CHAPTER 3

CONCEPTUAL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The conceptual analytical framework for the present study has been drawn from two basic sources. The primary source consists of the published writings of scholars on issues related to the identity of girls and women in the Indian context, in the areas of Psychology, Sociology, Gender and Women’s Studies. The other source draws upon some literary writings and specific researches that highlight significant theoretical positions and debates in gender theory, particularly feminism and the rights and justice perspective embodied in law. Since the writings of scholars and theoretical perspectives are very vast and varied, the frame of reference for building up the conceptual framework for the present research has been derived from the themes and issues which emerged in the novellas, novels and short stories, presented in the conclusive section of the previous chapter. To reiterate what was said, the gender identity of girls and women was seen to have been described and presented as the development of self, as a repository of the conflicts and personal struggles that girls and women face in their lives and their ways of coping, as a process that is influenced by contours of caste and community and experiences of embodiment and sexuality. These were identified as the main construals of identity. The focus in this chapter will be to build up deeper conceptual understanding of each of them.

In the many scholarly writings that I read as part of this quest, I came across a variety of studies spanning a time frame of almost three decades which gave me rich socio-historical insights. In the present chapter however I have tried to keep the focus to Indian studies and writings, mainly representing the last decade or so. Only a few older studies which were either seminal in nature or landmark attempts at bringing perspective to the discourse on gender, have been included.
The writings of some authors have been very wide in the themes and ideas that they address, usually covering a spectrum of issues within the same paper, article or book. Their work has thus been cited at various relevant places in the chapter.

The contents of this chapter are presented in two sections. The first section focuses on building up the conceptual framework of the study through a review of related research. The second section presents the consolidation of the conceptual framework as an analytical framework for discussion and evaluation of the identified literary texts.

**SECTION ONE: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

As has already been mentioned, in this section an attempt is being made to build up a conceptual understanding drawn from an interdisciplinary perspective on the four key construals of gender identity of girls and women, mentioned above.

**DEVELOPMENT OF SELF**

The development of self in most research writings in the Indian context presents an image of it being a relational and socially defined phenomenon. In this conceptualization, self gets constructed in relation to others and is defined by societal expectations. The notion of the individual or personal self gets undermined since the lives of girls and women primarily revolve around fulfilling their duties as daughters, wives and mothers, respectively. The concept of the relational self is seen to be embedded in women’s relationships with significant others such as those of a wife, mother and daughter and their roles and responsibilities vis-à-vis their families (Kakar, 1979; 1981; 2007). It is important to recognize that the relational self is governed by social expectations and
socialization practices and to a large extent is in confluence with the social self. The social self develops through the prevailing gender attitudes, the notions of masculinity and femininity and the socialization processes that are adopted in this regard.

I would like to discuss some significant writings which I located, that throw light on the concept of the relational and social self. Interestingly, I found that a number of studies have focused on trying to understand how they develop in the context of childhood, girlhood and daughterhood and as a function of gender, caste and class factors. Some research writings have focused on the loss of innocence and childhood joys in girls, owing to the double burden that they live with, the travails of child labour that they have to endure and their vulnerability to physical and sexual exploitation and violence at home and the workplace.

A number of writings focus on highlighting and describing the repressive socialization practices that girls are subjected to, which lead to restrictions on their mobility and excessive family concern about their chastity. Some studies also focus on the primary purpose of socialization being to foster the assimilation of traits in girls, which will enable them to be good wives, mothers and daughters-in-law. A few writings highlight a strong emotional bond that builds up between mothers and daughters as a consequence of this. I would now like to present the main findings of a few representative writings and research in this regard.

Karlekar (2008) in her article on “Domestic Violence”, points out the vulnerability of young girls to violent treatment at the work place, such as factories and mines.

Karuna Chanana (2008) in her perspective paper on “Gender Inequality in Primary Schooling in India: The Human Rights Perspective”, focuses on the double burden of household chores and sibling care responsibilities imposed
upon girls from poor socio-economic households. She emphasizes the fact that through the shouldering of multiple responsibilities at home, daughters make a significant economic contribution to their households, since their mothers can take on work outside their homes because of their daughters’ presence at home. These multiple responsibilities, however, prove to be a major deterrent in their access to education and even lead to high dropout rates.

Kamla Ganesh (1999) in her paper on “Patrilineal Structure and Agency of Women: Issues in Gendered Socialization”, focuses on the differential socialization norms for boys and girls. She describes this phase with reference to the restrictive socialization practices and gendered social expectations that characterize it. In her analysis, the negative fall outs for women are evinced through restrictions on their mobility, anxiety regarding early and appropriate marriage and the high valorization of chastity and fidelity for girls which generates very stringent and intricate rules for appropriate behavior for them. She also highlights that the severance of ties with the natal kin for women reduces the support network for them, when in stress or crises.

The daughterhood dilemma is revealed through describing her emotional disassociation from her natal family, coupled with an expectation that she should be able to help her natal relatives, if necessary. Further, girls’ socialization practices in her view focus majorly on developing the capacity to “adjust” to all kinds of situations at a final home.

The work of T.S. Saraswathi (1999;2000) which deals elaborately with understanding the social landscape of adolescence in India, focuses on the socialization process of young girls as well. According to her, they are groomed to become good wives and mothers. She highlighted that the increasing career options and personal aspirations of the middle class girl get subsumed within the
goals of marriage and motherhood. In a culture, where chastity is cherished as more precious than life itself, girls are socialized to accept their subservient role in a patriarchal set up to learn modesty, self-denial and to develop proficiency in household tasks and child care through intense participation in the natal home where they are considered as guests till they marry and leave. She also commented about the physical distancing of daughters from their fathers when they reach puberty. She further pointed out how the girlhood experiences of the lower class girls differ from those of the upper class. Girls from lower class families are denied the joys of childhood, education and schooling, are overburdened with household chores, sibling care, outside labour and are vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

Thapan (2009) in a study on the ‘Cultures of Adolescence’ points out that adolescent daughters share a deep emotional bonding with their mothers, they adore their fathers and yearn for a deeper emotional bonding with them. This once again points to the fact that post puberty the father daughter contact reduces.

As a life stage and particularly with reference to relational identity, motherhood is reflected as an emotional, social and cultural experience by a variety of writings which include research articles, perspective papers and literary writings. As a phase of life, it is governed by the dichotomy of powerfulness and powerlessness. A mother is largely perceived as one who is devoid of all individuality and personhood and exists only for the sake of her children. Despite the status and respect accorded to them, it is mostly seen that mothers do not enjoy power and control over the decision making process related to their family or reproduction. The cultural bias is vivified through the recognition and favors bestowed upon the mothers of sons as opposed to daughters. However, the fact that mothers emerge as the key agents of the socialization process in
conditioning the thought processes of their daughters, either through repressive or progressive modes, clearly emerges. They are the ones who either make their daughters conform to gender stereotypy or rake the spark of rebellion in them and instigate them to fight for their rights and justice. The bonding with the sons is emphasized through the control over the sons’ marital life that they wield, in most of the writings. The writings also discuss the emotive experience characterized by love, empathy and understanding which mothers share with their daughters.

The article by C.S. Lakshmi (1984) titled “Walking Erect with an Unfaltering Gaze: The Educated Woman in Modern Tamil Literature”, uses stories as the medium to explore the stereotypical roles which exalt the relational roles, duties and commitments of women over individual desires. She comments that the identity of women is constructed through their role as nurturers: “…the goddess like woman…full of unleashed power…but tender enough to be the nurturer…” (p. 274)

Thapan (2009, op.cit.) points out the “indestructible” bond shared between the mother and the daughter. The mother emerges as a close friend and partner for young girls from educationally disadvantaged families. Through her case interviews, she also presents images of dominating mothers who exercised control over their grown up sons, thereby thwarting their marital happiness and harmony.

Bhargavi V. Davar (1999) in the section on, “The female self, morality and mental illness”, quotes Gilligan’s theory of care in support of mother as a nurturer. She also cites Chowdrow, who argues against naturalizing motherhood and shows how social reproduction is far more significant for shaping daughters into mothers than their natural capacities. Basically, Davar emphasizes on a woman's
relational identity as a mother through the citation of various studies. She
delineates the care and concern perspective, affective dimensions of women’s
sense of self along with their assimilation of the un-individuated self in
relationships. Women’s relational identity as mothers is mediated through socially
spelt out expectations of them being optimal care givers, the failure of which lead
to feelings of guilt and unhappiness.

Rajni Palriwala (2008) in her article, “Economics and Patriliny: Consumption and
Authority within the Household”, talks about the special status accorded to
mothers of sons. The mother-son bond was succoured by women as their source
of support and security. The mothers of sons were fed special foods as opposed
to the mothers of daughters. However, the special bonding of empathy is
reflected between mothers and daughters. Knowing that the daughters would be
denied special foods in their marital home, mothers made it a point to serve them
what delicacies they could in the years, before they left.

Krishna Sobti (2002) through one of her works, “Listen Girl!”, presents the image
of motherhood as a phase devoid of individuality. As she remarks through the
portrayal of her character, “…A mother is kept either like a cow or a nursemaid.
She should keep working, catering to the comforts of its members; that is all she
is good for. She can conjure any image she wants for herself, but for her children
she is no more than a housekeeper…” (91). At the same time, we also evince
streaks of progressiveness, as she appreciates her daughter’s decision and
resolve to stay unmarried and independent. Sobti delineates domesticity as a
trap which robs a woman of her desires. The dreary work, camouflaged as
relational commitment and duty, drains a woman’s energy and even stifles her
desire to rise above mundaneity. “…I ran this house with clockwork precision but
I did nothing purposeful or important for me, myself…I wanted to climb tall
mountains reach limitless peaks. But this did not fit into the scheme of things domestic…” (73)

Colleen Sell (2009), in her work titled “A Cup of Comfort for Women”, projects motherhood as an emotive experience and portrays images of mothers who share a bond of faith and trust with their daughters and at the same time, foster their independent abilities to make their own choices.

There are a number of writings on matrimony, which in the context of women’s identity, focus on it as the means to maintaining male hegemony, power relations and keeping them in subordination. The writings specifically highlight the status accorded to married women vis-à-vis the respect accorded to them as opposed to widows who face social exclusion. They also reinforce the fact that a woman has no independent existence outside marriage. The various academic writings in this regard, basically emphasize that the matrimonial relationship borders on inequality, on the woman’s accommodation, adjustment and compromise, negation of her autonomy and surrender of her own wishes and aspirations to the demands of domesticity. Some studies also highlight the relational strain experienced by women with respect to maintaining of relationships at the cost of their individual welfare.

Suresh Vaid (2008) in the article, “Politics of Widow Immolation”, highlights the legitimization of violent practices such as sati, as an exaltation of pativrata dharma. The victimized woman is exalted as a symbol of conjugal love and sacrifice. Her ‘willed’ death serves to keep other women in patriarchal subordination, in their daily lives.

and issues facing the women’s movement”, (this paper was presented at the national workshop on family violence against females), which argues that wife beating is a reflection of the power relationship between husband and wife and mirrors women’s secondary status. Although wife beating is common across all social classes, yet the pattern of violence differs from one class to another. What is emphasized in the paper is that while the whole neighbourhood is a witness when a slum dweller beats his wife, a middle class professional’s physical oppression of his spouse is extremely private in nature. The other forms of violence to keep women under subjugation and control that are highlighted are marital rape and sexual violence.

Devaki Jain and Nirmala Banerjee (2008) in their article, “The Tyranny of the Household”, present marriage as one of the oldest social institutions which tyrannises women, thereby keeping them in subordination to men.

Amita Tyagi Singh and Patricia Uberoi (2008) in their article, “Learning to ‘Adjust’: Conjugal Relations in Indian Popular Fiction”, highlight the stereotypical matrimonial relationship based on male domination by citing various romantic stories from Women’s Era. The causative factors of marital conflicts, stresses and strain in their analysis may be attributed to women exercising their free will and autonomy. The stories interestingly place the onus of conflict resolution on the women, who have to on their part make adjustments and compromises for the preservation of marital happiness and domestic harmony.

Flavia Agnes (2000) in her article, “Women, Marriage and the Subordination of Rights”, raises the issue about an unequal relationship on account of the economic dependence of most upper caste women on their husbands. She argues that in most of the upper caste households, the husband was seen to have complete right and control over the person, labour and income of his wife.
Shagufta Kapadia (1999) in her article, “Self, Women and Empowerment: A Conceptual Inquiry”, presents the view that most women tend to avoid matrimonial conflicts since they are aware to some extent that their security lies in subordinating their personal well-being to the male authority figure. The preoccupation with maintaining relationships further complicates their position. She reports various studies which define the notion of self in terms of distinct private, public and collective selves, relational and separated self, interdependent and independent self and autonomous-relational self. Relationships constitute a significant element of women’s definition of self. Most of the Indian studies hold that women derive much of their self-worth and sense of satisfaction by maintaining a sense of connectedness with others and being perpetually conscious of their needs and desires. The goals and achievements of the family members become so significant that they are experienced as one’s personal goal or achievements.

Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford (1992) through their book, “Women and Gender: A Feminist Psychology”, vivify different types of matrimonial relationships which appear to be very relevant in the Indian context as well. In their view, the traditional relationships are the ones where roles are clearly defined, the modern relationships are the ones where the wife works, but equality is relative. The egalitarian relationships are the ones where there is equal sharing of responsibilities, irrespective of gender. Although both the partners work, yet inequality persists. Matrimony is characterized by the exertion of male power with respect to decision making and unequal division of labour.

Lalita Subrahmanyan (1999) in a study titled, “A Generation in Transition: Gender Ideology of Graduate Students from India at an American University”, interviewed male and female respondents to know their views about matrimony and gender
roles. She found that the male respondents alluded to gender typing, expecting their wives to give primacy to family, while the females expected their partners to be egalitarian. However, most of them alluded to the problems emanating from the double burden. Some of them even accepted the compromises that women had to make in matrimony as a given.

A number of studies have focused on socialization practices, gendering of spaces and using domesticity as ways of creating traits and characteristics in girls and women which compel them to develop a relational identity.

According to Davar (1999, op.cit.), girls are allocated responsibilities of sibling care, household chores and are confined within the four walls of the house since their childhood. They are kept more strictly disciplined than boys. She also found that girls were more undernourished than boys. The socialization practices for girls in her view, also lead to the reinforcement of traits such as passivity, emotionality, empathy and connectedness in them.

T.V Sekher and Neelambar Hatti (2010) in their book, “Unwanted Daughters: Gender Discrimination in Modern India”, reflect the apathy towards girl children through practices such as female infanticide, sex selective female abortions, neglect of the physical health of girl children, subjecting them to harder household work, lack of rest, leisure and decreased food and nutritional intake.

Kalpana Kannabiran (2008) through her article, “Rape and the Construction of Communal Identity”, has demonstrated how acts of violence such as rape and violence are inflicted upon women who are not placed within the context of family. Through the citation of Rameezabee’s gang rape by policemen, she highlights the legal bias, gender injustice and apathy of the judiciary in
administering justice to a woman. A single woman, who is not any man’s property, has no constitutional or democratic rights in society.

Malavika Karlekar (2008, op.cit.) locates the family as the site of inflicting oppression upon women. In her view, the oppressive practices of the family are deeply embedded in the processes and mechanisms of socialization. Physical, psychological and emotional violence is often inflicted upon girls and women. Devaluation of daughters is reinforced at times through upholding socio-cultural practices such as dowry, female infanticide and foeticide.

Mohan Rao (2008) in his article, “The Two-child Norm and Population Policy”, highlights the gender bias through the policy perspective. He has illustrated as to how the two-child norm proved to be an invitation to female sex selective abortion. Population policies in his view reflect the strong patriarchy and ideology of son preference. The policy was promoted under the garb of female welfare and family good. The sex selective abortions, he argued, were justified as a means of protecting females from illegal abortions and for limiting the family size.

Vina Shatrugna, Nirmala Soundarajan, P. Sundaraiah, Leela Raman (2008) through their article, “Backpain, the Feminine Affliction”, focus on the negative socialization practices which induce women to practice self-denial and negation at the cost of their health. They have argued that since women have been disciplined into living for others, they start denying themselves whatever little protective foods are available for the family. They even emphasize the care perspective as a construal of women’s identity. When it comes to nursing care or tending to the sick, aged and elderly women, only a female substitute is expected to step in.
Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2008) in their article, “Creating an Enabling Environment”, highlight the bias against education of girl children, the labour and household services of whom cannot be dispensed with by their families. Other factors related to school dropout rates they found were related to patriarchal ideologies such as early marriage, domesticity for women and poverty. The dropout rates amongst Muslim girls were found to be higher owing to the community specific factors among them and nature of gender relations. Muslim girls are often withdrawn from school when they reach fifteen or sixteen because exposure to the outside world is prohibited as they reach marriageable age.

C.S. Lakshmi (1984, op.cit.) through the portrayal of stereotypical images of women in fiction, reinforces the societal notions of femininity. According to her, traits such as independence and defiance were ridiculed. A woman’s identity was embedded within relational roles and expectations. Fictional writings extolled images of women who sacrificed their individual selves, desires and aspirations over their relational commitments. She very aptly points out the paradox of the Indian woman which is mediated through societal expectations. A complete woman is one who believes in loving and giving, and understands what to take from tradition and modernity, a non-aggressive woman who can combine what is traditionally expected of her in the home and society. Her short stories extol the feminist virtues of endurance, sacrifice and patience. The superiority of women is recognized by their ability to forgive and forget all oppression, injustice and discriminatory treatment.

Palriwala (2008, op.cit.) describes the discriminatory status of women within their homes. Despite their domestic expertise and household management skills, the young daughters-in-law had a devalued status in their family as they were supposed to eat the leftovers after feeding the entire family. Their work was valued much less than that of the male members. While the male members had
the first right to consumption, the women only had secondary status in the family. She emphasizes that a woman’s identity revolves around her family roles and responsibilities. Women’s largest concerns are about keeping up family relationships and kinship values. For this, they extend their support to all the members of their family. Rajni Palriwala also highlights the power structures in the domestic domain. The domestic domain becomes a site for the exertion of power and authority since it is the older women who had control over the items of consumption. She even refers to the kitchen and food wars amongst women.

Gabriele Dietrich (2008) in her article, “Women’s Movement and Religion”, delineates the dichotomy between religion, culture and society, very relevant to the Indian context as well. While religion exalts the power of women, society and culture merely reduce women’s potentialities to wifehood and motherhood. While religion advocates equality and freedom for both men and women, society ties them down to a subordinate life as housewives and mothers.

Chodorow (1978) in her book, “The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender” and Gilligan (1982), “In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development”, have remarked that in defining the sense of self, women are more concerned with relationship and connection whereas men are oriented towards separation and individuation. Gilligan has highlighted the care and concern perspective as crucial to women’s identity development and sense of self.

Sanjukta Dasgupta (2004) through the citation of various poems in her article, “Feminism and Contemporary Bengali Women’s Poetry”, delineates gender injustice and devaluation of girls through crimes such as female foeticide.
Anjelie Multani (2004) in her article, “The Page and the Stage: The Representation of Women in Two Plays by Mahesh Dattani”, through the discussion of the plays, conveys the deep seated gender bias. What is highlighted is that a woman’s identity is embedded within the relational roles and commitment, so much so that she is robbed of her individual and professional goals.

Jasvinder Sanghera (2009) through her book, “Daughters of Shame”, delineates the oppressive practices of the families which subject the girls to mental, physical and emotional trauma and varied forms of violence (such as forced marriages, honour killing and marital rape). Through her work she describes the plight of the young women who remain unwanted and are treated as aliens by their own family members. Their happiness, individuality and education are considered secondary to family happiness.

The NCERT Focus Group Paper on Gender Issues in Education (2006) highlights the gender bias with respect to the differential socialization practices, denial of education to girls, higher dropout rates owing to the lack of parental motivation and interest, imposition of restrictions on girls after puberty, their relegation to the domestic tasks such as sweeping, washing clothes and dishes on account of the sexual division of labour and their low valuation due to the impurity inherent in them during menstruation and childbirth.

Shohini Ghosh (2008) through her article, “The Troubled Existence of Sex and Sexuality: Feminists Engage with Censorship”, questions a woman’s placement with domestic appliances or household products in advertisements, since this places her permanently in the kitchen.
The issue of female hostility although not directly addressed in any study, is nevertheless reflected through and written about as strained relationships and ill will shared by women in the public as well as the private domain. Palriwala (2008, op.cit.) for instance, comments about the suspicion and tension between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. Likewise, Urvashi Butalia (2001) through her article, “Gender and Violence in India: A brief History of Gendered Violence and the responses of women activists in India”, delineates women as perpetrators of violence. She mentions this with specific reference to the women’s groups who inflicted violence on other groups and communities such as the Muslims by participating in militant activities. In the exhibition of hostilities, women have been perceived as upholders of patriarchal values, since certain groups of women supported practices such as sati.

Similarly, female bonding has been written about by Ashapurna Devi (1995) in her article, “Indian Women: Myth and Reality”, where she highlights the power of female solidarity and strength in opposing patriarchy. In her view, female solidarity can lead to building of things without male support and dependence. She felt that an organized women’s movement can help to raise male consciousness.

**GENDER CONFLICTS, PERSONAL STRUGGLES AND WAYS OF COPING**

This section is informed by feminist theory and discourse and is studied through analysing the expression of voice, space, agency, modes of resistance and rebellion. I would like to discuss the concepts of voice and agency as defined by Thapan (2009, op.cit.) and Spivak (1988; 2000). Thapan has pointed out that a woman speaks and has voice, will and agency. Spivak through her article, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, emphasized the need to engage with women’s voices ‘to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject
of the subaltern women.’ In the “foreword” to the book, “A Companion to Postcolonial Studies”, she defines agency as institutionally validated action. She argues that this is crucial. ‘The politics of demanding and building infrastructure so that when the subaltern speak, they can be heard.’ Thus, the concepts of space, voice and agency get reflected through the modes of resistance, rebellion, retaliation, negotiations, conflict management, awareness, consciousness, submission and compliance that women might use. They become the ways through which women begin to recognize their sense of self. Most academic writings have focused on the types of conflicts experienced by women, as well as the causative factors of stress and strain. It is seen that usually the struggles are a consequence of dissonance between personal wishes and societal expectations. Women may end up with feelings of guilt, at times experience social strain, may experience suppression of their own personal desires and when conformity pressure is high, may feel a severe pressure to comply. Mostly it is seen that the conflicts that women experience, do not necessarily result in a positive outcome. Yet they do reflect a consciousness and awareness among women about gender injustice and inequalities, their ability to question patriarchy, the institution of family and repressive socialization practices.

Thapan explained conflicts through the mode of resistance, which could be covert, overt or even border on compliance. In her view, women’s attempts at resistance are symbolic of their awareness of their condition and of their struggle to at least deal with it, if not to overcome it. She likens resistance to a “double edged sword…one with which they constantly articulate and exhibit their struggles, but one which does not always enable complete success.” She remarks that resistance gives strength to the women and enables them to assert their dignity. It is of their own making, driven by their awareness and understanding and lies outside the domain of what is socially approved or normative behavior…” (xv). Chanfrault and Duchet (2000) in their article,
“Textualisation of the Self and Gender Identity in the Life Story,” point out that by telling their life stories, women play out the tensions between self and society through the presentation of a unique self which can also be recognized by society. Women thus seek to define their identities in relation to the distinctive character of their experiential self as well as to their living out of the social in everyday life. They negotiate, strategise, manipulate, and rebel against events, situations and persons in their everyday lives in the family and in the workplace.

Conflicts, compliance and resistance are central to women’s lives irrespective of whether they are able to give expression to their desires and views. Both within and outside the family, women engage in the twin processes of compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech to assert their identities as women in what they clearly recognize as oppressive relationships and situations. Acts of resistance are linked to the possibilities of change without always attaining them, yet it is in these very acts that there is the possibility of openness and change.

Thapan also articulates the conflicts of women through providing a diverse set of images of women which categorise them in various ways. There is the image of the good woman represented as a selfless worker, wife, obedient daughter and mother; there are the radical women who depart from social norms. They may emerge as rebellious daughters who assert their identities as reflective thinking beings and challenge the social order. There exists yet another category of women, who with a negotiated self bring out their effort to establish an identity that is socially coherent as well as unique to their perception of everyday existence. What emerges as the important dimension of conflict is that the social self speaks, confronts, contacts and liberates the distinctive personal self and the evolving relationship between the two, perhaps unexpressed, unconscious and yet deeply present in the construction of both, as a gendered subject. Most
women’s personal and social worlds are defined in terms of home, family, their
childhood, workplace and their life experiences through various periods of their
lives. In the process of articulating their life worlds, they often encounter self
revelations, take cognizance of their strengths and at times re-live experiences
of shame, dishonour and rejection. Through this process, women revert to
memory, narrative and voice as tools for reconstructing their emotions, thoughts
and experiences.

Thapan in her work delineates various forms of conflicts which young girls face.
In her view, they are usually torn between troubled and contested conformity to
familial and social expectations about self and others. The other conflicts and
struggles that women face are related to matrimony, often resulting in feelings of
devaluation, servility and lack of freedom and autonomy. The other forms of
conflicts which women experience are sexual conflicts which may find
representation through violence, trauma and marital rape.

According to Davar (1999, op.cit.), the conflict management strategies of girls
and women are consequent upon the socialization practices that they have
experienced. Women are expected to internalize the distress responses and
resolve differences rather than exhibit traits such as assertion and retaliation.
Through the citation of several studies, Davar spells out the causative factors
which trigger conflicts amongst women- uncaring and unsupportive husband;
housewifery which is non remunerative, taxing and invisible; domestic burden
and familial responsibilities of child rearing causing mental stress and strain;
economic dependency; lack of decision making powers and employment.

Chunkath and Athreya (1997) in their study, “Female Infanticide in Tamil Nadu:
Some Evidence,” highlight the reproductive strain that women are subjected to. A
pregnant woman bears the entire responsibility for the consequences of her
pregnancy. The work of Sekher and Hatti (2010, op.cit.) explores the socio-cultural factors resulting in daughter discrimination. In their view, the cultural devaluation of daughters is strengthened by practices of daughters leaving their natal homes after marriage and denial of rights to perform the funeral rites of their parents. Sex selective abortions are perceived as a medium to avoid repeated pregnancies. The negative attitude and mindset of people perpetuates the bias against daughters by denying them education and property rights. This develops in them, a sense of devaluation of themselves and a feeling of unwantedness, which also aggravates their conflicts.

Davar (2008) in an article titled, “Our Mind Our Madness”, locates the causative factors of depression amongst women. According to her, psychosocial factors are responsible for depressive symptoms or mental ill health amongst women. Marriage and family are the essential stressors which aggravate mental illness in women. Other factors such as domestic violence, discriminatory socialization practices, denial of material resources such as food, education and weaning away the psychological support from the female children and pressures imposed on them to adopt the care giving functions quite early, also result in conflicts, mental illness and struggles. The discriminatory socialization practices do not allow the decision making ability to flower in Indian women. The silencing of the inner voice, curbing the routes of aggression and the social goal of subservience inculcated in them from infancy result in feelings of moral inferiority, guilt and worthlessness among them. The projection of mental illness also takes a religious form, evident from the preponderance of mentally afflicted women in allegedly curative temples.

Vasanth Kannabiran and Volga (2008) in their article on “Telugu Feminist Poetry”, discuss various unconventional themes articulated by women poets, which describe their fears, hopes, desires and disappointments in love, marriage,
motherhood which is envisaged by them as a trap and allied with pain, death and longing for release, instead of a feeling of joy and fulfillment. These feminist poets questioned the sanctity of family and motherhood and dared to discuss sexuality related issues such as menstruation and abortion. They openly talked about their bodily desires and sexual relations and retaliated against patriarchy, women’s oppression, politics of housework and the notion of propriety.

Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2008) in her article, “Alternative Interpretation of the Ramayana: Views from Below”, highlights the voice, agency, sufferings and injustice experienced by women through the deconstruction of the epic Ramayana from a feminist perspective. Chandrabati’s Ramayana uses the Rama myth to speak for the collective tragedy of the unrewarded virtue of Indian women. She questions Rama’s wisdom and integrity both as a husband and ruler. Sita’s conflicts, dilemmas, sufferings, injustice, loneliness, sorrow, abuse-physical and mental and devaluation at the marital home; are effectively conveyed.

Bina Agarwal (2008) in her article, “Why do Women Need Independent Rights in Land?”, argues about the need for women’s direct access to productive assets such as land. In her view, their lack of access subjects them to a condition of economic dependence on significant male members. Denial of land rights and access to resources keep them in a state of subordination. Entitlement of such rights would lead to their economic empowerment, strengthen their ability to challenge social and gender inequities and increase their negotiability and bargaining power with their husbands.

Mary E. John (1999) in her article, “Gender, Development and the Women’s Movement: Problems for the History of the Present”, points out that the major source of conflict emanates from the invisibility of women’s work. Women’s
position should be recognized as major rather than as supplementary wage earners. The World Bank Report on “Gender and Poverty in India” (1991) acknowledges that the major axis of gender discrimination in Indian society arises from the inside/outside dichotomy. “The culture's very definition of female is her association with the “inside” of the home. By contrast, men belong to the “outside” where livelihoods are earned and political and economic power is wielded.”

Renu Adlakha’s book, “Deconstructing Mental Illness: An Ethnography of Psychiatry, Women, and the Family” (2008), illustrates case studies of psychiatric women patients in the Indian context and highlights the gender bias and conflicts that they faced. She points out that the family emerges as the main causal factor of mental illness among women. The socialization practices in her view are to be blamed, for the girls in the family were expected to subscribe to ideal feminine virtues. Signs of aggression and assertion on their part not only led to their differential treatment and exclusion, but were also attributed to as signs of illness.

Tandon (2008) in her book, “Feminism: A Paradigm Shift”, delineates the constraints and conflicts which Indian women have to endure. The types of stressors and conflicts which they have to face are marital conflicts, domestic violence (the range of violence varies from simple suppression to abuse and aggression), mental and physical harassment and role conflicts manifested through maternal and matrimonial conflicts.

Flavia Agnes (2008) through her article, “Family Courts: From the Frying Pan into the Fire?”, highlights the legal and sexist bias in marital conflicts which deny women the right to divorce or come out of a turbulent marriage. The woman is advised to stay in a bad marriage only because society does not offer her any
alternatives. The family courts also put pressure that the institution of marriage be preserved in the interest and well being of the children.

Prem Chowdhry (2008) through his article, “Enforcing Cultural Codes: Gender and Violence in Northern India”, highlights the theme of gender injustice through the most heinous of crimes such as honour killing. Women who dare to exercise their volition and individual choice in heterosexual relations are violently killed by their own kinsmen. The exercise of individual and personal choice is considered as a ‘grave social violation’ and negation of family and community honour. Women are denied the right to choose their marriage partner.

Vineeta Bal, Vani Subramanian and Laxmi Murthy, Saheli (2008) in their article, “Contraceptive Research: Is there a Gender-Neutral Approach?”, remark about the anti women health policies related to contraception. Through their article, they also highlight the socio-cultural biases which promote the patriarchal ideology of womanhood as sacrificing and loving mothers, or obedient and tolerant wives.

While most writings discussed above explain the nature and genesis of the conflicts and struggles faced by girls and women, a number of them also portray the image of empowered women who can negotiate and deal with their struggles and conflicts. The ways of coping and dealing with them as reflected in the studies include individual and collective acts of rebellion, resistance, negotiation, challenging the stereotypical notions, reaffirming belief in one’s own self-worth and abilities, and assertion of one’s rights, justice and dignity.

Bina Agarwal (2008, op.cit.) defines empowerment as a process whereby individuals through collective or individual acts of resistance and rebellion are able to negotiate and bring about a change in the existing power relations that
place them in a subordinate economic and social position. She explains the process of empowerment through female solidarity in the form of activist women’s groups which try to bring about change by challenging gender violence and restrictive social practices such as female seclusion.

Shagufta Kapadia (1999, op.cit.) conceptualises empowerment as a process which essentially challenges subjugation and subordination. Karl in his book, “Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision Making” (1993), views it as a process of awareness building, capacity and skill development, control, decision making power and action towards gender equality. Batliwala in the report, “Empowerment of Women in South Asia: Concepts and Practices” (1993), defines empowerment as the process which begins from the woman’s beliefs about herself, her rights, her potential, her self-image, her recognition of strengths, knowledge and skills and from believing that she has an innate right to justice and dignity. Stein through his book, “Empowerment and Women’s Health: Theory, Methods and Practice” (1997), suggests that empowerment can be studied by partitioning it into measurable components which include psychological aspects (self-esteem), behavioural aspects and family relations (autonomy and decision making) and community relations (mobility participation in community affairs). Empowerment result in shifts in women’s thinking in terms of analyzing and questioning the status quo and works towards enhancing their self-worth and self-esteem. It also generates positive attitudes of change and facilitates active participation in demanding one’s rights.

Colleen Sell (2009, op.cit.) discusses empowerment as positive coping abilities and a positive outlook towards life despite all the challenges and hardships.

In the NCERT Focus Group Paper on Gender Issues in Education (2006), empowerment has been conceptualized as a process which promotes self-
recognition, critical thinking and reinforces the agency of girls and women to question and challenge the gendered relations and structures of power and take control over their lives. Ashapurnarna Devi and Leela Dube (1995, op.cit) have highlighted the positive coping of women as reflected through their multitasking abilities of managing their workplace responsibilities along with their domestic duties and family responsibilities.

Through her case interviews with women, Thapan (2009, op.cit.) too exalts their multitasking abilities, self-reliance, and persistence amidst hard experiences of poverty, deprivation and masculine domination.

Neeru Tandon (2008, op.cit.) in her writings presents a new image of empowered womanhood as a woman who is aware of her identity and dignity and exhibits a staunch will to fight against oppression and subjugation. She discusses the views of various women writers such as Shobha De, Vanamala Viswanatha and Shashi Deshpande who depict women’s struggles through their works of fiction, but do not categorise themselves as feminists. She goes on to highlight that regional Indian fiction depicts images of women who exhibit stoicism, will, determination, courage to question the gender norms and break the traditional and conventional boundaries that curb them.

Devaki Jain and Nirmala Banerjee (2008, op.cit.) in their writings advocate the possibilities of empowerment through the creation of a space for women whereby they are able to create new families which would provide them the choice to build a relationship on their own terms and not base it on what is handed to them by antiquity, tradition and ideology, most of which stem from patriarchal beliefs and male attitudes to female capabilities and roles.
Malashri Lal (2004) interprets empowerment through an alternative mode of thinking. She sees domesticity and the kitchen as mediums of power and authority available to women. Manju Kapur’s short story, “Chocolate”, projects a wife’s rebellion against her husband’s extra marital affair through the enhancement of her culinary skills by means of which she seeks her revenge. The wife prepares delectable meals for her husband and fattens him into an unsightly and unhealthy man. Thus, domesticity is perceived as medium of negotiating relationships of power and authority.

Urvashi Butalia (2001) presents a model of empowerment based on activism in women’s groups and their collective retaliation against crimes such as rape, domestic violence, sati and bride burning.

**EXPERIENCES OF EMBODIMENT AND SEXUALITY**

In most academic writings, embodiment has been discussed in the context of the female body, sexuality, old age and widowhood. It is viewed not only in corporeal terms, but is located in the social and cultural context as well. With reference to embodiment and sexuality, academic writings are seen to predominantly reflect the differential social and sexual norms levied on women often bordering on inequality, oppression and commodification. Issues related to the purity and pollution of the body and the patriarchal gaze (which are in tandem with socially acceptable norms of female sexuality), have also been addressed. The body as a site of control and violence—physical, sexual, verbal and economic has also been written about.

I would like to discuss at this juncture, somewhat more elaborately, Thapan's (2009, op.cit.) work on embodiment. She speaks about the ‘lived and communicative bodies’ that is, bodies which get articulated through the
subjective experiences in their everyday life and simultaneously in particular with
the historical and social location. In her view, “…we can articulate our embodied
experience through language, emotions, memory and speech, we use our bodily
senses to both perceive and give voice to our experience…” (p.3). She discusses
the linkage between embodiment, gender and identity and how these point to the
socially, emotionally and individually constructed body. Embodiment is referred to
not merely about being in the body or behavior, but about experience,
subjectivity, political consciousness, agency and will. The lived experience of
embodiment is perceived, constructed, performed, displayed and adorned. She
acknowledges the role of family in playing a vital role in making young girls
imbibe the trait of passivity. The dichotomous role of family is also commented
about, wherein on one hand it is perceived as a “cradle of nurturance”, comfort,
security, but on the other hand, it is viewed as a source of regulation for young
women.

In her work, she highlights the utilitarian aspect of the female body with respect
to its multitasking abilities as well. Thus, the body of the working class woman
becomes an instrument of survival. It is a weapon with which there is a desperate
attempt to contest the harsh realities of everyday life in the fight for survival in a
world that is ordered by relations of gender inequality and economic necessity.

Thapan also iterates that the body becomes a signifier of gender inequality and a
site for the assertion of male power. Her field work demonstrates that physical
and sexual violence are regular features in women’s lives. Many women live with
the pressure of producing a male heir. There is a visible fear of stigma allied to
barrenness and inability to conceive. In the case of some women, their bodies
become sites of endless pregnancies and childbirth. Masculine domination over
women’s bodies is also reflected in the way they control women’s physical
(domestic) and sexual labour.
Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin (2008) in their article, “August Anarchy”, discuss the commodification of women’s bodies with respect to the sexual violence committed upon them. The gruesome acts of savagery such as marking, tattooing and branding the breasts and genitalia, stripping and parading naked, mutilating and disfiguring and knifing open the wound, are highlighted as experiences that women have to face. They also point out that since women’s bodies are symbolic of male and community honour, it becomes essential for them to safeguard their honour.

Shohini Ghosh (2008, op.cit.) adopts a feminist stance while commenting about the objectification and commodification of women as sexual objects in media and films. In her work, she questions the sexual bias and skewed sexual morality, which prevent women from expressing their desires. She carries the feminist argument further by arguing for the need to create sexual spaces for women that would enable them to express their desires, pleasures and fantasies.

Maithreyi Krishnaraj (2010) in her article, “Women, Embodiment and Personhood”, writes about the utilitarian perspective of the body. In her view, a woman’s body has multiple uses right from that of a wife, to that of a seductress and temptress, placating men’s desires and offering them what their wife cannot. The utilitarian dimension is also reflected through the autonomy which women exercise through the use of their bodies. She highlights that many women make use of their bodies by working in massage parlours and even resort to prostitution to meet their survival and economic needs. The ideas of the body as a site of exploitation, male domination and conquest are also expressed.
Rhoda Unger and Mary Crawford (1992) in the section on “Sex, Love and Romance” in their book, raise the important issue of women’s right to reproductive freedom and choice.

Veena Shatrugnan, Nirmala Soundarajan, P. Sundaraiah and Leela Raman (2008, op.cit.) draw attention to the strain experienced by women’s bodies on account of the socially determined roles that they have to fulfill and the travails that their bodies have to undergo. For instance, in the name of femininity, girls are subjected to a whole array of disciplining methods while sitting, standing, walking or even working. The use of the veil also creates a strain, for it involves bowing and covering their heads for most part of the day. This leads to what they call the moulding of both the brains and body. Neglect of women’s physical health is also seen to be a consequence of the denial of protective foods and the practice of self-negation. As part of self negation, women essentially live for others and start denying themselves whatever little protective foods are available for the family.

Shoma Chatterji (2010) in her book, “Women in Perspective: Essays on Gender Issues”, also discusses dimensions related to the commodification of the female body and its treatment as property. She highlights their vulnerability to sexual terrorism and crimes such as incest, rape, coerced prostitution and trafficking. Girls’ and women’s vulnerability to sexual crimes may lead to the devaluation and erosion of self and psychological and physical problems. She also mentions that different forms of violence- physical, sexual, verbal, emotional and economic are used as a means to exert patriarchal power and control over women.

P.V.Sekher and Nilambar Hatti (2010, op.cit.) discuss the pressure that women encounter to give birth to male children. This pressure not only results in mental and bodily strain resulting in countless pregnancies, but also at times in heinous practices like female infanticide, foeticide and sex selective abortions.
Interestingly, some of the women respondents in their study considered such practices and technologies as a blessing in disguise since it spared them the burden of rearing endless number of children. However, some of the women from the lower socio-economic background, who cannot afford such practices, are seen to resort to the practice of female foeticide.

The concept of embodiment is also reflected through both positive and negative images of old age as documented in different writings. Krishna Sobti (2002, op.cit.) describes Old Age as the last phase in a person’s life marked by disease, a wait for death, a stage of cynicism coupled with feelings of being unwanted and of the body being a burden. Thapan (2009, op.cit.) describes it both as a phase of decay and emotional and physical maturity. Colleen Sell (2009, op.cit.) through her collection of stories describes old age as a phase of enjoyment, constructive activity and preoccupation with life.

**SEXUALITY**

The issue of sexuality deals not only with the social constructions that determine it but also encompasses the problems faced by women with respect to their sexual autonomy, freedom, and experiences of repression and violence, bordering on rape. Interestingly, most of the writings acknowledge sexuality not only as a physiological and emotional need but also locate it in the context of social and legal biases and differential sexual norms which penalize women. Many writings on sexuality also focus on issues such as female gaze, the need for space and greater sexual expression for women. They also point out that sexuality imbues women with a certain power as it becomes an instrument through which they are able to negotiate, strategise and manipulate their relationships with men. Interestingly, certain writings also delineate women’s retaliation against sexual repression and their open articulation of dissatisfaction
with their marital sex life. Some women achieve gratification and exhibit sexual autonomy through illicit relationships, voluntary indulgence in prostitution and fertility control.

I would now like to present a brief overview of what some feminist scholars and writers working in the area of women’s studies have to say about sexuality.

Ambai (1984, op.cit.) in Chanana’s book, discusses about women’s sexual autonomy through the medium of certain stories. She focuses on how sexual autonomy and freedom on the part of women has always been problematic and resulted in severe punishments.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1999, op.cit.) delineates the legal aspect of sexuality from the purview of the crimes committed against women which work in their favour. She particularly highlights the punishability of sexual crimes and offences such as stripping and harassment under Section 509 of the Indian Penal Code.

Meenakshi Thapan (2009, op.cit.) talks about the utilitarian aspect of sexuality with respect to women’s usage of their bodies and sexuality as weapons for survival. In her findings, women were seen to use their sexuality to combat the harsh conditions imposed by poverty, to attack the oppressor physically or to strategically manipulate, coerce or extract the maximum to their advantage. She thus infers that women seek to maximize their gains through embodied strategies of negotiations and manipulation, contestation and submission and creating desire and fulfillment. Further, the definition of femininity varies across women of different classes. A middle class woman’s perception of sexuality is different from that of the working class woman. The latter’s is based on the utilitarian and practical considerations grounded in her everyday life experiences at work in the family, community and poverty.
Adolescent sexuality is manifested through concern over issues such as appearance, body image consciousness and idealistic constructions of a dream boy having both physical and affective attributes. Thapan also delineates the issue of early marriage in the context of sexuality. Early marriage of young adolescent girls often subjects them to sexual violence or forced sexual intercourse.

An interesting concept described at length by Thapan is the female gaze, an essential aspect of their identity. In this, women view their bodies as they wish themselves to be seen. The middle aged woman’s perception of sexuality, for instance, is allied with looking and feeling good. The female gaze is also reflected through a woman’s personal but usually silent admiration of a man’s body. Thapan’s work also indicates that some women are able to express dissatisfaction to their husbands about their sexual relationships with them.

The need for women’s sexual space is articulated by Shohini Ghosh (2008, op.cit.) who argues for the creation of a space for consensual erotica in which women are willing and active agents.

Kalpana and Vasanth Kannabiran (2002) through their book, “De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power”, focus on the differential sexual norms with respect to the skewed legal process, which robs a woman of personhood and dignity by viewing rape, not as an assault on the integrity of the woman, but as an assault on the community, society and nation. She identifies rape as a major factor in the subjugation of women. The patriarchal construction of rape in the courtroom condones rape and legitimizes violence as normal and a natural male propensity, which makes women bear the burden of transgressions committed by others on their bodies. While the power structures are reified
through the judicial and legal discourse, the feminists also emphasize on the
deathless shame and ravished justice suffered by women leading them on to
maintain silence on such issues. As Mac Kinnon (1983) through the article,
“Feminism, Marxism, Method and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence”,
points out that rape is a ‘sex crime that is not a crime when it looks like sex.’ The
patriarchal lens reflects that concern for honour should take precedence over the
quest for justice. The masculine discourse on rape exhibits concern over the
rehabilitation of rapists and disassociates and negates women’s and girls’
subjective experiences and emotional turmoil substantiating their silence on
these issues.

Nivedita Menon (2000) through her article, “Embodying the Self: Feminism,
Sexual Violence and the Law”, provides a feminist context to sexual violence and
acts of terrorism such as rape and asserts the need for redefinition of rape laws.
Rape is perceived not as an act of sex, but as one of power and domination. She
also addresses the issue of gender injustice by asserting that women’s rights
over their bodies as well as their integrity get negated by the patriarchal nature of
legal understanding.

and Unloved: The Girl Child in the Family”, describe the lives of rural, tribal girls
from Bengal. They highlight that problems of sexual harassment at the work
place ranging from moderate to severe eve teasing, sexual trauma, marital rape
and fear psychosis allied with it, are encountered by the girls. They also draw
attention to the neglect of the reproductive health of pregnant women who suffer
from inadequate nutrition and ignoring of the menstrual problems of young girls.
The social construction of their sexuality is mediated through projecting the
image of a good girl typified by traits such as good manners, a respectful attitude,
modesty, docility, obedience and good nature. Sexual control is brought about by restrictions imposed on their freedom and mobility post puberty.

Kumkum Roy (2008) through her article, “Unravelling the Kamasutra”, delineates the male bias through legitimization of forced sexual intercourse, sexual and physical violence committed on the female body as male prerogative. That a woman’s body exists to placate male desire and lust is explicated through her detailed analysis of Kamasutra. The article, “Sex Workers’ Manifesto” (2008), also draws attention to the differential sexual norms for women. Women are denied the right to free expression of their desires and sexuality, including their manner of dressing up. The dichotomy that is articulated relates to women having to cover their bodies to protect themselves from the male gaze on the one hand, but having to bare themselves for male gratification on the other.

Mantosh Singh Devji (1999) through the article, “The Paradoxes of the Kama Sutra and the Veil: Asian Indian Women and Marital Sexuality”, talks about the sexual autonomy and freedom of Indian women. She points out that an Indian woman does not shy away from her sexuality. Sexuality for her is a means of gratification, an emotive and physiological need.

Prem Chowdhary (2008, op.cit.) through his article focuses on honour killing, the most heinous of crimes committed against young women who dare to exercise their rights to choose their partner and go against their community. That women are penalized for their sexual volition is highlighted through this article. The caste dimension also gets articulated through varying instances of sexual crimes, which remain unrecognized and which are committed against the lower caste women. “The purity of lower caste women, even when breached through rape, is not taken into cognizance.” (296).
Dilip K. Das (2000) through the article, “Lesbianism as Resistance: Sex, Gender and Identity Politics in Deepa Mehta’s Fire”, highlights the sexual bias through the subjugation of women’s sexuality and exercise of patriarchy. It was believed that the sexual desires and drives of women must only be directed towards their reproductive function and their sexuality has to be curbed as women are by nature lascivious, possessing an overflowing and uncontrollable sexuality.

CASTE AND COMMUNAL CONTOURS

While caste and communal contours of identity have been widely studied and written about, in the specific context of my research I have delimited the literature citation to Dalit and Muslim women. The reason for this is that the sample of selected literary writings focuses on these categories of women in terms of how caste and community factors define their identity. Although most of the writings delineate a subjugated and victimized picture of Dalit women who are assailed by exploitation of all sorts and are grappling hard to meet their economic and survival needs, yet some writings also exalt them as women of grit, determination and courage who exhibit positive coping styles and a sense of rebellion.

Gail Omvedt (2003) through the article, “The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden: An interview with a Dalit Agricultural Labourer”, describes the Dalit women as the downtrodden amongst the downtrodden. They are deemed to be thrice alienated because of their caste, class and patriarchal domination.

Despite their subjugated status and vulnerability to violence- both domestic and sexual, Ruth Manorama (2008) through her article, “Dalit Women: The Downtrodden among the Downtrodden”, exalts their courage, fortitude, activism, rebelliousness and the undying spirit of these women and recognizes “the possibility of a rich and ancient revolutionary base in the making” (443).
Ruth’s and Namala’s article, “Dalit Women: The Conflict and the Dilemma” exalt the pride in the Dalit identity through women’s physical strength and sense of belongingness to a non-Hindu community, devoid of biases and stigma associated with widowhood or the practice of customs such as sati and dowry. They highlight that Dalit women enjoyed greater freedom and economic independence and a better sense of equality with respect to man-woman relations as opposed to women of other castes. However, their alienation is conveyed through the discriminated treatment meted out to them in terms of lesser wages, double burden, denial of education, denial of land rights, and social and legal discrimination.

Annie Namala (2008, ibid.) adopts an activist position while discussing Dalit women’s issues and concerns. For ensuring justice and equality, she emphasizes the urgent need for their inclusion in society at large. She particularly highlights that a Dalit woman’s body becomes a tool and means to take revenge. The men of the dominant castes perceive her as a woman of loose character and easy virtue.

Even Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran (2003) through their article, “Caste and Gender: Understanding Dynamics of Power and Violence”, have reiterated the perception about the image and status of a Dalit woman to that of a public woman.

Leela Dube (2008) through her article, “Caste and Women”, legitimizes the practice of early marriage among the lower castes as a means to protect the virginity of the young girls. Both Dube and Radha Chakravarty through her article, “Visionary Cartography: Imaginary Maps by Mahashweta Devi” (2004), focus on the powerlessness of the Dalit women, whose bodies become the site of domination, control and exercise of caste hegemony. The tacit acceptance of
the violence on their bodies conveys the internalization of upper caste hegemony along with the powerlessness of the Dalit men, who are unable to protect their women. Thus, the stories of the Dalit women convey their activism as well as their ignorance.

Gabriele Dietrich (2003) through the article, “Dalit Movement and Women’s Movements” in Anupama Rao’s book, also delineates the patriarchal caste dominance through the acts of sexual violence meted upon a woman’s body. This violence is accepted as “normal” and becomes an integral part of the women’s lives and highlights the collective vulnerability and weakness of both men and women. That sexual violence becomes a tool for the exercise of caste hegemony has also been reiterated through Radha Chakravarty’s article (op.cit.). The assault on Dalit women’s bodies is symbolic as it also signifies an assault on their community. The patriarchal caste domination is also represented through the women’s subjugated status as they receive no gender justice for sexual assaults and crimes committed on their bodies by men of their own caste. Through a series of articles Anupama Rao (2003) in her book, “Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Indian Feminism”, talks about the hard life of toil as well as the everyday struggles of Dalit women.

B. Mangalam (2004) through the discussion of Bama and Sivakami’s works in the article, “Caste and Gender Interface in Tamil Dalit Discourse”, describes the caste and gender hierarchies both inside and outside the home. She particularly highlights the enforced silence of the Dalit women as well as their aspirations, struggles, vitality and determination to fight back oppression.

Bela Malik (2003) through her article, “Untouchability and Dalit Women’s Oppression”, talks about the caste as well as the gender based discrimination which the Dalit women have to endure. These include the casteist remarks and
abuses, denial of basic facilities like food, water and education, sexual exploitation and violence meted out to them inside as well as outside their homes.

The writings of scholars have looked at the identity of Muslim girls and women in a relational and communal context. What is highlighted is that socialization practices play a pivotal role in the development of their identity. Communal and family honour is given precedence over individual desires, aspirations and wishes.

M. Sridhar (2004) through the article, “Caste, Religion and Gender: Forms of Oppression in Telugu Dalit Women’s Poetry”, articulates the voices of Muslim poets like Mahe Jabeen, who views family as a major source of oppression for Muslim girls and women. Another poet, Shahjahana, critically talks about the marriage of convenience practiced in the Muslim community in which young girls are traded off in marriage to elderly men. Through her writings, she critically analyses the differential social norms which grant the Muslim man all the privileges such as remarriage and right to divorce, whereas a woman is sacrificed at the altar of male brutality and lust.

Zarina Bhatti (1984) in her article, “Socialising of the Female Muslim Child in Uttar Pradesh”, talks about the socialization patterns of young girls who are “fed on the model of tongueless, desireless, submissive, passive, obedient, sacrificing, serving pious women, non-persons who are able to live and die as daughters, wives and mothers, who should never even aspire to have an identity of their own.” (232). Mothers or grandmothers are the key socializing agents and they make the young girls imbibe the traditional norms and conventions of the Muslim community. Fathers are physically and emotionally distanced from their daughters and communicate to their daughters through the mothers or
grandmothers. Mothers emerge as strict disciplinarians, who instruct their daughters to assimilate traits of passivity, compliance, unquestioning obedience, sacrifice, observe the ritual of prayers and fasting and impose restrictions on their dress, demeanour, posture and body language. Above all, the daughters are instructed and discouraged from voicing out reproachful feelings against their husbands. Bhatty highlights the relational strains of these women through their fear of remarriage of their husbands or being divorced by them. The bias is furthered through the preferential treatment of sons, celebration of the birth of sons with pomposity, devaluation of daughters, and the practice of customs such as purdah and confinement of women within zenana quarters. Girls were denied the freedom of choice in the selection of marriage partners, were excluded from the marriage related discussions and forbidden from seeing the groom before marriage. The legal and social inequalities are also reflected through the denial of education and right to divorce.

Zoya Hasan and Ritu Menon (2008, op.cit.) highlight the lack of importance given to the education of Muslim girls owing to their fear of exposure to the outside world once they reach marriageable age. The differential social and sexual norms are also reiterated through the greater sexual licence given to Muslim men who exercise their control over women’s sexuality. The lives of the Muslim girls and women are governed by patriarchal ideology, which prioritizes marriage and domesticity.

The review of related literature has helped to sharpen the conceptualization process with respect to the issues identified through the novellas, novels and short stories. Identity can be looked at in multiple ways, as is evinced through the interdisciplinary nature of the writings, drawn from various sources. The writings in the review section mirror the biases, conflicts, varied forms of discrimination that magnify inequality and injustice faced by women, which in turn subjugate
and oppress them. The interesting aspect about the review section is that despite the skewed social, cultural, sexual and legal norms which act contrary to women’s goals, aspirations, desires and ambitions, we do not get a victimized or battered perspective of womanhood through these writings. On the contrary, an empowered image of womanhood emerges through certain writings, which enable girls and women to redefine their sense of self and identity, in a more positive stead. Thus, the identity development of girls and women has not only been studied from the lens of inequality, biases and discrimination which they face at different levels, but it is also studied in the context of their personal choices, power assertion, pragmatic approach to life and their ability to deal with their life situations through their courage, fortitude and conviction.

SECTION TWO: CONSOLIDATION OF THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The analytical framework is presented in the form of specific questions, which the present research would attempt to answer. These questions are presented under each of the broad identified construals of identity that emerged from the novels—Development of Self; Gender Conflicts, Personal Struggles and Ways of Coping; Experiences of Embodiment and Sexuality and Caste and Communal Contours. These became the contexts or themes for studying the nature and process of identity development among girls and women in the selected writings. The analytical questions were prepared and then as was mentioned in the first chapter, they were finalized after detailed consultation with four experts who specialize in the area of gender studies located in different disciplines. One of them works in, Sociology, another in History, the third in Political Science and the fourth, in Education. A common strand that cuts across their work is the interdisciplinary flavour of their writings. Thus, although they represent specific parent disciplines, their writings on issues of gender are much more inclusive. The consultation process with each expert involved a detailed discussion of the
objectives of the research, sharing of the issues that had been delineated from the analysis of the literary works and a brief overview of the insights that had been drawn from the review of related research. They were then shown the list of analytical questions that had been prepared for purposes of validation. The consultation yielded some constructive suggestions. The expert from Sociology suggested that identity related issues should be looked at from an empowered perspective rather than from a victimized one. The expert from History proposed that while discussing Caste and Communal Contours, an attempt should be made to cull out only those issues which become signifiers of caste and community. The other two experts suggested a few modifications in language. All the suggestions were incorporated and the framework of analytical questions was then finalized.

**ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

This section presents the final analytical framework of the study. It consists of a set of analytical questions related to each of the four construals of identity.

**DEVELOPMENT OF SELF**

- How do girls and women define their sense of self?
- Is the development of self circumscribed only by relational roles and expectations?
- Who are the dominant people who shape the development of self in girls and women?
- Is self largely circumscribed by the socio-demographic context in which girls and women live? (This would be answered in the context of the diverse backgrounds from which the girls and women come from, which in turn would vivify the rural-urban, class/caste and communal divide.)
• Does the sense of self of girls and women show traditional gender contours? Are there any signs of empowerment? How are these manifested?
• How do the styles of coping reflected in the construction of self redefine it?
• What is the space given to personal experiences, wishes, goals and desires in the construction of self?
• What are the frustrators, sources of stress and unhappiness which mark the definition of self?
• Does the definition of self change with the evolution of the time period in which the novels are embedded?

GENDER CONFLICTS, PERSONAL STRUGGLES AND WAYS OF COPING

• What are the personal struggles and conflicts which mark the lives of girls and women and how do they influence their construction of identity? (This would be explored through the nature and kinds of struggles and conflicts experienced by girls and women.)
• What are the causative factors which lead to the emergence of such conflicts? (A detailed exploration of the types of conflicts would be done along with the reasons for experiencing such struggles.)
• How are these struggles and conflicts dealt with and resolved and what are the specific coping strategies that are used? (This would be explored through the women’s varying modes of reaction, covert and overt forms of rebellion and expression of resistance.)
• In what ways do their ways of coping depict empowerment or surrender to circumstances? (This would be explored through the choices made by the protagonists as well as their conflict management skills which influence or guide them towards the conflict resolution process.)
• How is the identity of girls and women influenced by the nature of struggles and conflicts which they encounter?
• Does conflict resolution help in reshaping or reconstructing the image of womanhood? (This would be done through the analysis of the outcomes of the individual choices of the protagonists, which would portray either their empowerment or surrender to their life situations.)

**EXPERIENCES OF EMBODIMENT AND SEXUALITY**

• How are embodiment and sexuality experienced by the girls and women? (This would explore the varied forms of embodiment and sexuality and the impact on girls’ and women’s lives.)
• Do women have control over their sexuality? (This would be discussed in the context of women’s reproductive freedom and choices, and the varied forms of control including religious prescription over their sexuality by the significant members of their family and community.)
• How are embodiment and sexuality used by women in negotiating relationships with the men in their lives?
• What role does embodiment play in the definition of self? (The varied forms of embodiment of the female body and its construction right up to old age would be discussed.)
• Are embodiment and sexuality seen as sources of pleasure or pain? How, when and under what circumstances?
• Is there a sense of expressed joy or pleasure related to embodiment and sexuality? (The positive aspects and typification of embodiment and sexuality would be highlighted. The feminist perspective of sexuality and the female gaze would also be delineated.)
• How do the patterns and relative importance ascribed to embodiment and sexuality change as a function of age and context?
• How much of a woman’s identity is tied up with her sexuality and form of embodiment? How do embodiment and sexuality convey varied forms of discrimination and oppression for girls and women and in what contexts?
• How are voice, agency and empowerment represented through embodiment and sexuality?

CASTE AND COMMUNAL CONTOURS

• How does belonging to a particular caste or community influence the identity development of girls and women? (This would be analysed in the context of Dalit and Muslim girls and women.)
• Are caste and community signifiers of gender inequality? In what ways?
• What are the forms of discrimination, oppression, violence and injustice experienced by Dalit and Muslim women?
• How are autonomy and empowerment manifested through the lives of Dalit and Muslim women?

The present research attempts to answer all the questions which have been raised under each of the four key construals of identity in the subsequent chapters that follow.