Chapter V

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Elaine Showalter has divided literature of women into three phases, which are the female, the feminine and feminist literature. But, contemporary writers have topsyturveyed the convention and conventional genres. Namita Gokhale, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri project women as unconventional selves who deliberately subvert the gender roles. These women break away from form and norm, tradition and culture, patriarchy and hegemony. The image of women projected by earlier writers is that of a weak and meek person, often ready to sacrifice and compromise and that of a poor and helpless sufferer. These sacrifices and compromises were guised as her strengths, which ultimately led to her perennial suffering and suppression. Contemporary writers however have given a new turn to these roles played by women. Their women possess the ability to secure a place for themselves in family and society. The contemporary feminist fiction is the portrayal of a rational being called ‘woman’ who displays immense inner courage to cope with the complexities of life and complex problems such as marital alienation, loneliness, single parenthood.
and problems of sex and live-in relationships. Literature has been more powerful than mass media in expressing the identity of a culture and of a country.

Indianness has been placed very powerfully in the global ethos. Contemporary writers like Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Lahiri have given India and Indians the vantage point of being read, understood and being adjudged for prestigious awards like The Booker Prize and The Pulitzer Prize. Indian fiction provides a wide spectrum of various hues of India, Indians and Indianness.

Namita Gokhale, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri have interpreted mundane experiences of Indian women and discussed them on the local as well as global platform. The literary journey of these writers has can be looked upon as a confluence of sensitive intellect striving to pave ways for change and acceptance of change on the social and on the global level at large. The stories of Paro, Shakuntala, Parvati, Bibi Haldar, Mrs. Das, Moni and Esha can be termed as psychoanalytical odysseys of Indian women.
The image of woman has acquired a bold dimension in various art forms. Issues such as lesbianism, live-in relationships, extra-marital relationships, rape and domestic violence are boldly taken up as major themes in literature and films. Gender-based literature has brought these issues to the forefront, thus empowering women to expose their problems and overcome them. The contemporary woman protagonist refuses to succumb to tradition and society to save her relationship or marriage. This paradigm shift has paved ways for the psychological, sociological, cultural and even physical emancipation of women.

Namita Gokhale, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri have deliberately inverted the gender positions in order to argue against the age-old exploitation of woman and her successful revolt against it. Woman has metamorphosed through the different historical periods and movements. The earlier woman was an embodiment of selfless sacrifice but the present day woman is the quintessence of reason and rationality. She has learnt the art of questioning tradition, custom, system and above all man. Contemporary feminist literature is a pertinent enquiry into the enslaved past. Shobha De, one of the most popular feminist voices
maintains that: the very fact that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three letter word in India is enough cause to celebrate. The writers chosen here celebrate gender revolution in their fiction.

Indian films and painting too have undergone phenomenal change, as concerns the image of a woman. Films based on themes such as extra-marital relationships and surrogate motherhood have raised a nationwide furor but have certainly and successfully enlightened the male dominated society and changed the scenario to a considerable extent. Literature, however, has been more instrumental in revolutionizing and bringing a functional change in the society. The present day writer has destructured and demolished the idolized image of woman as an object of physical and psychological suppression. Male writers too have written about women and their problems but they tend to sympathise with women and keep them at the periphery. Feminist writers, have however, used this genre as a vehicle of translating the feminine experiences, thoughts and problems and also provided answers to certain questions and solutions to certain problems. But above all they have underscored certain issues about the existence of women
and their integrity that were deliberately shunned by the earlier and many of the contemporary women writers, both within and outside India.

Feminist literature does not present the woman as a rebel or a scott free animal but as a rational being and a sensitive individual who has sustained male domination since ages but now dares to question the patriarchal system. The present day woman as represented in the fiction of the writers chosen here refuses to let emotion rule her. She possesses the strength of character to be truthful to her self by realizing her desires and needs. This has been beautifully cited by Jhumpa Lahiri in “A Temporary Matter” through the character of Shobha who decides to leave her husband’s house and discloses her intention only after finding an apartment. Shobha does go through a very painful internal turmoil but overcomes it and tells the truth to her husband. The story does end on a positive note but the prerogative of dissolving the differences lies ultimately with Shobha.

Sunetra Gupta too, has portrayed woman as and a courageous being with firm determination and strength and stray will power. Moni, of Memories of Rain travels from India to
London, symbolic to her journey from an innocent and adaptive
girl into a mature and practical woman. Moni decides to break off
her marital bond and go back to India. Sunetra Gupta, in fact,
adopts to the feminist stance in terms of her perceptions of
women’s plights through different phases of their lives in their
national and international background. The role of a feminist
writer has been subtly defined by Rosalind Brachenbury who
maintains, nobody writes in a vacuum, away from the political and
social structure in which we live, we breathe the air of today’s
thought; we digest it in everything we read, and consider also, we
create. This is largely the role of women today. To present, create
and consider a new world.

Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri focus, mainly on sensitive
protagonists who are natural victims of racism, sexism and other
forms of social oppression. Whereas Namita Gokhale’s
protagonists unhesitatingly find means of satisfying their sexual
fantasies. In a novel like *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* she has
explored the power of uneducated, unsophisticated rural women in
a world that is dominated by selfish, self-seeking and hypocritical
men. Illiterate women like Ammi and Phoolwati possess higher
influential abilities than that of Roxanne Lamba. Gokhale’s women do not waste moments in contemplating the consequences while striding towards the fulfilment of their desires. Gudiya in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* is deserted by her husband Kalki, but not once does Gokhale show her missing him or sulking for him even though she is pregnant. Gokhale’s women do not repent or weep over their decisions or actions. Priya, Paro, Shakuntala, Parvati and Rachita show that women are capable of challenging the restrictions and limitations imposed upon them by their family traditions and society. They divorce their husbands, remarry, indulge in relationships and possess the courage to live alone and support themselves. They display the grit and gumption of listening to their hearts. They also possess entrepreneurial skills essential for a comfortable survival in this male dominated world. They refuse to function within the stereotypical framework. Gokhale’s women assert their needs and desires, especially the desire to live. Shakuntala fulfills her desire of seeing Kashi, the holy place. Rachita Tiwari from “The Book of Shadows” lives alone with a scarred face after surviving an acid attack. She does not regret sleeping with her friend’s husband and betraying her boy
friend, who hangs and kills himself after he gets to know about Rachita’s betrayal.

Namita Gokhale delineates women from all the social stratas. She attacks the elite class hypocrisy in *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, glorifies the survival instinct in women in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, adores Parvati’s unconventionality in *A Himalayan Lovestory*, elevates woman’s awareness of self respect in “The Book of Shadows”, and venerates her inner strengths in “Shakuntala”. Namita Gokhale is a true feminist for her projection of woman is authentic and the needs she has boldly discussed are natural to a humane being. “Paro: Dreams of Passion” was not received positively and it was criticized on moral grounds for its bold discussions on sex and female fantasies. But Namita Gokhale deserves appreciation for her honest representation of the inscape of women. Her evocative, suggestive and explosive language vociferously attacks the male dominated society. Namita Gokhale’s novels should not be considered as treatises on sex but a documentation of a woman’s quest for identity and struggle for survival and sanity.
Namita Gokhale does not beg for sympathy on account of gender, instead develops a woman’s character as a fantastic blend of sense and sensibility and emotion and reason. Her focus on the persona and the psyche undoubtedly has a global appeal, an appeal for liberation.

Sunetra Gupta cannot be adjudged or addressed as a feminist writer prima facie, but an in-depth reading and analyses of her novels underscore her feminist concerns. She provides a gendered reading of society while not making a militant political statement. Sunetra Gupta's novels share many stylistic, narrative and thematic characteristics: a dexterity with literary language, a profusion of canonical references ranging from Euripides to Tagore, a tendency towards versions of the stream-of-consciousness technique, a concentration on brilliant protagonists straddling the worlds of science and literature, and thin plots resolved by or revolving around momentous events deaths, disappearances, drowning, suicides. On account of Gupta's concentration on female protagonists, her textual experiments, and her language, it is predictable that critics in the West would compare her to Virginia Woolf. Kirkus Reviews, for example, has called Gupta "a young, true heir to
Virginia Woolf." This comparison is justified as it is a comparison that reveals more about Gupta.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s literary world too, attempts to liberate women from the age-old feminine bondages. She has wonderfully portrayed the feelings of women to be cared for and respected. Her short stories can be viewed from the Indian standpoint as well as the feminist point of view. Jhumpa Lahiri captures the complex human emotions in her novels and short stories. We get a glimpse of the lives and relationships of people from Bengal to Boston.

Preoccupation with the feminine world and problems of femininity continues engaging Jhumpa Lahiri’s creative efforts. Even in a story like, "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine" that apparently deals with the issues of global significance, like liberation of a country or of political and ideological combat and survival of highly sensitive beings torn apart by the historical exigencies, her concern with the feminine persists, though not in a direct confrontational mode that dominates the ideological writings of the immigrants settled in the West.
Lahiri not only discusses women and their relationships, but also discusses a small girl's feeling in the story “When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine”. She has very beautifully highlighted the soft dimensions of a woman’s mind and her innate ability to care for people around her. Jhumpa Lahiri’s other protagonists like, Shobha, Mina, Miranda and Twinkle are different women. They take their own decisions and display an independent disposition. Where as Bibi Haldar and Boori Maa are victims of their physical and economic conditions. Mrs. Sen is an Indian woman longs for something Indian every time. We sympathise with her for her loneliness. Mrs. Croft on the other hand is an old woman who is economically independent despite being one hundred and three years old. Lahiri depicts women of all age groups from ten year old to a hundred year old.

*The Namesake* is a narrative about individuals bound by certain relationships and their survival. The protagonist Gogol Ganguli is battling on various fronts due to his name, as he is born of Indian parents in America with a Russian name. The novel has several gender-based undertones. Jhumpa Lahiri has made
pertinent observations about the Indian culture in general and Bengali culture in particular.

Jhumpa Lahiri critiques the orthodox Indian society that does not even allow a woman to utter her husband’s name. Though, the entire action takes place in America, Lahiri has made subtle critical statements about the rituals related to arranged-marriage - an Indian socio-cultural construct that ultimately annihilates women’s lives. Even today, in many parts of India, girls do not enjoy the freedom of choosing their life partner. There is a statement regarding the salesmanship of mothers who have daughters of marriageable age.

Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri focus on the loneliness faced by women who have to leave their country after marriage. As it is, life after marriage is a mystery for women, and it is a greater mystery for those women who have to go and settle down in foreign countries. The characters of Ashima Ganguly and Moni can be understood from this point of view.

Namita Gokhale, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri are not rebels but messiahs of change, emancipation and liberation. Their
novels speak volumes about the art of novel; its creative concerns and creative strategies that finally reveal gender strategies and the compulsive gender problems associated with the complex socio-cultural patterns. The very conception of the form reveals the debates and intellectual discussions that signify cultural conspiracies hatched out by patriarchy.

These women writers have focused on the different generations; for instance Namita Gokhale’s *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* speaks about women belonging to three generations; Jhumpa Lahiri has characters like Lilia, Miranda and Mrs. Croft and Boori Ma and Suntera Gupta talks about Nirupama Roy, Reba Roy and Niharika Roy in *A Sin Of Colour*. They underscore various attitudinal traits in the women belonging to different age groups and different milieu.

All the three writers have made use of women belonging to three generations in their narratives for highlighting their perspectives on the growth and progress and women in their respective societies. Their women act as breadwinners, protectors, and caretakers and over all models of beings at par their male counter parts.
The message that they send across is that man and woman are complementary to each other. Neither can survive in isolation. The presence of both is essential for the harmonious progress and development of the society. Feminism, especially in the Indian context, does not advocate one sided anarchist approach, but a journey towards a destination that signifies complementary co-existence.