Conclusion

The three writers Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai belonging to the first generation of Indian English women writers, started their writing career at a time when Indian society was in a state of transition. Stepping out from the colonial past to the post-colonial present, Markandaya and Sahgal have been representing the Indian reality of a society creating a new life and tradition for itself. Anita Desai however is a link between this early stage and the modernist writers of the later years – the new generation of young writers. In the sixty years since independence, India has been in the grip of vast changes – political, economic, cultural and social. These changes in turn affect the common everyday realities, which find expression in the life of ordinary people – women and men. Women being more sensitive to the finer nuances of life, women writers can pick up these fine threads of existence and weave them into a coherent pattern. Though thematically and technically different, these three writers have a common factor in their concern for their protagonists caught in the throes of tradition and change. As women, reading women’s minds, voicing their concerns, depicting their tragedies, and also their triumphs even decoding their silences becomes primary in their creative concern. The lives of the ordinary and sometimes the not so ordinary women presented a saga which could be lifted to the level of the artistic, by writers like these. Humdrum reality then can be lifted to the level of literature to read and rewrite the history of a society, a culture and a tradition.

Reflecting the history, tradition and culture of a society then becomes the essence of Indian English fiction, and reading each text of successive
generation of writers of this genre we are awakened to the truth of Foucault's statement on the writer and his work:

> We try with great effort, to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds. (Foucault: 176)

Seminal works of Markandaya’s like *Nectar in a Sieve*, Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* and *A Situation In New Delhi* and Desai’s *Fire on the Mountain* and *Clear Light of Day* reflects ‘the time in which it unfolds’ and ‘the space in which it is dispersed’. These novels and others like them represent both the era in which they have found their space and the generation(s) of men and women who lived. The Indian women in her various historical and social modes: within the family, taking the first tentative steps to the wide world beyond – in the public domain, and women active at a crucial period of history has her image articulated in the texts represented.

These three post-independence writers of the first generation have broken the tradition of early Indian English writers of the romances and the refined aura of a cultured, upper class existence, where even suffering and labour is given a romantic idealised form. The distortion of landscape and those who inhabit this world is sought to be changed with the changing conception of these writers. Sarojini Naidu and Toru Dutt created the image of romanticised, submissive portrait of Indian womanhood. As critics proclaim:

> Naidu’s burden is to project, to explain, to justify............ As an accomplished poet Naidu is not only an exhibit herself, she becomes through her subject matters, also exhibitor. (Sangari and Vaid 1999: 78)
Torn Dutt on the other hand, was anxious to present a pure uncorrupted India by transforming the Indian landscape into a Western one and her heroines into the mould of virtuous Victorians. After the various stages of the sacrificing female (Savitri – Sri Aurobindo), the burdened women with the exceptional, glorified role of wife and mother with power to hold family and society together we are confronted with a particular breed of women who emerged from a strong economic and social background. Women who were able to achieve leadership and wield power who subverted the image of submissiveness and sacrifice but who at the same time advocated the traditional role of women before moving onto greater deeds and wider pastures. It is this image that is portrayed by Sahgal and Markandaya, a compound of tradition and modernity.

Sahgal’s Devi (A Situation In New Delhi) and Sonali (Rich Like Us) are women of the above mould, enlightened modern figures, yet steeped in their traditional culture and drawing strength from it. However, the question may arise- Is this the real face of the Indian woman? Not really, for these women are speaking from a privileged position of society having the means to overcome exploitation and take up positions of strength and power. These women cannot perceive real oppression of those less privileged women who are so thoroughly exploited that they are powerless to budge the burden much less overthrow it. Rukmani, Markandaya’s heroine in her classic novel Nectar in a Sieve is the quintessential rural Indian woman enriched by tradition, burdened by exploitation, and entrapped by fate is a convincing portrayal of strength, tenacity and the future of widening horizons of the common Indian woman. Anita Desai’s quaintly sensitive novel Fire On The Mountain explores the paradoxes of a privileged woman’s escape urge, the tragedy
of a socially deprived woman and the doomed existence of a victimised child. These novels reveal interesting and convincing portrayals of modern society.

The state of transition Indian society was going through threw up challenges and conflicts, that these three writers sought to depict in their writings. Institutions, values, perceptions, attitudes, change and decay, revive and transform, recording parallel changes in the human psyche. Markandaya, Sahgal and Desai (like their male counterparts) reveal the voiced and silent nuances in their protagonists, in the lives they live and in the situations they face. Desai, Markandaya and Sahgal have subverted tradition in the creation of the Indian woman’s image. They have demolished the Savitri ideal (victim stereotype) and also the role model of a perfect wife, mother and daughter-in-law creating women in search of a new self.

The compound of tradition and modernity with which the Sahgal and Markandaya women are created is a conglomeration of disparate effects of the past and present. Keeping alive and remaining responsive to both: in Eliot’s words, tradition as ‘the historical sense... a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.’ (Eliot 294). Proud inheritors of a great, sustaining legacy, Indian society sees a gradual erosion of values, decay and degeneration leading to a crisis in society. From politics, to religion and culture, tradition has eroded and decayed. Sahgal finds an antidote to this in the individual as crusader. She has a vision for India with women at the helm. These women, in their strength and weakness are persons with their own set of values and strength of mind, who fight against unscrupulous forces that threaten to swamp society with evil, exploitation and corruption. Markandaya likewise creates strong women characters who also emerge as crusaders for a cause. The difference with Sahgal is that her characters are simple, common women, not necessarily of the elite. Rukmani’s and Sarojini’s struggle is
equally intense and at the cost of tragedy, displacement and loss. Anita Desai also depicts the individual as fighters through characters as diverse as Nanda Kaul and Ila Das, Bim and Uma. Desai’s treatment of the maladjusted and marginalised characters is a statement of the deficiencies in society. However significantly some of these people turn tenacious, courageous soldiers struggling to keep up lost values and build new lives out of the ruins of a decaying society.

Inheriting a tradition of imperialism as an aftermath of the colonial encounter, we also come across the character of the “feminist-as-imperialist” (Gandhi, 83) in life and literature. She is the strong woman – the memsahib of colonial days who helped in the imperial mission. In course of time, this figure turned exploiter against her own kind. In post-colonial and modern independent India, we thus have the liberated Indian woman turned exploiter. Desai, Markandaya and Sahgal portray this type of Indian women whose liberation, emancipation and power is at the cost of their less powerful and less fortunate sisters. Markandaya’s Caroline (Possession) and Sahgal’s Madam (Rich Like Us) project this image of woman different from the known one of devotion / love / sacrifice. This is the menacing and autocratic face of woman – the female imperialist.

Though both these characters have symbolic and allegorical annotations, Caroline – the colonial domination of India and clash between spiritualism and materialism and Madam – the treachery and dirty dealings in the modern socio-political scenario of India, at the same time portray the power and influence of a certain breed of the new woman. Just as “Jane Eyre”s’ personal progress through Bronte’s novel is predicated upon the violent effacement of the half caste – Bertha Mason” as pointed out by Gayatri Spivak in her A Critique of Imperialism (Gandhi 2000, 91). So too the female imperialists like Caroline and Madam rise to the centre
at the expense of their weaker sisters. The powerful mothers, mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law – the instigators of dowry deaths and female infanticide represented by characters like Anamika’s in-laws in Desai’s *Fasting Feasting* are the menacing face of the female as exploiter.

Between the traditional Indian women, the incarnation of *Shakti* and *Prakriti* and the female as exploiter, there is another female figure. This figure is represented in Bim – in Anita Desai’s *Clear Light Of Day*, the epitome of the liberated woman. Projected as totally free from the bondages of social conventions, independent and liberated whose existence is paradoxical. Bim—a spinster, a college lecturer, liberated woman debunks, the myth of liberty in cutting off relationships. Like Nanda Kaul who wants to escape familial and social relationships and fails, Bim finds she cannot shed her familial responsibilities and finds that only relationships and responsibilities give life its meaning.

These three writers, I believe, have searched for a true image of women which will emerge with the changes coming to Indian society. They have shown women in various roles from submissive to dominating, gentle and menacing and sometimes a conflicting amalgam. Through the enactment of these roles the writers try to examine what their women can do to bring about positive values to society, to the public arena, politics, to domesticity and marriage and finally to relationships. They have also tried to reassess certain preconceived notions about gender issues in a traditional patriarchal set up. These issues are in the areas of experience, the biological state, social and economic conditions etc. The idea that women were biologically weaker is overthrown by characters like Caroline. The superiority of the male sex in the areas of experience is proved a myth by characters like Devi, Sonali and Rukmani. Metamorphosis of social and economic conditions is related to the
changing balance of power between the sexes. Today there are no definite borders about the superior or the inferior. Gender relationships have turned complex, critical and ambivalent. It is this ambivalence and complexity that can be deciphered in the depiction of the socio-cultural scene of these three writers.

It is a complicated process to place these three writers in the tradition of Indian English fiction writing. The Indian English text in its earlier stage remained pan-Indian in the sense that it handled certain all-India themes like the east-west conflict, exploitation of women, clash between tradition and modernity, the partition and so on. They were creating an image of India in direct contrast to the vernacular literatures which dealt with regional variations, the nuances of multiple traditions and the intricacies of various cultures, languages and religions which go on to make an interesting mosaic. Kamala Markandaya belongs to the earlier group of Indian English writing and follows the tradition of the early writers on these particular themes. Responding to change though, she demythicises certain aspects of woman and her reactions to the world. Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai were the first group of innovators who broke away from this earlier tradition. So we note in Sahgal’s and Desai’s writings a variety of currents and cross currents in theme and concern which does not subscribe to the traditional ideas of the early Indian English fiction. An instance of this can be cited from Sahgal’s novel Rich Like Us where the east-west encounter in not treated as the conflict of materialism versus spiritualism, or tradition versus modernity and where the characters are not stereotyped abstractions but very humanely universal.

It is to be noted that in a discussion of the three writers concerned we have to traverse beyond the literary conventions and traditions of fiction in general and Indian English fiction in particular. In talking of Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal and
Kamala Markandaya. We have to go beyond the individual texts and take into account the social and autobiographical background of the writers concerned.

The overtly political concern of Sahgal result from her strong political connections. A novel like Rich Like Us stems, as many critics would suggest, from the intense political rivalry in the Nehru family, particularly the animosity between Nayantara and her mother Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit with Indira Gandhi and her abhorrence of power struggle which Sahgal has seen at close quarters. This personal involvement to some extent, might interfere with the writer’s objectivity and sense of balance it maybe felt. However the personal focus showers the narrative with an intensity which would otherwise be lacking.

Desai’s sense of alienation partly psychological, partly sociological (as the daughter of a German mother, who always felt her mother’s loneliness in a foreign land) was responsible for her searing portrayal of Sarah’s dilemma at her dual existence of her cross-cultural marriage in her novel Bye Bye Blackbird. Also echoed unconsciously in the predicament faced by both Nanda Kaul and Ila Das with their elitist, colonial background who are misfits in today’s society in Fire On The Mountain.

Whether such personalities add or detract to the value of works is a debatable point but in case of this study which pertains to society, history and tradition one can relate the individual and small stories to bigger stories in a culture. In so dong one hopes that works such as these will “help us realize that literature does not occur in a space separate from most of the other concerns of our lives.” (Guerin, Labor et al 242).

Indian society has moved on with changes and transformation and so has Indian English fiction from the concerns and times of these writers. Many of the concerns
that they were voicing and struggles and conflicts of their protagonists have become commonplace and no longer revolutionary or novel because they have been resolved and newer ones have come to take their place. Therefore it is inevitable that gaps and doubts will always remain in a study such as this.
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