



Journey of Reflection: Girlhood, Migration, Grief, and Healing Through Soul Work

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Abstract

This article uses autoethnography to explore how identity was shaped and gradually re-authored of through experiences of girlhood, migration, grief, and reflective writing. Drawing on journals, poetry, and reflective rereading, I examine how Yoruba and Christian-inflected patriarchal expectations, migration from Nigeria to England, institutional misrecognition, and bereavement shaped my sense of self. I use the term *soul work* to describe the reflective and emotional labour through which writing became a means of examining inherited narratives of respect, silence, duty, and worth. The article argues that self-compassion and self-recognition did not emerge separately from writing, but developed through repeated acts of journalling, poetic reworking, and reflective engagement with personal experience. In doing so, the article demonstrates how creative and reflective writing can function as a method of inquiry, healing, and self-authorship within creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP).

Keywords: autoethnography, soul work, girlhood, poetic inquiry, self-compassion

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Beginning the Journey

As a Nigerian woman who migrated to England in 2008, my experiences of gender, migration, education, grief, and identity form the basis of this inquiry. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) argue, autoethnography connects personal experience with broader cultural experience, enabling researchers to examine how identity, memory, emotion, and social life are shaped within historical and cultural contexts. Rather than distancing the researcher from the subject of inquiry, the method foregrounds subjectivity, embodiment, emotion, and social location as meaningful forms of knowledge. Ademowo (2023) similarly describes autoethnography as an approach in which the researcher's own life, culture, and positionality become central to understanding lived realities that may otherwise remain hidden or underrepresented. Bochner and Ellis (2022) further suggest that autoethnography brings scholarship closer to vulnerability, uncertainty, meaning, and lived human experience, allowing research to engage not only with abstract theory but also with the emotional texture of everyday life.

Autoethnography makes it possible to examine these experiences as lived internally rather than only from an external or theoretical distance. It also creates space for reflective writing, journalling, poetry, memory, and emotional experience to function as meaningful sources of insight. In this sense, the method not only documents experience; it enables reflection on inherited assumptions, emotional patterns, and cultural narratives that shape identity over time.

The discussion proceeds chronologically because chronology is part of the argument itself. I move first into childhood and girlhood in Nigeria, where narratives of guilt, obedience, and 'marriage material' first became attached to my body. I then turn to migration to England in 2008, where those narratives no longer fitted the world around me but did not disappear simply because I had crossed a border. From there I examine qualification, deskilling, and liminality, including the experience of being educated yet repeatedly unread or misread by institutions. I then revisit the deaths of my parents and the role grief played in loosening, but also complicating, my attachment to inherited expectations. Finally, I show how journalling, poetic writing, rereading, and self-compassion gradually altered my relation to myself.

At the same time, critiques of autoethnography remain important. Delamont (2009) notes concern around excessive introspection, limited analytical depth, and an over-reliance on the self as the primary source of data. Holt (2003) similarly raises questions about representation and legitimacy, particularly how personal narratives are constructed, interpreted, and positioned as knowledge. These critiques cannot be dismissed. In response, I make my materials explicit, limit the scope of my claims, and position personal writing not simply as testimony but as a site through which cultural assumptions, emotional inheritances, and social narratives can be examined and made visible. The intention is not to present personal experience as self-evident, but to show how a personal archive can function as a site for cultural analysis and reflective understanding.

The central question guiding this work is how journalling and reflective rereading contributed to a movement from internalised patriarchal expectations and migrant misrecognition towards self-compassion and self-authorship. My central claim is simple: I did not first heal and then write about healing. Writing was one of the places in which healing began to take place.

Working with Journals and Poems as Method

The materials used here are reflective journal entries written across different periods of my life, including doctoral reflections, retrospective prose notes, and two poems developed through rereading those materials. Some entries were written close to the events they describe, while others were produced later, when I had acquired the language to interpret earlier experiences. Not all entries are dated, so precise archival accuracy cannot be claimed. These materials are approached as layered traces of experience, including immediate reflections, later interpretations, and writing that moves between diary and memoir. The purpose is to trace how thoughts and feelings shifted over time, what could be expressed at different moments, and how meaning evolved as reflective prose gradually gave way to poetry.

Journal writing allowed me to record events, feelings, and self-judgement in relatively direct language. Poetry did something different. It slowed me down and made me stay with image, rhythm, contradiction, and tone. It prevented me from explaining too quickly. In that sense, the poems are not embellishments added to an already formed argument; they are

knowledge-bearing forms. This reflects the understanding that creative practice can serve as a method of inquiry, as demonstrated in work where metaphor is accessed through creative processes (Williamson, 2020). Writing across life transitions has also been treated as a site of inquiry rather than simply a record of experience (Wright, 2024). The layering of poetry and prose has been shown to generate knowledge through tension and embodiment rather than illustration alone (Swafford, 2022), while lyric forms can hold experiences that resist linear explanation (Swafford, 2023).

Ethical considerations have been addressed through deliberate restraint. Relationships are identified by role rather than by name, and details that could expose others unnecessarily have been omitted. Working with personal material that involves others is not ethically neutral, which is why relational ethics guided the process. Relational ethics requires attention to interpersonal relationships and accountability for what is revealed (Ellis, 2007). This is particularly significant in work shaped by trauma, grief, and long-standing cultural experience. Writing in such contexts can be both emancipatory and risky, meaning selective framing becomes part of responsible practice rather than a limitation (Etherington, 2020). Only extracts that could be ethically and responsibly shared have been included. The intention has not been full disclosure, but sufficient disclosure to make the inquiry visible.

In practical terms, the method unfolded through repeated cycles of writing and rereading. Recurring words and images, including respect, silence, material, obedience, guilt, good daughter, and voice, were identified and examined. Attention was given to when these words first appeared, who introduced them, what emotional weight they carried, and whether they continued to shape self-understanding. Some material was rewritten in poetic form to reveal what explanatory writing had concealed. The writing was later revisited in a less critical and more compassionate tone. Self-compassion provides a framework for understanding this shift, through self-kindness, recognition of shared human experience, and mindful engagement with pain rather than harsh self-judgement (Neff, 2003). Through this process, rereading shifted from repetition to a more reparative engagement with experience.

In this article, I use the term *soul work* to describe the reflective and emotional labour of through which I revisited inherited expectations, grief, migration, and self-understanding through journalling, rereading, and poetic reflection. This language became meaningful later through doctoral

reflection and sustained engagement with personal writing, particularly in relation to transformative learning as emotionally and symbolically grounded inner work (Dirkx, 2000). What had already been taking place through journalling, revisiting earlier writing, and developing poems from those materials, became clearer as a process through which patterns could be revealed that were not accessible through straightforward explanation.

Existing work within this field demonstrates that writing is not only something that is analysed after the fact, but also the space in which insight is formed. Writing has been used to explore self-relation and reflexivity (Wright, 2024), engage metaphor through creative practice (Williamson, 2020), examine the ethical dimensions of writing trauma (Etherington, 2020), and develop reflective approaches to writing practice (Simpson, 2026). These contributions support the use of journals and poems as central components of inquiry rather than supplementary material.

This paper considers bereavement and parental influence, particularly how loss altered relationships to ambition, approval, and identity. It then turns to migration to England, experiences of deskilling, and encounters with misrecognition in a new context. The later sections examine how journalling and poetic writing made it possible to identify, question, and gradually loosen internalised narratives, and reflect on what changed through this process.

Girlhood, Respect, and the Internalisation of Guilt

My story does not begin with migration. It begins much earlier, in the ordinary discipline of girlhood. I grew up in a patriarchal society in which respect was not only a virtue but a language of social organisation. Respect structured how children addressed adults, how younger people moved around older people, how wives addressed husbands, and how daughters imagined the boundaries of acceptable femininity. I was raised within a Yoruba cultural context, in which respect existed not merely as a private family preference but as a cultural norm. I learned it through naming, gesture, silence, posture, tone, and repetition. I learned it before I had the language to question or critique it. Adichie (2014) argues, girls are often taught to shrink themselves in order to be acceptable, a pattern that can continue into adulthood.

At the same time, my home did not simply reproduce the broader social narrative. My mother worked in the bank for thirty-six years. My father, though strict, took pride in educating his daughters. Those facts

matter because they complicate any reductive account of my upbringing. I was not raised by a mother who embodied only submission, nor by a father who cared nothing for female education. What I inherited instead was contradiction: a belief that women could be capable, disciplined, and professionally accomplished, but also a belief that a good woman must be respectful, restrained, and mindful of how society perceives her.

An undated reflective journal entry captures the contradiction:

As a Nigerian woman, I grew up with the consciousness that my role in society was to be a child bearer, look after the home, and be a second-class citizen to my husband while doing as I was told. While growing up, this stereotype did not seem to hold true in my family because my mother was a role model who worked for 36 years in the bank, and my father was very enthusiastic about educating his daughters.

When I reread this passage now, I hear how carefully I once tried to balance gratitude and critique. I did not want to reduce my parents to symbols, and I still resist doing so. My father's commitment to educating his daughters mattered deeply. In a context where female aspiration was often limited to respectability and marriageability, his insistence on education allowed me to see myself as intellectually capable. Yet this encouragement existed within a controlled framework. Education was supported, but self-expression remained constrained. Discipline was valued, but freedom was still shaped by gendered expectations. Success was encouraged, but only in ways that did not disrupt communal ideals of modest womanhood.

Through rereading as part of my soul work, what becomes more visible is not only the social structure but the emotional tension within it. Even within a home that complicated dominant expectations, I had internalised the idea that womanhood required careful management. My mother's public competence did not remove the underlying pressures surrounding her. Instead, it revealed that a woman could function, endure, and even succeed within patriarchy while still carrying its weight. As an adult, I now understand her as both a figure of resistance and adaptation. This recognition has deepened my compassion for her, as well as for my younger self, who was learning to navigate these contradictions without yet having the language to fully name them.

This tension between affirmation and constraint is one reason the language of 'patriarchy' alone can feel reductive unless it is held alongside the specifics of lived culture. Work on Yoruba gender and on gender in African societies is useful here because it resists easy universalism while

still allowing us to name male dominance where it is operative. Oyěwùmí (1997) complicates Western assumptions about gender by showing how colonial frameworks imposed rigid gender binaries onto Yoruba social organisation. Similarly, Amadiume (1987) demonstrates that gender in African societies has historically been more fluid and context-dependent than Western models suggest, while still accommodating forms of male authority. More recent work on Indigenous Yoruba culture highlights how hierarchy, age, and gender continue to shape everyday social relations (Muraina, 2023). Salami's (2004) study of how Yoruba women address their husbands is especially resonant, as it shows how language itself becomes a practice of deference and social positioning. What I lived as 'normal respect' can now be understood as part of a broader social ordering of personhood in which hierarchy and gender are continually reproduced through everyday interaction.

The following journal extract records a subtle but revealing aspect of that order:

I am from the Yoruba tribe, and children are obliged to respect adults through words and actions from a cultural perspective, while women also respect their husbands. I never call my elder sisters by their first name alone because I must call them Auntie B or Auntie F, even though they are not my aunties. It is a sign of respect. My mum never called my dad by his first name; she referred to him as Daddy even though he was her husband.

At the time, these practices did not feel restrictive or unusual. They felt natural and culturally appropriate. They shaped my emotional responses long before I began to question them. I did not experience discomfort each time my mother called my father 'Daddy'; rather, I understood it as part of how respect was expressed. I learned that womanhood included forms of verbal deference and that care, order, and social harmony were often linked to how well these were performed. It was only later, particularly after migration, that I began to reflect on how such practices might also shape and, at times, limit a woman's voice from within.

If respect was one guiding norm of my girlhood, 'marriage material' was another. That phrase now lands on me with startling force because of how thoroughly it positions a girl as someone to be shaped and prepared for others use or pleasure. As a girl child, however, I heard it so often that it became common sense. Good girls were not loud. They did not speak too freely among adults. They were expected to sit in a particular way and not take up too much space. They did not draw unnecessary attention. They

were not unruly, sexually autonomous, or visibly angry. They learned compliance long before they learned desire.

This stood in contrast to the upbringing of boys around me, whose movements and expressions were less tightly regulated. Boys could speak more freely, take up space without reprimand, and explore the world with fewer restrictions placed on their bodies or voices. Where girls were guided towards restraint and preparation, boys were more often encouraged towards independence and self-expression. These differences were not always explicitly stated, but they were consistently reinforced through everyday interactions, expectations, and permissions.

What is difficult to communicate is that this training did not always arrive as explicit punishment. It often came through advice, humour, proverbs, warnings, or praise.

When prose could no longer carry the feeling of that inheritance, I wrote the following poem out of a reflective journal note.

Poem: 'Marriage Material'

I was raised under the weight of words,
carried like clay pots balanced on heads,
the careful steps of a girl child,
learning to move quietly
under the gaze of ancestors and elders,
in the rhythm of my mother's voice.

The boys ran wild like rivers,
free to chase the sun and climb,
to taste the world with laughter,
while I learned silence and smallness,
the art of obedience, the beauty of still hands,
to walk softly so the earth would not speak of me.

They called it 'marriage material,'
and I knew it as a duty, a name like carved wood,
smooth and polished, weighty as iron,
forged in the heat of ancestors' tongues,
moulded by fire and fate,
my worth wound up in a bride price,
my value marked by how well I could bend.

To be marriage material meant being ready,
soft, like ripe plantain, sweet and yielding,
yet strong, like palm roots clinging to the earth.

They would say, 'Prepare her well,
for a girl is like a pot; the cracks must be hidden,
so that water will hold and not spill.'

And I watched, from my side of the fire,
the boys run freely under wide, open skies,
learning that the land was theirs to inherit,
while I stayed rooted, like cassava,
tended and tested,
my spirit bound tight in the folds of expectation.

I became the fabric stretched on the loom,
woven tightly, each thread a rule or custom,
each stitch a whisper that said,
'Hold your voice, smooth your edges,
be a vessel, be quiet, wait so a man can find you.'

But under the stars, my spirit would rise,
and I dreamed of running like the boys,
of laughter wide as the African skies,
of dancing fierce, like the drums in my veins.
I longed to be more than prepared clay,
to know me beyond the mould
of what they say a girl must be.

For I am more than material,
I am the storm, the seed, the flame,
the soil rich beneath my feet.
In the quiet, I know my name,
carved by ancestors who whisper still,
urging me to rise,
to carry my worth like the sky above,
endless, untamed, unbound.

What changed for me when I wrote this poem was not that I suddenly learned something wholly new. Rather, I felt the older knowledge differently. Prose had allowed me to explain the rule, but poetry enabled me to inhabit its texture. I could feel the heaviness of 'material,' the pressure of preparation, the distinction between boys' movement and girls' restraint, and the way cultural language reaches into the body. In writing the poem, I also felt grief for my younger self. The poem carried anger, but not only anger. It also carried tenderness, because I could finally see how much effort had gone into becoming acceptable and begin to respond to that with self-compassion.

This is where Axel Honneth becomes useful, though only if his theory is kept close to lived experience. Honneth's (1996) work on recognition illuminates how self-relation is shaped by the forms of acknowledgement or misrecognition available within a social world. My difficulty was not simply that I lacked confidence in some private psychological sense. It was that the normative order in which I learned to become a girl made some forms of female selfhood more recognisable than others. Obedience was legible. Compliance was legible. Anger, complexity, or independent self-expression were less so. To write against that order was therefore also to write toward recognition.

I encountered certain proverbs that surrounding womanhood that reinforced this social ordering in subtle but enduring ways. Proverbs such as 'a woman is like a horse; he who can ride her is her master' and 'a fat woman warms the coldest night' were not presented to me as doctrines, yet they carried cultural meanings that shaped how gender was understood and lived. These expressions are not neutral. They condense ideas about gender, power, and social roles into memorable forms that become normalised through repetition across generations and everyday interactions.

The proverb, 'a woman is like a horse; he who can ride her is her master,' uses a simile to convey control and mastery. The imagery of *riding* implies dominance, suggesting that authority over a woman is both expected and legitimised within certain relational frameworks. Within its historical and cultural context, it reflects a social order in which male authority was embedded in everyday language. Contemporary readings, however, invite critical engagement with such expressions. Scholars have shown how metaphor and figurative language can encode social hierarchies, particularly in relation to gender, where comparisons may subtly position women in roles associated with obedience or control (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). In this sense, the proverb does not simply describe relationships; it participates in shaping expectations about them (Gibbs, 2023).

Similarly, the proverb 'a fat woman warms the coldest night' associates a woman's value with her capacity to provide comfort. Within many African cultural contexts, fuller female bodies have historically been associated with health, prosperity, fertility, desirability, and embodied warmth. The proverb therefore gestures not only to physical comfort but also to intimacy and emotional reassurance.

At the same time, it positions the woman's body in relation to another person's need for warmth and satisfaction, potentially reducing her value to what she can provide for others. The emphasis becomes less about the woman as a full person and more about her function in meeting another's needs. This reflects a broader pattern in which women are often valued through service, care, or desirability rather than recognised in their own right.

Reflecting on these proverbs did not lead me to reject them uncritically as part of my cultural heritage. Instead, it revealed how such expressions can feel natural because they are familiar. Through critical reflection, however, they can be unpacked to expose the assumptions and expectations they carry.

What I now understand as guilt emerged from this cultural and linguistic context. The guilt was not always tied to wrongdoing. More often, it was connected to desire itself: the desire to speak freely, to occupy my rightful space, to imagine a self beyond usefulness, or to resist fitting neatly into the category of a 'good woman'. This form of guilt was quiet but persistent, shaping how I evaluated myself even in the absence of external judgement. It became part of the emotional inheritance I carried with me when I left Nigeria. I crossed borders with it still intact, even as the context around me began to change.

It is from within this inheritance that the next phase of my journey unfolds, where migration, deskilling, and liminality begin to unsettle what had once felt stable.

Migration, Deskilling, and Liminality

When I moved to England in 2008, I entered what I can now understand as a liminal phase. Liminality refers to a transitional or in-between state in which a person is no longer fully situated within a previous identity but has not yet fully integrated into a new one (van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). Beech (2011) further describes this as a space in which former identities loosen before new ones are secured. While this language is analytically useful, it requires grounding in lived experience to fully convey its meaning. For me, liminality was not abstract. It felt like dislocation, exposure, and a persistent uncertainty about which parts of myself would still count.

A reflective journal entry written close to the time captures this rupture:

When I moved from Nigeria to England in 2008 with my husband, I encountered a profound liminal phase. Suddenly detached from the identity I had known, I was thrust into a society that both challenged and reshaped my self-concept. In Nigeria, my understanding of self-worth was deeply rooted in cultural norms, particularly those surrounding respect, gender roles, and moral behaviour. The values instilled in me were structured around clear notions of 'right' and 'wrong,' and my life was guided by societal expectations about how a woman should conduct herself. In that world, recognition and respect were often tied to compliance with established norms, with my worth as a woman seen in relation to societal and familial roles rather than my individuality.

At the time, this was a description of disruption. In rereading it now, what becomes clearer is how deeply my sense of worth had been anchored in external validation. Recognition had been structured through alignment with cultural expectations. Migration disrupted that alignment. The external frameworks that had once stabilised my identity were no longer consistently present, yet they continued to shape how I see myself. This created a tension between internalised standards and external realities.

At one level, migration widened my world. At another, it intensified loss. I was no longer within the familiar structure that had shaped me, yet I had not entered a social context in which my prior knowledge, education, or identity were immediately legible. Wright's (2024) notion of answering to myself in writing resonates strongly here. For me, journalling became a way of returning to my own experience in the midst of uncertainty, a way of making sense of what felt fragmented and unsettled. It was not simply a record of events, but a space where I could engage with thoughts and feelings that had no clear place elsewhere. In this sense, writing functioned as an anchor during transition, allowing me to express, question, and gradually understand what I was living through. It became the place where I could hold experiences that did not fit dominant narratives of resilience or gratitude.

This sense of in-betweenness became particularly visible in my experiences of education and work. I had initially imagined further study in the United Kingdom as a pathway to recognition and professional mobility. Instead, I encountered a system in which each new qualification appeared to promise access while simultaneously revealing further barriers.

A later journal entry reflects this response:

I have continued to acquire academic qualifications in the UK to liberate myself from this generational malediction of the patriarchal system. This is because I believe that the qualifications will help pave the way for me to

come off low-paid jobs. The qualifications include two Level 2 courses, three Level 3 diplomas, one Level 4 diploma, and two Level 5 diplomas completed in the UK, alongside a master's degree and doctorate obtained in the UK, in addition to my first degree in Nigeria (B. Tech in Urban and Regional Planning).

When this was written, it expressed determination and hope. On rereading it, however, additional layers become visible. The language of 'liberation' suggests that education was carrying more than developmental value. It was also tied to a desire to escape structural constraints and to reclaim a sense of worth. Each qualification appeared to promise movement, yet that movement did not consistently translate into recognition.

Opara, Sealy and Ryan (2020) argue that professional women from minority backgrounds often experience forms of marginalisation within organisational structures that limit recognition of their capabilities and contributions. This produced a persistent paradox. My internal sense of capability continued to grow, yet external validation remained partial. I experienced myself as increasingly knowledgeable, while institutional systems often positioned me as inexperienced. This aligns with research on deskilling and overqualification, where migrants, particularly professional women, encounter a mismatch between their qualifications and available opportunities (Ogbemudia, 2022).

What shaped my experience most deeply was not only the structural conditions but their emotional impact. In some instances, I was positioned at an early or entry level that did not fully reflect the knowledge and experience I had already developed. Processes such as validating qualifications, completing applications, and repeatedly demonstrating competence created a particular form of exhaustion. This extended beyond administrative demands and was experienced as ongoing emotional and professional strain. Over time, this was felt as a form of partial recognition, where what I brought with me was acknowledged but not fully valued.

Honneth's work on recognition is useful in understanding this dynamic (Honneth, 1996, 2007). In my doctoral thesis (Akilapa, 2024), I highlighted that experiences of limitation were often shaped by gendered expectations. In this context, misrecognition took a different form, emerging through institutional processes that did not fully acknowledge prior knowledge and experience. Although the context had changed, the emotional pattern remained similar. I found myself once again at risk of measuring my worth against external systems.

Journalling became a space where I could reflect on these experiences with greater clarity. In more formal or shared settings, I often expressed them in measured ways, mindful of how they might be interpreted. In reflective writing, however, I was able to engage more fully with the range and depth of what I was experiencing. This included not only a sense of challenge, but also feelings of strain, pressure, and, at times, vulnerability. For this reason, I now understand journalling not only as a form of expression but also as a method of inquiry. It enabled me to recognise and retain aspects of my experience that I had not yet found a way to articulate elsewhere.

At the same time, migration altered my understanding of respect. In England, I encountered alternative ways of speaking, relating, and being. These were not without their own complexities, shaped by race, class, and migrant positioning, but they created distance from what I had previously understood as normative. That distance was significant. It allowed inherited expectations to be examined rather than automatically reproduced.

This is where the generative potential of liminality becomes visible. While it was experienced as instability, it also created space for questioning. The disruption of familiar structures made it possible to ask a different kind of question: if these expectations no longer shape the world around me in the same way, why do they continue to shape me internally? This question did not resolve the structural realities I faced, but it shifted how I related to them. Liminality became not only a period of disruption but also a threshold for reflection and change.

This period of in-betweenness did not happen in isolation. As I continued to navigate migration, identity, and recognition, earlier experiences of loss and attachment began to surface more clearly. The instability of the present brought unresolved aspects of the past into the light. It is to these experiences of grief, parental inheritance, and the inward turn that I now move, as they further shaped the process through which identity was questioned, reworked, and gradually redefined.

Grief, Parental Inheritance, and the Turn Inward

Long before I named soul work, grief had already begun disorganising the foundations of my identity. In 2001, during my second year at university in Nigeria, my father died suddenly. In 2003, my mother also died. Those losses did not occur after the self had been formed; they occurred during

its making. They therefore affected not only my emotions but my orientation toward aspiration, study, discipline, and approval.

The journal passage I wrote about this remains one of the clearest in the original materials:

In 2001, during my second year at a Nigerian university, my dad suddenly passed away at the age of 62. I felt lost, as though I had lost my hero. Everything I had done up until that point was to make him proud. His death took away my motivation to succeed. While still grieving, sadly, about a year and a half later in 2003, my mum also passed away at the age of 52, and it felt like my world had turned upside down. I struggled to concentrate at the university, my grades suffered, and my overall Cumulative Grade Point Average was very low.

I keep this passage here because it shows something essential: my motivation was not abstractly self-generated. It was relational. I wanted to make my father proud. That desire made sense inside the family system that had formed me. He was a disciplinarian, but he was also the person whose approval had become entwined with achievement. When he died, I did not lose only a parent. I lost a central witness to my striving. Without him, the structure of ambition itself shifted. It is easy, in retrospect, to narrate this as psychological dependence, but that would be too simple. It was also love, attachment, and the ordinary social fact that identity is built through relationships before it becomes an internal resource.

My mother's death deepened the rupture in a different way. She had embodied endurance, steadiness, and female capability in ways I did not fully understand until after she was gone. Her death confronted me with absence on two fronts: the loss of a nurturing figure and the loss of a living image of womanhood that had not been reduced to silence. If my father had represented authority, expectation, and discipline, my mother represented continuity, work, and everyday survival. Losing both of them within a short period of time left me without a clear sense of direction.

Grief also sharpened the contradictions of inheritance. My father had imposed boundaries that often felt restrictive, especially around girls' sexuality, social contact, and the imperative of respectability. My doctoral thesis (Akilapa, 2024) records this history in detail: I was the fifth of six daughters; my father closely monitored our interactions with boys; he associated relationships with risk and academic distraction; and I spent part of early adulthood performing the role of the obedient daughter. I do not now want to erase the cost of that discipline. It narrowed my experimentation, complicated my relation to desire, and reinforced the

idea that a woman's moral worth could be compromised by too much visible autonomy. At the same time, those same parental expectations also supported resilience, hard work, and seriousness about education. This doubleness matters. It is precisely what had to be worked through, not merely denounced.

What grief altered was the emotional hold those expectations had over me. Without my parents physically present, their voices did not disappear; in some ways they became more internal. I carried my father's pride and prohibition simultaneously. I carried my mother's endurance and caution. Soul work later became the practice through which I could distinguish inheritance from destiny. Yet grief came first. Grief made me feel how much of my self-concept had been anchored around others' hopes for me. Only after that recognition could I begin asking what remained when those external anchors were gone.

This is also why grief belongs at the centre of my soul work rather than at its margins. It is not an incidental biographical detail. It marks the point at which obedience, aspiration, love, loss, and self-worth became entangled in ways that later writing had to untangle. My movement toward self-authorship did not emerge only from feminist critique or from migration. It also emerged from bereavement. Losing my parents forced me, painfully and slowly, to consider whether I could live faithfully to what I had received from them without living only for them.

What Soul Work Changed

If I ask myself now how reflection and self-compassion were actually discovered, the answer is that they were discovered procedurally. I did not announce one day that I would become self-compassionate. I stumbled towards it through repeated acts of writing and rereading. At first, journalling served mainly as release. I wrote when angry, ashamed, exhausted, or confused. The writing was often crowded with external voices: what I ought to do, what a good woman should accept, what education should achieve, how a wife or daughter should behave, how a migrant should be grateful. Later, when I reread these entries, I began to hear those voices more clearly. That hearing was the beginning of analysis.

The first movement of soul work, then, was *naming*. I learned to identify recurring patterns. I noticed how often I wrote as if my primary task were to justify myself. I noticed that I described silence as virtue even when I was suffering from it. I noticed how quickly disappointment turned

into self-blame. I noticed that some of my most painful sentences were not descriptions of events but verdicts on myself. Naming these patterns mattered because unnamed patterns continue to masquerade as truth.

The second movement was *poetic reworking*. Poetry altered the scale of attention. Instead of explaining why I felt diminished, I found myself writing images: clay, loom, plantain, river, scar, mirror, thread. These images did not solve the problem, but they helped me feel where social language had entered my body. Poetry also returned agency. In prose, I often sounded as though I were reporting what had happened to me. In poetry, I could shift position. I could speak, counter-speak, and imagine otherwise. That shift mattered because it allowed feeling and knowledge to meet without requiring immediate linear argument.

The third movement was *compassionate response*. This is where the transformation became most ethically significant for me. Rereading old entries can easily become a new form of attack. I could have used the journals to prove my own previous weakness, naivety, or compliance. Instead, I gradually began reading them as evidence of what I had been trying to survive and understand with the resources then available to me. Neff's (2003) work is helpful here because self-compassion does not mean sentimental self-excuse. It means meeting suffering without immediate contempt, recognising one's pain as human rather than uniquely shameful, and holding it in awareness without drowning in it. That was close to what I needed. I did not need a more flattering story. I needed a kinder and more truthful one.

The fourth movement was *re-recognition*. Here Honneth's (1996) language returns, reframed through reflection. Recognition ceased to mean waiting silently for the world to certify my worth. It became, first, the work of refusing older misrecognitions within myself. This did not abolish structural inequality. It did not undo labour-market bias or patriarchal culture. Instead, it reshaped my relationship to these forces. I could begin to say: the fact that a system misreads me does not make its reading true; the fact that a culture prepared me primarily for service does not define the limits of who I am; the fact that grief once disrupted my motivation does not mean desire cannot be rebuilt. That shift from misrecognition to recognition was not triumphant or linear. It was incremental, fragile, and often revisited. Even so, it was real.

The support of my husband also mattered within this movement, not because he 'saved' me but because his support helped create conditions in

which different self-relations became possible. As discussed in my doctoral thesis, this support was not abstract; it included emotional, practical, and financial forms of care, particularly in relation to doctoral study and childcare. I retain this point because recognition is never purely solitary. Supportive relationships can make processes of self-reflection and change more possible in lived, practical ways. At the same time, I remain careful in how this is understood. The deepest change described here is not that someone else finally gave me permission to become myself. It is that I gradually learned to stop limiting my own sense of self.

What soul work changed, then, was my internal tone as much as my social analysis. It helped me move from explanation to encounter, from compliance to inquiry, from repeating inherited judgements to examining them, and from rehearsing guilt to understanding it as a culturally shaped experience rather than an unchangeable outcome. It did not remove contradiction. I still honour parts of my upbringing. I still value discipline, family commitment, and cultural rootedness. At the same time, I no longer assume that honouring my inheritance requires the silencing of my own voice. That distinction is one of the most important things this soul work has taught me.

Where I Stand Now

I do not want to end by pretending that soul work culminates in a finished self. It does not. I now write from a later stage of life, work, study, and family responsibility, and that position has changed the meaning of the earlier materials. I no longer imagine healing as a decisive break from the past. More often it feels like a different way of accompanying the past. I am still shaped by Nigeria, by my parents, by migration, by grief, by institutions, by every earlier pattern of expectation that once seemed unquestionable. What has changed is not the disappearance of those influences but my growing capacity to examine them without surrendering to them.

This matters because it keeps writing grounded in ordinary life rather than an idealised retreat. I have not done soul work in conditions of unlimited time. I have done it in the midst of work, care, study, and the practical pressures that shape the lives of migrant and professional women. That context matters because it demonstrates that reflection is not separate from daily life but embedded within it. For me, the journal has often been a place of fragments rather than perfect form. The poem has

sometimes arrived late, after years of silence. The work remains unfinished, but unfinishedness is not failure. It is the condition of an ongoing life.

I end with a shorter poem drawn from my earlier writing, which was further developed through my doctoral thesis (Akilapa, 2024), because it now reads to me less as a neat resolution than as an honest statement of continuing movement:

Journey Of Reflection

In the shadows of old traditions, I grew,
Bound by roles, crafted yet not my own.
Through stories and silence, I learned what was due—
The weight of belonging, the burden I'd known.

I crossed to new lands, where paths twist and wind,
Where freedom beckoned yet troubled my sense of peace.
With each step, I questioned, leaving fragments behind,
Yet gathering pieces, a strange new release.

There in the mirror, I faced every scar,
From lessons unchosen, from words left unsaid.
Through grief and remembering, I wandered afar,
To make sense of each thread that my heritage had fed.

Soul work became solace, a journey within,
Where I unbound my voice from the weight of compliance.
In the quiet, I listened, let healing begin—
Embracing my truth with gentle defiance.

So here I stand, woven of past and choice,
No longer confined by expectations long set.
I speak with fullness, my heart finds its voice—
In each word, in each step, I am not done yet.

For the journey continues, and we walk in its light,
Reclaiming our stories, rewriting the song.
Together in reflection, we step into sight,
Honouring each part where we've always belonged.

Sharing this now carries a sense of vulnerability. There is vulnerability in bringing lived experience into a wider context. There is also relief. The poem allows me to appear in my own writing more fully than before. Journals and poems helped me hear the cultural voices within me, grieve

what they had cost, hold on to what remained life-giving, and move slowly and imperfectly towards a more self-authored way of living.

This work has argued that my movement from internalised girlhood guilt and migrant misrecognition toward self-recognition did not happen outside writing; it happened partly through writing. Journals gave me a place to record the pressure of inherited norms, migration, educational striving, and grief. Poems allowed me to encounter those pressures differently, in image and rhythm rather than explanation alone. Rereading made patterns visible. Self-compassion changed the tone of interpretation. Soul work, in this sense, is not a mystical abstraction. It is a practice of staying with emotionally charged material long enough to hear what inherited expectations and internalised beliefs have made of a self and then responding to that material with greater honesty and care. In doing so, I began, gradually, to move from internalised guilt towards a more accepting understanding of myself, allowing a deeper sense of self-respect to emerge.

Perhaps this is why a Yoruba proverb says, 'However far the stream flows, it never forgets its source.' In many ways, this journey has not been about abandoning where I come from but learning how to return to it differently.



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