all these things about motherhood and femininity explicitly, on the contrary they grow up with these social images and are confronted with them every day by living together with their mothers. Thus, female role models are reproduced within families and handed from one generation of women to the next. Nancy Chodorow expresses this in the following statement: “What is hidden in most accounts of the family is that women reproduce themselves through their daily housework.” (Chodorow 1978: 36) Additionally, most of this ‘knowledge’ is conveyed non-verbally, or comes in ambiguous double-messages from the mother. These double messages carry information, on a nonverbal, emotional level and this level differs from or contrasts
with from what is said verbally. However, the knowledge is given from one generation of women to
the next, because it is “the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies” (cf. Adrienne Rich 1976:
86) that is shared through matrilineage. Nancy Chodorow makes a clear point about the
transmission of ‘the feminine’ between mother and daughter in her book: “Internalization does not
mean direct transmission of what is objectively in the child’s social world into the unconscious
experience of self-in-relationship. Social experiences take on varied psychological meanings
depending on the child’s feelings of ease, helplessness, dependence, overwhelming love, conflict
and fear.” (Chodorow 1978: 50)

Chodorow talks about early childhood here, the very beginnings of life and argues that in this early
stage already, girls are treated differently than boys, because the mother feels differently about a girl
than a boy. When the mother sees the baby as extension of her self, she will more likely identify
more with girl than with a boy. Additionally, during this early symbiosis, the child is connected with
the mother’s emotional world and cannot differentiate between its own ‘self’ (because it has not yet
developed a sense of self) and the self of the mother; which means the baby also treats the mother
as if she were an extension of his or her body. The boy, as physically different from the mother’s
body feels this difference. It will be easier for him to separate from the mother, in his later life
because implicitly it is expected from him as his sexual identification processes shift to the father. A
girl, who senses her ‘sameness’ with the mother and who experiences herself as a physical and
psychological extension of her mother, will be ‘trapped’ in this bond, because she needs the mother
as an adult of the same sex in order to identify with her: “Identification is used here not as an
imitative activity by which a conscious being models itself after another; on the contrary,
identification is the assimilating passion by which an ego first emerges.” (Butler 1993: 13)

The mother-daughter relationship is thus a basic formative element of women’s lives concerning the
development of female identity. A female writer, who deals with the story of her own life and with
questions of female identity within our society, will inevitably be confronted with her own past as a
daughter. Moreover, a woman who is able to look back honestly, without glorifying or condemning
the relationship to her mother and how this relationship had formed her sense of self, will gain a
new sense of self-understanding. In the particular genre of feminist writing, or particularly in
feminist life writing, it is essential for a woman to gain this new understanding about herself, within
a new context of knowledge, which includes new views on her self and on her as a woman living in
Western society and writing about this experience.

2.4 Food – My Mother/My Body

A symptomatic quote of our time:
"Da sitzen dicke Muttis mit der Chipstüte vorm Fernseher und sagen, dünne Models sind hässlich"
(Karl Lagerfeld)

“And the one does not stir without the other. But we do not move together. When the one comes into the world, the other goes underground. When the one carries life, the other dies. And what I wanted from you mother, was this: that in giving me life, you still remain alive.” (Hirsch 1989: 67)

How does this unresolved struggle for separation relate to a problematic relationship (for daughter and mother) with the female body and further, to a problematic relationship with food? How does this struggle with the body and food relate to problems with female identity? These are not questions that can be answered easily, as the reasons for these problematic relationships are various and rather complex, like the mother-daughter relationship itself. The following chapter comprises the basic explanations to the problems implied in the above questions, according to the most recent findings in psychological studies on the etiology of eating disorders and family relationships.

As explained in the preceding chapter, a child’s first relationship, the relationship with the mother, becomes the script for all later relationships for a girl: the relationship she builds up towards herself – her body – as well as the relationships she builds with other people (friends, lovers or colleagues). As the primal caregiver and nurturer, mothers feed their children’s bodies. The process of nurturing already starts during the nine months a baby lives and grows inside her uterus: “Women´s responsibility for the nourishing of children begins from pregnancy, when women are expected to take special care of their diet so as to maximize the health and normal development of the foetus they carry.” (Lupton 1996: 41) Then, she feeds the child with milk that comes from her own body and later she prepares the food her child eats and regulates the times of food-intake and the ingredients of meals.
Deborah Lupton explains a mother’s nurturing role in the development of a child as follows: “The woman’s role as wife and mother is to keep the household harmonious, provide emotional stability for the family and acculturate children into appropriate norms of behavior, including conventions of emotional management and eating habits” (Lupton 1996: 39) Food becomes a metaphor within this relationship – a metaphor for warmth, security, attention and love - and thus gains emotional significance. In addition, children learn that the female body is the source of nutrition, in other words, the source of life itself. At first sight, this appears to be entirely positive, as the female body as the life-giving source, carries positive connotations within this culture, however, this view on the whole matter is rather superficial. On a deeper level, the metaphor of the female body as a source of life, a source of love and food, is tied to emotional messages (often, double-messages) and this is the source of various problems; especially for a daughter who identifies with this female body which she shares with the mother. Moreover, when the mother is struggling with her female identity, her own body and most of all, with her sexuality, the metaphor of life represented by the female body of the mother, would carry negative connotations as well. The mother’s struggles with her own body and her sexuality are communicated to the daughter in nonverbal messages that play an essential role in the daughter’s identification process.

To pursue this line of inquiry further, if the mother is disconnected from her own sexuality (because it is repressed for several reasons that will be explained later in this chapter), she is cut off from the second source of life that is represented by the female body as well. The fertility of the female body implies and includes the sexuality of the female body. However, in Western, Christian culture, in which the virgin mother is worshiped, motherhood and sexuality become a (unnatural) contradiction: “We are entitled only to the ear of the virginal body, the tears and the breast. With the female sexual organ changed into an innocent shell, [...]” (O’Reilly 2007: 193) This is the first ambivalent double-message the daughter subconsciously learns from the mother: Food is a source of life and the mother gives it to her child. Food is good. Food stands for “Love”. Sexuality is another source of life and the mother denies it by repressing it. Sexuality is bad and kept apart from “Love”. Nevertheless, both, food and sexuality are related to the body, and to basic human emotions. When sexuality is categorized as ‘bad’ and cannot be expressed or lived freely, then the most obvious consequence is that food becomes a substitute for it, but also for the emotions related to sexuality and the body. The cornerstone for a problematic relationship to the female body and food is laid - in early childhood, already because nonverbal messages, unspoken but shared through
the uncomfortable emotional tension between mother and daughter are always there:

By trying to protect her daughter from sexual hazards which, imagined or not, lie far in the future, the mother begins, from the daughter’s birth, to withhold the model of herself as a woman who takes pleasure and pride in sexuality. The daughter is deprived of the identification she needs most. Every effort of the daughter’s part to feel good about herself as a woman will be an uphill struggle – if not betrayal – against the sexless image of her mother. (Friday 1977: 22)

Friday further explains that it is not just the missing model of female sexuality which makes it difficult for the daughter, but the apparent condemnation of the issue per se, which troubles her:

It is our sexuality. It makes us take chances, pulls us here and there, brings us into a world larger than the family, fills our life with excitement, dangers, pleasures, and disappointments that make us grow even as we learn to handle them. […] The moment it was born in us, mother singled out sex as her greatest enemy. More than anything else, she knew sex would separate us from her. She could not even call it by its right name. (Friday 1977: 306-307)

However, it is not just the shame about and articulation of female sexuality, which is repressed within this relationship. Being woman is always associated with being more emotional and sensitive than men; although this image of female emotionality and sensitivity is not connoted positively within patriarchal society, where ratio and intellect count more. Emotions are associated with irresponsibility, weakness and – especially in connection with femininity – with hysteria. In a world, in which emotional self-expression is not valued or appreciated, a woman has to acquire certain repressive strategies herself in order to not being labeled as hysterical and irresponsible, when she is angry, sad or frustrated. However, there is this mental map, a ‘metaphor’, she has learned from the beginnings of her life. It is something that might replace or repress the emotions, which she does not allow herself to have or show to the rest of the world, something so closely connected to the rich emotional kaleidoscope she carries within her but struggles to deny: food.

The aspect of food as a means for emotional repression, is a very important one, when looking at the pathogenesis and symptomatology of eating disorders: The anorexic does not eat and hungers in order to avoid feeling her emotions, the bulimic binges and purges food in order to “swallow down” and then get rid of her emotions and the adipose woman swallows everything down, food and emotions and builds up fat as a symbolic physical protection. Anita Johnston describes in her book
Eating in the Light of the Moon the metaphor of food, as follows:

For most of us, eating takes on a meaning way beyond physical nutrition. It can be used as a substitute for love if we are feeling unloved. It can provide a kind of comfort, warmth, even security. This connection is easy to understand when you consider that as babies, our earliest experiences of being loved typically involved being held in our mother’s arms while we were fed. This can be a very powerful association especially if, later on in life, we feel deprived of sufficient experiences where we feel totally loved or accepted. In order to recapture our earlier experiences of feeling emotionally nourished, we might try to re-create it by feeding ourselves food and not realize that it is love we are really hungry for. (Johnston 2000: 41)

Furthermore, Johnston explains the issue in the context of eating disorders more precisely:

Someone struggling with anorexia may deny her hunger and not eat, but she is secretly obsessed with food and fat. She spends much of her day counting calories, weighing herself, exercising excessively, preparing food for others, and thinking about the foods she didn’t eat. Compulsive eaters find themselves thinking about the foods they are not supposed to be eating and scolding themselves for what they did eat and for how fat they look. Those who are caught up in the binge-purge process of bulimia spend enormous amounts of time planning and preparing for their binge and worrying about how they will be able to purge in secret. For concerned family members and friends who are witnessing this, all the evidence of an eating disorder points to food. And yet food is not the real issue. It is a smoke screen. It is the red herring. (Johnston 2000: 23)

However, patterns of emotional repression aligned with compulsive eating behaviors, an excessive preoccupation with body shape and weight do not only occur in women with eating disorders. It is something that is seen as a natural part of female thinking and behavior. That women are mainly concerned with their physical appearance had become a naturalized view on women as well as the image of the woman as silent bearer of many pains. In Western cultures, there are the religious images of the suffering Mater Dolorosa and the Virgin Mary which are inherent in the cultural concept of femininity. Both of these images represent aspects of the Western concepts of motherhood and daughterhood and are deeply anchored in the collective subconscious of men and women living in this culture. This has to be mentioned in order to understand, where these images of motherhood, daughterhood and femininity come from in contemporary Western societies. Nevertheless, how do they relate to the epidemic of eating disorders now spreading through these societies? The self-sacrificial image of mothers derives from the worshiping of such qualities which
can be found in the religious image of the divine mother as well as the image of the sexually pure because untouched mother (daughter) derives from religious dogmatics. In contemporary societies these religious dogmatics have been replaced by other suppressing patriarchal practices that intend to convey a limited view on a female or maternal role: through public media normalized images of femininity are broadcasted. Also in families these images are given from one generation of women to the next which makes it seem for many women rather impossible to escape those standards of womanhood. This is why the mother-daughter-relationship plays an important role in the etiology of eating disorders.

A woman struggling with her shape, her food-intake, counting calories, exercising, worrying about her appearance, binging, purging or compulsively thinking about food is fighting her own body, in other words: her femininity. The most imprinting things she learned about what it means to be a woman and about having a female body, she had learned from her mother, often implicitly in non-verbal messages or by instinctively imitating her mother’s ‘female’ behavior. These women learn that certain emotions have to be suppressed, denied and unspoken, such as for example anger or sadness. They learn that they are not allowed to express openly what they think or feel because the subjective truth that deviates from the normative world view is considered to be wrong, even crazy. Women often start to think that something is wrong with them because they feel or think in a certain (objectionable) way. They learn to distrust themselves and a profound self-doubt takes hold of them. Mothers often do not inhibit this (psychologically misguided) development in their daughters because they also feel this guilt, doubt and shame about themselves and see it as ‘typically female’ or normal that their daughters develop in that direction. However, these self-doubts create a high emotional tension that has to be compensated. The compensation is performed through a compulsive concern with the body and food. In addition, the compulsive behavior helps to suppress unpleasant thoughts or feelings. Women with eating disorders have lost the sense of who they are because they have forgotten what it means to feel. They grow up with mothers, who denied their feelings as well and lived in a similar constant emotional tension. Woman with eating disorders often come from families who desperately try to keep the facade of the happy family. They learn very early to conform to certain expectations. This conformist behavior also leads to a loss of the sense of self, a loss that is also symptomatically expressed through the loss of a sensual experience of the body. The compulsive concern with food is an attempt to regain a sense of self, to establish a new identity.
An eating disorder is the expression of a profound identity crisis. The rejection of the female body is a rejection of adulthood and sexuality as well as a symbol for the inability to separate from the mother and become an independent being. How could a woman who rejects her mother and at the same time her own body become adult and independent? What women with eating disorders often miss is a female role-model in which they want to develop. They often feel that they are destined to become like their mothers. Vice versa mothers are often unable to let their daughters go (grow up) because they feel that they would lose their female identity as mothers and because they are insecure about their identities as well, they contribute to this relationship of mutual dependence.

Through the compulsive behavior with food daughters are fighting for independence from their mothers, or better, from the female role models that are pressed towards them and which are represented by their mothers. However their enemy in this fight becomes the female body. Food is what sustains the body and food is what is given to daughters by their mothers. Through this relationship food gains a special emotional quality which is experienced and expressed through the body: “The earliest internalizations are preverbal and experienced in a largely somatic manner. When these earliest self-representations are recalled, they are recalled on a nonverbal level and psychosomatically. “(Chodorow, Reproduction, p.50) Recovery, a regain of a sense of self can, thus, only be achieved through a reconciliation with this enemy, the female body and with a growing sense of independence, from the mother and the role-models alike. The discussion of Chernin´s books in the following chapters will explain and demonstrate the role of the mother-daughter relationship within the development of eating disorders as well as the possibilities of self-definition and recovery from female identity crisis through the process of (life) writing. Kim Chernin’s life writings cover all of these issues mentioned above: the tensions between mother and daughter, the separation struggle, the misunderstandings and mutual dependence but also the process of recovery and reconciliation. All these stories are told in an independent female voice and in a new literary form as the following analysis of four of Chernin’s books will demonstrate. The first book that will be discussed, is *In My Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story* in which Chernin primarily deals with the relationship to her mother. In the second *In My Father’s Garden: A Daughter’s Search for a Spiritual Life* she reflects on the relationship with her father and how this relationship relates to that with her mother. The last two books *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* and *The Hungry Self: Women, Eating and Identity* she moves from more familial issues to the (female)
problematic of eating disorders and explores her identity as a woman who experienced suffering from one as well as she explores her identity as writer and therapist. All these books relate to each other and have to be understood in context with each other. They contain possible explanations to the cultural problems of mother-daughter-struggles and eating disorders. In addition the analysis will demonstrate that all of these books belong to the category of life writing as they are written in an innovative and unconventional way of autobiographic narration.

3. In My Mother’s House: A Daughter’s Story

„It is hard to write about my own mother. Whatever I do write, it is my own story I am telling, my version of the past. If she were to tell her own story other landscapes would be revealed. But in my landscape or hers, there would be old, smoldering patches of deep-burning anger. (Rich 1976: 221)

“For my mother, Rose Chernin
For her mother, Perle Chernin
And for my daughter, Larissa Chernin.”
(Chernin’s Dedication at the beginning of the book)

3.1 The Structure of the Book

The book In My Mother’s House is divided into three sections. Each of these sections contains several chapters that follow a specific pattern. The main chapters are told from Chernin’s perspective, the perspective of the daughter and author of the book, in a first person narrative. There she describes the development of the book and her experiences, when she visited and interviewed her mother. The other chapters, which occur in an alternating sequence to those of Chernin’s story, are told in the first person narrative as well, but from the perspective of her mother. These are the chapters in which Chernin re-writes her mother’s story. The pattern, in which the chapters are arranged – one chapter told from Chernin’s perspective, followed by a chapter, in which the story of Chernin’s mother is told – links the past with the present and is kept until the third section of the book, in which the pattern changes, as does the content of the book. The turning point in the story of the book happens when Rose passes the act of storytelling to her daughter Chernin, which changes
the narrative structure. In this moment of the story Rose suggests that her story is over and Chernin’s has to begin. Still, the pattern of past and present that alternates between the different chapters continues but now it is Chernin who tells the stories of the past as well, as those of the present, linking her past as a daughter with her present state. The writer’s individual voice becomes the predominant one in the discourse of the last section of the book.

The titles of the chapters indicate by whom the story is told: The first story that Rose tells, with the voice her daughter, the author, gives her on the page, is called “The First Story My Mother Tells”. Altogether, there are eight chapters, in which Rose’s voice is recorded on the page. The subtitles of each of these chapters indicate to which episode and to which time span within Rose’s life the content refers. In the third section of the book, called “The Survivor”, the pattern changes, and the first chapter, in which Chernin is narrating her story, is titled “The First Story I Tell”. Chernin tells three stories from her childhood and youth and then passes on the narrative to her own daughter Larissa, announcing that her story as a daughter has ended now and Larissa would be the next daughter in the family, whose story should be told with her own voice. Chernin follows a newly established tradition of story-telling in the Chernin’s matrilineage, offering her daughter the same possibility that her mother offered to her.

The chapters in which Rose is narrating her past, belong to the older woman and her story. They depict the story of a memory of a time when Rose herself was a small child and later a young woman. Chernin’s chapters from the present, which alternate with her mother’s chapters, belong to her and give an account of her voice, as a writer, as a reflective adult and as a daughter, who establishes a new relationship to her mother by writing this book. In the “Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition” of *In My Mother’s House* Chernin includes some essential thoughts that depict much of what the book is about and what the work finally meant for Chernin’s life as a writer. Thus, the summary of the foreword’s content is an important part of the book’s analysis that will follow in the subsequent chapters.

3.2 Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition
In the “Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition” to *In My Mother’s House* Kim Chernin depicts the tradition of storytelling within her family, how this tradition had influenced her in becoming a writer and further influenced her modes of writing in the origination of the book. “My mother and I were storytellers. It was an old line, it ran far back.” (Chernin 1983: ix) She frames her general considerations on truth versus fiction in the recount of a real persons’ life through retelling and re-capitulizing her own experiences with the matter. The question of truth and lie within a story have always been essential questions for Chernin; as child, listening to her mother’s stories; for her as a professional writer, telling her own stories; and most of all, when she was asked by her mother to write down the story of her life. “`Keep an eye on them´, my mother used to say, `just when you least expect it a story will tell the truth.´” (Chernin 1983: ix), she quotes the older woman in the preface. Indeed, the question of truth and fiction within the narrative are always of concern for a writer, who sets out to transform the experience of real life into a narrative: “Here, then, are the phenomena this discussion would illuminate: (Chernin 1983: 1) the ways in which the autobiographer’s position as woman inflects the autobiographical project and the four marks of fictiveness that characterize it – the fictions of memory, of the ‘I’, of the imagined reader, of the story; […] “ (Smith 1987: 45)

Chernin had to ask herself whether she would be able to retell her mother’s life with an authentic voice and how she could achieve to succeed in such a task. In the course of the foreword she partly answers these questions: regardless how strong her efforts might be, to make her mother’s voice sound alive and authentic on the page, it would always be framed and colored by her perception as a daughter, the listener who always filters the narrative of her mother’s story through her own experience, adding her own voice to that of her mother:

To get my mother to sound like my mother on a page, I had to find a voice that was as richly textured as her presence, a voice that could, being a paper voice, rely entirely on itself, having been forced to dispense lemon, teacups, apples, living breath. It had to sound like my mother, but not the way my mother literally sounded; it had to have something of her in it but something of me as well, of the way I had listened to her voice as, throughout our life together, it had told her story to me. (Chernin 1983: x)

The book’s title *In my Mother’s House* and its subtitle *A Daughter’s Story* also indicate, that the narrator of the story is Chernin, not her mother, although the life story of Rose Chernin is somehow
the main concern of the book. However, due to the structure of the whole book, the reader realizes that there are two stories told in parallel, but before I am going to discuss the structure and the content of the book in detail, I would like to summarize Chernin´s metatextual reflections on the development of the book, which she outlines in the foreword. These are reflections on the possibilities and limitations of recording authentic female voices on a page filled with words, as she describes it in the foreword.

Chernin´s writings at the beginning of the foreword consist of a mixed style of memoir writing and reflective self-interrogation of her present self. She explains to the reader how she acquired the modes of storytelling by sitting on her mother´s lap as a child, listening to her voice. Through the relationship to her mother she learned to understand the metatextual context of a story´s content: “My mother said, `In every story is a story not told.´ I learned to listen to the untold stories.” (Chernin 1983: viii) and “My mother always said, `Behind every story is another story.´” (Chernin 1983: xvii) There are two kinds of stories her mother was telling her, when she was a child: One kind, where the story obviously had been invented like a fairy tale, with a beginning and an ending and a pregiven structure, and the other sort, that came from the experience of life, `true´ stories, stories from her mother´s past. Chernin announces in the foreword that she is going to tell a story of the latter kind in this book. Although, one might assume that Chernin would continue writing a biography about her mother, in a certain established generic style, she disrupts the expectation by breaking with the generic conventions of biography, autobiography and memoir. The book contains her mother´s biography which is written in the mode of autobiography, in the first person narrative and a mature narrator, who looks back to her past; and it contains an autobiographical account of Chernin´s present life as well as of her past.

In the Foreword, Chernin also reflects on the effects the writing of the book and the publication had on the life of her mother, her own life and the life of Larissa, her daughter. The whole project affected the relationship between those three women positively because it initiated a process of mutual understanding and reconciliation between Rose and Chernin. It also affected the way in which Rose Chernin began referring back to her own life, as the following quote explains: “For after that, my mother never, to my knowledge, told her stories again in her own voice. From that moment in the bookstore she had taken over, or been taken over by, the voice I had created for her.” (Chernin 1983: xii-xiii) Before Chernin had written this book together with her mother, Rose had
never approved of the fact that Chernin wanted to become a writer, instead of becoming a political activist like herself. I think, this is important when we look at the starting point from which Chernin’s work on the book departed; a book, in which she writes and captures her mother’s identity as well as her own identity. In addition, the process of the development of the book changed the relationship of the two women who had felt distanced to and alienated from each other for a long time. It brought them to a new form of understanding because they learned to listen to the other’s story. The result is a mutual approval of each other’s identity as independent, adult beings.

The time span in which the book developed covered seven years, during which Chernin and her mother met for interviews and conversations, always together with Chernin’s daughter Larissa. Chernin recorded her mother’s voice on tape and transcribed it later into written words. The development of the book can be seen as a process in which the past is revealed and current familial relationships are negotiated from new perspectives. In the preceding paragraphs I have already mentioned that although the two women had their misunderstandings, Kim Chernin’s wish to become a writer does not differentiate her as much from her mother as it seems. Her identity as a writer has much to do with the woman who gave birth to her and who has influenced her throughout her life. In addition, through the work on this book, her mother realizes that the activity of writing can have an impact on people’s thinking and attitudes as well. Rose Chernin has been a Communist activist through all her life, marching the streets with her little children on her arms and being arrested for conspiracy during the McCarthy era. Although feminist writing is a concept she is unfamiliar with and which she does not trust as political medium, she finally approves of her daughter’s professional life and becomes proud of her work: “The first time I went to visit my mother in Sunset Hall she grabbed my hand with her iron grip. ‘This is my daughter,’ she said to everyone we met, ‘you’ve read her book about my life?’ They all had.” (Chernin 1983: xxvi)

Finally, Chernin also introduces in the Foreword an important motif of the book: the motif of food. “In the dining room, a bowl of yogurt and cottage cheese was waiting for me.” (Chernin 1983: xxvi) These were Chernin’s favorite foods as a child. Her mother still prepared them for the adult Chernin, when she came for a visit. The subsequent chapters will show how this motif of food re-occurs in the stories of the book, functioning as a metaphor within the mother-daughter-relationship. The meaning of this metaphor will be explained later.
The Foreword ends with a collection of old photographs from the Chernin family. The pictures show Chernin’s grandmother who came from Russia with her children, when Rose was a small child, her parents when they were young and photos of Larissa. The photographs and the descriptions of the people and moments that were taken, add a metatextual reference to the story as well. By looking at them, the reader has to ask herself the question of truth versus fiction within the stories that are going to be told. She might conclude with the assumption that the stories, although they retell the lives of real people, are filtered through their subjective experience and memory, and thus, have some fictional qualities as well.

3.3 Content Analysis

3.3.1 Rose’s Stories

“My father beat my mother. Always he would yell at her. There were terrible scenes. […] She was a gentle person and he broke her spirit. He broke her mind.” (Chernin 1983: 38)

Rose’s narrative starts with memory-recollections from her childhood in Russia. In this storis she depicts herself as the daughter of her own mother, Chernin’s grandmother. Very early in the narrative, she differentiates herself from her mother and depicts this woman, as a weak and fragile character: “Mama could not stand up for herself. We had to fight for her.” (Chernin 1983: 24) In contrast to this, Rose characterizes herself as a person of strong willpower and determination, she had set for herself: “It was a big event to go out of the shtetl. I´m not like my mother, who was always afraid to go away from home. I loved the idea of going to another place.” (Chernin 1983: 25) Later in the story we learn that Rose’s father, who had been living apart from his family in the U.S.A., was a violent and uncaring man, who suppressed his wife and children. Nevertheless, Rose, whose Yiddish name originally was Rochelle, stood up for herself very early and resisted her father’s violence: “But I couldn´t forget the idea of going to school. The idea never left me. My father, of course, did not want me to go to school. But I had already learned not to be intimidated by my father. He might have beaten my mother but I would never let him lay a hand on me.” (Chernin 1983 : 39)
Rose leaves her family, her sisters and her mother behind to follow her ambitions but not without feeling guilty for that. Over the spatial distance she corresponds with her mother through letters. Kim Chernin dedicates a chapter of the book to the story of this epistolary correspondence in “The Seventh Story My Mother Tells : Letters.” In this chapter Rose is explaining the meaning these letters had for her in the relationship to her mother:

While I was in New York my mother kept me informed about what was happening in the family. This is what I want to tell you about. With the years her letters grew more beautiful. […] I am today twelve, fifteen years older than my mother was when she died. I am older than ever my mother was. […] She was miscast in life. She hated housework, she hated the routine cooking. She wanted only to make delicacies, to bake, to make jam, to embroider, to write letters. When she was doing these things she would be peaceful. You could see she was contented with life. She hated the things she thought she should do. And who valued the things she loved? […] did we ever appreciate the things she made? (Chernin 1983: 173-174)

The quote above reads like a universal statement daughters would make on their mothers. It is the image of the self-sacrificing mother which Rose Chernin describes here, the image of a woman who, after becoming a mother, conformed to the expectations that were pressed towards her. Pearle lived at a time, when women were not aware that much of this institutionalized image of motherhood, the image of the mother who sacrificed her own well-being for that of her family members was limiting them in their personal development and that another image of motherhood was possible. However, how much choice is left to contemporary mothers in choosing their roles as nurturers for their families and primal caregivers? Adrienne Rich argues in her essay “Anger and Tenderness” that “Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is part of the female process; it is not an identity for all the time.” (O’Reilly 2007: 22) Nevertheless, Pearle had no `self´ to which she could have returned after her children had grown up and left home. She remained in a condition of profound dissatisfaction, an emptiness that caused her depression, as she lacked from a meaning of life, a meaning she was unable to find by conforming to an institutionalized role of motherhood. Ridiculously enough, the image of this role promises satisfaction and fulfillment to women, who conform, but according to Chernin many of them are left with the feeling that something essential is missing from their lives.
Pearle’s letters got lost over the years, thus, Chernin is not able to quote from them. She can just reproduce the few things Rose is able to remember and tell her. The letters mentioned in this book mostly cover autobiographical contents. In the study of life writings, letters count as autobiographical source. The letters of Pearle are an intertextual element, which is not an essential part of the book’s text itself however, they are part of Rose’s story as a daughter, and they reproduce a part of Pearle’s voice. Although the letters do not occur in their full form, they function as an element of recollection and memory in Rose’s and Chernin’s story, uniting four generations of Chernin women, as the following quote suggests: “When she was alive I never showed my understanding. Now I remember. And most of all I remember the letters. About my mother’s life my biggest regret is that we never kept those letters. After your sister died they got lost. You, a writer, never read them. I look at you. I think about my mother. I think, perhaps in you her great spirit has another chance at life.” (Chernin 1983: 180)

For Rose Chernin, the narrative of her mother’s life is an essential contribution to the depiction of the story how she became the person she is and has been throughout her life: a fighter. The story of Pearle and Rose is the story of a daughter’s decision to become active rather than passive like her mother, and to fight (social) injustice whenever and wherever she can. She tells the story of how she discovered her own will and strength that made her become a political activist. It is the story of Rose as a daughter, fighting for her mother who was unable to fight for herself. Pearle, Chernin’s grandmother, was beaten by her husband and never accustomed to her new home in the United States. She always wanted to return to Russia, her true homeland. She suffered under the reign of her violent husband, who degraded and abused her. Thus, Pearle becomes depressed and commits several attempts of suicide, until she finally succeeds, at the age of about fifty. The exact age is not mentioned in the book.

Rose’s fights for her mother begin when Pearle is sent to a mental hospital after her second suicide attempt. She realizes that this institution does not help her mother to recover but that being there, makes her mother become more depressed: “So, every month I went there and every month she was getting worse. She cried all the time. [...] `Rochele, I’m going to die here,´ was all she could say to me. This was my mother. My mother, you understand? [...] Finally, I couldn’t live with it anymore. It was eating up my life.” (Chernin 1983: 85) The metaphor in the last sentence is important. The frustration, the anger and the pain are `eating up´ Rose’s life. Terms that are normally related to
food are used to refer to emotional states here. However, Rose did not `swallow down´ her frustrations alike her mother. Thus, she stood up in front of her father, forcing him to take his wife back home, threatening to kill him if he dared to beat her. This action is a key element in Rose´s story: “And this, I tell you, is the story of the first victory I won. If you understand this story you understand my life.” (Chernin 1983: 84) Pearle killed herself a few years after this incident, and although Rose realized that she would have never been able to save her mother´s life – because she had to live her own life– the feeling of guilt never left her. Rose Chernin grew up with the inner tension of being torn between two lives: she could either have stayed with her family, caring for her mother, who was too weak to defend herself, or she could leave and live her own life. Rose chose the latter option of leaving her mother and her family. However, becoming the fighter she was is a reparation for the guilt and the anger she felt, because she had been unable to prevent her mother´s suicide.

These experiences made Rose become the peson Kim Chernin later describes from her perspective: the emotionally inaccessible mother, the angry and determined fighter. She also describes the tensions and unspoken conflicts between her and the older woman. It is important to understand how much the relationship to her mother Peale has influenced Rose´s life, even though the daughter left the family to `live her own life`. Nevertheless, the feeling of guilt and the worries about her mother never left her and further, she had to return home and take care of her mother who was unable to do so for herself. Furthermore, Rose constructed her whole personality in contrast to her mother´s. By doing so she attempted to make herself independent from her mother. Paradoxically, this shows just, how dependent she is from the feelings of guilt that bond her with her (dead) mother. In addition, there is the fear of ending like her mother that makes her become the person she is. Much of Rose´s identity construction, thus, depends on her experience as the daughter of her mother which shows the significance and importance of the mother-daughter relationship in a woman´s life. In how far this relationship not just affects a daughter´s identity formation process but her relationship to food and to her body becomes evident in Kim Chernin´s stories. The feelings of guilt and anger play an important role in this respect, as the following analyses of Chernins´s chapters will show.

3.4 Kim Chernin´s Stories
3.4.1 The adult writer’s identity

I should have known it. She has carried this guilt, as a mother, even before I was born. This awful sense that she has hurt her children by being a Communist. But I had wanted to give her this story of our life as a gift; as a reparation even for Nina’s death. And now it turns out that what I have just read to her she sees as her public condemnation. (Chernin 1983: 232)

In the first chapter of the book, Chernin narrates in detail how the fact that her mother had asked her to write a book about her life has changed her, as a writer and as a daughter. Agreeing to her mother’s proposal means for her that she would have to meet her mother again after a long time, having to face the old conflicts again, moving into unknown territory by conversing with her mother about her past. The parts of the story, told from Chernin’s perspective can be seen as Chernin’s autobiographical recount of the events that happened during the development of the book.

Starting in medias res, Chernin narrates the beginning of the story about her mother, with quoting a conversation they have, over food. Emotions of love and care are mediated between mother and daughter in terms of food. Chernin explains the meaning of this metaphor of food in the following paragraph:

July 1974
She calls me on the telephone three times the day before I am due to arrive in Los Angeles. The first time she says, ‘Tell me you still like cottage cheese?’ ‘Sure, ’ I say, ‘I love it. Cottage cheese, yogurt, ricotta … ’ ‘Good, ’ she says, ‘we’ll have plenty.’
The second conversation is much like the first. ‘What about chicken? You remember how I used to bake it?’
The third time she calls the issue is schav – Russian sorrel soup, served cold, with sour cream, chopped egg, and onion, large chunks of dry black bread. ‘Mama,’ I say, ‘Don’t worry. It’s you I’m coming to visit. It doesn’t matter what we eat.’
She worries. She is afraid she has not been a good mother. (Chernin 1983: 3)

This is a scene that might be common in many families. As Chernin already indicates, her mother’s real worries are not worries about food and whether she would be able to supply her daughter and grand-daughter with dishes they like (because she will be able to put food on the table they like), she worries more about the other conflicts that may arise when she meets her daughter Chernin again. In addition, she suggests cooking traditional foods, Russian dishes, which symbolically stand for the past they share, a past with which Kim Chernin apparently broke when she decided to become a writer instead of a Communist activist. I will discuss this food-metaphor again in the later
chapters of my analysis. Food can become a strong metaphor for emotions. In this scene it should convey love and regret as well as it should cover the hidden guilt and tension between mother and daughter. Anita Johnston explains the metaphor of food in this context as follows:

Eating can be used to escape from uncomfortable feelings in much the same way that drugs and alcohol have been used and abused. If we are having a difficult time coping with confusing or conflicting feelings, we may discover that by starving, we are able to disconnect from our bodily sensations so that we can’t feel what is inside, or we may discover that we can plunge into binging large quantities of food or eating small amounts of food nonstop whenever those feelings start to surface. (Johnston 2000: 42)

And Deborah Lupton writes: “The differential power relations that exist between children and parents in the context of eating are experienced in an embodied way. Emotions such as resentment, anger and frustration might find expression in and through the child’s body. (Lupton 1996: 55) These two quotes explain how food becomes a metaphor and substitute for emotional deficits and why such deficits are expressed in a nonverbal but physical (symptomatic) manner.

The narratives that follow in the subsequent chapters of the book relate to four generations of Chernin women, as each of the women’s stories includes an additional layer that covers the narrative of another woman’s life. For Chernin, it is the story of herself as a mother, and she includes her daughter Larissa into her narratives as the next generation. For Rose, it is the story of her mother Pearle, which she integrates into her story as a mother and as a daughter. Although, the two stories of Chernin and her mother constitute the central theme of the book. In the following quote, Chernin describes how she, in her role as a mother, is different from what she had experienced with Rose as a mother: “My mother looks at me, frowning, puzzled. There is a playfulness between Larissa and me, a comradeship she does not understand. When I was pregnant with Larissa I used to dream about running with her through the park, a small child at play with a larger one called the mother.” (Chernin 1983: 5) In this statement, she describes how she acquired another self-understanding of her maternal role that differentiates her from her own mother and her grandmother Pearle. Over each generation of the Chernin women, the maternal role that is described, has changed and each layer of the story conveys a different image of motherhood. These images are framed through autobiographical reflections, from a subjective perspective. However, this is an issue that leads to several conflicts that are addressed in the book’s content as well and
that are part of the mother-daughter-separation struggle that is described.

The following quote illustrates one of these conflicts, namely Rose´s scepticism towards Chernin´s professional life as a writer: “‘Your work,’ she says, with all the mixed pride and ambivalence she feels about the fact that I live alone with my daughter, supporting both of us as a private teacher, involved in a work of solitary scholarship and poetry she does not understand. ‘Still the same thing? ’ she asks, a tone of uncertainty creeping into her voice. ‘Mat-ri-archy?’” (Chernin 1983: 6) And the discussion about Chernin´s professional life, which is a constituent of her self-understanding, an essential part of her identity continues:

I answer belligerently, shaking with passion. ‘There is the same defiance of authority in the scholarship I do, the same passion for truth in the poetry I write as there has been in your life.’

‘Truth? We’re going to discuss truth now?’

‘And it changes, doesn’t it? From generation to generation?’

The silence that follows this outburst is filled up through every cubic inch of itself by my shame. We are not even out of the airport and already I’ve lost my temper. (Chernin 1983: 7)

At the beginning of the book, Chernin describes the tension between herself and her mother. Through narrating both female identities in the form of an autobiographical recount, giving them enough space on the page, they can exist in a written form side by side. Additionally, the two women realize that their different lives and identities can exist outside of the book in peaceful coexistence, although they have to solve difficult misunderstandings:

Larissa is gracious. She accepts the burden of love I feel for these women I loved so passionately as a child, these sisters of my mother whom she scarcely knows, having been raised in another city, during the time when I rarely visited the family, feeling that I needed this distance from them in order to become what I then called my ‘self’.

‘Become your SELF?’ my mother would shout over the telephone. ‘Why should you need to become what you already are?’ (Chernin 1983: 111)

The narratives within this book are accounts of this development. They depict the long way of a mother´s and a daughter´s mutual clinging to each other: “I feel, within me, a familiar sensation, an impulse of rage curiously mixed with despair. ‘Mama,’ I say, ‘that’s not what I mean.’ But how many times have I said these same words to her before?” (Chernin 1983: 79) So, to continue it is necessary to understand this search for an independent identity in context with the story of the two women´s reconciliation. This reconciliation happens through communication and solving of the misunderstandings between mother and daughter, but also through a honest reconciliation with their common past. The following chapter deals with the stories about the Chernin women´s past and the
narative account of their (different) memories.

3.4.2 Memories from childhood

In the scene quoted below, Kim Chernin describes the role of past and memory and how they influence the present moment. In addition, the scene illustrates how a woman never stops being a daughter, a small girl, in the relationship to her mother and which role this relationship plays even in the life of an adult woman:

June 1978
I stand with my hands in my pockets, trying not to look excited. What a foolish person I am, I think to myself, as I notice how fast my heart is beating. It is four years since I last saw her. Dry mouth, moist palms, I have all the symptoms of a young woman in love. But I am thirty-eight years old. And now as I glance over at the passengers it is my mother I catch sight of, a small white suitcase in her hand, her red cape folded neatly over her arm, as she comes down the steps from the airplane. (Chernin 1983: 119)

Chernin’s story of her past begins after the death of her older sister Nina. She then starts recollecting her childhood and how she experienced the time when she was living at the same room with Nina, seeing her sister falling ill and deteriorating physically due to Hodgkinson disease which was incurable at the time when Nina fell ill. Chernin remembers her feelings of helplessness and finally hatred towards the older girl who was lying there all days and nights, not recovering from her strange condition, unable to sing or play with her again. Then, one day she was gone and both her parents avoided to tell Chernin the truth, as they have already done during the time of Nina’s disease in an attempt to protect the younger sister from the unbearable truth. In the course of the book’s development, Rose and Kim Chernin, for the first time in their lives, dare to talk honestly about what happened to Chernin’s older sister Nina: “I remember my mother’s face when she had lived though Nina’s death again with me. […] It was the first time she wept because of Nina. The first time in thirty-five years. It was the beginning of mourning in our family because of Nina’s death. And for me it was the beginning of memory.” (Chernin 1983: 199).
The title of the book’s last section – “The Survivor” – gains in the context of this narrative a new meaning. The survivor is Chernin, but it is also her mother, if interpreted in the wider context of the book. This survivor-figure, or narrating ‘I’, Chernin establishes for this part of the book which narrates what happened during the time-span from Nina’s death to the moment in her life, when she finally becoes a writer and then passes on the autobiographical narrative to the woman of the next generation. The story of Chernin’s childhood is the story of a girl who had survived, but also of a girl who had to learn how to survive under difficult circumstances. It is the story of what she had experienced as a child when her mother was taken to jail and she was left alone with her father. Additionally, it is the story of how she learned to survive the hostile social environment of the McCarthy era during the 1950ies, when she was excluded by her mates for being the daughter of a Communist.

Chernin describes the strategies she developed in order to survive this loss and loneliness psychologically. The first strategy she developed unconsciously was to reject her mother. Long before her mother had been arrested, she had sensed that something was happening, something that would threaten her family and, although being a Communist, who had never been educated religiously, she started to pray: “I was horrified about my prayers. Did they work? Did they help? I began to repeat them beneath my breath, even at the dinner table. Took huge portions of potatoes. ‘Eat the string beans,’ my mother insisted, leaning over to take some potatoes off my plate. Without warning, suddenly, I picked up a glass and threw it against the wall.” (Chernin 1983: 216) Chernin also admits that: “I stopped sleeping. I lay awake and kept watch on things.” (Chernin 1983: 217) In her infantile horror, she turned to God, away from her mother and her mother’s values. In the above scene, food becomes another metaphor for the struggle that was going on between a mother and a daughter, who were unable to communicate about their fears. In the act of refusing her mother’s food, Chernin distances her as well from the woman she begins to hate for causing her so much emotional distress. Later, when her mother is in jail, she befriends with outsiders, her African-American school mates, because the other children do not accept her any more. Unconsciously she is also blaming her mother for whom she begins to feel shame. If her mother was not arrested for being a Communist she would not have been taunted in school. This experience harms her self-esteem and it troubles the feelings about her social identity. Even her name – Chernin – becomes an eyesore in her social identity.
Later, when Chernin is old enough, she travels to Russia, her mother´s country which she also calls the “Motherland” in the respective chapter´s title. Although she is fascinated with the Communist spirit there at first and after participating in public parades, becoming a member of a socialist youth network, sharing their excitement for Communist ideologies, she is heavily disappointed after seeing the negative sides of the socialist regime. Returning to America, having acquired a critical opinion towards her parents´ beliefs, she disappoints her mother´s expectations and turns away from Communism in order to study literature and become a writer. Her mother is infuriated with her, they lead heated discussions and disputes on the matter. Chernin feels misunderstood and flees from her family to study in Europe where she marries and gives birth to her daughter Larissa: “But here, of course, we have come to Larissa´s story. For me, the narrative is almost at an end. Those years, after her birth, belong to my daughter and must be told, if ever, in her voice. That, after all, is the pattern my mother has established.” (Chernin 1983: 294)

What Chernin uses as a stylistic feature in describing her mother is a detailed depiction of Rose´s facial expressions. By means of these descriptive passages, she re-enacts the face-to-face conversations she had with her mother and adds an emotional moment to the retelling of her mother´s words, something that cannot be expressed simply by quoting her mother on the page. The description of Rose´s face becomes the emotional equivalent to the tone of her voice that cannot be heard by the reader. Therefore, the description of Rose´s face is an indispensable element of her authentic voice on the page. Additionally, these descriptions aim to fill the gaps of silences that occur during the conversations between mother and daughter. Chernin depicts what she sees when she sits in front of her mother and muses upon the older woman´s inner feelings that were only visible on the surface of her face during these moments of silence.

My mother´s face is the face of a child. It refuses to give up its sense of the marvelous. She looks up as if she could still see that light coming from the ceiling. Her white hair is curled and tousled. Her head tilted to one side, she seems to be listening to the echo of her own voice. And then without warning something happens to her face. To me, it seems that a great convulsion passes over her features. She does not move, even her breathing seems to have stopped and now, very slowly, a single tear moves down her cheek. She lifts her hand, wipes impatiently at this tear, and suddenly she is an old woman again. (Chernin 1983: 28)

Within this paragraph we encounter a strong emotional moment as well as some sort of revelation, as the title of the chapter suggests - “Oh, my enlightenment” - , in the writer´s understanding of her mother. This paragraph links the preceding chapter about the past, in which Rose is talking about
her childhood, and the chapter, in which Chernin is talking and narrating what happened during the meetings with her mother. It draws a bridge between the two worlds of the past and the now. The revelation Chernin has during this conversation with her mother, is that her mother once was a child, a daughter, herself.

Chernin refers to the silences between her and her mother in different ways. At the beginning of the book, she describes those silences during conversations as uncomfortable moments: “Larissa is growing angry. She looks up and me – I should take her side. And I realize just how hard it is to become a daughter of this family, never knowing when some chance word or expression will suddenly transform a happy mood and create this terrible abyss, the silence.” (Chernin 1983: 30) During their conversations mother and daughter fall silent, when a very emotional or difficult point is reached. Through these silences her mother withdraws from her, nevertheless, they create a high tension between the two women. These silences stand for the inability to communicate about a certain issue: “‘Ach,’ she says, shuddering deeply. ‘I want to tell you about my mother.’ But then she says nothing. We walk on past the flowers. Finally she says to me, ‘A mother and a daughter. So much in this. How can I tell to you all I see?’” (Chernin 1983: 123) However, in the process of the creation of this book, Chernin learns to understand and, thus, bear the silences, because she has understood their meaning:

Again silence. Something is happening between us that makes possible these silences we have avoided all our lives, which might have healed us. And suddenly I understand. This precisely is what we have feared – this knowledge of loving, the depth of this love, our love so terrifying for us both. The last time in childhood, we loved like this we both lost so bitterly. Finally now I understand my mother, this woman who was once a child. (Chernin 1983: 184)

It is the phrase: “How can I tell you all I see,” which changes Chernin´s understanding of her mother´s silences. It is an epistemic question with which every one of us might be confronted during a conversation. In the context of this book, it is primarily the question of a storyteller, who asks herself, how she could achieve to narrate the story of this complex relationship of mothers and daughters. How can a writer transform the emotions and the experience of this relationship into appropriate words? The aim would be to make the reader understand, even if he or she had not shared the same experience, of how this relationship affects a woman´s life, her personal development and the becoming of her ‘self’. Departing from the assumption that the reader is female, she might understand the complexities of the mother-daughter-bond, without being able to put it into her own words. There might be an understanding within a female readership that would
grasp the notion of this unspeakable, unnameable that is more felt that rationally understood. Nevertheless, Chernin and her mother find their way of narrating this story, by making use of unconventional modes of narrating autobiography by deviating from the conventional modes of memoir writings:

[...] there have always been women who cross the line between private and public utterance, unmasking their desire for their empowering self-interpretation of autobiography as they unmasked in their life the desire for publicity. Such women approach the autobiographical territory from the margins of discourse. In so doing they find themselves implicated in a complex posture toward the engendering of autobiographical narrative. (Smith 1987: 44)

They touch upon a new territory of their relationship, and they find an innovative form of expressing it on a literary level. Here, I want to argue that life writing is the appropriate form of writing, in which this experience can be transformed accurately. As it is a unique experience it requires a unique form of expression. What Kim Chernin describes here is not just an experience that is recounted from a later point of time, it is the description of a process which is constantly reconsidered and reflected by the author. The conventional structures of memoir and autobiography would thus not suffice to transform the continuous experience of this process into words. The narrative patterns have to vary and shift from the conventional norm. „Can certain kinds of experiences (childhood, love, sickness, spiritual life) cross borders more easily, whereas narratives anchored more firmly in historical or national realities have a harder time,“ asks Phillipe Lejeune in his article “Is the `I´ Inernational?“ for Biography: An Interdisciplinay Quarterly, 2009. The study of life writing offers answers to this question. Personal experiences are individual and unique and thus request a unique form of narration and writing: “She looks up at us, her eyes full of the knowledge that she has become a storyteller for the first time in her life,” (Chernin 1983: 30) writes Kim Chernin about her mother. Here she refers to the process which the events have triggered that are retold in her book In My Mother´s House. It is the story about the development of the story about two women´s lives which are told, the effects the story has on the real lives of these women who are mother and daughter but it is not an autobiography, nor a memoir. In In My Mother´s House Kim Chernin is writing about life.
“Daylight is one thing, moonlight another. Things take on a different look beneath the moon than beneath the sun. And it well might be that to the Spirit of the light of the moon would appear to yield the truer illumination.” (Thomas Mann)

4.1 The Structure of the Book

In the next book I am going to discuss, Chernin’s focus shifts from the female experiences of motherhood and daughterhood to the experience of the father-daughter-bond, which is an indispensable aspect of the discussion of family relationships and eating disorders in Chernin’s books. Additionally the story of this father-daughter-relationship includes the mother-daughter-bond as well, as an instance that cannot be separated from the daughter’s experience. The search for spirituality becomes the search for the father, in other words, a part of the author’s identity as well as it is an important part of writing this identity and the life of the author. In Thomas Mann’s quote above the female and male aspects are symbolized through the images of sun and moon. Kim Chernin uses the moonlight as a symbolic reference to her father, who has always been calmer and more reluctant than her active mother. She reverses the symbols of sun and moon by doing so, an aspect that will be explained in greater detail in the following discussion of the book. This book is also deviating in its form from a conventional memoir and, thus, is closer to the category of life writing which the structural analysis will show.

The second of Chernin’s books I am going to discuss now, is In My Father’s Garden: A Daughter’s Search for a Spiritual Life. This book is listed under the category Memoir and Fiction on Chernin’s homepage. As it is the case with In My Mother’s House the form and content of this book’s narrative deviates from that of a conventional memoir. In My Father’s Garden comprises the narratives of personal experiences and thoughts as well as spiritual musings, that distinguish the narrative’s content from the common pattern of a memoir. In addition, the question of fiction versus truth is raised within the book several times as well. Although Chernin retells episodes from her own life, from her childhood and from her present life as a therapist, she never claims to tell stories that are entirely true. The truth within the stories can only be found in the eye of the beholder – or the reader, in this case. Spirituality is a very personal matter for which (at least in contemporary
Western societies) the individual has to make his or her own decisions. Thus, an ultimate truth in this matter could never be claimed, especially not by a writer. The notion of fiction that is referred to in this book, is a question on the reader’s belief in spiritual matters. A spiritual reader might pursue the same spiritual quest as the writer. A non-spiritual reader might enjoy a piece of entertaining fiction, while reading the book, or consider its autobiographical claim as complete nonsense, or in other words, a lie.

This book is stylistically discontinuous, as there are several story-layers that depart from the storyline, which the title of the book suggests. It is divided in the Prologue and three chapters, although the chapters contain several subplots, in which different stories and fragments are woven into the overall structure. These include for example, the story of Lynn and Marcie, a mother-daughter-plot, the story of Rose Chernin’s death, poems, written by her sister Nina and the story of Chernin’s spiritual quest for a spiritual mother. Unlike In My Mother’s House, which contains the stories and histories of the Chernin women, In My Father’s Garden contains several smaller narratives that reveal less about the life of Chernin’s father, or their relationship, than about Chernin. This, however, is indicated in the book’s subtitle: A daughter’s spiritual quest. In this quest, Chernin relies on her father, and what she learned from him. I will later in this chapter demonstrate, how this apparently spiritual quest becomes the quest for the father, on a psychological and symbolic level. Paul Kusnitz, Chernin’s father is described in terms of how she experienced his character and by recollecting exemplary moments of their relationship. Additionally, a striking point within this narrative is, that Paul is always compared to Chernin’s mother Rose, and the relationship between father and daughter always stands in relation to that of mother and daughter. It appears as if the latter one has always been the more dominant one and cannot be excluded from the narrative of father and daughter. This is an interesting detail, considering that this narrative seeks to discover the author’s and her father’s spiritual nature.

In In My Mother’s House, Chernin infrequently compares the mother-daughter bond to the father-daughter bond. The center of the story remains in the recollection of the experiences between the two women, except for the part of the story, in which Chernin is talking about the time, when her mother was away from home, in jail, and she was living alone with her father. Why does her mother occur, in comparison to the other book, so often, in a book that Chernin is writing about her father? Can a father-daughter relationship not exist distinctively from the maternal bond? Does Chernin
give her readers some clues, why she does not exclude her mother from the narrative on her father? These questions will be answered in the course of my analysis within the following chapters.

Considering the fact that this book does not consist of a continuous memoir, or contain memoirs in a conventional form, but comprises several different textual elements that resemble memoirs or depart from that literary pattern instead, I am strongly arguing that the text within this book falls into the category of Life Writing. In the following analysis of the book’s content I am going to demonstrate in which ways the narratives deviate from the form of a conventional memoir. In the conclusion of this chapter I will summarize my findings regarding the content and the structure of the book, substantiating my argument.

4.2 Content-Analysis

4.2.1 Prologue: In the shadow of a falling flower

„I have told many stories from my mother’s house. My father always missing from them.“ (Chernin 1996: 4)

Chernin wrote this book twenty-seven years after her father’s death. It can be interpreted as a literary obituary to this man, who was always standing in the shadow of his wife, Chernin’s mother. In the prologue, with the title “In the Shadow of a Falling Flower” Chernin establishes the metaphor of the garden that stands for her father’s realm. In this metaphor it is Chernin, who, as his daughter remains in his shadow, which is the shadow of the decaying flower of his life. A critical point of investigation, might be here when the two titles of In My Mother’s House and In My Father’s Garden are compared and the symbols and metaphors, Chernin chooses for depicting her parents’ roles. Kim Chernin, an acclaimed feminist writer assigns her parents their traditional familial (gender) roles by choosing the titles of these books: the house, the domestic sphere, as the realm of her mother; and the garden, a piece of cultivated and tamed nature, as the realm of the father, associated with the spiritual. However, as the previous book showed, Rose Chernin is not what can be considered a typical housewife or stay-at-home-mother. The metaphor still depicts her as the tenant of the domestic sphere, which includes housework, the preparation of food and the raising of a child. The father instead, finds his creative and life-giving forces in the cultivation of plants. The
activity of gardening gains spiritual qualities in the descriptions of the author.

The subject of the spiritual and Chernin´s almost religious musings throughout the content of the book are always closely linked to the issue of death which she frequently raises in this book. There is the loss of both her parents that concerns her, as well as the deaths of her sister and of one of her client´s mother. However, her father´s death and the description of his loss becomes one of the main themes in this book. Is Chernin´s spiritual quest, the quest of a daughter, who has always felt discrete from her father? The following quote might suggest that the quest Chernin explores throughout this book, is one of a daughter, who longs for a bond with the father, trying to integrate the love of both her parents into the current state of her personality: “Gardens have an odd way of growing inward when you think they have been left outside. As I grow older, I find that my father´s garden has taken root in me, that I am perhaps my father´s gentle, dreamy child even more than I had been my mother´s tempestuous daughter.” (Chernin 1996: 6) Uniting these two aspects of her identity, the internalizations of her father and those of her mother, might be the purpose of this spiritual quest, she pursu...
within a woman’s subconscious, according to C.G. Jung: “the animus produces moods, the animus produces opinions.” (Saguaro 2000: 171) and the archetypal realms of the feminine are emotional and those of man are rational. This is indeed a cultural image that exists globally and can be found in various religious and philosophical dogmatics as well. The dichotomy of ratio and emotion that exists within a family is thus embodied in the figures of the male and the female, the father and the mother. Jessica Benjamin, writes in her book *The Bonds of Love*, about the importance of identification with both parents: “I believe that, given substantial alteration in gender expectations and parenting, both parents can be figures of separation and attachment for their children; that both boys and girls can make use of identifications with both parents […].” (Benjamin 1988: 112) For Kim Chernin, the spiritual means an equilibrium of these masculine and female forces of ratio and sensibility, as the following quote demonstrates: “For the time being then, ‘spiritual´ means for me sensitivity to an unseen order. It means, further, the capacity to take seriously one’s relations to this unseen order, so that one can be transformed by it.” (Chernin 1996: 17).

4.2.2 My father and I

In the chapter “My Father and I” Chernin recounts an experience that has bonded her with her father during her childhood, however, as much as it has connected her with her father, it has separated her from her mother: “Once during a year, during my childhood, my parents disagreed with each other. The discussion concerned me and could not be avoided. We all knew we had said and done the same things a year ago and would repeat them the following year but each time they engaged us.” (Chernin 1996: 25)

The underlying story is that Chernin’s father was a passionate gardener, who devoted himself to the growing and cultivation of his plants. Thus, he wants to share a very precious moment with his little daughter that happened once a year during the night, in his garden. Paul owned a cactus – a night-blooming Cereus - which bloomed only once a year, opening its single flower only during the night. The father wanted his daughter to see this moment, however, the mother was strictly against waking up a child in the middle of the night for such a thing. Thus, Chernin’s parents quarreled over the issue and Chernin had the impression, as if it was her fault that they both were disagreeing. She writes: “I always took my father’s side.” (Chernin 1996: 25). In the narrative of this episode, she
depicts the conflict of the oedipal triangle, in which the daughter becomes the opponent of her mother, rivaling with her for the father’s love and attention. The daughter, aligned with the father, causes her mother’s envy, feels guilty and therefore, the story ends as follows:

I have sometimes told this story as if I remembered being out there, next to him, on the wet grass with my bare feet. But I have no real memory beyond the banging shut of the door. All sensual recollection stops there, the rest is reconstruction. Even when my father managed to get me into the garden, the garden remained secret, forbidden. If I was disloyal to my mother because I wanted to see the mysterious flower, the least I could do was not to remember. (Chernin 1996: 28)

The memory is incomplete, overshadowed by the forbidden, and the memoir of this episode cannot be told until its ending. The powers in the female bond between mother and daughter, the powers of envy and guilt, appear to defeat the capacities of human memory. There is no story left in the author’s mind that can be told about the spiritual, or sacred experience of nature that daughter and father shared in this garden. Is this the reason, why Chernin has to relate the story of the relationship to her father to that with her mother? Did she select the narrative of this familial episode in order to demonstrate how her relationship with her father had always been overshadowed by her mother’s interference? A few pages later, she answers this question, by unearthing another memory from her childhood:

When I was a small girl, about three years old, I developed a theory about the sun and moon. I told my mother that the moon was always there in the sky but we could not see it because during the daytime the sun was brighter. This counted as a sign of precocity in our family but I do not think I was talking so much about sun and moon as about my mother and father, and the way the dramatic scale of her activity blinded one to him, drowned him out in her greater brilliance. (Chernin 1996: 41)

In some way, considering the previous quote, Chernin’s father is absent from his family, in the sense that he is just a shadowy figure in the perception of his daughter. The father’s absence from the family is a theme that occurs in numerous stories, regardless of whether the father is physically absent from the family or not: “But the official story cannot conceal the fact that, as Gertrude Stein remarked, ‘fathers are depressing’. Barely known, scarcely knowable, the ‘absence’ of fathers permeates feminist stories. […] If an absent father is depressingly disappointing, a present father can be dangerous to mothers and children. “ (Hirsh and Fox Keller 1990: 223). Here, the apparent danger of the present father lies in the fact that he is not accessible as a figure of identification for his daughter during her childhood. Vice versa, the father might withdraw from the daughter because he is unable to identify with her and, therefore, leaves most of the parenting functions to the mother.
The mother-daughter-bond, as the primary bond, blinds out the relationship between father and daughter but this is not necessarily the mother’s fault. In Chernin’s anecdote about her childhood fable, the archetypes of the sun (the male) and the moon (the female) are reversed. The sun has always been represented by a male god, for example Helios or Apollo in ancient Greek mythology, and the moon by a goddess, like Artemis. The male principle in this case stands for power (the brighter sunlight) and the moonlight represents the female, according to the menstrual cycle which corresponds to the lunar cycle. The functions of the female and the male principle within the Chernin family are reversed in the author’s representation: the sun becomes female and the moon male.

4.2.3 Lynn and Marcie

The chapter of the analysis that follows now will highlight another important subject of the book. In the paragraphs above, I have already mentioned the significance of the theme of death in both of Chernin’s books about her family. Death, the physical end of life, will take away the beloved ones, and the survivors will remain with the memories, but also with unresolved questions, for which they might never find appropriate answers. Death has a spiritual dimension. Taking a more psychological stance on this issue, one could say that the relationship that existed between human beings during a lifetime will not disappear, because one person is gone. This is also an important subject in *In My Mother’s House*, where the relationships between dead and living family members find their expressions on the pages of a book. For Chernin and her parents, the older sister Nina would always exist in their memory. The question of spirituality becomes a question of dealing with the issue of death in the second chapter of the book:

In our family death took place in whispered conversations. That meant it never took place at all. When my sister died I was told she had gone away to school. Many years later my mother told me they had hoped I would forget her. Therefore no one ever spoke of her again. Death meant silence, aversion, uneasiness, a disruption in memory, a shadowy guilt if a thought of the hushed one happened to occur. (Chernin 1996: 71)

What Chernin describes here, is a common pattern within many families. By avoiding to talk about a thing that causes so much pain like the death of a beloved family member, people aim to protect themselves from the overwhelming emotions that are connected with the act of mourning. In *In My*
Mother’s House, the re-experiencing of Nina’s death and the retelling of this experience on the pages of the book has solved a knot of silence between Chernin and her mother. The beginning of conscious mourning plays an important role in the narrative of this book. In In My Father’s Garden the acceptance of death, as an unavoidable part of our lives becomes an important theme. In order to explore this issue further, Chernin weaves the story of one of her clients into the various fragments of memoir-narrative and spiritual musings. It is the story of a mother-daughter-bond, the story of Lynn and Marcie: “A woman who was dying called me to sit at her bedside. For now I can say, I helped her peacefully. I, who have always been angry at death. Death took my sister from me when I was four and a half years old.” (Chernin 1996: 19)

This chapter is as much about Chernin’s reconciliation with death, as it is about her professional life as a therapist and its spiritual quality. Chernin narrates the story of how she accompanied a client’s mother, who suffered from an incurable cancer, during the last months and days of her life. She was invited to help Lynn in dying peacefully:

The next morning I set out for the first time to visit a client in her own home, unsure of myself, aware of crossing a boundary I have always maintained. During the years of our work, Marcie and I had met for sixty minutes in a formal, confined space, according to an established ritual, which dying has just now overthrown. (Chernin 1996: 91)

Chernin accompanied both women during the last months of Lynn’s life. She was sitting at Lynn’s deathbed in her last hours and, instinctively, found a way to help the woman die peacefully. Through this experience, death gained another, completely new dimension for her. She admits several times during this chapter that she strongly wishes to share these insights with her father. It is interesting that she never mentions her mother in this context.

Why does she long to share this story with her father, and not with her mother, as it is the story of a mother and a daughter and which is is rooted in the feminine experience of familial bonds. Moreover, it is a story of matrilineage. Lynn, who is about to leave this earth, wishes for her daughter nothing more than that Marcie would become a mother herself and that their family would subsist. In addition, it is an old and common motif that can be found throughout literature and human history that is retold here: the motif of overcoming mortality through procreation.

One month later Lynn’s back starts to hurt. The pain is severe and grows worse daily. By the end of the month bone cancer is diagnosed. Lynn is terminal. When Lynn and Marcie come to see me for the
second time, Lynn says to her daughter, ‘I can’t understand it. Why did you have that miscarriage? I can’t leave you unless you have a daughter to take my place.’ (Chernin 1996: 87)

Lynn lives as long as it takes her daughter Marcie to become pregnant another time and although they are both happy about it, Marcie’s pregnancy is overshadowed by her mother’s illness: “For this child to be born it will have to live through its mother’s loss of her mother. Will it be the daughter that Lynn has wished for Marcie? Will grandmother live until the child is born?” (Chernin 1996: 88)

Chernin demonstrates through this narrative that the terrors of death and mortality can be overcome by confronting oneself consciously with them, instead of denying them; through accompanying a woman through the pains of her illness until the last hours of her life, seeing that dying can happen in a dignified and peaceful way:

I remembered myself: my interest in the spiritual grew while Lynn was dying. I acknowledge: this could mean, in my desperation about not knowing how to help her, I invented a soothing fiction. A spiritual world. It could also mean that her dying and my response to it threw open doors of perception that had always almost been open, then never quite, then widely thrown open, then banged shut. (Chernin 1996: 151)

Regardless of how fictive the narrative of Lynn’s death is, finally, the experience helped Chernin in dealing with her own parent’s death. In the last chapter of the book, Chernin narrates the story of her own mother’s death as well. She reflects on her identity as a daughter of her mother here. The reflections on her father’s death go hand in hand with reflections on her mother’s death. Again, the story of father and daughter cannot be told apart from the story of the primary bond between mother and daughter, which seems to outlive even death. Thus, why does Chernin aim to narrate Lynn’s and Marcie’s story to her father, rather than her mother? The explanation will follow in the continuing chapters.

4.2.4 Root and Branch

The last chapter of In My Father’s Garden turns to a more metatextual level again by inquiring the subject of stories and listeners again: “Stories require a listener who can suspend disbelief long enough to let the tale emerge. Once under way, the story will take care of itself, gather momentum, forget about the listener, charge off on its mission, whether well received or even vaguely comprehended. Beginnings are the problem.” (Chernin 1996: 120)
Apart from Lynn´s and Marcie´s story, Chernin narrates that of another spiritual quest in this book, which she longs to tell her father as well, a story from which she doubts her father would approve of its credibility. Also the reader is challenged by the question of this story´s credibility, except he or she is engaged in mystic practices. It is the story of Chernin´s search for the Divine Mother. Instead of her father´s voice of rational criticism, she has to discuss this idea of hers with her partner Renate, who partly replaces her father in his role. It is the story of Mother Meera, an Indian woman, living in Germany, who is said to be the incarnation of the divine mother of the Hindus: “It might be best to begin this tale by talking to my father about my client Nadine. She is a visionary painter, a French Jew whose family came badly through the Second World War. Some time ago, during our regular session, she began talking about a woman named Meera, who lives in Germany.” (Chernin 1996: 121)

Then, Chernin describes a conflict she had between her professional life, the life of a therapist and her life as a private, spiritual person. By trying to understand her client´s fascination with this ´supernatural´ being, Chernin became so fascinated of the idea that a divine mother might really exist that she longed to meet this medium and travel to Germany herself. The inner conflict she fights, while considering these contemplations was that she was not sure whether she should really believe in Nadine´s story or not. She asks herself, whether she might lose her credibility as a therapist engaging herself in spiritual matters. Psychotherapy is a profession in which religious beliefs should be excluded from theory and consultation practice. If Chernin started to believe in the supernatural or mystic powers of mother Meera, she would betray the science she had studied and according to which laws she practises her profession. She faced a personal dilemma, in which her partner Renate substituted the rational voice of her father: “‘We´ve been here before, ´Renate said. ‘What´s the big leap from saying the feminine divine principle is embodied in all of us to saying it´s embodied in Mother Meera?’” (Chernin 1996: 131) Later in the story, Chernin quotes another conversation between her and Renate: “‘But that is a child´s wish for a divine mother,’ Renate says thoughtfully as she ads a log to the fire. ‘Maybe, maybe not. Maybe children know things we have forgotten. Maybe they live in the real world and that is why it seems magical to them.’” (Chernin 1996: 129)

The spiritual quest of this book turns, again, to a feminist issue: the search for a divine mother. Additionally, she includes several narrative strains into her spiritual reflections, which deal with
feminist issues and that of matrilineage that make it hard to believe that the book’s primary focus is Chernin’s relationship to her father. Is it a daughter’s wish to let the experience of the female become accessible to the father, through telling him stories about it, which forms the base lying underneath the structure and content of this book?

With her mother, a woman shares a certain knowledge, the knowledge of what living inside a female body means, experiencing the world through the eyes of a woman. The father, as physically different from the daughter might only be aligned with her on a spiritual level. Father and daughter would never share the experience of physical sameness in the way that a mother and a daughter do. Chernin describes a quest for the spiritual within this book, however, interpreted from a feminist an psychoanalytic point of view, this quest is a quest for the father and it functions as a reparation for a relationship that has been overshadowed by the mother. Chernin’s discovery of her spiritual nature is the re-discovery of her father’s qualities that she finds in herself. These are qualities that seem to have influenced her in her work as a therapist:

Suddenly, it has occurred to me that this work of self-knowing has led most people I have spoken with over the years directly back into the world. Here, right in my consultation room, I have had an abundant evidence that soulwork, this private, seemingly solipsistic absorption in the minutiae of the self, arrives sooner or later at a sense of vocation, of mission. (Chernin 1996: 159)

If the qualities of a storyteller that Kim Chernin carries within herself derive from her relationship with her mother her qualities as a therapist (those of listening to, analyzing, understanding and reflecting on the life stories, she is told in her consultation room) may derive from the qualities she internalized through the relationship with her father. “Every family passes down a legacy, a characteristic way of putting children to bed at night, telling stories, interpreting the world.” (Chernin 1996: 5) Chernin’s final sentence of the book announces the incompleteness of the story it tells: “Now I am running back, around the lake, to the dark side, which always seems dangerous after dusk, as if I were racing after him, wondering how I could have let him go, the story incomplete on the eve of departure.” (Chernin 1996: 180)
5. The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness

5.1 The Structure of the Book

In the context of life writing, female identity and eating disorders it is important to consider two other books by Kim Chernin that deal with the author’s personal experiences, however, apart from family relationships. The next two books *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self* explore a woman’s search for identity within a patriarchal society, in which she feels alienated from her female body. However, these books have to be discussed in relation to *In My Mother’s House* and *In My Father’s Garden* and not in contrast to them, even if they differ in form, structure and content. They belong to Kim Chernin’s literary quest for identity, as a writer and as a member of her family. In terms of writing they become more distinct from canonized and acknowledged forms of writing autobiographical narratives.

*The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self* are books with a strong autobiographical reference to Chernin’s life, however, they can neither be categorized as autobiographies, nor memoirs. In addition to her autobiographical recounts, Chernin deals with the issue of eating disorders in women in Western societies and adds some highly theoretical considerations into her narrative that resemble a non-fictional test. As my analysis of the foreword, which comprises Chernin’s metatextual reflections on the origination and the actual text of the book, will show, the author has not intended the book to be read as a scientific or theoretical book. Several times, she insists on the fact that she is a writer and not a psychologist and that she wants these books to be read as pieces of literature rather than scientific texts.

Again, Chernin mixes different forms of texts taken from various generic bases within this book. This, in fact, makes it impossible to classify the work in terms of conventional literary genres. Interpreted from its content it is still an autobiographical book although it strongly deviates from the patterns of autobiographical narratives or memoirs. Some elements of the various narratives and reflections can be counted as memoirs, however, as memoirs with a personal, subjective content. Other elements fall into the category of biographical - or psychological - case studies, such as the case of the anorexic Ellen West to whom she dedicates a whole chapter in this book. As the content
of this case study strongly relates to Chernin’s personal life story, the case studies, she includes can be seen as part of her autobiographical narratives.

The parts of the narrative, in which her writings become more reflective, general and theoretical, still belong to her autobiographical account, as these parts summarize insights she had gained herself in a process of personal development and maturation. Parts of the texts consist of autobiographical poems which break the narrative discourse of the book. Nevertheless, as the poems have an autobiographical reference, they are part of the inner world the author depicts as her own. This is another text by Kim Chernin that has to be classified under the category of life writing. The author is without a doubt and continuously writing about her own life as a woman, although she includes the stories and voices of many women into this book as well. She is writing about the lives of women and their identity crises in Western society, as her own crises. Those are crises, which Chernin argues, women would share with each other and over which they would struggle on the symbolic battleground of food and the female body.

5.2 Content Analysis

5.2.1. Acknowledgements & The Foreword to the HarperPerennial Edition

In The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness, Chernin uses various kinds of literary styles which makes the story she tells, become less of a conventional narrative than a conscious literary reflection on the problems women are struggling with in Western society.

The book opens with the “Acknowledgements”-section, which is more commonly to be found at the end of a book. However, in this case, the section initiates the focus on an important aspect that will follow in the course of the book: its origination through and with the help of other people and the recount of their experiences. Besides mentioning the women who supported her work and career as a writer, Chernin includes acknowledgements to her mother, “Rose Chernin, has encouraged me all my life to become a fully developed woman, fully engaged with the world,” (Chernin 1981: x), her daughter Larissa and to Adrienne Rich: “[...] has given me a careful, detailed, and provocative reading of the manuscript. I have felt deeply the influence of her contribution upon my thinking and
writing.” In the last paragraph of the Acknowledgements Chernin mentions the women with whom she worked in order to being able to create The Obsession; and whose stories and voices are an essential constituent of this book.

The “Foreword to the Harperperennial Edition” then continues with reflections on Chernin’s work as a writer, in this context especially with the fact that she has written the foreword to this edition ten years after it’s first publication in 1981. She then describes the process of writing:

The author sits down to reflect on the earlier self who wrote the book. The she gets to set down the book’s history, for the book has, during the intervening decade, acquired a story of its own. Originally created by the author translating her (as in my case) from an unknown, unpublished writer into a person invited to hold forth in public about her most secret obsession. (Chernin 1981: xiii)

This is similar to what an autobiographer does when starting to write the story of his or her life.

Chernin also asks herself profound questions concerning her role as a writer and public person in the context of writing this book: “Who was I to be writing this book? Certainly I was not an expert in anything, unless one could say I had become an expert in suffering the obsession I was about to describe.” (Chernin 1981: xiii) She is writing about a taboo at the time, when the first edition of the book was published. In a way, she was a pioneer in exploring the issue of eating disorders on a literary ground. As can be seen in the next quote, Chernin characterizes herself as an autobiographer, in the sense that she takes her present, mature self as the one, who is writing and reflecting about her past, a time when she was younger and less mature:

“I was then forty years old. Forty and obsessed with a strange suffering that had begun when I was seventeen; forty and by no means an expert in anything, although I had spent the previous twenty-some years trying to puzzle out the reasons for this preoccupation that at times took over my life and threatened to make everything else in it (marriage, motherhood, divorce, study, writing) irrelevant. Should I have solved the problem before I dared to write of it? Could the writing become a part of the struggle of the solution?” (Chernin 1981: xiv)

Another point she makes here is the question whether writing about an eating disorder would contribute to the process of healing from an – as she calls it – obsession like this. Interestingly, Chernin never gives her own obsession a name, in the sense of a clinical term or diagnosis, such as bulimia or anorexia, she just calls it an obsession. In the course of the first chapter of the book, she
describes what happened to her in one of those obsessive moments, what she felt and experienced during the rush that began to control her eating behavior. The reader might, thus, be able to guess something about the clinical classification of her disorder. However, the hunger and the obsession remain unnamed, until chapter eleven in which she discovers the real meaning of them, the metaphor behind her obsessive eating behavior. Nevertheless, I will turn to that issue later, when it becomes relevant in the content of the book.

In the foreword, Chernin adds a few thoughts on the act of writing, where she suggests that the act of breaking the silence through writing contributes well to the process of healing: “Writing is a private act, an intimate, often secret activity. I, the obsessive, who for so long had suffered a secret condition that isolated me from other people, had managed through the articulation of the obsession to create a bond to other women? A helpful, healing bond?” (Chernin 1981: xiv) This might be easier to understand, knowing the context of the symptomatology of eating disorders. Like in every addiction, a strong pattern in this symptomatology is the secrecy women try to keep over their condition. They remain silent because of shame. Chernin might be right by acknowledging the fact that starting to talk about it with other people, in whatever form or way, might be a key to reduce the control this obsession has over a woman’s life. The obsession is in control of a woman as long as she thinks that she is alone with it. One aim of Chernin is, as she announces, to create a bond between women, who suffer from the same …. by writing this book. Another path she takes, is that she starts working as a consultant for women, who suffer the same. Partly, this belongs to her work as a writer, who is carrying out research, in order to understand what she is going to write about; partly, she already performs as a consultant, what would be her future work in her second profession, that of a psychotherapist. Thus, she also integrates contents of private communications, she had with women, who came to see her, into the narrative as well. She gives those women a public voice by leaving their real identity anonymously. Their different voices create a literary voice for women, who struggle with food and identity.

5.2.2 The Hunger Song – An Autobiographical Poem

Before the actual story then begins, the reader encounters a poem, written by the author, called “The Hunger Song” (cf. Appendix). I want to present a short interpretation of the content of the poem
now, as I think it is chosen deliberately by the author in the context of this book and it covers the central themes and issues that belong to the content of the book.

The poem is about a person – presumably a woman – speaking in the first person, who goes out into the woods, where she is addressing the trees of the forest, talking to them: “feed me, I cry”(Chernin 1981: xxiii). Chernin uses the imagery of nature, of the ‘trees’, which are ‘growing’, ‘branching’, ‘rising’ and ‘green’ as a symbol for the female body that hungers to grow and to branch into this world. Both, the trees and the speaker should grow out of the ‘snow’. The speaker (the woman) is eating the snow which does not satiate her, neither does the frozen winter earth satiate the roots of the trees. The image of the snow stands for the hunger, an image of nature in winter, infertile and cold. The hunger expressed in this poem has a double meaning; that of physical hunger and that of the metaphorical hunger. The speaker, then, names her metaphorical hungers, which are hungers of the soul and not the body, called ‘desire’, ‘love’ and ‘ecstasy’. In other words: it is the hunger for (emotional) life. The life is symbolized through the acorn, the speaker makes for the trees, a symbol for the spring that will come after winter and the life that will come back to nature. The image suggests that life would come back to the woman in form of food and fertility, both symbolized by the acorn.

This poem expresses the metaphorical meaning of hunger and food in the symptomatology of eating disorders. The hunger the woman in this poem experiences, is the hunger for life and for the abundance of her emotions, not primarily a physical hunger. The obsessive behavior with food and the obsessive preoccupation with the body, a woman with an eating disorder struggles with, can be found in the symbol of the trees in winter which will not grow green leaves until springtime. As the body and the soul are bound to the obsession with food the woman cannot grow, neither physically, nor spiritually. I will explain these things in greater detail in the subsequent analyzes of the books *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self* on the following pages. Nevertheless, this poem offers a profound insight into the issues Chernin deals with in her trilogy of books on women, eating and female identity.

5.2.3 The Obsession

The book is divided into sixteen chapters of different content and structure, and a prologue. Each
chapter, as well as the prologue, open with one or several quotes that introduce the respective content and, in addition, give an intertextual reference to the content of the chapters. A striking stylistic feature, Chernin uses throughout the narrative discourse, is the unifying ‘we´ and ‘our´, with which she addresses and includes her (female) readers. She also refers to ‘our´ society, when she is talking about the societies of Western Industrial countries, in which women are caught in an epidemic spread of eating disorders. By means of this unifying ‘we´, she includes the reader into the world, she is writing about, the world of her personal thoughts and experiences. She aims to establish a female bond; the ‘we´ shall include all women, who are struggling with their body, with food, with weight and over all, with their female identity in a patriarchal society. She includes herself into this ‘we´, as she herself, has been struggling with this obsession for about twenty years of her life. An example of this stylistic feature, is the following quote from the prologue: “This is a book about our veiled and often disguised obsession – with our right to be women in this culture, with our right to grow and develop ourselves and to be accepted by our culture in a way that ceases to do damage to what we are, in our own most fundamental nature, as women.” (Chernin 1981: 3)

In chapter one, Chernin writes a personal memoir, in which she recounts the memory of her first attack of obsessive eating. She describes how she suddenly lost control over her hungers and appetites, binging down huge amounts of food, unable to stop what she was doing. She was running down the streets of Berlin, buying foods, stuffing them into her mouth while running, gorging down, not knowing what actually happened to her, and not knowing that events like this would occur to her over and over again in the course of the next twenty years: “Looking back I can say: ‘That was the day my neurosis began.’” (Chernin 1981: 4) Recounting her later reflections, from the perspective of her older and maturer self, she sees the overwhelming emotions that caused her running outside, rushing for food, swallowing down: anxieties, discomfort, uncertainties, which she felt because she had to return home from Europe to the United States. Her maturer self sees the metaphorical dimension of this obsession, the younger self in the memoir is driven by forces, she cannot understand.

The narrative shifts then, from this recount of a personal experience to more general investigations on the issue of women and food. Within her reflective investigations, she draws several intertextual references to other writers, whose works helped her in the process of understanding the obsession, as well as in her research for this book. On page 11, she quotes a poem by June Jordan which
helped her to understand the metaphorical meaning of hunger. The poem describes an event that she has experienced herself several times in the course of her obsession. By dealing with the text of the poem, Chernin realizes that the ‘hunger’ she suffered from, was not a physical hunger, but an emotional hunger. She recalls a scene from her memory in which she woke up at night and tiptoed downstairs into the kitchen (in an entirely empty house where nobody would happen to become the witness of her weird behavior), feeling ashamed of compulsively emptying the fridge’s content in order to find herself dissatisfied with the foods she was eating. At that moment she realized that the hunger’s real name was loneliness and that her weird and uncontrolled appetites covered her sadness.

Another moment of revelation she describes she had while reading a book by James Hillman about Gustav Theodor Fechner the founder of psychophysics and experimental psychology sitting in a coffee shop. Fechner had experienced a breakdown when he went blind, fell into melancholic isolation and, finally, stopped eating. However, he recovered when he allowed himself to concede his appetites for food and his hunger for light. Chernin, after reading Hillman’s remarks on Fechner, caught sight of a chocolate-rum-cake and ripe oranges and was confronted with her own struggle against her appetites. During this episode, she says, she suddenly realized that it was necessary that one must allow oneself to hunger, to eat and to have appetites in order to recover from an eating disorder in the same way that Fechner regained his eyesight, when he allowed himself to “hunger for light” (Chernin 1981: 15).

Although the books she reads in the episodes she describes belong to another time and mainly deal with the lives of men, Chernin understands that there are meanings inherent in the stories (biographies and autobiographies) that serve to explain the female obsession with food, as a cultural dilemma, as well:

To establish nonhierarchical connections is to encourage lateral relations: instead of living within the bounds created by a linear view of history and society, we become free to interact on an equal footing with all the traditions that determine our present predicaments. On a textual level, we can choose authors across time and space and read them for a few insights. (Lionnet 1991: 7-8)

Chernin also refers to Cocteau’s *Opium: The Diary of a Cure* in which he describes his addiction to opium. Here, she stumbles upon a phrase that causes her to question the social attitude towards
women with eating disorders in contemporary Western societies. Although, a nearly epidemic disease in Western countries, eating disorders are still handled as a taboo and afflicted women feel shame about their problem. This leads he to conclude that conversation about it still happens rather in secrecy (in the protected environment of a consultation room, for example) than in public. In contrast, Cocteau, a hundred years ago, calls his circle of friends who are addicted to opium the “elite fraternity” (Chernin 1981: 13). This phrase triggered a process of understanding in Chernin, namely that eating disorders in women must be a problem of female suppressed identity in patriarchal society. Her contemplations are comprehensible: one only needs to imagine a group of bulimic women, organizing regular cook-binge-and-purge-parties and calling themselves the “elite sisterhood”. As bulimia is mainly a female problem, it is loaded with emotions of guilt and shame, and no woman would admit proudly that she is suffering from it, or would call her compulsive vomiting as an act of elite behavior. As Chernin had a similar revelation, while reading Cocteau, she continues with the following considerations in her book:

A book comes into juncture where a personal problem, which has caused great distress, has begun to resolve itself, so that the deeper meanings and wider issues of the problem are apparent. Certainly, I was now beginning to experience a vivid transformation in my way of seeing and hearing. Now, listening to women talk about their problems of weight, I felt myself understanding on many levels at the same time. I went to the same places as before, I listened often to the same women talking, recorded again and again the power of this obsession over their lives, but now I was asking new questions, following different leads, translating everything into a new structure of meaning. (Chernin 1981: 19)

Her new gained understanding of this problem offered Chernin a new way of communicating with others about it. This further influenced her research on the whole issue. It helped her interpreting the interviews with women as well as the texts she read differently. The whole socio-cultural dimension of the problem were now included into her reflections on the issue. The second chapter’s title is “The Flesh and the Devil”. The problem of eating disorders in women includes the problem of having a female body, being a woman within a patriarchal society. The title of the chapter alludes to the story of creation about Adam and Eve which is the profoundest misogynist myth in Western societies which influences the whole spirit of the Christian cultures there.

Within the second chapter, Chernin retells the content of a conversation she had with a woman she encountered in the locker room of a tennis club. A place which is a mere theatre of war when it comes to women’s struggles with their body shape. Women tend to define themselves through how
they look and whether they conform to a specific beauty ideal or not, as Chernin quotes from an interview: “Before that I had always looked at parts of myself. The hips were too flabby, the thighs were too fat. Now I began to see myself as a whole. I stopped hearing my mother’s voice, asking me if I was going on a diet. I just looked at what was really there instead of what should have been there.” (Chernin 1981: 26) This quote additionally links the issue of women’s struggles with their female identities and their bodies with the mother-daughter-issue that cannot be excluded from the problem as a whole. At least, what a woman shares with her mother is the female body and all the problems this fact implies for a woman, living in a patriarchal society.

In the chapter “The Matriarch”, Chernin shares with her readers the story of a female artist she knows, who is content with her physical abundance. The woman is a sculptor, who models mainly figures of fat women – figures that resemble (or externalize in the form of an artistic medium) her own body. In another chapter that deals with the relationships of men and women, also titled “Man and Wife”, Chernin discusses the case of a husband, calling himself “Depressed”, who writes a letter to a magazine’s agony aunt, called “Dear Abbey”, in which he complains about his wife who had gained weight during their marriage. She fully quotes Depressed’s letter as the letter Abbey writes in return. In chapter six, called “The Sisters”, Chernin analyses two fictional characters from Margret Atwood’s novels as possible case studies: Lady Oracle from the novel with the same title and the anorexic Marian from The Edible Woman. She analyses those two fictional characters in order to explain the similar conflicts women have to struggle with, regardless of which kind of obsession they suffer from. She uses these two fictional characters as case studies in order to demonstrate the problematic issue, which is explained by Anita Johnston as follows:

Someone struggling with anorexia may deny her hunger and not eat, but she is secretly obsessed with food and fat. […] Compulsive eaters find themselves thinking about the foods they are not supposed to be eating and scolding themselves for what they did eat and for how fat they look. Those who are caught up in the binge-purge process of bulimia spend enormous amounts of time planning and preparing for their binge and worrying about how they will be able to purge in secret. (Johnston 2000: 23)

Although standing on the opposite poles of the weight scale, the Anorexic and the Adipose, have different symptoms and show a different obsessive behavior. However, they are sisters, facing the same dilemma, that of a severe female identity crisis. In the paragraphs, in which Chernin discusses
the character of Lady Oracle in greater detail, she also raises the issue of the role, the mother-daughter-relationship plays within the aetiology of eating disorders:

Indeed Lady Oracle has glimpsed the fact that her mother had taken up a decidedly proprietary interest in her daughter’s body – that she hopes to make her daughter into an object that will reflect glory upon her mother. […] Understandably enough, the daughter is outraged by her mother’s intervention in her life and she determines to defeat her mother’s intention to make her into a socially acceptable product. Thus, by the age of thirteen, the daughter is ‘eating steadily, doggedly, stubbornly,’ anything she can get. And she tells us that ‘the war between myself and my mother was on in earnest; the disputed territory was my body.’ (Chernin 1981:72)

What this quote from Margret Atwood’s novel *Lady Oracle* describes here could be taken from a real psychological case study, or, could have been quoted from one of the conversations and interviews which Kim Chernin includes into the narrative. However, by using a piece of literature instead of a ‘real’ case, Chernin demonstrates that literature, even if entirely fictive, might be able to mirror a social truth as well as a ‘true’ life story: “Because so much of literary material is overtly and emphatically autobiographical, it can profitably be explored as a series of case histories of a variety of operations of human memory.” (Nalbantian 2003: 3)

Chernin continues with exploring the metaphors of hunger in relation to the female body and female self-understanding. There she analyses the discourses of two social groups that form different images of women within contemporary Western societies: the feminist discourse on female identity formation and the “weight-watcher’s discourse” on the female body. Her findings convey a clearer image of how language ‘shapes’ female identity and body images through discourse in these societies:

Listen to the spontaneous metaphor that finds its way into the discussions of these two groups. In the feminist group it is *largeness* in a woman that is sought, the *power* and abundance of the feminine, the assertion of a woman’s right to be taken seriously, to acquire weight, to widen her frame of reference, to be expansive, enlarge her views, acquire gravity, fill out, and gain a sense of self-esteem. It is always a question of widening, enlarging, developing and growing. But in the weight-watching groups the women are trying to reduce themselves; and the metaphoric consistency of this is significant: they are trying to make themselves smaller, to narrow themselves, to become lightweight, to lose gravity, to be-little themselves. Here, the emphasis is placed upon shrinking and diminution, confinement and contraction, a loss of pounds, a losing of flesh, a falling of weight, a lessening. (Chernin 1981: 100)

She adopts a rather linguistic perspective here, similar to the feminist investigations of Julia Kristeva or Luce Irigaray, who searched for patriarchal practices of female oppression in the public discourse.
Finally, in chapter 14 Chernin creates an astonishing case study of an anorexic woman, “The Mysterious Case of Ellen West”. Ellen West was a patient of the psychiatrist Ludwig Biswanger, who, after struggling all her life with a disease, she never came to understand, killed herself by swallowing poison. A highly symbolic method to chose for suicide, considering the fact that this anorexic woman feared to eat food, as if it was poison. Page 178 presents a poem, written in the year 1971 by Adrienne Rich, dedicated to Ellen West, titled: “For Ellen West, Mental Patient and Suicide”. In Chernin’s book this poem finds its first publication. As Chernin also mentions in her Acknowledgements, Adrienne Rich advised and supported her in writing *The Obsession*. “In the metaphoric equation forged by Ellen West, a preoccupation with the body has taken the place of a fascination with the soul. But now we see that hunger has come to take the place of spiritual longing and that food has become the substitute for all other objects of desire.” (Chernin 1981: 191)

In *The Obsession* Chernin only partly touches the mother-daughter issue that is closely connected to that of the female obsessive preoccupation with the body and food. Her analysis of this aspect of the problem becomes more detailed in the next book, I am going to discuss, *The Hungry Self*, which belongs, together with *The Obsession*, to a trilogy of books which deal with this contemporary problem of women.

6. The Hungry Self – Women Eating and Identity

So what is a woman to do, setting out to write about women? She can imitate men in her writing, or strive, for an impersonality beyond sex, but finally she must write as a woman: what other way is there? Examining the problems women reveal in imaginative writing, she will necessarily uncover her own. […] Through all literary genres – criticism as well as poetry, fiction, autobiography – women demonstrate their approaches to the solving of those problems. (Meyer Spacks 1976: 41)

In this book Kim Chernin explores further the issues, she already raises in the previous book. In *The Hungry Self* she returns to the work she has begun with *The Obsession*, however, she expands the dimensions of her reflections and considerations through several aspects that she has not dealt with in such detail in the first book. An important aspect she discusses here is the mother-daughter-conflict which is an essential part, or maybe the origin, of a woman’s conflict with her self, her trouble in finding her identity and her struggle with food. Concerning Chernin’s style of writing, this book does not differentiate much from the patterns of narration she has established in *The Obsession* apart from the fact that the literary resources she draws upon now are mainly
autobiographies and not fiction any more. Additionally, after the publication of *The Obsession* she had started working as a consultant regularly, but is still not a therapist when writing *The Hungry Self*. Nevertheless, the book’s content is enriched by the stories she heard from the women who had come to see her.

6.1 Foreword to the Harperperennial Edition

In the foreword Chernin reflects on a matter that I have already touched in my introductory paragraph. It is the matter of her profession and the discrepancy between how people see her and what they expect from her and how Chernin sees herself: “I was a woman who had suffered and thought, written and spoken. When other women called, when they wanted to talk with me, I was at pains to clarify who I was (only a writer) and was not (not yet a therapist).” (Chernin 1985: ix) This quote is important in the light of how she wants the book to be interpreted, namely not as a theoretical work but as a piece of literature. Again, I am strongly arguing for categorizing this text as well under the term life writing. It includes Chernin’s story, her thoughts and reflections on events that occurred in her life which define her autobiographical discourse. In addition, it contains the life stories of other women either, with whom she feels familiar, with whom she shares similar experiences and whose stories helped her to gain a deeper understanding of herself. Again, we find a collage of various forms of texts within this book which make the overall text become a hybrid literary form. Judged from its content, which, although sometimes departing from the expected pattern, the book is highly autobiographical. Here, we find another example of life writing in an innovative and, considering the book’s feminist and critical content, appropriate form.

In the foreword, Chernin addresses the central subject of the book and raises the reader’s attention towards it:

> It is dangerous to underestimate the intelligence of women. Large numbers of women we consider uneducated, not well read, whom we think of as simple people, homemakers or merely mothers, reveal an inherent capacity for analytical and cultural understanding when it comes to the suffering of their daughters or nieces, or their own often silenced conflicts. (Chernin 1985: xiii)

It is the issue of the devaluation of women in general, which she also discusses in *The Obsession*, but in this book also the devaluation of mothers and housewives she hardly criticizes. Women, regardless of their education or social stand, share a mutual understanding about the experience of
being female in a patriarchal society and their experiences of motherhood and as former daughters. They know what it means for a woman to grow up within this society:

The female body has a story to tell. In its hunger, its hidden shame, its shadowy sense of guilt, there is still as yet not fully articulated indictment of our culture’s treatment of women. We do not yet know just how many women break down when their periods begin, when they can no longer hope against hope, or believe against reality that after all they will not become women. With that first blood comes the certainty, as they imagine it, that they will be consigned to lives as restricted, as impoverished as those of their mothers. (Chernin 1985: xv)

With this statement Chernin sets the tone for the investigations that will continue throughout the book.

In the following paragraph from *The Hungry Self*, Chernin explains how she transformed the voices of women in her consultation room into voices on the page. Again, like in *In My Mother’s House*, she transcribes tape recordings, unless, this time she records the voices of strange women on the page and not her mother’s. In addition she creates a literary identity for those women without revealing who they really are:

The women whose stories appear in these pages came to speak with me about food. Many stayed to talk about their problems with love and work, their difficulties with their mothers and families, their dreams and aspirations, their incomplete and imperfect understanding of what it means to be a woman in our time. In presenting them I have, of course, taken pains to disguise them occasionally I have bought the stories of two women together and made a composite portrait that protects their identities and highlights the common themes of their lives. But their voices have been faithfully recorded so that they may speak here with the same urgency I first heard in my consultation room, where together we began to explore the unexpected meanings to which an obsession with food was leading us. (Chernin 1985: xx)

Certain conversational patterns then, lead Chernin and the women together to an issue that branches further from Chernin’s former investigations:

But this problem with female identity hides in turn a profound mother/daughter separation struggle, which becomes particularly acute when a daughter is required to surpass her mother. We can understand a great deal about this struggle by looking at the adult lives of mothers and daughters, but we shall also need to explore the roots of these adult conflicts and dilemmas that limit female development. (Chernin 1985: xxi)

Throughout this book, Kim Chernin refers to stories of mothers and daughters, those stories she went through together with other women, other stories, she extracts from autobiographies and further, her own mother-daughter-story. Again, by means of the use of the unifying `we´ and by including herself into the narrative discourse on mothers and daughters she creates a sense of unity
between herself and the female readership. As I already suggested, this sense of unity may function to help women to understand and/or overcome their struggles with food and identity by establishing a female bond and breaking the walls of silence behind which women with eating disorders tend to hide themselves: “I do not believe that new stories will find their way into texts if they do not begin in oral exchanges among women in groups hearing and talking to one another. As long as women are isolated one from the other, not allowed to offer other women the most personal accounts of their lives, they will not be part of any narrative of their own.” (Cross and Heilbrun 1989: 46)

What Kim Chernin apparently does here is a continuation of the works of former feminists, who have already explored themselves literary on the mother-daughter issue, such as Nancy Friday or Adrienne Rich. Her style as well resembles the writings of both feminists of a former generation. She extends the issues and discussions, both of them have raised a decade before Chernin started writing her books, plus she is extending their profound investigations on the subject on the additional layer of the cultural problem of eating disorders. Eating disorders have already existed when Friday and Rich wrote about female identity struggles that belong to the mother-daughter-separation process, though, at the time they were writing their books, eating disorders were not part of the public discourse, as much as they are now (although, still mostly tabooed). During the 1970ies, the different forms of eating disorders were not specified in the clinical and psychological discourse nor were they investigated sufficiently. This is a process that initiated during the 1980ies, when Chernin wrote her books. Through her autobiographical narratives, Chernin makes this issue become accessible to a broader readership, a broader social sphere. Additionally, she uses exceptional stylistic features in her writings, as she shifts between generic conventions and mingles narratives with memoirs, case studies and reflective passages. Friday’s texts, as well as Rich’s texts are similar to Chernin’s and can be considered as forms of Life Writing as well. However, I am going to sustain this argument in greater detail at the end of my thesis.

Cherin also relies heavily on the feminist theories of Betty Friedan in this book, who criticized the socially nearly compulsive assignment of the role of a housewife and mother to women, in her book The Feminine Mystique (1963). Chernin uses this text to explain how this image of women still influences the role-models modern mothers in contemporary Western societies conform to and how
these socially assigned roles contribute to the mother-daughter-struggles that make it impossible for women with eating disorders to separate from their mothers. Separating, becoming a woman herself, would mean, becoming like the mother who was unable to escape the social expectations towards motherhood. It is the image patriarchal society has in general about women and their social roles that makes these girls afraid of becoming women. Women´s wish to marry and establish another symbiotic relationship to a husband that replaces the primal symbiotic bond to the mother, is Nancy Friday´s main argument with which she explains women´s inability to become independent. In addition, marriage would imply that a woman will become a mother. Having a child would mean she would subconsciously re-enact what she experienced with her own mother during early childhood, which, according to Nancy Chodorow, results in the self-sustaining dilemma that mothers and daughters face: “Some see that a baby would be a good substitute for what they want (read: femininity) […].” (Brennan 1989: 249)

Kim Chernin argues that it is women´s dependence from food, their obsession with their body and their addiction to a self-destructive behavior which prevents them from becoming independent. Alike the trees in her poem “The Hunger Song”, women want to outgrow their mothers, branch into this world and free themselves from role-models that would limit them in their personal development. Although, patriarchal forces in society which occur in expectations towards role models (of mothers and daughters), beauty ideals and the devaluation of women and their bodies, still limit them to outgrow the `snow´ of the infertile winter. In the second part of the book, which is called “Daughters and Mothers”, Chernin explains exactly that:

A handful of cherished recipes, perhaps, a lifetime of broken dreams and disillusion – that is what most women alive today can receive from their mothers. We are a generation who, with every act of self assertion as women, with every movement into self- development and fulfillment, call into question the values by which our mothers have tried to live. (Chernin 1985: 42)

In the context of discussing the lack of an image of womanhood, daughters want to develop into, she further writes:

The dominant image for the woman vomiting is not the image of Fannie Lou Hamer, the black activist who struggled for her people´s right to vote; for the woman getting into bed to devour chocolates it is not the image of Margaret Sanger conquering fear by crossing the railroad tracks alone. For the woman vomiting it is the image of the mother hiding at home, a sacrifice to an earlier generation´s conception of motherhood and appropriate female destiny, that dominates her imaginary life. (Chernin 1985: 45)
This quote above should not be misleading in the sense of conveying the impression that the author intends to blame mothers for causing distress in their daughters. In one of her anecdotes, Chernin recalls a day in her consultation room, when a young woman comes to her and complains about her mother. The woman describes her mother as someone whom she experiences as someone in a “frantic search for meaning” for her life, taking up several different artistic hobbies but abandoning them soon after. Chernin describes, again, a moment of revelation, she has during this conversation, while first listening with the ear of a daughter understandingly smiling to the woman’s complaint:

And then I stopped smiling. This woman, this mother, was my age. My daughter was the age of the young woman who had come to consult with me. It had never occurred to me before. After twenty years of being a mother I thought of myself still as a daughter struggling to separate from my mother. I had never stopped to think of myself as belonging to an entire generation of women who had raised children and for whom we [Chernin’s emphasis] were the mothers, those awesome and difficult and troublesome beings from whom they in turn were struggling for separation. (Chernin 1985: 74)

The narrator of this book is not Kim Chernin, the daughter, who narrates her mother’s story like *In My Mother’s House*, or the daughter, who searches for the missing relationship to her father in *In My Father’s Garden*, the narrator of *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self*, is the adult Kim Chernin, a mother of a daughter herself, asking questions about the significance of this female bond.


“Any discussions of the role of food and eating in the context of the family must incorporate an analysis of the meanings and norms around motherhood and femininity, for most households in western societies, the purchase and preparation of food for the family is the major responsibility of women.” (Lupton 1996: 39)

An important contribution to the intertextual reflections on the complex issue of eating disorders, female identity and the mother-daughter-bond, is Chernin’s interpretation and analysis of M.K.F. Fisher’s autobiography *The Art of Eating*. Chernin uses Fisher’s autobiography, in order to explain the symbolic and metaphoric meaning of food within the mother-daughter relationship. Food can become a substitute for sensual and emotional experiences which a woman denies herself, food can become a substitute for experiencing and expressing female sexuality, authentic emotional and sexual experience that is not diminished by the expectations of society. The title of the book’s section “The Primal Feast” refers to the first food children are offered by their mothers in the form
of their lactating breasts, the primal feast coming from a female body. “The Primal Feast” also refers to the transformation that takes place within a woman, who recovers from an eating disorder and starts feeding herself, her body, her self as a woman with food she senses, enjoys and allows herself to eat. Recovering from an eating disorder, is like allowing oneself to live again, allowing oneself the intake of the abundance of life. On a symbolic level, a woman who is returning back into life, after her journey of self-destruction, granting herself to eat whatever she wants, without feeling guilty about it or counting calories, is giving herself a “primal feast”. This is the deeper meaning, of this section’s title, in which Chernin analyses the autobiography of one of America’s greatest gourmands.

By using Fisher’s autobiographical work, in which the woman describes herself and her way of becoming the famous cook and “food-artist” she was, as a case study, Chernin uses again, another woman’s story to illustrate the story she writes in this book. Fisher recalls her childhood memories in her narrative, the household, where she grew up, the foods she was eating. She recalls the memory of a strongly religious grandmother, living in the same household with her and her mother, for whom the lust that came with the tasting and devouring of delicious foods, was a sin: ““Take what God has created and eat it humbly and without sinful pleasure,´ Grandmother has been wont to say.” (Chernin 1985: 107)

One day the young Mary Frances decides to make a pudding for her mother. It is exactly the day, when their cook Ora is arrested for killing her own mother with a huge kitchen knife. On the day of the terrible matricide which Ora, who has become a maternal figure for Mary, commited, Mary Frances creates her first dish: pudding decorated with blackberries, berries stolen from the garden without asking permission from her nurse. As a parallel act to what Ora had done – freeing herself from her possessive mother by killing her – Mary Frances ‘frees’ herself and her mother from the tyranny of the grandmother by preparing a delicious and thus ‘forbidden’ food for her mother. Chernin interprets the child’s instinctive act to decorate the colorless, “Victorian” dish with delicious berries from the garden, as a tribute to Ora the cook. Although her mother suffers an allergic reaction to the berries, she does not condemn her daughter for serving her the dish. Instead the mother assures her that “it was the loveliest pudding I have ever seen.”(Chernin 1985: 112) This encouragement of her mother has placed the seed in Mary’s spirit that had made her become the famous cook she was. After the Grandmother’s death, Mary Frances and her mother start cooking
together, the most delicious and appetizing dishes ever, enjoying their different tastes and multitude of colors and delicate smells. In narration of these episodes M.K.F. Fisher describes her initiation to the art of cooking, a passion that emerged in childhood, awakened by the sensual and fleshly joy she felt together with her mother, while cooking.

This story is symbolic for what I have described above, the notion of the “Primal Feast” as the symbolic act a woman performs when she starts eating without guilt, or as Chernin writes in The Obsession, the day when a woman starts to allow herself to eat whatever she wants and whatever her body demands from her with its physical hungers. Kim Chernin has integrated this biographical, literary “case study” within this section of the book in order to describe the meaning of food and sensual experience in the process of the growing independence and identity formation in a woman’s life. M.F.K Fisher’s story is also exemplary for depicting the role of food within the mother-daughter-bond as these two strains of the story – food and the relationship between mother and daughter – cannot be separated from each other. The mother stands for life as well as she stands for food which sustains life. The refusal to eat is the refusal of the internalized mother but also of internalized femininity per se, the refusal of a woman to become a woman herself. The story of the mother-daughter-bond is, according to Chernin: “[... ] told, from first to last, through food.” By using this autobiographical story and putting it into the context of eating disorders, Chernin offers her readers an insight into the symbolic dimension of these two struggles – the struggle for separation and the struggle with food.

6.3. Why Kim Chernin? – An Exemplary Case Study

The creation of self through process and relationship. In any case, as I have tried to show at the the outset, any writing constructs and betrays a subject. It is not a question of choice. One might as well make something of the process. It is not because consciousness can never be full, never more than fragments or a patchwork, that the enterprise is fallacious.
(Ward Jouve 1991: 10-11)

“Now, however, it seems to me that my mother and I are a paradigm of that mother/daughter drama secretly playing out all around us.” (Chernin 1985: 47)

In this chapter I want to use Chernin’s autobiographical books to create an exemplary case study of
the author in a similar way in which Chernin used the literary work of others to do the same. By means of this case study I want to demonstrate how literary sources can be used, or function, as bases for investigations of that sort. In addition, the contents of these books will be summarized and compared within the analysis because the autobiographical content of all four books, discussed, will be highlighted, if they are interpreted in the context of each other. Chernin´s life story that is woven through the narratives of these four books will become visible in the following (biographical) analysis of her work. In addition it is an attempt to explain the background of the author´s work in which she labored through the various reasons for the development of eating disorders women´s life. By contextualizing her seemingly theoretical books with her autobiographical books, I intend to demonstrate that the last two books contain as much autobiographical reference as the first ones. This interpretation of her work will substantiate my argument, for counting all four of her books under the category of life writing.

Kim Chernin is the daughter of a strong and determined woman. As a child, she cannot see two sides of her mother, who is first, a woman who does not allows herself being weak, but second, a woman who carries deep and hidden feelings of grief and guilt. When Chernin´s older sister Nina dies, the young girl never sees her mother weep or show her grief in front of her child intending doing the best she can by `preventing´ her daughter from this `terrible´ feelings. At a very young age, Chernin is confronted with and left alone with emotions she is unable to deal with. She had to acquire strategies to deal with such emotions. However, suppressing them creates an inner emotional tension which is hard to keep under control. Her sudden outbreak of uncontrolled eating is a loss of control with which she subconsciously counteracts the over-control over her emotions. The atmosphere of her family which she describes in In My Mother´s House is also characterized by sudden, often unpredictable outbreaks of strong emotional reactions. In a passage of her book The Hungry Self, she lets a woman speak who describes exactly the same atmosphere between her and her mother:

I´d walk in after school and I´d have the sense I was walking into a mine field. You never knew when it would come. My mind would race. Had I made my bed properly? Had I finished the ironing? We each had our tasks. But she worked harder than any of us. Our house was spotless. There was never a dish out of place. But underneath all this order was a sense … how shall I call it? As if anything, at any moment, was just about to break loose and blow itself high sky ... (Chernin 1985: 76-77)

Nevertheless, according to Chernin´s stories from in In My Mother´s House, this could have been a
scene, a memory taken from her own life as well. Patterns of compulsive behavior root in early behavioral patterns children acquire through their earliest human relationships. A constant suppression of emotions can lead to a lack in conscious experience of them and a lack creates hunger, in a metaphorical sense. Food becomes the substitute for this hunger but it also functions as a means to suppress the emotions, for whom the woman hungers. This is indeed a paradoxical situation. The recovery of an eating disorder would imply that a woman regains her ability to feel and bear the abundance of her emotions, whether ‘negative’, nor ‘positive’ ones: “An eating disorder can be resolved only within this larger cultural context, which allows us to rage because of how terribly we have been mothered but including now in this rage our mothers as daughters with all right to their own despair.” (Chernin 1985: 92)

After her sister died, Chernin tries to compensate for the loss of the sister and perform as her successor. However, she seems to fail when she develops a conflicting anger towards her mother because the mother is arrested and not there for her; because she is the reason why Chernin is socially ostracized by her school mates. Chernin is ashamed for who she is and where she comes from her mother’s imprisonment is a disruption in her identity. She feels angry at the woman who had born her, but at the same time she feels guilty about it – a pattern which can also be found between Rose and Pearle. After Rose and her family emigrated from Russia to the States, Pearle fell psychologically apart. Rose felt angry about her mother, who could not serve for her as a female role model, nor as a caring mother figure, but she carried with her the feeling of guilt for rejecting this weak and broken woman. Neither Chernin, nor Rose could identify with the female figure her mother embodied.

The conflict between Rose and Chernin reaches its climax when Chernin turns away from the thing that is most important in her mother’s life: Communism. Although she chooses a similar pattern as her mother Rose, who also abandoned her family when she was young in order to live her own life, Chernin finds herself in the situation where her parents, especially her mother, do not approve of her individual choice. In the same way that Rose had once refused become like her mother, Chernin refused to become what her mother was but it was difficult for Rose to accept that. For Rose, the choice s she made for her life saved her, they made her become the survivor and fighter she was. She is hurt and disappointed when she is confronted with Chernin’s criticism because in her eyes she has always meant the best for her daughter. For Chernin, turning away from her mother, meant finding her individuality as a woman within a society that has changed from that of her mother:
“Hidden behind our obsessive preoccupation with food is a need to regain a relationship to the sacral mystery of female being – a mystery conferred inalienably upon women’s lives by our ability to create life and food from the female body, to sustain life through it, to succor and soothe through it our oldest terrors.” (Chernin 1985: 197)

This turning away from her family’s laws meant the outbreak of an identity crisis for Chernin, exactly the identity crisis she describes in The Obsession as one of the causes for the development of an eating disorder:

Indeed, the problem with female identity that most troubles us, and that is most disguised by our preoccupation with eating and body size and clothes, has a great deal to do with being a daughter and knowing that one’s life as a woman must inevitably reflect on the life of one’s mother. […] reshape these female bodies of ours so that they can help us pretend we have managed to escape from being our mothers’ daughters and have, on our appearance at least, become their sons. (Chernin 1985: 37)

In addition, she faces the crisis a daughter faces, who wants to turn away from her mother. This is, what Chernin describes in The Hungry Self, that a woman would rather refuse to grow up, than to hurt the mother, to lose her love and appreciation; or to hurt her by leaving. The older woman who depends on her daughter because being a mother is on what she had built the fundament of her female identity my not be able to let her daughter grow into this wold, so they both cling to each other:

`Abandon hope, all ye enter here: that’s what someone ought to pin up over the door of my mother’s house.´
`The woman speaking, with a bitterness, these words Dante placed over the entrance to hell was once a graduate student in comparative literature. Several years ago she dropped out of school in order, as she says, ‘to devote herself more completely to the obsession with food.´
`But you haven’t in fact given up all my hope.´
`I haven’t?´
`Don’t you call her every time you’re in trouble?´
`I ask her to send me money – that at least she can do. Financially, she can always support me.´
`And so you are letting her give to you in the only way she can?´
This comment stops, for a long time, any further conversation. She closes her eyes, she leans forward over her knees. Several times I have the impression she is about to begin talking and then stops herself. And suddenly, in a great rush of words, she says: ‘Are you suggesting I have this food thing, this breakdown because I wanted to give my mother the chance to mother me? In the only way she is likely to be able? Are you saying that’s why I can’t become independent? Because I need to give her this … present of my life? Is that it? I’m sacrificing myself to my mother … by falling apart? I develop an eating problem. I refuse to eat. In a sense, then, she has to feed me? (Chernin 1985: 65)

However, as Chernin has demonstrated, this circle of self-destruction can be broken without harming the relationship to the mother. A woman who finds out who she really is, that she is
different from her mother but carries parts of her mother within her; who realizes that growing up
does not necessarily mean becoming the mother can become independent. In her relationship to her
mother as well as in her relationship to food. For Kim Chernin, an essential part of this process
happened through writing; writing about her life and thus she concludes *The Hungry Self* with a
metaphor that describes this process:

> It requires weighing and measuring, the search for the right combinations of ingredients (traditional
female qualities measured against what have been regarded as exclusive masculine rights). It requires
ceaseless experimentation, a pinch of this and a handful of that. It cannot be learned from any
cookbook of recipes presently available to us, but it can draw on the traditional ways women have
always worked, kneading and pounding and substituting and adapting and inventing, all along
converting the kitchen into that ceremonial ground of transformation. (Chernin 1985: 204)

This metaphor of cooking, Chernin uses for describing the healing process of and the recovery from
an eating disorder can be used as analogy to what Kim Chernin is doing on a literary level by
writing her texts in the manner she does. Her female literary voice is the `ingredient´ of her
writings, in which she composes the `meal´ of feminist life writing, writing the body and the self,
creating a new identity through written reconciliations with her past and her memories. She does
not conform to the established `recipes´ of generic limitations and prescriptions but abandons the
conventional paths of memoir and autobiography in order to `brew´ her own `soup´, her own
autobiographical recounts that may be listet in the `menu´ under the category of life writing.

7. Conclusions:

7.1 Kim Chernin and Life Writing

Kim Chernin creates a feminist narrative discourse within her literary texts which opens a new
perspective on autobiographical writings by women. The issues she treats within these texts are
highly complex and within this thesis I have only touched a fragment of them. Besides the mother-
daughter-plot and all its inherent complexities of feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory,
unresolved bonds and female struggles for identity she explores the more complex issue of eating
disorders among women in Western industrial societies. Exploring those issues as a writer with new
modes and techniques of autobiographical narration, she creates a form of discourse, a new
language, in which the stories of women with eating disorders can be told, apart from already
existing scientific or therapeutic discourses on this issue. Her texts represent a new form of writing female identity in the form of life writing.

Identity is an important issue when looking at both, the forms and the contents of her texts. Through her style of writing she creates her identity as a writer, a feminist writer, apart from established and traditional literary forms. Kim Chernin fabricates, through her various narrative patterns and discourses, a voice, with which she aims to sound authentic. As I already mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, for feminist writers, such as Kim Chernin, it is important to find modes of writing with which they can express the new thematic ground they touch adequately. In the course of finding this adequate and authentic literary voice it is necessary to leave the common literary ground and explore new fields. Development can only happen if people dare to find new ways for reshaping common practices.

The issues she touches in her texts require new forms of writing and a new form of literary expression. Public discourse about eating disorders has been recently established since the disease is spreading through Western countries rapidly. Raising awareness about the issue seems necessary. Why not on an artistic level, on a literary level as well? Which literary area would serve this purpose better than Life Writing? It is always difficult to address such personal and wearing issues in an autobiographical account. Thus, there should be no limitations to the way in which they are expressed. By using various sources, literary and scientific as well as interviews, Chernin includes a broad social and historical sphere into her personal narratives, which demonstrate the exigence of her issue. Like other feminists her books partly aim to help women to understand themselves better, which implies also to understand themselves better in the relationship to their mothers as this relationship mostly defines who they are as women in contemporary society.

Female readers, who may suffer from the same or similar experiences themselves may gain a deeper insight and understanding into their complex relationships with their mothers. They may find possible answers in their search for identity and struggle for separation. They may begin to understand, which effects the loss of the father, in the classical model of the patriarchal family, in which the mother is the primal caregiver and the father mostly absent or unavailable for his daughters in the process of identification, might have in their lives and in their definition of female identity as well. As much as Chernin reconciles in In My Mother’s House with her mother, she
recovers parts of her father inside herself through the spiritual quest depicted in *In My Father’s Garden*. She lends not only her mother her abilities of a writer in order to make her being heard in a new voice within society, she also lends many other women these abilities by anonymously quoting them in *The Obsession* and *The Hungry Self*. A woman on her quest for recovery from an eating disorder may find help and advice when reading these books, she may find understanding and comfort in the female bond Chernin establishes by including her readers using the word ‘we´ for the fictional community among women suffering from eating disorders. She establishes a quasi therapeutic discourse, although being only a writer. However, a woman struggling with food, weight and her identity as well, may have the same revelations and gain a new understanding of herself and her obsessions by reading through Chernin’s texts. Again, the choice of ignoring and abandoning strict generic rules and given structures might serve this purpose best. Life Writing seems the most adequate choice of literary expression. If the texts would sound inauthentic because they were pressed into a limiting generic form, they would not fulfill what they aim to. It is an unusual life story, several unusual life stories told within one life story that consists of various narratives, that is told here.

In addition, she succeeds the most important feminist writers and theoreticians, who dealt with the mother-daughter issue during the last four decades, namely Nancy Friday, Nancy Chodorow and Adrienne Rich. Chernin´s works get already cited in theoretical books on eating disorders, such as in Deborah Lupton´s *Food, the Body and the Self*, for example. Where Friday aimed to help women in increasing their self-understanding by explaining female dependence through the symbiotic relationship they sustain with their mothers, even in adulthood, repressing their process of maturation through repression and infantilization of their female sexuality; Adrienne Rich explains the same matter in different terms by exploring the practices of patriarchal society that degrade and subdue women because of their female bodies and their procreative abilities of pregnancy, child-bearing and nursing, by establishing the institution of motherhood and the conflicting image of the maternal; and Nancy Chodorow, taking the stance of psychoanalysis sees the problem in the primal care-giving functions, solely left to women - “For Chodorow, the institutional villain is exclusive female parenting in the nuclear family. This family structure enforces excessive continuity between mothers and daughters, which jeopardizes women´s autonomy, and it drives boys away from their primary caregivers, which perpetuates sexist attitudes among men.” (Meyers 1994: 82); - Chernin departs from another angle, which finally leads her in the same direction. She extends an `old´ issue
with recent and new findings and offers solutions to the problem. She comprehensively explains the complexity within the mother-daughter-bond as well as the complex reasons for the epidemic of eating disorders among women and how these to rather complex issues belong inseparably together.

Considering that new forms of literary expression and new forms of writing may contribute to the development of new understandings of female identity and womanhood, Chernin´s works may also convey a new image of motherhood and daughterhood, which may, thus, initiate a healing process. A healing process that may initiate within and through literature. New forms of writing may better contribute to the reflection on new developments in society than old ones. The voices of our contemporaries, the voices of women, will be recorded on the pages, on which life writing is printed on.
Bibliography

Primary Texts:


Secondary Texts:


Journal Articles:


Internet-Sources:

http://kimchernin.com/

http://www.lifenarrative.net/articles/articles.html


Spiegel Online: http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/leute/0,1518,654472,00.html [Oct. 2009]
Appendix:

The Hunger Song
by Kim Chernin

Hungering, I
go out, I
go ravening into the woods
feed me, I cry
to the trees, desire
rising driven
in me like
a sap and falling
into my body again
I enter into the world
eating the snow, this
is my breath, I
say air of us feeding
me look
at this acorn I made
Love, to know you
like this, flesh
bound as I am, you
in your ecstasy
branching, I
in my green thoughts
growing up
out of the snow.

(The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness. 1981: xxiii)