Chapter 1

Introduction

Jacques Derrida outlines the three regions of violence that are situated and inexplicably wound together in linguistics. First, the “originary violence” of differences which severs the “proper from its property” and signifies the “loss of self-presence,” yet continues to be perceived as “normal” (*Of Grammatology* 112). Such violence is the product of the “original myth of a transparent legibility” which constitutes the “foundation, exclusion, repetition, contradiction, and obliteration” of a human being’s identity in linguistics (109). The presence of originary violence is, in Derrida’s view, confirmed by a second form of violence that is “reparatory, protective, instituting the moral and prescribing the concealment of writing” (112). Such violence is manifest in the institution of law and is generally interpreted as the attempt to limit or put an end to the multi-faceted violence. The third form of violence appears within the legitimized social structures or institutions. According to Derrida, this form of violence is more complex in its structure and becomes apparent only by means of “reflection” (112). It includes an individual’s experience of brutal and dehumanizing physical violence as well as other forms of control and exploitation. Derrida holds this tertiary structure of violence to be the most significant as it reveals the violence “perceived by social and moral consciousness as the proper, the reassuring seal of self-identity” (112). Both “originary violence” of discourse as well as socially sanctioned violence of law and norms is ubiquitous and universal in society. However, an
individual’s encounter with this generalized form of violence results in her or his undergoing diverse as well as unique experiences of violence. Derrida claims that literature captures the relation between this “generality” (universality) and “uniqueness” (singularity) that defines violence undergone by every human being (“Before the Law” 210-11). The present study attempts an analysis of selected Indian fiction to articulate the diversity of women’s specific experiences of violence.

The aim of the present research project entitled *Representations of Violence against Women: A Study of Selected Indian Fiction* is to critically examine the representations of violence directed against women in a selection of Indian fiction. It focusses on the problematic of gender-based violence which exceeds physical torture and takes the shape of subtle, covert and legitimised forms of violence. The basis of this investigation is the idea of violence as a complex phenomenon which takes a range of colours depending upon the situation in which it takes place. Violence is, in fact, inevitably linked to every aspect of human being’s existence. Various thinkers have tried to theorize the subtleties and complexities of violence. Their theoretical insights reveal violence to be creative, revolutionary, constructive, curative, liberating, destructive, subtle, conspicuous, disguised and/or convoluted. But they have failed to take into account the role played by every person’s gender, race, religion and class in her or his experience of violence. In fact, Western theorists have been largely ineffectual in the articulation of violence that targets women belonging to the Third World.

The present study concentrates on the problematic of violence as it impacts Indian women. It undertakes a study of the complexities of Indian
women’s experiences of violence. Indian fiction provides ample testimony to this experience. However, no one has attempted a detailed analysis of violence against women as depicted in Indian narratives. The present study examines the representation of violence in selected Indian literary texts written in English as well as those translated into English. The study is carried out, in part, by relating the theories of violence with feminist theory. This theorization of violence is also brought to bear on violence directed against women in particular representations in selected Indian literary texts in order to articulate various subtle and overt instances of violence.

The first chapter surveys the relevant works of theorists of violence, namely Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Walter Benjamin, Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, Frantz Fanon, Hannah Arendt, Louis Althusser, René Girard, Michel Foucault, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and Slavoj Žižek. These thinkers have shed light on violence that works on social, political, economic, religious, artistic and existential levels. They have paid serious attention to its diverse forms that are inconspicuous, subtle, complex, destructive, revolutionary, creative and a lot less discernable to the eye than any acts of physical violence. For instance, Gandhi states that an understanding of non-violence can be achieved through knowledge about violence. In his view, violence is the product of illusion and it is devoid of truth. Violence dehumanizes an individual. In his analysis of the status of law in recent times, Walter Benjamin shows violence as the foundation of all legal institutions. The crux of his theorization is that law is never able to divest itself of its original, founding violence. A study of Jean Paul Sartre’s philosophy shows that he
believes violence to be a force of destruction of humanity as well as of human communities. He probes into the violent nature of an individual’s personal/existential reality as well as interpersonal/social relationships. He considers violence to be a valid means to gain independence for nations in certain situations, like Algeria, that have been victims of colonial depredations for years. Raymond Aron, however, censures what he considers to be Sartre’s blatant glorification of violence. He denounces the humanizing, cathartic, and heroic quality that Sartre attaches to the natives’ acts of violence. Albert Camus also emphasizes the negative aspects of any kind of revolution. He analyzes the way modern forms of rebellion which begin as a protest against human suffering eventually end up betraying their origins and justifying the suffering and dehumanization of mankind.

In his treatise on decolonization, Frantz Fanon lays emphasis on violence as the means to restore freedom and democracy in colonized countries. For him, this form of violence is invested with positive and formative features as it forces every individual to respond aggressively to the violence of the colonizer. Hannah Arendt mainly investigates violence that appears in the political domain. She also probes into the equation that power has with violence, which she believes is highlighted only in a government that works on the principle of violent domination. Louis Althusser’s analysis of ideology lays bare the manner in which various social institutions exercise formative violence on the unsuspecting individual. Ideology, he argues, plays a major role in sustaining the capitalist relations of exploitation. He sheds light on the misrecognizing aspect of ideology which makes an individual submit freely to her or his subjection. In René Girard’s view, violence forms the basis
of all culture. He says that “mimetism” is the cause of reciprocity and repetitiveness of violence that prevails in a community. Mimesis is the tendency to unconsciously imitate the desires of another. In other words, the subject always desires an object which is desired by his rival, thereby giving rise to conflict.

Michel Foucault highlights the power-driven operations that are carried out in society in order to ‘discipline’ the individuals. Here prison is Foucault’s paradigm for the contemporary disciplinary society imprisoned by the norms of various institutions that it has itself created. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt focus on the violent operations of bio-power which aim not only control the population but produce and reproduce all aspects of social life. Giorgio Agamben reveals the essential “fiction” that underlies the link between the ruling government and the legal order. The present legal order is more involved in making sure that the repressive mechanism of power established in society operates smoothly than executing justice. Furthermore, the violence emanating from these pseudo-legal institutions is consequential in multiplying the asymmetry of power. Slavoj Žižek elaborates on the overt forms of violence manifest in language, and inherent in the economic and political order which relies on subtle approach towards controlling the citizens.

However, the aforementioned theorists have ignored the fact that every act of violence is determined by various factors, such as race, class and culture. Moreover, they do not take into account the complexities that gender introduces into an individual’s experience of violence. Violence, to all intents and purposes, is viewed by these theorists as belonging to the male domain.
They analyze violence from a viewpoint that sees man as both the perpetrator and the victim of violence, and so they overlook the implications of violence for women. Or these thinkers neutralize a person’s gender and conveniently overlook the fact that violence takes a different shape in its intersection with different sexual categories. Against the absence of a concrete analysis of gender-based violence, feminism affords a cultivated sensibility towards the victimization of woman. Feminism is an amalgamation of the socio-political movements that campaign on issues, such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, equal pay, sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination, and sexual violence. In addition, it is a critical discourse that explores and critiques the concepts of objectification, stereotyping, and dehumanization of women.

The second chapter of the thesis focusses on the theoretical framework of feminism, and gives an overview of the feminists’ empirical investigations about the various ways in which violence targets women. This chapter is sub-divided into two parts – Western feminist theory, and Third-World/postcolonial feminism. The theoretical framework of Western feminism is based on the notion of a universalized system of patriarchy, a society-wide structure of power-based relationships in which men exercise domination over women. Here men are accused to be the prime culprits who instigate the suffering perpetuated on women. In this section, various strands of Western feminism are explored, particularly, the manner in which they approach the problems that target women and the subsequent strengths and limitations of their analyses. Western feminist theorists have thrown light on the subjection of women at the social, political, intellectual and existential levels. Their perspectives range from Marxist feminism (which insists that women need to
be paid regular wages for domestic work) to liberal feminism which fights for women’s civil rights. Simone de Beauvoir, with whom is identified existential feminism, holds that men have succeeded in confining women to the sphere of ‘otherness’ by constructing myths about them. However, according to postmodern feminists, this position of other provides women with the opportunity to analyze and challenge those norms, values and practices that patriarchy forces on them. French feminists like Helénè Cixous and Luce Irigaray state that a female writer can write her body and sexuality into her work. But the contemporary post-structural feminist like Judith Butler points out the underlying discrepancy in Western feminist perspective for reinforcing the gender norms upon women. By designating woman as the ‘subject’ of their theories, the feminists trap her in the same political, judicial and discursive power-play from which she needs to escape to achieve emancipation.

Also, Western feminists have wrongly assumed that violence against women is purely gender-specific or the patriarchal. The fact is, however, that patriarchy never takes place in a vacuum; it always intersects with other factors, such as race, class, caste and religion, and generates multi-dimensional violence. Third-World feminism is, to some extent, a reaction against Western feminism’s Eurocentric attitude towards women from Third World countries. It is founded on trust in collective struggles for different identities. Postcolonial feminism dwells on issues like slavery, oppression, resistance, representation, race, caste, gender, etc. Moreover, Indian feminists seek ‘indigenous’ roots of a woman’s history for it is shaped by colonialism as well as the various firmly established indigenous cultural traditions. For instance, the Indian sociologist Gail Omvedt concentrates on the anti-caste tradition as
the key concept for emancipation of the oppressed women. There are diverse forms of violence, in her view, connected to the experiences of Dalit and untouchable women who are victimized and exploited by the caste-based Hindu culture. Likewise, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan criticizes the radicalization and feminization of the traditional Hindu culture. The valorized mythological divinities, in her view, promote those ideals that feminists have been fighting against since the beginning of their struggle. These ideals ultimately take the shape of stereotypes, strait-jacketing woman in specific roles for her entire life. Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques Western feminism for overlooking the phenomenon of globalization that has hit the Third World. The global restructuring of nations led by changes in economies has left a huge impact on the ongoing feminist movement in India. Mohanty envisions a cross-cultural feminist project that straddles the two different worlds and becomes a compelling site for the analysis of women trapped in the globalized, capitalist, racist and ethnic realms of oppression.

An investigation of the theories of violence along with a study of Western and Third-World feminism thus reveals their inadequacies in elucidating the experiences of violence undergone by women in India. It can be seen that most theories of violence do not include an analysis of gender-based violence. Moreover, the dominant Western feminist theory does not consider that women belonging to nations with a colonial history may carry other accounts of violence. Women living in India have to struggle against multiple forms of violence that emerge from a diverse cultural order. However, feminist theorists are yet to comprehensively explore and properly articulate the experience of violence fraught with complexities associated with
Indian women’s specific experiences of class, caste, and religion. The aforementioned complexities become visible through an analysis of literary representations.

**The Problematic of Representation**

The concept of representation has received extensive theoretical deliberation not only in postcolonial studies but in the larger cultural field of studies as well. In fact, an insight into the role of representation has been central to a scholar’s general perception about literature and culture. The “complex semantic history” of the term ‘representation’ has, however, forced theorists to concede that it is quite difficult to define it (*The Triangle of Representation* 4). The varied definitions of representation provided by *The Oxford English Dictionary*, such as “presence” or “appearance” or “an act or fact of exhibiting in some material image or form” or “likeness or reproduction in some manner” do not provide an exhaustive basis of analysis. An American theorist, Christopher Prendergast states that representation has a self-naturalizing tendency that makes it offer itself to be a definitive truth with regards to the thing that it represents; nonetheless, it is impossible to assign it a comprehensive definition mainly because of the complexity and the “multi-accentuality” attached to the issue of representation (*Critical and Cultural Theory* 38). The role of representation is to represent primarily “by virtue of being interpreted and ultimately represent anything it is capable of suggesting,” which indicates that representation has an unspecified number of potential representational contents (39). In other words, the concept of representation works in a variety of different ways according to the
perspective, rationale, and object of inquiry. For instance, it plays a significant role in areas as diverse as philosophy, literary studies, anthropology and psychology, and in varied theoretical approaches, such as structuralism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and semiotics. This variance of meaning and use adds to the difficulty of formulating a precise definition of the term “representation.”

Out of the varied definitions of representation, Prendergast extracts two basic meanings of the term. Firstly, the term derives its meaning from the Latin word *repraesentare* which means “bringing to presence again.” The above-mentioned meaning, according to him, can be interpreted as the literal reappearance of an absent person or object as well as making present again through simulacrum which consequently associates representation with the notion of illusion. The entire history of representation is, in fact, traversed by this fissure of absence of the thing, that is, it has not been reproduced and the absence within the thing which means that it has not been [re]presented (Nancy 37). The second basic meaning of the term “representation” is, in Prendergast’s opinion, to “stand for” something (*The Triangle of Representation* 5). In this context, he argues, the premise of the concept of representation can be construed as resting on the principle of substitution which covers the whole field of culture. These two meanings stand highlighted while looking at artistic works as representations, and by analyzing simulacrum in the political context. Prendergast mainly concerns himself with exploring and highlighting the negative connotations that are attached to the notion of representation in the context of a political system. For this purpose, he focusses on Emile Rousseau’s critique and the rejection of the concept of
representation in his work *The Social Contract*. Here Rousseau, Prendergast notes, rejects the notion of representative democracy. He states that there can be no authentic polity in which an individual is allowed to represent or “stand for” another because the presence of the citizen as a speaking and voting agent is essential. Rousseau extends this ideal of presence in participatory democracy to human presence in social and inter-personal relationships. In fact, he considers representation to be “the sphere of alienated human relationships” (7).

Contemporary critical theorists also view representation as grounded in alienation, but go further in their critique by exploring the relationship between representation and power. Modern critique of the idea of representation poses the question: if representation is based on the principle of substitution where ‘a’ stands for ‘b’, by what authority does it do so? Here the focus is on both the process of representing and the “subject of representation” who has the power to delimit and control the field of representation (9). According to Michel Foucault, the domain of representation always has a centered and integrated subject who sets the boundaries, exerts power over the object(s) of representation and maps the relationships that they form with each other. Foucault terms this phenomenon as the “virtual triangle” of representation (*The Order of Things* 5). Roland Barthes considers representation to be completely invested in the economy of authority and hierarchy where the subject of representation commands the systems of knowledge and socially validated beliefs and interpretations of the world. Moreover, he points out that the most fundamental representational system in the world, that is language, is extremely oppressive (“Diderot, Brecht,
Eisenstein” 35). Language, Barthes argues, imposes identities on individuals and forces them to conform to tradition.

The mechanism of representation, in Prendergast view, generally designates a set of subject positions that manifest through ideology, tradition, or set of conventions associated with the interests of a dominant group. The dominant group makes sure that the ideology that it propagates is able to construct certain cultural assumptions that would be accepted as permanent and valid. It is able to achieve this feat through the self-naturalizing tendency of representation (11-12). In Althusserian terms, representation is a policing agent that “hails” an individual and forces him/her into a given subject position (“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” 197). Hence representation should not be construed as a positive reflection of the varied views of the actual world. In fact, representation plays an active role in the social construction of “reality” that is assumed and accepted by most subjects (Prendergast 12).

Theorists consider representation to be a very alienating, oppressive and violent form that can be rarely challenged or changed. In his works, Barthes points to the most fundamental representational system in the world, that is, language to be extremely oppressive and “fascist” because it imposes identities on individuals and forces them to conform to tradition. Friedrich Nietzsche states that the syntax of a sentence has a juridical connotation and is formulated basically to incarcerate individuals in “the prison house of language” (qtd. in Jameson “Preface” i). Prendergast, however, states that the entire representational system can be weakened only when the relationship between power and representation is severed. He highlights the repressive
aspect of representation by questioning all the *master* representations which are an amalgamation of multiple voices and views. In his view, the most oppressive form of representation is the notion of the representative intellectual where an individual speaks for or on the behalf of others. This idea of the representative intellectual lies at the core of the phenomenon of multiculturalism in which cultures represent one another to themselves.

Edward Said’s book *Orientalism* exposes multiculturalism to be essentially a “monologue of power” that came into existence during the eighteenth century, where the dominant Western culture discursively constructed the East as the “other” primarily to further their colonial aspirations. This account of the Orient by the Occident, according to him, highlights the power that is at work in cultural representations. Said is in accord with Barthes who thinks that representations – like all the operations of language – can be classified as “deformations” (*Orientalism* 273). Foucault also characterizes Western orientalism as a system of representation which constitutes a discourse and whose objective is to circumscribe the East, categorize it as the other primarily to subordinate it, through imagination or practicality, to the authority of the dominant West (Prendergast 89). The West, however, considers the Orientalist to be an accurate “interpreter, exhibitor, mediator and representative (and representing) expert” and readily accepts the negative value attached to the Orient as being a valid truth (284). Similarly, an undeniable power-invested link exists between literary representations and culture. Literary fictions are never a simplistic reflection of the world; these fictional representations, in fact, pinpoint those structures that pre-determine an individual’s attitude and understanding of the world.
A network of representations is indubitably connected with the dominant ideology. An English historian, Timothy James Clark focuses on the way in which the ideology-driven representation technique of modern art “blurs” the reality of the oppressive aspects of this world so that they are not made subject to the processes of interpretation and subsequent demarcation (20). An analysis of these “blurred identities” is, according to Prendergast, the key to unlock all the social limitations and the controlling hierarchies that are concealed through representation. In his work *The Painting of Modern Life*, Clark analyzes Manet’s famous work *Olympia* which is the painting of a nude prostitute, with the noted deadpan expression, trying to conceal her body with her hands. Clark believes that the image of the prostitute alludes to the clash between disparate class relations and the body as well as the collision of social and sexual identity which is normally overlooked by individuals. Prendergast, on the other hand, states that the image of the nude prostitute – trying to conceal her private parts with her left hand – implies the formation of the female identity by reference to the male. It highlights the “lack” that is assigned to the female as well as the primal fear experienced by males of having their phallic identity destroyed. The deadpan expression on the face of the prostitute, in his view, symbolizes the individual’s capitulation to “blankness” (25). Hence it perpetuates the blatant disregard of the power-invested ideology’s role in the construction of social codes and identities.

Jean-Luc Nancy too focuses on highlighting the decisive position that representation has acquired within the dominant and controlling ideologically-backed socio-political system. For this purpose, he brings to light the manner in which Nazism meticulously cultivated representation in
order to justify its violent acts by giving the “regeneration” of the whites as an excuse (The Ground of the Image 38). The figure of the Aryan is, in Nancy’s view, the principle of the Nazi vision which promised the regeneration of man with the essence of the super-man. Hitler’s speeches and the artistic vision that he promoted primarily highlighted the contrast between the bearers and the destroyers of civilization. The language and art of the Nazi regime glorified the annihilation of Jews who were branded as the destroyers of civilization. The Jewish people were considered to be a ‘sub-human’ race and the spectacle of their elimination was deemed necessary for they were the enemy that could corrupt the very presentation of the White race. Here presence/life is vital to representation, and works on the code of death which is forbidding to representation. The concentration camps become a system of forbidden representation where violence was bombarded from all sides, that is, the simulacra of death was re-created through the figure of the condemned Jew as well as the officer who was the bearer of death. This ideology-driven representation of Jews highlights the persecutory nature of power-invested relationships where an individual exists only by eliminating the person standing before him (45). Hence representation must never be construed as something that is separable from the practicality of life. Representation is, in fact, a form of social practice that is produced and, consequently, produces within the moments of history and material life (Prendergast 33).

Therefore, the present research project examines various representations of violence directed against women in a selection of Indian literary texts. Derrida views literature as a historical institution both “brought into being and governed” by laws (“Before the Law” 181). However, the texts
that come under the literary aegis possess the specific quality of being able to stage, confront and suspend all the presuppositions upon which any kind of social institution rests. Derrida also points out that the uniqueness of a literary work lies in its ability to be put into question as “stable properties and concepts” (181). In fact, critique of literature exposes the inadequacies of existent theory as well as provides new theoretical insights. Suffice it to say that analysis of fictional representations illumines the structures that determine an individual’s attitude to and understanding of the world. They also provide an insight into diverse forms of overt and covert violence which is generated by the intersection of various factors. Hence, select literary texts by nine Indian authors have been brought under scrutiny to map the multiple forms of violence against women. These texts include English translation of Premchand’s Hindi novel Godan, English translations of Saadat Hasan Manto’s three Partition narratives in Urdu, English translations of Dalip Kaur Tiwana’s Punjabi novel entitled And Such is her Fate, English translations of Mahasweta Devi’s seven fictional narratives in Bengali, Shauna Singh Baldwin’s novel What the Body Remembers, Indira Goswami’s English translation of her Assamese novel entitled The Moth-Eaten Howdah of the Tusker, Amita Kanekar’s A Spoke in the Wheel, Neel Kamal Puri’s novel The Patiala Quartet, and Can You Hear the Nightbird Call? by Anita Rau Badami. A critical reading of the aforementioned Indian fiction is carried out to address those forms of violence that have remained unaccounted for by feminist theory.

The present research project scrutinizes the relevant works by various theorists who explicate violence that works at the social, political, economic,
religious, artistic and existential levels. But these thinkers do not take into account the violence that specifically targets women. Violence has been an issue in feminist campaigns and struggles. Feminist theory also elaborates on women being the target of a subtle and ubiquitous form of violence at the symbolic level. Nevertheless, a comprehensive and theoretical elaboration of violence with reference to women has yet to be undertaken. Moreover, theorists have failed to grasp the significance of Indian women’s experience of victimization in understanding violence. The diverse forms of violence undergone by Indian women, in fact, provide new insights to feminist theory. Indian fiction successfully captures and represents the complexities underlying women’s experiences of multidimensional violence with reference to her race, ethnicity and class. It accentuates the fact that Indian women have to suffer diverse forms of violence. Hence the study focusses on a comprehensive and meticulous analysis of the representations of violence inflicted on women in a selection of Indian literary texts. For this purpose, the theories of violence are aligned with feminist theory and brought to bear upon the literary representations of violence to pinpoint and analyze various subtle and overt instances of violence. These analyses demonstrate that patriarchal violence is complicated by various other axes of power. The present research project is, in fact, an attempt to map a concrete feminist theory that articulates those instances of violence that have been previously ignored or underplayed.