Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
A man is in the right in being a man: It is the woman who is in the wrong.


Women are oppressed in the east, in the west, in the south, in the north. Women are oppressed inside, outside home. Whether a woman is a believer or a non-believer, she is oppressed. Beautiful or ugly, oppressed. Crippled or not, rich or poor, literate or illiterate, oppressed. Covered or naked, she is oppressed. Dumb or not, cowardly or courageous, she is always oppressed.

Taslima Nasrin.

http://www.taslimanasrin.com/

Exploring feminine consciousness is a fascinating experience in literature. When the world suddenly reveals its meaninglessness, this derived feminine consciousness is compelled to doubt and question all the beliefs it has inherited, experienced or learnt. Then it starts to reassess the entire meaning of its life. The concept of female identity shows us how female experience is transformed into female consciousness, often in reaction to male paradigms for female experience. It is a process and writing by women engages us in the process as the female self seeks to
Identity is a self-reflective and self-conscious projection of shared and remembered symbols, myths, traditions, religions, History, language, food clothing and such other factors. It is also an affirmation of difference because when I know who I am, I also know whom I am not, or how I am different from other.¹

Feminist critics have approached writing by women to find what makes women’s writing different from men. They find that experiences felt by women are totally different from men. The concept of female identity explains the diverse ways in which women’s writing is different. The purpose of this study is to take up three different women writers, placed in three different contexts, who make a foray in trying to look at the development of Identity in their women characters. The texts taken for study are, Namita Gokhale’s Gods, Graves and Grandmother, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s Sister of My Heart and Vine of Desire and Taslima Nasrin’s French Lover.

The initial part of this introduction briefly outlines the theories of Erik H. Erikson, Heinz Lichtenstein and Nancy Chodorow. The next section deals, again, very briefly with feminism. Since a separate chapter was not considered necessary to talk or introduce the writers, a life sketch of the writers is included in the introduction itself. The latter part of the introduction introduces the texts taken for study. To understand the concept of female identity, a look at some of the Identity theories is necessary. For the purpose of this study, the theories of Erik H. Erikson, Heinz Lichtenstein and Nancy Chodorow are read. Freud is also brought in, but not in detail, merely as a tangent. Rather than being completely theoretical, this thesis is largely thematic with the dictum "female identity is a process" as its guiding force.

Erik H. Erikson is known as the architect of modern identity theory. He published a number of books on his theories and research, including Childhood and Society and The Life Cycle Completed. His book Gandhi's Truth was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award. He contributed to our understanding of personality as it is developed and shaped over the course of life-span. According to him, identity is both formed and manifested through social relationships. Although he believes that both sexes pass through the same stages on
their way to maturity, there is a basic biological difference between the sexes. In his theory, it is the male, who achieves mature identity, whereas the female has a specialized role as child bearer. Therefore, a young woman spends her adolescence, looking for the man to fill her ‘inner space’ and the stage of identity and intimacy are conflated for her.

Heinz Lichtenstein is one of the pre-eminent psychoanalytic theorists of identity. He had demonstrated that one could read someone’s personality in terms of a core “identity theme”, established in early object relations. He believes every child forms a ‘Primary identity’ in responses to the expectations implicitly expressed by its mother. This core identity sets the pattern according to which the person thereafter relates to other people and to the world. He defines the self as,

The total potential range of all possible variations of the individual which are compatible, with its primary identity and a person may risk death rather than give up identity.  

Sigmund Freud’s theory of feminity has also been contested. His famed dictum, ‘Anatomy is destiny’ privileges the male. Women were seen as half-man, in other words, castrated. His theory talked about

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women becoming men, thereby conveniently doing away with the female genealogy altogether. Freud describes woman as subject of her psyche, that is, as living experience of self, conscious and unconscious mental processes, as subject to herself. He also talks about her as an object seen through male eyes and none of what he says is very flattering to woman. By comparing man to the woman and the boy to the girl, Freudian psychoanalysis has very conveniently suppressed and submerged the concept of women.

These theories posit a problem with a distinct female identity theory. Nancy Chodorow’s explanation of personality differences between the sexes has gained wide spread acceptance. She implies that personality differences between the sexes are historically variable. Nancy Chodorow is a feminist and an American psychologist. She has written many books, including *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978), *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory* (1989), *Femininities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond* (1994) and *The Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender and Culture* (1999). She has extensively pursued the question of why women desire motherhood.
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She says that a girl’s personality takes on a different shape as she grows. She forms her gender identity positively, and she can pleasurable re-create the mother-infant symbiosis when she herself becomes a mother. So, women develop capacities for nurturance, dependence and empathy more easily than men do, and are less threatened by these qualities, where as independence and autonomy are typically harder for women to attain. She portrays female personality as relational and fluidly defined, starting with infancy and continuing throughout womanhood. She does not see female personality formation as a predetermined progress. She believes women are socialized, so that mothers can regress to earlier stages of development. The young girl must identify with her mother and also separate from her. In order to be a mature mother, a woman must develop an identity sufficiently flexible that she can emerge emphatically with her child and still retain an adult sense of herself as nurturing, yet independent. This maternal stage of female identity bears special relevance towards women’s literary identifications.

This thesis makes an attempt to extend these insights into identity theory with the formula, female identity is a process.

Since the social condition of women has its roots in the past, an accurate analysis requires some knowledge of the past. A few pages here
survey the changing position of women since the beginning. Protestantism radically rewrote the Catholic version of man’s relation to God. The Reformation theoretically made women and men equal before God. However, the leading heretics did not favorably have attitudes towards women. They consider women as weak, frail, impatient, feeble, variable, cruel and made marriage the only possible means of survival for most women. During the late 18th and 19th centuries, work outside the home was seen as a threat to womanly virtue, bad for a woman’s physical well-being and emotional health and importantly, possible evidence of her husband’s failure to earn sufficiently to support the family. Despite woman’s supposed physical disadvantage, she has always played a vital role in the production of goods and services, not only for family use, but also for exchange in the market. At the beginning of the industrial revolution, she was usually a co-worker with her husband in farm-work. With the introduction of machinery, women left the household for factory wage work.

While in many ways the industrial revolution improved the standard of living of women, they were stripped of a degree of economical independence and prestige that had resulted from working with their husbands and other family members. Experiences during wartime also led women to reassess themselves. Sexuality, political
power, and economic capabilities all became salient issues of women. Middle class women fought for admission to colleges and universities and tried to enter the professions. Working class women tried to unionize or at least, to improve working conditions. Technological improvements, too, continued to be important in giving women the time and energy to develop an active interest in their society. Feminism spoke to our literary experience with the fierce urgency of a revelation or great awakening. Feminist critique of women’s position in contemporary society demonstrates that every aspect of social life is governed by gender. In other words, it reminds us that all of social life is structured by rules that establish different types of behaviour as appropriate to women and men. Feminists make these rules to critical scrutiny, arguing that, in many cases if not all, they are oppressive to women. To establish this critique, feminists are confronted inevitably by questions about women’s nature, its potentialities and limitations. They are forced to develop a theory of human nature that includes an explicit account of the nature of women and men. Juliet, Mitchell in her work The Rights and Wrongs of Women, says,

Man and women actually become human in relation to each other and if sex in denigrated as a sex, then humanity is the loser...
any or oppression diminishes the dignity of the whole society exploitation.³

The history of mankind unveils the social structures, laying bare the unequal gender relationships. As man grew civilized, the social roles of men and women grew different and diverse cultures dictated different rights and duties, leading to gender hierarchy. The sociological structure and cultural practices aborted the growth of women, trapped her in orthodoxy, and taught her to be an obedient and willing slave of man. Carole Pateman points out,

Marriage is a long term social relationship between the sexes, in which, in return for protection from a husband, a wife gives obedience. Men gain material psychological benefits from her subjection.⁴

Thus the man-woman relationship has been perverted, disharmonized and distorted in the process of development. The abominable monster born out of progress and development is


⁴ Carole Pateman, Genesis, fathers and the political liberty of songs. Feminism 1,169.
"Patriarchy", which has succeeded in systematically wiping out the identity of women. It is a bitter curse to women, as it not only destroys the individual, but also has long-lasting effects on the younger generations. Adrienne Rich remarks,

_Patriarchy is the power of the fathers, a familial, social, ideological, political system in which men, by force, direct pressure or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male._

Patriarchy has imposed several restrictions on women systematically through religion, law, custom, politics and science. It has ruthlessly destroyed the attempts made by the oppressed to find their identity. Kate Millet describes the pathetic condition of females thus:

_The history of patriarchy presents a variety of cruelties and barbarities. Sati in India, crippling deformity of foot-binding in China, the life long ignominy of veil in Islam, the wide – spread persecution of sequestration, the gynacium and purdah,

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5 Adrienne Rich, _The Kingdom of Fathers_, feminism II(163-183) 78.
cliterodectomy, clitoral incision, the slave and enslavement of women, involuntary child-marriages, concubinage and prostitution...⁶

The vicious circle of patriarchy has turned her life into a living hell. Patriarchal ideology defines woman as nature, inspiration or chaos who ought to be suppressed, denied or hidden. Kate Millet further says,

Sexual politics obtain consent through socialization of both sexes that operates in three fold ways- temperament role and status which are based on political, social and psychological factors... The two central functions of the family are socialization and reproduction. Patriarchal power is wielded by man’s control over the sexual relationship. Male is psychologically and technically upped to perpetuate physical violence while female is rendered defenseless both by her physical and emotional training⁷.


Feminism has always been seen as a synonym for 'equality'. It cannot be denied that equality was indeed one of the main thrust areas of the feminist movement in the early days. But with changing times, the dimensions of feminist demands have also undergone a change. After decades of feminist struggle for equality, there still lurks within society signs of disturbance, suppressed revolt, open rebellion and dissatisfaction among women. Craving for equality was perhaps necessary during the early stages of the feminist struggle, but with time, things did not work out very well. Equality is not all that women need. At best it made them look like men, act like them and be like them. Gradually women realized that the need was not equality arising out of sexual difference but identity. Women should speak out their experience, breaking centuries of enforced silence. Women have to make a beginning somewhere by reasserting herself. Virginia Woolf, the founder mother of contemporary debate on feminism quotes,

A women writer should kill the angel in the house, that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom.\(^\text{8}\)

She also states that,

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\(^8\) Virginia Woolf, Room of One's Own (New Delhi, Foundation Books, 1998) 265.
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Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.9

Man is elevated in his position by women who serve him, fears him and worships him. It is patriarchy that makes him stronger, more powerful, and more authoritative. Woman is reduced to 'a thing' by stereotypes. Woolf sums up the position of women neatly in a male-centered society:

Imaginatively, she is of the highest importance, practically, she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact, she was the slave of anybody whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband.10

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9 Ibid. p. 44.
10 Ibid. p. 51.
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Feminist literary critics emphasize that women have to look to their past with their eyes open, and listen to their mother’s silences, to realize what they really are. They have been kept in dark for too long, and are made to believe in the ideologies of the male society. In most South Asian and South East Asian society, even before the child is born, good measures are taken to ensure that it shall be male-child only, either through religious practices or through scientific measures. The Birth of a male child is an occasion for jubilation, while the birth of a female child is accepted with reluctance. Life, for a girl, who has reached the stage of puberty, becomes unbearable as she is transformed into an ‘object for consumption’ in male centered society. The society regards her as ‘sex object’, and parents guard her strictly as chastity is much more precious than anything else. She is an object for display as parents are eager to marry her off at the earliest, lest she goes astray. Feminists allege that marriage is a male institution that belittles woman with its dehumanizing rituals and ceremonies. Simone de Beauvoir observes,

\[\text{After marriage she takes his name, she belongs to his religion, his class, his circle, she joins his family, she becomes his half.}\]

The conventional society dictates terms to woman. It is the wife’s duty to soothe her husband, who returns home exhausted. Man is the decision maker, who occupies an authoritative position in the family, while she is the home maker, who is pulled down to a subordinate position. Even the weak, feeble men are made powerful by such particular norms. Simone de Beauvoir alleges,

Marriage diminishes man, but annihilates woman.\(^{12}\)

This is very true in the case of women in South Asian Societies. Woman has to depend on her husband for survival, is expected to be meek and obedient and she has to remain voiceless, weak and passive. The preconceived notions of womanhood drift her away, into a sea of passivity, where the currents are too strong, to find her way back to life. She is taught to endure all the miseries with a brave smile on her face as a popular Kannada dictum says, “Woman’s life is a saga of suffering”.

The fate of woman has always been tied to the organization of the family, while the fate of the family has been interwoven with the organization of the rest of society. Home is the place, where peace and

\(^{12}\) Ibid. p.496.
tranquility should reign, and it is believed that women enjoy ‘domestic happiness’ with her beauty, kindness, innocence and purity. She soon realizes that man has trapped her in a booby trap, through her body, while glorifying her womanhood. Her powerlessness leads to a state of self-denial, guilt and depression. Man needs her body, her service, her sacrifice, but not her companionship. Women, whose active, creative impulses are bound by tradition, cannot survive too long on the male fantasy of an ‘angel in the house’. Home, which should have given her some live space to breathe, has instead aborted her dreams, desires and aspirations. However, no person can be enslaved for too long and woman is no exception. How long can she carry the burden of pain and agony, misery and humiliation? She has always fought her wars against sexual prejudices, in her own ways. Feminism is not a new phenomenon, but an ongoing debate against women’s oppression. One should not exaggerate either the repression of woman in the past, or the liberation of women in the present. Feminism is primarily a battle against feminity, where the feminists fight over the myth of ‘eternal female’, or the false images of women. It makes an attempt to overturn all the concepts of manhood and womanhood. In India, the constitution provides the same social and economic rights to women as men and same opportunities for promotion to the highest offices.
Hence Indian women are not denied many opportunities; but the movement still has to deal with problems such as murder of women for dowry, child marriages, female infanticide, temple prostitution practice, oppression of tribal and Dalit women, rape, wife beating, sexual exploitation at work, child molestation etc. Traditional Indian women suffered, submitted and adjusted themselves to the circumstances. But now they have changed. They are aware of their status, their quest, their identity, and their individuality. They use the pen to voice their thoughts. The writers of the contemporary world come out and present the realities of the life of women. As the image of women keeps on changing all through the years, the writer’s views, too, are changing, resulting in a variety of realistic images. Before providing details on what each chapter intends to do, it is essential to unravel the life and times of the writers themselves. This might again take a few pages, but it seems practical and necessary, because it would save time when the argument in the thesis actually takes off.

She contributes regularly to several newspapers and magazines with focus on women's issues and current literary criticism. She lives in Delhi with her two Daughters.

Of subtle and enduring interest is the character of Grandmother in Namita Gokhale's *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*. The protagonist is Grandmother; who remains so throughout the novel. An ace manipulator, she uses her charm, her intellect, and her raw will to survive the hardships of life. Her character acquires significance when related to her profession, not that of a prostitute, but the religious image she portrays.

If religion has suppressed women in India and elsewhere, Grandmother very deftly manipulates the same religion to her benefit. She becomes a god woman. The stolen marble becomes 'God'. The marble turns out to be a metaphor, symbolizing orthodox religion. The act of worshipping that marble stone becomes rather an intense search for her identity. Religion, in India, is not confined to the places of worship; it is a way of life and has a strong hold over people. Grandmother knows it, but uses it as a weapon against her exploitation. She defies authorities through religion. Religion provides a space to express her anguish.
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Grandmother resists through various strategies as she has her own dreams to be fulfilled and her own life to live. She protests against female subservience, later when she becomes ‘Mataji’, the godmother, she dons the robe of ‘Mataji’, but doesn’t believe in rituals. Her behaviour during the eclipse is testimony to that. She makes use of superstitious and religious beliefs of people for her convenience. But never allows herself to be superstitious. She perfects the art of presenting confusing abstractions as exalted philosophy and converts her lack of specific knowledge into a Gnostic strength. In a way, she subverts the patriarchal system, which keeps a woman in check through rituals and traditions. She makes use of rituals to keep her alive and survives beautifully. Gudiya Rani learns from her grand mother to assert her identity. She becomes a creature of possibilities, totally involved in the process of becoming. The act of changing her name is again a subversion of her conscious effort to change and establish her identity.

Gudiya Rani, Alias Pooja, learns her lessons from Grandmother. She battles against the social evil and stigma of rape and domestic violence and emerges as a winner. Nowhere does Namita Gokhale make Gudiya Rani a weeping, clinging girl. She is strong, and manipulative. She listens to Phoolwati to marry Kalki, her rapist lover, but gets rid of him easily. She has no remorse, only her will to survive. Domestic
violence and rape is a part of life of women belonging to the class, but they fight in their own way. They break traditions subtly leaving a trail of protest. These two women assert themselves with courage. They do not emerge as victims of oppression, but emerge as survivors. If Grandmother and Gudiya are the passive, powerless, and vulnerable victims, who outwit domineering, and strong men through their clever strategies, then Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *Sister of My Heart* and *Vine of Desire* traces the link a step ahead.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in India and lived in India until 1976. At present, she is living in California. She got her master’s degree from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, and her Ph.D from the University of California at Berkeley. To earn money for her education, she did many odd jobs including baby-sitting, selling merchandise in a bakery, and washing instruments in a science lab. At Berkeley, she lived in the international House and worked in the dinning Hall, slicing jell and removing dishes from the dishwater. She briefly lived in Chicago and Ohio, before she settled in Sunny dale. Currently, she lives in Sunny dale with her husband and two children. She teaches creative writing at Foot Hill College in Los Altos Hills, California. She has been the president of MAITRI, a helpline for south Asian women that particularly helps victims of domestic violence, and other abusive
situations. She states that she is motivated to be excellent in her field, and to create literary art of lasting value. She says that she sees herself "as a listener, a facilitator, a connector to people", and "to me, the art of dissolving boundaries is all what living is all about." 

Before she began her career in fiction writing, Divakaruni was an acclaimed poet. She writes poems encompassing a wide variety of themes. She shows the experiences and struggles involved in women trying to find their own identities. She has written poems such as Dark Like the River (1987), The Reason for Nasturtiums, (1990) Black Candle, (1991) Leaving Yuba City (1997). She edited a cross-cultural anthology Multitude in 1993 and wrote a short story collection Arranged Marriage in 1995. Her major contribution is in the field of novel. The Mistress of Spices (1997), Sister of my Heart (1999), The Vine of Desire (2002), The Palace of Illusions (2008), are her reputed novels. She has received many Awards and Honours such as, PEN Oakland Josephine Miles prize for fiction, Bay Area Book Reviewers Award for Fiction, Before Columbus foundations American Book Award, Gerbode Foundation Award, Two Santa Clara Arts council Awards, Barbara Deming Fellowship, Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize, Pushcart prize, Two PEN syndicated Fiction Project Awards, Orange Prize for Fiction.

Much of Divakaruni’s work is partially autobiographical. Most of her stories are set in the Bay Area of California. She deals with the immigrant experience, which is an important theme in today’s world. She writes to unite people, and she does this by destroying myths and stereotypes. As she breaks down these barriers, she dissolves boundaries between people of different backgrounds, communities, ages, and even different worlds. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says,

Women in particular respond to my work because I am writing about them, women in love, in difficulties, women in relationships. I want people to relate to my characters, to feel their joy and pain, because it will be harder to be prejudiced when they meet them in real life.¹⁴

Divakaruni’s interest in women began after she left India, at which point she re-evaluated the treatment of women there. At Berkeley, she volunteered at a women’s center and became interested in helping battered women. She then started MAITRI with a group of friends, which eventually led her to write Arranged Marriage, a work that includes

stories about the abuse and courage of immigrant women, who are both liberated and trapped by cultural changes and are struggling to carve out an identity of their own. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an award-winning author and poet. Her work is widely known, as she has been published in over 50 magazines, and her writing has been included in over 30 anthologies.

Divakaruni’s book *Arranged Marriage* is a collection of short stories, all about women from India, caught between two worlds. She deals with a variety of issues in the book, including racism, interracial relationships, economic disparity, abortion, and divorce. She says that the stories are inspired by her imagination, and the experiences of others. In *Mistress of Spices*, the character Tilo, provides spices, not only for cooking, but also for the homesickness, and alienation that the Indian immigrants experience in her shop. The novel follows Tilo, a magical figure, who runs a grocery store and uses spices to help the customers overcome difficulties. In the process, she develops dilemmas of her own when she falls in love with a non-Indian. This creates great conflicts, as she has to choose whether to serve her people, or to follow the path leading to her own happiness. Tilo has to decide which parts of her heritage she will keep, and which parts she will chose to abandon. The novel is currently made into a movie. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s plots
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whether set in India or America, feature Indian-born women torn between old and new world values. She uses her laser like insight and skilled use of strong, plot and lyrical description to give readers a look at her characters and their respective worlds, which are filled with hopes, fear and discovery. Whether in California or in Calcutta, women learn to adapt to their new and changing culture and as a result discover their own sense of self amidst joy and heartbreaks. This thesis attempts to analyze Sister of my Heart and Vine of Desire and to see how women carve out an identity for themselves.

Sister of My Heart is the story of Sudha’s search for identity. Sudha’s battle is against the prejudice of a society for a son. It is a fight against patriarchy, marriage, and the freedom to control her own body. The novel records how Sudha, although a hesitant and fumbling woman, begins to overcome her inhibitions gradually. We find a self-assertion born out of her own consciousness, conviction, and experience. For Sudha and Anju, her cousin, romantic love does not play a big role in what they have to say about their marriages. And what two women say about caring shows, in fact, that they have internalized an extensive repertory of normal social beliefs. We see wide variation among cultures in the way they construct gender differences in the area of love and care. We must use the contrasting cases of Sudha and Anju to exemplify part
of the range that exists, even within a single nation. Anju revels in her feisty, independent, and extremely combative personality, whereas Sudha has learned a gentler and soft set of norms. She seems to think it good to depend on someone tougher than she is, whether male or female, for support. To some extent such differences may be personal; but they also reflect the influence of cultural norms.

In *Vine of Desire* a sequel to *Sister of my Heart*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni further expands the character of Sudha. After personal tragic experience, Anju, her cousin needs support. It gives Anju the strength to recover her inner spirit and Sudha, the confidence to make a life for herself and Dayita, her daughter. Sunil, Anju’s husband, had been attracted to Sudha ever since he has seen her in a garden, but now he is betrothed to her cousin. He confesses to Sudha and proposes to her. The sword of desire cuts her into pieces. Then she feels reproach. She may not know why she did, what she did, but what she must do now, is clear enough to her. She picks up a job, and leaves Sunil’s house. She wishes she shouldn’t have come to America. She takes a bold decision to put her mistakes behind her. The old man puts forward a plan to Sudha that he is going back to India and stays in a hill station along with Sudha and Dayita. She accepts this offer, to find a new future for her Dayita. Thus,
these novels depict the protagonist Sudha’s searching for her real self, and also her struggle to establish her identity.

If Sudha succeeds by breaking away from conventions, Nila in Taslima Nasrin’s *French Lover* goes another step ahead, which is what the next section is all about.

Taslima Nasrin was born in August 1962 in a Muslim family, in Mymensingh, East Pakistan, now called Bangladesh. Growing up in a highly restrictive and conservative environment, Taslima was fond of literature, while she also excelled in science. She started writing when she was 15 years old, beginning with poetry in literary magazines, and afterwards herself editing a literary periodical called SeNjuti (1978-1983). She was the president of a literary organization while in medical college where she staged many cultural programs. Earning her medical degree in 1984, she worked in hospital for eight years. Her first book of poetry was published in 1986. Her second became a huge success in 1989. Then she started writing about women’s oppression in the regular columns of regular and weekly newspapers. With no hesitation she criticized religion, traditions, and the oppressive cultures and customs that discriminate against women. Her strong language and uncompromising attitude against male domination stirred many people,
eliciting both love and hatred from her readers. Her works include Lajja (shame) French lover (2002) Amar meyebella (my girl hood), wild wind and sei sob and ondho kar (those dark days), Ko (speak up), Dwikhandito (split in Two).

In 1992 she received the prestigious literary award ‘Ananda’ from west Bengal in India for her Nirbachito kolam (selected columns), the first writer from Bangladesh to earn that award. Islamic fundamentalists started launching a campaign against her in 1990. They broke into newspaper offices that she used to write for regularly, sued her editors and publishers and put her life in danger that only increased over time. She was publicly assaulted several times by fundamentalist mobs. In 1993, a fundamentalist organization called soldiers of Islam, issued a fatwa against her, a price was set on her head because of her criticism of Islam, and she was confined to her house. The government confiscated her passport and asked her to quit writing if she hoped to keep her job as a medical doctor in Dhaka Medical College Hospital. She was forced to quit her job. The Government however, banned Lajja (shame), in which she described the atrocities against Hindu minorities by Muslim fundamentalists. Her main message being ‘Let humanism be the other name of religion’.
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Taslima’s views that religious scriptures are out of time and out of place and that instead of religious laws, what is needed is a uniform civil code that accords women equality and justice, caused fourteen different political and non-political religious organizations to unite and demand her immediate execution by hanging. The government, instead of taking action against the fundamentalists, turned against her. A case was filed charging that she hurt people’s religious feeling, and a non-bailable arrest warrant was issued. Deeming prison to be an extremely unsafe place, Taslima went into hiding. In the meantime, Islamic extremists issued two more fatwas; two more prices were set on her head. But the international organization of writers and many humanist organizations beyond the borders of Bangladesh came to Taslima’s support. News of her plight became known throughout the world. Some western democratic governments that endorse human rights and freedom of expression tried saving her life. After long miserable days in hiding, she was finally granted bail, but was also forced to leave her country. Taslima has been living in exile, in Europe. After a decade, when she was granted a visa, she visited India, her second home. When she was granted residence permit, she moved there. But only after 3 years of living in west Bengal, some Muslim extremist wanted her to leave India. The west Bengal government and the Indian government forced her to live under house
arrest and put pressure to leave the country. She was forced to leave India after being confined for seven and a half months.

She has written more than thirty books of poetry, essays, novels and short stories. The Bangladesh government has recently banned three other of her books Amar Meyebela (My girl hood), Utol Hawa (wild wind), and seisob ondokar (Those dark days). Writers and intellectuals both in Bangladesh and West Bengal went to court to ban her autobiography Ko (speak up) and Dwikandito (split in two). Her fellow writers filled two million-dollar defamations suit against Taslima. The west Bengal government finally managed to ban Dwikhadito on charges of hurting religious feeling of the people. A human rights organization in Calcutta filed a case against the West Bengal government for banning a book that is against the freedom of expression. After two years, the Kolkata High court lifted the ban, which, Taslima says, is a victory for the freedom of expression.

Taslima Nasrin’s novel French Lover taken for study is about Nilanjana Mandal, know as Nila, a young Bengali woman from Calcutta, who moves to Paris after her marriage to Kishanlal, a restaurant owner. Her lover Sushanth forsakes her because they are not from the same caste. She gets married to Kishanlal, to defend herself against nasty
conjectures about why she didn’t marry until so late, and also to prove to everyone that she was not deaf or lame, and could still get a good match. Kishanlal’s luxurious apartment seems to Nila a gilded cage, and she feels stifled within its friendless confines. Her marriage, when she functions as little more than a house keeper and a sex object is far from fulfilling, and Nila looks desperately for a way-out of the boredom and depression, threaten to engulf her life. At this juncture, she meets Danielle and stays in her apartment. But her lesbian relationship and self-improvement makes Nila to leave her. Nila meets Benoir Dupont, a blond blue-eyed handsome Frenchman, and is swept off her feet. Benoir introduces Nila to the streets, the cafes, and the art galleries of Paris. Nila feels that the doors to a whole new world have opened before her. In her passionate, sexually liberating relationship with Benoir, she finally begins to have an inkling of her own desires. The relationship ends when Nila realizes that Benoir’s first priority is himself, and not the woman he loves, and her need for him has ended. But her road to self-discovery has just begun.

The women in the novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Namita Gokhale and Taslima Nasrin present a new generation of women and review everything with reason. This thesis intends to focus on the growth and inner struggle of their characters and trace a pattern of awakening,
Chapter 1

Introduction

protest and freedom in the novels taken for study. The introduction to
the thesis sets the tone. It sets out what to do about Taslima Nasrin, Chitra
Banerjee Divakaruni, and Namita Gokhale. Though the novelists are set
apart geographically, they make an attempt to transform female
consciousness by eliminating sexist socialization. Despite the cultural,
economic and individual differences between them, they successfully
depict the indifference, cruelty, and atrocity of the patriarchal situation
with all its associations and overtones. They focus on personal and
familial issues in a quiet unobtrusive manner.

The second chapter in this thesis titled Feminism and Identity
throws light on the different theories of Feminism and Identity. These
theories have been used as background material for the analyses of the
chosen texts. The beginning of this chapter studies and traces the brief
history of Feminism and feminist movements, which eventually led to the
awakening of feminist consciousness. In the pages, which follow, an
attempt is made to study theories of Identity by Erik Erikson, Heinz
Lichtenstein, Nancy Chodorow and Sudhir Kakar and they are used to
reach a theory of female identity with the formula, 'female identity is a
process'.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters, are devoted to a thematic
analysis of the novels. The thesis is titled The Identity of Woman in the
Novels of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Taslima Nasrin and Namita Gokhale: A Comparative Study. But while reading and analyzing the works taken for study, a distinct pattern of movement emerged. It was seen that the creation of these three writers, move in a specific direction of protest within the tradition, then breaking away from it and finally emerge out of conventionality into freedom.

The sixth chapter concludes all the readings made of the writers. Finally, this work is a modest attempt to delve into the ever problematic area of female Identity. An effort has been made in this thesis to explore the Identity of woman in the novels of Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Taslima Nasrin. If this reading prompts more questions, then I would consider this work fruitful and worthwhile.