There’s really no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced, or preferably unheard.

Arundhati Roy

This chapter attempts to deconstruct the essentialist Indian woman image and reconstruct a plural, contradictory, complex notion of what feminist paradigms mean in India in the present context.

Feminism in Indian literature is most commonly conceived as a very sensitive concept which is most subtly handled due to opposition in the name of religion and national identity. The traditionalists perceive feminist discourse as alienating women from culture, religion and family responsibilities. The nationalists are of the opinion that feminism has its roots in west and it will only result in eroding the culture and national identity of women. They believe that women are the best custodians of a nationalistic identity. Hence, they have developed an aversion to the western concept of feminism. Feminist ideas have, throughout history, been the subject of attack from most religious and political ideologies. The word feminism has acquired many negative connotations in India. “Feminism is a signifier of something very particular and comes with additional meanings attached, which many seek to avoid. It has acquired connotations of separatism, extremism, men avoiding lesbianism” (Walby 3). Some people think that it attempts to bring some kind of barriers in the traditional system and is instrumental in breaking up of marriages. The genesis of feminism has been in the west so the religious fundamentalist are always suspect of its intentions. Third World feminists, therefore, have to fight against feminism imposed from outside as well as the misogyny of third world men who put women down in the name of protecting their national culture.
The construction of a nationalistic rhetoric on the basis of religion has always attempted to erase internal differences and conflicts within India in the name of national identity. “It is at once a claim for a distinct non-western identity and a brushing away of internal differences” (Chaudhuri xxi). Also the western attempts at appropriating a construct of India have resulted in a homogenized reductive reading of Indian feminist issues and the silencing of many women in the margins. Ironically for women in India the global era comes along with a fresh wave of orthodoxy which attempts to push them back into an imaginary past invoked in the name of tradition and national identity. In order to preserve culture and tradition from the onslaught of globalization and hybridization of culture the fundamentalist in India work to preserve the past at all cost. To quote Jasodhara Bagchi in this regard, “The Indian womanhood is transfixed on an essentialist historical juncture to define Indianess” (102-103). The invocation of mythological role models like Sita, Draupadi, Savitri is to urge the women of India to follow these role models of self-effacement. “For nationalists, history has always meant, in fact, selective history. Nationalists, whose objective is to foster a sense of identity and solidarity, to establish a chain of heroes, or to prove their case for a certain historical boundary, pick up those raisins from the cake of history which support and rationalize their cause” (Benyamin Neuberger 43). Similarly, Lois Mc Nay observes, “The production of knowledge is always bound up with historically specific power and, therefore every society produces its own truths which have a normalizing and regulative function” (25). Thus, the feminists need to unravel how discourses of truth operate in relation to the dominant power structures of a given society.

India represents many worlds in one. Arundhati Roy said in an interview, “India lives in several centuries, simultaneously” ranging from feudal worlds to cosmopolitan cities like Mumbai, and it is across these contradictions of caste, class and even race that feminism has to be negotiated in the Indian subcontinent. The unusual heterogeneity of Indian experience reveals that there exist multiple levels of patriarchies and also multiple levels of feminism; such as inheritance laws, the practice of widow immolation known as Sati, dowry, female feticide, female infanticide, honour killings, dalit feminism, tribal feminism, eco-feminism, feminist struggle of Muslim women, dowry-related violence, domestic violence etc. Hence, feminism in Indian literature, as well as the broader perspective of feminism in India
is not a singular theoretical point of reference. It has metamorphosed with time keeping pace with historical and cultural realities, levels of consciousness, perceptions and actions of individual women and the community of women as a whole.

This chapter foregrounds the voices of feminist agenda pertaining to the Indian sub-continent. The analysis is also an eye opener to western feminism about the issues that are unique and originate due to the socio-political and historical contexts of this part of the world’s women. This chapter attempts to give a glimpse of the contours of feminist thought and concerns in India. As all the varied configurations of feminist struggle of this continent are beyond the scope of this research project, I have limited myself to two aspects of the feminist struggle namely forced widowhood in the name of obscurantist religious sanctions and sexual taboos on women.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s Water is chosen for analysis for the historical time it represents. The novel is written in the backdrop of pre-independence time around the 1930’s when the national struggle for independence had begun under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The era was epochal as it opened pathways for future feminist movements. It was also the time when actual legal reforms for women took place in India. It becomes pertinent to study the evolution of feminism from its nascent stages to the present, as the past movements have shaped the present context, and allow us to draw broader lessons from their specific concerns. “This first phase of feminism in India was initiated by men to uproot the social evils of sati (widow immolation), to allow widow remarriage, to forbid child marriage, and to reduce illiteracy, as well as to regulate the age of consent of marriage and to ensure property rights through legal intervention” (Napier 35).

The other text that I have chosen for analysis for this chapter is The Dark Abode by Sarojini Sahoo. Sahoo treats women’s sexuality as one of the paramount necessities that will liberate women. Women’s sexuality is still considered a taboo in India. She contends that Indian feminism needs to theorize ‘sexuality’ as one of its core issues apart from economic and social empowerment agenda. Sarojini Sahoo’s The Dark Abode is avant garde in Indian feminist writing as it is a book written in the present times, which discusses the female sexuality which is still a prohibited issue in India. It is still in the hands of men to “define precisely the dimensions of her
(woman’s) physical freedom” (Dworkin 113). The domestic violence within the
precincts of home is still unchecked even where women are educated and aware of
their rights. The ingrained submissiveness towards the husband has been depicted and
probed in The Dark Abode. It is evident that only a small percentage of women, after
attaining education and economic independence, have gained some amount of
liberation, knowledge about legal protection and basic human rights in India.
Feminism has not been able to address issues of a large percentage of women in the
villages. Feminism in India has been charged with tokenism as very few women have
savoured the fruit of feminist interventions.

The novel Water depicts the harsh reality of widows in India and also upholds
the belief that, “the problem before majority of women (in India) today is not equality
but survival” (Mukhopadhyay 50). The two narratives are in contrast with each other
in terms of the issues of priority. Water deals with the struggle of basic human rights
which were denied to the widows in India during the pre-independence time. The
issues of basic human rights to the widows in this country have still not been resolved
after independence. There are many women who have to live a life of utter
subjugation even after the legal reforms concerning widows have come into force. On
the other hand, The Dark Abode is about a woman’s innermost sexual desires and her
coming to terms with positive power of her sexuality.

In this chapter the ideological thrust of Sarojini Sahoo and Bapsi Siddhwa is
analyzed vis-a-vis their works. The essentialist ‘Indian Woman’ image needs to be
dismantled. Indian gynocritics from diverse cultural backgrounds are making a
valuable contribution in bringing into light the multiple issues of feminism in India.
Vandana Shiva, Urvashi Butalia, Mahashweta Devi, Madhu Kishwar, Brinda Karat,
Mahashweta Devi have raised their voice against many issues concerning women in
India. The issues that these gynocritics deal with are diverse and to some extent give a
small representation of the multitude of feminist agendas within Indian feminism. I
have tried to develop an argument to prove how the empowerment in sexual liberation
and the integration of widows in the main stream of the society is still impeded by the
religious sanctions against them. Women in India find themselves implicated in the
system of dharma codes. The men who did not created these codes are also tyrannized
by them in the present time. However, it becomes important to mention here that these
aspects are just a tip of the iceberg as there are many other feminist issues that need to be fore-grounded and put on record.

Though the problems faced by women in India cannot be pigeon-holed into western theoretical findings, it cannot be denied that feminist movements in India are informed by the west. Maitaryee Chaudhuri clutches the issue with her statement, “There is no turning away from our engagement with the west” (xix). Colonial period brought about a significant change in the socio-political life of Indians. The experience of colonial rule was one of the most important formative influences on the feminist movement of the early twentieth century. Social reforms which deal with the lives of Indian women are especially noteworthy, as they made the position of women in India legally strong. But at the same time the engagement of the reformist with the dharma codes to validate their reform movements cannot be overlooked. The reformists from India were quick to invoke instances from the Vedas to strengthen their argument in favour of women. Women like Gargi and Maitri from the Vedic age were often quoted by the reformists as they were held in high esteem through all times. “Thus, the Dharamshastras came to be handy to reformists also and it worked on the minds of the majority of Indians creating favourable opinion towards the reforms” (Padia 227). However, on the other side the studies of western feminists about the Indian contexts have been brushed aside as inauthentic and culturally far removed from the actual situation. “Debates on feminism in the West have been well represented in a very large number of writings that have been institutionalized as readings in university courses” (Chaudhuri xiii).

Feminism in India is still ambivalent, does not find much representation in literature and has been mediated through the west. However, some scholars are of the view that feminism in India predates the feminist movement in the west. The shakti cult of feminism; “goddess inspired feminism” exemplifies this. Indian feminists, in an effort to counter attacks of being western have turned to Hindu iconography and Sanskrit idioms denoting women power. Instead of trying to debate and establish precedence of one over the other my contention here is that much can be gained from the interface between western feminist epistemology and Indian feminist issues. Indian feminism stands to gain, immensely from feminism of the west and vice versa. If feminism of the west can be informed by male theory for its cause then why cannot Indian feminism benefit from the western theory? Just as intellectual ideas of progress
for humanity do not remain an intellectual private property of a few then why should
the ideas on feminism, which find their genesis in the west, be shunned in Africa and
India as irrelevant? But at the same time the gains from western feminist theory
should not be allowed to over-shadow and silence Indian feminist tradition.

The intersections clustered around gender discourse are immensely complex in
India. Creative theory must first sift through the vast information on women from
different contexts and arrive at key directions that feminist thinking can take. I have
sought to problematize feminism in the context of Indian society by highlighting
multiple oppressions that women in India have to face apart from gender bias.
Compared with Western society, the Indian society has disparate conformation system
of conduct which is tethered to the caste system and religious dharma codes
prescribed for its members. Simultaneously, different cultural traditions are
manifested in diverse rituals, mythical contours and complexities. The repercussions
of these dharma codes affect men and women differently depending on their caste and
gender. Feminism in Indian context is further complicated by the plural and
hierarchical society. Women in India experience hierarchy at multiple levels and their
issues cannot be compared mutually. In order to avoid essentialist claims about
Indian feminism an analysis of ‘women’ through works of gynocritics situated in a
specific social, economic, cultural, historical and political context has been taken up.
Through the works of chosen artists I have tried to establish how they represent a
variety of impulses and approaches.

The Indian social codes of conduct are a continuation of a religious tradition;
they serve as a ‘social doctrine’. Madhu Kishwar in her article “Manusmriti to
Madhusmriti” in Manushi, mentions that the British wanted to establish a scriptural
law, similar to the Biblical law, to govern their colony in India. William Jones
translated the Manu Samriti into English and upheld it as a law book to govern its
subjects and also to establish the British government’s supremacy. It is also argued
that the British championed the cause of women in order to maintain colonialism and
to demonstrate their national superiority.

Manu Samriti was written when the Brahman tradition was under serious
threat from non Vedic movements. The book was written during a time when the
Brahmanical tradition was under a threat of annihilation and was undergoing a social
turmoil. This text is projected as the defining document of Brahmanical Hinduism, and it has also become the key source of gender and caste oppression in India. It is still projected as a pivotal canonical source of religious law for Hindus by the fundamentalists. But it needs to be studied in its historical context.

*Manu Samriti* responds to the tenor of times and resonates with the time in which it was created. It contains the doctrines which were useful in the political and social conditions for which they were written; these *Shastras* have been misinterpreted and misread by people to grind their own axe in various ages. The *Dharamashastras* need to be reinterpreted in modern times. There is also a debate over whether the text *Manu Samriti* has suffered from later interpolations of verses. A lot of accretion and deletion has taken place in the *Dharmashastra* over a period of time in the hands of those who interpreted them for their personal gains. The present times are quite alien to the social ethos that created and generated those dharma codes. A radical break from the tradition and *Dharamashastra* is not possible since it is deeply entrenched in our consciousness but we do need to be wary of the limitations it has imposed in the process of women emancipation in the Indian subcontinent. These dharma codes need to be revalidated with the changing times. Evidently, the same yardstick cannot apply to the present time. Since *Manu Samriti* was written in the distant past, some allowance has to be made while invoking its injunctions in later times.

This caution is also expressed by Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan in her essay on “Goddess Inspired Hindu Feminism”. As she says, “This tradition has not only marginalized and alienated women in minority communities, but has also opened up possibilities of further exploitation of these very communities by the Hindu Right and demarcation of more restrictive and repressive cultural lines.” Religion and politics play an important role in the life of every human being. But they should not be above human beings. Social political crisis has always been very detrimental to women’s identity in all cultures. “Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: woman in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformed” (Mani 117; 118).

*Water* and *The Dark Abode* from the Indian subcontinent grapple with the legacies of old traditions and their interface with newer knowledge. They attempt to
sensitize the reader about the changing times and some of the women’s issues. In Water I have focused on the disempowering and debilitating power of tradition and in Sahoo’s The Dark Abode the focus is on validating cultural forms which are empowering for women and help in sustaining a positive self-worth for women. My attempt is to read culture and tradition analytically for its dialectical relationship with feminism.

All traditions are not oppressive for women; certain myths and legends have to be acknowledged for their empowering potentials.

_Water, Imaging Injustice: A Counter-Narrative of the Dharma Codes_

Widows in India represent an invisible population of women against whom sins of omission abound so much that it is a dreaded destiny for all women. In her book, _Revisiting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai_ Uma Chakarvarti writes that during the nineteenth century, the low status of women was exemplified by the plight of the child widows, who were, “Condemned to a life of enforced celibacy” (82). It was abolition of sati in 1825(Act XXVII) that spearheaded the idea that widows should live a life of celibacy. It was apparently part of the design to enforce patriarchal control over women and to assert the Brahmanical view that both in life and death female sexuality was the sole possession of her husband. “Though the 1825 Act saved widows from compulsive death, it did not grant them right to fruitful entrance into life” (Vidyasagar vi).

Simran Chadha in her essay “Marginalised by Domesticity” opines: “Like the sati, ascetic widowhood is also symbolic of continued devotion to the dead husband’s memory, and therefore a continuing symbol of martyrdom” (93). A widow thus becomes the abysmal wreckage of Indian society washed ashore at the portals of exploitative ashrams in the hope of dying there and attaining moksha. In most cases she becomes a prey to predations of relatives who enslave or mentally torture her. Reduction to a virtual non-status through a series of rituals masquerading under obscurantist religious sanctions: the breaking of her bangles or banishing her from auspicious functions; she loses her independence and capacity to fight for her property rights. According to Tutun Mukherji, “Until recently, two linked social practices—gauri daan or child marriage to avoid social ostracism if a daughter remains unmarried after attaining puberty and kulin pratha that allows polygamy among the
brahmins—were the major causes for widowhood since very young girls were wed to much older men and men with multiple wives.”

In India widows have been constructed as the icons of submissive piety or even signs of bad omen. A widow’s union to her deceased husband was the only aim left for her survival in this world. It was nothing less than a ‘forced suicide.’ A widow was denied many rights; she lost her right to property of her husband. Norm of hearing only religious verses and eating under-nutritious diet was strictly imposed on widows. She had to be tonsured regularly, she was to eat only once a day, sleep on the cold floor, and observe celibacy and numerous fasts. Remarriage was completely banned for widows from upper castes. Such austerities were to be observed even if they caused bodily weakness. Fasting and under-nourished diet was a norm for a widow. Perhaps, it was a step towards slow suicide. Widow had to live her life as a constant reminiscence of her husband to whom she had to meet after her death. A widow had to live her life with a sense of shame that she survived after her husband’s death. Life was bondage for her, and these fasts and austerities were a sure way of leading her life to a slow death. All this and much more find a representation in the novel Water. Bapsi Sidhwa wrote Water based on the script of Deepa Mehta’s film about the lives of widows in 1930s Benaras. The film was surrounded with a lot of controversy. The deplorable condition of widows in the widow ashrams and their subsequent involvement in prostitution for survival as depicted in the film incurred the wrath of Hindu activists. They stalled its shooting in Varanasi and blamed Deepa Mehta for tarnishing the image of Hindu religion to gain favours from the west.

Bapsi Sidhwa’s representation of widows against pre-independence backdrop has been studied to determine the artistic translation of her feminist ideology into gynocriticism. Water depicts a transformative revolt against patriarchal sexual ethics (pertaining widows) unique to the Indian sub-continent. It is a critique of the silencing of women’s voices, the denial of their right to their own bodies and the thwarting of choices; a kind of forced exile from the main stream of society. The women who were pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible means have been depicted in the novel. The study of the widows becomes pertinent in today’s context because even today the condition of widows in the ashrams and in joint families is deplorable and needs to be taken up by feminists. Further, the government can intervene by formulating policies, social reforms and laws to ensure a secure future for widows in
India. Bapsi Sidhwa’s narrative is an attempt to highlight and introduce to the world of the privileged, sufferings of the widows. It urges women to liberate themselves from paying obeisance to those religious codes and social conventions of patriarchal agenda that function in complicit, with culture and religion to exploit them. The Tribune reports, “They are called the ‘white rainbows’ to camouflage the ugly reality of their existence. Hindu widows live in a world bereft of colour and hope”. Widows suffer social marginalization that gives them no community to turn to, nowhere to escape to, no space to which they can belong. Such social exiling is so absolute that these women are often silenced in violent deaths.

*Water* depicts the plight of the poor and unfortunate widows who knew nothing other than what society made apparent to them, even if it was a dominant ideology which was actually a construct to exploit them. It is a narrative which portrays the different levels of struggle of three widows, Shakuntla, Kalyani and Chuhiya. It is first Chuhyia in her childlike innocence who questions the injustice of the widow’s plight, then Kalyani who dreams of bringing about a change in her destiny and later Shakuntula who struggles to understand, articulate, and challenge the structure that supports this oppressive system.

We are introduced to Chuhiya in the novel as a care free child enjoying the bliss of childhood; playing the usual games. Her life takes a tumultuous turn when she, at the age of eight is married to a widower man of forty one. The match was solicited by her own father. Though it seemed her father was trying to hide his anxiety over the issue by calling it good news, yet his expressions belied his wonder. Getting a daughter married was a great ordeal for Hindus with the pre-condition of dowry attached to it. Chuhiya’s mother Bhagya was not even consulted about such important matters. For Chuhiya it was all like a game in which she was the center of attraction. At her age she was absolutely unaware of the implications of marriage. Bhagya, Chuhiya’s mother had to resign herself to getting her daughter married to an old widower, when her husband quoted injunctions from the scriptures. “A girl is destined to leave her parents’ home early or she will bring disgrace to it. She is safe and happy only in her husband’s care” (Sidhwa 7). “A woman’s body is a site for conflict between a demonic stri-savahava, which is her lustful aspect and her stri-dharma, which is her womanly duty” (*Water* 8). “Of all the ceremonial gifts, the kanyadaan, bride gift is considered to be the holiest. Just as the giver can no longer lay claim to
an object that has once been donated, the parents of a traditional Hindu bride have no right over their daughter once she has been gifted to the bridegroom" (Water 23). The narrative is strewn with such dharma codes to invoke a response from the reader about the validity of such injunctions in the present times.

Hardly any time has passed when Chuhiya is to accompany her dying husband to the ghats for the last rites. Moving in a cart with her kin, she relishes a piece of sugarcane unaware of the bleak future that holds for her untold miseries. When Somnath, Chuhiya's father asks her if she remembers getting married – she replies that she does not remember. And when she is told that her husband is dead and she is a widow. She innocently replies, “for how long baba?” (Water 32) Chuhiya is ill equipped to deal with the social expectations she encounters at a tender age.

In Brahmin culture, once widowed, a woman was deprived of her useful function in society- that of reproducing and fulfilling her duties to her husband. She ceased to exist as a person; she was no longer either daughter or daughter in law. There was no place for her in the community; she was viewed as a threat to society. A woman’s sexuality and fertility, which was valuable to her husband in his lifetime, was converted upon his death into a potential danger to the morality of the community. (Sidhwa 24)

Bhagya was “frozen with the weight of a hoary tradition that brooked no deviation” (25). She has to bow down before the laws that were ordained for her little widowed daughter. The natural response of her conscience had to be curbed in the face of social obligations; she has to concede to what her husband said. “Her husband was right, his words bore the cumulative wisdom of Gods and ancient sages, and who was she to challenge that august pantheon?” (Sidhwa 9)

Chuhiya is announced a widow and this is followed by the most inhuman rites: smashing of her bangles with a brick and the callous tonsure of the head to mark a descent to widowhood; why such violence is required and came to be associated with widowhood is something that puzzles. The tonsuring of head “was enforced by the belief that if the widow did not shave her head, every drop of water that fell upon her hair polluted the husband’s soul as many times as the number of hairs upon her head” (Water 35). The sacred Hindu text, The Laws of Manu, states, “A widow should be
long suffering until death, self-restrained, and chaste. A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband dies goes to heaven. A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal” (Chapter 5 verse 156-161). The ritual of making the widow tonsure her hair is associated with religious conjectures to avoid any kind of objection and rationalization. However, the real reason for it was to make the widow look ugly and physically unattractive. The narrative articulates the brutal treatment meted out to the widows in the name of religion and righteous codes of conduct.

In the novel Chuhiya emerges as the voice of nonconformity, a destabilizing force that challenges societal norms. Her quality of nonconformity serves to temper the unflinching condition of stark circumstances and suffering of the widows. The novel highlights how the widows become victims of cultural and traditional forces which are passed on in the name of righteous religion. Throughout the novel, Chuhiya challenges the traditional values imposed by the male-dominated society on the women every now and then. “Chuhiya is impulsive non judgmental, unaware of the rules and spontaneous in her responses” (Jain 2009: 65). She does not shrink back in any argument just because the arguers are the Dharma codes and she is just a child. She speaks and puts up her thought with logic, courage and conviction. Chuhiya resists being victimised by circumstances. She becomes a construct to topple, depose and question the ways of the prevailing order for widows in the society.

The entire narrative is sprinkled with references from the Dharamshastras and Chuhiya’s innocent questioning of the givens of the dharma codes. Our holy books say, “A wife is part of her husband while he is alive. So how can poor half dead woman feel any pain?” To this question of Madhumati, Chuhiya replies, “Because she’s half alive” (Water 42). The complexity of the social codes are seen and comprehended in the novel through the eyes of a child. And a child’s mind is a tabula rasa untouched by the worldly ways.

When Chuhiya encounters a group of widows in a sermon given by a priest her analytical mind is quick to observe and ask “Where do the men go when their wives die? Do they also have widow ashrams?” (Water 46) All the widows are totally scandalized by her blasphemous remark and jointly respond that God save their men from such a disaster. The narrative highlights the muteness of the widows in the face
of one-sided sermonizing by the priest. Similarly, Chahiya’s defiance of the tradition of begging outside the temple, throws ample light on the rebel in her. The rest of the widows “had grown as accustomed to begging as they had to the gruelling hours of singing in temple halls to earn a few coins and a fistful of rice without these handouts, they would starve” (Water 96). The widows in India are still given paltry alms on festival days by temple-goers and on regular days they are given a cup of rice and a fistful of lentils for every eight hour session of singing and dancing in temple. For many widows, this is their only means of sustenance. On those days when a widow is too sick to perform, she starves. This description resonates in the novel in the words of the author, “the widows were anaemic-looking” (Water 45). The religious dancing of the widows, “the entire performance was so joyless that it was frightening” (Water 48). They did not obviously dance to rejoice, it was their means of earning a meal. It was a dance for survival for these widows.

The widows in the Ashram lived a life of forced penance, self-denial and slow suicide. Widows were treated as inauspicious and their touch and even shadow was considered as blasphemous. When Kalyani bumped into a married woman by accident the woman retorted, “You’ve polluted me. I have to bathe again” (Water 60). While in pursuit of Kaalu, Chahiya who was unmindful of the world had to listen to remarks such as, “They shouldn’t allow widows to run like this. They bring bad luck to our business” (60).

In the Western and developed countries feminism has reached a stage of Post feminism. It has ripened. The initial issues that they fought for have found place in the main stream of natural justice which was earlier denied to them. Now women in the west have not only established their identity but they are also making inroads into boundaries which were hitherto stereotyped. They are making a dent in the cultural constructs which were earlier out of reach for them. One of the reasons for the apparent fading away of feminism in modern Europe is the fact that equal rights have become a reality in almost every area of Western social life. Women are recognized as capable of filling any position they choose, and are provided by law with the right to receive equal pay for work. In society, the modern Western woman is no longer expected to revolve her purpose in life around marriage, children, and homemaking, while on the other hand nothing prevents her from choosing to do so. Because all
these rights have been secured for women, some theorists believe that feminism is no longer necessary, and indeed, no longer has a purpose in modern Europe.

However, the same is not true about women from countries like India. Here, we have different levels of feminism and not all women have reached the stage of post feminism. There are women who still jostle with basic human rights and struggle for existence. They are so caught up with their insecure existence that they cannot think in terms of identity and selfhood. They are unaware of their strengths or the human rights laws. They are uneducated, live under economic dependence, and have a servile existence. Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel *Water* depicts the plight of such women and their struggles. The novel delineates the harsh injunctions that are imposed on widows; legitimized by patriarchal mandated religious customs.

The basic pleasures of food, sweets, fried food are forbidden for the widows, apparently to tone down their sexual desires. In the novel when Chuhnya is offered a *jalebi* by Gulabi, the transvestite, she is stopped by Madhumati and she sarcastically remarks, “From when have widows started eating sweets?” Chuhnya retorts she will eat as many as sweets as she wishes at Kalyani’s wedding. To which Madhumati replies that it will never happen, as widow remarriage is out of question. Chuhnya who is massaging Madhumati by gentle stomping on her feet gets really angry and she is filled with such hatred that the gentle stomping becomes calculated, frenzied stamping that sets the old widow screeching in pain. She goes on and on with the act till Shakuntla intervenes and pours a bucket of cold water over her head to cool her down. The episode exposes the psychological trauma and helplessness that widows are subjected to. Another poignant narrative is about the oldest inmate of the ashram who nurtures a dream of feasting over *ladoos*. The last *ladoo* she had was on her marriage when she was a child and now she can only dream about it. Chuhnya, who is full of humanism, is able to translate Bua’s simple dream into reality by procuring a *ladoo* for her from the money she has obtained through begging. The boundaries of her family assume a new fluidity as Chuhnya tries to reach out to the inmates of her ashram. These inmates become points of reference in relation to which her evolving consciousness may be articulated. Chuhnya’s strength of character and resilience evolves with the changing circumstances and her never give up attitude fills her with hope against all odds.
Another character who shares Chuhiya’s willful nature but in a more covert and subdued way, is the beautiful Kalyani, who is the only one among all the widows of the ashram who is allowed to have her hair intact. She shares Chuhiya’s love for freedom. Kalyani is the bread earning member of the ashram. Her good looks, a powerful tool, are used by Madhumati, who becomes complicit with patriarchal forces for using her to gain economy for sustenance. Thus, she becomes a perpetuator of patriarchal ideology. Power grids work even within the ashram, Madhumati becomes powerful within the ashram owing to the donations made by her rich brothers. Madhumati is clearly the ruler of dilapidated ashram and had forced Kalyani into prostitution. The author attempts to split up the outer hypocrisy which lays bare the inner rot through her narrative. Double standards of morality contribute to and perpetuate the injustice to women. Narayan’s friend Rabindra tells Narayan about the prostitute widows and makes a sarcastic comment “The gentry have an ‘unnatural concern’ for widows” (Water 73).

One of Sidhwa’s strengths is the ability to make a point without underlining it. She does over-stress the irony in a couple of places – for instance when Madhumati, the ashram head who has forced Kalyani into prostitution, says, “We must live in purity, to die in purity.” Kunti, one of the inmates of the ashram who also has imbibed the double standards of the world comments, “Eating with Kalyani would pollute our food” (Water 82). But is she unaware of the fact that the food that she eats is obtained out of Kalyani’s prostitution?

Pandita Ramabai’s book, The High Caste Hindu Woman discusses at length the social practices that degraded and dehumanized widows and reasons as to why it is so. Reflecting her views Uma Chakarvarti writes:

The young widow was the object of suspicion and therefore closely guarded for the fear that she might ruin the family’s honour through her ‘lapses’. In order to make her less attractive to “man’s eyes” she is disfigured and made to fast so that her youthfulness and desires are suppressed. The anxiety about family honour makes even the parents impose on her an entire set of oppressive social and cultural practices. Faced with an unending cycle of degradation with no possibility of employment, the high caste widow had no option. The only available
choices were suicide and prostitution. However, these were not real choices but ones forced upon them because of cruel customs and traditions. (Chakarvarti 283)

Circumstances force them into a life of compromise. Despite the fact that the ashram has its own internal politics, and that we are constantly favouring some characters against others, we are never allowed to forget that all these women are victims of a cruel, unthinking tradition which exists for no better reason than that “it has always been so”. Even Madhumati, variously compared to a “beached whale” and a “satiated sea-lion”, and despicable in her treatment of Kalyani, has a human side. She too was once a young girl with dreams, and in the parasitic monster she has become, we can see how one evil begets another.

Kalyani had somehow learned to compartmentalize her life. Her childhood was in one box; occasionally she opened it and let her happy memories spill out. Her meetings with Narayan were locked up in another box she kept close to her heart and opened frequently. She kept her nocturnal calls in a recessed box hidden even from herself and allowed it to open only when she was doing business for Madhumati. (\textit{Water} 129)

Kalyani had learned to retreat to a place deep inside her where her emotions could not be violated, despite what happened to her body. In the midst of all the despair she had created a space of private morality for herself. She believes that just like a lotus that grows in muddy and polluted water, though her body has been polluted through prostitution yet her inner soul is pure. Kalyani had almost given up on any change in her life when Chahiya enters the ashram and befriends her. And soon her life changes when Narayan, a progressive follower of Gandhi ji, falls in love with her. He brings a ray of hope of freedom from the eternal bondage of widowhood by offering to marry Kalyani. Kalyani who had till now kept her life in compartments little knew that these compartments of her life were not segregated, they were all a part of her being and each had an influence on the other. Her hopes of remarrying are shattered by her past of prostitution. She is left with the only choice of going back to the ashram which she had left earlier defying Madhumati. When she returns to the ashram she becomes acutely conscious of her powerlessness in the face of reality; she
has the same option of forced prostitution looming ahead before her. The rebel in her 
opts out of the endless degradation at the hands of the power grids and she chooses to 
commit suicide. *Water* is a powerful book against social ostracism and cultural 
prejudices. It is a harbinger of social and moral debates and also raises the ethical 
issue of human invasion through the presentation of the widows.

Shakuntla, who is one of the educated widows in the ashram, is also the 
mouthpiece of the author. Her character has been especially created to evoke a 
response from the reader. She is shown to be a devout widow, practicing all the rituals 
prescribed in the scriptures for the widows, without ever questioning them. She was 
bearing her servitude towards the dharma codes in silence. “Shakuntla had never 
questioned the belief in the *Dharmashastras* that widowhood was the punishment for 
a sinful existence in the past, and she atoned for it with prayer and observance of fasts 
as prescribed . . . . It also dulled the pain of memories of all she had lost and all she 
had endured” (*Water* 55). She had internalized the dharma codes for her future 
existence. Prayer served as opium for Shakuntla to forget her joyful past life and 
present miseries. However, when Chuhiya comes to the ashram she ruffles the 
conscience of Shakuntla by her innocent defiance of the rules of the ashram. She 
brings along a breath of fresh air and stirs a profound chord in the heart of Shakuntla. 
The coming of Chuhiya perpetuates a kind of metamorphosis for Shakuntla into a 
feeling, reasoning, independent woman. Social change is registered in the novel 
through the evolving consciousness of Shakuntla. The values do not reside in some 
ideal concept of truth, but in the ability of the people to maintain their psychological 
integrity in a situation. Shakuntla becomes a sort of surrogate mother for Chuhiya, 
protecting her in times of her distress. The conditions of deprivation on one hand 
generates hard won insights and help the inmates to develop strong bonds of 
sisterhood but on the other hand it also creates the likes of Madhumati who choose to 
dominate and rule over others in the ashram. These two aspects of human behaviour 
in response to difficult times are universal and have been represented in the film 
through the character of Shakuntla and Madhumati.

Chuhiya’s presence goads Shakuntla to question the validity of the dharma 
codes for widows. The dharma codes which served as bed rock of faith for Shakuntla 
seem to be shattered in the face of what she encounters in the society. There appear 
chinks in her steadfast belief system. Her soul is divided between her faith and
conscience. Her analytical mind which had become deadened by the weight of dehumanizing, debilitating regulations and strict dharma codes, begins to take charge again. She goes to Sadanand, the priest who reads out the scriptures to the widows, to sort of bring a compromise between the two. When Sadanand asks her if she has attained salvation from being a devout practicing widow, she replies, “If self-liberation means detachment from worldly desires, then, no, I’m no closer to it” (Water 95).

The metaphor of the ideal widow in Shakuntla is deliberately idealized; traditional passive widow is evoked to be dismantled through the course of the narrative. Her development, her freedom; her independence must come from and through herself. Chuhiya’s positive will and pro-life attitude brings a visceral change in Shakuntala, who tries to conquer her own inherent conservatism by questioning the scriptures. When Shakuntla is informed about the widow remarriage law by Sadanand she is surprised that they are not aware about it. Sadanand replies “we ignore laws that don’t suit us” (Water 172). Sadanand’s words find a resonance in the words of Narayan who reiterates that it is the vicious socio-economic system that entraps the widows. “Widows are segregated from the families as it amounts to one less mouth to feed, four sarees saved; one bed, one corner free in a family house . . . . There is no other reason why you are here. Disguised as religion it is just about money” (Water 181). The condition of widows in traditional Indian societies enforces cruel sexual and social abstinence that in fact mask economic reasons sanctioned by religion. Despite the reformist movement in Bengal, the plight of the Hindu widows remained abysmal and pathetic, and although re-marriage of Hindu widows had by then received legal recognition, it was still not encouraged and accorded social acceptance. The novel concerns with the social neglect and physical and mental deprivation of widows.

A widow’s gnawing anguish; her solitude and her alienation have been depicted through Shakuntla’s quest of righteous living. Sad experiences and bitter disillusionment with the realities of life force her to question her belief system. The novel traces the self-actualization of Shakuntla who feels solidarity towards widows as ill-fated as herself and commits herself to bring about a change. She takes a step against the grain of customs and expectations. She assists Kalyani in freeing her from the bondages of the ashram and forced prostitution. Madhumati locks up Kalyani and
ravages her beautiful hair but Shakuntla, strong in her will to help Kalyani assists her to escape from the ashram. She also becomes instrumental in bringing about an affirmative future for Chuhiya. Shakuntla’s resistance evolves in the form of her bonding towards Kalyani and Chuhiya.

Shakuntla is urged to re-examine the religious texts in the face of the hypocrisy and double standards that are rampant in the society. She is forced to question her own faith. She is like ‘water’ drifting with the flow of change that ‘water’ stands for in the novel. Water becomes a metaphor for flux or change that was inevitable for progress as opposed to stagnation. Through Shakuntla the author seems to tell all the women that we should not forfeit our rights to change and never underestimate human ability to search for alternatives. Shakuntla demonstrates agency, solidarity and courage. In the course of events that unfold, her religious rigid social inhibitions give way to a more flexible and humanist vision. As Jasbir Jain observes, “Shakuntla has overlaid her mind with spiritual faith as means of restraint and numbing of desire allows her innate sympathies to yield to reason” (67). The narrative also establishes a link between private sorrow and collective social trauma of the marginalized widow. The narrative becomes an oblique voice of all the widows who have suffered endlessly under the process of such grand narratives of patriarchal ideology. These grand narratives do not offer any scope for an alternative way of living.

When Madhumati tries to pimp Chuhiya after Kalyani’s death, it is Shakuntla who intervenes and prevents the vicious dehumanizing sacrifice of the gullible child widow, Chuhiya. She does not want Chuhiya to replicate Kalyani’s fate and fall a prey to Madhumati’s selfish social atrocities. She rescues Chuhiya from Gulabi. Shakuntla is carried by the flow of changes that were rocking the religious edifice of dharma codes that advocated ostracism of the marginalized widows and the dalits under the leadership of Gandhi. The novel ends with Shakuntla handing over, the sexually battered child widow Chuhiya, to Narayan with a hope that she will be able to have a better future in the care of Gandhi ji. Shakuntla’s leaving Chuhiya in the hands of Gandhi ji signifies a widow’s quest for change for a more fruitful and fuller life. It is an attempt to etch a new destiny for the child widow. Shakuntla is able give “Chuhiya a chance of deliverance, a chance at life, one person saved, the first step towards liberation” (Jain 35).
Sidhwa does a fine job of detailing the contradictions and layers of intolerance in society; on hearing the news that Mohandas Gandhi has proclaimed the Untouchables to be children of God, a eunuch Gulabi wonders aloud “if hijras can be considered God’s step-children” (Water 103). The growing influence of Gandhiji does in fact seem to indicate a better future for tradition’s victims.

Gandhi moves with ease between seeking support of tradition and scriptures where they support women on one hand and rejecting them outright where he finds that their dictates are oppressive tools in the context of women. Gandhi denounced in unequivocal terms the custom of child marriage, which he considers as an immoral and inhuman act, for it undermined our morals and induced physical degeneration. He contended that by countenancing such customs we recede from God as well as swaraj. Repudiating the claim that child marriage has a religious sanction, Gandhi argued, Samritis which enjoined early marriages do not depict the true essence of Hinduism and must be rejected as interpolations. He also contended, “Nothing in the shastras which is capable of being reasoned can stand if it is in conflict with reason” (Dasgupta 99).

*Water* also represents the varied voices hitherto marginalized which were coming up for articulation in the changing scenario with their contesting discourses. The attempt of Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa to establish a dialogue with tradition with the objective of searching for theoretical possibilities available within the tradition that may serve as new vantage points in the struggle for empowerment is quite commendable. It also exposes the fact that the same glorious tradition is also struck by paradoxes and hypocrisy of its own kind. On one hand in India women are treated with utmost respect at certain occasions and shunned when they become widows. The novel exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of Indian society; “Our holy texts say Brahmmins can sleep with whomever they want, and the women they sleep with are blessed” (*Water* 174). On one side women are venerated as goddess and on the other hand they are used and despised as whores. The novel constitutes a critique of conventional patriarchal values and satirizes the honour with which women are placed in society. It makes a shocking statement in a land where women are worshipped, that they continue to be tortured abused and humiliated in the name of religious sanctions. *Water* ends on a tenuous note of hope. But the story is still just as relevant; the violent protests that nearly aborted Deepa Mehta’s film are a
reminder of how unthinking adherence to tradition can supplant it over reason and humanity.

The novel is a post conventional analysis in the opposition of hierarchies that underpin our understanding of ourselves; it is an attempt by Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa to uncover the constructed nature of our epistemology and ontological categories. The novel articulates a discourse which refutes and questions the relevance of Dharma codes for the widows. “Deepa Mehta’s film Water revived an ongoing controversy about whether those who exploit and downgrade women are following shastric injunctions” (Kishwar).

If we look into the conditions of widows in other parts of the world we find similar ostracism meted out to them in other cultures. Though the degree of discrimination and level of inhuman treatment may differ, yet self-similar constructed structures are also found in African society as well. Across a wide range of cultures, widows are subjected to patriarchal customary and religious laws and confront discrimination in rights.

Widowhood is a kind of living death for women in almost all cultures. In Bangladesh, the Muslim widow is, in theory, better off than the Indian Hindu widow. The *Koran* encourages remarriage and a widow cannot be disinherited. Under *sharia*, a woman is entitled to one eighth of her husband’s estate, and half her male siblings’ share of the parent’s estate. In practice, however, many Bangladeshi widows, especially those who are illiterate and live in rural areas, are subject to oppressive patriarchal traditions. In Pakistan, destitute widows are reported to be supported by a small pension or *zakat*. But, the allocation system is often corrupt and they are deprived of it. In Afghanistan, it is estimated that approximately 40,000 widows live in Kabul, most of whom lost their husbands in the war that killed an estimated 50,000 of civilians. In January 2001, the United Nations estimated that about two million war widows live in Afghanistan, who is the sole providers for their families. In Afghanistan the Taliban, in 2000 was estimated, to control 95 per cent of the country. It espouses a fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic Law that forbids women to work outside the home or to leave their houses unaccompanied by a male relative. Girls cannot go to school, and those who infringe the strict codes concerning dress and behaviour are severely punished. Under the Taliban, widows have been doubly
victimized. Denied paid employment, these widows further lost access to international food aid, since it was decreed by the Taliban that such aid had to be collected by a male relative, which these widows did not have. The Taliban ban on women working outside the home has drastically increased the number of widows and children begging in the streets. Widowed mothers’ children suffer malnutrition, ill health and depression, which in many cases leads to suicide and the neediest widows are frequently neglected.

In Sri Lanka, war widows from both sides of the conflict experience poverty and marginalization. South-East Asia is a region where decades of armed conflicts have caused a huge explosion of widowhood for women of all ages. Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia and Viet Nam are home to war widows in every generation. In East Timor, for example, human rights groups estimate that, since the invasion in 1975, one third of East Timor’s population has been killed, disappeared or died of war-induced famine. In many cases, widows were internally displaced, seeking refuge in the hills, or moved at gunpoint to camps in West Timor, becoming victims of rape. They have often been reluctant to speak out, fearing retaliation or ostracism by their communities and families. As a result, many cases of sexual violence have gone unreported. The situation of war widows in Cambodia reveals similar atrocities and marginalization. Because of the significant number of casualties from armed conflict within the male population, some 35 per cent of rural households are headed by women, often widows. Many young widows are forced through poverty to become sex workers. African widows, irrespective of ethnic groups, are among the most vulnerable and destitute women in the region. Common to both francophone and Anglophone countries in the region, is the concept that death does not end a marriage. While the widow may have no rights to ownership of her husband’s property, she is usually expected to fulfil, obligations towards her deceased husband through her participation in traditional practices. In return she would be allowed to remain in her home and to have rights to cultivate land.

Widows across the globe share two common experiences: a loss of social status and reduced economic circumstances. India has the largest recorded number of widows in the world—33 million. Widows’ deprivation and stigmatization are exacerbated by ritual and religious symbolism. Indian widows are often regarded as “evil eyes”, the purveyors of ill fortune and unwanted burdens on poor families.
Words in the vernacular used for widows are crudely pejorative: “witch”, “dakari” and “whore”. In Kannada, Tamil and Telugu, ‘widow’ is a term of abuse. In Hindi, for instance, “raand” is a widow as well as prostitute. Similar verbal abuse is common in Bangladesh as well as in some countries in Africa. A recently published book *Invisible, Forgotten Sufferers: The Plight of Widows around the World* (Dutt, Vijay and Harma, Risto F. 2010) reveals that there are an estimated 245 million widows worldwide, 115 million of whom live in poverty and suffer from social stigmatization and economic deprivation purely because they have lost their husbands.

It becomes very relevant to publicize one of the most hidden and veiled areas of violation of women’s human rights. The widows are the most under-represented section of Indian society. Their specific needs for a dignified existence are not addressed even by the women’s movement. Very few fictional works have depicted the plight of the widows. Thus, the gynocritics and artists like Deepa Mehta and Bapsi Sidhwa are catalysts in bringing social justice to those sections of women who have no representation in the mainstream of the feminist movement. They become instrumental in bringing about a transformation in the social condition of women through their narratives which make an attempt to expose and demystify the social practices associated with widows. Bapsi Sidhwa’s critique seems to be directed at society’s failure to guarantee a decent life for its members, especially widows, who appear to be still subordinated and subjugated in most contemporary societies.

The subject matter of such films and fictional works which draw their inspiration from the real life situations brings into focus those aspects of women’s lives which were hitherto ignored for a wider hearing.

**Sarojini Sahoo: Woman’s Body, Woman’s Voice**

Sarojini Sahoo celebrates the body of the woman instead of negating it in her novel *The Dark Abode*. It becomes the take-off point of her feminism. Sahoo is a bilingual writer who writes her fictional work in Oriya and her essays and blogs in English. She is a bourgeoning feminist from the pan-Indian sub-continent. She writes about the patriarchal dominance in all spheres of a woman’s life. Her writings defy patriarchal limits of expression for a woman writer. She has dealt with issues about women which have never been discussed from women’s perspective in literature such
as menopause, rape, abortion, infertility and motherhood. Sahoo does not believe in brushing anything under the carpet.

The focus of her novels and short stories is on the lack of sexual liberty among women in India. Sarojini has emerged as a writer crusading for the cause of feminism through various experimentations in fiction. Most of her stories and novels tend to become no-holds-barred exploration into the feminist self of a feminine soul. Sahoo’s writing is frank and invites the reader into a kind of positive activism. Her writings engage with a social criticism of the patriarchal structures which pose a hindrance to the emancipation of women in India. She gently provokes the reader with an alternative possibility. Her work actively seeks to engage her audience in a process of self criticism and education. She is an internet-savvy writer and a regular blogger who reaches out to her readers with the immediacy of the World Wide Web. Indian Express says about Sarojini “You may call her creativity controversial and term her unconventional frankness as feminist but you can never afford to ignore this woman and writer of courage and conviction. Sarojini Sahoo is a noted short story writer of India and known for her brilliant boldness”. As someone has rightly remarked, “The role of a writer is not to say what we all can say, but what we are unable to say.”

Sahoo places her protagonists in situations which are contrary to schematized over simplifications. They are depicted in all the complexities that life can offer. The protagonists’ refusal to be completely absorbed into the cultural system within which they find themselves placed is the cut-off point of her fiction. Sahoo’s protagonists question the limitations imposed on their sexual desires. They grapple with the double standards surrounding female and male sexual freedom. Sahoo highlights how women’s sexuality in India has always been smothered by religious and patriarchal control. The sexual control on the female body is mystified as social custom under the weight of ancient scriptural authority. The expression or denial of sexuality is controlled through a patriarchal and political interpretation of traditional religion and ritual in India. As rightly pointed out by Madhuri Chatterjee in her essay ‘Women’s Bodies, Women’s Voices’, “Post Foucault, we know that sexuality when represented or perhaps translated into culture is much more than a simple manifestation of physical desire, it is politics” (75).
Sahoo attempts a kind of subversion of the givens of the patriarchal system in India by portraying her protagonist in *The Dark Abode* as a woman who dares to transgress acceptable norms of family and sexuality. She incurred the wrath of critics for writing *The Dark Abode*. The issues that Sahoo has expressed in the novel are dangerous to the patriarchal set up of India. These are neither tempered nor diluted for the patriarchal society. She has conceded nothing to the tastes of the reigning patriarchal ideology.

The title of her novel speaks volumes about the dark recesses that she attempts to probe. This novel is a translation of her Oriya novel *Gambhiri Ghara*, which was first published in a serialised form in a magazine and later published as a book. *The Dark Abode* symbolizes the heart; a place in the house which is the innermost place, where we keep valuable things and where we keep our personal deities. Here it becomes a metaphor for Kuki and all the women who keep their innermost desires tucked deep in their hearts. The “dark abode” is both the homely space that Kuki inhabits in utter subjection to her husband, who often humiliates her, and the secret new life she has discovered on the internet with Safiq who honours her as a mother, daughter, wife and goddess.

When you see me and touch me, you will realize that I am an ordinary human being with my own sorrows and grief, doubts and dissatisfactions, I am no goddess; I possess no divine powers. I hunger, I thirst, I crave for sex; I have my own aspirations and ambitions. I also pretend; I also lie; I also betray Aniket and live my life behind a mask.

(Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 54)

The sexuality of a woman in India has always been an issue or rather a non-issue, something which has never been dealt with. It is something about which the Indian society is very uncomfortable. Moreover, if a woman’s sexuality is depicted explicitly by some male writer it becomes a piece of art whereas if a woman chooses to write about her sexuality, it is treated as titillating the male sensibility. Woman’s sexuality is still considered taboo in the male-dominated society of India. Sarojini Sahoo’s stand on “secular sexuality” was taken with a pinch of salt by male critics. A similar censure was faced by Kamala Das who was also very explicit in describing her innermost desires in her autobiography *My Story*. Lois Mc Nay observes in this
regard, “Sexual pleasure in women was seen as perverse and, correspondingly good women were not passionate and had no sexual desires. The good woman was fulfilled through her reproductive capacities and through the nurturing of children” (31).

“Why detest the body so much when the body is the physical manifestation of one’s existence? Is it possible for attraction to exist where there is no body? Is it possible to feel love without the body made up of the five elements” (Sahoo, Sensible Sensuality 6). The fate of women in India is exposed to the dilemma of their physical needs on one side and their social obligations, which are mandated through religion and spirituality, on the other side. “Most women are termed frigid because of their bashfulness. An open enunciation of sexual desire was not encouraged by society particularly on the part of women” (Sahoo, Sensible Sensuality 93). This mental agony has been depicted in the novel by Sarojini Sahoo. She glorifies the power of sexuality through her novels and short stories. The fate of women in India is intrinsically related to their ability to balance or, to put it more succinctly, to the self effacement of bodily needs and personal desires. Sarojini in an interview with Phillipe Pratx said, “I think a feminist writer is herself a challenge for the patriarchal form of society and also always faces challenges from society.”

The sexuality of a woman is either revered or feared and never acknowledged in its reality by the society. Sarojini Sahoo has tried to present female sexuality in opposition to Indian patriarchal concept. In India women’s sexuality is used for begetting of children and there is no question of women expressing their sexual desires. Sahoo has deliberately tried to delink female sexuality from its procreative function and, instead, has tried to bring to the fore the consciousness of the body that is inherent in a woman’s sexuality. She believes that sexuality plays a major role in the understanding of feminism. “Sexuality” as pointed by Sudhir Kakar, “is the creation of a two person universe, where the affirmation of the female body and the recognition of her feminine soul take place simultaneously” (Kakar 144). Instead of reinforcing the destructive image of a woman’s sexuality as circulated in the dominant patriarchy, Sahoo attempts to empower women through the positive strength of their sexuality. According to her until now in Asian and African countries, patriarchal society has its control over women’s sexuality. So, women need two types of liberation. One is from financial slavery and the other from sexual repression. She believes in the theory that says “a woman’s body, a woman’s right”, that means
women should have control over their own bodies. What other liberty can women demand if they do not own their bodies? A woman in India has to surrender her basic bodily needs in the hands of patriarchal forces at various junctures. A woman undergoes male domination and subordination at every level of experience from the most obvious to the most subtle. Her body suffers malnutrition when as a child she is deprived of nutritious food because the sons have to be well-fed in the family. Her body becomes a site of contestation when she is married; her body becomes a medium for begetting sons and if she fails to do so she is treated as a non-entity. Similarly, she is supposed to deny her sexual urge. Sexuality is the arena where patriarchal control is exerted most distinctly over the female body. It is either the overt domination as rape, or through a variety of covert control of the female body such as the tradition of obedient wife and self sacrificing mother. According to Jasbir Jain “The body needs to be recognised with all its desires and unconscious drives as much as the feelings and thoughts which inhabit the human mind.... Feminism is the recognition of this wholeness of existence that encompasses all three- body, mind and soul” (Jain, Indigenous Roots of Feminism: Culture, Subjectivity and Agency 5). There is a constant denial of the female body in the Indian patriarchal society. Sahoo in her novel The Dark Abode has tried to depict Kuki as a woman who tries to probe her strengths through her sexuality. The protagonist Kuki in the novel is neither a character larger than life nor a representative of feminist activism. She is a common woman; the delineation of the character of Kuki is a reminder that repression and marginalisation of female sexuality has been a precondition of prosperity for patriarchal powers.

Sarojini Sahoo is considered the Judith Butler and Virginia Woolf of contemporary Oriya literature. And yet for her, feminism is not just about battling male hegemony. For Sarojini Sahoo, feminism is linked with the sexual politics of women. She refutes the limits that patriarchy places on female sexual expression and identifies women’s sexual liberation as the real motive behind the women’s movement. (Partija)

Western feminism stands to gain from Sahoo’s perception of feminism in the sense that American feminists focus on gender neutrality by obliterating the female body. Sahoo on the contrary valorises biological difference of women. Sahoo contends that the idea of difference should be neutral in social structures. She believes
that one should either deny difference or delineate it in a positive light. Her attempt in the novel is to treat this biological difference not as debilitating but a source of positive strength. Her feminism is a kind of feminism which argues that feminism must not underplay the biological difference between the sexes, and attribute all difference to culture alone. To do so is to accept male civilization’s devaluing of the female reproductive role. Sahoo has subverted the patriarchal representation of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive instead she has highlighted the positive virtue of female sexuality. It can also be argued that inversion is a necessary stage in the process of resistance. This is a feminist strategy that can be seen in this narrative.

The radical feminists of the west differ from Sahoo’s take on feminism by trying to prove that their bodies can be disembodied and appropriated like men with the aid of medical science and technology. They want to free themselves from their nurturing function. Instead of giving precedence to their bodily difference they end up imitating the bodies of men.

As opposed to the Western feminism Sahoo’s theory on feminism finds glory in “difference” of the female body. Sahoo, contends that “while the woman’s identity is certainly constitutionally different from that of man; men and women still share a basic human equality. Thus, the harmful asymmetric sex/gender ‘Othering’ arises accidentally and ‘passively’ from natural, unavoidable inter subjectivity” (Sahoo, Sensible Sensuality 132).

They are “others” in real definition, but this is not in context with Hegelian definition of “others”. Hence, it is quite evident that at the ontological level there is differentiation of gender but Sahoo contends that it should not encourage gender discrimination at the social level. Sahoo is a cultural feminist who upholds the traditional female qualities such a desire to nurture unlike the radical and liberal feminist who denigrates such qualities. According to Payant:

Cultural feminist believe that women’s life experiences make them more humane and urge an infusion of superior female values into the world beyond the home, creating a society in which poverty, war, and racism would become outmoded relics of the dead patriarchy. This sort of feminism sees a total cultural revolution and a utopian new age emerging in which both sexes would benefit from the female values of
nurturance, reverence for the land, and rejection of hierarchical and power-based modes of rule. (20)

Her novel emphasizes the validity of women’s own interpretations of their needs and lived experiences. Through her writing she protests against the institutionalized injustice perpetrated by men as a group against women as a group, and advocates the elimination of that injustice by challenging the various structures of authority or power that legitimize male prerogatives in a given society. There is a loud silence about women’s sexuality in India. “Sex is so suppressed in social conversation that if any one tries to have a conversation about sex or sexuality, some may think of it as “dirty” or “perverted” (Sahoo, Sensible Sensuality 50). According to Sarojini Sahoo, “Art that depicts humans depicts sexuality” (Sahoo, Sensible Sensuality 10). Female sexuality is constructed as something which invites control imposed by oneself and by the society. “Traditions are used often to control female sexuality, and controls of the female body are mystified as being faithful to tradition” (Katrak 157). It becomes difficult to write against the grain of tradition as Katrak illuminates the roots and sustaining forces behind tradition.

Tradition often mystifies actual control over female sexuality. Tradition is often problematically ahistoricized, so that cultural traditions are presented in dominant ideologies as timeless and totalizing, whereas, in fact, tradition is dynamic, as well as historically and culturally specific. Female sexuality is controlled effectively through a reifying of tradition. Tradition is gendered so that the same elements of tradition, such as religious belief, education, dress codes, freedom of movement are enforced very differently on males versus females. A struggle over what is tradition is a battle over the female body—how to control it and keep it familiar within recognizable and legitimized patriarchal codes. (Katrak 159)

Sahoo’s novel is a counter-narrative where a woman crosses the limits set by patriarchy and tradition. The Dark Abode is subversive in terms of Kuki the main protagonist of the novel having an extramarital affair even though platonic; given the standards of chastity for the Indian women originate from thought process itself. Kuki’s marriage bereft of love becomes the context of her extramarital mooring.
Sarojini Sahoo also critiques the middle class Indian marriage in her novel *The Dark Abode*. According to her it has become an institution which offers no space for a woman to articulate her own desires. The myth of romantic love and socially enshrined institution of marriage are also subjected to ironic scrutiny in the novel.

Marriage is boring, true! A contract to be honoured till death, an institution that fetters one into slavery and formality. But the moment you disregard the norms of married life, you realise how your existence itself is questioned and how you become helpless and isolated. (Sahoo *The Dark Abode* 61)

The narrative telescopes the inner crisis of the protagonist Kuki against the realities outside. It is an effective dynamics through which the inner layers of the protagonist are laid bare. Through the double frame of reference, one alludes to a public world in a state of suspicion and conflict, and the other to the private agony of a woman’s struggle with her own split subjectivity. Sarojini questions the hierarchical model of patriarchal discourse which privileges ‘public history over personal story’. In the novel personal story gets enmeshed with the historical forces and demands the attention of the reader. The historical background of India Pakistan partition, the Kashmir problem, Indo-Pak relationship and Hindu-Muslim hatred make an important background to understand the nostalgic reminiscences of Kuki. The novel also delves into the relationship between the ‘state’ and the ‘individual’ and comes to the conclusion that ‘the state’ represents the moods and wishes of a ruler and hence, ‘the state’ actually becomes a form of ‘an individual’. So, the ‘personal story’ of Kuki and Safiq actually represents the story of a subcontinent. Sarojini Sahoo has tried to include all forces that regulate the destiny of a personal relation be it tradition, macro level politics, economic forces, political and geographical wars, religious and ethnical non tolerance and even terrorism. Probably it was her intention to highlight the various forces against which all human beings are pitted. She has tried to engage with powerful forces of militarization and fundamentalism. A synthesis of feminism with other forces that effect human relationship has larger implication for justice projects.

Kuki, the main protagonist in the novel is having an extra marital “virtual relationship” with a man from a different religious, cultural and geographical background. She is a housewife from India and Safiq is from Pakistan. Kuki is
married to Aniket and has two sons out of this marriage. Incidentally hers was a love marriage but her present situation is far from the marital bliss she had dreamed of. The love and bliss of domestic idyll begin to disintegrate in her marriage. Kuki feels stifled emotionally in her marriage to Aniket who is burdened by his corporate life and has become emotionless. Kuki ends up being drawn towards the internet, which becomes a voice board for her to launch her emotions. Kuki lacks the language, voice or support system to contest the domination faced by her in marriage. The internet becomes a safety valve for her where she could let lose her innermost desires without the social inhibitions. The Indian tradition does not provide any privilege or space to women to voice their discontent in marriage. Instead, they are expected to remain silent in spite of all the traumas of domination.

Kuki, a common Indian woman and her typical womanish shyness prevents her from admitting her actual feelings towards sex and love. She has to constantly struggle through the confusions and contradictions as a result of dual standards towards sexuality. This is not only due to any restriction imposed by her family, but the ingrained social conditioning of the idea of being a good woman that constantly pursue Kuki to hide her own true feelings.

Women have no independent identity in the patriarchal order of society. They are not independent human beings. Men think of women as an extension of themselves. When women violate these standards, it is a direct blow to the men’s sense of identity. Marriage is a sacrosanct bond in India and any step taken by women to break from it is treated as blasphemous, however, the same is not true if a man breaks this sacrosanct bond. Hence, Kuki can only fantasize about escaping from the restrictive social conventions of marriage while remaining within the confines of the institution of marriage. Within patriarchal structures, women often need to negotiate rather than reject regressive interpretations of tradition. Kuki experiences alienation, even exile from her body as she precariously negotiates traditional norms and roles.

Whatever a girl or woman’s particular negotiation— speaking against, being complicit within, or resisting tradition—female protagonists experience self-exile, a sense of not belonging to themselves, and particularly not to their female bodies. They must mediate physically among the categories of belonging to their bodies, to their desired
sexualities, and to traditional norms, or opting out of conforming, and thus facing serious consequences. (Katrak 158)

In the novel Kuki tries to escape the destiny attached with her body and hence the social constraints attached to it by creating an alternate identity of Ruksana. She adorns a different persona when she communicates with Safiq on the internet. “Slowly and without any reason, this person she had never met had somehow begun to occupy a corner of her heart and perhaps of her subconscious mind too” (Sahoo The Dark Abode 9).

Safiq is a painter, liberal in his thinking and has led a bohemian lifestyle; he would urge Kuki to shed her inhibitions of orthodox and conservative thoughts. He wrote to her, “Listen, we must transcend the petty considerations of caste, religion and nationality. Never allow them a place in your heart” (The Dark Abode 25). Sahoo tries to draw an analogy between the characters of Safiq and Kuki; Safiq the artist raises his voice against the dominance of religion and the bindings on the freedom of expression of an artist and pays the price for it. How the State obstructs and suppresses the individual freedom has been shown through the character of Safiq, and his struggles as a painter. His predicament is expressed by him in these words, “You feel lost somewhere between the cruel reality of life and dream-like fairy-tale that you wish to live in” (The Dark Abode 130).

There are evocative parallels between the use of Safiq’s rebellious painting, and Kuki’s non-verbal platonic virtual relationship. His predicament is similar to that of the Indian woman who also dreams of breaking a similar yoke. The difference is that he is willing to pay the price for his inner freedom while the Indian woman remains secretive and silent in her “dark abode”. As long as women are oppressed, they will never actualize their full potential. Oppression is a complex; interlocking web of factors, making resistance difficult for all human beings. As Gayatri Spivak asserts in this regard, “The agency of change is located in the insurgent or the subaltern” (83). Women should be seen, as Amartya Sen envisions, “not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things — both individually and jointly.”

Kuki and Safiq discuss religion, philosophy, their personal day to day problems and everything under the sun at length over the email. The openness,
equality and frankness in their relationship give it strength. Kuki believes that Safiq had revealed everything about himself, “even the darkest of his sins” (Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 30). Lack of communication between Kuki and Aniket becomes a cause of marital discord. The marital life of Kuki and Aniket is so disjoined that there remains no place for deep sympathy and steady love. She feels distanced from her husband Aniket even when physically close to him. On the contrary she feels close to Safiq who is separated by distance and even culture.

Married life was such a strange entity. It wiped out all traces of love; wrings it out of the relationship. Living on a day to day basis with another person slowly begins to appear like the discharge of one’s duties as set out in a contract. The stream of love hides itself in some obscure niche. (Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 43)

It is the love and respect that Safiq offers which Kuki finds missing in her relationship with her husband that makes her drawn towards Safiq. When she was not married to Aniket he was a lover and quite like Safiq but as he got married to Kuki his status was suddenly raised to a God; *pati parameshvar* who has to be venerated. He becomes unapproachable and starts treating Kuki like a trophy wife. “Kuki was his property; he would scold her, beat her, adorn her with sarees and jewellery and Kuki would accompany him like his shadow at parties and picnics he went to” (Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 48). Patriarchy teaches males that violence equals strength and this adage, if negated by men in India, will not only help empower women but also liberate men from the impediments of their self-created caricatured identity.

The narrative also deals with the prejudice that seeps into the psyche of people from different religious backgrounds against each other. Kuki analyses her hatred for Muslims and realises it was due to the social conditioning and no personal vendetta as such. Sahoo brings to her narrative parallel issues of man-made binaries that inflict people of the Indian subcontinent. These binaries are of Hindu/ Muslim, Pakistani/Indian, state/individual, these are all man-made binaries including gender wars. These are like ‘shadow lines’ which have been etched on the minds of people by dominant political forces. Yet these shadow lines are as meaningless to Kuki as to Safiq. They are a result of social conditioning. ‘She was what her circumstances, upbringing and environment had made her. The prejudices had seeped into her
psyche. She couldn’t help it. As a child she had often heard elders say, “Don’t trust even a dead Muslim” (Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 71).

Jacques Derrida reminds us that binary oppositions are a ‘violent hierarchy’ where one of the two terms forcefully governs the other. A crucial stage in their deconstruction involves an overturning, an inversion ‘which brings low what was high.’ The political effect of ignoring this stage, of trying to move beyond the hierarchy into a world quite free of it, is simply to leave in intact in the only world we have. (Dollimore 190)

Sahoo’s emphasis in the novel is to free humans of these binaries in order to rise spiritually and achieve a kind of equanimity in all spheres of human existence. She interweaves a narrative where these issues converge in the life of a middle class Indian house wife. She highlights how a blissful marriage which started with love is gradually poisoned by patriarchal ideology. Aniket, Kuki’s husband becomes emotionless, abusive and violent with her. Kuki in turn, also internalises the unequal power relation in their marriage as her destiny because she is a woman. Kuki is enmeshed in the process of defining and sustaining masculine order and she cannot be exonerated from taking on the responsibility of being a passive recipient of the violence. But when she finds an alternative in Safiq, all the binaries melt away. Their relationship is based on love and equality, where these man-made differences are meaningless. Kuki finds her soul soaring in spiritual bliss in her communion with Safiq. The transcendence from love to equanimity, an inclusiveness of the mind soul and the body is achieved by Safiq through his virtual relationship with Kuki.

The opening lines of the foreword set the tone and theme of the novel. “Call her by name and she will appear, gaze upon her face, her beauty. Celebrate: *metta, mudita, upekks*”. These are Pali (Middle Indo-Aryan language) words that mean love, joy, to see within; equanimity. *Metta* embraces all beings. *Mudita* embraces the prosperous. *Upekka* embraces good, bad, loved, pleasant and unpleasant. Kuki and the entire womanhood have been invoked as an embodiment of the ultimate equanimity. A celebration of this inclusiveness has been depicted in the relationship of Kuki and Safiq in the narrative. The love and sexual power of Kuki is able to mentor Safiq who led a bohemian and a lustful life before falling in love with her. He had physical
relation with fifty two women. His lust has been described by Kuki as the hunger of a caterpillar. The narrative unfolds the transformation of Safiq from a lustful being into a spiritual being. Kuki asks Safiq, “What is the point of living like a caterpillar, or leading a life of unbridled enjoyment of female flesh without any emotions or attachments? Do you think I have been attracted towards you in anticipation of physical pleasure? I wish I was aware of all this from the beginning” (Sahoo, *The Dark Abode* 32). Here ‘caterpillar’ is a symbol of ‘sex hunger’ and Kuki wants to raise herself from the mire of sex to celestial expansion.

The internet is the ‘heteropia’ for both Safiq and Kuki; a melting point where all differences erase; including the bodily differences and man-made discriminations. Those gender cues which direct and constrain traditional oral, visual and tactile forms of communication become increasingly diffused in cyberspace. So the internet becomes a space epitomising ‘level playing field’ for both Kuki and Safiq. Their relationship is born on the internet. They have not seen each other yet love each other. Kuki’s internally fractured psyche finds solace in the company of Safiq’s emails. Her language visibly shifts from mundane, prosaic to poetic when she communicates with Safiq. Their virtual affair is symbolic of the promise of the possibility of an integration of the opposites and dualities that inflict human relationships.

Women writers explore a variety of strategies of coping against traditional constraints. Kuki the protagonist of the novel finds a virtual relationship on the internet as a means of escape from the reality that exiles her body. The virtual love relation of Kuki may be seen as her nonverbal revolt against patriarchal domination and the binaries that divide human beings. Kuki’s covert rather than overt expression of agency generates a situation of possibility to liberate her from the exile of a loveless marriage. “This covert action is not less radical than an overthrow of the system, it is often more courageous to conform on the surface while devising resistances from within accepted institutional, such as marital frameworks” (Katrick 159).

Sahoo’s *The Dark Abode* offers a demystification of the traditional female wifehood, not as it is traditionally expected to be: fulfilling and nurturing; but enslaving. Her narrative becomes a counter-narrative that explodes the myth of the institution of marriage without love; where the image of the ideal housewife is re-
examined and questioned in the context of Kuki. Aniket leaves no opportunity to
demoralize her and the result is that their marriage lacks the warmth of love; and
results in an almost neurotic behaviour of Aniket who becomes obsessed with
cleanliness. Unfulfilled wifehood is expressed in physical ailment that Kuki
undergoes frequently in the narrative. It is symptomatic of her exiled body and
unfulfilled sexual expression. She undergoes domestic violence and abuse at the
hands of her husband.

As wives, women may subconsciously internalize sad-masochistic
roles, and become unable to emerge from situations of physical and
psychological battering. The main cause for their silence is the
complex web of female socializations based on unequal power
relations. . . . Given these layers of female willingness to participate in
a male dominated model of marriage, women writers question whether
such consent is an exercise of free will or whether it is the only option
for most women in the cultures depicted. (Katrak 166)

It hints at the limited choice that is available to women in marriage and how
women continue to negotiate their lives. There remains violence against women that
is not fully criminalized under law in many countries.

Kuki too subsumes her identity under her husband and this is the case with
majority of women in Indian society. She is educated but does not work because she
is made to believe that her education is irrelevant and she cannot contribute in any
productive manner. “Aniket had never liked the idea of Kuki working in some office
and mixing with ten other men. He had a notion that women lost their softness and
simplicity if they worked” (Sahoo, The Dark Abode 64). She becomes economically
dependent on her husband. This further makes her go down in her own self esteem;
she loses her identity and only lives for others. “Feminists argue that classical
Marxism marginalises women in two ways. Firstly, by privileging the labour/capital
distinction, it renders women peripheral unless they are engaged in productive labour.
Secondly, by emphasising the primacy of economic determination, women’s
oppression is reduced to an ideological effect” (Me Nay 24). In the economy, there is
a gendered division of labour, women being much more often engaged in unpaid
domestic work. The fact is that it is not a ‘natural’ biological difference that lies behind the sexual division of labour, but certain ideological assumptions.

Sahoo through her narrative appeals for space and identity for the fulfillment of women within the institution of marriage. Sahoo seeks to expose the hypocrisy latent in the dominant discourses of patriarchy, she does not reject the values of love, care, nurture and responsibility that are traditionally associated with the woman’s role. Instead, she reappropriates these values for her feminist project, locating in them a moral core that contains the possibility of female self-empowerment. Sarojini is a progressive writer who has not severed her social responsibilities but she does want to draw the attention of the reader towards what is ailing in the institution of marriage. It is a gynocritic’s effort to provide a corrective to the Indian code of righteousness. According to Maitaryee, Chaudhuri:

In India most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their right in a way that estranges them not from their family but also from their kinship group and community. They want to ensure that their rights are respected and acknowledged by their family and prefer to avoid asserting their rights in a way that isolates them from those they consider their own. (31)

Within patriarchal structures, women often need to negotiate rather than reject regressive interpretations of tradition. Kuki experiences alienation even exile from her body as she precariously negotiates traditional norm and role of a dutiful wife and a mother.

There seems a nostalgic passion in the feminist writers in India to represent the character and message from the greatest resources of their culture and mythology. In the face of exploitation meted out to Indian women the best way to initiate a revolt or struggle to overthrow the patriarchal dominance is to quote from religious texts examples of female power. Feminist writers in India have tried to explore their own cultural traditions to mobilize women. They have come to realize that Indian traditional women are rooted in their past; and political rhetoric and dialectical materialist analysis does not hold the kind of sway that the mythical role models will bring along. Hence, they have learnt to emphasize the need to locate their points of
Francoise Lionnet claims:

"Literature, as a discursive practice that encodes and transmits as well as creates ideology, is a mediating force in society: it structures our sense of the world since narrative or stylistic conventions and plot resolutions serve to either sanction or perpetuate cultural myths, or to create new mythologies that allow the writer and reader to engage in constructive re-writing of their social contexts. Women writers are often especially aware of their task as producers of images that both participate in dominant representations of their culture and simultaneously undermine and subvert those images by offering a re- vision of familiar scripts. (132)"

Mythical narratives are deeply embedded in the psyche and reflected both in the conscious and unconscious behaviour of Indians. Myths form a large part of the baggage that we bring to our self-image. How we see ourselves collectively or individually depend a great deal on myths. They are part of human psyche and their cultural histories. The mythological female icons of Sita, Draupadi, Kunti, Hidimba and the goddess tradition of the Shakti cult that even predates the Hindu mythology have been used by many Indian feminist writers to enrich their indigenous feminist fictional writings. Mahashweta Devi, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukherji and Anita Desai all have tried to portray women characters that internalize the liberatory potential of the Shakti cult in subverting or transgressing the boundaries lay down by the patriarchal ideology. The prevalence of the goddess cult in Indian subcontinent has been explored by many feminist writers and Sahoo too has explored it for its positive psychological strengths. These mythical icons have been treated as torch bearers for contemporary women. They have become embodiments of self-assertion for women in the present times. Myth is seen as having a particular part to play in persuading women to accept the naturalness of their fate. Following the same impulse Sahoo too has tried to evoke the Uma Shakti myth, one of the intimate icons of Indian tradition, to garner support from her traditional roots to strengthen her take on feminism. The goddess of nature and fertility (Uma), whom we do not find in the Veda, developed as Shakti of the pre-Aryan Siva. In the north she was the mountain goddess Parvati. In later Brahmin Hinduism she was equated with the divine cow, like the Indo-European
Lakshmi. We may also mention Sarasvati, prototype of the later river deities; Durga, who protects and upholds the cosmic order; and Kali, the cosmic mother and nurse.

The novel, *The Dark Abode* is also a collage presentation of Ed Baker, an American poet/painter’s sketches on Uma Shakti. The empowering potential of Uma Shakti myth has been evoked through the sketches of Ed Baker in the novel. In the forward of the novel Ed Baker, the artist/poet has written a few lines on Uma:

> It is said in the *Soundarya Lahari*\(^9\) that Uma is the source of all power in the universe and because of her; Lord Shiva gets all of his powers. She is often depicted as half of Lord Shiva, the supreme god, and she also is a major symbol of female sexuality. Her name refers to her being born daughter of Himalaya, lord of the mountains. Beautiful, gentle, powerful consort of Shiva, mother of Ganesh, Kartikeya, Saraswati and Laxshmi, she encompasses their powers and exudes a tranquil, serene beauty and provides calm within. Uma is a symbol of many noble traditional (Hindu) virtues: fertility, marital felicity, spousal devotion, asceticism and power. She refers to the symbol of early feminine power and energy. Known formally as goddess Uma, Lady of the Mountains, she shows us how to balance the many aspects of our lives. Beautiful and benignly powerful, she is also known as Shakti, Parvati (consort of Shiva), Ambika, Annapurna, Bhairavi, Chandi, Gauri, Durga, Jagadamba (Mother of the World), Kali, Kanyakumari, Kumari, Mahadevi, and Syama.

> Shakti cult is a “moral exemplar”, to borrow a term from Madhu Kishwar, for feminist writers from India. Women are the living manifestation of Shakti, the feminine energizing force behind the universe. The use of this creative potential of the myth has been used to transform situation of traditional imprisonment into space of freedom by many feminist writers. The Uma myth evoked in the novel is commensurate with the, exploring of sexuality and desire to compose new images and

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\(^9\) *Soundarya Lahari* is a famous literary work in Sanskrit believed to be written by sage Pushpadanta and Adi Shankara. Some believe the first part “Ananda Lahari” was etched on mount Meru by Ganesha himself (or by Pushpadanta). Sage Goudapada, the teacher of Shankar’s teacher Govinda Bhagavadvpada, memorised the writings of Pushpadanta which was carried down to Adi Shankara. Its hundred and three shlokas (verses) eulogize the beauty, grace and munificence of Goddess Parvati / Dakshayani, consort of Shiva.
metaphors to evoke a counter myth of positive strength in a women’s sexuality as opposed to the destructive nature of woman’s sexuality which is rampanty depicted in the literature which upholds patriarchal ideology. Sahoo has tried to integrate this myth with her narrative but the story does not explicitly illuminate the reason for the use of rather erotic sketches of Uma by Ed Baker. She just leaves it for the reader to figure out the connection between the protagonist and the Uma Shakti sketches. Her use of these sketches is quite innovative though it remains ambiguous to the uninitiated reader. One is left with the question; are the sketches used in the novel to evoke a shock value from the reader or do they have a deeper connection with the narrative? A strategic change of focus from the assertion of the equality between men and women to the re-discovery of an alternative women’s culture, with its own myths and complicities, providing encouragement and self-awareness has been successfully used through the invocation of Uma Shakti by Sarojini Sahoo.

The positive and progressive strength of women’s sexuality has been subtly hinted at by Sahoo through the relationship of Kuki and Safiq. Safiq evolves from lust to love to spirituality in the novel. Safiq’s development into a spiritual being can only be attributed to the strength of Kuki’s sexuality. This kind of powerful presentation of ennobling power of love for “self” and “same” is crucial to construct a basis for self-esteem as a woman. Instead of replicating a phallic and misogynous and subsequently self-hating sensitivity, Sahoo has tried to highlight the power inherent in a woman. If women want to break with mainstream, reigning phallic discourses, which perpetuate denigrating images of woman’s sexuality as destructive, they have to create their own positive representations of themselves.

The fundamental factor underlying the inferior status of women in society is cultural, as the images constructed through mythical stories which have been predominantly written by men, are responsible for not only how women are viewed by others and more importantly how the women have internalized this gaze of the patriarchal ideology. Creating alternative positive figurations can become a sort of new archetypes. Writing in this sense, acts as an effective weapon in counteracting dominance of male mythologies, it is an act engaged not only in formulating alternatives but also in accurately recording what is, in fact already there. In a way, it is a sort of decolonization of women’s self-expression, connecting the creation of new ideas to policies of reform. Women’s writing thus would appear as an embodiment of
the feminine imagination, subverting the modes of phallogocentric representation. It would represent women’s experience and positions in a way that until now have been under-represented, obliterated and colonised by misogyny.

Sarojini Sahoo’s writing is one such attempt to create alternate construct of woman to make her apocalypse the power within her. She also uses strategies of drawing parallel images or creating paradoxical traditional to highlight this difference. But again this kind of feminist deconstruction of patriarchal representation of women to replace them with alternate icons of strength will again amount to a kind of essentialism and in the Indian context a kind of Hindu fundamentalism. This viewpoint has been pointed out by Edwards and Roces:

However, the search for this kind of gender symbolism today is fraught with problems. At the time the goddess image was an effective and powerful source for the women’s movement, but in recent years it has been shown to be alienating for minority women since it derives from the majority Hindu tradition. (Edwards and Roces 104)

Sahoo in her novel has made a plea for “secular sexuality”, which finds its resonance in the words of Kuki who echoes what Virginia Woolf had said centuries ago: “As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world” (The Dark Abode 36). In her personal interview with me Sarojini Sahoo has explained her take on “secular sexuality” by quoting from Baul saint Lalon Fakir (1774–1890) of Bangladesh:

Everyone asks, ‘What religion has Lalon in this world?’ And Lalon says, ‘What the shape of religion is, I have not seen with my eyes’. The religion he speaks of encompasses and surpasses not only religious identity, but also notions of gender. ‘If circumcision makes you a Muslim, what then is the dictum for women? If a Brahmin can be identified by his sacred thread, how shall I know a Brahmin woman?’ asked Lalon. Any honest, thinking person cannot ignore the blatant misogyny and barbarity of any religion towards women. The powerful Creator Gods were the product of a patriarchal, tribal, violent, intolerant society. They reflect the ignorance and brutality of that society and at the dawn of a new millennium, fundamentalists insist
that we should all abide by their religious law. So, I’m always in support of the idea that a woman has no religion. She has a “secular sexuality” which transcends all boundaries. (Sahoo)

However, we cannot deny that religion continues to play a powerful role in social life across the world. Religion is inextricably enmeshed in our lives. It is therefore, important that women engage in interpreting it to negotiate their rights. If feminists choose to remain in association with religion it will strengthen their sense of continuity with tradition and will also find favour with more women. If Hindu women wish to find ways to express some of their feminist aspirations using resources from their religious tradition, it will be crucial for them to use “interpretive and integrative imagination.” This will demand constructive re-interpretation of traditional resources and integration of the new interpretations at practical level with courage. Such an effort can also open a space for dialogue with women in other religious communities who are already engaged in similar tasks of re-interpretation. It is also possible for Hindu women to constructively explore the potential of their goddess traditions, which have been viewed by many feminists as non-consequential because of the historical subjugation of women in the Hindu society.

In order to mobilize women, the feminist movement in India tried to appropriate symbols from the Indian tradition, such as the use of the goddess imagery, as source for empowerment. This was particularly necessary because they had consciously tried to develop a mode of feminism that was distinct from Western feminism. Madhu Kishwar, the editor of Manushi once argued the need to draw from Indian cultural traditions, which people hold dear (Kishwar and Vanita 1984). It was important to have an understanding of the images that have a powerful force in the hearts and minds of women ‘to identify their points of strength and use them creatively’. (Edwards and Roces 103)

Sahoo validates the counter desertion of patriarchal dharma by Kuki to evoke a response from the reader. She attempts to transgress events of overarching national importance and probe instead the concept of female honour within the institution of family. Sahoo attempts to peel off layers of patriarchal formations of ‘woman’ by probing the deepest recesses of her mind. She gives the reader a peep into the dark
abode of Kuki’s heart where a constant struggle is going on between what she is and what she has become. It is a bold step where Sahoo envisages a world order celebrating the positive strength of woman’s sexuality. She has placed the two contrasting images of ‘Shakti’ within Kuki; the main protagonist. On one side Kuki represents Shakti the dynamic source of energy and creation and on the other side she is engulfed by sorrow and depression—‘Shakti’ in reticent form. It is her attempt to ruffle the conscience of women to gently awaken the creative power within them.

The author raises a number of pertinent questions. Is the protagonist in this novel a modern, living form of Uma? Is she all that Uma represents in human form? Sadly she is just a pale shadow of the Uma Shakti. She has become oblivious of her strengths and it is only in rare moments that she is able to realize her true self. The patriarchal forces have totally encroached upon what was rightfully hers. They have made her vulnerable and she is constantly under siege of exploitation. It is for her to realise this eventually. The novel has been left open ended with an option for Kuki to realise this power within her. The novel ends at a crossroad where Kuki is left alone without the support of Aniket or Safiq; she has to fend for herself and her sons; it is a kind of a new beginning for her. The novel is left open ended with a hint of hope of Kuki’s enrichment of her own self awareness, worth and enhancement of her sense of responsibility.

For feminists from other nations this aspect of feminist research has still not been explored into. Cross connections in diverse cultures can be established if a deeper research is undertaken exclusively on this topic. Different forms and manifestations of this universal creative energy are personified as a vast array of goddesses not only in Hindu mythology but the representations of such goddesses can be traced in other mythologies too. However, one should not confuse religion with mythology according to Sahoo:

Religion and mythology are two different fixations. Religion is the broader term: besides mythological aspects, it includes aspects of ritual, morality, theology, and mystical experience. A given mythology is almost always associated with certain symbolic representation of ideas or philosophy of a ‘group’. It is very interesting to note that though Mesopotamian, Greek and Hindu civilizations, religions and
cultures existed in different parts of the world and were separated by great distances and time, but there are some amazing similarities between their fables and myths. The concept of goddess always lies with sexuality and we find great similarities in all the myths of goddesses in worldwide. In Sumer, the goddess was known as Inanna, and in Babylon and Assyria, was known as Ishtar. She was Aphrodite for the Greeks. The Egyptians called her Hathor, Quaddesha and Aset. To the Phoenicians, she was Astarte. To the Hebrews, she was Ashtoreth and Ashera. And to the Philistines, she was Atergatis. So, the concept of Uma is universal idea/philosophy of sexuality in all other cultures. (Sahoo, personal interview)

Sahoo’s brilliance lies in her capacity to disturb ideologies of gender and religion, through the reconstruction of myths, which reconfigure human potential.