Chapter I

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The present thesis aims at exploring gender dialectics as projected in the novels of Namita Gokhale, Sunetra Gupta and Jhumpa Lahiri. The dissertation mainly focuses on the novels of the selected women novelists. However, some of the short stories of these writers are also analysed to authenticate the critical statements on the issues of gender. Gender issues in the recent global and ideological context, occupy central place in the creative, critical or intellectual literary genres, it is novel that has formal flexibility and spatio-temporal ability to accommodate socio-philosophical or polemical issues pertaining to gender dialectics. Since, the authors chosen for in-depth critical explorations are essentially Indians by birth and critical temperament it seems quite plausible to make a survey of the Indian novel in English, especially written by women. This survey will convincingly reveal the facts that gender issues have always been quite vibrant in the creative writings by Indian women. It will also reveal an authentic novelistic tradition in India. In order to understand the complex nature of gender dialectics, it also seems quite plausible to
approximate the gender problem in the global perspective. This perspective would logically bring forth the intellectual status and distinguishing literary achievements of the selected writers.

India is a land with a rich but conservative cultural tradition. Problems of women may be common but they vary according to culture, economy, milieu and societal structure. The problems highlighted by Indian women writers can be understood from various standpoints such as the pre-independence woman, the post-independence/colonial Indian woman, the modern and post-modern Indian woman and the contemporary Indian woman. Women have endured oppression and discrimination on the domestic, social and professional front from time immemorial. Women writers have underscored the problems of women that transcend the physical and move to the psychological plain asserting the need to be understood and respected. These writers project the élan vital of the woman race, which had gone unnoticed and unrealised. Indian women writers deal with the common but ignored needs of women belonging to the various social strata. Women writers mainly articulate the problems faced by women within the family, which is the most powerful social structure. It is
evident that gender discrimination has been a prominent theme in Indian Women’s writings.

The tradition of Indian Women’s writing can be traced back to Torulata Dutt who wrote a French novel before she died at the age of 21 in 1877. *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* and *Le Journal de Mademoiselle D’Avers* by Torulata Dutt were posthumously published. These novels talk about the feminine journey from innocence to experience. Other novelists like Raj Laxmi Debi’ who wrote *The Hindu Life* and *The Enchanted Fruit* (1876), and Mrs. Krupabai Satthianadhan’s *Kamala, A Story of Hindu Life* (1894) and *Saguna, A Story of Native Christian* (1895), Cornelia Sorabji’s *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901), *Sun Babies: Studies in the Child Life of India* (1904) and *Between the Twilights* (1908) talk about the various aspects of life of Indian women. Ms. Sorabji tried to penetrate the silken curtain of the ‘pardah’ and reveal the nuances of femininity. Woman was easily caught in the meshes of intrigue and social taboos. Man did not grant her any freedom; yet she managed to endure somehow, by sheer power of womanliness, and her inherent gifts of love, patience and compassion.
A later writer, Iqbalunnissa Hussain in her, *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in Indian Muslim Household* (1944) presents the undercurrents and cross currents in a typical Muslim family. Indian fiction after the World War II blossomed with writers like Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Prawar Jhabvala. Markandaya’s first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) has been compared with Pearl S. Buck’s *The Good Earth*. Markandaya’s writings speak of the realities of life. Her latter novels *Some Inner Fury* (1957), *A Silence of Desire* (1961) and *Possession* (1963) deal with different shades of the human life. These novels also take into account the pernicious effects of the development in the field of technology and industrialization. In Ruth Prawar Jhabvala we find Indo – Anglian feminine urban sensibility that is opposed to the masculine Victorian novelists. In novels like *To Whom She Will* (1955), *The Nature of Passion* (1956), and *A Backward Place* (1965) Jhabvala comments on the cosmopolitan milieu, the cultural centers, clubs, groups and numerous aspects of espionage, intrigue and power. Ruth Prawar Jhabvala probes the mind, the sensibility and the agitated heart of the lonely or trapped woman. Her protagonists, whether Amrita from *To Whom She Will* and Indu from *The
Householder reveal her compassion for women and her strife to highlight their problems.

Anita Desai, the most prominent voice delves into the intensity of women’s problems. Her characters articulate the substance of womanhood. In *Cry The Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), and *Bye Bye Blackbird* Desai deals with the theme of incompleteness of a woman. Her *Fasting, Feasting* shows how women have to lead a life of suffocation and undeserved sufferings both physical and psychological in a male dominated socio-cultural framework. She has distinguished herself from the other writers on account of her preoccupation with the inner world of the individual. Anita Desai has been lauded for her truthful portrayal of women who are seen suffering from an acute sense of existential problems and passions.

Shantha Rama Rau also continued explorations into the problems of women engendered by a sheer fact of their being a gender that always has been a target of patriarchal conspiracies. She has been a practitioner of a variety of literary forms like travelogue, fiction and drama with immaculate narration and mastery over English language. In *Remember the House* (1956) she
beautifully captures a girl’s search for identity who is trapped in a confusion of contradictory cultures. Rau’s second novel _The Adventuress_ is a story of a woman’s search for fulfillment.

Indian writing in English has undergone various changes with time. The post partition and the post-independence literature deals with the trauma faced by people and especially women on account of their gender. Women were raped and abused and this pain was carried forward into the independent future. India did gain independence but women became greater slaves of the painful memories. There were women who were raped and abused on the one hand and those who were widowed on the other. Qurratul-ain-Hyder, Sada Hassan Manto, Rajender Singh Bedi and Joginder Paul have very effectively portrayed the sufferings caused by partition. Manto’s _Khol Dor_ is a masterpiece that stands as an eloquent metaphor for humiliated, tortured and mutilated women. Ismat Chugtai also deals with especially the pain endured by women during that period. Violence against women and the threat of assault is repeatedly mentioned in all literature dealing with partition. This literature has provided an opportunity to study gender roles and violence against women. Women were indeed the
worst sufferers in those crisis-ridden days. Men suffered in terms of physical violence, material destruction and displacement but women, along with these suffered also from loss of dignity, self-respect and esteem all inseparably aligned with sexual purity that could not be regained and restored. For them crisis was not temporary but left an indelible imprint on their psyche, the burden of which was borne by them long after. Lalithambika Ananthraj and Jamila Hashmi are fine illustrations of the portrayal of the psychological trauma, the lamentation and consolation of trauma.

Recent occurrences like internationalism, globalization, technologisation and inter-cultural transaction brought forth a tide of bold writers like Namita Gokhale and Shobha De whose exposition of the elite societal hypocrisy paved ways for newer literary trends and new outlooks towards women. These writers boldly voiced the sexual urges of women and their preparedness to fulfill them. Arundhati Roy in her Booker Prize winner *The God of Small Things*, deals with the socio-political position of a woman. All the women characters like Ammu, Baby Kochamma and others have some or the other grievance on the domestic and social front. Arundhati Roy’s book shows discrimination against daughters in
favour of sons. It is a comprehensive protest novel which describes atrocities against the powerless children, women and the untouchables. Writers like Chitra Banerjee–Divakaruni, Bapsi Sidhwa, Jhumpa Lahiri and Sunetra Gupta translate the diasporic experiences of women with an obvious emphasis on the problems faced by women on account of their gender in a foreign land. These diasporic experiences provide new insights into the problems of women.

Thus, women kept articulating women’s experiences, their psychic disruptions, their inner and outer chaos, and their emotional upheaval generated by gender dialectics. Gender like narrative, is a word of wider significance than ‘feminist’ hence the genre of gender instead of feminism. Sandra Harding maintains,

Gender is an analytical category within which humans think and organize their social activity, rather than a natural consequence of sexual difference. 1

Etymologically, the word “gender” adheres closely to the concepts of sex, sexuality, sexual difference and generation. Gender, in fact has larger connotations that include issues beyond the individual; it includes issues of even race and nation. Donna
Haraway explains how words close to gender are also implicated in concepts kinship, race, biological taxonomy, language and nationality. 2

Feminists in the past looked upon sex as something that was biologically given while gender was regarded a social system built upon sexual difference. Gender related fiction brings out gender injustice on a larger scale. These writings expose the problems faced by women on the various levels of existence.

The transition of a girl into a woman is itself a delicate experience. The need for a woman to be loved, cared for, and appreciated and above all being understood play an important role in the role that she plays in the family and society. Traditionally, women saw the world through the eyes of men. Their opinions about themselves, too, were governed by the ubiquitous. It is really an amazing fact as to how women must have related themselves to the outside world, how could they have perceived themselves and their problems through double perspective: through an objective and exploit a live male point of view as well as through their own view point though women writers all over the world have politically translated their thoughts through their writings.
Gender studies deal with the conscious and consciousness of the woman in the gendered form. The use, abuse and misuse of woman at various levels are highlighted.

The relationships shared by woman such as Mother-Daughter, Mother-Son, Husband-Wife, Father-Daughter, Brother-Sister, Lover-Beloved, Boss-Subordinate and Master/Mistress-Maid have its own beauty and horror. Different historical events and eras have transformed woman into a thinker and a rebel against the process of being victimized as a result of human/masculine rage. Rape has been regarded as a manifestation of aggression against the victim and subsequently an attempt to grind woman into submission. Laurie Sucher feels that sexual violence is grounded in class resentment as the communication is not between the victimizer and the victim but between him and her male relatives. Woman has always been used as a controlled medium for man. She has been a means of communication, a communication that does not aim at cordiality or restoration of peace, order and amicability. On the contrary she has been used as a means of communicating power and superiority, for selfish ends. She is often fringed between the male forces that clash for a variety of
purposes that ultimately prove to be pernicious for the integrity of woman. Sucher rightly comments that it indicates Levi Strauss’ formulation that: men use women as verbs with which to communicate with each other.(3)

The situation has not changed much even today. In fact technological advancement has lead to the identifying and killing ‘the female ‘much before it is born. The right to take birth has been confiscated by the male dominated so-called literate and progressive society. Women writers deal with these and many other issues.

In India, too, man has been the proud possessor of not only land and wealth but women also. Woman has been a victim of suspicion at home and sexual assault at work place. In the Indian context gender acquires a new dimension. Problems begin with the right to be born, nutrition, to be educated, to make a career, to be at the helm of affairs, discriminatory wage system, medical privileges and opportunities of self-development in addition to domestic violence. Woman has to submit before tradition, culture, religion and society. In the Indian cultural frame marriage functions as a mandatory ritual therefore widows, divorcees and spinsters are
considered a stigma or an inauspicious presence. India, thus, has gone through various traumatic experiences of which, the worst sufferers have been women. In a work of fiction by a female author the representation of women characters can be presumed to be a reflection of the writers’ experience of the situation of women in her contemporary society.

Women have been criticized and tormented for mythological and historical reasons. Draupadi’s molestation is accredited to her arrogance and pride. She also became a victim of her husband’s greed to win the game of dice. Feminism begins with Draupadi’s interrogation in the royal court after her molestation. In the Indian context the intensity of a woman’s sufferings varies according to the strata. But the common factor is the status of woman as a possession. Women writers have voiced out problems such as discrimination, decision-making ability, and right to ownership, physical violence and threat to life for reasons such as dowry.

Writers have attempted to encourage women to rise out of the ashes and deconstruct the traditional image. Gender roles in a stereotypical patriarchal society run on typical lines. The sexual temperament, role and status are clearly marked which are:
aggression, force, and efficacy in the male passivity, ignorance, docility, ‘virtue and ineffectuality in the female. Ania Loomba states:

We need greater conceptual plasticity in understanding the relationship between physical bodies, our sexed selves and our gender identity.4

Male dominated society has used woman a means of procreation and her inability to procreate as a bane. Unproductive or barren land is a symbol of an infertile woman but never of an impotent man. Thus gender bias becomes evident through the labels such as ‘male’ and ‘female’. Women writers, who have written especially about women, highlight their gender consciousness through their attempts to question various cultural and social factors that govern their destinies through their characters.

A Muslim writer like Ismat Chughtai used her pen to shear the purdah behind which the whole world of middle class women vibrated in gossip and scandal, desire and urges, jealousies and tensions, rituals and traditions, repressions and little rebellions…’ 5

Like Ismat Chughtai writers from other sections of the society, too, have written about the conservative traditions that
bound women in chains. In all Indian literatures there has been a special emphasis on depicting the image of a decrepit, dying old man survived by a youthful, adolescent wife, which highlights the social system that was prevalent in India. Writers have attacked various religious rituals such as treatment given to young widows, associated with the suppression and victimisation of women. Hatimi Nafisa asserts:

Thematising gender as the central problem for women attempting to reconcile individual and social demands, the contemporary narrative of Indian women writers which reveals the conflicts that women undergo while facing the trials of life as victims, marginalised and bound to their psychological ghetto. 6

Women writers have tackled a very important dimension in the life of women and that is the institution of marriage, which has the status of a contract as per law and sanctity awarded by religion. In many Indian communities a girl meets her husband only on the wedding night. Tradition denies woman the right to choose her life partner and carry on with the relationship because divorce is a taboo! Inside the Haveli by Rama Mehta is a beautiful novel that documents the life of Geeta the protagonist who hails from Mumbai but gets married into a traditional family living in a
Haveli. Initially Geeta tries to bring changes inside the haveli but has to succumb before tradition and her family. Characters in Indian fiction tend to live, grow, outgrow and sustain all the pressures and perform their gender specific roles sustaining the domination and manipulation enforced by the patriarchal society. They assume a global dimension and represent suffering at the universal level. There are references to the woman being treated merely as a body and her work is looked upon merely as a physical corpus. Helene Cixous points out that:

The flesh is writing and writing is never read: it is still to be read, to be studied, to be discovered and to be invented 7

Feminist theory and practice have brought to light the ‘discursive construction of gender and sexuality of social and domestic relations’ The concern of feminist studies has been to explore the ways in which women’s voices are marginalized, suppressed or appropriated in various literary works. Feminism in all its diversity – Liberal, Radical, Marxist, Psychoanalytic is concerned with the marginalization of women in social, political literary any psychosexual premises of our culture. Feminist writers and gynocritics believe that our culture is essentially patriarchal
and organized in favour of men and the true “self” of women is ignored, repressed or distorted. The post-structuralists view feminism in its binary opposition as a male, a cultural notion left over from the past, and focus on how ideological construction of a text takes place. They view literary and other texts as forms of discourses that construct apparently “natural” ways of being woman or man. Barbara Goddard stated that fictional texts offered their readers subject positions and modes of subjectivity that imply particular meanings and particular definitions of femininity in relation to masculinity. Karen Gould argues:

But what happens when a feminist writer begins to read and identify with the works of feminist writers who are, themselves, self-consciously and overtly writing against the male literary tradition and toward the construction of some new vision of themselves in language and in the world? 8

Feminist critics like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Betty Friedan examine the “female self” as a cultural idea promulgated by male authors. Beauvoir, in her work The Second Sex (1949) discusses how woman is constructed differently by men and demands that man defines the “human” and not “woman”. In Sexual Politics (1970) Millet observes that the essence of “Politics
is Power” and the most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance. In a patriarchy, a poor man’s house may be his castle but a rich woman’s body is not her own. In Millet’s view,

The “interior colonization” of women by men is sturdier than any other form of segregation, and more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more enduring. 9

Post structuralist feminist writer and critic Louky Bersianik informs us that the dominant discourse in every society reflects the value system of the group in power. Men who constitute the dominant power in-group in all societies have occupied the center pushing women to the periphery. Virginia Woolf in A Room of Ones Own stressed that women’s writing was special, and that the sex of the novel was elusive.

The multilayered Indian society has multiple problems for women on the basis of milieu. Various art forms have projected problems of lower classes such as literacy, rape, child-marriage, multiple childbirths, physical harassment and under nourishment. Whereas the upper classes or the elite class has to face problems of entirely different nature. Men and women have certain psycho –
physical cravings which go beyond the socio – religious sanctions.

Tharu has a point to make in this regard:

Familial ideologies clearly constitute male and female subjectivities in different ways. Further, ideologies are not experienced or contested in the same ways from different subject positions.

Shobha De has wonderfully captured the hypocrisy of the socially elite classes in her novels such as *Starry Nights* and *Sisters*. Husbands in De’s *Starry Nights* indulge in extra marital affairs, which expose the infidelity that is dominant in the upper classes. On the other hand the middle class woman has to kill her dreams and passions that she cherishes since childhood. Her entire life becomes a compromise – family, finances and feelings. Woman has become a symbol of sacrifice as portrayed in Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence*. She gives a vivid description of women in search of the self who ultimately lost in a labyrinth of gender constrictions.

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in *Real and Imagined Women* draws attention to the representation of the ‘new Indian woman’ who effortlessly balances tradition with modernity – an image that is at variance with the real life middle class working Indian woman
for whom reconciling tradition with modernity is a painful struggle.

Gender issues have been extensively dealt with in the recent fiction. In Canada, for instance, right from as early as 1970’s Nicole Brossard, Madeline Gagnon, Louky Bersianik and France Theoret along with numerous other critics published a variety of new and radical woman centered texts that call for attention to complex relationships between gender and writing, between language, sexual politics and cultural production. Through their various self – conscious attempts to inscribe the feminine, they have sought to undermine the presumed universality of literature written through male eyes and to shatter patriarchy’s pervasive influence over language and thought. The 1960’s and 70’s Quebec Nationalism gave many feminists a political and theoretical language with which to articulate their particular sense of oppression and alienation as women ands with which to formulate their desire for collective liberation and radical social change. Anjali Bhelande and Mala Pandurang assert:

The relationship of women to their mothers and to other women- Thus towards themselves are rare subject to total narcissistic black- Out, these relationships are totally devalued. Indeed, I have
never come across a woman who does not suffer from the problem of not being able to resolve in harmony, in the present system, her relationship with her mother and other women. Psychoanalysis has totally mythologised and censored the positive value of these relationships.11

In terms of Quebec feminism, the decolonization paradigm developed by francophone nationalists also created an international frame of reference for women’s political analyses through its identification with its third world liberation struggles. Feminist socialists and nationalists were able to link women’s oppression under patriarchy with the struggles of developing countries subjected to the dominance of foreign capital. Algeria, Chile, Vietnam and Argentina were frequently cited at rallies and in the rallies and in the socialist feminist journalism of the time.

Some of the writings of Madeline Gagnon and France Theoret are excellent examples of the influence this discourse of decolonization exerted over women’s writings throughout the 1970’s. In Mon Corps dans l’écriture (1977) Madeline Gagnon has explored her own preoccupations with the female body as a generator of new forms of textual productions. She has launched an attack on the psychoanalytic constructs of Freud and Lacan and stresses on the connections between feminism and third-world
resistance to Western Imperialism, between material bases of class struggle and sexual politics.

Diane Lamoureux argues that the Quebec Nationalism provided feminists with a view of culture and especially literature that was oriented toward the notion of a territory of “difference” in the need of celebration and liberation. Lamboureux also stated that:

The colonized body was also a ‘woman’s body’ and the source of foreign oppression, was increasingly ‘men’. 12

In America too, Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly established the feminist thought very powerfully, especially with respect to tearing through the fabric of patriarchal mythologies and refashion language to refashion language to celebrate woman’s “converging power”. Helene Cixous’ much discussed invitation to women to “write themselves” in another language captures the new point of departure and the new spirit of women’s experimental writing in Quebec after 1975. Cixous affirms:

Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal 13
With women writing and discussing their gender centered problems turning into a movement all over the world, they began efforts to reclaim the text as a site of their political strength, collective affirmation and artistic nourishment. This activist stance evolved out of resistance, confrontation and ruptures with male-oriented history and leads in turn to the unearthing and rediscovery of other women – past and present. Marcelle Brison maintains:

… Woman writes from her own hills and caverns and mountains…If there is no reference to the body there is no feminist writing. 14

Feminists like Nicole Brossard, Bersianik, Theoret and Gagnon radically broke away from the conventional forms of discourse and dissociated women’s writing from the unifying authority of the phallus in all its possible modes of expression. Their theorizing does not forget the body but moves outward from it, citing it as the origin of narrative movement and poetic invention, returning to it for creative inspiration, analyzing and theorizing its power and resources.

Women, who write as women, from their bodies and in utter defiance of patriarchal structures and paternal law, break the
censure of silence, reconceived women’s trajectory of thought about them and replace traditional approaches to writing with a writing of approximation and orientation toward the future. Nicole Brossard’s statement reinforces the argument:

To write is always to make the inadmissible emerge; to produce from the collective imaginary territory we occupy, other cues, and other vehicles for thought. It is to conceive of a link between mental space, body and reality: in sum through to conceive what is inconceivable outside language. It is to know how to be synchronized there. 15

Feminists all over the world have struggled to liberate women from the institutional structures, cultural myths and philosophical discourses that continue to subjugate us. The writings of Nicole Brossard, Madeline Gagnon, Bersianik and Theoret offer inspiring models for women’s entry into language and into the various process of signification that writing allows. While it may be argued that their linguistic explorations are never entirely free from the oppressive forms of discourse they have sought to overthrow nor from the binary logic of sexual difference of sexual difference that patriarchal thinking has so far so long encouraged, their writings nevertheless move beyond resistance
and rupture to the more open spaces of reflection, desire, rebirth, where women’s bodies minds and voices no longer tremble uncontrollably under the male gaze. Rosalind Miles asserts:

The task of interpretation of women’s experience cannot be left to male writers alone, however sympathetic they may be. The female perspective, expressed through men’s writing of all kinds, is more than a valuable corrective to an all-male view of the universe. For women readers it is a lifeline. 16

The discourses of Barthes and Cixous in the early 1970’s spoke of a body in writing whose gender was secondary at best, even if le feminin the term of preference to describe that body’s. This can be best understood in the words of Nancy Chodorow:

Where gender identity is concerned, this means that the boy will learn masculinity as being “not- feminine or not-womanly, not- mother” and will establish his physical and emotional autonomy from his mother. 17

In French Kiss (1974) Brossard located and inscribed the female body and feminine text. A prolific writer like Brossard constructed various analogies to breakdown the distance between the female body in motion and the male dominated metropole. Brossard through her exploratory language has demonstrated that structures of patriarchal language must themselves be
disassembled and reassembled. Feminist texts offer various dimensions of socialist politics, feminist psychoanalysis and feminine creativity. The writers struggle with textuality, discourse and cultural production of gender is evident. The main purpose of gender centric writing has been deconstruction of phallocentricism. Writers have struggled to create a feministic/ feminine landscape for the assertion of feminine power.

Men represent women from an exterior viewpoint. It is a translation of mere observation. Simone de Beauvoir states,

… She is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute – she is the other. 18

Women’s writings have given an adept analysis of her experiences in the domestic and social spheres. In A Room of One’s Own Virginia Woolf suggests that since the other forms were quite mature, by the time she became a writer, woman turned to novel, which was young enough to be moulded in her hands. In Women and Fiction Virginia Woolf states:

If, then one should try to sum up the characters of women’s fiction at the present moment, one would say that it is courageous; it is sincere, it keeps closely to what women feel… It does not insist upon femininity. But at the same time, a
woman’s book is not written as a man would write it. 19

The main challenge, which women writers had to face, was of ‘detypifying’ the image of woman, which had been created by man. She had been typecast either as a ‘goddess’ or an object created by the creator to be dominated. This representation of women makes flat characters. In ‘Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness’ Elaine Showalter maintains:

…The study of women as writers and its subjects are the story, style, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. 20

Inspired by works like Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, Mary Ellman’s Thinking About Women (1968) and Kate Millet’s Sexual Textual Politics (1970) feminist criticism in its first phase, began by rereading literature authored by both sexes, in order to expose the extent of misrepresentation of women in the canonical ‘classics’ of literature. It has revealed the unreal images of women in fiction written by both sexes. (13) There was a wave of raged woman writers who focused upon the impact of social and
cultural impact on the lives of women. Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of their own* (1977) gives a chronological account of English novelists from Bronte sisters to Doris Lessing. Showalter has given emphasis to the documentation of the minor writers of that time. Pam Morris in *Literature and Feminism* maintains:

> Many women, some for the first time, sense that their own existence was meaningful, that their view of things was valid and intelligent, that there was suffering, was imposed and unnecessary, and a belief in woman’s collective strength to resist and remake their own lives. 21

Feminist texts mainly focus on a woman’s quest for identity and are a rendition of alienation and the conflict of gender identity that the female child experiences as a daughter. Reflection of woman’s submission to the male – in the role of the father, brother, husband or lover has been realistically represented on a global plane. Post-modern women’s writings show the breaking off of the patriarchal constructs. Women writers write with a vision that links radical feminist politics to the subliminal, corporeal and reflective consciousness. Feminist discourses have brought to notice the discursive construction of gender and sexuality and of domestic relations. Feminist concerns delve into marginalization and suppression of women. A lascivious widow, a beautiful virtuous
virgin and an obedient housewife were a global epitome for woman. A woman cannot exist beyond her sex and gender and gender is a patriarchal construct. Elaine Showalter offered her theory of “Gynocrticism” (1978) or woman centered writing which exerted a formative influence on the Anglo-American feminist critics and writers. This genre emphasizes the direct expression of female experience in male writing. The gyno-critic identifies an essential struggle towards “self-realization” or “self-hood” both of the author and the characters embedded within the text. It brought the woman from the periphery to the center.

In *Towards Feminist Poetics* (1979) Showalter urges that female diaspora to protest against their exclusion from the dominant discourse and dismissal as “irrational” by writing in a language suitable for the female experience:

> The experience of a woman can easily disappear, become mute, invalid and invisible, lost in the diagrams of the structuralist or the class conflict of the Marxists. Experience is not emotion; we must protest now as in the nineteenth century against the equation of the feminine with the irrational. 22
Such a female aesthetic would express a distinct female consciousness and constitute a coherent literary tradition. To quote Barbara Smith:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women; women of colour, working class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, oldwomen-as well as white economically privileged women. 23

Issues such as remarriage of a widow or a divorcee too, have been at the pivotal literary concerns. Acceptance of a woman who has been divorced or widowed and giving the deserved status has been the prime concern of Senegalese writer Mariama Ba’s in So Long A Letter which is an excellent elucidation of the problem. Mariama was committed to the cause of emancipating African women from the shackles of subjugation and making them self-reliant. The text offers a critique of gender relations in the modern African society where male domination persists with degrees of variation and discrimination.

Texts by women can be looked upon as the manifestations of the bitter cruelties of life and it is, therefore, feminist literature of any language or nation remains close to a female reader’s heart. Mary Eagleton’s words reinforce this thought:
There is an objective reality which the author apprehends and describes truthfully in the text; the reader appreciates the validity of the text and relates it to her own life. In this paradigm, author, character and reader can unite in an exploration of what it means to be female-they can even assert a collective identity as “we women” and the reader is gratified by having her anger, experiences or hopes confirmed by the author and narrative. 24

African women faced discrimination on the basis of colour, race and gender. Toni Morrison has highlighted this trauma of black girls and women in novels such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and merciless killing of female infants in *Beloved* (1987). The depiction of Pecola’s molestation by her father (*The Bluest Eye*) is a shockingly pathetic revelation of the insensitivity of men. Problems such as incest and sexual abuse too have been voiced out by writers.

Marginalization and powerlessness of women is, thus, a global phenomenon with varying degrees and shades of brutality captured in literature. Indian fiction in English, being attuned to the drastic socio-cultural changes both at the national and international level registers noticeable representation of gender dialectics because Indian women, too, have been victims of various circumstances since ages. Denial of education was the most severe
form of oppression. The trend of educating women began again in the late 19th century with the rise of the reformist movement in India, which saw more women's participation in rebelling against British rule. This led to a new stage in the development of women's literature in India. The body of work produced was often related to the freedom struggle, social reform and nationalist movements.

Ellen Dengel makes an interesting comment in this context:

Feminist critics have argued that “woman” is produced by gendered discourses and thus is constructed according to dominant thoughts and ideologies that are present in a given culture. 25

Although there were still women such as Bhabani and Jogeswari whose writings in the early 19th century questioned the patriarchal dominance of their husbands, the majority concentrated on the freedom struggle.

The earliest woman writing during the reformist period was Savitribai Phule, who along with her husband championed the cause of women's education. She was the first woman teacher in modern Maharashtra and together with her husband started the first school for girls. Her writing carries the mark of an activist and
scholar who wholeheartedly believed in the cause of the untouchables.

Among the women writers who followed was Pandita Ramabai Saraswati who was educated both in English and in Sanskrit. In her *The High Caste Hindu Woman* she argues against the patriarchal reading of the Hindu scriptures and early scholarly works of learned Brahmins, which encouraged a repressive and demeaning interpretation favouring the suppression of women.

Sarojini Naidu, dubbed, the Nightingale of India, published her first set of poems at the age of sixteen and went to England where she was educated at King's College in London, and later at Cambridge. Her writings as an activist and as the governor of Uttar Pradesh reflect her honest and heartfelt concerns about the situation of her country.

Towards the mid-nineteenth century more and more women began to write in English. Some of them, such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, created a world of feminist ideologies. In Sultana's Dream she talks about a world dominated by women; a world which has imprisoned men in a male equivalent of zenanas.
(women's quarters). She creates a world that is much better than the one men managed.

Women's writing in the 20th century moved towards a medium of modernism in which womanist and feminist statements were combined with political messages. The writings of women such as Hamsa Wadkar conveyed an honest impression of a world of professional women whose careers in television and stage segregated them as a class apart, yet subjected them to the same brutality and force of patriarchy. In her autobiography, Hamsa Wadkar talks about her life as an actor from the age of eleven, her marriage to a suspicious and abusive husband, the birth of a daughter, her life after eloping with another man, the imprisonment she faced at his home along with two of his other wives, and her rape by a justice of peace.

Women writers such as Mahashwetadevi combined women's causes with political movements. In *Draupadi*, Mahashwetadevi creates a world of tribal rebels whose fight against a political system of enforced capitalism has driven them to become Naxalites (supporters of a Chinese-style Communism). Others such as Shashi Deshpande build a platform of universal female
experiences. In Binding Vines she examines the experiences of women coming from different echelons of society.

Over the years and throughout the political instability which affected Indian society at large, along with a myriad of other influences which have affected culture, language and social patterns, women's literature in India has evolved to show common experiences, a sense of sisterhood and a range of female experiences that question the recurring face of patriarchy. Ila Rathor’s statement about the situation of women and their redemption is highly realistic and painful. She states:

The gender bias, the strictly marked male and female roles, the undue emphasis on the female chastity and the social stigma attached to it are major obstacles in the ‘rehabilitation’ of the women who have been victims of male brutality. So much so that the most genuine efforts and lots of goodwill also cannot help their lot. 26

Indian women novelists have carved a niche for themselves in the world of literature. Writers have sought to achieve gender equality by taking bold stances in their writings. The Indian woman is not afraid of voicing out her desires such as - to be loved by another woman, go in for live in relationships and extra marital
relationship to fulfill her womanhood. The contemporary writer displays woman’s strength, which was earlier considered to be her weakness. M.K. Naik opines:

The ‘new’ women novelists naturally share most of the preoccupations of their male counterparts, though in spite of what fanatical feminists would claim, ‘they do have a room of their own’ in the fictional mansion, in terms of certain pressing concerns and their attitudes towards them. 27

Anita Desai has exposed the power structures of, discursive dualisms such as public versus the private, empire versus the nation, popular versus the elite and male versus female. Desai uses these dualisms to underscore the engendered power structures and political issues. Cry the Peacock (1963) elucidates the yearnings of an unhappily married woman Maya. Her very practical husband Gautam, who is a lawyer by profession, fails to understand her and her sensitive nature. The alienated Maya kills her husband by pushing him off the parapet wall and ultimately committing suicide. Through Voices in the City Desai has exposed the theme of urban alienation in the post independent India. The entire novel talks about communication gap between the women characters leading to the suicidal end of Monisha on account of her inability to reach out to the world. Where Shall we go this Summer captures
the dangers of solipsism through the story of Sita, a wife and mother who becomes a neurotic. She has delusions of having her fifth child in the womb and is out to protect it. She abandons her home and husband and strives to survive in primitive conditions.


> Privacy and silence are unnatural conditions to Indian women, intensely social as they are. Without silence and privacy, no two consecutive and comprehensive lines can be written. The social system, from long having been opposed to independent work and intellectual exercise by women. 28

Shashi Deshpande explores into the various aspects of the position of women in our society through her writings. Her concern for women is evident from her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) to her very recent text *Small Remedies* (2000). Shashi Deshpande’s female protagonists are seen delving into the search of the self and struggling to free themselves from
subordination. Shashi Deshpande also takes a feminist stance into the consumerist world. Shashi Deshpande ventures into personal problems of women, their space and place in family, society and profession and the insatiate creative desires in a novel like *The Binding Vine* (1992), which gives insight into the sufferings of women characters – Urmi and Meera. These women show the loss of a woman’s self in the roles of wife and mother. Shashi Deshpande also criticizes the ritual of ‘Saptapadi’, which means that the wife is supposed to walk behind her man. She has also highlighted the male dominance by projecting marriage as an institution for the protection of chastity of women.

Kamala Das has been another strong voice in the plethora of Indian littérates whose novels are a depiction of the workings of the inner recesses of women. Kamala Das reveals her personal life, which was quite rebellious, in her autobiography entitled, *My Story*. She has displayed inner strength by discussing her husband’s affairs.

The Indian literary scenario covers various religions and segments of the society. Though, problems of women remain almost the same in every part of the world, in the Indian context
religion has to a great extent been a determining factor of women’s marginalisation. Religion has decided the code of behaviour for women. The Indian society has looked upon man as the carrier of generations and remained conveniently ignorant about woman’s role as the creator of generations.

India has always been proud of its unity in diversity and the women writers have further reinforced this motto by discussing problems of gender and sex in the form of novels and short stories. In various languages we witness this unified effort of liberalising ‘the engendered sex’.

Atiya Hussain, Qurratul Ain Hayder, Wajeda Tabassum have, quite convincingly delieneated the plights of women in Urdu. Ismat Chugtai, a prominent voice on the Urdu literary canvass observed the Muslim middle-class which was ritual ridden and tradition bound and refused to openly accept the western education. Chugtai observed the ignorance, superstition, segregation of sexes, polygamy and other forms through which women were exploited. Her bold elucidation has been assaulted as obscene but she defensively stated that she had objectively penned the things people did behind the curtains. Chugtai in her novel
“Terhi Lakeer” writes about the sexual urges and romantic longings of girls from conservative Muslim families that result from the deprivation of a normal relationship with boys at home and in school. Chugtai has thus continually ridiculed the despotic husbands who surrender to debauchery but expect unswerving loyalty and faithfulness from their wives. She touches on all the aspects of a woman’s life from her unwelcome entry into the world to her struggle for a respectable survival.

One the most eloquent voices of the Punjab has been Amrita Pritam who refused to conform to the established norms of the man-woman relationship. She revolted against the existing patriarchal system not only through her writings but in real life also. Amrita Pritam accepted the failure of her marriage and did not hesitate to seek love outside marriage. She has boldly spoken about her relationships in her autobiography, *The Revenue Stamp*.

Assamese writers too have voiced out the discriminatory treatment given to women. Mamoni Raisom Goswami has rendered the protests of women to affirm their rights to self-fulfillment in a repressive world of suffocating socio-religious conventions and of the predatory men. Goswami’s women
protagonists like Nirmala from her novel *Ahiron* and Narani from *Rusted Sword* articulate the hardships and destitution faced by women for survival.

Rajee Seth a Hindi writer and the daughter-in-law of a feudal family from Uttar Pradesh dared to transgress the ingratiating female roles. Stories written by Rajee Seth are terse reflections of a woman who sees her world through the isolated predicaments of her many roles that are often conflicting. Krishna Sobti, one of the finest writers in Hindi revolutionised the conventional literary scene by openly discussing female sexuality. Her heroines remain proud and towering in several trying situations and refuse to be marginalised. Sobti broke the bounds of creating heroines with limited and secondary roles. She gave the message that women should realize the worth of their will and assert it wherever necessary.

There are expatriate Indian writers too who have contributed to the Indian Literary Feminist Movement. A strong feminist voice in Hindi Usha Priyamvada wrote about the urban and semi urban middle class Hindu North Indian women. She specifically writes about the conflict between a woman and her milieu. Priyamvada’s
novels attack the inequities perpetrated by patriarchal patterns. Her protagonists are socially evolved individuals who work out their own resolutions.

Gauri Deshpande, a prominent voice in Marathi interrogates the prescriptive constructs of social institutions such as marriage, motherhood, wifehood and widowhood. She writes about the lives of average middle-class Maharashtrian women. She has depicted the failure of women to live and experience life as women because of the unequal distribution of power between the sexes. Gauri Deshpande has created women characters who are man’s equals and are capable of solving their own problems. Gauri Deshpande has indeed paved a way for new and liberal thinking because her protagonists overcome anything that comes in the way of their success and happiness. Her literature gave a new direction to the Indian Feminist writing.

A number of women novelists made their debut in the nineties. Their first novels have effectively rendered the state of Indian society and its treatment of women. They have written mainly about the urban middle class. The mission of liberation woman from the manacles of patriarchy was and is still being
pursued by contemporary writers like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Sunetra Gupta, Meena Alexander and others. The feminist and post-modern Indian women novelists discuss the problems of women in a wider perspective. The writers have evolved their independent fictional strategies and they seem inspired by the feminist movements of the west. Writers like Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi, Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai have brought India honour by winning prestigious awards and holding prestigious positions in global organisations.

The literary achievements and global recognition have recharged the debate on feminism and gender issues. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, the author of novels like *Sister of my Heart*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *The Vine of Desire* and *The Unknown Errors of our Lives* deals with issues related to the lives of women. Manju Kapur, the recipient of Commonwealth Award for *Difficult Daughters* (1998) deals with the challenges and constraints of middle class women for their existence. Suniti Namjoshi is yet another writer who has experimented by recreating fables to convey her feministic message. Her writing reflects elements such as gender and sexual politics.
Discrimination against the daughter, the silence of women and lack of communication between the sexes has the themes of most of the novels. Anjana Appachana has dealt deeply with these themes in order to portray the feminine crisis. In her novel *Listening Now* (1998) she presents a heart-rending picture of the exploitation of a daughter-in-law, which is a rampant practice spread over the country.

Mrinal Pande focuses on gender bias in her novels *Daughter’s Daughter* (1993) and *My Own Witness* (2000). She laments the fact that gender discrimination should plague the profession of journalism.

Githa Hariharan, a significant writer of the nineties made her debut with *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Novel in the Eurasian region. The novel is woman centered and deals with the themes of barrenness and loneliness of women.

The basic premise of these women writers has been the ubiquity of patriarchal power. It underscores the deeply entrenched politics of sexuality, beginning with the reproduction of sexuality through psycho- sexual conditioning in the family, which operates
in all economic and cultural structures. Motherhood and the whole gamut of psychological and social implications that it had for both men and women within the family have been seriously explored by many writers. Feminist writers have attacked the concept of training girls to view marriage and motherhood as the central events in their lives. The woman’s body, sex and gender are the foundations on which gender inequality is built, established and legitimized. A woman’s identity is defined by societal and cultural norms of a patriarchal familial structure and within her social relationship to men. Indian woman has always been a metaphor for purity, chastity and sanctity, which is guised as the essential spirit, culture and tradition of India.

Women’s literature, however, is characterised by women’s experiences and the nature of relationship between the sexes. By placing women at the centre of intellectual inquiry, women’s studies offer a new perspective on the world. Though women’s studies have a specific focus on women, it is a critical instrument to study reality from the standpoint of women. It treats women as a category in a multidisciplinary approach in order to incorporate their experiences and understandings. Women’s studies developed
out of specifically feminist concerns with women. It was a part of a political project seeking to establish the rigorous and scholarly study in order to change their position. As a multidisciplinary study it aims at providing a holistic view of society, through an objective and critical enquiry. It aims at filling in the deficiencies in the understanding of social enquiry. Barbara Goddard opines:

The importance of feminist theorizing for women’s writing and its inverse, the interweaving of women’s creative endeavours with political engagement are evident in Anglo-American and French Literatures over the last two hundred years. … how impoverished would the literary traditions would be without the Contributions of Virginia Woolf, Charlotte Perkins Gilman or Helene Cixous? 29

The feminist theory and practice have brought into notice the discursive construction of gender and sexuality and of social and domestic relations. The concern of feminist studies have been to explore the ways in which women’s voices are marginalised, suppressed or appropriated in various literary works. While feminism is interested in the problems related to the marginalisation and suppression of women, New Historicism deals with similar problems in a more general sense. Their concern is with all the marginal groups in the society whose voices are
suppressed. A literary work becomes not a text whose meanings are produced by the play of impersonal, linguistic or cultural forces but a site for the dialogic interaction of multiple voices or modes of discourse, each which is not merely a verbal but social phenomenon.

Simone de Beauvoir, in her autobiography *Memoir of a Dutiful Daughter* (1958) articulates her commitment and subjugation to the patriarchal values of her family. *Woman: Myth and Reality*, a popular essay by Beauvoir attacks the concept of “other” created by man for referring to a woman. The concept of other is used for lower groups including race, class and religion hence is objectionable, as it has rendered the reinforcement of patriarchal systems in society. In her most famous treatise on gender, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir admits that principle precedes essence. Hence, she tries to prove that one is not born a woman but becomes one.

The central thesis of Beauvoir’s work is that, since patriarchal times women have, in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men …and further that this secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of
men. This has resulted in the in the general failure of women to take a place of human dignity as free and independent existence, a condition that has not only limited their achievements in many fields but also given rise to pervasive social evils. 30

Beauvoir laments the secondary position awarded to women and considered the backwardness of women as a curse. She considers this inferior treatment as an impediment to the progress of women and society as well.

Betty Freidan, a very influential feminist voice of the late twentieth century, critiqued the patriarchal systems in her highly acclaimed book *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). She argues:

The problem lay, first, with the nature of homework as a full-time occupation for women, who had been trained to be able to do more, and second, with the culture that presented housework as the only acceptable career for “normal” woman. 31

She attacked the media for projecting woman as a happy being in the role of a housewife. She also objected the idea of educating women for the sole purpose of seeking suitable men. Freidin strongly resented household work as the solitary vocation for women. She lamented women being deliberately severed from creative activities and challenging professions. She called the roles
assigned by marriage as ‘obsolete’ and voiced her concern for women.

Simone de Beauvoir’s argument can be aptly quoted here:

A man enforces chastity upon a woman, but for himself looks for pleasure. There is a double demand, which dooms woman to duplicity: He wants the woman to be his and to remain foreign to him. He fancies her at once as servant and enchantress but in public he admits only the first of these desires, the other is sly demand, which he hides in the secrecy of his own heart and flesh. 32

Kate Millet another prominent feminist voice, critiqued patriarchy in the Western society and literature in her very famous book *Sexual Politics* (1970). She states:

Patriarchy (the rule of men) is a universal form of social organization related to all that is violent and abusive in society, but most particularly to violence against women, as exemplified in the act of rape. 33

Millet presented rape, not as an expression of sexual desire, but of aggression, hatred, contempt and the desire to break or violate personality. In Millet’s work, politics refers to the power structured relations and arrangements by which one group is controlled by the other. The patriarchal nature of the society is evident from the fact that all avenues of power – military industry,
technology, university, science and police are entirely in the male gamut. Status follows from the sex roles assigned to individuals. In patriarchy, sex roles assign domestic service to the female and the rest of human achievement to the male.

Elaine Showalter, who coined the term ‘gynocritics’, is one of the pioneers of feminist literary criticism in America to describe literary criticism based in a feminine perspective. In *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1979) she divides the history of women’s writings into three phases namely: Feminine, Feminist and Female. In the Feminine phase, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual accomplishments of the male culture. They internalize the male assumptions about the female nature. In the Feminist phase women protested against the male standards and values in their writings and advocated their own rights. In the final Female phase, which began from 1920s, women rejected both: imitation and protest. Both these modes were the forms of dependency. Women in this phase turned to female experiences as the source and extended the feminist cultural analysis to the forms and techniques of literature.
Similarly, in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture*, 1830-1980 (1985), Showalter attempted to show how cultural ideas about proper behaviour have shaped the definition and treatment of female insanity from Victorian era to the present.

The Australian writer, broadcaster and academician Germaine Greer has been creating controversies since the publication of *The Female Eunuch*, (1970). She maintains:

> She is looked upon as a witty and gorgeous ‘Trojan Horse’ built to penetrate the fortress of patriarchy for letting women fool soldiers inside. 

Greer was a bold exponent of feminism and used words related to the female anatomy for making women realize that their true liberation would be achieved by revolution and not by evolution. Greer opposed the sexual oppression of women in family.

Greer was concerned about the potential of women that had been suppressed since ages. She unfolded the mind and body of woman for her emancipation from self-hate that had arisen out of male hatred. In various other books like *The Change: Women
Ageing and Menopause (1991), The Female Misogynist (1991), Greer has tried to dispel the false notions about menopause and criticizes the society for the lack of progress made by the feminist movement.

Shulamith Firestone, the Canadian born Jewish feminist and founder member of ‘New York Radical Women’ and ‘Red Stockings’ occupied the center stage in the early phases of radical feminism.

In The Dialectics of Sex (1970) Shulamith attempted to correlate the best of Marx and the best of Freud to arrive at a solution, both private and personal for the problems of women. She believes that gender inequality originates in patriarchy and patriarchy is forced on women through their biology. The division of sexes pervades in all cultures and the modern western sex discrimination is only the most recent layer. Hence, Shulamith tries to explain how this situation has arisen and through which institutions it operates. She also suggests the ways through which institutions it operates.

Based on Freud’s psychoanalytical theories, The Psychoanalytical Feminism attempts to prove that gender is not
biological. On the contrary, it is based on the psychosexual development of the individual. Psycho-analytical feminists are of the opinion that gender inequality comes from early childhood experiences, which lead men to believe themselves as masculine, and women to believe themselves as feminine. It is further maintained that gender led to a social system that is dominated by males, which in turn influences the individual psycho-sexual development. Toril Moi shed light on the concepts of ‘feminist and feminism’ in the following words:

The words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960s.(p 204) Therefore the very fact of being a female not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach… A feminist tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a ‘feminist one’. (Pp206-7) Feminist writing is markedly characterised by its political commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism… 35

Nancy Julia Chodorow, a leading contemporary psychoanalytical feminist theorist and the author of widely acclaimed books like Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender (1978), Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory (1989), Feminities, Masculinities, Sexualities: Freud and Beyond (1994), and The
Power of Feelings: Personal Meaning in Psychoanalysis, Gender and Culture (1999), shares Freud’s assertion that the individual is born bio-sexual and that the child’s mother is its first sexual object. The child forms its ego in reaction to the dominating figure of the mother. The male child forms this sense of independent agency easily. He identifies with the agency and freedom of the father and emulates his possessive interest in the mother. But, this task is not simple for the female child. The mother identifies with her more strongly. The daughter attempts to make the father her new love object. But she is stymied in her foundation by the intense bond with her mother.

Liberal feminism concentrates on the legislation aspect in the fight against patriarch. It criticizes and analyses the ways in which women are excluded from power and prevented from playing a full part in political activity. Women are marginalized by denying the same opportunities in political, economic, social and professional spheres. Women should have the right to choose their spheres of work and education.
Liberal feminists promote and support acts of legislation to demand equal access to jobs and pay for women. However, liberal feminism is criticized for neglecting deeper ideologies of society and patriarchy.

Radical feminism believes that the radical (= root) cause of the problem of women’s oppression is patriarchy. Thus the radical feminists want to dismantle patriarchy altogether. Extreme radical feminists like Valerie Solans (in her SCUM Manifesto 1960) calls for the destruction of the entire community of men and men-loving women. Radical feminists claim that oppression of women is the first, most widespread and deepest form of oppression. They reject many scientific theories, data and experiences because they exclude women and are not woman-centered. Similarly, radical feminism clashes with liberal feminism because radical feminists believe that society can and must be changed by radical actions and not by legislation alone. They want to free women from the rigid gender roles imposed upon them by the society. They also emphasize their differences from men and form groups that exclude males completely. They highlight the importance of individual feelings, experiences and relationships. Radical
feminists believe that ‘femaleness’ and reproduction limit women’s capacities to contribute to society. Women should essentially be androgynous. They like to violate sexual norm and believe that women should control every aspect of their sexuality. They also advocate artificial means of reproduction so that less time is devoted to worthwhile things. They promote abortions, contraceptives and other forms of birth control. Radical feminism sees sex and penetration as male dominated.

Marxist feminism believes that capitalism is the root cause of economic inequality and political confusion as well as the unhealthy relations between men and women. Hence, it is the main cause of women’s oppression too. In capitalist societies, the individual is shaped by class relations. Marxists feminists see gender inequality as determined by the capitalist mode of production. A Marxist feminist organization ‘Radical women’, in its manifesto claims that enslavement of women was the first building block of an economic system based on private property. They think that elimination of the capitalist profit-driven economy will remove the motivation for sexism and other forms of oppression.
Socialist feminism encompasses Marxist feminism’s argument of the role of capitalism in women’s oppression and radical feminism’s views of the role of gender and patriarchy. Some socialist feminists criticize Marxist feminism for failing to find the inherent connection between patriarchy and classicism. They believe that Marxist feminism’s view of gender oppression and class exploitation. Thus, Socialist Feminism attacks the common root of sexism, racism and classicism, i.e. the determination of a life based on accidents of birth or circumstances. Gayle Rubin in her famous essay, ‘The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex’ (1975) criticizes Marx without dismissing his fundamentals, for his incomplete analysis of sexism under capitalism. Socialist feminists believe that although women are divided race, class, ethnicity, and religion, they all experience oppression for being women. Thus to end women’s oppression, both the oppression of both: class and gender women must work side-by-side men in the political sphere.

Woman and woman’s body has been used as a metaphor of domination and subjugation. Every thing or object that is susceptible to domination and suppression has been identified and
epitomized as ‘female’. In *Colonialism and Postcolonialism* (1998) Ania Loomba states that female bodies symbolized conquered land from the beginning of the colonial period and extended beyond it. She comments on the victimization of ‘brown women’. There are references to marginalization of women in the racial context. Loomba quotes Nancy Leys Stepans argument based on the analogy between race and gender:

> It was claimed that women’s low brain weights and deficient brain structures were analogous to those of lower races, and their inferior intellectualities explained on this basis. Women, it was observed, shared with Negroes a narrow, child-like, and delicate skull, so different from the more robust and rounded heads characteristic of males of ‘superior’ races... In short, lower races represented the ‘female’ type of the human species, and females the ‘low race’ of gender. 36

The analogy between race and gender is an assault to both as it de-humanizes the very human essence of their existence.

Loomba also quotes Freud’s formulation of the female psyche:

> We know less of the sexual life of little girls than of little boys; the sexual life of grown-up women, too, is still a dark continent for psychology. But we have learnt that the small girl feels sensitive over the lack of a sexual organ equal to the boy’s and holds herself to be inferior on that account; and that this ‘penis-envy’ gives rise to a whole series of characteristic feminine reactions. 37
Post colonialism and Feminism can be called as parallel theories because every colonized country was referred to as ‘female’ and the colonizer the ‘male’ and women of colonized countries were further dehumanized by raping or enslaving them. Franz Fanon indicates some congruence in the position of women and colonized subjects. He maintains, In patriarchal society, women are split subjects who watch themselves being watched by men. They turn themselves into objects because femininity itself is defined by being gazed upon by men.

Fanon describes the objectification of blacks and their internalization of this process in the same way. Colonialism eroded many matrilineal or woman – friendly cultures and practices and intensified women’s subordination in colonized lands. In rural Africa, the control of women over farming and the crops they produced declined with the advent of the slave trade. Christianity profoundly altered family structures and sexual patterns. In India, too various changes in the social structures are visible after independence. Colonialism intensified patriarchal relations in colonized lands, often because native men, increasingly disenfranchised and excluded from the public sphere, became more
tyrannical at home. They seized upon the home and the woman as emblems of their culture and nationality.

Literature by women stands testimony to the confusion and pain than women suffered during and after the colonial rule. Nicola Beauman makes a very crucial statement on the women’s novel:

It deals with the drama of the undramatic, the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships. 38

The writers chosen for the study, thus, have an authentic literary tradition, both, within and outside the country that emphatically takes into account gender dialectics. This tradition centralizes and prioritizes the issues pertaining to women’s conditions in the recent socio-cultural mutations. This tradition also provides the authors with models of experimentation in form and language.

Namita Gokhale is a journalist in Delhi whose work focuses on women's issues and literary criticism. Her first book Paro: Dreams of Passion, which was published in 1984, is said to have 'pioneered the sexually frank genre' that would later characterize Shobha De's work. Namita Gokhale firmly believes that
articulation of problems, needs and desires is the first step in the process of empowering women, and communicating these in the next step. Namita Gokhale’s use of locale too plays an important role in shaping the destinies of her characters. Most of her novels are set in the Kumauon hills. The towering mountains represent patriarchal dominance. They play a very dominant role though they are the, “muta personae.” Gokhale’s books, A Himalayan Love Story (2002), Gods, Graves, and Grandmother (2001), and The Book of Shadows (1999) also have strong female characters who deal with love, lust, death, and often the supernatural.

Sunetra Gupta belongs to the Rushdie and post-Rushdie generation of "Indian English" writers whose members are essentially cosmopolitan in their cultural and linguistic affinities—though they are often read and marketed as predominantly "Indian" writers in the West. Gupta, born in 1965, spent her childhood in Bengal and Africa, studied biology at Princeton University, and obtained her Ph.D. from London's Imperial College. She now lives in Oxford with her husband and daughter and divides her time between writing and researching infectious diseases. Sunetra Gupta is the author of four novels: Memories of Rain, The Glassblower's
Breath, Moonlight into Marzipan, and A Sin of Colour. She has been described as "a prodigious talent" by the Independent on Sunday and her work has been pronounced "brilliant" by The Times. Sunetra Gupta’s fiction is characterised by various hues of human relations with a special focus on women and their ability to either, tactfully cope with situations or find solutions as per their will. Gupta’s use of stream of consciousness technique makes her fiction interesting and at the same time poses a challenge to the reader to uncode her message. Monideepa, Reba and Esha reflect Sunetra Gupta’s concern for women and their problems.

Jhumpa Lahiri captures the complex human emotions in her novel and short stories. We get glimpses of the lives and relationships of people from Bengal to Boston. The stories discuss Indians settled abroad, their lives and loves and their profession. Jhumpa Lahiri’s novel and short stories may not appear feminist according to the traditional feminist norms but her writings highlight a great degree of the female trauma and internal conflict. Lahiri’s women face problems of displacement, generational differences, transformation of identities and longing for homeland. Her characters transcend the feelings of confusion of culture,
language and traditions and find new ways of adaptation and thinking as per the demands of the situation. Lahiri’s characters seek to reach out to the world, places, people, situations and circumstances. Most of *Interpreter of Maladies* characters play out a simultaneous existence in two cultures. They are Indians living in America or India, and/ or their lovers, neighbors, or landlords are. With informed cultural chiseling, their creator shapes them into sharply sculpted personalities.

*Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) is a collection of characters from all over the world, which live with both, objectivity and compassion for life. Lahiri’s female characters feel isolated and alienated. The female characters face a very painful condition of living ‘in - between’. *The Namesake* documents the pain and loneliness of a simple Indian girl whose life can be viewed as nothing but mere compromise and coming to terms.

Namita Gokhale makes use of nature and locale to highlight the lives of the protagonists. She uses mythological names like Parvati and Shakuntala who symbols of fidelity and sacrifice but
her protagonists are out to change the world and revolutionize the established traditions.

Paro: Dreams of Passion broke all the cultural norms and boldly discussed sex from a woman’s point of view. Both the main characters project different dimensions of a woman’s personality and the reactions of women to different situations and circumstances.

Shakuntala brought out the hidden desires of women to travel around the world and see the different places. Namita Gokhale has highlighted that every woman is a captive of tradition and culture and so the desire to set free becomes very powerful. It ignites to such an extent that Shakuntala leaves her home and her loving husband. Parvati, of A Himalayan Love Story is compelled to indulge in pre-marital sex and extra-marital affairs as well. She tries to complete her ‘self’ by indulging in promiscuity. But, the fact worth noting is that she does not repent for her actions or brood the departure of the men she had relations with. Parvati’s display of courage is certainly a reaction to the domination of the patriarchal system.
The Book of Shadows highlights Namita Gokhale’s concern for women who suffer from violence like acid attacks. Rachita Tiwari the protagonist is the victim of acid attack. She is compelled to leave her home and settle down in isolated area where she encounters a horrifying past in the form of supernatural elements like ghosts. The novel depicts the isolation of a woman and the pain she suffers because of it.

Gods, Graves and Grandmother is a fine rendition of the lives of three women belonging to three different generations. They belong to the same milieu and they display the power that a woman possesses for survival in this world. The grandmother, Gudiya and Phoolwati are the three women who dominate this world, which is hegemonised by men. They become their own mistresses and rule their masters. The story is wonderfully weaved into a feminist paradigm.

Sunetra Gupta presents women as self-respecting individuals. Moni of Memories of Rain refuses to compromise with her husband’s infidelity. She decides to return to her maternal land and home. She experiences pain at the thought of separating her daughter from her father but her self-respect surpasses her
sentiments and she leaves for India. *Moonlight into Marzipan* is a scientific story yet has powerful feminist undertones. Esha, the protagonist is forced to commit suicide because of her husband’s infidelity. *A Sin of Colour* is a story about the complications of relations and relationships.

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* highlights women belonging to varied social backgrounds. These stories underscore the feminine needs from a very critical and crucial viewpoint. Her protagonists belong to various age groups, which makes her viewpoint crystal clear. Lilia, a young girl, Mrs. Das, a beautiful and vivacious NRI, Miranda a young beloved to a married man, Mrs. Sen, an old lady acting governess to an American child and Boori Maa, a refugee, all battling against some or the other problem.

*The Namesake*, a highly acclaimed novel, focuses on the turmoil of a male character, but brings out various problems faced by women who have to migrate to foreign countries after marriage. The character of Moushumi makes one contemplate about the upbringing that an Indian child would get in a foreign country.
Ashima Ganguly and Moushumi represent two different generations and two opposite cultures.

All the three writers chosen for the study are intellectual novelists seriously committed to the cause of women. Their fiction authentically shows their concern for the gender dialectics. Their entire body of writing interrogates the patriarchal designs and, therefore, indicates their intellectual endeavours to find out ways and means to wriggle women from the age-old patriarchal clutches. Their fictional writing also registers their irresistible desire to reconstruct social order and restore dignity and integrity to woman who has always been relegated or pushed back to the secondary, tertiary or even insignificant position in a society that is essentially a male dominated society.
References


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