Introduction

Gendering Representation

Introduction

Gendering Representation

Contemporary cultural theory defines the term representation as, “The use of one thing to stand in for another in order to transmit meaning; the construction of meaning through the use of signs and concepts” (Milner and Browitt 239). A representation can be a visual, verbal, or oral image; or a narrative, a sequence of images and ideas; or the product of ideology. The political definition of representation differs from its cultural one. In politics the word representation is the active presence of a person who can speak for his/her constituency and act on its behalf (Stimpson 183). Representation has always played a significant role in the understanding of literature, and “Man, for many philosophers both ancient and modern, is ‘the representational animal’, homo symbolicum, the creature whose distinctive character is the creation and manipulation of signs--things that ‘stand for’ or ‘take the place of’ something else”(Mitchell 11). For Plato and Aristotle literature was one form of representation. Though there is a long tradition of explaining literature and art in terms of representation, the significance of the word ‘representation’ in literary contexts is constantly redefined. Representation can no more be considered as providing fixed meaning, as representation depends upon a person’s cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds which are subjected to historical changes. Representation can never work in isolation from other cultural contexts. The way the representations work in specific historical circumstances is an important area of enquiry for postcolonial
studies. In postmodern culture “Categories such as 'the things itself', 'the authentic' and 'the real' which were formerly considered the objects of representations . . . now become themselves representations, endlessly reduplicated and distributed” (Mitchell 16 - 17).

Most theoretical discussions on representations of women in literary texts commenced with the inception of feminist literary criticism. In the major discourses of the society, women have been absent or silent, and various social or cultural representations of women are also highly misogynistic or gender biased. Textual representations often highlight more or less the same androcentric attitudes. Catherine R. Stimpson explicates the role of feminist literary critic in analysing the cultural and textual representations of women:

Feminist critics have decomposed the representation of women in culture; the images, stereotypes, and archetypes. They have found women as beautiful other, as aesthetic object whose power is that of eros, glamour, and fashion. They have found woman as mother, whose will and power if checked and directed, will succour. They have found woman as schemer, whose will and power, if unchecked, will devour. (117)

Cultural, social and religious representations of different societies project women differently according to their class, caste, racial and national status as inferior, dangerous or as powerful. So women’s representational politics brings under its purview women’s representation in society, culture, literature and politics; how they are represented culturally in various social units as well
as in literature; and how they represent themselves. Natania Meeker in “Representing Women, Writing the Body Politic” observes that “the rubric representations emphasizes the interplay between individual acts of textual production and the social contexts in which these acts take place” (201). Therefore, while engaging in textual production, women may assimilate the social notions regarding womanhood, or subvert those notions that reduce them to an object of patriarchal control by restricting their mobility and freedom. Often the system of domination based on class, caste, gender, race etc. effectively work through misrepresentations (Meeker 200). Misrepresentations of the subjugated have been used to justify their domination throughout the history. Cultural, social, or textual representations of women has often corroborated the subjection of women by justifying the inferior status assigned to women in various gender, racial, caste and colonial contexts. Laurie A. Finke writes of representation as specific to historical periods and culture:

Women--along with other marginal social groups, specifically the lower classes--were constructed by the dominant culture as the grotesque body, the low other, whose discursive norms include heterogeneity, disproportion, a focus on gaps, orifices, and symbolic filth. The grotesque body is at once feminized, corrupt, and threatening; it is a reminder of mortality, imperfection, and the wretchedness of human existence. (88)

the time written history begins, however, we see some women acting to change the way ideas about gender shape social practices” (6). A close perusal of history reveals that at all times, in various degrees and nuances women resisted their subordination through oral or textual representation. In Natania Meeker’s words women writing is “a form of intervention in a political arena and a way of constituting a wide variety of female identities. Women have often used written and oral forms of representation to demand, argue for, and justify their political rights” (206). Women writers work with or struggle against the cultural representation of gender, the gendered social contexts, and against the cultural policing of women’s bodies. Social and cultural discourses of various periods have represented women in such a way that corroborated the general oppression of women, and women writers of all ages have to confront this either through assimilating or subverting it. The concept of women writers itself negates the accepted notion of Western European societies that femininity and creativity will not go together. Women who attempted to enter into literary or intellectual activities were represented either as monstrous or sexually promiscuous (Meeker 204). In The Second Sex (1949), Simone De Beauvoir remarks that the woman is a social construct. So women are invariably exhorted to be women, remain women, and become women. This reveals the social conception that not every female human being is necessarily a woman. Only those women who obey the norms of femininity are real ‘women’ (13). According to this, intellectual perusal is considered unwomanly, and emotional sentimentalism is often attributed to women. In “Professions for Women”, Virginia Woolf examines how the
constraining social conditions debilitate the creativity of a woman writer. As a woman writer, she has faced two challenges, one is to free her mind from the norms of femininity that she has internalised, and the second is telling the truth about the experience as a body. She adopts the term “the angel in the house”, to denote the constraining norms of femininity, and she comments that often the misogynist notions of the society censure the free utterances of a woman and, thereby dampen the dedication and enthusiasm of a female writer (89). In *A Room of One’s Own* (1928) she scrutinizes the differences between the “women as objects of representation and women as authors of representation” and thereby “opened up the entire territory of modern feminist criticism” (Leitch 1017). Woolf opines that women’s lack of economic independence and lack of a space of her own hinder them from accomplishing great heights as a writer. In *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Betty Friedan adopts the term ‘feminine mystique’ to refer to the patriarchal society’s representation of femininity (43). Friedan examines the pejorative effect of the concept of “feminine mystique” on women, as media, culture and society exhort women not to cherish high ambitions for their life but to spend her entire time for fulfilling domestic duties.

**Feminist Readings of Literary Representation:**

In “Towards a Feminist Poetics” (1979), Elaine Showalter divides feminist criticism into two varieties--feminist critique that studies the representation of women in male texts; and gynocritics that deals with how women represent themselves through their texts. Feminist critique is the political and polemical reading of male texts and male culture by feminist
criticism, and it is concerned with woman as reader (170). It analyses images and stereotypes of women in literature, how women are omitted and misconstrued in literary history, and probes into the expulsion of women writers from the male constructed literary history. It is also concerned with manipulation of female audience in popular culture and film and the analysis of women as signs in semiotic systems. Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1971), which popularised the urgency of feminist critique, explicates how a system that vests domination and power on male is reinforced through the literary texts. She foregrounds the sexual politics embedded in various canonical literary texts of male authors. Defying New Criticism’s analytical method of considering literary texts without taking into account their cultural and social implications, she pursued her analysis on the premise that “there is room for a criticism which takes into account the larger cultural context in which literature is conceived and produced” (xii). She used the term ‘politics’ as referring to power structured relationship, and probes into the situation between sexes throughout history which is mainly a relationship of dominance and subordination. One of the main contributions of Millet is her theory of ‘sexual politics’ that is the power structured relationship between sexes and her incisive review of the varied cultural and historical background of patriarchy as a political institution (xii). Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking About Women* (1968) attends on women in literary texts, and gives basic tenets of ‘Images of Women criticism’ which is a search for female stereotypes in the works of male writers and male critics (Moi 32).

Gynocriticism is concerned with “woman as writer -- with woman as the producer of textual meaning . . .” (170). The female creativity, problems
of female language, the literary career of a single female writer or a group of
female writers, literary history, studies of particular writers and works come
under the purview of gynocritics (170). Women-centred approach has become
a dominant trend within Anglo-American feminist criticism. Ellen Moers’
*Literary Women* (1976) is a pioneering work in this tradition, which makes
the first attempt to describe the history of women’s writing. Elaine
Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* (1977) probes into the writings of
Victorian women writers of the period from 1840 to 1960, and in her opinion,
only a few authors got prominence in this period, and hence a lack of
continuity exists in the history of women writing. She classifies three different
period of women’s writing--‘Feminine’ (1840-1880) is the period of imitation
of male works and accepted norms of femininity. Womanhood itself was a
vocation during the time and writing was considered selfish, unwomanly and
unchristian. The second phase ‘feminist’ (1880-1920) is the period of protest
against male centred norms, and the last is ‘female’ (1920-1960) is a phase of
courageous self-exploration. They overcame feminine self-hatred and feminist
withdrawal yet they were hesitating to confront the realities of body as their
writing exhibits a flight from male and adult sexuality. Androgyny provided
them an escape from confrontation with the body (34). During the Victorian
Period, women were entering the literary profession in unprecedented
numbers, yet they were always a minority. Showalter notes in their writings
the authors’ attempts to balance literary vocation and family responsibilities,
and conflicts between obedience and resistance, and womanhood and
vocation. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s *The Madwoman in the Attic: The
Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination published in 1979, provides an exhaustive study of the major English women writers in the nineteenth century, and the text attempts to elaborate a new theory of women’s literary creativity. The text analyses the dilemma and vexed condition of the women writers of the nineteenth century who had to write in a cultural context that was overtly and covertly patriarchal, and that defined literary creativity in patriarchal terms. Refuting Harold Bloom’s literary theory, the authors state that a female writer suffers not an anxiety of influence, but an ‘anxiety of authorship’—“a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her”(49). The women writers of the nineteenth century engage in variety of strategies to deal with the anxiety of authorship. As Charlotte Bronte did in her novel Jane Eyre (1847), many female writers of the period expressed their rage by creating dark doubles; and thereby they redefined femininity and creativity.

In “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness” (1981), Elaine Showalter subsumes the theories of women’s writing under four categories. This categorisation as biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural is based on the mode of analysis each theoretical perspective adopted to analyse women writers and women’s texts. Feminist theorising under different categories either contradicts or supports each other, yet every critical perspective mainly centres upon how women are represented in language, society and culture; and how women writers represent themselves in the literary text and how they overcome various cultural barriers. Feminist criticism written in the biological
perspective stresses the importance of body as a source of imagery for women’s writing. Refuting female biological inferiority, they imply biological difference in writing. For them the body indelibly marks a text, as “anatomy is textuality” (336). Many French feminists are supporters of this and they consider sexual difference as the source of writing and women’s writing proceeds from body. Linguistic and textual theories of women’s writing probe whether the use of language is gender marked and whether men and women use language differently. Language has always been a topic of keen interest for feminist critics like Mary Jacobus, Dale Spender and Tillie Olsen who concede that neither language nor language acquisition has been gender neutral; they analyse how language manipulates our views, and how it becomes an instrument of our oppression. Patriarchal society enforces silence on women through inhibitions and taboos, and denies women full access to language (Cameron 4). French feminists also exert much attention on women’s language.

For psychoanalytically oriented feminist criticism, the difference of women’s writing is situated in the author’s psyche, and in the relation of gender to the creative process. “It incorporates the biological and linguistic models of gender difference in a theory of female psyche or self, shaped by the body by the development of language, and by sex role socialization” (Showalter 342). Psychoanalytic criticism deals with feminist interactions with psychoanalysis, and Alice Jardine has set alongside Gynocritics ‘Gynesis’ which deals with the ‘feminine’ in philosophy, language and psychoanalysis. Gynesis renders psychoanalysis as a powerful tool of feminist
criticism and at the same time incisively criticises the phallocentric assumptions in the writings of psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan. French feminism extols not women’s equality with men, but women’s difference from men, and the features of unique womanhood. Feminist critics like Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, and Nancy Chodorow deconstruct the phallocentrism by challenging the hierarchical and monolithic structures involved in the western thought as a whole, and they proclaim the power of women’s language and women’s sexuality.

In Elaine Showalter’s opinion, a theory based on women’s culture can more satisfyingly define the specificity and difference of women’s writing than the theories based on biology, linguistics or psychoanalysis. Feminist cultural theory posits that in spite of the racial, class, and national differences between women, women’s culture forms a collective experience of women within the dominant cultural whole. This cultural experience binds women writers to each other over time and space. Women’s culture redefines cultural and social activities from a woman centred point of view, and emphasizes an awareness of sisterhood. The cultural model of women’s writing proposes to read a woman’s text as a double voiced discourse containing a dominant and muted story. So women’s writing is “a double-voiced discourse” (348) that represents the social, literary, and cultural heritages of both the muted and the dominant culture. “Women writing are not, then, inside and outside of male tradition; they are inside two traditions simultaneously” (348).

In Rita Felski’s opinion there are many conflicts of opinion among feminist scholars on various issues, and therefore “Refusing to make
distinctions, claiming that all feminist approaches, however dubious, should be given unconditional support, can only lead to a serious loss of credibility” (5). In her opinion a feminist critic approaches a literary text with a series of questions about gender, not answers (10). She traces problem with gynocritics’ insistence that feminism concerns itself with the real, material, lives of the women. They turn to literary works for evidence about female experience. Felski comments that, “An author is not a solid and unshakable presence that precedes a work of art and guarantees its meaning, but a figure created by a particular way of reading” (63). The author does not simply create a text, but a particular way of reading a text creates an author, so the author is not a sturdy presence, but a projection of the readers’ fantasies and desires. Therefore, feminist critics who scrutinize female texts for hidden clues, meanings and symbolic authority, “do not just rediscover or reclaim the female author; but in a certain sense they create her” (64). Felski analyses various allegories, metaphors and myths regarding the female authorship adopted by the feminist critics--like the allegory of mad woman in The Mad Woman in the Attic-- to discern woman writers and the tradition of women writing. Felski admits that the issue of visibility of women writers in a male centred area is a key issue, but through evolving an all-encompassing theory of authorship, feminist critics are trying to “cram a disparate body of writing into a very small box” (89). Felski observes that now, feminist critics are taking a third position, that is beyond killing the author or reading the literary works as allegories of female authorship.
We can recognize that female authors have themselves been authored—that is to say, shaped by a multiplicity of social and cultural forces that exceed their grasp—without thereby denying their ability to act and to create. Similarly, we can factor the author into our readings of literary works without reducing literature to autobiography or assuming that such links determine the meaning of the work once and for all. Authorship is one strand in the weave of the text rather than a magic key to unlocking its mysteries. The trick, as Elaine Showalter puts it, is to avoid “over-feminization,” the belief that everything in women’s writing can be explained by gender, as well as “under feminization,” the complete neglect of signs of gender in women’s texts. (91-92)

Felski points out that many well-known writers have raised their objection for being labelled as women writers. Their response reveals that the feminist labelling is constraining for their creativity, because those female writers feel labelling their works as women writing is as if they are permitted to write about certain kinds of female experience and they are being reduced to their sex (92). “As feminist critics are coming to recognize, to prescribe what it means to be a female author is to do a disservice to the rich and unending variety of real female authors”(93).

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) analyses the reliability of the term ‘representation’ while talking in relation to feminism.
On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (2)

So, considering the cultural condition where women have been misrepresented or not represented at all, feminist theory tries to develop a language that fully represents women; but recently the stability and viability of the subject as “the ultimate candidate for representation”(2) has been challenged. The dominant feminist literary criticism has been subjected to opposition in the later feminist studies. The black/third world/lesbian strands of feminisms have alleged separatism, essentialism, and colonial underpinnings on them. In Judith Butler’s opinion, feminism encounters a political problem in the assumption that the term, women denotes a common identity (4). In her words:

    gender is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and because gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained. (4-5)
She refutes the assumption of a universal basis for feminism or a female identity that exists cross-culturally. The notion of a universal patriarchy has been widely criticised as it fails to realize “the workings of gender oppression in the concrete cultural contexts in which it exists” (5). The dominant feminism not only colonizes the non-Western cultures, but also constructs a third world in which “gender oppression is subtly explained as symptomatic of an essential, non-Western barbarism”(5). Here feminism’s claim to represent all women also is questioned: “By conforming to a requirement of representational politics that feminism articulates a stable subject, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation” (6-7). This undermines the early feminist strands of essential feminine identity and true female experience. Butler further explicates: “The identity of the feminist subject ought not to be the foundation of feminist politics, if the formation of the subject takes place within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation. Perhaps, paradoxically, ‘representation’ will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of ‘women’ is nowhere presumed. (8)

Adrienne Munich raises the charge that Elaine Showalter, by polarizing literary criticism into gynocentric and androcentric, reproduces the social categories of gender (243). She argues that the male-authored works of the literary canon are properly as much the objects of feminist criticism as are the texts written by women(244). Chris Weedon, proponent of poststructuralist feminism considers the liberal feminist’s attempts to establish social equality within the existing social relations, or radical feminist’s emphasis on essential
difference of female self and separatism are not politically adequate. “Poststructuralist feminism requires attention to historical specificity in the production, for women, of subject positions and modes of femininity and their place in the overall network of social power relations. In this the meaning of biological sexual difference is never finally fixed” (135). In Weedon’s opinion, French theories of feminine writing also fail to take account of the historical, cultural and social specificity of reading and writing. Feminist poststructuralism does not underpin the theories of the feminine psyche or biologically based definitions of femininity which locate its essence in motherhood or female sexuality. Poststructuralism posits no guarantee of the nature of women’s experience. Conversely, as women’s experience is based on historically and socially specific discourses, it is discursively produced. However, this does not rule out the existence of a definite women’s experience under patriarchy. Thus, the poststructuralist feminism views literary representation of women as endorsed by its historical, cultural and social specificity. In *Feminism/ Postmodernism/ Development* (1995) Marianne H. Marchand and Jane L. Parpart explain that those feminist writings that draw heavily on postmodernist thinking have encouraged openness to differences and are reluctant to essentialize 'woman'. “The emphasis on the role of place and location in the construction of identities and difference(s), particularly the emphasis on marginality as a site of resistance, has aroused a new interest in the way spatial contexts influence women’s live...” (8).
bell hooks in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984) directs her censure on feminism in the United States that is centred on the life of white middle and upper class women, and which never writes of those silent majority of women who are most victimised by the sexual oppression. She considers Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique* (1963) which is said to have given momentum to the feminist movement “as a case study of narcissism, insensitivity, sentimentality, and self-indulgence . . .”(3) as Friedan ignores the existence of all non-white and poor women in her analysis of the troubled psyche of the American middle class women. As racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, they can hardly realise “the reality that race and class identity creates differences in quality of life, social status, and life style that take precedence over the common experience women share—differences that are rarely transcended”(4). She refutes the second wave feminism’s claim that women share a common lot and culture, and that all women are equally oppressed. Black women are in an unusual position in the society as they bear the brunt of sexist, racist and classist oppression. In the fight against sexism, they have to face the racism of white women. Black men’s sexism alienates them to form a separate social and literary movement for black women (16), and the Black women’s writing confronts racial, sexual and class oppression in an incisive and critical way.

Jane Freedman comments that there was what we called feminist thought and activity even before the term itself was adopted (2). Feminism is thus a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status in the society. Even after the word was coined, many of those who
campaigned for women’s cause did not accept it as a term of identification. It is only more recently that the label feminist has been applied to all women’s groups indiscriminately (3). Feminism can claim to be a field with its own ideas, history, and practice. Yet these ideas, history, and practices are far from unified and are subject to continuing debate. Rosalind Miles talks of the indigenous roots of feminism.

Every country held, too, peculiar challenges for feminism; the struggle worldwide consisted not of imposing a set of general principles from nation to nation, but of winning what could be won from the local conditions and national conventions. So in India, Sarojini Naidu, Abala Bose and others campaigned against both widow–burning and the caste system . . . while in Japan, Fusaye Ichikawa led the fight against the regulated prostitution that held thousands of Japanese women in virtual slavery. (241-242)

Freedman comments that classification of feminism as first wave and second wave will mask the diversity of feminist thoughts that have existed both within the two waves and between them by giving one label to a whole series of different theories and actions(4). Freedman decries feminist attempts to provide neat classification of feminism into different theoretical families such as liberal feminism, radical feminism etc, as they cannot do justice to the complexity of feminism. Freedman says complexity of feminism can be untangled through an examination of different issues and problems to which feminists have brought their attention. Mary Eagleton questions the veracity
of the various constructions of feminist literary history. In most versions of this narrative the black, lesbian, third world remain as 'other'. Those are defined in relation to the dominant white, heterosexual account as “an interesting adjunct, an intervention that momentarily arrests the white and/or heterosexual reader into self-critical thought. . . (3). In Eagleton’s opinion it is not third world feminism that has just come into existence, “rather the change lies in a recent and belated willingness on the part of the First World academic to recognize Third World feminism”(3).

Third World Feminism on Female Representation:

The postcolonial feminists like Susie Tharu and K. Lalita are of the view that the feminist criticism that has been widely co-opted by the academy and circulated among third-world scholars is the kind of feminism that naturalises the experiences and issues of western feminism. The gynocritics’ attempts to retrieve the lost writers hardly show any concern to the colonial ideology, which used literature as a tool for its conquest in the colonies (28). The third world feminism claims that there are many mainstream literatures. Refuting the concept of essential female nature, it claims that “it is not the same essential female nature that struggling the world over, to free itself from male bondage” (Tharu and Lalita 1: 31). Tharu and Lalita point out that the feminist critics like Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert vigorously criticised the social construction of middle-class femininity, but they omitted the politics of class, race, or imperialism from it. Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar universalise and naturalise a ‘female literary creativity’ according to the aesthetics of Europe; and envisage a monolithic and unchanging patriarchy that has no
connections with other hegemonies like class or race. “The paraphernalia of a European middle-class woman’s place is regarded as an adequate metaphor for all women’s worlds” (1:29). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985) staunchly censures the critical approach of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar who have depicted Bertha Mason, the Jamaican Creole in *Jane Eyre* (1847) as the dark double of Jane, the celebrated feminist individualist heroine of British fiction. She defies the notion of *Jane Eyre* as a cult text of feminism as the explicit ideology of ‘imperialist axiomatics’ permeates through the book (802). Spivak explicates that it is not possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that “Imperialism, understood as England’s social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of the England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored” (798). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak rejects the universal claims of feminism to speak for all women, and in “French Feminism in an International Fame”, she considers Julia Kristeva’s “deliberate application of the doctrines of French High ‘Feminism’ to a different situation of political specificity might misfire” (92). In Spivak’s opinion, Kristeva in *About Chinese Women* (1977) is not concerned about the real material realities of peasant women in China but only in using the matrilineal kinship structures of China to support Kristeva’s theory of femininity (81). In her opinion, “Reflecting a broader Western cultural practice, the ‘classical’ East is studied with primitivistic reverence, even as the ‘contemporary’ East is treated with realpolitikal contempt” (89). Non-Western women are depicted as ‘not yet human other’ by the colonial
discourse, and thereby British imperialism is justified as a social mission for enlightening and civilising those colonial world. In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak is concerned about the silenced and disempowered women of the third world. “It is, rather, that, both as an object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more in shadow” (287).

Ania Loomba comments that colonialism virtually intensified women’s subordination in colonised lands in many a way. It eroded many matrilineal and women friendly cultures, practices, and intensified patriarchal relations. The native men when increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from public spheres became more tyrannical at home. A sharp increase happened in the practices like widow immolation as a form of anti-colonial disobedience (Colonialism 167-168). New forms of patriarchal dominations were introduced like the Victorian notions of female purity. In Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction (1998 ) Leela Gandhi explicates that feminist and post colonial theories attempt to invert prevailing hierarchies of gender/culture/race/caste, and they have each welcomed poststructuralism to rebuff the binary opposition upon which patriarchal/colonial authority construct itself (83). In feminist postcolonial writing, severe criticism has been raised against colonial/neo-colonial representations of third world women as tradition-bound, passive, voiceless and interchangeable objects or as the ‘other’ (24). Geeta Chowdhry analyses the various ways in which neo-
colonial discourse represents third world women. “The first one is that of the *zenana* representation” (27). According to the image the veiled third world women are members of harem, leading a cloistered existence circumscribed by male dominated tradition and is relegated to homemaking without any hold on the public sphere. In another representation, third world women are shown as sex objects. “Eroticised, unclothed ‘native’ women representing the need to be ‘civilized’ through their contact with the colonizer may appear, at first sight, to be different from their fully clothed counterpart in the zenana representation. However, both images define ‘Third World woman’ as inferior and subjugated- the object of sexual desire” (28). This imagery is deployed in the practice of sex tourism in Thailand and Korea. Thirdly, Western and Western-trained feminist writings often portray third world women as victims. They intervene in the condition of women of different cultures based on their claims to know the shared and gendered oppression of women.

Western feminists are ignorant of the indigenous roots of third world feminisms. First world feminists’ belief that feminism originated only in North America and Europe and any other feminist activities are mere copies of this original feminism is refuted by the third world feminists like Kumari Jayawardene and Uma Narayanan. They argue that feminism is not an ideology imposed by the West on the third world but has existed in the third world countries as long ago as in the first world countries. In third world countries, women’s liberation movements usually emerged in the contexts of nationalist struggle of independence from colonial powers (Freedman 82).
Indian Feminisms (2001), Jasbir Jain opines, “feminism is not entirely of the West. It has its indigenous roots. The idea of a ‘self’ does not exist in abstraction. It is deeply rooted in one’s awareness of one’s body, and is moulded by socio cultural patterns” (9-11). In Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s words, any discussions on third world feminism must address two simultaneous projects: “the internal critique of hegemonic ‘Western’ feminisms, and the formulation of autonomous, geographically, historically, and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies” (172).

**Readings on Female Representation in Indian Context:**

The feminist critic of the postcolonial India has to contend with the the construction of Indian womanhood by the colonial discourse or Western feminist criticism, and the oppressive and stultifying patriarchal structures of the society (Parker 23). Indian feminists are concerned with the intersection of gender with caste or class, sexualities, nationality while analysing the representation of women in society or literature. As Shirin Kudchedkar comments that in the case of the third world, “the feminist voice cannot confine itself to women’s issues, women’s relationship, women’s oppression, women’s fulfilment. If that ‘the personal is political’ is the great discovery of the Western feminist movement, the third world feminist also insists that the political is personal” (10). Maya Pandit in “Towards Indian Feminist Literary Criticism” opines that theories of women’s liberation as well as movements against oppression have become the part of women’s movement in India. Liberal and Gandhian perspective on Marxian and ecofeminist theories have structured its theoretical frameworks. She points out that feminist literary
criticism can be traced in the works of women writers like Tarabai Shinde in nineteenth century India. Women’s issues have been part of cultural and political movements in India from the colonial days. Yet, a spurt of feminist literary criticism has evolved in Indian academia under the influence of radical and liberal feminist approaches that developed in the West by the 1960s. Women’s Studies, gender studies, and feminism have become established as significant disciplines in Indian academics. Recently it is understood that exploring gender issues without taking into consideration other power structures operative in the society such as caste, and class will be superficial. Maya Pandit remarks, “there have been significant beginnings of research which are based upon the assumption that there are different ideologies of gender and they are class and caste and race bound” (310). One strand of Indian feminist criticism attempts to reconstruct the history of women’s writing in India. This method has been incorporated in works like as Women writing in India: 600 BC to the Present (1991) by Tharu and Lalita, and In Other Worlds: Essays In Cultural Politics (1987) by Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak. Susie Tharu comments in the article “Women’s writing in India: Questions for a New Literary History”, that traditional canons have included only a few women, and they are included after “the cutting edge of their writing has been blunted” (9). So feminist scholarship must not only retrieve women’s literature but also provide the contexts within which that literature emerge.

It must provide the contexts, historical and critical, within which the significance of women’s text might emerge as might the
meaning of their silences. What are the social, economic and ideological forces that have a bearing on women’s writing, critics asked: how may we illuminate the aesthetic strategies that characterise it in different periods? (2)

In *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* Spivak analyses Mahashweta Devi’s works using subaltern politics, and shows how Devi subvert imperialist and patriarchal practices. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid’s *Recasting Women* (1989) locate women’s writing in the context of colonialism and social reformism that “defined woman as a prime site of constructing the concept of ‘nation’” (M. Pandit 311).

Feminists like Susie Tharu, K. Lalita, Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid, Uma Chakravarti, and Partha Chatterjee probe the representation of women during the colonial period. Deterioration of Indian civilization and abject condition of Indian women were focused in the colonial history of India. It was often used to justify colonial ideology, that is, “India was the white man’s burden and their government essential to its salvation” (Tharu and Lalita 1:10). The reformers who wanted to rebut the colonial charges tried to improve the status of women. Thus, women’s question became a focal point of concern for colonial rulers as well as for the reformers. During the period of Indian reformation which began in the nineteenth century, the glory of Vedic period and the high status of Vedic women were foregrounded to rebut the colonial charges. The Orientalists like Max Muller largely popularized a racist Aryan version of the Hindu golden age, and this influenced the later Indian thought. Uma Chakravarti points out the problems with the Orientalists
and the nineteenth century Nationalists’ representation of women. They attempted to recast Indian womanhood based on the image of women in the ancient Vedic times, perpetuating the myth of the golden age of Indian Womanhood. While claiming the period as golden period where women were educated and powerful, they were foregrounding Aryan women as the only object of historical concern, and “the Vedic dasi” or the majority of lower class/caste women are not important in their perspective (Chakravarti, “Whatever” 28). Moreover, their perception of the past that glorifies its lost glory was often tending to be a burden for women (28), as the colonial writers and the early historians engaged in the construction of a peculiar kind of womanhood. They failed to see the multitudes of women belonging to the lower castes and class section during the Vedic golden age. “The 20th c has continued to reproduce, in all essentials, the same kind of womanhood that the 19th c has so carefully and so successfully constructed as an enduring legacy for us” (Chakravarti, “Whatever” 79). The social distance between the ‘new woman’ and the lower class women and the less educated sisters increased. Tharu and Lalita comment that the new bourgeoisie inscribed its identity on the body and souls of women and ‘the proper woman’ was born. This paved the way for moulding a new respectability for middle class women (9).

Partha Chatterjee probes into the nationalist resolution of the ‘Women’s Question’. The nationalist ideology proclaimed that the East was superior to the material culture of the West in the spiritual domain, and so we should retain the spiritual distinction of our culture, and should protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture. The outer world is part of the
material world, and the home represents the inner spiritual self, or the identity. “The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world--and woman is its representation” (238-239) and “The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality” (243). There developed home/world, spiritual/material/ feminine/masculine dichotomies. Nationalism resolved the women’s question on this central principle. The threat of westernization was one of the main themes of the literature of the period. This ‘new’ woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy, and was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous culture. The new woman was a reversal not only of the Western woman, but also different from the common women or lower class women who were considered as coarse, vulgar, loud, and quarrelsome. Such representations stressing the cultural superiority of ‘the new woman’ were commonly found in the literature of the period. The new patriarchy that was evolved during this time considered formal education a requirement for the new bhadramahila or respectable woman of the household as it was possible for “a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home” (Chatterjee 246). She could explore the world outside, “But the ‘spiritual’ signs of her femininity were now clearly marked in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanour, her religiosity” (247-248). Men might change in their dress, food habits, religious observances etc. but it had to be compensated by the spiritual purity on the part of women (248). This
dominant middle class culture made popular the Sati-Savitri construct through literature and art of the period; and inculcated in women spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, etc. This spirituality did not impede the woman from moving out of the physical confines of home; she could go out under conditions that would not threaten her femininity.

Only the women of upper middle class were the recipients of the fruits of social reforms of the colonial government and the early reformers. Indian women largely entered into the nationalist struggle for freedom, but women were exhorted to serve the nation with their abilities of caring and nurturing, and to be mothers in the joint family that is India. However, often women’s ‘natural’ qualities of love and suffering were connected with the concept of Satyagraha. Women’s ‘essential’ qualities were more recognized as a deserving quality for their public entrance, than admitting women’s intellectual competence as equal to that of men. Consequently, equal recognition in the public domain as full participants in the national or political struggle was hardly ensured to women (Devika, *En-gendering* 207-208). Even in the middle of their active participation in the social, political and literary sphere, women were represented more in terms of their ‘essential womanliness’ than the intellectual competence. Therefore, many of the women leaders, very active during the early decades of twentieth century failed to get enough attention in the later politics.

Tharu and Lalita show how the political and ideological change that happened in Indian society during the colonial time adversely affected women’s literary production and consumption (1:8). The works of many
women artists like Muddupalani were banned, and the artists were led to penury. The stigma continued in the postcolonial era also as “the interests of empire and of nation are not always in contradiction” (1:14) in matters of class, caste and gender. The middle class women were warned against the licentiousness of wandering women artists; and to keep themselves away from the corrupting influence of their works. The colonialists believed that Indian literature is incapable of moral and mental cultivation of the people. The carefully selected canons of English literature are introduced in Indian universities in order to inculcate in people a taste that will appreciate colonial rule and ethics. Thus, “Colonial restructurings of gender and the curricular institutionalization of literature...” (Tharu and Lalita 1:11) marginalised and destroyed Indian literatures, and the societies that generated them. As society becomes more rigid, the number of women writing also becomes less. In Ania Loomba’s words,

In the process, entire traditions of female expression and communication were delegitimized. Nationalist and colonialist patriarchal thought ironically collaborated in repressing deviant femininity. As several critics have pointed out, "tradition" and "modernity" as well as "India" and "the West" were being debated via the question of Indian womanhood. (“Tangled” 272)

Cheralyn Mealor in *A Historical Companion to Postcolonial Literature in English* (2005) opines that Anglicisation is a primary strategy of domination employed to maintain and expand control of the colonies. The administrative, legal and bureaucratic apparatus of colonial rule and other
institutions like churches and schools aided the process of Anglicisation and “its devastating effects on the cultures of indigenous populations. Education played a crucial role in this process and…the rhetoric of the ‘civilizing mission’ sought to legitimise this enterprise” (6). Gauri Viswanathan, in *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989), comments that the British policy reduced native learning to an archaic institution (45). The study of English literature was established on the curriculum with the hope that it would disseminate the belief in English cultural, intellectual and moral supremacy. This strategy put a mask on the reality of colonial subjugation. Most of the modern literature began with English education.

Maya Pandit points out two problems with the Indian feminist literary criticism that is concerned with the reconstruction of literary history. The major part of our cultural and literary tradition remains invisible in the oral tradition of India. Women are main transmitters of oral tradition and the rich body of folk tradition in India. It was often created and imparted through the mouth of ordinary people working in the fields, was popular from the twelfth to nineteenth century, and was different in different regions and communities. Women who subvert the hegemony of feudalism, casteism and patriarchy are also a conspicuous presence in some folk songs. Dominance of print culture and the subordination of the nomads, the tribes, and peasants have undermined the significance of oral traditions. The second problem is that many works about the representation of women during the colonial period deal with elitist trends in ideologies of nationalism and empire, and they do
not give much attention to the marginalised people’s attempts to define nationalism and gender (313).

Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana in “Problems for a contemporary Theory of Gender” are concerned with the representation of women in the contemporary society. They draw attention to the visibility women’s issues gets all of a sudden in Indian media, politics and academics (494). However, this sometimes puts feminist movements at crossroads. Often anti-secular, anti-dalit movements in India project women activists who are aggressive, and hardly submissive and then feminists find it difficult to distinguish their stand from the fundamentalist, caste, and class movements. Feminists arguing for uniform civil code find it difficult to distinguish their stand with aggressively anti-Muslim lobby. “Women on the Right have also opened up a space that might in many ways regarded as a feminist”(511), and women often come out as active political subjects in communal politics. Therefore, “the crisis in feminism is clearly related to the crisis of democracy and secularism in our time” (495).

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan observes how in the contemporary society femaleness is constructed by the dominant mode of ideology of patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, and consumerism; and “What is required here is an alertness to the political process by which such representation becomes naturalized and ultimately coercive in structuring women’s self-representation” (Real, 129). She analyses the emergence of ‘new Indian woman’ through advertisement, media and official discourses in contemporary India. This ‘new woman’ is ‘modern’, liberated with a pan
Indian identity, who is exercising conscious and deliberate choice as a consumer for herself and for the family((130-31). The new woman hardly resists conventions and thereby idealizes concepts of conjugal or domesticity (132). The notion that the female is the prime bearers of domestic duties is stressed by projecting the image of “insouciant and elegant housewife” (132) who ‘wisely’ uses advertisement products for cleaning and washing. This liberated, new woman is represented as the outcome of capitalist socio-economic forces, and so is totally separated from the contemporary women’s politics and movements. Analysing various representations of women of the past and the present in the media, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan comments: “In the representations of both kinds of women—women in history and myth who are ‘modern’, as well as contemporary women who are ‘traditional’—women (and religion) are made to serve as harmonious symbols of historical continuity rather than as conflictual subjects or sites of conflict” (135).

In “English Literary Studies, Women's Studies and Feminism in India” Rajeswari Sunder Rajan probes the feminisation of English literary studies in India. More female students opt for it; and the image of the high class bourgeois Indian women liberated through their exposure to English education has been popular from the colonial period. She comments that, “Between the feminisation of the discipline and feminism there exists not only no natural identity but in fact an active opposition. The discipline's female following implies a trivialisation of its content, whereas a feminist pedagogy would call for a radicalisation of its politics” (67). She observes
that feminist literary criticism in India has not had as much impact on the women’s movement in India, as it had in the West through the texts like *Sexual Politics* (1970). Here feminist studies has drawn much from the cultural studies, and as a result English literary studies often transgresses the disciplinary boundaries while engaging in feminist analysis:

And feminist scholarship in India has engaged ‘representation’ very broadly, well beyond the investigation of ‘images of women’. Representation is instead the dynamic process whereby the forces of reform, regulation, and ideological self-fashioning ‘recast’ women through a variety of textually encoded forms such as law, religious texts, myth and legend, conduct books, manuals, theatre and oral performances, devotional songs, sermons, popular literature. Any and all of these cultural texts therefore invite critical reading, interpretation and recuperation. (69)

In “Feminism and Cultural Studies in Asia” Tejaswini Niranjana speculates on the link between the cultural studies and feminism. She points out that while in the western discourses women are identified with nature, and the opposition is set between women and culture. In the non-Western countries with colonial background women are opposed with modernity, and identified with culture (210). In Asian countries, “feminism is foundational to the emergence of the new area of cultural studies . . .” (211).
Outlining the Female Literary Tradition of India:

Examining the literary traditions of India, Mandakranta Bose comments that women in India always “left their mark, sometimes faint but often strong, in the form of poetry” (viii). In the Introduction of Women Writing in India: 600B.C. to the Present, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita comment that the earliest known anthology of women’s literature possibly anywhere in the world Therigatha was the collection of songs composed by the Buddhist theris, or senior nuns, of the sixth century B.C. (1:65). Buddhist nuns’ poems express women’s joy at finding freedom from the drudgery of everyday life, and at achieving not merely social but spiritual liberation. Many poems of Sangam period between 50 BCE -250 CE, carry women’s signature, and the poems are divided into two genres--akam that deals with inner space and often love poems; and the yard, court, the public life and the battlefield enter in the puram poems. The young women of akam poems are made for love, and the older women of puram poems are mother of grown up sons or a courtesan or a widow (Tharu and Lalita 1: 71). With the eight century Tamil poet Karraikal Ammaiayar, begins a long line women poet–saints of medieval bhakti movement in India. A large number of bhakti poets were women whose poetry spread not only in the court but also moved into fields, hearth ,and open places as they wrote in the regional language as a protest against the literary and religious hold of Sanskrit (57). Women poets largely came into the movement resisting the strictures of the family and domestic chores. The biographies of the poet saints like Akka Mahadevi and Mirabai usually begin with the break from family, community and socially sanctioned roles for
women; and in order to get acceptance within this movement women poets had to struggle hard and face harsh trials. Powerful representation of women who found strength through the search of divine and their own self through poetry and songs can be found from their works. In Chandra Nisha Singh’s opinion, “In the rebel women poets of the medieval period, a strategic, if not wholly conscious, inversion of sexuality can be seen in the paradoxical fusion between the erotic and the religious” (274).

Geraldine Forbes in “Education for Women”, comments that among the earliest women’s memoirs from the nineteenth century are stories of passionate desire to learn to read (83). However, in early India “If learning to read would lead to a husband’s death, then pursuing knowledge was tantamount to suicide” (84). In Geraldine Forbes’ opinion the British rulers, Indian male reformers, and educated Indian women were the three sections who promoted female education. The British promoted English education to ensure loyalty. The reformers believed women education would save the society from backwardness and decadence; and the educated Indian man yearned for companionship and support from educated women. Educated women of reformist families started challenging their subordinate position and that paved the way of the birth of women’s organization. Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain(1880-1932) were a few among those women who raised their voice for women’s education and rights. Forbes comments that while the first generation of educated women found a voice by writing about their lives, the second generation of women acted (107). The early women’s organizations did not
espouse radical change owing to the vehement protest of conservative society, and they did not depart from the image of radical change. “The educational system was overwhelmingly conservative, but the education of women had unexpected and unanticipated consequences” (Forbes 107). The conservatives feared that education might make women disobedient; and learned women were harassed and ostracized, and the demand for different kind of education for women was raised (107). Therefore, “By straining for new lives, ‘new women’ learned where the boundaries were and just how far they could go. But this was a dynamic process; women were becoming educated and then becoming educators” (107).

Jasbir Jain, in Feminizing Political Discourse: Women and the Novel in India (1997) enquires the beginning of novel as a form, and its roots in Indian tradition. She traces the transition of status from women as listeners of novel, and readers of novel, to writers of novel. Jasbir Jain probes into the centrality of women in the late nineteenth century novels in India. Fiction provides a more comprehensive handling of the widely discussed women’s issues of the period than any other mode of expression (45). It projects women in a complex social structure related with caste, class, and gender. The image of woman is used as a symbol of rebellion or heroic values; or the image of bhadramahila is projected to arouse patriotic values. The print facilitated the transference of women’s roles from listener to reader (46), but women’s reading was mainly limited to the upper and middle class. Women have been the subject matter in the literary masterpieces written by men. Early male writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Jainendra
Kumar, and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee have created many memorable portraits of women. Jasbir Jain comments that in such novels “Even in their boldest ventures, even when they acquire new roles and identities, they do not abandon the traditional moral values associated with feminine behaviour” (Feminizing 81). Indira Nityanandam in her work Three Great Indian Women Novelists (2000), comments that in earlier Indian novels written by male novelists women were represented more as symbols and less as people. They were portrayed in one-dimensional manner as virgin-heroine, temptress, the dutiful daughter or all sacrificing mother, the Pativrata or redundant widow. “These women characters could be epitomes of virtue or beauty or sensuality but never real women. Their obvious passivity doomed them to a secondary position and a life of submission and pushed them further into stereotyped roles which the male writers and male characters envisaged for them” (11).

The first novels of Malayalam also evolved under the effect of English education, and centrality of women was conspicuous by their eponymous heroines. Those novels were aimed at women readers. The author of the first novel in Malayalam, Appu Nedungadi states in the preface of Kundalata (1887): “this book will be useful to have harmless pleasures for those who have no knowledge of English language and also for those women for whom passing time is a task as they have no tight work schedule”(qtd.in Ravindran 160 ). Chandu Menon who was in the service of British government during 1880s had the habit of reading English novels, decided to write something like an English novel in Malayalam at the request of his wife. The central theme of his novel, Indulekha (1889) itself is woman of this transition period
who has knowledge of English. The author hints that English gave Indulekha
the power to select her partner, to defy the Karanavar, to restrain her
sentiments, to argue supporting women’s right to select their husband, to put
an end to an unwanted alliance and to strongly defy Brahmin hegemony.
Thereby a new heroine is born along with the changing scenario of the
society. The novelist projects through the novel a new feminine symbol who
is familiarized with “the education, knowledge, and customs generally taught
to a young lady in England” (C.Menon 7) and yet “she was keenly aware of
her Malayali identity” (7) and hardly deviates from feminine virtues. The
novelist obviously projected the image of the ‘new woman’ that was
emerging during the reformation period, but he was careful not to subvert the
gender stereotyping. In Devika’s opinion, “In this strategy, the new ideals are
posed in such a way that they do not seem to threaten the older order by
displacing it. Rather, their role is projected as limited to elevating the better
elements of the older order, and thus strengthening it” (En-gendering 103).
In a recent study on Indulekha (1889), Dr. P.K Rajashekharan and Dr. P
Venugopal probe how the concluding part of the novel, which is an appeal to
the need of women’s education, freedom, and equality has been omitted in the
publications of the novel after the 1950 onwards. The authors allege that the
intervention of the patriarchal politics of Kerala during the 1950s has
deformed the novel. In the concluding part of the novel, the novelist exhorts
women to equip themselves with English education, and thereby to acquire
the knowledge that is needed for the modern day, which would assist them to
be free and equal with men (18-23). The novelist also mentions of the
discussions going on during that time in the Indian society regarding female education. It was believed that English education for women would pose a threat to the society, as it would provoke women to imitate western culture and that would erode the morality and ethics. Chandu Menon decries this arguments in the concluding part of the novel (23). The novel had been translated to English by W. Dumergue in 1890 itself.

The novel *The Slayer Slain* (2003) written in the nineteenth century by Mrs Frances Wright Collins is an early novel in English written by a colonial master about the colonized. The novel is set in the background of nineteenth century Kottayam and the Meenachal River, and it tells the story of a Syrian Christian family. The author was the wife of Rev. Richard Collins the missionary, and both settled in Kerala. As Mrs Collins died before completing the novel, the last chapters were written by her husband Rev. Richard Collins, and was published in serials in the first ever college Magazine *Vidya Sangrah* of CMS College, Kottyam from 1964. He also translated the novel into Malayalam and published it as *Khadhakavadham*. The main theme is the evolution of Mariam from an innocent girl to mature one as the result of her education she received at the missionary school. Sheeju. N. V. opines that, “The portrayal of Mariam’s character is no exception to the linear delineation of personality. The character of Mariam may be read along with the colonial project and process of creating Indian bodies with European souls. The first thing that strikes us about Mariam is that she is a Malayali girl (woman) with European ideas and feelings” (254). The shift in the point of view is obvious from chapter sixteen, as from here onwards the focus of the novel shifts from
Mariam to the ideology of religion like love, faith, conversion and sin. Rev. Collins opinions on conversion are clearly reflected in the concluding chapters.

It was by the mid nineteenth century, women shifted from their status as the listeners and readers of the novel to realize their new role as writers. At first, they contributed to prose, letters, diaries, memoirs, historical accounts, and satirical pieces (Jain, Feminizing 148). Works like Pandita Ramabai’s *High Caste Hindu Women* (1888), and Tarabai Shinde’s *Stri Purush Tulana* (1882) are fearless criticism of patriarchal system. Evidently, women were perturbed by their own condition and they initiated a counter discourse with which they questioned the normative ideals of patriarchy (133). Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) in her work *Love and Life Behind the Purdah* published in 1901 satirises the domineering attitude of the male centered society. Krupabai Satthianadhan (1862-1894), and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) who wrote in English made bold representations through their works. Hossain’s *Sultana’a Dream* depicts a feminist utopia in which women run everything and men are secluded in purdah. Jasbir Jain claims that the works of the early women writers differ from their male predecessors. “There is a shift from married or abandoned women to questions which relate to the formation of the female self. Women are beginning to be seen as active agents of the making of their selves . . . and as individuals endowed with psychological perceptions…” (Feminizing 148). They returned to the concerns of domesticity, and it presents a counter discourse to reformist movements, which had used women’s issues for political purpose and as a
means of strengthening the myth of heroic self-sacrificing Indian woman (148-149). “The women writers, in contrast, return to the self; they resist from politicizing the discourse and are, to that extent, subversive, but of that later” (149).

**Representing Gender in the Social and Literary Context of Kerala:**

The patriarchal social structure of old Kerala can be adequately read only in connection with the caste system in the society. Society was largely controlled by feudal and caste system that stipulated the observance of caste rules. In early Kerala, women’s freedom and mobility were controlled by caste rules (Ganesh 213). The main concern of caste system thus was to avoid the danger of admixture of blood, and that the blood of the low caste man should never ‘defile’ the progeny of an upper caste man. It was believed that as far as women were not strictly controlled, the purity of the caste and the religious rituals could not be maintained. Strict means therefore were deployed to avoid the admixture of blood (Haridas 29-31). Therefore, the belief of pollution was deeply rooted in old Kerala, and was often attached to women and low castes alike, as many inhibitions existed for women also during the time of menstruations and delivery. However, here also, it is incongruous to equate the condition of women of the upper castes, and the lower castes; since the lower caste invariably faced the social stigma, and indignation from the upper caste men as well as women. A woman as a low caste was under the duress of multipronged exploitation as Uma Chakravarti mentions: “the sexual availability of lower caste women was part of the material structure of the domination by the higher castes . . . ”(Gendering 85-
Yet owing to women’s participation in the production and due to the existence of bride price, girls were not unwelcome guests to the families of lower castes. Moreover, widow marriage, divorce and mobility of women were not restricted. Powerful upper caste men’s control on the body of the lower caste women was often represented through folk songs like “Pumathai Ponnamma”.

Power and freedom of Kerala women was often discussed in connection with the matriliny which existed in Kerala among various castes like Nair and communities like Muslims. Though social and political power was vested in men, the wealth was passed through women, and the birth of a female child was considered a fortune. There was no practice of dowry and women after marriage did not have to leave their home (Anandi 55) Owing to the matrilineal tradition, the concept of women in old Kerala had much importance in the matter of lineage, family concepts, and the concepts of goddess. M.R.Raghava Warrior talks of the importance of *thavazhi* or mother’s lineage in Malayalee’s life over patriliny. Malayalees mainly worshipped goddesses or Bhagavatis, and goddess was situated in *kavus*; and they imagined a sisterly or mother daughter relationship between various goddesses. The concept of family in *Thottampattu* also had maternal lineage. In Raghava Warrier’s opinion the changes that later brought to matriliny were mainly due to Malayalee’s eagerness to imitate western values (18). In G. Arunima’s views it was during the colonial period that the evolution of a patriarchal figure in the person of the eldest uncle occurred (“Multiple” 149). Colonial rulers invested greater rights with the head of the family by legally
granting natural headship to the elder male member or *karanavar*. Colonial rule redefined matriliny and institutions related to it, and mother child unit was represented as purely domestic or apolitical (149). Arunima argues that until the nineteenth century, power differences within the household were more along lines of generation than gender that is matrilineal *tharavadu* were managed by older women, and women could move out to create a new branch. (153-54). Earlier in Kerala knowledge about *thavazhi* (mother’s lineage) was enough, and the patriarchal colonial rules recognised father as the owner of property and progeny. Through colonial writings, there spread various myths regarding matrilineal women’s immorality, and sexual practices within matriliny were brought under severe criticism. The matrilineal past disturbed those middle class who were educated by colonial standards. A new ideology was popularised related with female virtue, womanhood, and conjugal love; and the control on women’s sexuality and fertility heightened. (159). In Meera Velayudhan’s words, the legal and ideological pressure of the modern society to abolish matriliny weighed heavily against Ezhava women also. “It projected women as dependent and subordinate members in the family and men as heads of household, and argued that the male authority was derived from ‘natural law’ and that was ‘the way civilization moved’” (“The Reform” 71).

Spread of modern education increased the impetus of change further in many aspects of life in colonial India. The first women’s movement in Kerala Marumarakkal Samaram or Upper Cloth Revolt evolved among the low caste Channar women who were converted to Christianity, for the right to wear
upper garment. Pulaya women’s struggle against ‘Kallumale’ a heavy necklace they had been compelled to wear, was another upsurge against the regulations of casteism. “The social awakening among women in the early 30s is reflected in the wide range of organised activities witnessed during this period. The emergence of prominent, educated women is a notable feature” (Velayudhan, “The Growth” 497). The rise of printing press and printed media as well as literature brought a major social and intellectual arousal in Kerala. Women came to know about the social changes through the rise of media. The educated women of the early twentieth century raised the issue, and they participated and contributed to the reformist movement. J. Devika in Her-Self: Gender and Early Writings of Malayalee Women (2007) has collected the articles of women whom she calls “the first generation of Malayalee Feminists” (xx), and who wrote between 1890 and 1930. But after this period, their writings almost declined and some of them are little remembered and some are remembered not in terms of their actual contributions. Anna Chandy (1905-1996) is known not as a powerful feminist intellectual but as the first Malayalee woman to become a judge and Lalitambika Antarjanam not in terms of her powerful critique of gender bias in society but as the epitome of motherliness (xx). Anna Chandy vociferously argues for women’s employment deflating the popular demand of the time that married woman should not be granted employment (125). Devika and Mini Sukumar observe:

These women also sought to politicise the category of ‘women’, projecting ‘women’ as a group that faced common forms of
oppression despite their differences in location and social endowment. This was evident in their demands for greater representation of women in the new political institutions such as legislatures, and reservation for women in government employment. (4470)

At the same time, there occurred in the society, different attempts to undermine women’s social, political and educational growth. The demands for separate and different training for the sexes; and the controversies over the issue of women becoming westernized through education, and the discussions on the threats such a situation would pose to family were a few examples. Devika analyses the changes that happened in modern Kerala society from caste based to gender based society by the beginning of the twentieth century where gender became “the key principal of social ordering” (En-gendering 35). During the period, there witnessed “the institutionalisation of a set of domestic practices in and through women . . .” (65). Women were held as responsible for maintaining modern family values and practices; and the concept of ideal man and woman gained popularity. The two distinct social domains-- the public and domestic--were considered as naturally ordained for them (65). Women were allowed to enter in the public field and to engage in works only by abiding the social norms on womanliness: “This entry of women into the public domain without any necessary threat to their womanliness--has come to figure prominently in the picture of Keralam’s ‘progressiveness’ . . .” (210). The literary public field that evolved in Kerala by the end of the nineteenth century was male centred. Writing, reading,
criticism, publications are done by male, so it was accepted that literature should satisfy the tastes of men. Women writers of the period had to write either in accordance with or resisting these accepted notions. The person who is writing was considered as male, and the literary text was considered as woman. Therefore, women engaged in writing were attributed masculine qualities (Devika, “Malayalathinte” 36). When women engaged in writing they were expected to convey and reflect feminine virtues. Liberal humanist thoughts of the period considered literature would mould people and humanity and according to which women writers were expected to lead people to the right path, and the genres that are palpable to women are children’s literature and moral stories (42). Through illuminating their own virtues, they were expected to purify readers. An early women writer in Malayalam, Tottaikkattu Ikkavu Amma (1865-1916) who wrote about ten books including Subhadrarjunam (1892) believed that, in the matter of literary pursuits, women had equal rights and talents as men and wrote vociferously in support of women writers.

Did not Satyabhama give a valiant fight?

Did not Subhadra drive the Chariot?

Does not Victoria rule over the whole world?

If women are adept in all these crafts,

How is that they are incapable of writing high quality of poetry? (qtd.in Narayanan 79-80)

The formation of female self in Malayalam literature began to evolve with works of Lalitambika Antarjanam (1909-1988). She found her space
within the modern literary field, resisting various social impediments. In 1934, she wrote a play *A New Birth* (*Savitrikutty*) about the tragic plight of a young widow and remarriage of the widow, and it became a huge success but she chose not to publish it. “A vague fear prevented me from doing so….I did not even have it printed. I did have the satisfaction that the play achieved what I had hoped it would, and that its message had been fulfilled” (*Cast Me 167*). Geeta, the feminist critic of Malayalam, opines that Lalitambika Antarjanam though a reformer and writer activist was hardly discussed with V.T. Bhatathiripadu or M.R.B, and she was more discussed as a writer and this reveals the double standard of reformism. The concept of reformism was man deciding what is best for women (*Pettunovum* 20). Lalitambika Antarjanam through her stories unveiled the gender politics of the contemporary literature and society, and in the story “Ithu Asasyamano” or “Is This Desirable” (1935) she mocks at the double standard of male reformer. The male reformer in the story pretends like a liberal in front of the public and behaves like a despot within the household. So in her stories women are often envisaged as a greater presence that cannot be controlled by the reformist man (*Devika, En-gendering* 245). She also touchingly reveals the conflict of a female writer who struggles between her creativity and the demands of society that stipulate women to bear the burden of household chores, which often steal her whole time:

All this must certainly have weakened my position in the world of art, for I have never been able to write a poem or a novel or an article that demanded deep concentrated thought and
experience, that monopolized my time and attention. Unhappily, I also had impudence to take on the role of a social reformer”. (Cast Me 160)

In Geeta’s opinion her memoirs, Athmakadhakoramukham (1979) should be considered as her contribution to feminism, since it is a work in which a female writer analyses the text and context of her own writings (“Sthreekal” 39).

Lalitambika Antarjanam's novel, Agnisakshi (1976) represents different facets in the life of women who lived during the period of reformation of Indian society. When the oppressive traditions and customs made her existence unbearable Thethikkutty leaves her husband and becomes an activist, Devaki Manambally, a leading member of National movement, and in the post independence India a Gandhian and later a sage Sumitrananda. Lalitambika writes that she represents three faces of women of the early generation, as the author knows the life of some women activists who left their house for social reformation and freedom struggle and later became sages (Antarjanam, Cast Me 106). In the independent India, they did not become ministers, leaders or even committee members (68). Thankam, the girl who got the fervour of social reformation through her mother’s words and through the books and the magazines, was herself a victim of Brahmin domination. Resisting this tradition, she fights for higher education. However, later as Mrs. Nair married to an employee of the British government, she leads a complacent life in cities, and fully engages in domestic duties
alienated herself from the nationalist movement as a typical ‘modern’ wife of the period.

The quest for female self is vigorously pursued in the works of K. Saraswati Amma (1919—1975), who is known as an outstanding feminist writer of modern age. Her writing was an uncompromising struggle against male domination in familial, social and literary circles. So she was largely neglected during her lifetime. Her stories reveal the disillusions women face within the marriage and under the burden of household chores. Often love becomes a trap for women since in life they are forced to remain a subordinate. Saraswathi Amma’s stories put forward a new concept of family, and raise the women’s voice for emancipation (Geeta, Pettunovum 32). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in their anthology of women’s writings in India remark of Saraswathi Amma: “She wrote long before the resurgence in the seventies of the women’s movement, without much support from other women, and in the face of derogatory and dismissive critical reception. Many of her stories illustrate different aspects of well-developed feminist theories”(1:165).

Rajalakshmi (1930-1965) who committed suicide at the age of thirty-five, was a victim of androcentric attitude of the society. She conceded that she was going to die because she could not put an end to her writing; if she continued to live, she would write. She was forced to stop the publication of her third novel midway through it while it was being serialised. Geeta opines that Rajalakshmi’s life, death and her writings testify to the stains of searing gender discrimination existing in the society against a woman as a person and a writer (Pettunovum 44). P.Valsala says that she started writing to transcend
the limitation of a woman (46). These women writers in their search for an authentic female self depict women characters who have personal convictions, and who engage in different modes of resistance against oppressive and constraining norms of the society. The women in their novels are different in many ways from the female characters depicted by male writers of the period (Geeta, Pettunovum 46). They deal with themes like double burden women bear within the household duties and their vocation; the struggle women writers face to find time to do justice to her creativity, and the disillusions women face within the confines of domestic duties. Dr.Akavoor Narayanan discerns certain dissimilarity in writing: “Here too one distinction is discernible, I think. It is the writing of those who have led a normal, happy and contented conjugal life with children that we get a realistic, balanced, genuine and wholesome image of womanhood. In other cases, what we often get is a partial distorted and prejudiced representation” (84). These types of criticism often tend to do harm to women writers who engage in their creativity resisting the accepted gender norms of society.

Madhavikutty or Kamala Das or Kamala Suraiyya (1934-2009) perplexed the Kerala society with her adoption of different identities as well as with her writings that sought different dimensions of female self hitherto unexplored by a writer in Malayalam. She reveals a wide range of feminine identities and emotions, and openly writes about female body, sexuality and various political and social issues pertaining to female life. “Entrenched literary criticism in Malayalam has, since the mid-20th century developed specific strategies of "taming", in the writings of such authors as Lalitambika
Antarjanam, K Saraswati Amma, and Madhavikutty, which systematically reduced to the terms set by modern gender ideology” (Devika and Sukumar 4473). Sara Joseph’s stories openly quarrel with the ideology of patriarchy. Pennezhuthu or women’s writing as a political term gained popularity with Sara Joseph’s writings in which she seeks the identity of women, and their relationship with men, with nature, or with the locality. She is an activist and writer; and through her political and fictional writings, she openly resists the capitalist, consumerist, patriarchal society. Her writing raises staunch criticism at the sexist norms of religion, society and family. The women writers who entered after 1990s like S.Sithara, Priya A.S and Indu Menon, K. R. Meera are remarkably bold in presentation of the issues related with body, life, and society. Khadeeja Mumthas in Barsa (2007), a novel with the title that denotes one whose face is uncovered, voices the doubts a woman believer who confronts the male centred ethics of society and religion. Though Valsala’s novel to a certain extent adopts a subaltern perspective, not much depiction of dalit or the marginalised life are there in women writings. Nalini Jameela’s autobiography raises the voice of a sex worker and issues related with the life of a sex worker. J Devika and Mini Sukumaran analyse the acceptability of feminist critical studies in Kerala.

The present seems to one that holds possibilities for us. On the one hand, women’s literary writing has now gained a fairly wide market. There should be no underestimation of the power of the market to tame even the most recalcitrant of literatures. However, younger women authors are managing to break
stereotypes . . . If many of these authors have rejected the identification of their writing as pennezhuthu, it is precisely because we have been unable to transform it into an enabling, rather than limiting category. Importantly, this rejection has not deterred these authors from building incisive critiques of contemporary patriarchy. On the other, feminist social critique outside literature has grown both in volume and variety: now it draws upon a wide variety of disciplines, including anthropology, history, literary criticism, cultural studies and political science. Few of these retain notions of homogeneous Malayalee Womanhood. . . . (4474)

**Woman in Indian Writing in English:**

The history of Indian Women Novelists in English commences with Toru Dutt who lived during the period from 1856 to 1877 (A.Prasad 315). In *Twice Born Fiction* (1971), Meenakshi Mukherjee comments that the works of the early Indian English writers like Dutt and Manmohan Gosh who belonged to highly westernized families, were not natural products of the general social and cultural conditions of the time. Therefore, they cannot be evaluated against the history and geography of the India of their time, and their works were written in the Victorian idiom (17-18). Susie Tharu in “Tracing Savitri’s Pedigree” considers the early Indian English literature as the products of Indo-British encounter. (257). Toru Dutt’s poem “Savitri” is an attempt to rebut the negative image the British projected on Indian womanhood; and Savitri’s purity and virtue closely match the Victorian concept of sexual purity in women (261). Sarojini Naidu projects the Indian locality as refined
and befitting to the taste of the British, while “Toru Dutt transforms the Indian landscape morally into a western one and her heroines to virtuous Victorians”(262). This pattern shows up repeatedly in Indian English writings like Kamala Markandeya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* (1977). The Victorian concepts of purity and restraint are projected in Aurobindo’s “Savitri”, and in the character of Savitri in Raja Rao’s *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). Susie Tharu comments that “The burden of saving the nation politically (Gandhi), spiritually (Aurobindo) aesthetically (Raja Rao) is on the feminine”(265), and for that women are represented as the symbol of purity and modesty. In her opinion, in order to probe the representation of women in Indian English writings, it is necessarily to analyse the link between patriarchy and emerging nationalism (265).

In *The Twice Born Fiction* (1971), Meenakshi Mukherjee discusses the problems related with creativity and the literary production faced generally by Indian English writers. In her opinion, Indian English literature faces two large handicaps viz. “first, it endeavours to create literature in a language which in most cases have been acquired rather than spoken from the birth; second, it seeks to establish a distinct literature in a language in which great literature already exists”(23). Moreover, Indian English writers confront a number of artistic problems while presenting the nuances of Indian life through a language that is not of Indian origin (24). Owing to the varied linguistic background of readers, the technique of suggestiveness is rather difficult, and the writer has to explain rather than imply. They have employed various methods to overcome this such as selecting urban or cosmopolitan
situation where language is not a serious hurdle. Alternatively, they choose themes and situations that are valid all over the country such as the theme of social change. The sense of nostalgia, or the conflict between duty to family and personal fulfilment, are some other recurrent themes found in Indian English fiction. First person narrative, the quest for self, and the conscious use of myths for heightening the effect of the contemporary situations are pointed out as a few recurrent techniques that have been adopted in Indian English fiction (31).

In *Only So Far and No Further: Radical Feminism and Women’s Writing* (2007), Chandra Nisha Singh observes how reformists and revivalists formulate an image of the respectable middle class housewife who stands for purity, virtue and self-sacrifice. Women writings of the period that reflected the same sentiment became part of the literary history, while those which resisted the dominant discourse were left unnoticed until recently (24). By the latter half of nineteenth century, a deliberate inversion of the dominant values and stereotypes became discernible in some women’s writings (27). They depicted women not mere as efficient homemakers, supportive companions or charming beauties; “Instead, woman is a creator herself and an imaginative being whose discourse is a subversion of her silence and whose speech is a challenge to her peripheral status”(1). Thus, in women’s writing, the woman character was shifted from the periphery where she was an object to be moulded according to the social requirements, into the centre where her own aspirations shaped the plot (27). In her opinion, the friction between society and individual, tradition and modernity, dependence and independence, has become a recurrent theme of Indian English women writers
A gradual deviation from the stereotypical representation of *Pativrata* an all suffering-wife, to the depiction of the image of a dissatisfied wife became discernible. Singh also comments that Indian English women writers are reluctant to portray the new middle class workingwomen of India. Although their text do not fully support patriarchal values, “a reinforcement of the motherhood mystique” (209) is often found in the Indian English texts of mid-nineteen fifties. Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), “transforms the stereotype passive and silently suffering mother into a comparatively active fighter who sustains the dominant values with survivor instincts and additional utilization of personal assets and capabilities” (Singh 210). Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (1927-2013), a German who settled in India and married an Indian wrote about urban middle class Indian life, and her *Heat and Dust* won Booker Prize in 1975. Nayantara Sahgal (1927) with an independent and critical sense depicts the contemporary Indian political scene. Indian women’s search for freedom, marital conflicts and the dissatisfied wives of urban upper class circles became the theme of her novels (63). Anita Desai (1937) probes the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women, and their longing for self-emancipation and dignity. She is often praised for the psychological portrayal of her the characters. A Harvard educated sociologist Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* (1977) has been unfairly neglected in the literary history (Lal 7). Bharati Mukherjee (1940) mainly explores the immigrant lives.

Malashri Lal in *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* (1995) attempts to suggest a methodology for women’s studies in India, and she argues, “women’s personal lives are often disguised in fiction as narratives of a depersonalised time and space” (3). Toru Dutt wrote an unfinished novel Bianca (1878), and after Toru’s death, her father published
all her works except this novel. In Lal’s opinion the novel may not have published due to the uncomfortable parallel between her life and the novel. Sarojini Naidu stopped writing when she entered the politics, and started her career as a public woman. Lal mentions of the sharp divide between her private lyrical mode of her poems and her vigorous speeches in the public, and it is “... a strange tale of schisms within which women’s utterances find approximation in words”(7). Often elitism and separatism from the masses have been alleged against the Indian English Writers. Malashri Lal opines while examining the case of women writers that “This is not a position of ‘privilege,’ particularly where creative writing about one’s own experience becomes an urgent need” (9). She develops an Indo-centric feminist methodology, ‘the Law of Threshold’, and she probes the works of Indian English women writers using the methodology. Threshold is a real and symbolic bar marking a critical transition. Men are traditionally partakers of both the world within and outside the home. “For women, a step over the bar is an act of transgression” (12). She also points out that even within the threshold there are forbidden territories women writers often hesitate to explore. While analysing the novels of women writers from Toru Dutt to Bharati Mukherjee she opines that uninhibited verbal exchange of passion are hardly found in their novels, as physical dimensions are systematically eliminated in their novels. There is a withholding of bodily expressions or body activities, and Lal attributes this to the middle class inhibitions of writing women. In her words, “The Indian women have not liberated their language accordingly” (16).

Chandra Nisha Singh observes that since the late 1960s onwards, a notable inversion of social values has become visible, and sexual ideologies have become more liberal. The writings of Indian English women writers
have resisted the dominant sexual mores, and have explored female sexuality through their writings. Singh observes three phases of female writings based on the authors’ attitude to female sexuality: the earlier texts depicting the devoted, self-sacrificing, chaste wives; the second phase depicting women tormented with deep guilt at extramarital situations; and contemporary texts where female sexuality is addressed as a necessary urge despite the mental and moral conflicts (276). Yet there is not a radical sexual revolution in their texts, conversely they “exploit sexuality as a weapon for some kind of autonomy and fulfilment” (279). Meena Shirwadkar concedes that the works of women writers have given a distinct dimension to the images of women in the family and society. S. K. Khan’s observes that a major development in modern Indian fiction has been the initiation of feminist approach that seeks to project and interpret experiences in female perspectives. Though feminism became discernible from the 1920s, a deliberate incorporation of feminist ideas started with the 1960s (60). Quest for identity, willingness to surmount the constraining social mores, and challenging conventional stereotypes have become the theme of women’s writing.

Meenakshi Mukherjee in “Women Creative Writers in Indian English Literature” criticises the tendency to essentialise ‘Indianness’ and ‘Indian womanhood’ in discussions on Indian writing. She opines, “neither Indian nor woman are perennial terms. They are not unchanging concepts, they need to be constantly historicised and particularised” (19). She opines that growing feminist criticism has projected women as producers of textual meaning, in the act of writing and reading and “Until very recently one could not speak of
the female experience or the woman’s voice in literature in serious critical context in India without compromising one’s own academic respectability” (16). Yet women creative writers in Indian English Literature, in her opinion, is “a twentieth century phenomenon emerging from a particular class of the urban elite” (18). So while examining their perception of life and experience, the dimension of their class also should be considered.

Sharad Srivastava’s opinion the emergence of the ‘new woman’ who craves to be accepted as an individual of equal status is a global phenomenon, and the stresses and strains she faces become the theme of the contemporary fiction(1). Women authors have boldly come out more uninhibited in their writings especially in their novels. The Indian English women writers have a special advantage in the sense that “writing in the English language is sometimes more helpful to an uninhibited frankness so necessary to the portrayal of the emotional, moral, spiritual problems of the ‘new woman’ ” (2). Ranu Uniyal in Women in Indian Writing: From Difference to Diversity (2009) comments that women’s writing is not a monolithic whole dealing with the question of self and identity. The diversity of socio-political contexts in India specifically determines the representation of women in the works of those women writers. Yet much of Indian Women’s Writing in English focuses on the middle class women; and the Dalit, underprivileged and the poor women have not become part of the literary creation (15). Their lives are rarely represented in Indian English women’s writings.

Meenakshi Mukherjee bestows a special value on Shashi Deshpande’s writing “in an uncompromising toughness, in her attempts to do what has
never been attempted in English, her insistence on being read on her own
terms and a refusal to be packaged along with the demands of the
market” (172). Writers like Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Das, Shobha De,
Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Sujata Sankranti, and Jhumpa Lahiri belong to
the post-independent India. Trajectories in the life of women in post colonial
India, the challenges they face, and possibilities they attain have become part
of their writings. They conduct experiments with themes and narrative
techniques. They have adopted satire, irony and laughter to confront the
patriarchal notions of the society.

Contemporary Indian English women writers have bagged many literary
achievements like the Booker Prize won by Arundhati Roy, Common Wealth
Writer’s prize for Eurasia region by Manju Kapur and Pulitzer Prize for
Jhumpa Lahiri. Meenakshi Bharat who has edited Desert in Bloom: 
Contemporary Indian Women’s Fiction in English (2004) comments on the
growing presence of women writers and women critics in Indian English
literature. She concedes that the hype surrounding the publication has helped
the contemporary writers. Signing coups, amounts, awards and the media
reports have contributed to the creation of some kinds of a pattern for success,
and female writers have benefitted from this hubbub (11-12). Still, the
inequality of gender persists in society, and the situation is easier only
because there are many women writers and there is a greater acceptance.
“Contemporary Indian women writers are not only highly aware of their
piquant location but are more than just aware of their craft of writing” (12-
13). Indian English women boldly attempts to “break out from the restrictive
limits of conventional idiom and technique to give word to their re-visioned
experience. The critical issue now is not only of finding a tradition; it’s a question of finding it and then freeing the self from it, to create an unfettered creative individuality” (13).

An early Indian English writer of fiction from Kerala is Sankarankutti Menon Marath (1906-2003) who was settled in England, and his *The Wound of Spring* (1960) is set in pre-independence India, in Kerala, in a feudal, matrilineal society. *The Sale of an Island* (1968) and *Janu* (1970) are his other novels. Now many writers are there from Kerala who contribute to Indian English Literature, and “Kerala writers in English are talented enough to influence the shape and future of Indian writing in English” (iqbal). Manjula Padmanabhan, CP Surendran, Jeet Thayil, Binoo.K. John, Manu Joseph, Mridula Koshy, Anjali Joseph, Shashi Tharoor are a few among them.

This study focuses on the representation of women in the selected works of four Indian English women writers from Kerala, viz. Kamala Das, Arundhati Roy, Jaishree Misra, and Anita Nair. Though they often bear pan Indian or expatriate identities, their association with Kerala become explicit through some of their significant works. Since “it is necessary at this moment in Kerala's history, to think of Malayalees as a people spread all over the world, rather than as a group limited by the geography of the sub-nationality of Kerala” (Devika and Sukumar 4474), their different identities will not undermine their association with Kerala. They may be born, brought up or settled out of Kerala, but their works or a few of their works reveal their affinity with Kerala.
Though Kamala Das (1934-2009) was brought up in Calcutta and later settled in different parts of India, her life as well as her writing is deeply rooted in Kerala. Being a regional writer, she always has been a strong presence in the cultural and literary realm of Kerala. She was born as the daughter of a famous Malayalam poet Balamani Amma. Being a bilingual writer, Kamala Das wrote adopting a penname Madhavikutty in Malayalam, and as Kamala Das in English. After her conversion to Islam, she accepted the name Kamala Surayya. As part of this study, her fictional works and autobiography written in English have been selected. Her poems, prose writings, translated works or her works in regional language are not included in this study. Kamala Das was initiated into writing in the 1950s, and in 1964 she got PEN Asian Poetry Prize for the poetry collection *The Sirens*, and Kent Award for *Summer in Calcutta*. She worked as the poetry editor of Illustrated Weekly of India from 1971-72 and from 78-79. Apart from the various awards and recognitions she got for her literary contribution, she was nominated for Nobel Prize in 1984; and her works have been translated into a number of languages. Her autobiography *My Story* (1976), and her novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1976), short story collections *A Doll for the Child Prostitute*, (1977), *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992), and the posthumous publications *Wages of Love* (2013) and *The Kept Woman and Other Stories* (2010) are her major contributions to Indian English prose writings.

Arundhati Roy, daughter of Mary Roy the activist was born in 1961 and her father was a Bengali. She spent her childhood with her mother in Kerala,
and her single novel *The God of Small Things* is based on her childhood experiences in Kerala. Arundhati Roy took four and half years to complete her novel which was published in April 1997, and in the following October itself the novel won the Booker Prize. It won the fame as a biggest selling book by a non-expatriate Indian author. Before 1997, Arundhati Roy worked for television and movies, and she wrote screen plays like *In which Annie Gives It Those Ones* (1988), which was shown on the national Television Channel, Doordarshan. Her highly critical review ‘The Great Indian Rape Trick’ criticising Shekhar Kapur for using rape as a main dish in his 1994 film *Bandit Queen* had drawn much public attention. Now Arundhati Roy’s international fame rests not on her novels alone, but on her political writings and activism also. Roy has staunchly protested against the exploitation of large millions of poor people and ecology in the name of national development, militarization, privatization and globalization. Being a supporter of Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) she campaigned against building of large dams which cause disruption of the lives of millions of people, and the destruction of ecological stability. She has donated her Booker prize money to the Narmada Bachao Andolan. In *The End of Imagination*, one of her earlier essays written in 1998, she has sabotaged Indian euphoria over India’s testing of nuclear weapons through her realistic account of the terrible aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. Roy was awarded the Central Sahitya Academy award for the best Indian writer in English, yet she turned it down in protest against the policies of India government. On many political issues, she has openly raised her voice, and her words often draw much public

Being born of Malayalee parents settled in Delhi, Kerala for Jaishree Misra (1961) was a place where she came occasionally to spend her vacations, and later she was married into a family in Kerala. Jaishree Misra took a Masters degree in English literature from Kerala University during that time. Later when her marriage turned out to be a failure, she left Kerala and moved to UK with her daughter for doing a course in special Education, and for providing better tutelage for her child suffering from learning disability. Eventually she settled in UK with her daughter and her second husband. Meanwhile, she attained two postgraduate diplomas in special Needs and in Broadcast Journalism, and worked in the fields of special Needs in India and in the Department of Social Services in Buckinghamshire. In addition, she worked as a Broadcast Journalist with the BBC, and as a film classifier in the British Board of film classification in London. Recently she has returned to live in Delhi, and there she works for the people with special needs. Kerala,
Delhi and London appear as the recurrent background of many of her novels, and she has often been described as London-based author as she wrote most of her novels while staying in London. Kerala remains a powerful presence in her first autobiographical novel *Ancient promises* (2000). It was major best-seller in India and it was translated into German, Greek and Malayalam. Her second novel *Accidents like love and Marriage* (2001) is a hilarious comedy of manners set in Delhi and her *The Little Book of Romance* (2001) is a collection of poems. *Afterwards* (2004) is a pensive story of loss. The historical novel *Rani* (2007) is a rendering of Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi’s personal as well as historical profile. Utter Pradesh state government banned the novel accusing it of tampering with history. In 2009, Misra signed a three-book deal with Avon, the commercial fiction imprint of Harper Collins, UK, and among them the first book *Secrets and Lies* that celebrates friendship of three women was published in 2009 and the second one *Secretes and Sins* in July 2010 and *A Scandalous Secret* in 2011.

Anita Nair was born at Mundakkottukurussi near Shoranur in Kerala State in 1966. Anita was brought up in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. Since her grandparents lived in Kerala Anita made frequent visits to Kerala, and these trips enabled her to know the rural Kerala. Anita was working as the creative director of an advertising agency in Bangalore when she wrote her first book, a collection of short stories called *Satyr of the Subway & Eleven Other Stories* (1997). This book had won her a fellowship from the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. Her second book was *The Better Man* (2000) published by Penguin India. This was the first book written by an Indian author to be published by Picador USA. Her third book *Ladies Coupe* (2001) was rated as
one of 2002’s top five books of the year. It was published in 29 countries and in 30 languages. Puffin Book of *World Myths and Legends* (2004), *Adventures of Nonu, the Skating Squirrel* (2006), and *Magical Indian Myths* (2008) are her contribution to children’s literature. Anita has edited *Where the Rain is Born* (2003) a collection of writings on Kerala. She translated Thakazhi’s *Chemmeen* and her travelogue *Koo Koo Koo Koo Theevandi* was published in Malayalam in 2013. She is a prolific writer, and has been publishing regularly since her initiation into the literary world. Anita Nair constantly mentions that Kerala has influenced and inspired her a lot. *Mistress* (2003) is a novel about a Kathakali artist. *Lessons in Forgetting* was published in 2010 and in US it is published in another name *The Lilac House*. The novel is adapted into an English film by Unni Vijayan, and it won National Film Award. *Malabar Mind* (2011) is her debut collection of poems, and *Cut Like Wound* published in 2012 is a detective story. Her sixth novel *Idris: Keeper of the Light* published in 2014 is a historical novel about a Somalian trader who visited Malabar in 1659 AD. Anita Nair claims herself to be a full time writer, and resigning her job, she accepts writing as her vocation. This study has focused upon her first three novels -- *The Better Man, Ladies coupe* and *Mistress*.

Evidently, these writers are from different social contexts, and some of them may not openly identify themselves as Malayalees. However, here they are subsumed under the category ‘women writers from Kerala’ because they engage with the experiences of living in Kerala within their gendered and class/caste specificities and their works that are selected here are mostly set in Kerala. Though this study probes pan Indian as well as regional contexts of
the text, Kerala is a main factor of analysis as the locale of many of the selected works. These authors invariably assimilate, interrogate or resist its social and political realities through their representation of characters, novel narrative techniques or images. As Indian English Women Writers from Kerala, these writes are placed in a literary tradition that is at once Indian, regional and female. Therefore, a brief analysis of ‘woman’ in the social, cultural and literary context of Kerala and India is incorporated in the introductory chapter. Since the feminist theoretical reflection involves a detailed perusal of the texts and contexts of their literary oeuvre, an overview of feminist concerns are a vital part of the introductory chapter. The coming chapters provide readings on gendered identities as represented in the selected texts by these four authors. This study bases itself on the theoretical premise that a scrutiny of the class, caste and racial divide of the society is essential for an in-depth analysis of gender. The negotiations that naturally take place between creativity of the writer and the dominant forces in the society are also attempted to deal with here. A central concern of this enquiry is how the process of writing in English and addressing a global literary market shape the narrative trajectories of these texts, their possibilities and limitations. As a part of this enquiry, I have also tried to situate these texts within the larger feminist debates that have informed the Kerala public sphere during the time of the composition of these texts.