CHAPTER IV

AT WAR FOR PEACE

Scientists acknowledge that the story of the human race began with the female. "Women are the race itself, the strong primary sex, and men the biological after thought" says the eminent thinker Elizabeth Gould Davis, supported by the scientific fact that in the human cell structure, woman's is the basic 'X' chromosome, and a female baby simply collects another 'X' at the moment of conception while the creation of the male requires a 'Y' chromosome, which is said to be a genetic error or a defective 'X'. But in spite of the biological supremacy of the female, women are generally excluded from positions of significance, power and domination, and are subjugated to men everywhere. Civilization, religion and politics have always catered to the interests of the dominant masculine group to perpetuate the notion of feminine subjugation. Woman is defined simply as what man decrees, and thus she is called the sex; or she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. Simon de Beauvoir maintains that women have been
relegated to the status of "the second sex" and reduced to objects for men since the dawn of history. In her seminal work *The Second Sex*, she asserts that woman has been constructed as man's other and that she is denied the right of her own subjectivity. She writes in *The Second Sex*,

"She is simply what man decrees; thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her. She is the incidental, the inessential, as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute. She is the other."²

Kate Millett in her powerful polemic *Sexual Politics* observes that an unbalanced relationship of dominance and subordination has prevailed between the sexes throughout history and continues to exist even at present, and that a most ingenious form of "interior colonization" has been devised as a result.

The dominance of men over women has long been accepted, though intellectuals even among men, like Jean Genet and Claud Levi Strauss have observed the injustice of male dominance. A serious probe
into the anthropological and social factors that contributed to this kind of extraordinary relationship between the two sexes has thrown much light on the history of many unsung heroines. It is found that the passage from the state of Nature to the state of culture was one of man's victory in removing women from the central position, which they occupied in the primitive communities, to the periphery. For, early human beings have recognized femaleness as the norm, as the fundamental form of life, since they were awe-struck by the reproductive ability of women. Besides, women were actively involved in all aspects of the tribe's survival and flourishing; like hunting, food-gathering, making of clothes and tools and childcare. W.I. Thomas, the famous anthropologist, observes:

"Children were the women's and remained members of her group. The germ of social organization was always the woman and her children and her children's children".

For the primitive tribes, before the role of the male in conception was known, the birth of new life out of women's body was a great wonder, and women were highly revered for their miraculous capability of creation. It is noticeable that the first deity was a goddess—not a god—the Great Mother—and the person qualified to worship her was a
priestess—not a priest. Women owned property, fought in war fronts, led explorations and managed tribal life. In Sparta, two-thirds of all lands belonged to women, and Arab women were the owners of big flocks, while their men simply pastured them.

After centuries of superiority, with the discovery of the secret of reproduction, man began to emerge as the powerful group. As women lost their sacredness, they became expendable, and were forced to experience man’s rage to dominate and downgrade. And as societies evolved, male control through brutal force was gradually supplemented by the rule of the law. Gradually, in many parts of the world, women fell into the subservient and supporting role for which the lords of every known phallicracy have insisted they are ‘naturally’ fitted; yet even under the most adverse circumstances; women have never been wholly subordinate.

Once women’s traditional power based on creation and nature had been systematically whittled away and men began occupying the central position, phallus-worship came into existence. Subsequently, women were denied any social or emotional roles, other than childbearing, and a mother was, in some parts of the world, considered not as the parent of her child, but as a nurse of the newly planted seed.
But with the discovery of agriculture and the consolidation of tribes into townships, human societies became increasingly sophisticated, requiring structures, systems and administration. Once survival was assured-surplus became ‘property’ and man awoke to the glory of being lord and master. To secure ownership, to protect the rights of inheritance and to achieve power, something subtler than a deified phallus was needed, and the result was the invention of male divinity and thus the concept of a Father God originated.

All the world’s major religions shared the common notion of the inferiority of women, though with varying intensity and at least limited to certain periods; they all demand their subjection to values and imperatives devised to promote the supremacy of men. All religions denied her opportunities for growth and the development of her selfhood and excluded her from many spheres of life, at one time or other. All the Father God religions, like Judaism, Christianity and Islam assert that God created man first and woman was born after man, framed of an insignificant and expendable lump from his body. Judaism delegates quasi-priestly authority to the male parent, and curses the father who teaches his daughter the Torah. Sir Henry Maine has observed that in the Roman patriarchal families, the eldest male parent held undisputed power of life and death over all members of his family, of which he was the only full person in the eyes of the law.
Christianity considers woman as the temptress, leading men astray, and for the well-being of the society she is to be controlled.

St. Paul exhorts women to keep silent inside the churches, as he insists,

"they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says".\(^5\)

St. Augustine believed that woman is not the image of God, whereas man alone is the image of God.

In Islam, women enjoy very little freedom, and they are confronted by forms of oppression like veiling, seclusion etc; they are even forbidden to enter mosques. Islam command "men are in charge of women because Allah has made one to exceed the other. So good women are obedient, guarding in secret that which Allah has guarded. As for those from whom you fear rebellion, admonish them, banish then to beds apart and scourge them."\(^6\).

In the ancient Indian society women enjoyed a very high status, and in the different spheres of life she had her voice. She was vested with power and veneration and there were intellectually emancipated
women. During the Vedic period, women were free to pursue scholarly studies and engage themselves in discussions and arguments with men and were respected for their intellectual and spiritual pursuits. These women like Ghosha, Lopamudra, Maitreyi, Gargi were called 'Brahmavadinis' and they involved themselves in administration, finance, agriculture and crafts of their age. There were seers and writers of eminence among Vedic women. Even warriors like Vadhirnmathi, Vishpala are described in the Rig Veda. A woman could undergo the same ritualistic observances as men and she had an undeniable role in composing and explaining the Vedas and Upanishads. The biggest Upanishad, the Brihadaranyaka is the result of the philosophical discussion between Vajjvalkya and Maitreyi. Vedic woman had all the opportunities for education and her contribution to the nation was always recognized. She had the freedom to choose her sexual partner and her status in the society was highly esteemed. In short, in the first Vedic period, known as the Rig Vedic Age, the concept of equality between men and women was widely accepted. It was approximately in 2500 B.C, that the Rig Vedic Age was at its full glory, and later the Rig Veda was followed by the other Vedas. In the Later Vedic Age, that is between 1500-1000 B.C, with the rise of private property and commodity production, the primary incapacitation of woman was brought about which led to her loss of status and eventual oppression by man.
The Vedas and Upanishads were followed by Smruthis and Puranas. The most popular of the Smruthis, known as the Manusmruthi, lays down the rules which are to regulate the lives of women in all ages. Manu's precept suggests,

"Pitha rakshati kaumare
Bhartha rakshati yuvane
Puthro rakshati vardhakye
Na sthree swathanthriamarhati."7

(A woman should be protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in youth and by her sons in old age. Never does a woman deserve freedom)

At about this time, the idea of female chastity became deep-rooted in the Indian mind, which led to the tendency to lower the age of marriage of girls, thereby curbing their opportunities for education and personal development. By this time, brahminical supremacy and strict observation of caste system also became established in the Indian soil. In order to preserve the caste system intact, the purity of women was insisted upon and this resulted in the system of 'Sati' and the practice of child marriage. Also, the spread of Islamic culture in India
between A.D. 900 and A.D. 1500 contributed to the growth of male chauvinism.

Many women had already been awakened to an awareness of the unjust treatment meted out to them, long before the formal inauguration of the women's movement. During the late eighteenth century itself, a movement aiming at the social, educational and political equality of women with men originated. However, it was with the Seneca Falls convention in America in 1848, that the official inauguration of the women’s movement took place. The activists recognized the 'otherness' of women in male centred societies and the limitations imposed upon her freedom of movement and thought. They perceived that women’s sphere of action was decided and assigned by man and that she was denied the opportunity to use her own discretion and decision-making capacity. Woman's grievances against-man, in any patriarchal society holding women in bondage were discussed in the convention.

Thinking men were ready to understand and support the cause of women, which led to the formation of the Liberation Movement. Reverent Theodore Parker, in 1853, made the remarkable declaration in Boston like this:
"To make one half of the human race consume its energies in the functions of housekeeper, wife and mother is a monstrous waste of the most precious material God ever made."

The last part of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century saw the emergence of activists like Susan B. Anthony, Lucretia Mott and others who led the suffragette movement. They aroused the women of their country to the realization that their lives were no better than that of slaves. They discovered that women were, as a class, the most oppressed. Liberation became their urgent need. The suffragette movement became more intense as a political movement and succeeded in achieving suffrage for women in 1920.

In the 1960s, in America, University students and women organized great struggles to liberate the blacks and to protest against the war in Vietnam. Many young women who participated in these struggles gained confidence from their experience, and hence emerged to play decisive roles in raising feminist consciousness. Consequently in 1966, with the formation of the National Organization for Women organized feminist movement became a reality.
Many authors like Betty Freidan, Germaine Greer and Simone de Beauvoir published their seminal works, which aimed at inspiring woman to fight against oppression in the following years. The Feminine Mystique by Betty Freidan is regarded as the manifesto of the movement. The Sexual Politics by Kate Millette and The Female Eunuch by Germaine Greer prompted women to emerge from biological existence and to achieve liberation. In her ground breaking study of women, The Second Sex, which is actually a work of anthropology, sociology, biology and psychoanalysis, Simon de Beauvoir discusses the problem of being the ‘other’ in her own world, and argues that if a little girl were brought up from the first with the same demands and rewards, and with the same severity and the same freedom as her brothers, “she would not take her fate for granted; she would be interested in what she was doing she would throw herself without reserve into undertaking.” 9. In the second half of the twentieth century, feminism became one of the most significant liberation movements, spreading all over the world, being accepted as a global phenomenon.

The Indian Renaissance movement of the 18th century tried to rectify the errors of the past. Many great reformers and visionaries took up the cause of women and promoted their social, economic, educational, intellectual and spiritual progress. Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy who
struggled for the abolition of 'sati', Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, Keshava Chandra Sen, Madhava Govinda Ranade and a host of others clamoured for reforms to put an end to the practice of child marriage, ill treatment of widows and the like. Swami Vivekananda thought very highly of the women of India and believed that they should get opportunities for self-manifestation through proper education. He believed that education would liberate Indian women and put them in a position to solve their own problems in their own way. He writes,

"There is many a burden bound with legal tightness on the shoulders of western women, that is utterly unknown to us. Of course, our women have many problems, but none, that are not to be solved by that magic word 'education'... True education is no accumulation of information, but a development of faculty, or a training of individuals to will highly and efficiently."\(^{10}\)

Unlike the western women, the women of India were not bereft of legal or political rights, even in the colonial days. So most of them, in fact, did not realize the need for a reawakening. Conventional Indian women, who were not given modern education, were not really concerned about their oppression and they did not feel the need for an organized revolt. Also the men of India did not exclude women from
participating in anything that had some national importance. A careful observation of the role of women in the Indian freedom struggle reveals this fact. English education that was popularised during the British rule helped in making the thinking men of India reflect on the oppressive conditions of their women in society. Mahatma Gandhi was very much aware of the role women had to play in building up a refined society. He exhorted the women of India to join the National Movement and those who joined and dedicated their lives to it, were given vital positions as leaders of the Movement. Gandhi, a staunch supporter of women’s liberation, believed that only a society that respected women could progress. In Women And Social Injustice he writes:

"These questions of liberation of women, liberation of India, removal of untouchability, amelioration of economic conditions of the masses and the like, resolve themselves into penetration into the villages and reconstruction or rather reformation of village life".

Gandhi, by calling upon the women of India, to come out of the confines of their homes, and contribute their mite to the freedom struggle, was giving vent to his idea that ‘Sthree-Sakthi’ was inevitable in the building up of any nation. When many women responded to his invitation or rather challenge, and participated in the historic struggle
and thus proved their mettle and heroism, it acted as a reminder of the glorious Vedic days when women warriors had fought and won. Among the women of India, it marked the beginning of an awakening of their inner selves, and consequently it resulted in an arousal of the feminine consciousness.

In western countries, most feminists emphasize a separatist culture that avoids the influence of men. Thus the very word ‘feminism’ seems to conjure up an extremist, radical and anti-male attitude in women. Also, western feminism gives importance to sexual politics, it is more theoretical, and introverted and does not regard economic conditions as vital. But in India, feminism has to be related to economics and politics, and it examines the approach of the society to questions like sexuality, abortion and dowry in the Indian condition and it is connected with the social problem of women that are exclusively Indian.

In her article, “Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian convictions” Suma Chitnis says:

“...There are at least three specific points on which the perceptions and sentiments of a noticeably large number of Indian women seem to diverge from those of the western-influenced feminists. By far, the most
conspicuous of these, is the average Indian woman's disapproval of feminist anger. The second is their somewhat mixed and confused reaction to the feminist emphasis on patriarchy and particularly on man as the principal oppressor. The third is their relative inability to tune into the demands for equality and personal freedom.\textsuperscript{12}

The western feminists are more concerned with the necessity to fight for equal legal, political, economic and social rights for them. Theoretically, western countries are committed to the ideology of democracy and equality for all; but in actual practice, women were not given equal rights. As a result, the western women had to organize and fight for their rights. The suffragette movement organized by the western feminists is an instance. These feminists, or rather activists, as they were opposing the denial of human rights to one sect of human beings, had to fight, whenever justice was violated: Their reaction often took the form of furious outbursts directed against the hypocrisy of the cultural and ideological stand of the society.

Although the Indian constitution itself guarantees equal rights to women, the actual practice of equality in everyday life is still an unrealised dream. While the women of the upper and lower classes are relatively more free and confident, it is the middle class women who
suffer the restraints of the society. It is they who are mostly afraid of the societal anger that may be aroused, if they have a will of their own. Thus, the prime concern of the feminists of India is to bring about an all-round liberation or emancipation, which includes emotional, intellectual and moral liberation of women belonging to all classes.

Another reason for the basic difference between the feminism of the west and that of India is the cultural ethos of the nation. Indian feminists are largely influenced by the socio-cultural background of the nation and therefore show marked deviations from the western type. The traditional hierarchical set up of the Indian society plays a major role in hindering the development of a personal and individualized type of autonomy in the Indian woman. The Indian community is taught to maintain a very stubborn insistence on selfless service. It believes in self-effacement and sublimation of the ego. It is ruled by duty-consciousness. The religious convictions of this country attach more importance to the spiritual life of an individual than the worldly. These are all factors that have influenced the Indian women and prevented the growth of self or ego in them, whereas the western woman is used to view herself as an individual and is more conscious of her rights than her obligations. The woman of India looks upon herself as a very responsible member of the family and is more concerned with her duties.
than her rights. Family relations and social relations matter most to the women of India, and they value family as the basic unit or binding force, while the western women cannot give up her individuality to uphold the interests of the family. Western feminists like Germaine Greene and Adrienne Rich recognise the family as a unit of oppression, to be done away with by women. Though, the spread of education, the conscious effort from the part of activists and exposure to western feminist ideologies have awakened the women of India to the concept of liberation or personal freedom, it will take a long time for a total change to overcome the cultural conditioning of centuries.

Also, in India, even the radical feminists do not insist on the negation of the influence of men in the lives of women; he is accepted, his capacities as a partner, lover and companion are appreciated; his co-operation and support in dealing with social issues are welcomed. The fact that reformist movements against evil social practices and abuses of women were led by enlightened men proves that the thinking men of India were always ready to take up the cause of women.

Thus, we realize that a unique feature of Indian feminism is that, it tries to find a place within the community and family relations, and
that the Indian woman has to seek her identity within the circle of family acquaintances, by discharging her duties properly.

The attitude of the Indian society, including that of the women, to motherhood is another relevant point on which western feminism differs from that of India. Here, motherhood, wifehood and marriage are regarded as the major social institutions that make up the life of a woman. Motherhood is an exalted state in the Indian condition, and a mother is held in a very much revered position.

"Janani Janmabhoomischa/Swargadapi Gareeyasi"\(^{13}\)
(Mother and motherland are greater than the heaven itself)
is not what Valmiki alone thinks but what ancient India believed.

Mother is the very symbol of the Mother Goddess-Saraswathi, the Goddess of knowledge, Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and Kali, the Goddess who punishes the wicked. The mother is expected to be a Bhoomi Devi, the Earth Goddess who symbolises endless patience, immense selflessness and eternal suffering. This Mother Goddess was considered to be occupying a higher position than the male Gods, according to the Devi Bhagavatham.
“Brahma Hara : Sauri Sahasranetra
Vagwagni Soorya Bhuvanadhinadha
Te twat Krita : Santi tato na mukhya:
Maya yadasthwam sthira jamgamani.”  14

(Brahma, Siva, Vishnu, Indra, Vak, Agni, or Soorya are considered as the rulers of the world, but none of them is the real ruler. It is the Mother Goddess, mother of all these Gods, who is the real Supreme Power)

This is what the Indian mind expects from a mother—to bear up with anything, to be benevolent to her children even when she suffers the worst. For her suffering and tolerance, she is worshipped, and is thus rewarded. According to Swami Vivekananda,

“The ideal womanhood in India is motherhood – that marvellous, unselfish, all-suffering, ever forgiving mother. The wife walks behind. The shadow”  15, while in the west “the woman is wife” 16.

His observation is true, for in the west, the essence of man-woman relationship is conjugality. Whether the institution of marriage is held
as anything sacred or not, man-woman relationship is at the centre of every social issue. Also sex is regarded as the foundation of husband-wife relationship.

But in India, marriage, for woman, is a way to motherhood. The aim of every Indian woman is to become a mother of sons. Meena Shirdwadkar in *Image of Woman in the Indo - Anglian Novel*, writes:

"The mother in the Indian tradition is the giver of blessings, the giver and protective goddess, to be respected and worshipped. To a woman, to be the mother of a son is the goal of womanhood." 17.

In the western world, feminists like Adrienne Riche see motherhood as a burden, or as an instrument for opposing, enslaving and ruining women, whereas the Indian woman cannot do away with motherhood, which will raise her status in the family. Once she becomes a mother, she ceases to be an individual, giving up her personal comforts. Even exposure to western culture and the feminist propaganda fail to make her neglect her role as a mother.

The religious and cultural myths that have conditioned the Indian woman through traditional subordination have a major role in deciding
her attitude to wifehood. Such myths inhibit the growth of feminist awareness in them: Indian mythology has archetypal heroines like Sita, Savithri, Seelavathi, Draupadi and others whose piety and chastity are emphasized as their power. These 'pathivrathas' — women who are devoted to their husbands all through their lives—and their self-negating, sacrificial lives have made a deep impact on the Indian psyche. Every girl is brought up after the image of Sita or Savithri. Her ultimate aim in life is to get married. She must dedicate the rest of her life to serve her husband, attend her in-laws and look after the family. She is traditionally supposed to worship her husband as God, however despicable he is. This conditioning by the religious and cultural myths that perpetuate the subordination of women down the ages makes Indian women put up with unhappy or even loathsome, marriage at any cost, for the sake of their children and also for the pretence of keeping up their prestige as 'happily married' in the society. Changing times have not done much in changing the attitude of most women of India towards wifehood. Even economic independence could not liberate her from her social and emotional dependence upon her husband. Most Indian women, even today, do not prefer to get divorced from their incompatible spouses and they drag on with their marriages unlike their western counterparts.

The great importance given to spirituality down the ages, in India, has contributed a lot in moulding the outlook of Indian women. The
great sages of the past, who were relentless seekers of the Ultimate Truth, had laid down spirituality as the essence of human life, and worldly life and its pleasures as momentary. According to them, one should do one’s duties perfectly rightfully and should not complain about hardship. They regarded earthly life as a medium for performing one’s duties, and not as a means to achieve pleasure. Thus the destitute and the downtrodden have adopted themselves to the desperate hardship of their lives; thus, the women of India have learned to put themselves at the feet of their husbands, suffering anything, without the slightest discontentment, for such a long time that even feminist ideology could not drive them away from their faith. Feminism aroused self-respect in them. But they were not ready to break their families and be strangers in a family-centred society like that of India. Subsequently, the feminist awakening and woman’s established role in the family as the one who sacrifices came to co-exist.

Thus the Indian variety of feminism which differs from that of the west fundamentally has evolved from so many typically Indian cultural, moral, social and psychological situations. Hence, despite the irresistible influence of western feminism, it has an essential Indianness. It follows a middle path. While the western militant feminism advocates a separate culture and identity for women, devoid of the influence of
man, the feminist concepts in India take into account the continuing prevalence of the institution of family and marriage. In an underdeveloped country like India, however, feminism could get a foothold only among the educated upper class and middle class women. Women belonging to the lower strata of the society, those who are bothered only about their survival at all costs, do not understand the need of being treated as equals, or achieving emotional and intellectual liberation, as they have other priorities in life. Sagarika Ghose comments in “Indian Feminism: Coming of Age”.

"Indian feminism in the 90’s is trying to reach a stage where it draws on the indigenous tradition of emancipation for its growth. As such, it works within the confines of Indian society instead of trying to overthrow the system from the outside. So religion is no longer denied, but communalism is combated, the family is not sought to be destroyed, only reformed from patriarchy; equality with men is no longer seen as the ultimate prescription for freedom; and abortion and contraception are no longer absolute imperatives for the health of Indian woman.”

Though Indian women are conditioned by religious and cultural myths that help to subordinate them, the same myths can inspire self-respect and inner strength in them. A re-interpretation of traditional
myths like Sita or Savithri will reveal their confidence, courage of conviction and strong determination and thus it will be an impetus to the feminist cause. Sita and Savithri never fluctuate from the path of chastity and fidelity and thus become the most revered ‘Pathivrathas’ but nor do they accept humiliation without self-respect, and thus they can be a great inspiration to the women of India. Similarly, the same spirituality that encouraged the Indian women to accept subordination, suffering and self-effacement at the hands of men without complaint, can become the inspiring force that would help them to rise up and awaken their feminist consciousness.

In this regard we are reminded of the ‘Arthanareeswara myth’ that symbolizes a perfect fusion of both sexes. All differences between the two sexes are forgotten in this myth, and what matters is equal partnership, equal importance and equal sharing of each other’s body and mind. Seetha Sreenivasan, in her article “Rebelling Against Patriarchy” writes:

“The androgynous deity of Indian myth may be an inspiration. In this symbol, Arthanareeswara (artha-half; nari-woman and Easwara-Supreme God-the creator) man and woman are mutual, one sustaining and complementing the other even while preserving their
individual autonomous identities. They may correspond to the "woman-in-man" (Men in Feminism) idea. Only we in India knew it 5000 years ago".19

The western ideal of an androgynous relationship between man and woman and the post modern concepts of men-in-feminism ideas can find their perfection in the ideal of the 'Arthanreeswara' Godhead that is worshipped by Indian women through ages. The complete and harmonious blend of man and woman is represented through this myth and it has acted as a pillar, through ages, supporting the ideal of the equality of men and women.

Though very slowly, Indian women writers were influenced by the concept of a liberated woman. In their writings, woman's struggle for self-realization and self-definition, woman's quest for her identity and her pursuit of freedom and equality found expression. All kinds of female experience such as wifehood, domestic toil, pregnancy, motherhood, abortion, rape, being single and so on became their theme of discussion. The gradual evolution of feminine consciousness and woman's rebellion and protest against oppression at every level reflected in their writings. Indian literature was, for a long time, dominated by the ideal of loyalty and devotion from the part of a woman to her husband;
now, the woman writers have started emerging from the Sita Cult and have begun to depict the real inner character of woman with all its conflicts and contradictions.

The post independence era saw women writers in Indian English becoming more conscious of the concept of a liberated woman and there are images of the new emerging woman in their works. In poetry and fiction, the thinking woman, the woman in search of her self, became a strongly felt presence. Disappointed with the treatment meted out to women in our society and supported by their competence to write creatively in an international language, these women writers took up the cause of women. Consequently, they have, to a great extent, succeeded in spreading the concept of feminism in the society. But in the case of most of the contemporary male writers, this awareness of the emerging New Woman did not happen; they continued to portray women as wholly subscribing to their traditional images. Writers like Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Bhabani Bhattacharya have not given us any significant picture of Indian Women in their fictional works. Raja Rao spiritualises and glorifies the concept of motherhood in his work The Serpent and the Rope. Mulk Raj Anand pictures the silent, suffering nature of women in Coolie. Bhabani Bhattacharya emphasises the traditionally approved qualities of women
like gentleness and adaptability, in his novels like Mr. Sampath, The Dark Room etc. R.K. Narayan projects the image of suffering wife, and only in The Painter of Signs we get the picture of a woman who makes her way to become a liberated woman. In short, these male writers have mostly characterised women in the traditional mould, overlooking the evolution of the New Woman and giving her no place in their writings.

In the works of Indian English and regional women writers, we get more realistic portrayals of women. The focus in novelists like Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawar Jhabwala and Anitha Desai is on the woman's point of view. In them, the investigation and presentation of feminine consciousness is directed towards an objective account of woman's emotions, assessing Indian womanhood's confrontation with male reality. They attempt to discover the actual social and emotional bonds that shackle Indian women.

"A woman articulating her inner most feelings, her desires, her ambitions, and trying to utter her anguish over the frustrations faced by her, may not surprise the readers of today, but it did disturb them greatly when Kamala Das published her first volume of poems entitled Summer in Calcutta in 1965. In those days, Women's Liberation
Movement in India was still in its infancy observes Iqbal Kaur. The society Kamala Das was born into was a traditional, orthodox one which had still retained the memories of ancient matrilineal system of inheritance. The matrilineal system, as against the patrilineal inheritance which is the norm for almost all other Indian communities, allows more freedom to women. In this social set-up, as the property of the family flowed into the hands of the nieces and their children, women were economically empowered and thus had developed a spirit of independence. As Siby James in "Hegemony and Culture: The Case of Indulekha" in the journal, Haritham opines:

"The 'Marumakkathayam' (Matrilineal System) gave women great freedom and status, and this was not merely conceptual as many critics now consider it to be. They had control over property and could exercise the right of divorce in marriage."

Before Kamala Das was born, the matrilineal social set-up of strong-willed and independent women had come to an end. In its place, in Nair families, middle class morality had crept in, and staked its claim. The powerful matriarchs gave way to timid maidens and obedient wives whose opinions were never sought. They were degraded to silences
who could not speak beyond whispers even within the household. The society built up double standards of morality for men and women.

Kamala Das was a pioneer as she began breaking the laws of the conventional society of treating women as sheer commodities. In a society which did not expect women to speak about sex even among themselves, Kamala Das gave an uninhibited and aggressively frank expression to the whole range of female experiences. She talked about love, lust, sex; and about the endless hungers of the female body, thereby shocking the society.

In those days when writing was considered to be primarily a male activity, a woman’s choice of writing as her occupation was extraordinary. Such a male-oriented society always wanted to keep, “the significant difference between the lives possible to men and women and the violence necessary to make men maintain their position of authority.” But Kamala Das strongly protested against all sorts of gender discrimination, she wanted liberation from the age-old concept of keeping women as silences.

Kamala Das's society could not accept women writing about their intimate experiences, and her autobiography My Story became a
controversial revolutionary attempt. It caused commotion in her family and embarrassment among her relatives. The orthodox society which had hitherto suppressed its female folk and made them accept their inferior position to men, was thoroughly disturbed. In this book, she writes about herself as a representative of Indian women and expresses her rebellious and unconventional attitudes towards the treatment meted out to her by her family members, society and her husband. In *My Story* she represents all women who are forced to lead subjugated lives; she wanted such women to realise that they were equal to men. She wanted “to remove the gender-difference.”

One is liable to be labelled a feminist if one writes about love and sex in a forthright manner, like Kamala Das. Through her prose and poetic works; she is exploring the true nature of love and sex in human relationship and she is accepted as a spokeswoman of women liberationists. But, she is a feminist, not because she candidly and boldly speaks about love and sex, but because her attempts to describe her emotions and experiences as a woman are terribly and totally uninhibited. She is a feminist, not because she is advocating adultery, but because she does not disapprove of seeking fulfilment outside marriage, if it is not forthcoming within it. Kamala Das seemed to have set pen to paper with the aim of treading the untrodden, challenging
area of exploring and sharing her experiences as a body which serves as the foundation of her sociological, psychological and even spiritual development. Through her writings she explores the female body with unparalleled frankness and honesty and thereby throws the traditional Indian morality to winds. She seems to agree with Helene Cixous in that by censoring the body one is censoring “breath and speech at the same time.” Kamala Das’s attempt is to surpass all such barriers of censorship and seek freedom which means ecstasy for her. By baring her soul and self in poetry, she is stripteasing the mind of every woman, for, she believes that she is every woman and that what she feels is what all of them feel. In “Composition” she observes,

“We are all alike
We women
In our wrapping of hairless skin”

She confesses that she has never received true love and neither her parents nor her husband her the emotional security which she needed most. She feels that nobody cares for a woman’s needs, and the questions related to man-woman relationship haunt her.
Kamala Das writes about her body without censoring and with an intense feminine sensibility and expresses all the injuries she has received from the insensitive man-made world. By confessing her feminine passions and experiences, by peeling off the layers of all inhibitions, she feels that she reaches "closer to the soul and to the bone's supreme indifferences".

Thus, to reach the soul and expose it, she chose to expose the body. And in trying to expose both, she concentrates virtually on one theme that is the theme of love, with the obsessiveness of a woman who can realize her being only through love. The spiritual and carnal aspects of love are mutually complementary but for a woman, carnality alone is not fulfilling. She desires something deeper and stronger than this "skin-communicated thing". But most often a woman seeking the consolation of love is disillusioned as what she receives at the hands of her husband or lover is lust alone. Unaccompanied by love, sex becomes ugly and disgraceful and most women are forced to bear up with this kind of disgraceful experiences all through the years of their married life. For Kamala Das, the sexual act, when it is deprived of the magic of love, is "hacking at each other's parts/Like convicts hacking, breaking clods/At noon".26.
She realizes that marriage, the institutionalised form of man-woman relationship, has no place for love. It makes people hide their real feelings, abandoning all that is natural about them, and play-act. It transforms people into posers and pretenders. For a thinking person, this kind of pretentious existence is suicidal, and Das experiences the frustrations of her woman persona who is confronted by such a fate, in her poem "The Suicide".

"I must pose
I must pretend
I must act the role
Of happy woman
Happy wife"

The Indian society does not approve of divorces and it cannot spare women who are not 'obedient' to their husbands. So most wives unwillingly submit themselves to a life of disillusionment and despair, which ultimately results in spoiling their personality and making them dwarfs.

".......... Cowering
Beneath your monstrous ego I ate the magic loaf and
Became a dwarf" is what the woman persona experiences in her married life.

Conditioned through centuries to accept the superior position of man, most wives do not even realize the tragic fate which the society has set up for them. Not being able to experience real happiness that springs from real and selfless love, they live their lives in weariness. But Kamala Das, very much aware of the meaning of love and the great solace it can bring, asks:

"Woman, is this happiness, this lying buried
Beneath a man?"

Thus, the woman persona in her poems begins an incessant quest for the bliss of love. But wherever she goes, what she receives is only the shadow and not the real thing. Time and again she asks herself:

".........Can this man with
Nimble figure-tips unleash
Nothing more alive than the
Skin's lazy hunger?"
Then finally, she comes to realize that all men—"a substitute for a substitute"—are alike in their attitude towards love, and to expect pure love from them is meaningless. In "A Losing Battle" she observes:

".........Men are worthless, to trap them

Use the cheapest bait of all, but never

Love..." 31.

Kamala Das's woman persona is not ready to suffer this kind of frustration and emotional insecurity resulting from man's inconsiderate ways. She decides to leave the narrow, stale world of hypocrisy and breathe in freedom and fresh air. In an interview Kamala Das has declared that "inside I was always the same rebel"; and this rebellious spirit enables her to write like this,-

"I shall someday leave, leave the cocoon

You built around me with morning tea,

Love-words flung from doorways of course,

Your tired lust. I shall someday take

Wings, fly around, as often petals

Do when free in air" 32.
But what she condemns is artificiality and insensitivity in man-woman relationships, and not the relationship itself. She does not overlook the role of men in the lives of women. She does not even disapprove of sexual love, but celebrates it as a means of recognition, when it involves love and admiration. The genuine feelings of a woman are exposed thus.

"Isn't each
Embrace a complete thing, a
Finished jigsaw, when mouth on
Mouth, I lie ..., ..., ..."). 33

She believes that an act of love is a way of celebrating her sense of liberty and she advocates total and wholehearted submission to one's lover; thus submission, contradictorily, results in victory. She is eloquent on the dignity and nobility of the human body, when one looks upon it in the magic light of love.

"Stand nude before the glass with him
So that he sees himself the stronger one
And believes it so, and you so much more
Softer, younger, lovelier, .... Admit your
Admiration

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hair, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers.”

Unlike most other Indian women writers, she is celebrating sex and the human body. This courage to articulate what is regarded as taboo by the society reveals her revolutionary zeal.

The question of a woman’s identity haunts Kamala Das throughout her writings. She speaks of the woman’s identity in many of her poems. She writes about the roles and moulds the society expects of a woman. She rejects them altogether, laughing at the stupidity of those people who cannot think differently.

“.............. Dress in sarees, be girl
Be wife, they said. Be embroider, be cook
Be a quarreller with servants. Fit in, oh
Belong, cried the categorizers.”
She condemns such categorizers in her poetry in English, her short stories in Malayalam and My Story. She is seen to hit out against the unwritten laws in society which entail women to seek fulfilment as wives and mothers, never as persons with identities of their own. By articulating the consciousness of women, Kamala Das establishes the fact that women also have dreams and desires of their own, and they are not to be taken for granted. She believes that women have to discover themselves, and in the process define themselves.

This attitude of defying what society and convention urge her to do is typical of Kamala Das. Her female characters, seeking fulfilment from a desired man, when their husbands fail to understand them, also represent the same spirit of defiance. Like a true feminist, she desires freedom, but unlike one, she opts for the love of a man who can satiate her feminine self. Freedom from commonplaceness, from suppression, from indifference, from domestic burdens is longed for, but not freedom from her feminine feelings. Like critic P. Udayabhanu states in his article “Akam Pollayaya Iruttu” (Hollow Darkness) in Sthree, Swathwam, Samooham, Madhavikkutty Patanangal: “The woman of Madhavikkutty is not one who blames man, or one who wants freedom from the race of man........”36
In exhorting girls to learn judo or karate to protect themselves or in portraying women who transcend the rules of the society and culture and become epitomes of a new society that would be built on broad minded and liberal values, she is expressing her rebellious attitude.

Kamala Das definitely supports woman's role as a mother, and she has personally experienced great satisfaction in her role as a mother. The conventional adulation of motherhood is seen in her writings, but she also gives pictures of children who neglect their mothers in their old age. In stories like "Koladu" (The Goat) and "Naipayasam" (The Dessert) sympathetic portrayal of such neglected mothers can be seen. The unselfish service rendered by these silent, suffering housewives is always taken for granted by the other family members.

In many of her short-stories like "Narichcerukal Parakkumbol" (When Bats Fly) we find women undergoing terrible conflicts within themselves. The unfortunate, destitute maidservants, the sexually and emotionally starved women of middle-class families, the foolish women who are easily cheated by their lovers and even prostitutes are portrayed with a deep concern and a great fellow feeling. She seems to advocate
a better understanding of these miserable folks. As a philanthropist, she gives foremost importance to the healthy mental and physical life of every individual. If culture becomes punishment, she supports breaking it; if sexual liberation is a solution, it can be allowed. She writes in My Story, "... my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain... I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage, I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit ... wanted to be given an identity that was loveable".

Thus, we find the women personae of Kamala Das questioning injustices, challenging the hypocritical attitudes of society and wielding war against the vice of dishonesty. The courage they show in attacking the well-armed male oriented society reminds one of the myth of Sakthi or Durga; in both cases, the relentless storming is aimed at purifying and improving the society.

Sugatha Kumari began her poetic career as a Romantic, writing about the sweetness of love, the pain of loneliness and the beauty of Nature. In her first collection of poems, Muthuchippi (The Mother of Pearl) itself we find poems expressing a profound disgust with human frailties and weakness as in "Kaliya Mardana" (The Taming of Kaliya)
and "Kurushethrathil" (In the Kurushethra). Nostalgic memories of childhood and disillusionment at the turn of events in post-independence India appear in her later poems. The terrors of war and the glory of peace are discussed in her poems. She wrote about famine and plague. Man’s unscrupulous disregard for his fellow beings and his greedy conquests find expression in her poetry. The aftermath of his neglect and abuse of Nature is discussed. The terrible gulf that separates the haves and the have-nots is portrayed. The miserable life of women labourers toiling in fields and factories is depicted. But the question of woman’s identity and her place in the largely man-made society does not make its appearance in her poetry until 1971 when "Sthree Parvam" (The Canto of Woman) was published.

Sugatha Kumari has been preoccupied with the concept of love, warmth and understanding. The theme of love is a vital force in her poems. The woman persona in the poetry of Sugatha Kumari is a deathless Radha, in search of her Krishna, or ideal lover. And she is engaged in an eternal search for perfection in love and the solace it can bring her. She believes that love is all-pervasive and its reflection can be seen in the opening of a flower, the singing of a bird or at the first rains in summer. She realizes that it is love that makes life liveable and lovable. But she does not say much about the want of love in many
human relationships, especially in man-woman relationships. She does not seem to realize how pathetically the institution of marriage fails often to preserve love. Also, unlike most writers with feminist leanings, she does not write about sexual love in her poems. She portrays the hopeful beloved, the rejected love-lorn fiancée or the blissful sweet heart; but not about a woman enjoying, demanding or dissatisfied with the physicality of love. Instead, she sings about the kind of love that exists beyond body, beyond the impermanence of flesh. Thus, as a writer with romantic ideals about man-woman relationship, Sugatha Kumari was not aware of the question of woman’s liberation at first.

But Malayalam Literature had an earlier history of recognizing the role of women in society, as individuals, not as wives or mothers only. As in the case of other literatures of the world, in the earliest forms of Malayalam Literature also there were folk songs. There are hundreds of varieties of these songs, reflecting our ancient life and culture. The ballads of North Malabar, the most important and representative among them, are glorifications of the heroic deeds of some of the brave men and women of North Malabar; Unniyarcha, one among the heroines of this folklore, was a lady of exceptional courage. She was a terror to mischief-makers, and was adored by common people.
But it was the renaissance of the 19th century that created a new awareness about the problems of women. The social awakening of the period inspired many of our writers to take a close look at woman in a new light. It also exposed the hollowness of our traditional idealisation of woman, revealing the fact that woman was the victim of multifarious social injustices. In poetry, Smt. T. Ekkavamma (1865-1916) was a pioneer to write in revolt about the inequalities and humiliations suffered by the women folk and to fight for safeguarding woman’s rights and privileges. She firmly believed that women were also talented like men in literary and intellectual fields and she wielded her pen to fight against male domination.

The great poetic trio of Malayalam (Mahakavithrayam) who were the harbingers of modern romanticism in Malayalam Poetry gave birth to a new concept of womanhood. Vallathol, one of the trio, started as a traditionalist and the women characters of his early poems had more external charm than internal strength. But later his approach changed and there emerged through his works an image of woman who assumed her own liberation as well as represented the spirit of national liberation in those days. Ulloor, the most conservative among the three, wrote Chitrasala as an answer to Miss. Mayo’s “Mother India” which was extremely critical of the Indian society for denying woman her due
position. Chitrasala presents pictures of epic women, remarkable for their eminence. Kumaran Asan was also an ardent social reformer who fought against the value set up of the society in which he lived. In ‘Chinthavishtayaya Sita’ (Thought-stricken Sita) he transcreates the supreme epic heroine in a modern world. Here, Sita questions the power structure of the male-dominated society and becomes the symbol of the modern enlightened lady fully conscious of her rights and privileges.

In Malayalam fiction also, the problems of women found expression. Lalithambika Antharjanam (1909-1987) gave vent to the miseries of Nambudiri women through her writings. Her magnum opus is a novel, Agni Sakshi, which narrates the evolution of an innocent, inexperienced Nambudiri girl into an active participant of the National Movement, and later into a ‘sanyasini’ or nun. Saraswathy Amma, (1919-1975) another most outstanding feminist writer of the modern age, has all her women characters raising the banner of revolt against male-domination. She considers exploitation of women as more prevalent in the institutions of marriage and family, so that she even seems to hint that these traditionally valued institutions can be done away with for the betterment of women. She suggests that women could become more educated and financially and intellectually independent of men, as an alternative. Rajalakshmi (1930-1965) is another notable
woman writer who has been able to expose and explore the light and shade of women’s psyche.

Among our major poets after the trio, Balamoni Amma has a prominent place, and she is known as the ‘Amma’ or mother in Malayalam poetry. Her poems bring out the nobility of motherhood with all its tenderness. Although she tends to idealize woman as housewife, mother and grandmother, her concern for the world and the worldly life as a benevolent mother is relevant.

Sugatha Kumari, who considers Balamoni Amma as her Godmother, also followed a traditionalist’s path at the beginning. Though woman occupies a pivotal place as beloved, mother or daughter, as an individual she remained insignificant in her early poetry. But in her later poems, there are women who are fed up with domesticity, with household chores and the routine of hopes and despairs. Girls from poverty-stricken families driven to sell their flesh are introduced; the questions of woman’s security is ardently discussed, the quest for woman’s identity and the hope for her liberation are pronounced. The evolution of a rebel is marked by the appearance of self-respecting women personae who question the injustices around, in her poems.
It is the picture of woman fed up with domesticity that we find in the poem “Sthree Parvam” (The Canto of Woman). This long poem has a dramatic form, with many characters, including chorus. The protagonist is a woman in her old age, who has spent the whole of her life toiling for her family. After having trodden the tedious path of life, like a beast of burden, she has come to take rest at the feet of her ancestral home, where she had spent her girlhood days. As she grew up, she fell in love with a man, got married to him and had borne his children. As years passed by, she was disillusioned to find that there is no place for real love in marriage and no sacrifice is remembered. A woman is supposed to devote herself to her husband and children, though she may not be thanked for it; she has to do all the cooking, washing, cleaning and a thousand other household chores without complaining. Now in her old age, she realizes that she has been wearing the mask of a happy wife and mother all through her life. She decides to do away with all such masks and go back to her ancestral home.

Thus, the poem “Sthree Parvam” is a commentary on the disillusionment of a traditional Indian woman’s life and the burden imposed on her by domestic and sexual domination. Sugatha Kumari raises her voice in revolt against the societal discrimination of women as the ‘second sex’. Here, the revolt is not quite mild, as it aims at
shaking the very pillars of the so-called ‘family-centred’ society of India. The image of how the patriarchal society forces a woman to sell her body to earn a livelihood for her family and herself is the theme of the poem “Jessey”. Jessey, who hailed from a very poor family of seven children, was a classmate of the poet. She used to stammer, indicative of her diffidence. Her father was a drunkard, and one day her long-suffering mother went mad. Jessey had to discontinue her studies and work as a maidservant to bring up her brothers and sisters; but worse was in store for her. After a few years, the poet happened to meet her as a cabaret dancer in a star hotel. Once again, after some years the poet meets her at the airport. Now she is leaving for some Arabian country, to become a maidservant there. By now, she has lost all hopes, anxieties and fears, as is suggested by her cold, unstammering voice. The realistic portrayal of Jessey’s life throws light on the hellish experiences of being a woman and having no money. By articulating the sense of helplessness and insecurity that surrounds Jessey’s life, Sugatha Kumari is focussing on the predicament of being a woman and legitimising the female ego. When Jessey bursts out,

“I will never be back in this damned country”

it reveals how mercilessly her native land has abandoned her,
and how emphatically she expresses her contempt for the insensitive society.

Though the woman persona of Sugatha Kumari does not show much desire to free herself from the dominance of the patriarchal society, she seeks to assert her identity. Sugatha Kumari is very much aware of the role of woman and her contribution to the welfare of humanity. But always her contribution is overlooked and her position is marginalized. It is always taken for granted that woman should serve, support and bring solace to man. The Sanskrit saying,

"Karieshu Manthri, Karaneshu Dasi,
Roopeshu Lakshmi, Kshamaya Dharithri
Sneheshu Matha, Sayaneshu Veshya
Shadkarma Naree, Kuladharma Patni"\(^{39}\)

(As a minister in administration, as a servant in doing things, as Goddess Lakshmi in looks, as Mother Earth in patience, as one’s mother in love, as a harlot in bed—a wife who plays all these six roles is the ideal one) of Neethisara asserts that woman should play every role she is expected to in the best possible manner. Moreover, down the ages, nobody has bothered to care about what woman expects from man.
Sugatha Kumari makes a note of dissent about this traditional way of thinking and suggests that in love there is no superior or inferior. If woman serves, supports and brings solace to man, she should also be served, supported and brought solace to. She believes that only such a relationship can be meaningful. It is such an ideal man-woman relationship that is depicted in the poem “Oru Vrindavana Rangam” (A Scene from Vrindavan). The picture of Krishna decorating his sweetheart Radha is made all the more appealing by the poet’s comment that “every woman in this poverty-stricken land is a Radha in her soul.”

Sugatha Kumari hopes that if such a soulful relationship is possible between the sexes, it will help people attain a wholeness of personality, which Woolf and before her, Coleridge have called an androgynous mind. She desires to see a complete integrated harmony between the male and the female; but what happens really is the exploitation of women. The poem “Ivalkku Mathramay” (Only For Her) throws light on the innumerable wrongs woman has to swallow in day-to-day life. She is there, for man,

“to trample on, and sometimes to adore

to ridicule, and to reject at times

to walk with hand-in-hand, to bear

and bring up babies, she has a little
flower on her forehead, a pale
smile between her lips, and a deathless
flame in her heart.”

Everywhere she is harassed, tortured, insulted and assaulted.
Bride-burning, rape, and sexual exploitation of women and even
ten-aged girls have become everyday happenings. She who loves man
as mother, beloved or daughter is ill-treated everywhere. Yet, invariably,
she is the one who,

“.........places
love even above God
And seeks solace at the
Hands of Time alone”

Hence the poet wishes to sing a song in praise of woman—the one
who has lost and suffered most. She seems to convey the message that
it is high time the role of woman was recognised.

Sugatha Kumari believes that woman has her own rights, at least
the right to live, to love, to be loved and to seek liberation. Since it is
real love that liberates the soul, one cannot help going for it. Thus, the
woman persona in the poem, "Abhisarika" (The Woman Who Goes to Her Lover) leaves her home, her husband and her child, in the mid of night, to reach her lover. She knows that this is not what is expected of her. She should always stay at home attending to the needs of her husband and child. But when pure and selfless love beckons her, she cannot turn a deaf ear; and she rushes towards it, transcending all social barriers. The journey is not easy, for the path is full of dangers and threats. Yet, she is ready to face anything in-order to reach her goal. Thus, Sugatha Kumari presents her woman persona in this poem as a bold, determined and relentless seeker of the ultimate value of life. The love she is after may be disastrous to her; it may even mean death. But death too becomes sweet and desirable when it is a synonym for love.

"Falling down, getting up again and
Rushing towards you through darkness
And sinking into your arms, sinking
Into to the last moment 43

Here the poet is unravelling the moral courage of a woman who believes that facing the challenges of life in doing what she thinks right, will not defeat her invincible spirit. Also, we find the rebellious spirit of the poet in proclaiming the divinity of true love whether it is legitimate
or illegitimate. It is noticeable that the woman persona is not anxious nor is she fearful about what is in store for her, when she sets off for her nocturnal journey. Her faith in her lover is complete, and her optimism unshakable; she is sure that her joining him, whether it is in death or life, is sweet and soothing. This spirit of optimism is the soul of her feminist vision.

Sugatha Kumari portrays another aspect of the same moral courage through the character of Radha. She is totally devoted and absolutely submissive to her lover and lord. Everything else is immaterial to her. But, if he rejects her love, she won't go begging for his love, nor for his mercy. Instead, she would endeavour to achieve salvation through her self-sacrificial love. In Sugatha Kumari’s long narrative poem, “Radhayevite?” (Where is Radha?) we find a bold, daring, and determined seeker of perfect love.

In India, where arranged marriage is standard and marriage for love is exceptional, husband and wife have never been regarded as equals. The members of the middle class are taught to believe that the family is more important than its individual members and love is believed to flow out of social arrangements and it is actually subservient to them. But the love story of Radha and Krishna rejects all
such theories of concocted love and proves itself by defying the constraints of society. Radha, the beautiful milkmaid has a husband and her love for Krishna is an adulterous one. But by its own magic, it transcends all the barriers of time and space, and succeeds, for all times, as one of the greatest love stories of the world. When Krishna leaves for Madhura, she is left alone at Ambady, and all on a sudden, her life becomes aimless and vacant. She too leaves that place which is full of sweet memories and wanders around plains and hills, deserts and dense forests. Finally she falls down dead, only to be reborn as an array of Krishna devotees, and as the embodiment of true love. Though driven by love for Krishna, Radha is not without self-respect, when his love is denied, she asserts strongly,

"If I cannot have your love.
Nor do I need your mercy”

Thus, the woman persona of the poem proves herself to be no slave to man’s whims and fancies, in spite of her devotion for him. Nor does she let him trample over her feminine self. It is the powerful voice of a self-respecting woman who won’t let anybody abuse her, that we hear in this poem. ‘Bhakthi’ or devotion and ‘Shakhi’ or power are inseparably blended in her character. Surrender which results from
devotion and vigour and energy which mean power are the stuff of her love.

While conjugalilty is the essence of life in man-woman relationship in the West, in India more importance is given to the role of a mother. Sugatha Kumari is traditional in her portrayal of the mother image. Instances of devoted, selfless, suffering, sacrificing and endlessly patient mothers are seen in her poems. In "Amma" (Mother) the long-suffering mother is Devaki, the mother of Krishna. The tyrant Kamsa had imprisoned Devaki, his sister, and her husband. All the seven babies borne to her were murdered by him, and her eighth child, Krishna, having escaped the wrath of the tyrant, is now living in Ambady. Since the day he was taken away from her, Devaki has been waiting for his return. Time has elapsed but her dream has not come true. Behind the bars of the damp, narrow cell Devaki is patiently waiting for him.

"............ I am the one who sank
Into the depth of despair;
I am the one from whose soul
Breast-milk and tears flowed alike
I am the one who drank the ocean of sorrows......."
The poem unwinds to portray the unending story of suppression, humiliation and torture of women down the ages. All the injuries she had received at the hands of men are questioned. The poet raises the question if woman would ever be strong and self-sufficient to stand upright and defend herself. The suffering mother hopes that one day women would be able to defeat male brutality, just as Durga had done. The myth of Durga, presenting woman as the one who eliminates the evildoers is reflected here.

What makes this poem remarkable is Sugatha Kumari’s positive outlook on life as is reflected here. Despite her helplessness, she does not feel disheartened. On the other hand, she is hopeful and optimistic that all her hardships would be over, sooner or later. She asserts confidently,

"I was sure, quite sure
That you would come to me oneday."

Sugatha Kumari’s positive attitude is evident in her faith in man who is responsible for all the sufferings of woman, as the redeemer also. She does not refute man’s capacity to stand by and support woman. She believes that, one day man will be able to recognise his faults and
then he will repent and make amends for the damages done to woman. She is, in fact, waiting for the day when male atrocities are done away with, by virtuous and just men themselves.

"Penkunju-90" (Female Infant-90) is another poem that expresses the bitter experiences of the womenfolk of our country. The insecurity that haunts the whole of a woman's life is given a limpid form by presenting an unmarried mother and her illegitimate girl-child. The miserable mother is forced to abandon her child, since the Indian society cannot approve of unmarried mothers and illegitimate children, while no accusing finger is pointed at the child's father. The mother knows that her daughter's life is in danger, as the hypocritical, unscrupulous society will not let her live a quiet life. Enumerating the horrors that could befall her daughter's future the mother realises that "the sum and substance of woman's life is sorrows." The poem reminds us of the female infanticides that become more and more common among the lower classes of the country, and abortion of pregnancy if the foetus is found out to be female, after conducting prenatal tests that determine the sex of a child, which are spreading like wildfire among people belonging to the different strata of the society. The attitude of the Indian society that is moulded by centuries of prejudice and discrimination towards its female members is severely criticised here.
Towards its close, the poem expresses the hope that there will come a day when woman will be able to stand on her own feet, with her head held high, and when she will be able to earn her bread with the sweat of her brow. Such a hope of the reawakening of the 'subjugated sex' makes the poem obviously rebellious in its tone. It is noteworthy that even a poem like "Penkunju-90" which deals with such a poignant theme as the irrevocable plight of women, ends with a note of optimism; the poet has an undying spirit of optimism which enables her to believe that one day women all over the world will be able to "hold life high like a golden flag". When the poet asserts that she can dream about even the unwanted girl-child, and hope that one-day she will be able to "hold life high like a golden flag", the depth of her faith becomes obvious.

In her latest anthology, Devadasi (Handmaid of God) this tone becomes more vehement. The wasted, neglected, exploited and brutally shattered lives of women is the prevailing theme of the poems in this collection. The title piece "Devadasi", as the name implies is about a so-called devadasi, who had been put at the feet of the local deity in her girlhood days. She is supposed to sing and dance and decorate herself to please the deity. All her youth was spent dancing and singing, and now she is old and decrepit and is even unable to climb up the
steps leading to the temple. She sings her swan song about her wasted love, youth and life. The malicious system of offering women as sacrifices to gods and rulers and using them against their will is strongly hinted at in this poem. Here, as Sugatha Kumari attempts to unveil the neglected world of feminine feelings and passions in a comparatively mild language, she is actually giving vent to the "endless female hungers" which, the society thinks need no expression.

The very same experience of neglect and rejection is depicted through the story of Oormila, the wife of Lakshmana, in "Oru Ramayana Rangam" (A Scene From The Ramayana). Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are to set off for the forest for their fourteen years' exile when Oormila requests her husband to take her along with him. But her yearnings fall flat on his ears, and he discards the young princess. As Lakshmana accompanies Rama and Sita to the forest, Oormila is left behind in the loneliness of the palace. Her realization that she is not an inseparable part of her husband's life and that he does not care for her feelings, comes as a blow from the blue. Woman's expendable position in her man's life is still a better reality; even in our society, many women are confronted by their husbands' indifference and the story of frustrated feminine passion goes on endlessly.
Again, it is the helplessness of a mother that is presented in “Kolleendathengane?” (How to Kill). The mother of a mentally-retarded woman of thirty-four years, is in her old age. She knows that death is not far away for her. All through her life she has been struggling to support her daughter, and now she is too old. The hapless mother is threatened by the prospect of leaving her daughter alone in this heartless world and so she decides to kill her, to take her along with herself. Her husband had already left them, as he did not want to bear up with the burden of a retarded child. Men have options, even as husbands or fathers, but women have none; they cannot escape from even the most hellish of homes. If the mentally-retarded child were a boy, the mother could have left him somewhere. But the so-called moralistic society of the highly literate people of Kerala, is no safe place for a woman to live alone; not even if she is a dumb, helpless creature, she would not be spared. Thus, her tearful words,

“I fear, if I leave this child of mine
Whom I hold safe under my wings, for a moment
Sharp claws will steal her away,
As she can’t run nor resist”,

fully express the brutality of the society in its treatment of women.
The poet’s righteous anger at the unjust and inhuman attitude of the
societal mind towards women, and her awareness of the need of a reawakening of women are expressed in these lines.

Literacy or financial security is no solution to the problem of ill treatment of women, in the cent percent literate state of Kerala, and atrocities to women are mounting. Even little girls are found out to be the victims of male barbarism. An instance of this is the theme of the poem “Enthupattee Namukku?” (What Happened To Us) A female infant is raped and being left on the railway track. Such an incident may be done by some mad men; but when madness like this occurs more frequently, it reveals the unhealthy societal attitudes towards such acts. The poet’s anxiety about the safety of girls or women is the driving force behind a poem like this. The question of how to safeguard women against all such eventualities seems to be obsessing her.

Many of her women characters are educationally, financially and intellectually liberated women who do not decide to walk away from marriage or interaction with men. Instead they want men to realise that they are to be treated on an equal footing, and with understanding. She does not aim at disturbing the status quo of the Indian family
life, nor does she want to cause any inconvenience to the stronghold of family relation. Her heroines show a keen sense of justice and they question the double standards practised by the hypocritical society, where men and women are judged by different standards.

Thus, we find that beginning with poems which sing about moonlight or soft petals symbolic of the charm of love, she has traversed a long path. In her latest poems, the ugly, cruel and shameless face of the male oriented society becomes an obsession. Cruelty to Nature, animals or women, all of which are day-to-day occurrences in the enlightened state of Kerala seem to be haunting her. Shocked by these bitter realities, the evolution of an activist happens in her poetry. A humanist demanding a merciful treatment of women, or a rebel breaking the long silence that has been maintained in the world of woman’s experiences, emerges and she becomes the spokesperson of all suffering, humiliated women in a patriarchal society, repeatedly questioning male atrocities. In spite of the woman’s privations and travails, tensions and failure, suppression and oppression, mental disorder and male chauvinism, Sugatha Kumari is hopeful that one day woman would be able to stand on her own feet and be respected for her qualities. Thus, we find the woman persona of Sugatha Kumari marching forward with a newly acquired consciousness of woman’s identity and her space, with
brave steps, challenging the oppressors. The inborn strength of an Indian woman in fighting against the forces of darkness is reflected in Sugatha Kumari’s revolting women characters.

Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari are true feminists in their own way, although they may not strictly adhere to the doctrines put forward by eminent feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Freedan, or Kate Millet. In fact, one of the aims of feminist writing is a truthful representation of women in a patriarchal society, and such a representation is found in the poetry of these two writers. Moreover, the basic principle of feminism is the recognition that women’s problems are not private but communal, and here again, Kamala Das and Sugatha Kumari are true feminists, as they delineate womenfolk in general, being subjected to male oppression. Their attempt is to picture women who are not comfortable with stifling traditions and taboos and are struggling to break the chains of patriarchy that bind them. By awakening the female consciousness, they become champions of marginalized women and crusaders of their much-longed for emancipation. They are aware of the haunting question of woman’s identity and her predicament, but never do they lose hope and become crest-fallen. Instead, their woman personae face all crises boldly, and wait for a new morn and the spirit of optimism upheld by their rebellious nature brightens their vision.
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