Contextualizing the Discourse of ‘Writing the Body’: Ruptures and Continuities

Foregrounding women’s body and its desires is not exclusive to just the literary scenario of contemporary India. Issues pertaining to body and sexuality, especially the female body and sexuality are no longer tabooed areas in the broader Indian socio-cultural scenario as it used to be around twenty or thirty years back. In fact, a concern over the conduct, rights and representation of women in relation to their body and sexuality is discernible in fields as varied as legal discourses, health-related discussions, scholarly works, intellectual delineations, and both entertainment and information based media like cinema, TV channels, advertisements, talk shows, popular magazines, popular literature and newspapers (Dwyer 2001; John 1998; Kasbekar 2001). Everywhere, the female body and sexuality is getting unprecedented space and visibility. However, this, in itself, tells little about the transformation of the cultural scenario. Whereas the discourses on body and sexuality are proliferating; within the discourses, contradictory messages abound. The visibility of the female body and sexuality has by no means guaranteed a more egalitarian and gender sensitive society (Abraham 2004). Actually, a majority of the discourses around espouse the traditional values and conventional codes of female sexuality and vouch for the norms of heterosexual monogamous relationships on the part of women. Whereas active female sexuality is now an accepted phenomenon, it is still expected to be exercised within matrimony (Abraham 2004; Kasbekar 2001). For women specially, marriage is still the most significant aspect of life and there is
no questioning the respect given to it (Abraham 2004: 226; Dwyer 2001: 247). "Virginity" before marriage and "chastity" after marriage are even now the ideals for women (Abraham 2004: 212; Dwyer 2001: 268; Ghosh 2005, 2006; Kasbekar 2001; Menon 2007b; Srivastava 2004a; Verma 2004, Vishwanath 1997). Nevertheless, the proliferation of discourses has opened up the spaces for counter-hegemonic voices as well. Thus, though the ideals of womanhood still remain those of Sita and Savitri (Abraham 2004; Kakar 1990; Verma 2004) many of the contemporary discourses have endorsed self-determination for women's body and sexuality and legitimization of its desires and pleasures. The images of women desiring pleasure, and initiating and participating in sexual relations actively even in the non-normative ones are no aberrations in contemporary media like cinema, soap operas, advertisements, film songs and popular romances (Bose 2000; Dwyer 2001; Ghosh 2006; John 1998; Kasbekar 2001; Mankekar 2004; Menon 2007b; Uberoi 1997, 2006). While not being completely beyond the impact of the dominant, such discourses exist "in a continuing tension (relationship, influence, antagonism) to the dominant culture" (Hall 1997: 462) having emerged out of previous invisibility and misrecognition. One such discourse is discernible in a substantial number of contemporary Indian English women's novels that espouse women's rights over their bodies and challenge the patriarchal norms that silence women's desires. This project concerns itself mainly with this phenomenon.

This chapter contextualizes the contemporary trend of "writing the body" in Indian English women's fiction in the larger socio-cultural framework of contemporary India and emphasizes that this discourse does not stand apart from other cultural products. Rather it is one of them and the ambivalences and
paradoxes underpinning this discourse are very much similar to the others such as cinema, soap operas and advertisements (Centre of Advocacy and Research 2007; John 1998; Uberoi 1997, 2006). Here, an attempt has been made to identify a few factors responsible for the upsurge of such interest in the female body and sexuality in the present. I also situate the practice of “writing the body” in contemporary Indian English women’s fiction in the larger frame of the history of women’s fiction, specially Indian English women’s fiction, and identify the ruptures and continuities in explicit representation of the female body and sexuality in ‘literary’ and ‘popular’ novels. Rather than implying that “writing the body” in Indian English fiction is a completely radical phenomenon, this chapter underscores the fact that the seeds of this practice were very much there in vernacular literatures as well as in an earlier generation of Indian English women writers. What is new is its proliferation as a trend. This chapter sets forth the tone of the next three chapters, which focus on the three levels of paradoxes involved in this practice.

I

Widely acknowledged is the fact that India is undergoing a phase of ‘transition,’ since the last two decades of the twentieth century. New forms of “political/aesthetic /cultural practices” characterize contemporary India (Pinney 2001: 2). An equally significant change has occurred in the field of economy. All these interrelated changes at various levels of society have resulted in the radical transformations and equally serious anxieties over these transformations in the socio-cultural discourses. One of the major areas which has witnessed changes in the social-cultural life of India is that of body and sexuality. Sociologists as well as feminist critics such as Asha Kasbekar (2001), Brinda Bose (2006), Christopher Pinney (2001), Janaki Nair (1998), Leena Abraham (2004), Mary E. John (1998), Nivedita Menon (2007), Patricia Uberoi (2006), Rachel Dwyer
(2001), Ruth Vanita (2005), Shohini Ghosh (2005, 2006) and Sudhir Kakar (1990) have invariably pointed to the unprecedented presence of discourses and images relating to body and sexuality in the socio-cultural fields in contemporary India. This does not, however, imply that earlier such discourses on body and sexuality were absent. The point is that their public presence was not so palpable, as sexuality was seen as an immensely private issue. Even if there were discussions around the issue of sexuality, these were mainly in terms of anxiety and in the context of religion, duty and morality, emphasizing the need to control and monitor this aspect of life. Sanjay Srivastava (2004a) has pointed out that for long semen anxiety was the dominant theme in the sexuality discourses in India (15). Active female sexuality was hardly given any visibility till the second half of the twentieth century in the history of “modern India.” The major public discourses and movements privileged women’s reproductive role only and all other forms of female sexuality were delegitimized (21). However, since the second half of the twentieth century, female sexuality and desires started finding space in the non-dominant discourses like – footpath pornography, the street guidebooks to ‘better sexual life’, popular women’s’ magazines. In these images of female sexuality, the framework remained that of hetero-normativity and domesticity, but female desires were no longer seen as sinister (23). From these lesser visible discourses to the more publicly available and acceptable discourses, the journey of sexuality, specially female sexuality, had been quite dramatic in the last three decades. The circumstances have changed so much that body and sexuality have become interesting and acceptable topics in social, cultural, and academic discourses.

Though not always favourable to active female sexuality, the very presence of these discursive spaces for the earlier ‘tabooed’ arena has been one of the most liberating aspects of contemporary India. Various critics have speculated upon the reasons for such developments at different stages. At the international level, Mary E. John and Janaki Nair have related the immense interest in the field of sexuality to five important signposts in the twentieth century, namely, Freud and his psychoanalytical theories; radical sexual politics and women’s movement in the 60s and 70s; Lacan and French feminist theories; Foucault’s histories of
sexuality; and the more recent designation of sexuality as sexual preference (1998: 2).

As far as the Indian context is concerned, many other historical and local factors have also contributed to the enormous increase of interest in the issues relating to sexuality since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Most critics have identified the liberalization of the Indian economy since 1990s, the resultant impact of globalization, media revolution and immense flow of satellite private TV channels to be the most important cluster of factors that has affected the sexual revolution in contemporary India (Abraham 2004; Ghosh 2005, 2006; Gokhale 2001; John 1998; Mankekar 2004 Menon 2007b; Pinney 2001; Srivastava 2004a: 24; Thapan 2007, 2009; Vanita 2005). Mary E. John aptly captures the scene when she relates economic liberalization with sexual liberalization. She writes:

Globalization in India has rightly been associated with liberalization and the opening up of the economy to the forces of international market .... Along with such processes there has been a tangible sense of the liberalization and globalization of sexuality as well. Never before or it seems so have our public spaces been so inundated with sexual images, on posters, billboards, TV cinema, daily newspaper, everywhere (1998: 368, emphasis added).

Leena Abraham acknowledges the same and notes “sexual liberalism appears to have received a boost under the recent impact of economic liberalization and globalization” (2004: 211). According to her, the reason for such proliferation lies in the consumer culture:

In the context of unprecedented expansion of worldwide television channels and consumer goods, erotic literature and films are widely available. New cultural and material products with modern values and meanings have brought different dimensions of sexuality into the open (2004: 211).
The opening up of Indian society in economic terms, thus, not only brought “an influx of consumer goods and artifacts of material culture” but also “their accompanying social and psychological characteristics,” hence bringing in “a transformation in the social and cultural fabric” of contemporary India (Thapan 2007: 31). The impact of new media and especially, satellite TV channels since 1990s, has been immense in this emergence of new values, new attitudes and aspirations in the field of sexuality (Centre of Advocacy and Research 2007). As the sexually explicit and suggestive images from the West flowed in through private cable TV channels, thereby increasing the tolerance level of Indian consumers, these affected the choices of Indian producers in different spheres. Mary E. John sees the moment of liberation of sexuality coming in 1990s, and her signpost is the Kamasutra condom advertisement, which, in contrast to the Nirodh advertisement’s conservative and euphemistic attitude, “signalled a new public legitimation of sexuality in the form of consensual, mutual, safe and private heterosexual pleasure, in a style not witnessed before” (1998: 377). Whereas Thapan sees the impact of liberalization and “media revolution” only on the urban middle class India, Menon sees its wider implications. According to her, sexuality has become visible in the public space “both elite and non elite” and thus effecting “a certain degree of banalism of the hitherto unspeakable” (Menon 2007a: 6). The persistent emphasis on the newness of the images and representations which came in after the 1990s hints at the “sexual revolution” which India underwent since then (Menon 2007b: xxxi) and “radically transformed our conversations” around sex and sexuality for good (Ghosh 2005: ix).
Equally important has been the contribution of women's movement and feminist awareness in bringing this area of fright, silence and repression to the open. While acknowledging that "the questions of sexuality have been raised during a number of critical periods in modern India and clearly predate explicit feminist concerns," Mary E. John and Janaki Nair find it undeniable that, "Sexuality has recently gained more prominence as a subject of political movement or academic discourses as a result of the growing feminist involvement with the rights of women to their lives and bodies" (John and Nair 1998: 8). However, this concern of feminists with sexuality in terms of desires and pleasures also coincided with the liberalization of the Indian economy. Till the late 1980s, as Sanjay Srivastava and others have pointed out, female desires—hetero- or homoerotic have not been part of the feminist agenda in India context (John and Nair 1998; Menon 2007b; Srivastava 2004a). Feminist concerns (and those of non-feminist women's groups) were largely focused on the issues of social, cultural, and legal oppressions of women (Srivastava 2004a: 23; Sunder Rajan 2000: 158; Vishwanath 1997). Seen mostly as sexual victims, the pleasure aspects of female sexuality were hardly given any heed by the feminist activists. Another major context within which women's movements discussed sexuality was that of "women's health" (John and Nair 1998:9). It is only through the 1990s and into the new century that the shift from "victimhood" to "agency" has occurred (Sunder Rajan 2000: 158). In the field of sexuality discourses in India Menon calls this a shift from "violence to desire" (Menon 2007b: xiv), which has opened up spaces for alternative and non-conformist sexualities (John and Nair 1998: 24, 9). These feminist discourses directly and indirectly have had wide ranging influence on the diverse socio-cultural practices of contemporary India
and have contributed considerably in increasing the acceptance level of society towards active female sexuality. The impact of consumer culture along with feminist awareness, however, has created a situation of ambivalence in terms of agendas of the representational discourses dealing with the female body and sexuality. Still, one can hardly deny that the "emancipatory politics" (Giddens 1991) of feminism has contributed in legitimizing the public space for discourses of the female body and sexuality which consumer culture and liberal economy alone would not have been able to achieve (John and Nair 1998).

Another factor which has facilitated the rise of sexuality discourses and the "changing erotic climate" in the last three decades internationally as well as in India is the AIDS epidemic (Singer 1993: 52). Nivedita Menon refers to this remarkable discursive change when she writes:

From the late 1990s growing awareness about the AIDS epidemic made it increasingly legitimate to talk of sex outside the realms of law, demography and medicine ... and not only as violence against women or in terms of sex control.... Although AIDS is a disease which also fits into the medical discourse, its source made sex speakable (2007a: 5).

Menon notes that whereas autonomous groups of women had discussions on sex (in terms of violence mostly) since the 1970s, "AIDS understanding and international funding for AIDS/ HIV prevention played a significant role in creating space to deal with other aspects of sexuality" (2007a: 5). Consequently rather than the "moral" aspects of sexuality, its pleasures and desires and safety became the buzzwords (Verma 2004). All these factors named differently by critics as Westernization, modernity, media revolution, liberal politics, emancipation, health concern, have brought in a proliferation of the discursive
space for sex and sexuality across cultural and social practices and locations in contemporary India.

II

Rachel Dwyer (2001) provides a detailed account of the various Indian cultural discourses in which sexuality has become a primary concern. According to her, such an obsession with the issues of sexuality is "probably due to the fact that it is now regarded as one of the most important and problematic areas in existence as well as one of the greatest sources of pleasure" (266). She identifies that along with the state locations such as "educational institutions, medical discourse, population control, and censorship" (266), the issues of sexuality have found significant space in the arenas of popular culture also. Areas as diverse as popular magazines (men's, women's, lifestyle and film based ones), posters, billboards, daily newspapers, advertisements, cinema, film songs and their picturization, TV soap operas, women's romantic fictions and so forth, all seem to be saturated with sexually explicit images (Dwyer 2001: 268; John 1998: 368). In addition, there is an "abundance of discourses on virginity, the age of consent, the life of widows, eve-teasing, etc [which] show the centrality of the sexual discourses" (Dwyer 2001: 268). Whereas in 1990, Sudhir Kakar in his survey of Indian sexuality found "a general disapproval of the erotic aspect of life" and observed that in India "sexual time beats at a slower pace than its chronological counterpart," by the end of the twentieth century, John could hardly see any evidence of it (1998: 371-2). In the present times of rapid transformation she has
found both the visual and print media inundated with sexual images, representations and narratives.

In this sexualization of the public discourses in India, the female body and sexuality has received utmost importance. Be it because of the consumer culture where the female body sells or because of the feminist awareness of the legitimation of female sexuality, women's body and sexuality have found visibility in most spheres. However, this proliferation of the discourses on female sexuality has exuded ambivalent messages in the public arena. Various studies and surveys of the cultural products and day-to-day lived experiences attest to the fact that despite the space now available to female sexuality in the public sphere, the arena is laden with anxieties. A persistent tension between tradition and modernity; indigenous value and Western influence; individual choices and social responsibilities; moral uprightness and private pleasures mark any discourse related to the female body and sexuality (Abraham 2004: 212; Bose 2006; Dwyer 2001; Ghosh 2005, 2006; John 1998; John and Nair 1998; Kakar 1990; Menon 2007a, 2007b; Srivastava 2004a; Thapan 1997, 2007, 2009). What Shohini Ghosh corroborated in 2005, holds good even today largely. She observed that even after fifteen years of the beginning of liberalization, the changes in the field of sexuality continue to generate anxiety.

The cultural contestations around sex and sexuality and the increasing space being devoted to them still generate moral panic that becomes articulated through persistent demands for stringent legislation, censorship and cries of Indian culture being in danger (xiii).

There seems to be still more of a phobia than acceptance of sexuality in the mind of the public at large, when it comes to real life practices in the society, and
hence, there have been constant moves at different levels to “control activities identified as sexual and illegitimate” (Menon 2007b: xxxix).

Whereas the voices of subversion have been identified and celebrated by researchers and a section of public also at times, the dominant ideology is still of the conventional norms of female sexuality (John 1998). There are many opinion-polls and surveys conducted in popular media and otherwise which hint at the changing (liberal) attitude of the common people (both men and women) towards body, sex, sexuality and marriage (the major locus of sexual behaviour in the Indian society) and other related issues (Abraham 2004: 210). Media reports and studies indicate that the attitude towards premarital sex is no longer as conservative as it is believed to be, extra-marital affairs and promiscuity are also not rare (Abraham 2004: 210-11). Still, one can hardly forget the limited nature of these findings. Besides, these hardly claim a homogenous picture of Indian society. On the other hand, academic works, especially ethnographic ones and the studies of cultural practices have frequently underlined the paradoxical nature of the ‘sexual revolution.’ Critics such as Jyoti Puri, Leena Abraham, Meenakshi Thapan, Sanjay Srivastava and Shilpa Phadke have frequently pointed out the ambivalence and uncertainties that underlie the relationship between women and active sexuality in lived experiences. Meenakshi Thapan in her ethnographic studies of both adolescent urban girls (2007) and women across classes and locales (2009) has attested to the “ambivalent” attitude of women when it comes to exercising sexuality (2007: 31; 2009: 20). On the paradox involved in the contemporary situation, she writes:

The new Indian woman is an ambivalent entity shaped by the social and public domain which simultaneously portrays her as glamorous,
independent, conscious of her embodiment and of the many forms of adornment and self-representation available to her, and yet enshrined in the world of tradition through her adherence to family and national values. The overarching trope therefore remains that of middle class respectability (2009: 25).

Thus, in the sphere of sexuality, she is expected to be both “pure” and “mature” (2009: 77). Similar are the views of Shilpa Phadke as she says, “Never has it been so legitimate (or so compelling) for women to be sexy,” but also adds that, nevertheless, “women are expected to demonstrate their respectability ... [they] have to be both sexually desirable and sexually virtuous” (qtd. in Menon 2007b: xxxi). Thus, even if, the contemporary India woman is no longer passive and conservative in her sexual behaviour, sexual respectability continues to haunt her thinking and actions (Puri 1999). Anthologists, historians, and sociologists have repeatedly attested to the social significance of being *pativrata* for Indian woman (Kakar1990: 88; Srivastava 2004b: 383). Leena Abraham captures the complex nature of this sexual upsurge in India for women in day-to-day life as she concludes her study saying:

Liberalism with regard to sexuality is male oriented and preserves the traditional notion of male and female sexuality. While enhancing avenues for men to gather information and knowledge about sexuality, the social arrangements continue to keep girls ignorant about their bodies and sexuality. The cultural significance of *lakshman rekha* [of virginity and chastity] continues, confining female sexuality. It neither protects nor does crossing it liberate her (2004: 241).

According to her, despite the saturation of the public domain with sexual images, sexuality is still a “tabooed area for discussion” in social occasions, especially for women (211). Socialized in the “practices of silence regarding their
bodies and sexuality,” for the majority of even young urban women, sexual liberation has not arrived. Sexuality according to her has found maximum representation in the consumer culture, and these representations “draw upon the dominant norms of gender asymmetrical heterosexuality” (212). In this schema male sexuality as aggressive and uncontrollable and female sexuality as passive and compromising is the standard. Male sexuality extends beyond the family boundaries and female sexuality is “centered around the marriage and spouse” (212). Thus, “any automatic connection” between “the liberal milieu” of the contemporary period and “the transformative aspects of globalization” on the one hand, and “their emancipatory effect on women needs to be regarded with caution” (Srivastava 2004a: 43). The presence of active female sexuality in various discourses and media has not challenged the norms of society ‘drastically.’ Rather, in many instances, it seems to be a case of “recolonization” (Thapan 2009: 20).”

Analogous have been the observations of critics who have studied the changing portrayal of female sexuality in popular representational media.” The report of the Centre of Advocacy and Research (2007) records that though in recent times many of the TV serials like Tara, Aurat, Shanti, Hasratein, Saanjhi, Saans, have played upon the theme of female sexuality, these hardly stand up for women’s ‘sexual liberation.’ Despite their assertiveness and bold appearance, most of the female protagonists remain trapped in the sacrificing roles of wife, mother and daughter. Patricia Uberoi’s (1997, 2006) readings of classical to contemporary Bollywood cinema underpin the ways in which female sexuality and its changing contours are frequently projected in the cinema, but get subdued in the course of the narrative. Mary E. John has noted that mainstream Indian
cinema now accepts female sexuality, both within and before marriage (1998: 379). “Today’s heroine can not be a passive object of desire, but displays a responsible, active and at times disturbing sexuality” (1998: 378). Ranjani Mazumdar also spots the appearance of a sexually confident heroine and the convergence of heroine and vamp figures in the Hindi films since the 1990s, but also significantly points out that these, nevertheless, retreat behind the *lakshamn rekha* of chastity once Romance has triumphed (cited in Menon 2007b: xxxi).

Thus, the representational shifts and ruptures within the narratives of popular culture including cinema, TV, magazines, advertisements, songs and popular romances have been widely recognized by the critics (Ghosh 2006; John 1998; Kasbekar 2001; Vanita 2005), but rather than valorizing, they have seen these as “neither fully progressive nor completely retrograde” (Ghosh 2006: 278). These discourses, nonetheless, have served to prise open the new spaces. In brief, while one cannot help feel seduced by the surface attraction of these new sexually “egalitarian images,” we must not forget that “the most obvious wider context” for the mobilization of sexuality and sexual desire is that of “consumer culture” (John 1998: 381). Hence, the presence of female sexuality in the popular cultural discourses may mean not so much the popularity of feminist agendas as the impact of capitalist commodity culture (Srivastava 2004a: 24).

It is against this bewildering and complex scenario of discourses regarding sex and sexuality that I situate the contemporary practice of “writing the body” in Indian English literature. This practice being a product of the rapidly transforming culture that is caught in the tussle between tradition and modernity, like other cultural tropes displays elements of resistance to as well as coalition with the dominant sexual (sexist) ideology.
According to John and Nair the real place to look for full blown representation of sex would be the sphere of the arts and media, the one aesthetic and the other commercial (1998: 26). Yet, in the present scenario when literature has become more and more like a commodity and consumer culture has developed high aesthetic sense, it has become somewhat difficult to distinguish between the two. Nevertheless, John and Nair are right in their observation. In fact, critics have frequently shown that the concern with sex and sexuality and the sensitive issues related with this aspect of life found expression in literature much radically and before the feminist agendas became popular and liberalism could spread its wings (Jain 2001; Kakar 1990; Singh 2007; Srivastava 2004a).

Just like most of the other known literary cultures, the Indian literary tradition also had very few women writers till recently. Since the ancient period, specially the Vedic age when the strictures of patriarchy had to be consolidated to maintain caste-class order, women’s freedom (specially sexual freedom) came under severe restrictions (Altekar 1987; Bose 2000; Chakravarti 1993; Goldman 2000; Wadley 1988). One major way to control women and their sexuality was to keep them away from literacy. The command of written language could lead to the development of dangerous “power” in women through “knowledge,” and hence instigate them to express and justify their rights and wishes (Goldman 2000; Sen 2000: 298-99, 2007, Tharu and Lalita 1991). This is the reason that the knowledge of Sanskrit, the standard literary language was denied to them (along with the lower caste people, who also needed to be ‘controlled’). The only women who were generally allowed the right to the written words were
noblewomen, ascetics or prostitutes (Tharu and Lalita 1991: 64). Consequently, the literary works which have survived from ancient times are mostly from women of these categories (Tharu and Lalita 1991). Still, out of these few writers also, we do have a tradition of women writers raising the issue of the legitimacy of body and sexuality in their literary works since ancient times (Singh 2007). Though a lot written by women in the past has been lost, whatever could be retrieved by the rigorous work of the contemporary feminist critics at least gives evidence of this (Tharu and Lalita 1991). In many of these texts “women’s unfettered literary voice that gives a verbal expression to their physical desires and treats sex as a natural primal instinct” is visible (Singh 2007: 271). For example, in Vedic literature, women writers like Lopamudra, Shashwati, Romasha expressed the pleasure of freedom and equality and spoke of sex as a normal urge. The significant anthology of women’s writing in India by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1991) records several instances of such writings in the medieval period. The most fascinating of these texts is surely eighteenth century poet Muddupalini’s Radhika Santvanam. A text celebrating female sexuality, its pleasures and desires and the reversal of roles ‘prescribed’ by patriarchy in sexual relations, this text attests to the frankness with which women could express themselves. One can rarely find a text matching the candour of Radhika Santvanam even today in the age of ‘liberalization’ and ‘emancipation.’ It is also a text whose history of reception represents the treatment women writing about female sexuality have generally received. While there is little evidence that the text was attacked or dismissed at the time of its production in the Tanjavur era (Tharu and Lalita 1993: 204), since the time it was first published in 1887, it has had a history of “misadventures” (Tharu and Lalita 1991, 1993). From that time
onwards till the late 1980s it was invariably critiqued, censored, banned and curtailed on moral grounds. It was after all a text that had challenged the norms of 'feminine modesty.' The ideologies of empire and nation both could not tolerate feminine sexual liberty as such. Till about the beginning of the twentieth century we hardly have any other woman writer daring to touch upon the issue so audaciously. The reasons were perhaps socio-political. The reformist and nationalist movements hardly allowed women to engage in separate projects to delineate their identities as woman. Early twentieth century, however, witnessed writers like Rasheed Jahan and Ismat Chughtai who wrote with unbridled frankness about the issues relating to the female body and sexuality. For such immodesty, they were not only criticized in the literary critical world but also dragged to the court for encouraging obscenity (Gopal 2005: 39-89). It seems that the attitude of the society has not changed much in the course of history as Mridula Garg (in 1970 for Chitta Cobra) and Arundhati Roy (in 1990s for The God of Small Things) were taken to court for writing obscene things in indecent language.

These adverse responses of the society and the critical world did not, thankfully, restrain women from raising the issues of body and sexuality in writing. Since the 1950s, there has been an upsurge in the Indian women's writings concerned with the sexual aspects of women's lives. While it is impossible to give details of all Indian literatures, Chandra Nisha Singh's study gives at least a representative picture of the scenario. According to her Rajani Pannikar's Jade ki Dhoop (1958) was the first Indian novel dealing with women's sexual satisfaction and desires thematically. The sixties and seventies witnessed many such works in Hindi where the rights of body were asserted by
women writers and their female protagonists. Usha Priyamvada’s *Pachpan Khambhe Laal Diwarein* (1962), Krishna Sobti’s *Mitro Marjani* (1967), Mridula Garg’s *Uske Hisse Ki Dhoop* (1975) and *Chitta Cobra* (1979) are some of the novels where the protagonists invariably accept their bodies and its demands for sexual pleasures. Whether the protagonists are able to sustain their radical attitude in face of the adverse social situations or not, and despite somewhat conventional ending of the narratives, there is surely a new and radical assertion of the female body in these texts. Here the protagonists understand and accept their body and its desires and its worth without guilt. Most of the times, they transgress the limits of modesty and matrimony in search of satisfaction – both physical and emotional. While till the first half of the twentieth century “any assertion of physical needs and sexual liberty involved a sense of guilt” (2007: 271) and therefore was underplayed, Singh notes the changing ethos in the contemporary Indian women’s writing thus:

Women’s narratives in almost all Indian languages have traversed a long distance, from the tradition-bound ethos of chastity and fidelity and one-woman one-man relationship to a new sexual ideology, recast gender norms and defiance of the models of prescribed sexual behavior. Contemporary women novelists often speak of premarital and extramarital sexual experiences, adultery and even of promiscuity, without the conflicts of patriarchal moral norms. They also construct a new, unmasked and uninhibited language to facilitate the propagation of new sexual conventions. The process of change has been slow and not always even, reflective of the various socio-cultural factors in transition. There has been not overnight transformation in female sensibility, although the texts of 1970s and 1980s give a definite indication of sex becoming, in itself a new discourse, which may symbolizes feminine freedom, individuality and confrontation (2007: 271).
Nevertheless, these depictions of the female body and sexuality have not been fully liberating as well. Heterosexuality still is the norm in most of these narratives where “male defined theories of sexual pleasures” govern (2007: 271). The narratives often end in either a ‘return’ of the protagonist (now wiser and mature enough to handle the frustrations better) who transgressed the norms at one point of time, or the suicide, death or mental imbalance of the radical transgressor who has left no way of ‘return.’ This is true of most of the narratives of sexually transgressive protagonists written till recently across Indian languages. It perhaps indicates the power of the society in which we live, the one that despite its ‘liberal’ nature is still neither fully comfortable nor broadly conducive to active female sexuality. Still the number of writers dealing with these sensitive issues is on the increase."

As far as the context of Indian English women’s fiction is concerned the representation of the female body and sexuality, woman’s right to pleasure are not new. Though the Indian English fictional world had got its first contribution from a woman writer as back as in 1894 (the year Kripabai Satthianadhan’s Kamala: A Story of Hindu Life was published), it was only since the 1950s that women writers started making themselves visible. The period till the early eighties was ruled by the triumvirate of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. In the early eighties Shashi Deshpande emerged to equal their stature. Though there were many others such as Attia Hossein and Manju Kapur, in terms of their literary output and the critical attention and the popularity these four writers got, they can be seen as representative of the ‘earlier generation of the writers.’”" Against and in continuity with the works of these writers the present study situates the contemporary trend of “writing the body.” The
clubbing of these four writers together as the ‘earlier generation of writers,’ however, does not mean that they have all written about the issues of the female body and sexuality in the same way. Nor does it mean that they were not radical in challenging the patriarchal sexual norms. Rather it makes it easier to understand the way the new generation of writers has followed the path paved by them as well as moved away from them.

Kamala Markandaya’s novels are concerned with the sociological issues of the time and portray the phase of transition in post-independence India. While dealing with issues like East West encounter, the impact of industrialization, question of identity and the validity of tradition, the complicated man-woman relationship has found peripheral space in her works. In this little space Markandaya at times has raised issues relating to the female body and sexuality. For example, in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), the issue that sweeps through the narrative is fertility of women and not specifically her sexual rights. Ira’s decision to sell her body, though under the compulsion of poverty, and her consequent motherhood, which washes off the blame of barrenness, are some spaces where Markandaya hints at the corporeality of woman and her rights over body, nevertheless, her narrative hardly foreground these. The two novels dealing more overtly with the issues of female sexuality are *Possession* (1963) and *Two Virgins* (1975). In both, her outlook is conservative. She does not display an open mind towards the women who challenge the sexual norms of the society. Those who do so are either Western or are too much under Westerns influence and set an example to others in the narrative and the readers as to what should be avoided. The character of Caroline is almost negative in *Possession* because of her desire to possess, and specially for her sexual overtures, similarly Lalitha is
depreciated for succumbing to the lures of the city, money and its sexual freedoms and Saroja learns the value of control at her cost. In both the novels sexual liberty in women is addressed as a social threat.

Nayantara Sahgal is much more radical in her attitude towards the rights of woman over her body. Sahgal’s novels skillfully depict the inner lives of women skillfully against the turmoil of politics. The issues of female sexuality and her desires are raised in many of her novels like *A Time to Be Happy* (1958), *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977). Her narratives frequently refer to the fact that female sexuality is not given its due in the patriarchal society and that the sexual norms are gender biased. Premarital and extramarital relations are frequent in her narratives, which undercut the sanctity of the institution of marriage. In *A Time to Be Happy*, for example, we see Maya, already married, getting attracted towards the narrator. However, it also shows the impossibility of running away from socially sanctioned relationships. In fact, in most of her stories the women characters are trapped in loveless marriages. Some of them compromise, but most find solace in either divorce or extramarital affairs. Both the options give women a chance of self-assertion, a chance to claim the rights over the self. In *This Time of Morning* Rashmi takes divorce from her husband and tries to find comfort in the company of another man Neil. Her post-divorce life shows that she has moved away from the traditional definition of sexual morality. In *A Situation in New Delhi*, Devi, a widow, has a fulfilling relationship with both Michael and Usman, and feels no guilt for it. Sex is recognized as an important part of life in Sahgal’s novels and women are expected to have an equal share in it. In *Storm in Chandigarh* marriage breaks down as a result of the breach of sexual norms on the part of the
woman. In her reading of Sahgal’s novels Chandra Nisha Singh aptly says that in these, the sexual involvement of women outside marriage becomes a symbol of a process of social change and women’s resistance to male oppression. Even if not all do so, in her novels, “almost all her female protagonists feel the need to be unfaithful to their husbands” (Singh 2007: 325, emphasis added). The extramarital relations signify freedom and fulfillment of body and soul of women, even if transitory. In her we find the female characters emerging as desiring women and their extras-marital sexual relationships are acts of non-conformity. Though one can easily see that these matters are only subsidiary to the central thematic concerns of her fictions, it is also true that:

Compared to her contemporaries Sahgal’s stand on women and female sexuality and the concern with women’s right to her body is both unconventional and subversive.... She can be singled out for her boldness in relating the issues of sex, to individual freedom and the desire to free a woman from being treated as a possession(Jain 2004: 129).

Anita Desai has dealt with the psychological depths of the human mind in her novels. Her early novels Cry, The Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), and Where Shall We Go This Summer (1975) concentrate on the feminine sensibility at war with the hostility and callousness of the male centered universe. She has shifted to the existentialist angst of the modern human being in the later novels. In her woman oriented novels, man-woman relationships occupy focal position and her protagonists are invariably caught in incompatible marriages with insensitive, practical and successful spouses. Their suffering arises as much from emotional deprivation as from physical. Maya in Cry, The Peacock loses
her sanity and eventually murders her husband Gautam, as she can feel no bond with him. She finds the sheer neglect of her body and emotions intolerable:

How little he knew of my suffering, or how to comfort me ... Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely, wanting mind that waited near his bed (Desai 1980: 9, emphasis added).

The roots of Monisha’s frustrations and ultimate suicide in *Voices in the City* also lie somewhere in unfulfilled passion. One realizes her thirst for fulfillment when she speculates, “Is this what is my life? Only a conundrum that I shall brood forever with passion and pain, never to arrive at a solution? Only a conundrum—is that, the life?” (Desai 1965: 124-25, emphasis added). But no details are provided on the issues pertaining to women’s sexual desires and rather than resisting the system through divorce or extramarital relations as in Sahgal’s novels, Desai’s heroines either suffer mental breakdown or commit suicide. The desiring women have no future in her fictional world. The only other option Desai allows to her estranged protagonists is to slowly learn to adjust and accept the ways of the world as happens in the case of Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer*. There is a consistent absence of rebellion through the body in her fictions and the details remain focused on the psychological state of the characters. Malashree Lal notes this absence of the details of the intimate life in Desai’s *Where Shall* when she says that even as the novel is about the trauma of unexpected fifth pregnancy and there is a lot of anger, rejection and pain in it, “the novel does not allow a single line to convey this in terms the the woman’s contemplation of her sexuality” (1995: 15).
Shashi Deshpande has shown a persistent interest in the various aspects of women's lives in her novels. The demands of relationships, specially marriage forms the crux of most of her stories and in this context she has referred to the issues of sexuality and physical fulfillment. Her novels invariable undercut the sanctity of the institution of marriage which demands silence and tolerance, and "a superhuman ability to ignore the self" on the part of women (Jain 2005: 16). She has given more importance to the theme of the female body and sexuality in her novels than the three novelists discussed above. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980), Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983), Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988), Sumi in *A Matter of Time* (1996), and Madhu of *Small Remedies* (2000), are all women caught in non-satisfactory marriages. They are all desiring women who find their partners unable to understand the demands and expectations of their flesh. In Deshpande's fictional world, "it shocks [people] ... to find passion in woman" and this leads to frustration in the protagonists (Deshpande 1983: 83, emphasis added). Divorce hardly provides a solution in her novels and whereas extra-marital relations are not aberrations, there is generally a return of the protagonist to the folds of middle-class respectability. Though Deshpande acknowledges the legitimate claims of the physical aspects of the body, these are not allowed to determinate her narratives. Most of the times, retaining and sustaining relationships is given more importance. Thus, we see Saru, a victim of marital rape, deciding to give her abusive sadistic husband another chance despite her own economic freedom. Indu, who is bold enough to give her body to Naren without a tinge of guilt, ultimately comes back to her husband 'confidently' hoping that the situation will improve. Jaya is troubled by her desire for love and intimacy as her husband is not comfortable to see passion in a woman. Eventually
her middle-class urge for security forces her to live a life of deception and she conceals her extra-marital relationship with Kamat. In brief, Deshpande’s protagonists often question the conventional confinements imposed on the female body and sexuality, but in the end can hardly overcome the social structures in any radical way. In her novels women's sexual transgression is not radical, as it is not regarded to be the panacea for all of a woman’s physical and psychological predicaments. Deshpande does not show promiscuity or licentiousness to be the solution for women and socially sanctioned relations still occupy centre stage for her fictional characters. Lastly, despite the thematic concern with the issues of sexuality, reticence is conspicuous in terms of its expression in language. Sexual desires and pleasures hardly find language in her works.

Mention may also be made of novels like Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters (1998) and Uma Vasudevan’s Shreya of Sonagarh (1993) where also the issue of female sexuality and desires are raised, and resistance is shown to the patriarchal sexual expectation (though once again in an inhibited language). However, Virmati in Difficult Daughter fails to appeal the readers because of her subsequent weakness and almost complete surrender to the professor, whom she chooses to marry defying her family. In the other novel, Shreya is married to Brijesh but lacks sexual compatibility with him. She learns the pleasures of body in extramarital affair with Anand, but eventually realizes that this would harm her in the end and returns to her husband. This pattern of sexual transgression leading to women’s objectification or their regret for undertaking a socially unacceptable step has been a staple formula for many other lesser-known women writers as well.
These details, in short, show the treatment of the theme of female sexuality and desires in women’s fictions till recently. Either these were not given a prominent position in the narrative, or the narrative closure hardly gave a positive portrayal of active female sexuality. Besides, a hesitation to put the ideas related to body and sexuality in language is palpable. Malashree Lal in her *The Law of the Threshold* (1995) describes the situation well. According to her woman writers often have to represent the disturbing aspects and experiences under mask and in socially acceptable forms. While she acknowledges that with the passage of time some issues related to women have started getting speculated more openly than others, nevertheless “a timidity about the expression of the self mark women’s texts in a repetitive way” (6). Lal observes that despite the fact that women’s novels often concentrate on the world “within” and this part of the threshold should contain “the private space of adult personal and sexual encounters,” yet surprisingly few women novelists “talk about body expression or even relatively uninhibited verbal exchanges of passions” (15). In fact, the public aspects of the private world only are depicted in most of these works.

These more or less ‘muted expressions’ of the female body and sexuality, its desires and pleasures have found a challenge in many of the novels of contemporary writers like Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Namita Gokhale and Shobha De. Their works foreground the issues of the female body and sexuality by giving it a central place in the narrative. In this practice of “writing the body” many points of continuity and rupture with the works of the earlier generation of writers discussed above can be deciphered. The major points of rupture are the – the central place given to these issues in the narratives, the conscious decision of the protagonists to transgress the sexual norms which do
not allow them freedom of expression and pleasure, absence of shame and guilt despite the challenges they face as a result of their crossing the threshold, a sympathetic narrative tone towards these transgressors, an openness in language and expression depicting the issues of sexuality, and narrative closure which does not suggest surrender or return. Novels such as *Paro* (1984), *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), *Snapshots* (1995), *Second Thoughts* (1996), *The God of Small Things* (1997), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), and *Shakuntala* (2005) (the texts chosen for the present study) more or less exhibit all these features. The points of continuity are also equally significant. Just like the works of earlier fictional writers, these texts are also realistic in nature. This is why though radical in their steps to assert the rights of their bodies, these protagonists have their moments of doubts before and after transgression. Though the narrative closure does not show these transgressors surrendering, their futures mostly remain uncertain after the boundaries are crossed. Besides, though the language is much overt than that of their predecessors, some inhibitions, some reticence is still apparent. Besides, these texts do not give alternatives to heterosexual desires. These show that while the social existence of the creators, their characters and consumers have changed, the transformation has not been complete. The constant tussle between resistance through body and submission to the system as seen in these writings reminds us of the highly complex environment of competing values in which these have generated. Yet one cannot deny that a new comfort with underscoring active female sexuality and its rights is discernible in these texts.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter many factors have contributed to the surge of this trend of representing the female body and sexuality in cultural
discourses. As far as the present subversive discourse in Indian English fiction is concerned, many other factors have been equally significant. Before proceeding further it may be noted that images of active female sexuality seem to have found an audacious expression in Indian English women’s ‘popular’ fiction much before their ‘literary’ counterpart. Whereas these popular novels seem to be as much influenced by feminist agendas as by the commodification of female sexuality; ‘literary’ ones seem to have benefited from the acceptance of the popular ones. David S. Reynolds in his study of the American Renaissance (1997) has established that far from being estranged from their context, the writers of “literary” texts are in large part created by it. In his work, he shows how along with the socio-cultural scenario, the trends and elements of “popular” culture and literature influence and shape major literary pieces. The same seems to be case of ‘literary’ novels by contemporary women writers. Shobha De’s ‘pulp’ writing though cannot be given the full credit of creating space for the fictional figure of the ‘sensuous woman,’ a woman asserting the rights of her body; her popularity since the late 80s has surely contributed to this upsurge. In fact, her novels display an unflinching critique of the patriarchal sexual norms in an unreserved language. Along with all the other socio-cultural factors discussed in the first part of this chapter, De’s impudent ‘writing of the body and sexuality’ in popular fictions, with simplistic narratives catering to the masses, can be said to have provided a rich soil for the later experimentations in serious literary endeavours of women writers on similar issues. While, De in “writing the body” seems to be cashing in on the commodification of literature, the writers of ‘literary’ novels can be held to be more influenced by feminist awareness.
Another important factor for this increased interest in foregrounding the issues of female sexuality and desires in recent Indian English women’s writings seems to be the means of communication – English language. Sociologists and literary critics have frequently emphasized that in India matters relating to the body and sexuality are delineated more comfortably in English (K. Hall 2005; Sen 2006, 2007; Srivastava 2004a, 2004b). Indian languages either have little vocabulary to give scope to an uninhibited expression, or hardly allow women writers to express themselves freely. Nabaneeta Dev Sen calls this “the freedom of foreign language” (2007: 11). According to her, while attempting to write about sexuality, this language gives a lot of power to women, because:

So many difficult things you could easily blurt out in English. Things you could never write down on paper in your mother tongue. Eroticism … is on your fingertips if you use English. Mother tongue stands over you like Mother herself... keeping [the woman writer] and eroticism apart, inhibiting … verbal expressions (2007: 11).

In addition, this language, because of its international market and the growing number of readers within India among the urban educated ‘progressive’ and ‘liberal’ circles, has allowed the writers to be more experimental and daring in their treatment of the subject matter. Besides, sensing the nerves of the public and ever growing numbers of readers, the publishers in English have become more open to these counter-hegemonic narratives. In fact, in present times any ‘decently’ written fiction dealing with the issues of the ‘subaltern’ easily finds a publisher. Moreover, the publishing world is no longer hostile to women writers as it used to be twenty years ago. Due credit must be also given to the ‘affluent’ readers, who are ready to consume these tales of self-assertion. Whatever may be the factors, it is true that Indian English women’s fiction in the present is more
radical and rebellious in its representation of active female sexuality. Nevertheless, several contradictions and paradoxes still underpin these works at all three levels – representation, production, and consumption, as the following chapters reveal.

Notes:

i. I here use Anthony Giddens’s (1991) idea who has called modern era a period of “emancipatory politics” where the claims are regularly made on the part of both the liberals and radicals for the empowerment and emancipation of the oppressed groups. He defines emancipatory politics as a “generic outlook concerned above all with liberating individuals and groups from constraints which adversely affect their life choices” (211). It is above all concerned with reducing or eliminating “exploitation, inequality, and oppression” (211).

ii. However, while this phenomenon has opened up discursive space for sexuality it has also led to the unprecedented promotion of safe sites of sexual behaviour. The result has been a rigorous campaigning of family and family values – ironically the site where women face utmost oppression and sexual violence.

iii. *India Today* and *Outlook India*, two leading magazines of contemporary India have conducted regular “sex/sexuality surveys” with various focuses like ‘what women want,’ ‘single women,’ ‘what men want’ since 2003. These surveys refer to the attitudinal changes Indian public is undergoing in present time regarding sex, sexuality, marriage and other issues relating to sexual pleasures, desires, and fantasies. These have frequently concluded that people are becoming more and more liberal-minded. However, these studies hardly capture the complicated nature of Indian society. A major drawback of these studies is their limited sample. Besides, the commercial aspect of these surveys also can hardly be denied, first, because of the added number of sale these special issues get and second, the way these cash on the idea of what it means to be sexy and how the ideal can be achieved. Details of the similar surveys conducted by other
agencies since 1978 is available on 

iv. According to Thapan “recolonization” is characterized by a mix of global elements translated into socially and culturally acceptable and thereby legitimate ideas, values and practices in everyday life” (2009: 20). It serves to “retain conventional images that will feed the post-colonial habitus as well as provide more challenging images, that through unconventional imagery, tease the viewer into surprise, submission or rejection” (72). She feels that the phenomenon of globalization and its implications for urban India over the last decade offers an example of recolonization of women (20).

v. Interestingly, in contrast to the newer and urban representational media, where there is still a reticence over the issues of active female sexuality, ethnographic works on traditional folk songs and narratives in the rural areas have underlined the presence of lustful, sensuous and desiring women. Two of such studies are: Gloria Goodwin and Ann Grodzins Gold’s *Listen to the Heron’s Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) and Prem Chaudhry’s “Lustful Women, Elusive Lovers: Identifying Males as Objects of Female Desire” in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 8.1 (2001: 23-50).

vi. Some of the contemporary writers who have raised the issues of female sexuality in Indian languages are: Bindu Bhatt (Gujarati), Mamoni Raisom Gowasmi (Assamese), Sangeeta Bandyopadhyay (Bengali), Sara Joseph (Malayalee), Sarojni Sahoo (Oriya) and Vaidehi (Kannada).

vii. Though Deshpande and Desai are quite active even now and are experimenting new themes and concerns in their works, for the sake of convenience I have grouped them together with the ‘earlier generation of writers.’ In a recent fiction, *In the Country of Deceit* (2008), for example, Deshpande has brought up the issue of sexuality in a manner never found before in her writings. The novel is about an adulterous relationship where the protagonists Devi ‘falls’ in love with a married man despite knowing that there is no future of the relationship. Deshpande has projected her protagonist in such a way that in choosing to do so, Devi seems to assert the rights of her body and its demands to have pleasure
rather than behaving in an immature or immoral way. This novel could have fitted well into the schema of the present study.

viii. In contrast, we have Kamala Das, the Indian English poet. Her poems exhibit her commitment of making 'public declaration of private experiences.' Against the prescribed themes of women’s writings, God and domestic bliss, she writes of the desires of women and how these are suppressed by the norms of the society. She has been the first of her kind in terms of using unreserved language to give expression to female body and sexuality in Indian English literature. An extract that makes her style evident goes like this:

Gift him all,
Gift him what makes you woman, the scent of
Long hairs, the musk of sweat between the breasts,
The warm shock of menstrual blood, and all your
Endless female hungers ("The Looking Glass").

ix. I have used the term ‘contemporary’ for these writers for the sake of convenience. Whereas Shobha De started writing in the 80s, and has been included in this category, Shashi Deshpande has been clubbed together with Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. This categorization has been done on the basis of the concerns and style of their novels, rather than mere chronology.

To the list may be added Anjana Appachana (Listening Now 1997), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (Sister of My Heart 1999), Rani Dharkar (Virgin Syndrome 1997), Sagarika Ghose (Blind Faith 2006) and Uma Vasudevan (Shreya of Sonagarh 1993) who have also raised the issues of female sexual desires in their fictions to different degrees.

x. In their study of sex and erotica in English women’s novels Ann Barr Snitow (1980) and Avis Lewallen (1992) have pointed out the significant contribution of feminist ideas in the proliferation of themes related to female sexuality in fiction. What Lewallen says about British novels holds good in the Indian context as well. She writes: “These things could not have been written or widely consumed as morally acceptable if the women’s liberation movement had not been in the

xii. In fact, now, most of the major publishing houses like Oxford, Cambridge, Macmillan, Routledge and Sage have a separate section for writings on and by women. Even the houses dealing with creative writings like Harper Collins, Penguin Publishers, Picador, have special imprints for women's fictions. Besides, equally significant has been the availability of the publishing houses devoted exclusively to women's writing like, The Feminist Press, Women Unlimited, Kali For Women, Virago and The Women's Press. For a woman writer writing in English it is no longer a hazard to find publisher for even her 'unconventional' works.


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