Reading Women’s ‘Writing the Body’: Contradictions in Reception and Interpretation

To tell a story is to exercise power... But authority is not absolute, something inherent in a specific individual or in that individual’s discourse; it is relational, the resultant of an act of authorization on the part of those subject to the power.

-Chambers 1984: 50

Narrative acquires its feminist specificity not from the person who tells it, the ‘other person’ who indeed both lived and narrates it, but from its intended audiences, from its addressee.

-Rooney 1996: 2

Participating in a dominant cultural practice, one where a prime site of women’s oppression — her body — is the focus of activity may be viewed as consent and even collaboration.

-Gotfrit 1991: 191

Women “writing the body” represent the female body and sexuality from a subject position. In opposition to the patriarchal sexual norms and narratives, where women have been negated their bodies and sexuality through material and ideological constraints, contemporary Indian English women’s fiction projects protagonists audaciously asserting their rights over their bodies, accepting their sexual desires and acting accordingly, even if at times it means inviting criticism and punishment. This deliberate foregrounding of the hitherto silenced experiences of women aims at startling the readers and initiating new ways of perception of the self and the others. In fact, the success of any radical or ‘different’ discourse depends as much on the writer as on the reader. It is the
reader who makes the text come alive through her reading and interpretation. Reader response critics and reception theorists have emphasized the role of the reader in concretizing a text (Fish 1980; Gadamer 1989; Iser 1978; Jauss 1982). In their opinion, meaning is neither intrinsic to the text, nor can it be pinpointed to the author’s intentions. Rather, it depends, if not solely, at least to some extent on the readers. According to culture theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, a word is a “bridge” thrown between the speaker and the listener; it’s “a territory shared by both addresser and addressee” (Bakhtin/Voloshinov 1986: 85-86). Though “feminism has mainly indulged or focused on feminine voices, or telling women’s stories – on production, speaking, writing or telling,” (Rooney 1996: 2), several feminist literary critics have acknowledged the role of the reader or perceiver in the realization of feminist politics and discourse (Barrett 1985; Boyce Davies 1996; Cranny-Francis 2003; Dralus and Shelton 1995; Felski 1989; Kolodny 1997; Pearce 1997; Plummer 1995; Rooney 1996; Wolff 1990). They all recognize that even if a particular text has feminist potential, it needs to be read through feminist lenses for its implications to become palpable. This fact gives a lot of power in the hands of the readers. This chapter deals with the contradictions impinging on the practice of “writing the body” at the level of interpretation and reception. While it is true that a text does not exist on its own and needs to be read, equally true is the fact that it does not make itself available to each reader in the same way. A reader’s intentions, perceptions and her cultural affiliations play a significant role in bringing the text to life. This chapter underlines the fact that just as transgressive characters and subversive writers of the novels foreground female sexual desires live in a patriarchal capitalist world that limits their ‘sexual politics’ substantially, so do their readers.
The location of the readers within the system shapes and determines the interpretation and reception of texts to a great extent. The same texts, characters and events may be read in different and even contradictory ways by different readers. Whereas conflicting readings are possible with all kinds of texts, narratives dealing with the female body and sexuality are more prone to such contradictions. In every culture, the meanings of expressions and images are heavily determined by the force of reiteration in the dominant ideology; hence, commanding different meaning from the same material is a difficult task (Wolff 1990: 120-141). Patriarchal cultures have persistently depicted the female body as either an object of desire or an apparatus of reproduction. Sexuality and its experiences are rarely autonomous phenomena for women. There have been few other ways of looking at these two aspects of women’s existence. Hence, the texts that tell a different story of women’s sexual desires and pleasures from a feminine subject position are seriously prone to misappropriations. While for some readers it may be an exercise in revelation, the nuances and subtle subversions may be missed by others habituated to look at images in a particular mode. The reception of contemporary Indian English women’s fiction foregrounding female sexual pleasures and desires attests to this fact. These texts have been celebrated by some readers and critics for suggesting new ways of looking at the female body and women’s sexual experiences, and criticized by others for being complicit in the masculinist capitalist system and commodifying women’s body and sexuality. Giving instances from the limited material available on the reception and interpretation of the texts selected for the study, this chapter focuses on the uncertain and paradoxical repercussions of the practice of “writing the body” in terms of the feminist goal of evoking new ways of perception.
Before proceeding to this issue the chapter also briefly looks at the general bias of the literary critical world against women's writings which, in any case, diminishes the significance of 'the other side of the story' using various strategies of appropriation, and consequently limiting the "horizon of expectations" of the readers (Jauss 1982: 23).

I

She didn't write it. She wrote it but she shouldn't have. She wrote it, but look what she wrote about. She wrote it, but she only wrote one of it. She wrote it, but she isn't really an artist and it isn't really art. She wrote it, but she had help. She wrote it, but she's an anomaly. She wrote it BUT...

Joanna Russ 1997: cover page

These hard hitting lines on the cover page of the Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* indicate the general approach of the male dominated literary critical world towards women writers and their writings. Women's writing has traditionally not had the reception that writing by men has received. Whereas 'men's writing' is taken as 'writing,' 'women's writing' is always 'women's writing.' Jane Gallop has called this the irony of "female public discourse" which is hardly public and remains mainly a woman to woman communication (1980: 275). Feminist literary critics have often pointed out the prejudiced reception of women's writings in literary circles (Eagleton 1999; Joseph et al. 2004; Nair 2008; Roy 2008; Russ 1997; Sen 2000, 2004, 2006; Shiach 1991; Wolff 1990). According to them, women writers not only face a complex web of material and ideological difficulties at the level of production, the reception of their writing poses an equally tough challenge (Eagleton 1999: 223).
There are some stereotypical ways in which women’s writing is categorized and treated which not only affect their circularity, but also limit their connotative potential. According to Mary Eagleton “phallic criticism” has conventionally taken three classical responses to women’s writing: “it belittles women writers, dismissing them as unfeminine and presumptuous;” it “ignores or marginalizes women’s production;” and it “confines women authors within the bounds of rigid sex stereotypes” (1999: 67). Joanna Russ corroborates following methods through which women’s writing is disparaged:

Informal prohibitions (including discouragement and the inaccessibility of materials and training), denying the authorship of the work in question (this ploy ranges from simple misattribution to psychological subtleties that make the head spin), belittlement of the work itself in various ways, isolation of the work from the tradition to which it belongs and its consequent presentation as anomalous, assertions that the work indicates the author’s bad character and hence is of primarily scandalous interest or ought not to have been done at all (this did not end with the nineteenth century), and simply ignoring the works, the workers, and the whole tradition, [are] the most commonly employed technique and the hardest to combat (1997: 5).

Similar views are expressed by Nabaneeta Dev Sen and Ammu Joseph et al. who have pointed out that either women writers are not reviewed seriously in the critical world or if they are at all and praised, they are praised for “writing like a man” (Joseph et al. 2004; Sen 2004: 86). The woman who writes like a woman is invariably “dismissed” as “inconsequential” (Nair 2008: 128). This prejudice takes a serious turn if the woman writer is writing about issues that are “not in accord with the dominant ideology” (Joseph et al 2004: 7). To prevent such works from reaching their ‘intended’ readers in an ‘intended’ form, such
works are defamed or even purposely misinterpreted. Arundhati Roy's experiences in this context are quite telling. In one of her interviews she spoke about how during the BJP regime she was convicted of contempt of court and sent to jail, and in the congress regime, she was given an award. According to her, “Though these seem different ways of dealing with the writer, to my mind they are both ways to neutralize a troublesome writer” (2008: 201, emphasis added). Censorship and domestication have, thus, been two effective ways of managing dissonance from women writers.

In the patriarchal critical tradition the most dismissive responses are reserved for those women writers who deal with the issues of the body and sexuality, specially, “sexual politics” and erotica (Joseph et al 2004: 20, Sen 2006). The reason is obvious. Body and sexuality are not just the spaces where control over women is exercised in the most effective way, but also the ones upon which the social orders of caste, religion or even class depend. Any disruption or challenge to these structures can not be accepted. And if it comes from a woman it becomes graver. Till recently any woman writer who tried to raise the issues of body and sexuality was often accused of writing pornography or obscene material, and her literary credentials were tarnished for ever (Joseph et al. 2004; Nair 2008: 132-43; Sen 2000). Mridula Garg in 1979 was charged under the Indian Penal Code with writing “pornographic literature.” In her novel Chitta Cobra she had depicted a woman developing an adulterous relationship without guilt. For doing so the literary critical world branded her as a writer who writes “shock value fiction” and her subsequent books were “denied their due literary merit” (Nair 2008: 137). Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2000) refers to a similar incident of literary ostracism of Debarati Mitra because she wrote on the pleasure of erotica
in her poems. The more common response of our times is to ‘objectify’ the writer along with the ‘erotic’ text (Joseph et al 2004: 14; Nair 2008; Roy 2008; Sen 2006: 13-14). Sen pertinently points out that in present times it has become possible for women writers “to give frank expression to female sexuality” and “celebrate women’s sexual desires” (2006: 13). The reaction of the readers has changed substantially. But this acceptance and popularity has barely made the situation better for most of the women “writing the body.” As it happened with Mandakranta Sen, a poet, women writers often become an extension of their “erotic” writings (2006: 13). Anita Nair had a similar experience when she started receiving pornographic material in the post from a reader just because she wrote about sex in her novels (Nair 2008: 132). According to Nair, whatever may be the era, it is not considered “appropriate” for a woman to “write about sex” (2008: 141). For a woman to do so is to invite unnecessary troubles (Nair 2008: 141). Whereas earlier references to sex and bodily issues were criticized for being cheap, immoral and sensational, now there is a tendency in the literary-critical world to conflate “everything related with sexuality, pleasure, bodily desires” with “subversion” and ghettoise every woman who writes about sex into one group (Nair 2008: 141-43). These practices of assimilation and homogenization practically rob women writers of their individuality and the creative works of their “sexual/textual politics.” The response of the common reader towards women who raise the issues of body are almost equally reductive. Nair’s observation in this context is quite interesting and seems representative. She writes:

In my ten-year career as a writer, and a writer of ‘sex part’, I have discovered that writing about sex elicits certain definite responses. First
there is the flushing reader who mumbles an ‘Ahmmm ... do you write the you know ... the sex ... you know ... for effect or do you think it’s necessary for the story? .... Then there are the rather censorious types who toss me the ‘what does your mother think about you writing about sex?’ .... I now do run into an occasional curious and priapic being who comes on strong with a ‘So have you experienced all that you write about? The sex, you know...’ (Nair 2008: 142).

Despite all this, with the sensitization that has resulted from the dissemination of feminist ideas and philosophy and the increasing comfort level with the body and sexuality in the present, women’s “writing the body” has begun to receive positive responses as well from some quarters. Though the power of patriarchy strengthened with capitalist muscle is all set to curb the revolutionary edge of women’s voices, ours is also an era when politically oriented theories have made tools of critical analyses sharper than ever. Especially in academic circles, as feminist theory and criticism have become integral to the curriculum, increasing numbers of scholars and critics have responded openly to these issues in women’s writing. Now there is a sanctioned space in the literary critical world to discuss and debate ‘sexual politics’ in women’s writing seriously, as never before. While the ‘dominant’ prejudices have not disappeared substantially, new ways of reading are certainly ‘emergent.’ The following section of the chapter deals with the paradoxical responses of the readers and critics to some of the selected texts for this study. The endeavor is to underline the complexities that impinge on the ‘feminist’ accomplishment of contemporary Indian English women’s novels that foreground women’s body and sexuality.
I have the power? I define? And I control? But it takes two live bodies, one writing and one reading, to generate a sky, A habitable planet and a working sun. The colour of my sun happens to be yellow. Yours too, you say? I feel so pleased. Our task is made easier. We are not fighters, but fellow-travellers?—would you say?—enabled to bask in our mutual glow. But it's there you baulk. What would have happened, you wish to know, if your sun had been the colour of milky chalk or had presented a more muted show? What can I say? Perhaps I'd have shouted, 'Yellow! Bright yellow!' and you'd have refused to say it was so.

(Suniti Namjoshi, qtd. in Chatterjee 2004: 138)

It is a widely acknowledged fact that a voice without listeners is silence, and without the reader, there is no text. The reader exercises her power of interpretation and the text, then, becomes alive. The meanings of stories emerge out of the interaction between the text and the readers. Though the texts have an intended reader's position, the actual reader may or may not comply with that position. Reading, even though personal, is a highly socialized activity. Hence, the receptive or resistant reading positions of the reader with regard to a text generally depend on her affiliating interpretive community. Equally important is the role of mediating agencies like critics and reviewers in shaping the meanings of texts. Therefore, despite the fact that a text has endless possibilities of interpretations, it is generally read in certain dominant modes. These modes of reading are heavily influenced by the current ideologies of the time, and may enable or limit the potential of the text in drastic ways. This is why it has been
often emphasized that feminist aesthetics or cultural politics can not be defined in abstract textual terms. According to Rita Felski "the political value of literary texts from the standpoint of feminism can be determined only by an investigation of their social functions and effects in relation to the interests of women in a particular historical context" (1989: 2). Though it is very difficult to assess the impact of a literary work on 'real life relations' as such, its reception and circulating interpretations do provide provisional ways to measure its effects. Contemporary Indian English women's novels that feature female protagonists asserting rights over bodies are texts with feminist potential. Undercutting patriarchal sexual codes of modesty and repression, these narratives envision alternative ways of being for women. Even if these do not 'celebrate' women's sexual desires as panacea, these do accept its validity. The frank language and expressions relating to issues of sexuality coming from a woman writer and from women characters further the subversive features of these novels. Besides, the narrative tone and point of focalization that invite the readers to see the narrative world and events from the perspective of these sexual transgressors add to the 'political value' of the text.

However, all these 'politically correct features' of these narratives have not guaranteed their consistent effectivity. A look at the reception of these texts shows that these have been read in contradictory ways by different readers and critics. Not only critics trained in patriarchal modes of literary criticism, ironically even feminist critics have responded to these texts in unexpected ways. Whereas these works have been sometimes celebrated for bringing hitherto silenced issues to the fore, at other times their 'body politics' has been reduced to 'commodification' of the female body. While at times the subversive 'nuances'
of some of the texts have been simply overlooked, the audacious stance of others has been criticized as sensationalism. Such has been the paradox of women’s "writing the body” in the hands of readers.

Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, for example, has been read as both legitimization of ‘female sexual desires’ and as encouraging ‘sexual immorality.' Ranjana Harish (1999), for instance, has praised Roy for portraying Ammu asserting her body as “her estate” (49) and foregrounding the “rejection of male authority of the female body” in a powerful manner (47). For Mini Chandy (1999), the novel is “an eye opener” (91) and in her view, “Roy’s key strength lies in her bold depiction of the issues that are yet considered taboo such as ‘caste’ and ‘sexuality,’ specially ‘female sexuality’” (86). In the words of Meeta Chatterjee “over stepping the boundaries of what is acceptable,” in the novel we have a “celebration of the body” (2004: 134). For S. P. Swain, Roy’s depiction of sex ceases to be a private affair. He writes:

Arundhati Roy’s description of the sexual act may seem to some as vulgar and objectionable writing but is not so since for her the act of sex is ‘not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp but a great surface network in which the simulation of bodies’ and the intensification of pleasures is a means of self-exploration and self-actualization (1999: 145).

According to Brinda Bose, the novel delineates “a politics of desire” where eroticism takes the form of “politics” (2006: 95). However, on the other hand, readers like EMS Namboodiripad have interpreted the novel as “scoured with sexual anarchy” (“Roy Scoured with Sexual Anarchy” 1997). Arundhati Roy also refers to some such readers who found the novel “offensively immoral
and obscene” (Roy 2008: 35). According to Rukmini Bhaya Nair, even though the novel has “desire as its subject” (2004: 198), it is “emotionally frangible” and “lacks the intellectual robustness of a political novel” (187). In Aijaz Ahmad’s point of view, the novel is flawed in its “politics” and in “the way it depicts and resolves the issues of ... sexuality, specially female sexuality” is “thoroughly conventional” (2006: 35).

Such contradictory responses to the novel underlines the volatile nature of the text. According to Shohini Ghosh, such responses to a discourse concerned with female sexuality are common, since in India we have a general tendency to see sex in itself, as ‘bad’ and condemn any discourse concerning women’s sexuality and body as ‘degrading’ (as it leads to objectification and commodification) and threatening. Not only readers in general, but even some feminists are unable to comprehend the subtle difference between sexism and sexual explicitness. She pertinently writes on the opposing responses to the work:

Representation is a complicated exercise with no easy answers. One person’s erotica could well be another’s porn. In 1997 Arundhati Roy’s Booker prize-winning novel was charged with obscenity for showing a Syrian Christian woman making love to a lower caste man. The petitioner claims that the said scene is obscene and glorifies sexual anarchy.... Not all of us agree. In fact, the representation of a woman as an active and willing sexual agent is the kind of ‘counter speech’ with which contentious representations ought to be fought. Yet, this very incident exemplifies the dangers of collapsing categories of consensual and coercive sex (2006: 269).

In addition to the overall opinion on the work, critics have differed on their interpretations of narrative incidents as well. For example, Ahmad finds it “pitiable” that the novel depicts erotica “as that private transgression through
which one transcends the public injury” and not something more radical (2006: 38). In his opinion, Ammu’s death is “unnecessary,” and is just a political “flaw” of the novelist. Further, for him the liaison between Ammu and Velutha, as depicted in the novel looks more like “fatal attraction” than a complex and conscious choice:

What is most striking about that final, phallic encounter between Ammu and Velutha is how little it has to do with decision and how much it takes the shape of what the title of a recent movie calls fatal attraction. Now, the difference between decision and fatal attraction is that whereas decision...is anchored in praxis, in history, in social relationships, chosen and lived in a complex interplay of necessities and freedom, fatal attraction can never cope with such complexities and must be acted out simply in terms of libidinal drive (2006: 39).

On the other hand, Brinda Bose underlines the political nature of private transgression as well. Hence, even if private, the sexual transgressions of both Ammu and Velutha and Rahel and Estha are certainly harsh attacks on the patriarchal “Love Laws.” According to her, Ammu’s degradation and eventual death is both tragic and realistic, rather than a case of “flawed ideology” as Ahmad has interpreted it (2006: 90). She writes:

Perhaps Ammu’s death in itself something of a politic statement – neither simply generic (it is one of the oldest conventions in fiction that women who live impermissibly must also die horribly), nor merely the trick of a tired novelist who does not know how to let [her character] go on living (2006: 90).

Moreover, she also does not find the theory of “fatal attraction” complex enough to do justice to Ammu’s decision to love Velutha. For her, in the novel:
The transgressions are the result of conscious decisions by the emotionally overcharged characters. The very circumstances of their choice(s) affirm the political judgment that surely it could not simply be body need; the sublimely erotic experience is also the pursuit of a utopia in which ideas and ideals, greater than what a momentary sexual pleasure offers, coalesce (2006: 87-88).

Another aspect of the novel that has entailed opposing responses from the readers is the longish and detailed description of sexual encounters between Ammu and Velutha in the last pages of the novel. Whereas for Brinda Bose these “beautifully written erotic passages” have an “inherent politics,” and are not just “necessary ingredient of marketability” (2006: 93), Rukmini Bhaya Nair and Aijaz Ahmad fail to see anything like this. While Shohini Ghosh sees the “sexual politics” of these explicit descriptions of these encounters, where Ammu is an equal initiator and participant in the relationship (2006: 269), S. P. Swain has found it engrossed in the patriarchal pattern of “male domination” (Swain 1999: 148). This contradictory reception of The God of Small Things is quite representative and highlights how readers and critics can read a novel with feminist potential for “sexual politics” in differing ways.

Anita Nair has referred to somewhat similar paradoxical responses to her novel Ladies Coupe in her Goodnight and God Bless (2008). She notes that while with the depiction of Akhila’s unfulfilled sexual desires, her readers had no problem as such, her assertion of her rights over her body by selecting a stranger to reawaken her sexually, led to a lot of debate. On her visit to a book club discussion on the novel, she found that her readers were “divided into two distinct groups. One who said that the heroine picking up a young man for a one-
night stand was vulgar and the other group vociferously praised the importance of that tryst” (2008: 139, emphasis added). To her surprise, Nair found that none of the readers bothered to think of “what was right for the story” (139). The right of the story to proceed in a particular manner has been questioned by Nair herself in her reading of Namita Gokhale’s *Shakuntala*. She does not find herself comfortable with the death of the spirited and adventurous protagonist at the end. To her disappointment, “almost lovingly written all through, in its finale the story acquires the leanings of a morality tale. Shakuntala forlorn, bewildered woman of tragic integrity deserves better” (Nair 2005). In contrast, in their reading of the same novel Manish Mukta and G. A. Ghanshyam have emphasized more on the journey Shakuntala undertakes to defy the sexual norms of the patriarchal society. Rather than finding it tragic and having the features of a “conventional morality tale,” they see the novel as being full of “optimism” and “opening new avenues” for women’s “emotions and aspirations” (2011).

In fact, the “literary” novels other than *The God of Small Things* selected for this study have not got much critical attention. Whereas *The Thousand Faces of Night* has been discussed by some critics, its sexual politics has not been the focus of any study. There are very few scholarly articles on the three novels - *Ladies Coupe, Shakuntala,* and *Mistress*. Reviews have mostly glossed over their body politics. The very absence of critical approaches that focus on such politics or call the novels ‘flawed’ creates a paradox of interpretive positions.

The response of readers and critics has been somewhat similar on the popular novels that portray a sexually assertive woman as protagonist and raise the issues of the female body and sexuality. Whereas till a few years back popular fictions like that of Shobha De were not even considered for critical attention,
with increasing interest in cultural studies and popular culture, there is a huge corpus of literary criticism focused on these novels. And while dealing with novels like Namita Gokhale’s *Paro* and Shobha De’s *Socialite Evenings, Starry Nights, Snapshots* and *Second Thoughts* critics have mostly focused on the depiction of body and sexuality. Even when dealing with issues like search for identity, development of the protagonist, or the cultural politics of the novels, these studies have given importance to the handling of female sexuality that features overtly in these novels. In these studies the general point of contention has been how far these novelists have raised women’s concerns genuinely and to what extent they have been compliant with the forces of the market and neo-colonial ideology that commodify and exoticize the female body and ‘Indian culture.’ The conflicting readings once again make the feminist politics of these novels “writing the body” uncertain.

*Paro*, published in 1984, was regarded to be much ahead of its times in the way it dealt with sexuality. It literally created uproar in the critical world with its blatant delineations of insatiable female sexuality. Since its publication the novel has been read mainly in two different ways. Whereas one group of critics has praised the novel for its freshness, subversive humour and feminist potential, another has criticized it for succumbing to the demands of the market where soft porn sells.

A. G. Khan’s reading seems representative of the readers trained in patriarchal values who can tolerate sexual immodesty neither from the woman writer nor from her female characters. According to him, this novel is no better than “third rate pulp,” (2002: 113) and the success it has achieved in the market and media is for extra-literary reasons. In his opinion, the novel managed to...
create an “euphoria” because Gokhale already had connections with the press (113). The content of the novel is nothing, but:

An attempt to attract notice by churning something shocking, to capture market by tantalizing voyeurism, to cater to the needs of ignorant adolescents, bored housewives, ageing husbands with something steamy and hot (2002: 116).

He is not able to digest the “feast of four lettered words and erotics” prepared by a woman and goes on to chart its evil effects on the youth as well as on criminals (2002: 114). According to him the sort of stuff Gokhale has written would only “encourage every rapist to learn” (114). He even expresses his bewilderment at how anybody could read it as a “protest novel” (Pande 1991) or even a story of women’s search for self and identity (Bharucha 1993), scoured as it is with sexual “immorality” and pornographic details and concludes by saying that:

The narrator, Priya Sharma, and her idol Paro deserve neither sympathy nor serious concern. When seventy percent of the population craves for a crust of bread or a thatchet; to publish, enjoy and sympathize with such pseudo victims is a kind of sin. It is un-Indian and extremely detrimental to woman’s cause (2002: 117, emphasis added).

Not all readers have agreed with Khan’s views. While Khan dismisses the novel as inconsequential, for Ira Pande it’s a “memorable contribution” to “Anglo-Indian novels” (1991). The sexual anarchy of Paro as pointed out by Khan has been read as a feminist trait by R. S. Pathak. Even Rustam Bharucha agrees to the fact that the novel can be read “as the writer’s expression of a rebellious inclination to reject a culturally imposed sexual repression” (1993: 213). For both Pathak and Bharucha, in the novel, the pursuit of sexual passion is a mode of “self discovery” for its protagonists (Bharucha 1993; Pathak 1993: 236).
Whilst in Khan’s opinion, the novel has no significance at all, in Pathak’s view, the message of the novel is “that sex can be no substitute for happiness and sexual indulgence can only leave a coarsening and devitalizing effect” (1993: 195). However, all these readers of *Paro* have missed one vital point of the novel, i.e. its irony and humour. Meeta Chatterjee fills this gap and gives an alternative perspective on the novel. According to her using the body as a “trope of subversion” the novel interrogates the “subordinate status accorded to women in Indian society” (2004: 123). In her reading, she feels that Paro, with her transgression of the “moral boundaries of the typical Bhartiya nari set down by society,” undercuts and destabilizes the system. Chatterjee agrees with Vrinda Nabar that, “[I]n the Indian society where there is such a resistance to any suggestion of sexuality, specially female sexuality, writing about it, by itself, becomes an act of defying the establishment” (2004: 133). Moreover, the tone of humour and satire that underscore the sexual explicitness of the novel makes it all the more political. According to her “to dismiss the novel as steamy erotica is to overlook its satirical potential. Sex is not used just to titillate but also becomes a short hand message signalling frustration with patriarchal discourse without seeming victimised” (135). In contrast to the moral lessons deciphered by critics like Pathak and Bharucha, for her “reconstituting women as sexual beings and not goddesses is a secret mission in the novel” (137).

Such an absolute disparity in reading the same novel and its characters also mark the reception of Shobha De’s novels. Her fictional works have aroused “curiosity and interest on the one hand and downright rejection and denunciation on the other” for their bold handling of the issue of the female body and sexuality (Pathak 1999: 145). Readers have found the scope for both liberation and
titillation in her narratives. For example, Alladi Uma in her article “Over-
[w]rit[d]ing Body: Shobha De’s Novels” has observed that “Though De has given
a very prominent place to women’s sexuality it fails to raise serious concerns, and
generally stops at the titillation of the readers” (1996: 182). For her, Shobha De’s
novels fail feminism. Nabaneeta Dev Sen is also not quite positive on the
treatment of female sexuality in De’s novels. According to her “the liberation of
feminine spirit” in female erotica is yet to be achieved in India as even in the
sexually explicit novels of De, it has been projected in a “conventional way” and
“the approach is borrowed from the male market in pornography” (2000: 302). In
her reading of the sexual explicitness in De’s novels, Sarbani Sen has criticized
De for allowing herself to be “co-opted” by the forces of the market and “Euro-
American neo-colonization” (2011: 23). Ira Pande has accused her of
“vulgarizing the printed word with dilettante dabbling of a vapid mind” (1991:
37). A G. Khan has a similar take on the sexually explicit nature of De’s
narratives. Without giving much heed to the subversive and ironical
underpinnings of her portrayals, Khan regards them as no more than “trash”
(1995a: 33). In his words De’s “entire acrobatics is to reduce fiction to
‘fucktion’” (1995b: 78). For him, rather than envisaging “emancipation of
women” through her novels Shobha De is nearly “seducing them to eternal
prostitution” (82). Voicing the concern of almost all the traditional critics he
writes:

From a woman writer we want a glimpse of the female psyche to which
the male has no access - the agony and trauma of oppressed women....
Let some woman make us aware of their aspirations/ frustrations or
doom. What do we find instead? Nothing now – the same rotten stuff:
thighs, pubis and so on? What then is one’s justification of being a woman writer if she has nothing new to portray? (Khan 1995a: 35-36)

This group of critics have found no justification for Shobha De’s “writing the body” in an audacious and ‘unfeminine’ way. For them, her depiction of female sexuality is not only immoral and derogatory, but also un-Indian and commodified (Khan 1995a, 1995b; Pande 1991; Sen 2000; S. Sen 2011; Uma 1996). On the other hand, we have readers like R. K. Mandalia, R. S. Pathak, Neelam Tikkha, Jaydipsinh Dodiya and R. K. Dhawan who think that through her novels, De has tried to shatter patriarchal sexual hegemony. In the words of Dodiya and Dhawan she is “essentially a feminist writer” (2011: 15). According to Pathak,

Despite their titillating details, what Shobha De’s novels indicate is the arrival of a new Indian woman eager to defy rebelliously against well-entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system...One may not like everything in De’s fiction, but her treatment of the contemporary Indian women’s challenges, predicaments values and lifestyle is surely not without significance” (1999: 148-149).

Mandalia feels that rather than obscenity, her novels are full of politics. He finds De’s widespread disapproval for “sexploitation” (Swain 2011: 136) undue and feels that “our colonized mind is partially responsible for directing us to such criticism” (2006: 212). Neelam Tikkha sees irony and satire as integral to the sexual explicitness of De’s novels and finds that sexual adventures of her protagonists facilitate their transformation from victims of patriarchy to “winners” (2000: 195). Even if in an uncertain tone, S. P. Swain also states that “pornography in Shobha De’s novels becomes a symptom and symbol of the female’s defiance to a male regulated female sexuality” (2011: 139). The specific
novels of De selected for the study have also received similar contradictory readings from readers.

*Socialite Evenings*, the first novel by De, has perhaps received the maximum as well as the most contradictory responses from the critical world. Initially it was found to be “choked with listless lust” (Sethi 1991: 41) and branded as “high society potpourri, bland and banal, bristling with orgy laced parties and voyeuristic serving of souped-up, four-wheel-drive-sex in-all-directions” (qtd. in Pathak 1999: 148). However, many later critics have underlined the feminist potential of the novel that depicts the journey of the protagonist from victim to non-victim position (Barat 2011; Lata 2011; Nayar 2011; Shukla 2006; Swarupa Ravi 2011; Walter 2011). In their readings they have all given emphasis on the sexual experiences of Karuna which eventually liberate her. For example, Bhaskar A. Shukla and Pushp Lata have both highlighted the “maturity” and “rebelliousness” of Karuna “who declines to dog the traditional path of etiquette and manners” (Lata 2011: 63) and asserts her body and rights of sexuality without a tinge of guilt (Shukla 2006: 116). Quite opposite are the views of Bhargavi P. Rao, according to whom, “Karuna is the hollow woman of our modern wasteland” (2011: 97). Such paradoxical stances are also visible when we find Pramod K. Nayar reading the novel as a “feminist romance” where De has given a glimpse of “resistance culture” through the foregrounding of autonomous female sexual desires (2011: 116) and Swain saying that the novel “fails to meet the aesthetics of feminism” (2011: 140).

*Starry Nights* “the most sensational and controversial” of De’s novels has acquired similar mixed reputation (Dash 2011: 167). Tracing the journey of the rise and fall of a Bollywood star, Asha Rani, who also matures as a human being
side by side, this novel is saturated with the explicit details of her sexual exploits and experiences. According to Alladi Uma, rather than “celebration of the body” the novel projects the female body as “a source of vicarious thrill” (1996: 185). She even feels that De at times in her urge to titillate the readers makes her protagonist looks “whorish” (184). On the other hand, Shukla can see the arrival of the new woman in Asha Rani, “eager to defy rebelliously against well entrenched moral orthodoxy of the patriarchal social system” (2006: 115). While for Sarbani Sen the “constant reiteration of physical coupling” is an “Americanized attitude towards body” and make the novel almost pornography (2011: 24), Sandhyarani Dash sees the novel having feminist prospects. According to her, “We see De as abominable and bizarre as we are not habituated to a woman talking so much about sex so freely and so frankly” (2011: 172). Then there is a reader like Sudhir Kumar who misreads the closure of the novel and blames De for providing no solution to the problems of women (2011: 197).

One of the most subdued of the De novels Second Thoughts has been read differently largely for its ambiguous ending. Bipin Parmar praises De for the psychological depth of Maya and sees her growing as a “self willed” and “assertive” “new woman” who by debunking the social and sexual norms of patriarchy is able to establish “an identity” of her own (2001: 230). On the other hand, Alka Saxena finds the novel depressing, which rather than espousing ‘freedom’ seems to give a message of adjustment. According to her, at the end of the novel, Maya “accepts to remain enveloped in loneliness and sadness. On second thoughts, she learns to survive the sultriness of not only Bombay but also her marriage” (2011: 271).
Like most of her other novels, *Snapshots* also got poor reviews when it first came out in 1995. At the time of its publication De was accused of "sexual titillation due to her banal sexual imagery and vivid expression of pre-marital, extra-marital, incestuous and lesbian relationships" (Myles 2006: 215). In the line of those reviews, Alladi Uma also sees no justification of the overdose of sexual images in the opening scenes of the novel than seducing the readers through sex. However, Myles (2006) reads the whole phenomenon differently and says that rather than being there for the sake of voyeuristic pleasure these descriptions underline and comment upon the sexual exploitation of women in Indian society and their possible negotiations. For her the feminist potential of the novel can not be underestimated.

Thus, it is clear that critics have read women's "writing the body" in contradictory ways. Whereas, no formal censorship is exercised on the literary text for sexual explicitness per se, it must be recognized that informally, the opinion and reviews of the critics and media may define the circularity as well as reading circles of a text radically. As reading is a time consuming and expensive endeavour, readers do not read everything. Their choice of a text is heavily mediated by the critics and media, and so is their interpretation (Juffer 2005). Though the readers do have a power of interpretation, the opinion of influential readers (critics) may enable or limit the understanding of other 'common' reader. Hence "writing the body" as a liberatory practice becomes limited so far as its affective politics is concerned. The media and the critics have been both encouraging and dismissive of such works by women. The readers may get influenced by any of the sides and not see the nuances of alternative politics that are spread all over the text or fail to comprehend the practical limitations of the
celebration of body. However, despite the fact that these paradoxes and uncertainties of the affective implications of women’s texts dealing with the female body and sexuality continue “it would (still) make sense to demand space of greater sexual expression on the part of women” as “Targeting sex in place of sexism is simply missing the wood for the trees” (Ghosh 2006: 278).

Notes:

i. In this section uneven space has been allotted to the texts depending on the variety of critical responses and availability of the related materials. Whereas the sexual politics of The God of Small Things has been discussed by many critic and readers, the other novels have not got such critical attention. Virtually no scholarly articles could be located on Ladies Coupe, Mistress and Shakuntala. Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night has hardly been evaluated from the perspective of its sexual politics in the available secondary material on the novel, such as Indira Nityanandam, “A Search for Identity: Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night” in Indian Women Novelists, Set III Vol. IV, ed. R. K. Dhawan (New Delhi: Prestige, 1995. 183-192); K. Ragini Devi, “Thwarted Dreams of Women in Their Constant Life: The Thousand Faces of Night,” Journal of Literature, Culture and Media Studies 2. 4 (2010): 200- 207; Praddep Trikha’s “Githa hairharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night: Straight from a Woman’s Life” in Feminism and Literature, ed. Veena Noble Dass (New Delhi: Prestige, 1995. 169-173); S. Indira, “Walking on the Tight Rope: A Reading of Githa Hariharan’s The Thousand Faces of Night in Dhawan (1995: 177- 182).

ii. Several reviews and critical studies are available on this novel. This study uses only a few of there. Some of the collections of critical essays that deal exclusively with Arundhati Roy’s writing and specially this novel are: Murari Prasad, ed. Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives (New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2006); R .K. Dhawan, ed. Arundhati Roy: The Novelist Extraordinary (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999); Indira Bhatt & Indira Nityanandam, ed. Explorations: Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things (New Delhi: Creative Books, 1999).
Ahmad, Aijaz. "Reading Arundhati Roy Politically." Prasad 32-43.


Rao, Bhargavi P. "From Purdah to Popular Culture: Anees Jung’s *Unveiling India* and Shobha De’s *Socialite Evenings.*" Dodiya (2011) 92-97.


