FOUR

Women ‘Writing the Body’: Paradoxes at the Level of Production

In literature, men have always written about sex. They have established themselves as the gender with the rights over this topic. They have considered it their domain to talk about sex, to express their desires and fantasies. They have objectified women’s bodies to the extent of reducing it to bits and pieces — breasts, cleavage, vagina. They have practically been raping women with words throughout the history of literature.

And then they shout, ‘Obscene, obscene’ when a woman writes about her own body, about her desires and fantasies. They call it pornography, when a woman does it. Why do they do this? Because it threatens them. It challenges their ideas about themselves as the active gender. It prevents them from reducing a woman to playing the passive role of a ‘sex object.’

But they can’t stop me.

-Taslima Nasreen, 2006

A feminine text can not fail to be more subversive…. It brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments.

-Cixous 1997: 357

To evade the bodily is to reproduce a structure of oppression which has made of women’s bodies their point of vulnerability and of guilt. To speak of the bodily risks a similar reproduction. At a fairly trite level, it is clear there is no escape. Yet this should not surprise us: one can not simply walk off patriarchy and shake off its effects.

-Shiach 1991: 20

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When women “write the body,” it is an act of defiance, a sort of a challenge. It hypothetically aims at the subversion of social constructs that estrange women from their own bodies, and must lead to better entitlement for women at large in the society. Many of the feminist critics have agreed upon it. However, this theory meets several constrictions when it is translated into practice. Just as the earlier chapter has established that assertion of body on the part of female characters in a realistic narrative world always remains constrained by the world in which they live and need to survive, similar is the case of women writers “writing the body.” While theoretically, writing is an agential exercise on the part of women writers, it must be recognized that this agency is never absolute. As there is no practice or position outside the system, these writers and their works, despite their potential for subversion, stay entrapped in the conventions of the genres and society at various levels. By now it is an accepted dictum that to understand an artistic or literary product, just textual analysis is not sufficient. The scenes of production and consumption play an equally significant role in shaping up and concretizing the text (Felski 1989: 2; Storey 1999; Strinati 2004: 195; Wolff 1990: 5). This chapter highlights the ambivalences that underpin the contemporary practice of “writing the body” by Indian English women writers particularly at the level of production, which is again intricately related with the stage of its consumption or reception. It looks at the paradoxes that emerge when women take up the task of writing about female sexuality and desires in a society which is essentially patriarchal and capitalist in nature. Whereas there is no denying that when a woman writer chooses to foreground the issues of female sexuality and create sexually autonomous and desiring women, she confronts the system by exploding the myths of female sexual passivity, her
writings remain wedged in the conventions and structures of language and genres which are very much seeped in the patriarchal ideology. The first part of this chapter looks at the challenges that writers “writing the body” have posed to such conventions and in turn have been restrained by the same. The other part of the chapter looks at the paradox of being a part of capitalist society where though these writers’ dissenting voices are finding a space for articulation, their simultaneous co-optation to the system that commodifies the female body also can not be overlooked. With reference to the various writers and fictional works selected for the study I here establish that while the project of “writing the body” is certainly an exercise of power on the part of women writers, this power need not be romanticized as it gets curtailed at various level so far as the feminist agenda is concerned.

I

Feminist literary and cultural critics have regularly underlined the fact that in patriarchy men have always occupied the place of authors, the story tellers, and women most often that of silent listeners. This has been one of the most significant reasons sustaining patriarchy for so long. Hence, if this edifice has to be challenged, women must give up the position of passivity. They must speak up, they must write. Women’s narratives, stories written from their own perspective can go a long way in dismantling the arbitrary patriarchal structures. The enormous efforts to encourage women to participate in the literary world are based on the premise that literary texts have transformational capacities. These imaginative works can produce real effects. Literature gives women an avenue to
make their perspectives and experiences public and thus, revise the old values and shape new realities (Cixous 1997; Frye 1986; Roy 2008; Wolff 1990). The urge to “write the body” is also based on a similar assumption. As the male dominated society has frequently concealed and censored the female body and confiscated its pleasures and desires, the assertion of the self and the writing from position of the subject is seen as a resistant gesture, a political practice.

Such assumptions have been quite influential in the current upsurge in the trend of raising the issues of female sexuality and desires in contemporary Indian English women’s fiction literature. Now-a-days the stories of “Surpanakhas” aren’t unheard-of and more and more women writers are telling the stories of sexually desirous women who want to fulfill their sexual wants and gain pleasure. These stories have indisputably challenged the constraining social norms regarding female sexuality. However, as these writings are becoming more and more visible, it becomes necessary to examine the extent to which these literary works have succeeded in “writing the body.”

The subversive potential of women’s novels in “writing the body” is based on the assumption that literature can change the way people think. But critics have frequently objected to such tall claims (Baudrillard 2005; Davis 1987; Plummer 1995: 77-79; Walby 2000). Baudrillard assumes that the excessive frenzy regarding the telling of stories means nothing in the present materialistic world. Talking in the context of capitalist ideologies, he feels that the alternative stories are no more than “mild diversion” that can make no substantial changes (2005). According to Lennard Davis, “Reading novels as a social behaviour prevents change,” rather than initiating it (1987: 17). This subjective and personal activity is more of a cathartic exercise and serves the purpose of the dominant
ideology by blurring "the distinction between reality and illusion" (3). Thus, the exercise of "writing the body" by these women seems to be limited by virtue of existing in a world where people have lost their sensitivity as a result of 'consuming' materialism. Sylvia Walby (2000) has a different objection to the rationale of telling stories. According to her in a globalized world, literature can hardly challenge the rigid patriarchal structures. She believes that scientific argument and data can be more effective to achieve feminist goals. Moreover, in the present world, where audio-visual media has saturated our lives in unprecedented ways, the claim for literature being revolutionary comes under suspicion. In addition to the fact that the consumption of literature is almost negligible in comparison to other representational or entertainment media, the case of Indian English women's fiction becomes interesting because of the medium of expression. Though writing in English gives opportunity to the writers to overcome the tag of being "regional writers" and unnecessary censorship, it also limits their readers to just the "elitist classes" (Roy 2008: 77). Such a readership, indeed, limits the transformative capacities of the practice under consideration.

However, this does not mean that literature or subversive literatures have no use. If there are limitations to the affective potential of literary works, fiction still remains the most popular and prominent of the genres, influencing other popular media like cinema, soap opera and theatre. Though fictions or stories are not the sole authority of dissemination of ideas in the social circles, these do have some weightage. If some critics have expressed their doubts about the usefulness of telling stories in the present world, not less is the number of those who still believe in its significance. Critics like Griselda Pollock (2003), Naomi Scheman
(1980) and Sylvia Blood (2005) have stressed the power of representation and narratives on the psyche of the people. Arundhati Roy (2008), Eve Ensler (1998), Helene Cixous (1997), Joanna Frye (1986), Judith Fetterley (1997), Ken Plummer (1995), Linda Singer (1993), Luce Irigaray (1997), Rita Felski (2000), and others have recurrently emphasized the impact of stories on cultural transformation. According to them, narratives not only ‘mirror’ but also shape the new direction of society. Whereas Walby thought that rational arguments alone could win feminist rights, Felski firmly feels that “telling stories” can be a “powerful mechanism for convincing others of the rightfulness of feminist claims” (2000: 227) because of its persuasive qualities. With their “revisionary power,” narratives can not only develop alternative means of perceiving the world but also the self (Belsey 1985: 51; Scheman 1980: 175). From a feminist perspective these can serve the purpose of both self-affirmation and self-fashioning for the writers as well as the reader (Juffer 2005: 78). Thus, at least for individuals at a personal level, the public discourse of women’s fiction can be both empowering and illuminating.

The two contradictory positions – that literature can change nothing and that it can be transformative – seem equally convincing with regard to the feminist agenda of securing the rights for women through telling stories and writing fiction. The literary endeavours of “writing the body” represent the same dilemma. These novels foregrounding the body are subversive because they propose an alternative female sexuality; but their power is restricted to a small group of readers.

Even if the power of narratives is granted, the novels foregrounding women’s body and sexuality remain politically confined because of the structures
of language and conventions of genre within which these work. Critics have pointed out that it is not only the society in which we live that is patriarchal; the language that we use is equally an accomplice to the dominant male ideology (Cixous 1997; Gallop 1980; Holland et al. 1997; Irigaray 1997; Spender 1990; Woolf 1999). Language plays a significant role in constructing and maintaining gendered inequality. Women's writing faces several constraints while employing 'man made language' to the services of self expression. It has been especially difficult to talk or write of the female body and sexuality from a subjective position, as it is the locus where the patriarchal foundation is laid. Patriarchal structures have always kept the female body and sexuality in the position of subservience and the Other. Hence, any effort to "write the body" is marked by the apprehension of being misappropriated and misunderstood. There are virtually no ready made words and phrases which give women a subjective position in the discourse of sexuality. The options available make her sound "childish, clinical or obscene" (Holland et al 1997: 24). Virginia Woolf called it the scarcity and inadequacy of "common sentences ready for her use" as a woman (Woolf 1999: 72). Somewhat similar have been the opinion of the French feminists like Cixous and Irigaray who proposed the evolution of *écriture feminine* i.e. feminine language based on the nature and experiences of female sexuality. According to them only a new feminine language can serve the purpose of changing the libidinal economy of the masculinist society. Mary Daly in *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) attempted to supersede the patriarchal constraints by inventing a "new feminist language," by coining wholly new terms, or giving new meaning to old ones. However, in practice, just like the use of 'standard language' these experiments have not been
of much help to women writers. There is hardly any tradition of “*écriture féminine*” in existence. The reasons are palpable. Language is “intersubjective,” and so are the discourses of sexuality that depend on language (Gallop 1980: 281). Individual whims and practices of women writers “writing the body” can hardly catch or retain the attention of readers.

The result of such lack of options for women writers has been precarious for them. Whether they use the masculinist words, phrases or expressions or appropriate them to suit their vision of an alternative sexuality, readers have frequently conflated both. Hence they (the readers) have either taken ‘uninvited’ pleasure in the texts or criticized the writer for being a party to the system that objectifies and commodifies the female body and sexuality. The association of the terms related to the female body and sexuality has been so close to the sexist ideology of the society that even the genuine efforts to tell the ‘other side of the story’ fail to envisage alternative ways of seeing and being.

Contemporary Indian English women writers trying to give voice to female sexual desires and pleasures have faced this dilemma regularly. The language of sexuality has both enabled and limited them. While stating female sexual desire in language is an act of empowerment, the same has been a source of anxiety as well. Namita Gokhale in one of her interviews said:

> For a woman writer, writing about sexuality is a way of reclaiming the territory of her body, laying claim to it, resisting the societal control that is exerted at every level. So it is a political act, and writing ‘normally’ and matter-of-factly about sexuality is a declaration of independence (2001).

However, in the same interview she also corroborates how her first novel *Paro* came under attack for the same reasons. Hence, whether women have chosen to
write it explicitly or decided to avoid overt references to women’s sexual experiences, they have invited unwarranted criticism — in the first case for catering to the demands of the market where sex sells (Sen 2000, 2007) and in the second, for not being authentic to the feminine concerns (Lal 1995). Thus, we have Githa Hariharan whose “cerebral erotica” seems to point to the ‘dangers’ of writing about the body overtly. Despite the fact that one of the central concerns of her novel The Thousand Faces of Night is female sexuality, she is reticent about the explicit description of sexual experiences. On the other hand, Shobha De has unabashedly used the masculinist language (even slang) of sexuality in her stories of sexually assertive female protagonists. However, the very fact that this language and expression coming from a woman writer and female characters have political implications as these challenge the ‘sexual permissibility’ of the social order, have often been discounted by the readers and the critics. Frequently De has been vehemently criticized for ‘selling sex.’ The proximity of her language and expressions with the ‘soft porn’ available in the market seems to be the most obvious reason for this response. Namita Gokhale has apparently moved away from the rawness of Paro to the more ‘mature writing’ like God, Graves and Grandmother, A Himalayan Love Story and Shakuntala, which though equally subversive in sexual politics, lack the Paro-like attempts at verbalizing sexual experiences. Arundhati Roy has taken liberty with the rules of language and grammar to give her own vision of the female body and sexuality, but either has been inaccessible to common readers or sometimes criticized for writing “obscene stuff” in beautiful language, and using sex as a means of marketability (Bhya Nair 2004; Roy 2008: 35). Anita Nair, neither impudent like De, nor experimental like Roy, has written about female corporal desires in an
aesthetically overt manner. Nonetheless, her works have also been questioned regarding the raison d'etre of using such language and theme and she has been ghettoed in the group of women who “write sex.” (Nair 2008: 141). Even if these writers have often received accolades for their daring challenge to the patriarchal sexual codes, they have also been severely criticised.

Thus, the task of raising the issues of body in language has been difficult for women. There is always a risk of ‘misreading’ when the female body and sexuality is written about in a language entrenched in sexism. The works of Gokhale and De attest to that. While Susan Rubin Suleiman observes that to overcome the difficulties of “writing the body” what is “needed is not merely an usurpation of old narratives and the old words by new speakers (however important these may be as first steps),” but also invention of “new structures, new words, a new syntax that will shake up and transform the old habit of thought and old ways of seeing” (1990: 123), the mixed reception that Roy’s and Nair’s fictions have received make this attempt doubtful.

Just as the use of the language of sexuality has been both productive and constraining for women writers, so has been their choice of the realistic genre of fiction. Most of the contemporary Indian English women novelists have selected the realistic mode. In fact, all the ten representative novels chosen for the present study belong to this category (though Shakuntala has certain elements of fantasy as well). This preference for realism has while made their sexual politics more viable and influential for the readers, the conventions of this genre have imposed certain restrictions on these writers. This, once again, highlights the contradictions involved in the trend of “writing the body” in Indian English women’s fiction.
Patriarchal societies have always propagated a dichotomy between autonomy and femininity, self dependence and sexual desires, so far as women are concerned. Sexuality as practiced in the male dominated order puts women in to the position of passive object and it is professed that only by rising above their erotic desires women can achieve independence (Lorde 2001). The contemporary fictions foregrounding women’s sexuality as discussed in the last chapter undercut such myths. These novels underline how sexual satisfaction is not necessarily contrary to female autonomy and, in fact, can be very much a part of women’s self-fashioning. Their sexual politics lies mainly in their realistic genre. Unlike the stories of utopian existence, these stories tell the tales of alternative existences in relation to the complexities of real lives. Resisting the norms of patriarchal society (though not in absolute terms) these underscore the possibilities of negotiations. Joanna Frye’s observation on the liberating nature of women’s novels fits well in this context:

Novels of female self assertion … do more than ‘represent’ the available possibilities in women’s lives. They do more, even, than create new ‘role models.’ They take an active role in the broader patterns of cultural change, first by enacting their own redefinition of personal attribution processes and then by giving substance to readers’ alternative interpretations of femaleness. As characters find themselves in new patterns of attribution beyond the stereotypes, they simultaneously help to create for readers the alternative memories and anticipations (1986: 199).

Nevertheless, despite their potential to shape new realities and inspire new ways of being, these texts remain bound in the conventions of the genre. When writers choose to write they are not free to exercise full freedom (Frye 1986; Kennard 1978; Machery 1978: 39-50). The conventions of the genre can be
transgressed, but only moderately. Hence, these constantly limit the choices and
strategies of the writers (Frye 1986): Moreover, the conventions of literary forms
are never “neutral, purely mimetic or purely aesthetic” (DuPlessis 1985: 2).
These reflect the norms of the society in which they exist. Thus, the selected
texts showing the desiring women’s transgression of the sexual norms of the
society though unconventional remain within purview of social ‘ethics.’ Whereas
these novels do project women who are desirous, their first alternative is always
within monogamous matrimonial bonds. It is because of the dissatisfaction within
the marital relationships that these women seek fulfillment outside the norms.
Accordingly, the codes of sexuality are transgressed, but always with a ‘moral
justification.’ This justification invariably comes attached to the emotional
deprivation. Most of the protagonists in these narratives are caught up in marriage
with men who can not understand their emotional needs. For instance, Devi’s
husband Mahesh continues to be a “stranger” for her (Hariharan 1992: 40), and
Ammu realizes that her means of escape was actually a “mistake” (Roy 2002:
38). Radha does not want to play “mistress” to her husband (Nair 2005: 53), and
Karuna feels that she and her husband inhabit two different worlds. For Maya,
caged in her husband’s house it is both emotional and physical denial. Aparna’s
husband was a hypocrite who always wanted things his way, and Reema and
Surekha’s partners are too indifferent to the “disappointments and longings” of
their wives (De 1995: 65). In the case of Shakuntala, the entry of another woman
in her husband’s life instigates her to severe her nuptials ties. Absence of
harmony and warmth in matrimonial relationship, thus, make them find solace in
extra-marital relations. Paro and Asha Rani break away from their ‘settled life’ as
it does not give them material success and emotional security simultaneously. For
Akhila, on the other hand, sexual transgression is not of matrimonial vows, but of the norms of respectability and age. However, the justification yet again comes from a background of deprivation in care and concern on the part of her family members who do not treat her “as a woman” (Nair 2001: 77). Thus, in these novels, the pleasures of the body always come subservient to emotional satisfaction. In fact, in most of the novels discussed, though the sanctity of loveless marriages comes under persistent attack, the fate of the protagonists is often projected as individual, and the implications are that the situations could have been different, had there been a better partner. The validity of marriage perse is not denied. Besides, heterosexuality still remains the norm. So women can assert their rights over body and desire sexual pleasures, but they can not do without men. Hence, a tricky balance has been maintained in terms of the transgression of socio-sexual norms. Subversions are very much there in these novels but open rebellion whose unequivocally radical messages might have provoked publishers and readers to keep their doors closed, has been certainly avoided.

Another significant paradox which marks these texts featuring sexually assertive women pertain to their ends. Narratives do not represent life in its chaotic form. Their endings give a final shape to the stories and are integral to the narrative strategy (Jain 1994). Conventionally, sexual transgression of women characters conclude in either their return to the system after a sense of guilt or failure, or their death. Sexual indiscretion of women has been given no other alternative in the traditional narratives of any patriarchal society. While the return of the transgressor celebrates the traditional social and family values and attests to the ‘maturity’ of the character, death is reserved for those defaulters who have
left no option of return (DuPlessis 1985: 2). It becomes the only “line of defense for the containment of female revolt, revulsion and risk” (DuPlessis 1985: 16). The contemporary Indian English women’s narratives have moved beyond such traditional endings. These texts show that their authors have chosen to depict alternative fates for their protagonists. Even as living in a ‘realistic’ world, sexual adventures never provide a permanent solution for their woes, these self-fashioning protagonists do not also return to the folds of traditional structures for the sake of ‘safety.’ Their decision to live life on their own terms marks a significant point of departure from their traditional counterparts. Accordingly, we see Devi, Radha, Karuna and Asha Rani growing as individuals and eventually taking life into their own hands. But, it is interesting to note that these women who go against the codes of conduct, have nothing substantial to fall back upon. The return of Devi, Karuna and Asha Rani to their parents leaves the issue of self-dependence, both economic and emotional, ambiguous. Interestingly, it was at the site of the family where they had first encountered the stifling of their desires for freedom. Though there is a sign that the equations between the daughters and parents have changed, uncertainty of future life persists. Asha Rani, for example, seems just as insensitive and controlling as her mother while planning the future of her estranged daughter, Karuna is too much in love with her independence to accept any marriage proposal, though the pressure her parents put on her to ‘get settled’ continues. Devi’s return to her mother remains ambiguous as the reader is left wondering how these two strong headed women are going to live with each other. Having no family to fall back upon, Radha’s source of support becomes her unborn child, again more or less a traditional trope. Then, there are protagonists like Ammu, Shakuntala and Paro who fail to
survive in the world in the absence of an "alternative community of support" and die (DuPlessis 1985: 16). However, their deaths can be read both as statement of their failure in the fight against the system, and their indomitable resistance. Equally interesting is the position of Maya, who after her failed attempt to break the shackles of matrimony becomes wise enough to laugh at the façade of ordered life, even if she can not give it up. The fate of Akhila and Rahel as to how they will cope with the future remains vague though the narrative does end on a positive note. Thus, despite the fact that contemporary novelists like Roy, Hariharan, Gokhale, Nair and De have done away with the conventions of traditional fictions, they have not envisaged an alternative life for their protagonist in either a non-normative sexual partnership or economic freedom (Sunder Rajan 2004). In most of the cases, narratives end with ambiguities. Ambiguity, in fact, has been a favorite device of these contemporary realistic novels depicting sexually transgressive women, where the writers neither punish their protagonists nor do they celebrate their contravention. Maintaining a fine balance they seem to have both participated in and stepped out of the dominant cultural discourse.

Thus, "writing the body" has been tricky for these women writers. When they write about the female body and sexuality in explicit language they are criticized for objectifying women, and when they do not, their allegiance to the woman's cause is questioned. If they show the transgressing protagonist dying, they are blamed for succumbing to the conventions of the genre and society; and for projecting self-sufficient autonomous characters they are called utopian. Uncertain endings are again critiqued for their lack of commitment. Despite all this, however, the fact remains that these women have subverted, if not
transformed, the rules of patriarchal society, at least, at one semiotic level, i.e. writing. Though the uncertain endings many times seriously limit the emancipatory power of disruption, and indicate self-regulation and control on the part of these authors, their effects on the receptive readers can not be overemphasized.

II

There is no innocence and there isn't any sense in which any of us is perfect or not invested in the system.... But from that un-pristine, is it better to say something or to say nothing? One is not powerful enough nor powerless enough not to be invested in the process.

- Roy 2008: 49

The system Roy is referring to here is basically the capitalist one which leaves no position of innocence. In simple words “capitalism” is “an economic system in which goods and services are produced primarily in order to be sold as commodities in a more or less competitive market” (Milner 1996: 64). In this system, production is organized and controlled by “an individual or collective capitalist, which advances the capital necessary for production, in the form of either machinery or of money, and whose activities are motivated in principle only by the pursuit of maximum possible profit” (Milner 1996: 64). Capitalism is the dominant form of economic organization in the world we live in and all the seemingly “non-economic” practices are also heavily determined by the forces of capital (Bourdieu 1997: 183). Literary activities are no exception (Adorno and Horkheimer 1996; Desai 2007; Gerrard 1989; Gokhale 2001; Joseph 2006; Joseph et al 2004; Kellner 1995; Milner 1996; Pollock 2003; Roy 2008; Signer 1993; Storey 1999; Wolff 1990). In the contemporary world along with other
cultural practices, literary creations have become “products” to be sold and consumed for “material or symbolic profit” (Bourdieu 1997: 183). With the gradual commercialization of the world, the publication industry has “taken the shape of a well run modernized profit making business” (Gerrard: 1989: 5) and writing is longer a solitary ‘artisan’ activity to be pursued in private with none or little financial investments and rewards. Now writing is a full time occupation, a profession, a means of earning livelihood in the ‘literary industry.’ Anita Desai has called it a shift from “Cave” to “Bazaar” for the writer (2007: 6). Whereas earlier writers were destined to lead secluded lives, now they have become the part of a glamourous and highly profitable business of publishing. Advances and royalties, agents and contracts, launches and awards are parts of this commercialized business. While such an institutionalization of writing has made the lives of writers easy, freeing them of financial worries, this transformation has come with it is own pitfalls. The earlier freedom of the writer has been subsumed by the demands of the market and marketing agencies. As writing is a highly time consuming and “unproductive” activity, at least in the short term, the producers of literature living in a capitalist world need constant funding from some agency (Milner 1996: 104). Market publishing houses and agencies are providing this much needed support in various forms, in lieu of which they demand the supply of ‘saleable items.’ Not only this, it is these agencies which decide the fate of a writer, as more and more, it is the ‘publicity’ and ‘awards’ which decide the ‘success’ of a work of literature and not its intrinsic quality. Hence, the writers and the publishing houses are in a close relationship today as never before.
This tie up between the writers and capitalist agencies is pertinent. If the economic ideology of the present society is capitalist, the social one is patriarchal; and both go hand in hand to maximize their ‘profits.’ In such a situation women, specially those intending to undercut the ‘dominant’ through their writings are left with limited options. The forces of patriarchy and capitalism controlling the mechanism of production of literary writings can not, but influence the shape and strategies of women’s writings.

Whereas the financial aspect has been determining in the cultural practices, critics have pointed out how the “excesses” have also been in practice (Singer 1993). There has been a constant urge to avoid economic reductionism that leaves no space for creativity or uniqueness or a position of resistance (Fiske 1987; Kellner 1995; Pollock 2003: 27; Storey 1999). As John Storey has observed that the capitalist structures determine the shape of the product, the individuality of the producer also matters. Thus, there is a dialectical, even if uneven, relationship between individual agency producing the artifact and economic structures that facilitate the production (Storey 1999: 151). Besides, at times, when the cultural and the economic forces are not in harmony with each other (which is quite often the case, culture being essentially heterogeneous), we witness “an intense struggle between races, classes, gender and social groups” in cultural products (Kellner 1995: 10). In addition, the power of capital is frequently undermined by an uninvited and different decoding exercised on the part of the reader or consumer. The audiences or the consumers are, of course, not “cultural dupes,” who mindlessly consume the ideology of the dominant class (Fiske 1987; Kellner 1995; Storey 1999); they frequently adopt resisting positions. Hence, there is always a possibility of discord between the power of
culture industries and the power of their influence (Storey 1999: 153). These are some of the fissures where despite the inevitable pressure of patriarchal capitalist ideology, some possibilities of disruption rest for women writers. As the discussion in the above section has attested contemporary Indian English women writers despite their location within the patriarchal capitalist economy have managed to create space for their individual positions.

Another important aspect of capitalism that is of special relevance in the present study of women’s fiction that challenges the *patriarchal libidinal economy* by foregrounding the validity of female sexual desires and satisfaction, is that “the capitalist drive to produce profit” many times leads capitalists to promote dissent (Storey 1999: 153). Thus, despite the fact that capitalism has patriarchal roots, it has provided women opportunities to articulate and participate in its processes. Today with more women writing than ever before, more voices of dissent are heard of in the market in comparison to the past. This market is huge and influential, and as critics have pointed out, there are dangers of appropriation and domestication of feminist issues and concerns in women’s writings by market forces. Rachel Bowlby’s opinion that “Domestication harmonizes, calming down the possible disjunctions between the positions, theoretical and social, of the writer and his interrogator over the smoothing influence of shared bagels and cream cheese” (1998: 786), seems applicable in the case of most of the ‘rich, successful and famous’ women writers of our times. According to one of the most radical as well as successful writers of our times, Arundhati Roy, commercial success meant “both a release and a burden” for her; simultaneously curtailing the space of the writer and making space for her in the big world (Roy 200: 235). Namita Gokhale feels that the capitalist culture
encourages only “formulaic writing by women” which rather than promoting a genuine betterment of women’s lives just “increases commodification and exoticisation of women’s issues for a tailored market” (Gokhale 2001: 41). Ammu Joseph et al. have a similar take on the influence of the capitalistic market on women’s writings. Whereas in the beginning, the small but committed publishing houses and feminist presses provided women an opportunity to express their points of view in an uncompromising way and allowed space for articulation (despite limited funds and small readership), the entry of big players seems to have ruined that critical edge (Joseph et al 2004). Their pertinent observations on the commercialization of the publishing industry and its influence on women’s writings deserve to be noted:

Perhaps the biggest hurdle that women writers face is the market, a hydra-headed monster. After little magazines and alternative publishing houses- many run by women- began to publish women’s writing, it was clear that there was a distinct market for it. Mainstream publishing houses moved in quickly to occupy this space and consolidate the market, gradually destroying the small journals and publishing houses who found it hard to compete with their financial and marketing muscles. Once small and radical houses are wiped out market censorship begins to rear its head. The very difference that made women’s writings attractive is no longer acceptable; rather by trivializing and vulgarizing the difference the mainstream ‘expands’ its markets, and writers are then compelled to write to suit market needs. Subject matter, form, language, length are all laid down as conditions of the ‘market.’ Gradually, literature that sensationalizes women’s issues begins to replace the writing that earlier attempted to explore and lay bare the patriarchal structures within which women’s lives are lived; while issues that women struggled to legitimize and bring within the parameters of the literary- rape, sexuality, housework and reproductive labour — are subject to market control. Consequently the very social change that
women writers intended to usher in is defeated by the material that is the creation of market forcers. Notes of revolt turn into melodies of harmony, and along with the literature she produces the writer also becomes commodified (2004: 38-39).

Publishers, specially the multinational ones favour a certain kind of writing that is ‘market friendly’ and the writers are expected to produce accordingly. “Determined by the political economy of the time, the market pushes women’s writings towards sensationalism on the one hand, or forces women to write in a traditional conservative mould on the other. There is little space left for those who question tradition and convention” (Joseph et al. 2004: 40). Many other critics have also expressed their anxiety regarding any engagement with the mainstream. According to Nicci Gerrard, for women writers, entering into the mainstream means “a host of opposing interpretations: selling, or selling out; gaining access, or losing substance; making more money, or taking more risk; becoming art of the larger world, or relinquishing the female world” (1989:2). But she is not too pessimistic either. According to her, if commercialization of the literary world has limited the scope of experimentation for writers, it is because of the same commercialization that our literary world is not longer a “desert” and more than anybody else women have benefited from it (3). It is certainly true that for women writers to get published is not too difficult in recent times.

And if the woman is writing on the ‘sensitive’ issues like body and sexuality it becomes even easier. Just as in other cultural practices of contemporary India, in the publishing industry also, sex related issues are not taboos. In contrast, it seems to be on the hot list of most of the major publishers
of our times. It is evident from the fact that the selected text chosen for the study, have all been published by some of the biggest publishing houses for fictions in India like Penguin, Rupa and Picador. Namita Gokhale’s *Paro* written in 1984 was a bit too early for its time because of its frankness in terms of its language and the theme of sexuality and had to find its first publisher in Chatto and Windus. Since 1991 (the year of ‘liberalization’ as well), it became a part of the Indian market with Rupa and Co. taking over the task of publishing it. And in the twenty first century as there is a renewed interest in this predecessor of Shobha De fictions, Penguin has become the ‘authoritative’ publisher of the book. Since the 1990s Penguin India has become the biggest publisher of Indian English women’s fictions in India, be it more conservative ones or radical like the ones chosen ones for this study. Arundhati Roy chose IndiaInk first for her novel in India. Penguin took over soon. The reasons for such an abiding interest in these novels foregrounding female sexuality are obvious — it is on the agenda not only because it is an important issue of life but mainly because it sells (Lewallen 1992: 266). In fact, the proliferation of the trend of representation of sexually assertive female protagonists taking bold steps and using audacious language to assert their rights over their bodies and pleasures of sex can be easily associated as much with the commercialization of market as to the feminist awareness. While feminist ideology might have provided the theoretical foundation for the writers, material facilitation is unquestionably coming from the capitalist market. The combination of these two opposing forces has benefited both the parties, the writer and the publisher equally, but for the feminist concern success has come at a cost. One can not deny the significance of being able to raise the issue of the woman’s rights to her body even if in a somewhat ‘non traditional’ manner, and

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getting published and marketed by a major publisher is a big achievement for both the women writers as well as for the women’s movement. It is because of this wide circulation of such images across media and disciplines that now it is normal and acceptable for women to be sexually active and desiring. But the other aspect of this phenomenon are equally important. It is the same system that renders the more radical ideas “unthinkable,” and the so called “interventions” into the dominant can be of modest nature only (Fenton 2001; Pollock 2003: 27).

As the discussion in the earlier section of this chapter has made clear, these texts despite their seditious nature are hardly radical. According to Susan Rubin Suleiman both modern patriarchy and capitalism have “a ways of assimilating any number of potentially subversive gestures into the mainstream, where whatever subversive energy they may have possessed becomes neutralized” (1990: 123). Hence many a times, “the interest in women’s sexual pleasure” in contemporary women’s novels “functions” not as a radical critique of a society that has no place for women’s desire, but as a confirmation of women’s position as “personal, ahistorical, sexual and non-political” (Cowie et al 1999: 164). Blunted of critical edge these narratives look more in the line of compliance than resistance. In addition to the patriarchal conventions of language and genre that limit women’s attempts to “write the body,” some of the processes through which further taming is exercised at the level of reception in patriarchal capitalist society are “appropriation, misreading and essentialism” (Wolff 1990: 7).

Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale, Anita Nair, Githa Hariharan and Shobha De have faced such assimilation, domestication and rejection time and again on different platforms. Roy’s work, for example, has been misread and her treatment of Ammu’ life has been called “flawed politics” with a traditional ending (Ahmad
2006). On the other hand, the media seems to have deliberately hyped the issue of
the ‘rationality’ of the last few pages of the novel that describe the sexual
encounter between Ammu and Velutha. Moreover, the charges of obscenity that
were levied against Roy, for showing a Syrian Christian falling in love with a
lower caste paravan, by a small group of people also got gratuitous coverage.
The sexual politics of the work got commercialized for no reason and if the novel
got nothing else out of it, it surely got many more buyers. The Booker and the
enormous amount Roy got as advance were, of course, ‘additional’ charms. In
contrast, in Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night the “politics of body” has
hardly been noticed by the media. The fact that in this powerful work almost all
the female characters are either revolting or submitting through their body and
sexuality, remained unnoticed in the little space media and the literary critical
world gave it. It seems because the novel had few sensational elements and issues
to be of interest to voyeuristic or ‘women oriented’ readers, media did not find it
worthy of much consideration. Though it did get its due in the award of the
‘Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best First Book,’ the novel didn’t get much
critical attention. Anita Nair’s works have got publicity of a different type and
because of their themes she has been put into the “coterie” of writers who “write
sex” (Nair 2008: 138). To Nair’s frustration, undue attention is paid to the “sex
part” of her works, which come to her naturally in the process of story telling,
and all her other “subversions” are reduced to just this aspect (Nair 2008: 141).
Namita Gokhale and Shobha De have been widely projected and marketed as
women oriented “soft porn” writers, as it suits their publishers and their
phenomenal market.\textsuperscript{vi} As a result of this, the critical sexual politics of their
writing has been mostly sidelined.
Keeping in mind all these complexities, it is possible to speculate that the patriarchal capitalist market is now ready to accept ‘sex talk’ from women as it has both male and female consumers (both though consume it for different reasons). It is the ‘sexual politics’ that is persistently blunted through the conscious or unconscious practices of the consumerist society where the female body is still a sex object, frequently used to market commodities. In fact, along with most of the commodities of the capitalist market where female sexuality is used to sell the products, the novels by women that foreground female sexual desires are packaged in a way as to invite conventional reading. In the case of specially the popular fictions, the cover page invariably has a ‘beautiful’ woman in a seductive pose and the blurb on the backcover frequently highlight the sex element in the novel in ‘steamy’ language. Both obviously ‘encourage’ sexist evaluation of the novels.

While Cixous had said that feminine texts cannot, but be subversive, these texts “writing the body” marketed in the dominant ideology get somewhat diverted of their politics. As for any writer and writing to be effective and influential it must reach the reader, there is no way of overcoming capitalist structures completely. One of the major difficulties for contemporary women writers in the capitalist world, hence, has been to produce “a politics, while and through, producing marketable writing” (Eagleton 1999: 70, emphasis added). But even under such pressures, one can not also deny the individuality of the writer who can easily use subtle methods of undercutting the ideologies of the dominant and the decoding power of the reader who can pick even the issues glossed over. The writers selected for the present study are those who have been able to negotiate the limitations posed by the pressures of the market, even if
subtly. They have shown through their writing that women can also have sexual desires and attempts to fulfill these do not necessarily have to be punished. Though the fear of saturation cannot be denied, the fact that these novels are popular is enough proof of the changing attitude of society to what women can desire and write.

Accordingly, it is clear that the various structures in which writing is produced like the language, the genre and the market have been both liberating and restraining for contemporary women writers “writing the body.” As these writers and their writings are products of the society, their resistance is of a limited nature, and not what Cixous and Irigaray expected it to be. Despite all the limitations and anxieties of appropriation and domestication, it seems reasonable to acknowledge the significance of these new forms of cultural expressions, which by virtue of their existence have challenged and dislocated the dominant patriarchal narratives and discourses of passive female sexuality, and provided space for different voices to be heard and for hitherto silenced subjects to articulate their experiences. While for women to be able to write, in itself, means overcoming a complex combination of material and ideological restrictions, these women “writing the body” despite the several limitations imposed by “the angel in the house,” “the watching mother,” and “the monster of public reception,” have surely broadened the area of ‘permissible’ subject matters for women writers. Unlike their predecessors who represented their protagonists mostly as sexual victims, or punished transgressors, these writers have projected a different and better destiny for their protagonists. These novels are not the tales of women’s sufferings and oppression only, but also of their desires and pleasures. Rather than being just a passive victim of the social norms here we
have women exercising agency and trying to control their density through the assertion of the body. In their depiction of such characters these texts are marked both by the structures of the market and individual agency of the author, resistance and submission to the cultural and material forces of the society. The transformative effect of these novels can be measured from the fact that these narratives are no longer banned by the state authorities. In the changing cultural scenario when women “writing the body” are no longer anomalies, their exact role in social transformation would remain an ambiguous phenomenon, as these are intangible spaces to work upon. Still, as it has been said, at least for women writers and readers “the very fact that sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three lettered word in India, is enough cause to celebrate” (Singh and De 1993: xxii).

Notes:

i. Bishakha De Sarkar and Dola Mitra, “Fair sex,” The Telegraph Sunday (December 17, 2006). In this article the writers have given interesting details of some of the lesser known Indian English writers who are writing about the female body and sexuality in a daring manner. 17th July 2008 <http://www.telegraphindia.com/1061217/asp/look/story_7139046.asp>.

ii. Writing in English gives writers a lot of freedom to explore the tabooed areas of life, specially sex-related issues in India. We have a tradition of thinking according to which the English reading public is thought to be more liberal and progressive and less susceptible to ‘corruption’ than the ‘masses.’ This is the reason that many times the English version of films get passed uncensored, but the regional ones have to through several cuts and changes. Films like Fire and Bandit Queen attest to it. Feminist critics have called it the freedom of “father/
other tongue." For a woman writer writing in her mother tongue, there is always a psychological binding to the 'phantom mother' looking over what she is writing. English frees them of such guilt and self-censorship. Ammu Joseph et al. (2004) and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2000, 2007) have elaborated upon this idea.


v. My personal experiences attest to the fact. Even readers in the habit of in reading fictions expressed discomfort with the "complicated" narrative style and structure of the novel. Similar are the opinions of some of the readers who have participated in the blog <http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/9777.The_God_of_SmalT_Things>.

vi. Though in *Paro* there is reference to masturbation and in *Starry Nights* and *Snapshots* Shobha De has included episodes of lesbian relationships, these have not been given much space within the narratives. Rather than providing substantial sexual alternatives to the characters, these look more like adding to the variety of sex depicted in the novels (though that also can be seen as a political position).

vii. Shobha De for example is one of India's top best-selling authors. All her 17 books have topped the charts and created records. Her books are best-sellers in several regional and foreign languages as well. Some of the details of her market success are recorded in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shobhaa_Dee>. Namita Gokhale's limited success in terms of market may be attributed to her shift from the rawness of *Paro* to serious writings like *Shakuntala*.

viii. Interestingly in many prints of the Shobha De novels, her own glamorous photographs have been used at the back cover to market the product. The photographs are generally accompanied by a small note on De's career as model
and her status as “the porn queen of India” or “Jackie Collins of India.” Such briefs and comparisons limit the horizon of expectations of the readers substantially. Sen (2000) has blamed De for becoming “an accomplice to the male book seller by catering to the readers of soft porn and by willingly allowing her femininity form a part of the (extra-literary) erotic appeal of the text” (302).

ix. Virginia Woolf (1999), Mary Eagleton (1999: 66-72) and Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2000) have referred to many such constraints like lack of privacy, shortage of time, restrictions on movements, burden of social expectation, unsaid family censor and absence of a literary tradition to fall back upon which censor women as writers.

x. Feminist critics have pointed out some of the areas which have been denied to women writers traditionally. According to Ammu Joseph et al. (2004) “sex, religion and politics” are three such areas. According to Kamala Das (2006), a woman can easily write about either domestic bliss or their love for god. But how she desires and would like to love a man of flesh and blood is not permissible to her. Defying such prohibitions, contemporary Indian English women writers have expressed their freedom.
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