Chapter Five

Summation

"How can a woman thinking along my lines be constrained within the confines of any religion."

(Madhavikutty, Prasanna interview 13)

Alice and Kamala deny being feminists and refuse to be identified with any particular school of thought but they are seen to find their positions among feminists who by their fictional practices prove that the Freudian paradigm of "lack", "castration" and "repression", despite its great influence, could not be the right way of rewriting women's history. Sensitive women with a literary flair who suffer discrimination or alienation tend to narrate to their sympathetic readers their tales of woe through biography, autobiography, memoirs, diaries, letters or fictional fantasies. The very act of writing on female sexuality in explicit terms is itself a feminist enterprise. The two writers here see how patriarchal or religious morality is so conditioned by tradition and culture as to privilege man and to subjugate woman. Woman is pushed out of all structures of power and marginalized with no choice or voice. She is denied her subjectivity and treated as the "other". The concern of Alice and Kamala is to revalue the way in which femininity is inscribed on
the female figure in a socio-familial sphere in which there is less space for female equality. The women portrayed in the works of these writers here do not alter their values in deference to the dictates of the male world.

Sexuality in adolescence as well as adulthood leads the female protagonists of Alice and Kamala to think over questions of selfhood and the male ethics of sexual practices. In their adult lives their perceptions of morality persistently clash with the perspectives of Mrs. Grundy as their sensibilities predispose them to give the free flowering of their flesh primacy over fulfilment of their forbidding familial or social fiats. All the same, subjectivity for these women is seen to be conditioned out of their connection with men and not out of separation from them. What distinguishes Alice and Kamala from most other explicitly confessional fictionists of the world are their uncommon ability to anatomise the micromechanics of their characters’ mental lives. Most of their stories serve to bring into focus modern women’s attitude towards female sexuality, and familial decadence through male cruelty. While Alice has obviously no message to deliver for reforms beyond revelations of harsh realities, Kamala thinks her occasional political satires are grist to the mill. But what brings them closer together is their lack of reticence and their irresistible urge to empty themselves of all their secrets and “depart when the time came with a scrubbed-out conscience,” as Kamala puts it in My Story (“Preface”).
This comparative study is expected to enable one to see how the Canadian and the Indian writers’ reflections on life and manners and their reactions to male offers of love and sex parallel. Chapter one entitled “Introduction”, apart from explaining the title of the dissertation, briefly comments on the current scope of short fiction and its genesis at the global level. An insight into what feminism seeks to put across is next given along with an attempt to see how this literary form took deep roots in Alice’s country and in Indian-English. The history of the short story in the two countries is recounted with particular reference to how women began to make use of this genre in its fractured form to relate their real or fantasized tales of how men masculinized the world and made it male-orientated. Next Alice and Kamala are introduced along with their major publications. How they were received by their native audiences are shown. A note on the tool of comparison used here is also given.

Chapter two entitled “Sexuality” has three divisions subtitled “Adolescent Sexuality”, “Adult Sexuality”, “Abusive Sexuality”. The introductory part here seeks to point out that human sexuality is the product of one’s culture whereas sex is seen to be only a biological fact. One sees here how women, seeking liberation, expose and explain female sexuality with a view to changing women’s familial and social positions and male attitudes towards this vital area of human existence. Alice and Kamala are showcased
here as female fictionists who have evolved a feminist sexual ethos in their fictional world where they project things the way they want them to be. Their protagonists realize that all the practices that restrict their freedom have to do ultimately with their bodies. Sexuality is no longer viewed as the special male preserve where women passively submit, as Freudians assume. How male dominance could not be maintained through sexual suppression when the process of women's emancipation gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century is sought to be underscored. In the first division of the chapter the reader is shown how in the phase of adolescent sexuality Alice's women protagonists like Del Jordan or Rose, and Kamala's heroines like Sheela or Subhadra, face the situation where external reality breaks in on their fantasized world and they are impelled to seek a balance between self and others. In the process of transition from innocence to experience they define their female-friendly values and discover their real self. The contrast between the Canadian and the Keralite scenarios in the matter of sexuality is focused as sexuality in Kamala's part of the world is seen to be confined to a secret segment of life and is unacceptable outside the orbit of conjugality. The kind of difference seen here has to do with the manner in which culture shapes the psyche and creates socio-familial conditions in which repression of feminine passion is sought to be made desirable in the West and essential in the East. What the two writers seek is a reversal of patriarchal values and liberation of
the female body from the male fantasies which have dispossessed woman. They do it with explicit exposition of what woman in her adolescence considers “sexual communication to be”. To annoy the patriarch Alice even makes a liberated woman say, “Virginity is all a thing of the past. So be it.” To do this, Kamala even portrays a few scenes of female bonding and makes a virgin pulsate with passion and the urge to surrender her virginity to a married man with the words, “I will be proud of that blemish. I’ll display it on my forehead like a crimson mark of decoration.”

The second division of the chapter explores the texts of the two writers where one sees erotic celebration of the female body or jouissance. The two writers are acutely conscious of how female sexuality has considerably been constricted by the discursive and disciplinary practices in the male-ordained milieu which seeks to “channel bodies and subjectivities into predetermined gendered models.” The narratives here are so structured as to make their texture give one the feeling that women write through their bodies to reclaim what they have been deprived of. Indulgence in sex is seen by the Canadian writer to be pleasant as “dancing and nice dinners.” Kamala asks, “Who is the first theologian that propagated the widespread belief that there was obscenity in man-woman relationship?” Woman’s emergence from marginality is reaffirmed in the process of the reversal of traditional values. Sexuality is no longer viewed as something unfeminine or unlawful. Writing about it without
inhibitions is itself a feminist act. What the women characters here do is to “reject everything finite, definite, structured.” This is what constitutes for them liberatory female discourse. The transcendence of sex that the narrator of Alice’s “Bardon Bus” and Kamala’s narrator in “Thanuppu” (“Cold”) experience explodes the myth of Freud’s assertion that female sexuality is passive. Here familiarity in male-female relationship does not breed contempt, for the reader is told by Alice’s narrator, “We moved through a leisurely domesticity with a feeling of perfect security – a security we hadn’t felt, or so we told each other, in any of our legal domestic arrangements, or in any of the places where we more properly belonged.” Kamala makes the male protagonist in “Kadalmayooram” (“Sea and the Peacock”) say, “The body of the woman overcome with passion perspires. This sweat could cool the skin. The odour emanating from her can be likened only to a strong-smelling substance obtained from a civet’s genetalia. That fragrance has an unusually attractive power.” A fifty-five-year-old unmarried woman professor feels that if her unexpected lover in Singapore had not crossed her path “a never-ending emotional poverty” would have plagued her. Her very outlook on life undergoes a transformation when she discovers the delights of the flesh. The blissful celebration of female sexuality here reminds the reader of the sort of disruptive delight derived by women writers which the French feminist theoreticians talk about.
In the third section of the chapter how men abuse sex through violence has been investigated. Men who subjugate women for sex and their propensity to be selfish or sadistic are satirised as fiends. How socio-familial institutions create psychological divides and how women fail to find sufficient space for individuality are shown here. Kamala is of the view that most men these days are “sexually inadequate and they conceal their inadequacies behind a fake machismo, using weapons of terrorism as substitutes for virility.” The callous attitude of men from different social strata towards the little girls in Kamala’s “A Doll for the Child Prostitute” confirms what she has alleged. The vulnerability of girls and women is frequently brought into focus by Alice too although Canadian society is relatively permissive and has greater space for female ideation.

The potentialities of short fiction are explored and expropriated by the two writers for the delineation of female anguish. In this form they are seen to disrupt linearity and jettison patriarchal logic. They make it even informal with the introduction of epistles. Kamala’s fictional constructs are relatively linear and less complex but Alice’s narratology is devious because her fictional world ranges back and forth not only in terms of time and space but in terms of dream and reality too. However, the personal element helps the two writers to introduce into their fiction their feminist viewpoints which counter the formality of the male authored texts. Neither writer approves of
male sexuality in its abusive form which denigrates women. As one scrutinizes the short fiction of these two writers, one sees how a subtle shift of the female moral paradigm defines their parameters.

It is seen that human development of moral standards passes through different phases until in adulthood what unconventional people adopt are those principles which they accept as inherently valid in spite of societal disapproval. What the chapter titled “Morality” seeks to focus is the fact that the values of women are basically different from those evolved by the masculinist world. Alice has a “different view of the world” which differentiates her fictional world. In the same way, Kamala has her unusual way of viewing life. What these two writers set out to do in their short fiction is to reclaim the feminine body from patriarchal oppression and to rediscover and revalorise their feminist values outside the framework of male notions and moral standards. One sees in their fictional creations strikingly subversive elements which bring into focus their revolt against the norms and values which their socio-cultural settings impose on them. Their perceptions of morality projected through the practices of their main women characters frequently clash with the religious codes framed by patriarchs. The researcher here seeks to highlight their conviction that standards of morality and conceptions of good and bad behaviour are seen to vary from age to age or even religion to religion, or even from one religious sect to another sect within
the same religion. What the women consider to be violations of morality from the feminist angle are male callousness or cruelty to women or the exploitation of disadvantaged sections of society for the fulfilment of male needs. In their sight a woman’s walking out on her husband when her marriage turns out to be a “living hell” or a “cosmic disaster” does not constitute immorality. They oppose all kinds of moral restraints on the free flowering of a woman’s individual self. In the process Alice and Kamala are seen to revolutionize male attitude towards morality where marriage and chastity are concerned.

The third chapter has three divisions with the subtitles: “Patriarchal Morality”, “Religious Morality”, “Feminist Paradigm of Morality”. The first section discusses how the concept of paternity culminated in the subjugation of woman as the only way to protect the fatherhood of the patriarch. How woman came to be viewed as the objectified “other” and how feminists seek to do away with male dominance are pointed out. The two writers implicitly or explicitly expose the real face of the patriarch concealed behind his mask of morality and the double moral standards practiced by him. He is seen to practice violence in its different forms on the woman he marries when she fails to pursue the path prepared for her in accordance with his position as her protector and provider. Jealousy, a vital element in the origin of sexual morality, is seen to arouse in the patriarch anger and anger in turn becomes moral disapproval which one sees concretized in the codes of conduct. Both
the writers have fictionalized human society in such terms as to point out that it continues to be patriarchal as men are largely in control of institutions which determine what in a woman’s behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable. The situations the two writers have depicted and the attitudes of men and women analysed here go to prove that sexual identity is constructed rather than inherited. Woman is seen by man as an emotional creature and rationality is believed by him to be his monopoly. However these writers do not, unlike radical feminists, have their characters reject male society for lesbian partners but have them live in the male-ordained culture and challenge its sexual concepts and moral codes. Feminism or “womanism” in the final analysis is basically a struggle against patriarchal fascism.

The second division here seeks to focus the fact that it is the influence exercised by religion that primarily prevents women from reappropriating their subjugated bodies from patriarchal control. These writers seem to think that it is religious tenets which perpetuate and sanctify male dominance. They jettison the concepts of conventional Christian creed as well as the Hindu moral conventions that curtail woman’s right to be an independent individual. One sees how the authority of the father who heads the family eventually results in the inferiorization of women. Alice makes Del Jordan’s mother say “God was made by man! Not the other way around!” Kamala says, “There are different religions but there is no difference between them.” She calls
them all “a pack of lies.” Kamala looks upon “morality” as a “slaughterhouse erected by the untruthful granny termed society.”

The third division brings into focus the need for an alternative ethics of existence as male-ordained and religion-based values are unacceptable to the emergent women of Alice and Kamala. What their women value most is the autonomy that the individual needs in relation to social codes and moral injunctions. What feminist morality challenges is the way in which male moral concepts have persistently effaced and devalued the experiences of women and their emancipatory endeavours. This kind of resistance is not founded on universal imperatives but is based on a notion of individual autonomy. What the two writers here strive to do is to destabilize all patriarchal concepts through their resistance to dominant power formation. Truth is no longer seen to be a monolith existing exclusively for the monopoly of men. Alternative truths are constructed to prove that it is not something to be universally accepted as the last word. Consequently an alternative system of morality is shown to be a reality. It is woman’s claim to equality with men which entails a new system of morality today. What constitutes morality for women is seen to be different. It is in their case contextually orientated. Custom is ultimately seen to be the basis of morality and law. Emancipated women refuse to accept the moral injunctions formulated by a patriarchal society primarily because they revolve around a woman’s genitalia. The
scrutiny of the short stories of Alice and Kamala goes to prove this researcher’s assumption that it is a kind of female-friendly morality and values that animate their fiction. They underscore the necessity to develop values from within following the dictates of the heart rather than have them thrust upon one by male-oriented ethics or conventional religious edicts. The search for sexual harmony and mutual understanding is what should drive humans to attain fulfilment in wedlock and not the man-made morality derived from an irrational belief in a jealous and revengeful God who is intolerant of human attempts to seek delights of the flesh as Alice’s Cameroonians or Manusmriti’s adherents mistakenly assume. These women writers with their feminist moral vision have written stories which overtly or covertly show how by subverting the patriarchal structure of society and its religiously evolved moral codes alone women could hope to be in control of the realities that shape their lives.

The fourth chapter titled “Subjectivity” attempts to define what subjectivity from the female point of view is. It is primarily seen to refer to a woman’s conscious thoughts and feelings, her sense of self or her unconscious urges and desires. Feminists see women as self-determining subjects who are conscious of their need for independence in a patriarchal socio-familial system. She is seen as one who has the potential to bring about both cultural and material changes. What a writer seeks to say from the bottom of his or
her heart is bound to be subjective and so it turns out to be autobiographical in nature. The literary creator gives expression to his or her own inner self in their creations. Alice and Kamala are treated here as fictional autobiographers who transmute mostly their own experiences into what they write. Their reactions to and resentment against male betrayal and wife-bashing could be seen in the guise of the narratives of their female protagonists' self-discovery and renunciation of male-evolved decrees. Most of the protagonists of the two writers move from situations of alienation to the discovery of female identity as they pass through adolescence, wifehood, motherhood or old age in a predominantly masculinist world. One could see their endeavours in their narrativizations to map out the space for self-emancipation. What the central characters in their stories speak is the language of their authorial hearts that have been hurt. This chapter which charts their attitudinal changes has three sections with the subtitles: "Childhood and Adolescence", "Wedlock and Wifehood", "Memories of Mothers' and Grandmothers' ".

In the first section one sees how isolation in childhood and longing for love in adolescence drove Alice and Kamala to create fictional worlds where their heroines emerge as remakes of their own inner selves. An attempt has been made here to pinpoint the similarities between their real experiences in life and their fictional recreations. Both the writers give their readers insights into their schooldays and the kind of friends they had or wished to have. In
spite of their common feminist stances, their experiences differ which the stories discussed here bear out. The culture of the society in which one lives and the language that one appropriates have their bearing on what one writes. The culture which conditions the writer sometimes creates in him or her the impulse to rebel against its mores. This is what one witnesses in the case of these women writers who think that their culture or way of life has marginalized them. The present investigation, however has been an endeavour to read the universal woman’s mind and hear her voice. Fictional transmissions of their experiences for the two writers have been a release from social and familial constraints. Their recollections of childhood are replete with resonant images of what they longed for and missed out in life.

In the second section the woman as writer figures prominent in some of the stories of Alice and Kamala. Their female protagonists turn out to be not only producers of feminist texts but also authorial voices. Their texts are subjective in that they explore their central characters’ changing perceptions of their subjugated predicaments. Subjective experiences here get objectified and transferred to feminist fictional figures. There is in the process rejection of male-fashioned familial values. Existing fictional frameworks are here transformed into women-centred narratives where the reader could hardly see the boundary between fiction and autobiography. These fictional confessions reveal those facets of woman’s life that have been ignored or denigrated in
most male-authored texts. The dominant theme here is the troubled relationships of couples who are basically mismatched. Western couples are seen to split up when they see their incompatibility because their relatively permissive society does not stigmatize divorce which is seen to be the only escape from a marriage of misery. But Kamala in the East has had to pass through a marriage of misery unlike her Canadian counterpart because of the socio-cultural pressure preventing a woman’s release from marital captivity. But through Kamala’s female narrators the reader is given a detailed but disguised depiction of the distress that such a mismatch entails. Kamala’s heroines are very passionate women whose intelligence and sensitivity enable them to recognize the presence or absence of love in their marriage. They see outside the orbit of marriage the beauty of life and love when it is found to be missing inside wedlock.

In the third section the maternal body is seen to represent the unique female ethical sense that lays stress on caring, relationality and responsibility. These writers repudiate whatever reiterates the biological essentialism that has down the centuries formed the basis of women’s subordination. They accept the ineluctable fact that rejection of the corporeal is the very rejection of femininity itself because her life and survival are intimately bound up with the physical potential of her body. They seek to suggest that their descent and distinctive kinship are to be reckoned through the female line. The creative
impulse for both the authors comes from renewed contact with their lost mothers or grandmothers. They go back to recapture the images of their mothers and grandmothers and to relate tales of their descent on the female side which goes to disprove that they “dream through the dreams of men.” They seem to echo the words, “We think back through our mothers if we are women.” The role of a writer in a man’s world has been difficult for a mother to play which the fiction discussed here underscores. The memories here connect their subjective experiences to the objective realities of familial life where women in the process of mothering suffer a cultural loss but gain a new creative vision.

In a patriarchal world women are only shadowy figurations with no subjectivity. They are seen to be driven out of power structures of social institutions. Woman acquires subjectivity only when she speaks out, reacts to denial of rights, attacks injustice and denies man the slavish use of her person. Her very act of speaking of sex in explicit terms breaks her silence. When she protests and questions tradition her quest for identity begins. She begins to see how morality is conditioned by tradition and culture to subjugate her. When she resists social or religious morality she resists patriarchy itself and plays her liberatory part.

The sexual responses of women characters in the fictional world of the occidental and the oriental writers here go to prove how these reactions are
shaped by psychosocial and socio-familial forces. Sexuality is seen to be value-laden because what is considered to be “moral” or “right” varies from culture to culture or country to country. In an issue of the *New Indian Express* Soli J. Sorabjee the former Attorney-General has pointed out how even “in some countries kissing can be dangerous” and cautions that “Logically it should not overtake our country, which prides itself on Khajuraho and Konark with their brazen display of the genitals and acrobatic sexual positions” (8). Unconventional people rejecting traditional values are also moral in their own eyes and ways. There cannot be a moral code universally acceptable to everyone. Subjectivity for the woman grows out of connection and not simply separation from the world of realities. As their subjective perceptions conflict with external realities these writers directly or indirectly get across the need for restructuring society on feminist, rationalist and humanist lines.