THREE

Paradoxes of the Assertion of the Body:
Resistance and Compliance within the Narrative

Women, who for centuries had been the objects of male theorization, male desires male fears, and male representations, had to discover and reappropriate themselves as subjects and the obvious place to begin was the silent place to which they had been resigned again and again .... to invent both a new poetics and new politics, based on women's reclaiming what had always been usurped from them: control over their bodies and a voice with which to speak about it.

-Suleiman 1990: 119

Positing women as sexually active, as creating a female subject of desire can destabilize the gender variables of which one does and which is done to, and envision a less aggressive pairing of where both do and are done to.

-Makinen 1996: 42

When the dominated quest for distinction leads the dominated to affirm what distinguishes them, that is, that in the name of which they are dominated and constituted as vulgar, do we have to talk of resistance? In other words, if, in order to resist, I have no other resource than to lay claim to that in the name of which I am dominated, is this resistance? Second question: when, on the other hand, the dominated work at destroying what marks them out as 'vulgar' and at appropriating that in relation to which they appear as vulgar. Is this submission? I think this is an insoluble contradiction: this contradiction, which is inscribed into the very logic of symbolic domination. Resistance may be alienating and submission may be liberating. Such is the paradox of the dominated, and there is no way out of it.

-Bourdieu 1994: 155 (emphasis added)
Contemporary India English women's fiction increasingly displays an ease with raising issues of the female body and sexuality. An important facet in many of these novels has been to show women asserting rights over their bodies, to pursue its pleasures and fulfil its desires. The fulfilment of libidinal desires outside the patriarchal norms of feminine sexual codes has been seen as a mark of 'resistance' to the social codes which demand constant sacrifice, adjustment and coping on the part of women. It has been widely observed that the female body and sexuality is a crucial site of woman's oppression in a patriarchal society (Bartky 1998; Bordo 2003; Cixous 1997; Cixous and Clement 1989; Dworkin 1981; Gotfrit 1991; Kirk and Okazawa-Rye 2001; Laxmi 2000; MacKinnon 1989, 2001; Menon 2002; Sarkar, 1994, Smith 2004, Thurston 1987). It is the site where her inferiority is marked and perpetuated though misogynist rules, regulations and myths. Linda Phelps has rightly observed that:

From an early age, we are alienated from ourselves as sexual beings by a male society’s ambivalent definition of our sexuality; we are sexy, but we are pure; we are insatiable, but we are frigid.... We are also alienated because we are separated from our own experience by the prevailing male cultural definition of sex - the male fantasy of active man and passive woman (qtd. in Thurston 1987: 33).

Under such circumstances any effort, any move, any narrative that undercuts the myth of passive female sexuality and shows women asserting their rights of body, in itself, is a challenge to the patriarchal theories, and thus, political. Women's persuasion of satisfaction and pleasures especially in and through sexual relations poses a threat to the norm of self-sacrificing passive female sexual object. This is a move from being 'an object of desire' to 'the subject of desire.' The contemporary Indian English women's fictions
foregrounding women's body and sexual desires enact this resistance politics. These novels project the protagonists who challenge the sexual hegemony of the patriarchal society through their transgressions. It is by and large an accepted premise that stories have a close relationship with reality. These do not only reflect reality, but can also create it by enumerating an alternative vision. By providing an alternative story of active female sexuality, these novels have contributed significantly in undermining the, till recently, unchallenged myths of female passivity and self-sacrifice, and opening up a space for discourses on female sexuality. Though earlier also there have been narratives which raised the issue of female sexuality, there are perceptible differences between these contemporary ones and their predecessors: These recent texts seem to be more radical in nature in terms of their treatment of this issue and the boldness of their female protagonists.

This chapter reads the practice of “writing the body” in contemporary Indian English women's fiction at the level of representation. Taking example of ten contemporary texts, five ‘literary’ and five ‘popular,’ I here underline how these narratives and their protagonists undermine patriarchy through their sexual politics. Despite the differences in terms of the larger narrative style and structure, and the background of the protagonists, these novels invariably give a lot of importance to the sexual contraventions of their protagonists which prove to be significant turning points in the narrative development as well as in the growth of the protagonists. These are the stories of mature women who choose to act in the ways they desire. Their sexual transgressions are consistently justified through the intricate position from where they undertake such steps and their own arguments as well as the narratorial voice so as to direct the sympathies of the
readers in a particular direction. Hence, these transgressors of the sexual norms
do not emerge as ‘unnatural’ or ‘sinners.’ The relative absence of shame and guilt
about having sexual desires and seeking fulfillment, mark (even if not
persistently) their positive acceptance of the same. Besides, the ease with which
they can think and at times speak about their body and its desires and experiences
further undercuts the patriarchal norms of feminine modesty. The most crucial is
the closure of these narratives which does not show a ‘wiser’ protagonist who has
‘learnt to adjust’ as a result of the sexual mis/adventures. With these aspects,
these novels have surely carved a niche for active female sexuality in the cultural
discourse. But rather than valorizing the practice, this chapter critiques this
‘writing’ of the body as a practice embedded in the same system which it
challenges. Contemporary critics have frequently criticized the idea of
“romanticizing” resistance (Basu 2000; Correll 1989; Gotfrit 1991; Kalpagam
2000; Katrak 2006; Merry 1995; Mohanty 2003; Sunder Rajan 1993, 2000;
Thapan 1997, 2009: 164-72; Vance 1984). They have emphasized that “we must
recognize the limited nature of agency even though the possibilities may be
endless” (Thapan 1997: 11). Like any other resistance discourse, women’s
assertion of sexuality also remains limited in nature. This chapter concentrates on
the potentials and limitations of this practice of “writing the body” as resistance
discourse at the level of representation. It exhibits how the assertion of the body
and sexual desires on the part of the female protagonists in the contemporary
novels lead to contradictory results – liberating as well as limiting them. This
chapter concentrates on how at the level of the narrative, the protagonists, caught
up in a realistic narrative world, (which is neither comfortable, not considers
women’s rights over their bodies legitimate) struggle to sustain their resistance to
the sexist system through their sexual choices, but do not succeed fully. Even the moments of victory are fraught with anxieties about the future. It underlines how the narratives though trying to justify the demands of body are not able to celebrate these. The resistance mostly fails to prove ‘transformative’ at a larger level for being a private act. Besides, the chapter points out how the moments of resistance and compliance occur simultaneously at times or proceed/follow each other as a part of constant tussle between self-assertion and survival. Thus, despite their political acts of foregrounding the issues and experiences, desires and pleasures of women these texts fail to envisage a fully emancipated female subject position. The reason is their location within the structures of power, which though powerful can not wholly contain either. Michel Foucault’s opinion here fits well when he says, “to say that one can never be outside power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat... [but] that there are no spaces of primal liberty” (Foucault 1980: 141). Herein, surfaces the paradox of the assertion of the body as resistance to sexism in the society. In the first part of the chapter the focus is on the five ‘literary’ novels – *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), *The God of Small Things* (1997), *Ladies Coupe* (2001), *Mistress* (2005), and *Shakuntala* (2005); and the second part deals with five ‘popular’ ones, *Paro* (1984), *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1992), *Snapshots* (1995), *Second Thoughts* (1996). The grouping points to the differences in narrative style and language. Both kinds – the ‘popular’ and the ‘literary’ – display the politics of “writing the body.”
Feminists have widely accepted that despite being the most obvious site of patriarchal control, the female body and sexuality provides a site where the system can be confronted and subverted (Bordo 2003; Correll 1989; Derné 1994; Gotfrid 1991; Jackson and Scott 1998; Price and Shildrick 1999; Singer 1993; Thapan 1997: 3, 2009; Waugh 1989). Women frequently transgress through their bodies, its excesses and its volatility and undercut the system which expects conformity and pretends to have complete control over of the body and sexuality. The protests through the body are enacted overtly or covertly, radically or subtly, consciously or unconsciously, depending on the agent as well as the circumstances in which it is acted out. The conscious and chosen acts of sexual transgression of norms on the part of women always come in conjunction with their right to self-determination. Choosing to fulfill the demands of the body denied to it can be either a result of autonomy or lead to the same (even if momentary). In some cases it can be both. Whatever may be outcome of such assertions, these acts illustrate a self-determining female sexual self. And herein lies the feminist politics of the assertion of the body. By posing a challenge to the system, these acts may lead to a reconsideration of the spaces, entitlements and rights of women in the society.

The five representative ‘literary’ novels selected for this project - *The Thousand Faces of Night, The God of Small Things, Ladies Coupe, Mistress,* and *Shakuntala* have female protagonists who radically challenge norms of society by exercising their sexuality outside the prescribed peripheries. They consciously choose the rights of their body and sexuality for fulfillment and freedom and thus
enact sexual politics. Before proceeding further and elaborating upon how these narratives and their protagonists subvert the *sexual economy* of the society and are limited by it, it must be clarified that these texts are about much more than just sexual transgression. Along with the issues of gender, the concerns of class, caste, age, history, identity, memory, freedom and destiny intersect constantly in these texts. The novels are intricately woven and each has a unique design and style of its own. This project does no claim to do justice to the intricacies of these novels. What it concentrates upon is just one aspect, but an integral one, in the development and design of the novel – the crossing of the threshold; the violation of “Love Laws” on the part of female protagonists.

Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* is the story of Devi and her struggles to make sense of life. Fed on the mythical stories of ‘rebellious women’ by her grandmother in childhood and of ‘ideal womanhood’ by her father in-law in youth, Devi’s life shuttles between conformity and rebellion. The observant Devi is surrounded by women who have survived in the world despite enormous difficulties – through surrender (like Mayamma, the maid), “patriarchal bargains,” (Kandiyoti 1998) (like Sita, her mother), or total renunciation (like Parvathi, her mother-in-law). These women have either embraced their destiny as body (Mayamma), suppressed the physical aspects of life in such a way as to become almost like an embodiment of order and control (Sita), or rejected it completely (Parvathi). Listening to stories and reading the lives of others around both liberate and enslave Devi who shapes and reshapes her life (40). Her inquisitive childhood nature and the desire to question every instance of injustice point to a daring nature that continued till her youth. Her stay and experiences in the USA for education confirm her love of adventure, freedom of spirit and
abhorrence of any string that would bind her. Nevertheless, equally powerful has been the controlling authority of her mother who taught her to “adjust” (17) and “please” (95) since childhood. While her “clandestine” affair with Dan is an example of her thirst to gain “experience” on her own (3, 6), her marriage with Mahesh as arranged by her mother indicates the internalization of patriarchal norms of femininity. Whilst getting married, she feels that she would be able to fulfill the requirements of an ideal daughter and an ideal wife, but disillusionments start soon after. Even after a long time her husband remains a “stranger” (49). Mahesh can not understand the adventurous and romantic nature of Devi who needs a companion rather than a provider in her husband. She finds him cold and detached. Whereas he has no inhibitions regarding the nightly rituals of “love-making,” showing off passions and emotions in the open is quit “unIndian” to him (49). As his official tours become longer and longer, and he starts showing apathy towards Devi for not being able to conceive, it becomes next to impossible for Devi to adjust any more. Having no company at home and no friends to move out, her life become stifled and she drifts into boredom. But her husband hardly notes it. Even when she wants to take up a job, the suggestion is rejected without a thought by Mahesh, who wants Devi to be an ideal ‘housewife.’ Devi realizes that her education had left her completely “unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of ... womanhood” (54). Left to herself, she begins resisting in her own ways. The first thing she takes recourse to is her body and sexuality. She starts refusing “her body” to Mahesh when he desires it (79). She “teases” him through this denial, but her “rebellious” step hardly affects him (71). This ‘token’ rebellion further leads to her radical transgression. The indifference of Mahesh had already pushed Devi towards Gopal, the famous
classical singer from the neighbourhood. When all her efforts to make Mahesh value her fail, and Gopal proposes that she come with him, she decides to leave Mahesh for good. Brought up in a culture where “love in conjugal relationships is always a matter of prescription” (Bose 2000: 259), it is, however, not easy for her. While in dreams and imagination she has many plans of rebelling, to enact these in reality is difficult and intimidating. As she speculates, “in my waking hours I am still no conqueror. My petty fears and that accursed desire to please, which I learn too well in girlhood, blur the bold strokes of ... revenge” (95). Still she acts to “be a woman at last” (95). Rather than just surrendering herself to the non-happening and uninspiring life of boredom and neglect, she takes a chance. Like a feminist “heroine,” in a “bold” and “carefree” step, she violates the sanctity of matrimony, for the life of adventure and romance (138). In daring to do so she steps outside the patriarchal norms and asserts the right over her body and life. This is the most radical step in her life through which for the first time she chooses something for herself. As later Devi contemplates, “I have made very few choices, but once or twice, when a hand wavered, when a string was cut loose, I have stumbled onstage, greedy for a story of my own” (137). Her refusal to be a decorative doll in Mahesh’s house is one such choice. Ironically, her heroism is undercut when she feels herself, even if for a moment, to be behaving like a “common little adulteress” (95). If this revolt through body does not make Devi live in bliss, it surely makes her more independent. A short stay with Gopal makes her recognize that he is also, like others, a man in love with himself. What troubles Devi more is the treatment she gets from the people around for living with Gopal out of wedlock. Though she had revolted against the oppressive system to seek happiness for herself, to create a “story” of her own, society
around is hardly able to digest and respect her individuality. When she is frequently labelled in insolent terms and seen as an ‘available’ sexual object she can hardly resist it. Thus, her assertion of her right over the self, a move away from the confining as well as protective walls of the household, is thwarted by the society in which she finds herself. Yet, it is the same move which frees her, she has to be “no longer on the run” (138). One step out of matrimony and she is unable to compromise anywhere else. This time without much hesitation she leaves Gopal and comes back to her mother. This ‘return’ to the mother is not the return of a defeated daughter. And she has not come back all broken, to be protected and guided by the mother, but as the one who has come to stay, to “love” her mother and to “fight” and “to make sense of it all” (139). But at the same time the end of the narrative indicates that just the assertion of the body and one’s rights over it, can hardly be a solution for women to resist sexism.

*The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy displays a similar assertion of the self and the body and the complications involved in it. This is a novel about the transgression of “Love Laws” (33), i.e. sexual norms, as well as the gender bias determining the degree of these transgressions and their consequences in society. Here, Ammu and Rahel, the two protagonists violate the most basic laws of sexuality that govern their social existence, that is of being a mother and a sister. Focalized mostly through Rahel (both child and adult), in this third person narrative, the narrator comes in every now and then, to comment on the action, guiding the tone and reception of events and characters. The central event of the novel is the sexual transgression of a desiring Ammu who chooses forbidden “happiness” (218, 332) for herself. From a traditional perspective, she is a divorcee who shamelessly and without any concern for family honour and her
young twins, indulges herself in sexual gratification with a lower caste “paravan” and in the end pays a heavy price for her “sins” with “Two lives. Two children’s childhoods. And a history lesson for future offenders” (336). However, this is not the way the story is told. The events remain the same, but sensitivity changes as the narrator not only offers a justification of Ammu’s ‘human needs’ but also exposes the double standards in social norms and morality by drawing a parallel between the sexual transgression of Ammu and her brother Chacko.

In the novel, Ammu emerges as a young girl, who chooses to marry outside her community (Syrian Christian) to escape “the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, and long-suffering mother” (39). Unfortunately, she shortly realizes that “she [had] made a mistake” (38). However, first, by deciding to marry as per her wishes and later, by refusing to sell her body to her husband’s boss, Ammu asserts her individuality and her right over her own life and body. Eventually, when the circumstances become intolerable, leaving her husband, she returns to Ayemenem, “To everything that she had fled from only a few years ago” (42). Still young and full of life and vibrancy, the neglect which she receives from her own family and the Ayemenem society makes her comprehend the sham of traditional customs and “Love Laws” which demand sacrifice just from women. The only choice she is left with is between rebellion and conformity; “to smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (176) or live with emptiness and become another bitter Baby Kochamma. And Ammu decides to walk out of the mapped boundaries, and venture into the ‘unmappable,’ untouchable territory. She chooses to love Velutha, a lower caste paravan, in whom she finds an equal companion, one who shares her rage towards the rigid system of the society. Brinda Bose in this context has observed that:
In asserting her own ‘biological desire’ for a man who inhabits a space beyond the permissible boundaries of ‘touchability’, it appears that Ammu attempts a subversion of caste/class rules, as well as the male tendency to dominate by being necessarily the initiator of the sexual act (2006: 92).

Accordingly, by giving a background of a deprived and loveless past the narrator justifies Ammu’s human need to love and be loved and her violation of the feminine norms. Concurrently, the narrator directs irony towards the duplicitous nature of the sexual standards by providing a parallel reference to the ‘physical needs’ of both Chacko and Ammu. Though both desire fulfillment, their needs entail different responses from Mammachi — a representative patriarchal sanctioning authority. Whereas, Mammachi is quite tolerant of her son’s illicit sexual relationships with the women in the factory because “he can’t help having a Man’s Needs,” (168) and even facilitates his ventures, the very idea that a woman can also have “needs” is unthinkable for her (357-58). In the “Indian” culture, where woman is required to observe the ideals of fidelity and submission within marriage and sacrifice and selflessness as mother, (Kumkum Roy 1996; Niranjana 2001) by choosing to love Velutha, Ammu actively asserts herself and “set [-s] aside the morality of motherhood and divorcehood” (44).

Rahel has inherited her mother’s unconventionality and the questioning attitude. Even when she is an adolescent, her rebellious nature becomes evident in the narrative. Since “She didn’t know how to be a girl” (17, original emphasis), she keeps on drifting, breaking one rule after the other in school, in hostels, in college. She even drifts in and out of marriage without any passion or need and defies the sexual standards of the society. The most transgressive moment in Rahel’s life as well as the novel, however, comes when she challenges ‘kinship
norms.’ She chooses to heal her brother’s psychic wounds “through the bereaved solace of incest” (Ahmad 2006: 38). Once again, the Love Laws are broken. While choosing to do so, Rahel, just like her mother asserts her right over her own body, though not for “happiness, but hideous grief” (328).

Thus, in the novel both Ammu and Rahel surface as rebellious and sexually assertive women who refuse to be controlled by the gender biases and regulations of the society which deny woman the most fundamental right over their bodies. However, this sort of resistance to patriarchal norms through foregrounding the body comes with its own limitations. There are surely moments of transgression and resistance in the lives of Ammu and Rahel, but, these seem to be ‘reactive’ at the individual level, rather than ‘revolutionary’ resistance that aims at social transformation. First to take the case of Ammu, her life has been full of substantial ‘moments’ of sexual resistance, such as – opting for a love marriage, that too an inter-religious one and without the consent of her parents and later breaking the vow of matrimony and coming back to her natal house. But once she takes up the most daring of the transgressions, and breaks the “Love Laws” challenging family honour, caste boundaries, and norms of motherhood and femininity; she has little to fall back upon. U. Kalpagam’s point that “Patriarchal affiliations serve several functional and emotional needs” and “offer both securities and control” (2000: 176) fits well in her situation. Once Ammu has crossed the threshold, she is left with almost no security and the consequences she faces are disastrous. While we admire Ammu as she chooses a way for herself and asserts her ‘being’ as a woman of flesh and blood, rather than a disembodied creature; we also notice that once her violation of class/ caste and sexuality norms becomes public, she is regarded as “veshya” (8) or prostitute not only by
outsiders, but also by her own family. Her celebration of body leads to its ‘objectification’ in the police station where she is molested by the custodians of law. She is confined in the house and despite her best efforts, fails to save the life of her lover, who is framed through false allegations. She is too powerless to fight the system and succumbs to the dictates of the family. That remains the best possible alternative for her and her children at that moment. Her moments of rebellion give way to moments of submission. It may be said that the resistance which Ammu exercises is an individual one and fails mainly because she is not able to give up the ties of family and motherhood. Unlike Nora (the protagonist of A Dolls House) who could leave her three children to explore an identity of her own, or Edna Pontellier (the protagonist of The Awakening) who could embrace death to free herself completely from the system, Ammu “remains firmly enmeshed within or dependent on the economic or cultural system she is responding to” (Basu 2000: 185). This closeness to family and kin limits her life even when she is away in Kottayam to find a source of livelihood. Without much education or working experience she finds it difficult to support her children on her own, and depends on the support of her natal family and ex-husband. While Estha is sent back to his father, Rahel becomes the responsibility of her grandparents. The husband and the family against whom Ammu had rebelled against just some time back, become her only resort. These are compromises which Ammu’s rebellious spirit can hardly accept; they take toll on her health and she dies as a destitute in a hotel. In projecting such a fate for the rebellious protagonist Roy seems to be bound by both the realistic nature of the narrative along with the trends of the genre, where generally, as Nira Gupta Cassale says “the more radical the gesture of resistance, the more conservative [is] the
resolution”(2000: 156). Though the narrator shows us the justification of Ammu’s sexual transgression, the real world does not become a utopia, which would accept her without reservations. If we try to critically read the whole incident of transgression of “Love Laws” by Ammu, we must give due importance to both her intentions and the consequences of the act. When done so it becomes next to impossible to decide for certain the success or the failure of the resistance. Even her moments of compromise for survival can be read as strategic resistance to the system, which otherwise would not allow her to carry on. In fact, in the narrative, the moments of resistance and submission to the system emerge simultaneously, often the results of the same actions. On the other hand, Rahel’s transgression remains too personal to be called political. It is political only at the level of the ‘narrative,’ but within the narrative world it remains very much private. Like Ammu, even Rahel has broken the laws of femininity and sexuality throughout her life – by being too indifferent to social norms of femininity, and drifting in and out of marriage without much concern. But it must be noticed that Rahel’s acts of defiance are mostly non-confrontational and that is her way of life. She is least bothered about the society to either accept its rules or question them. Even her most crucial transgression of kinship norms remains too private to question the dominant system in the world of the narrative. Thus, the sexual politics of the narrative contains its own pitfalls. vi

Anita Nair’s Ladies Coupe projects a different transgression of sexual laws. Here rather than the norms of matrimony, age bars and laws of ‘respectability’ are desecrated. It is the story of Akhila, a single woman in her mid-forties who was never allowed to live her own life. From first playing the role of a dutiful daughter to being a responsible provider to her family Akhila
never got to be her ‘self.’ In fulfilling the needs and expectations of her family she had to ‘stifle’ the woman and her desires within her. The novel traces her journey from being just an appendage in the life of others to her determination to live life on her own terms, to let the “woman” inside her have her rights and pleasures.

At the age of nineteen, when her father dies, Akhila has to don the role of the provider of her family, forgetting all her youthful desires. After eleven years of providing, when everybody else in the family is settled, she wants to “feel like a woman again” (77). Ironically none of her family members raise the issue of her marriage. “In their mind she had ceased to be a woman and had already metamorphosed into a spinster” (77). She desperately wants to be loved, to have her sexual fantasies satiated, but finds no outlet. Even when Hari, a man around seven years younger, proposes that she marry him, Akhila knows that her family and the society would never let her live in peace with him. Though she knows that Hari loves her, she succumbs to the dictates of the culture that a woman can not marry a man younger than her. While she rebels against the norms of propriety by spending a weekend with Hari far away from the familiar surrounding, and enjoys every moment of being a woman, feeling passion and fulfilling the desires of flesh, she knows that this is going be a sort of goodbye to Hari. Thus, in her life the physical desires either remain discontented or only satisfied fleetingly. She does not dare to hurt her family, in whose world “women never knew what it was to desire” (151). To overcome the repression of her sexual desires and fulfill her needs to be touched and loved, she even lets a stranger explore her body on bus journeys. Though she knows that no respectable woman would do that, she loves the awakened sensation of “being a woman,” “of
being desired," but only till the time it is discovered by others (139). Accordingly, she has an intense longing to love and be loved, but has no strength to acknowledge it publicly. The only place she can have her desires sated is in her dreams, but even there her family keeps on warning her of dire consequences (she cannot even dream without her family in it) (92).

It is at the age of forty five that she realizes that for all her sacrifices, she has gained nothing except loneliness in life, having nobody to share her life with, and a tag of eccentric “spinster”(4). Now, Akhila craves a life and ‘identity’ of her own, rather than still allowing others to take advantage of her. “What Akhila most desired in the world was to be her own person…. To do as she pleased. To live as she chose with neither restraint nor fear of censure” (200-201). Yet, for a woman like Akhila, to desire of the heart is one thing, and to actually realize is another. She, with her conservative Brahmin middle-class ethos and until now secured life in the ‘family,’ is incapable to making up her mind as to what she wants – to live a ‘free’ life of self-fulfillment or a ‘protected’ life of conformity. To settle the confusion, she takes up a solo journey from Bangalore to Kanyakumari, which not only allows her an escape from the family and its guard, but also gives her the opportunity to access the uninhibited personal narratives of fellow women travellers. Feminists have frequently emphasized the significance of travelling (Heilbrun 1988; Lawrence 1994; Wesley 1998) and sharing of personal narratives for the individual growth and empowerment of women (Beck 2005; Scheman 1980). In Akhila’s case we see both inspire her to reassess her life and assert her right on her life and body.

The women who she meets on the train in the ladies coupe are from completely dissimilar backgrounds and from different age groups. Despite the
differences, all share in a sisterhood of being a woman in a patriarchal society. At Akhila’s urging they all agree and tell their life stories one after the other. Their stories are about women’s struggle to control their lives and survive. They are about their desires, expectations, frustrations, and negotiations. All the stories refer to the sexism that these women had faced in their lives one way or the other, and how they managed to carry on through their candour, their subversions, subtle strength, and courage. Thus, the stories are not as much about the victimization of women, as they are of the ability to cope and the desire to live in the best possible manner. As she treads through their narratives, Akhila continuously responds to them and is a changed person after every narrative. More or less these narratives tell her to listen to her heart rather than brood over how the world would respond to her acts; that she must “learn to move on with the tide of life rather than be cast on its banks” (208). Listening to their stories she is a new person and her transformation is complete when she reaches Kanyakumari. Travelling away from the family and listening to the uninhibited stories of fellow travellers, Akhila arrives at a peace with herself. She discovers that her sexuality and the desire to fulfill its demands are natural and she has the right to do so. Under the effect of these new convictions, in the last section of the novel, Akhila asserts her right on the pleasures and desires of a woman:

Where the body goes, the mind will follow, she tells herself, repudiating all that has been instilled in her. One feat of courage to tread where she has never gone before...she feels lust crouch in her temples and demands that she do its bidding (272).

By satiating her lust with a young man whom she meets on the beach, she not only awakens the almost dead senses of her body and claims her sexuality,
but also transgresses the norm of 'adventure' which says that it suits the young only, and that in the middle age women become or should become more conforming, sexually and morally. This affirmation of the 'rights' of the body as a part of self-discovery provides her a positive energy, facilitating her decision to become the 'mistress' of her life. Now she does not 'fear' anyone or anything. She has got her answer to the question with which she had started her journey:

She has no more doubts about what her life will be if she lives alone. It may not be what she has dreamt it to be, but at least, she would have made an effort to find out. And perhaps that is all she needs to ask life now. That she be allowed to try and experience it (271).

Now Akhila is certain that "she won't let her family use her anymore" (270). As she has discovered the woman within herself, now she must fulfill her needs too, and must write the text of her destiny. Thus, the narrative underlines the rights of body and sexual fulfillment for woman as a part of self-assertion. It shows that sexual liberation may lead to the liberation of individuality. As sexuality is the site where women are oppressed most, its assertion and acceptance can lead to the path of freedom. Akhila’s rebellion through her body liberates her as much as it explodes the shallow control of the societal expectations from her. However, this resistance through the assertion of body remains partial in nature for being exercised far away from the site of oppression. Whereas the narrative shows the sexual adventure as the cathartic point in the protagonist’s life, a point when Akhila is ready to be the controller of her life, one remains unsure as to how she is going to cope with the protest she would meet from her family. The novel leaves certain issues unaddressed and ambivalent through its open ending.
Radha is the protagonist of *Mistress*, a multilayered narrative of “art and adultery,” “love and deceit” by Anita Nair (blurb). In this novel we get a first person account of Radha, her husband Shyam, and her uncle Koman, as they speculate on their past and present, relationships and feelings. The story starts with the arrival of travel writer Christopher Stewart, who comes to meet Koman, a famous Kathakali dancer, in order to know both about the old man and his art, as well as his own past, his parentage. It is the arrival of this charming, ‘alien’ cello-player, which brings turbulence in the life of all around, especially Radha, and lets her discover her ‘self.’

Radha is an adventurer and a romantic at heart, and feels suffocated and dominated in her marriage life with Shyam who hardly knows the difference between loving and possessing (52). Whereas Shyam wants her to play mistress – “someone to indulge, and someone to indulge him with feminine wiles” (53), she can not comply with his expectations. Her unhappiness is rooted in her utter dislike of the mannerisms and pretensions of Shyam. The narrative reveals that after having a misadventure in her licentious youth with a much older married man, just to abort her past, Radha agrees to marry Shyam, a man much below the status of her family and very different from her in tastes. Allowed no life of her own, no freedom, she knows well in the eight years of married life that she would not be able to develop love and passion for Shyam; she can only loath, pity and hate him (9). Her life is full of little acts of resistances such as the way she dresses (mostly in jeans), the way she talks (insolently), the language she uses (with a lot of f- and c- words) and the way she behaves with her sister in law, etc. Except these little ways of teasing Shyam, Radha’s life is non-happening.
Chris is a turning point in this listless life. Radha gets attracted towards him because of the air of chaos he exudes in contrast to the orderly and controlled life Shyam embodies. Chris arouses the old passion and lust in her. The one she had felt earlier. The only difference is that now she is mature. First she fears this adulterous surge in her. “When I married Shyam, I swore never to flout the rules of custom again,” (54) but her attraction towards Chris makes her grow disdainful of honour, and contemptuous of conventions as represented by Shyam and his sister Rani Oppol. These conventions and codes of honour demand a complete submission of her individuality to the desires and life of her husband. On the other hand, with Chris she feels equal, because of their past, because of their temperament. Her intense desire for Chris becomes her only way to solace, when Shyam violates her physically as a result of his insecurity and in order to assert his rights as a husband (163). It is at this point when Radha decides to use her body and her sexuality to subvert Shyam’s control. She makes up her mind, “I would pretend as if nothing had happened. I would cheat him of the pleasure of having imposed his will” (165). She enters the territory of deceit to resist Shyam who thinks that he “owns her” (173). She rebels against her husband and the oppressive system he represents, through her body. The earlier guilt she felt while feeling attracted towards Chris vanishes, once she is virtually raped by her husband. She takes life into her hands and lets herself loose. Chris brings in “colours” and happiness in her “grey” and dull life (252). In his company, she feels free from her “dead marriage” (207). In their clandestine meetings, Chris satiates her desire for passionate love and freedom. She is an equal sexual partner with him. Feminists have observed that in an egalitarian sexual relationship, man and woman should be equal partners, and there should be reciprocity of doing
and done to, of submission and domination (Hollibaugh 1998; Makinen 1996; Singer 1993; Suleiman 1990). Initially, the relationship between Radha and Chris is like this. And Radha feels that she knows happiness and perfect bliss. But is does not take her long to see that Chris is quite insensitive in many matters. When he blames Radha for their adulterous relationship and trapping him into it, Radha understands what it was all about. When they discuss matters other than love Radha realizes that they inhabit two different worlds, and his intolerance unnerves her. As the “wonder” of their passionate love starts “diminishing,” (348) she comes to see that for Chris, their relationship is nothing more than an “interesting encounter” (399). Her revolt through the body fails to provide her a sustainable support system. But this does not break her completely. After moments of agony, she gathers herself. This time she does not seek anybody’s protection and shield as she did in her youth. Whereas first she thought that she would need time to make Chris understand her value and leave Shyam, now she knows that it would not change life much either way. She reflects, “When I think of Chris, what I see is a shadow of Shyam. And when I think of Shyam, what I see is the possibility of escape with Chris. I know for certain that I cannot live with one or the other” (398, emphasis added). She feels guilty about Shyam, not because she committed adultery, but because of robbing him of his sense of pride, the only thing he possessed. Besides, she is struck by the thought “that this love affair of mine is no more than an act of defiance” (397). And here is a moment of revelation for her. She knows that Chris was no more that perhaps a means of “shrugging away of ennui,” (348) a pretext of her overcoming the trap of fractured marriage. This is a time when she discerns that she is pregnant with Chris’s child. She knows it well that she can choose with whom she would like to
spend her life. Chris would certainly take the responsibility if he knows about the child and Shyam would also accept her and her child, being impotent and ‘terribly’ in love with her. But she does not want to pressurize Chris or do injustice to Shyam. Whereas she lets Chris go, she decides to leave Shyam as well. The narrative, thus, shows her growth as a human being. When she reflects, “I can not continue to play wife merely because it frees me of worries,” (426) it shows both her sense of morality and responsibility. And this has come through the assertion of the rights of her body and her passion for Chris that arouses a new courage in her which lets her take life into her own hands. Now she does not want any more compromises and compulsions in life. Rather she is ready to give life another chance. To take time and relearn the skills of “survival” (426). She is confident enough to live without the ‘protection’ Shyam could provide her and the ‘courage’ Chris would have ignited. Her freedom of spirit is transparent when she tells her uncle:

All my life I have stumbled from one thing to another, persuading myself that this is how it should be. I have never behaved as if I have a mind of my own. I have never made a decision of my own. I have let myself be swept along. Isn’t it time I assumed some responsibility for my life? (402)

The narrative ends with her reconciliation with the self, a time when she is at peace, a time when she has fallen in love again – this time with her unborn child – and has enough “time to count her joys and blessings” (426). Thus, it is the story of Radha’s claim not only over the self but also her body and the new life developing in it. But as Srimati Basu has aptly observed that, “While the notion of resistance celebrates non-compliance to systems of power, it is critical to remember the limitations of the structures of power within which resistance is
framed” (2000: 188). The limitations of this resistance through the body must not be overlooked. Whereas feminists have frequently asserted that accepting the rights over the body may lead to empowerment, in Radha’s case, it leads to conflicting results. It gives her pleasure, but it also leads to violation which she can not defend against. Her assertion of the body is futile when she is raped by her husband and is left with no better option than to just pretend as if nothing had happened. Besides, she can hardly accept her desire for Chris openly in front of anybody except her uncle, and has to keep it a secret. While there are moments when she finds justification for her adultery in the pleasure she is getting (205, 216), she can not keep herself aloof from the scorching eyes of everybody around who looks at her with suspicion. The narrative is full of moments when she feels guilty (252) and hates herself for “wantonness,” for “behaving like a bitch in heat” (291). These instances undercut the politics of the assertion of the body, which at times looks more like an uncontrollable passion finding expression in sexual encounters. In fact, it is much later that Radha understands that her passion for Chris was more a form of defiance than love for the man. Whereas one can not deny that it is the same ‘defiant act’ through which a new Radha is born – one who knows how to deal with life on her own and that too, without guilt and pretensions, it remains uncertain as to how far her resistance was intentional, and not the result of some ‘fatal attraction.’ And thus the ambivalence emerges.

The ambivalence regarding the assertion of the body and its pleasures forms the core of *Shakuntala* by Namita Gokhale. Set in a time and a place different from ours this is the story of spirited, adventurous and stubborn Shakuntala who is destined to suffer the “samaskara of abandonment” like her
namesake (7). But unlike Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, who is coy, shy and dependent on fate, she chooses to be her own mistress and shapes her destiny.

A girl brought up in nature, from her childhood, Shakuntala had exulted in the freedom of spirit. Restlessness marks her life and movements from the beginning. Despite living under the watchful eyes of her mother, she frequently devices ways of escape. A rebel from the beginning, she does not comprehend the denial of body and physical existence in her family. Denied education and the autonomy her brother gets, marriage seems to be the only escape from her situation (18). It is on the onset of her menarche, her first escape from home that she meets a woman who reveals the powers and mysteries of the mother goddess and of being a woman. And the lesson that one must be ‘mistress of herself’ is one that she follows throughout her life (36). After coming of age, when she marries Srijan, she hopes for the liberated and unrestrained life of birds and clouds. For her marriage is more a flight than bondage. The fact that she does not want to follow the star of fidelity, Arundhati, and deliberately ignores its presence when her husband wants to show it to her on their first night together (42) indicates what lies in the future. Her liberated spirit wants no impositions. Whereas in her husband’s house she enjoys a “rare” freedom and a life completely free from responsibility, she still seeks something else (41). With Srijan she learns the pleasures and joys the body can give. But she is not satisfied. Her restless spirt wants to see the world, know the world and experience it. She feels dissatisfied with the limited freedoms of being a woman. Little episodes hint at her discontent. More than having ornaments she has the desire to see the elephant; she hates being confined to the interior chamber during her menstrual periods; she is not able to understand the fear the priests have of a woman’s
womb and her blood. The unrest grows in her as she realizes that she is not able to fulfill her husband’s desire of progeny despite her best efforts. The rituals performed with this end evoke only indifference in her. She feels that her desire to experience the world is more profound than to be a mother (76). And when her husband brings a handmaiden from one of his trips, she knows that his love has been divided forever. She feels depressed and cheated. Whether it was an effect of the visit to the temple of matrikas, the powerful goddesses which makes her too assertive (77), or her inborn talents to run away (37), when she meets a man from a different world, a different place — a Yavana, who promises her a life of adventure and passion, she knows her life has changes forever. Now she can not go back and live the life of Shakuntala. Rather than suffering under the constant pangs of jealousy and suspicion, uncompromisingly she breaks the vows of matrimony and gives herself over to a more or less bohemian life by accompanying her Greek lover. The decision changes her life for good “disengaging ... her life and destiny ... from the wheel of duty and dharma and what should be, throwing it directly into ... [her] own hands” (110). Rather than shame, she feels exulted and rejoices in assuming the identity of a Yaduri (130), a fallen woman. She surrenders herself to a world of pleasures, reveling in “utter and absolute freedom” from rules and bonds, the way she had always desired (136). With him she satiates her hunger for knowledge and experience as much as of flesh. This assertion of the self over the body frees her from bondage of any sort. It is her way of putting up resistance to the world that does not treat women as equal. However, this fails to give her peace. Restlessness seeps into her life once again. Leslie Gottfrit has noted that:
Even when women do experience pleasure on the site of the body it is not without conflict. Sexual expression itself carries with it multiple and contradictory identities and experiences: loving and violence, pride and humiliation, empowerment and oppression, and pleasure and shame (1991: 189).

Shakuntala’s life embodies these contradictions. She realizes that the pleasures of the flesh without dignity can hardly give satisfaction. In the company of the Yavana she is unable to assume self-respect. Her act of self-assertion in choosing to live an adventurous life makes her completely dependent on the Yavana. Despite her love for the man and the passionate and tender bond they share, she regrets abandoning her husband and with him the dignity of being a wife. When she is not allowed to enter the holy city of Kashi, the city of her dreams, with her lover, she wishes for a life of dignity and respect. But now she is a woman "without recourse" (163). The restlessness which had earlier made her give up her married life soon compels her to forsake this world as well. The challenge Shakuntala had posed to the societal norms and reveled so much in, eventually subsumes her completely. Thus, the sexual politics of this novel about the courage of a woman who lives life on her own terms and challenges the codes of matrimonial fidelity is somewhat tamed by the narrative end with the death of the protagonist. Still her robust and passionate thirst for worldly life and lust leave the readers with an alternative picture of woman as other than passive victim of social repression.

These representative contemporary Indian English novels embody the politics of the assertion of the body on the part of women. As the narratives discussed above suggest, this affirmation despite its potential for undercutting the patriarchal norms, remains entrapped in the system it challenges. Despite the
differences in terms of narrative ends, and the sexual codes transgressed, what makes these narratives subversive is that here women do not just wish to challenge the system; they act accordingly and with the full consciousness of a mature individual. In representing desiring women these novels effectively dramatize a rupture from the ‘normal’ rules of the world and reveal alternative possibilities. They enact the lives of women who, in the face of conflict between the security of a culturally defined feminine identity and the uncertainty of autonomous urges to self-definition, choose to live life in their own terms, and “claim personal agency rather than passive capitulation” (Frye 1986: 5). Unable to shed the burden of tradition and culture fully, these protagonists have moments of weakness and compromise in their lives, before and after the act of transgression, but this does not lessen the political significance of their acts. The narratorial voice and the focalizer let the reader see the world from the perspective of these transgressors, who have their own justifications for the act. In addition, what makes these novels more radical is the way experiences and parts of the female body and sexuality are expressed. Women writers till recently could hardly refer to the phenomena relating to body and sexuality explicitly in their writings (Joseph 2004; Lal 1995; Sen 2000). These novels have not only made the sexually transgressive women their protagonists, but also transgressed the norms of “modesty” in women’s writings. These are quite uninhibited in referring to the intimate female body parts and processes like the onset of menarche, menstruation, the intense pleasure and desire of sexual copulation, the pain of being violated. Moreover, it is not just at the level of terminology that this text is explicit; it is so at the level of representation as well. Sexual encounters are described quite elaborately in most of these novels. Whereas in traditional
narratives sexual encounters are either glossed over or depicted from a male perspective, where men alone are the initiators and active participants, these fictions frequently depict sexual encounters from women’s perspective where they are generally the initiators and equal participants. Though it would be very easy to dismiss both these aspects as a “necessary ingredient of marketability” (Bose 2006: 93) and titillation, we need to recognize the politics inherent in them. Coming from a woman writer, such a sexually explicit language as well as detailed account of sexual encounters have a shocking effect on conventional readers. Not only the narrative and the narrator, these protagonists also, be it Devi, Ammu, Rahel, Akhila, Radha or Shakuntala, are all equally at ease with their bodies. Their femaleness does not evoke revulsion in them. While in patriarchy, women are often trained to ignore and feel ashamed of their bodies and its demands, these women have no qualms in this regard. They can easily look at themselves and accept their corporeality. It is their comfort with the self which facilitates their transgression through the body.

Although this is true, equally valid are the limitations of this assertion of the self through sexual transgression in these narratives. As enumerated earlier, in most cases the acts of sexual transgression soon lead to the disillusionment of its efficacy as the foolproof solution to the various oppressions these women are facing (Devi, Radha, Ammu, Shakuntala). The most significant paradox with regard to the politics of assertion of the female body and sexuality lies in the fact that when these assertions are overt and public, it does not take long for the society to objectify the involved women (Gotfrit 1991; Wolff 1990), and when these are private these hardly qualify as political stance (Basu 2000; Kalpagam 2000). Thus, we see that the claims of self-determination and subjectivity by
asserting the rights of the body lead to the objectification of some of these protagonists – Ammu is regarded as _veshya_, Gopal’s associates start looking at Devi as a woman who is “available”, and Shakuntala loses her dignity and becomes a ‘fallen’ woman. The patriarchal world cannot allow dignity to women who flaunt their sexuality. On the other hand, the sexual rebellion of Rahel and Akhila remains too private to have any political significance because “when resistance is covert, it does little to dislodge dominant inscriptions of femininity or female sexuality. While a disruptive discourse exists underground, it has little visible effect” (Basu 2000: 190). Hence, the resistances of most of these women fail to entail the desired effect for one reason or the other. Besides Ammu, Shakuntala, and Devi’s financial dependence undercuts their desire to set the self ‘free’; the narratives remains ambiguous as to the consequences of the transgressions of Akhila, Rahel and Radha. These ambiguities proscribe the celebration of the assertion of the body as a foolproof means of ‘feminist resistance.’ Rather, these narratives, despite their definite sexual politics, underline the idea that erotica is rarely a _sufficient_ mode of overcoming social oppression. vii One must take some more complex steps in which assertion of the body may be one element, but is hardly the only one.

II

The overt politics of the assertion of the female body seems to have started much earlier and in a much more audacious form in the Indian English women’s ‘popular’ fictions. The genre that started with the publication of Namita Gokhale’s _Paro: Dreams of Passion_ in 1984 and was popularized by Shobha De is one that is neither romance nor a traditional tale of women’s victimization or their
capacities to ‘adjust.’ Written from women’s perspective and explicitly sexual in theme and language these fictions have ruled the Indian English bestsellers charts for more than two decades. This part of the chapter underlines the sexual politics of some of these texts at the level of representation. Written by women and focalized through women protagonists these texts undercut the sexual norms of passive female sexuality. With their impudent treatment of body and sexuality, these tales undermine the repression of the female body and sexual desires and fantasies. They subvert the sexual codes that allow liberty of sexual exploits and experimentation to men only. However, very much like the ‘literary’ fictions discussed above, these novels also display an ambivalence in their resistance to patriarchal sexual codes. While deflating the expected models of femininity by dramatizing sexually desiring women and their subjectivity, these novels use a technique and style that does not seem to confront the codes of society overtly. Like their other counterparts in popular culture, these novels contain elements of both conformity and discontent with the system.

Written in a humorous-satirical tone with the intention of making fun of the shallow life of the Delhi socialites, the novel Paro: Dreams of Passion interrogates the sacrosanct traditions of the male dominated society. In the face of the restrictive taboos on the open expression of female desires and sexuality by women and specially women writers, the novel seems to tear apart these norms. The novel does not only have Paro, embodying the celebration of the female body and its immense sexuality, as its protagonist, but also Priya the narrator who tells the story of this sexually charged woman in an equally bold fashion.

The novel has a thin story line. It seems to just record the life-long sexual ventures of a candid and confident ‘temptress’ Paro since she marries B. R. – a
rich businessman till she commits suicide out of eventual desperation. In addition, we do get to know the premarital and extramarital escapade of the narrator as well whose life is intricately related with her object of study. The novel, in brief, is about lust and passion. But what makes this work with its clichéd theme of soft erotica, interesting and ‘political’ is its usurpation and subversion of the gendered roles of such tales. Whereas conventionally in such tales of sexual adventure the woman is only an object of desire and incidents are represented from the perspective of the man alone, here we have a reversal of conventions. This is a novel about the assertion of active female sexuality. Though not an admirable figure, the protagonist of the novel surely challenges the norms of the society not only with her acts, but also by voicing her thoughts aloud. As the narrator records “she did not perceive the shame and furtiveness of sex. She talked of mating her bitch and the complexities of her own sexual life with the same directness and with the same degree of involvement” (31). Paro is a woman in love with her body (32) and this makes her justify its pleasures and demands inside and outside the norms of matrimony. Her innumerable liaison with men like B. R, the rich businessman; Bucky Bhandpur, test cricketer and scion of a princely family; Lenin, Marxist son of a cabinet minister; the fat minister Shambhu Nath; Leoras, the homosexual Greek film director, confirm that she has no bars of age, looks or talent while choosing her object of desire. She is a narcissist, a woman in love with herself, and needs men only to satiate her thirst for sex (and for financial support). By making a sexually assertive woman its protagonist, the novel undercuts the sexist ideology of the society that demands passivity and submission from women in sexual relations. The Paro of this novel, thus, is completely different from her docile, virtuous and submissive namesake in the famous myth
of Devdas. She controls her life as she wishes and revels in calling herself a liberated woman, a woman with the “courage of conviction” (43). And herein rests the subversive power of the novel. Debunking the prescribed norms for the Indian woman in her acts and words, she feels no shame or guilt. In contrast to the expectations of following duties, she lives a life of enjoyment. Besides, coming from a woman, the novel is radical for its explicit depiction of sexual encounters and desires. Images of body and sexuality permeate the entire novel, and different forms of sexual experiences are depicted openly. Meeta Chatterjee points to one such instance of sexual politics in this novel when she writes, “this is perhaps the first book in which an Indian author openly celebrates female sexuality through the depiction of female masturbation” (2004: 136). While these depictions of sexuality may be dismissed as ‘steam’ erotica, its subversive potential, because of coming from a woman writer and written from women’s perspective where women are often the initiators, must also be recognized. This, however, does not mean that the novel is without limitations so far as the feminist agenda of the assertion of body is concerned. Whereas one can justify the overbearing presence of sexually explicit material as an aspect of resistance to the norms of women’s writings, the pitiable suicide of Paro, a woman who lived life on her own terms looks to be nothing more than a conventional ending, sending the message of the futility of the pursuit of the pleasures of the body which are always transient. Besides, the text fails to show the liberation or empowerment of women through the assertion of the body, as we see that both the protagonists have to finally depend on one man or the other and comply to survive in this world. Their financial dependence undermines their celebration of body that at times looks like exploitation of the body for material gains. Nevertheless, one could also argue that
this conflation of the erotic and the economic is also a devise through which the novel undercuts the ideal of romantic monogamous love. And though Paro dies, the very task that Priya take upon herself to tell the story of a woman like Paro can be read as a gesture of acceptance for active female sexuality. Thus, the novel displays the politics of body with limitations of its own.

Written in the form of a memoir *Socialite Evenings* traces the growth of Karuna from an immature, dissatisfied and dependent person to a woman of *substance*, a woman in control of her life and in no need of anyone to make it complete. The assertion over the rights of her body plays a crucial role in this transformation. The narrative tells that Karuna was a rebel since her childhood days. Born in a conservative middle class family, but dreaming to be a part of the glamorous world of upper class society, she was a misfit both at home and in the school. The urge to transgress the limitations of class and conventions become intense with age and the first radical step Karuna takes to assert herself and create an identity of her own is of entering into the profession of modelling. The assignment initiates her into the world of glitz. But soon she knows that she is not made for this profession. She is not able to cope with the various challenges it poses and the compromises it demands. While she still dreams of becoming a part of the socialite world, she does not know how to achieve this. At this stage of uncertainty she just drifts into marriage with a wealthy businessman which gives her an entry into the world of her desires. But the dream does not last long as she soon realizes that though marriage has given her money, the freedom and liberty which she wanted through wealth eludes her. Marriage puts a temporary stop to her quest for freedom and self-identity. Though her husband is not a bad human being, he like any other Indian husband is “unexciting, uninspiring and untutored”
In fact, Kanina feels that they inhabit two different worlds and her husband makes no effort to understand her. The disappointments make her grow restive. She attempts to find solace in the company of friends who suffer a similar fate, tries literature, but can hardly do anything radical. She feels herself utterly passive and powerless (95). She knows the reasons also, “I wondered why I didn’t get the hell out of the marriage? ... I don’t know, perhaps it was because, for all my little rebellions, I was a well trained Indian wife” (94). And then almost unaware of the consequences she takes the most daring steps of her life. When she gets attracted towards her husband’s friend Krish, she lets herself loose and a ‘passionate’ affair starts between the two. In getting involved with him, Karuna asserts the rights of individuality. She chooses to live as a woman again rather than just be a wife. Krish makes her experience the delights of her body and sexuality. And it leads to the rebirth of the old Karuna who could go against the prescriptions of the society and live as per her wishes. While she knows that Krish is a rake and is just enjoying her, she does not mind it much. For her this affair becomes a means of self-discovery and self-assertion. It gives her the confidence to declare her disappointment in front of her husband. While she had no plans to give up her married life for the sake of Krish, when her husband seeks divorce, Karuna knows that she would be able to manage her life alone. The stepping out of the threshold of secure matrimonial life makes her confident about living life on her own terms. She terminates her pregnancy and undergoes hysterectomy. She does not want to live for others; she wants her life and body only for herself. The earlier passivity and powerlessness vanish as she knows that she is free to live life in her own ways. She finds a job for herself, and is able to look after her parents and feels content. She no longer needs a man to be happy. She declares her selfhood when
she rejects her husband’s proposal to come back or even an art film director’s offer of marriage. She does not want to compromise on her newly gained freedom. The novel ends with the image of a “disgustingly self assured” and “revoltingly self sufficient” Karuna (305), ready to write the story of her life in her own words rather than letting others represent it.

According to Paulina Palmer the novels that end with an affirmation of the woman defined sexuality and acts of “marriage resistance” are truly positive endings from a feminist perspective (1989: 161-162). Seen from this standpoint, the present novel succeeds in challenging the patriarchal norms of oppression. However, the novel also suggests that just the assertion of sexual liberty can hardly lead to anything positive in the lives of women. While for Karuna the liberation of the body from the norms becomes a point of cathartic release, and frees her from the drudgery of her life, in the case of other women characters, this does not happen. Along with Karuna’s story, the novel also gives the details of the lives of other socialites like Ritu and Anjali, and their sex exploits. Whereas Karuna is able to control her life through the exploration of the joys of the body which free her from all sorts of inhibitions, the lives of Anjali and Ritu give a different picture. As a result of their immature exhibitionism and exploitation of the sexual powers of the body Ritu almost loses her mental balance, and Anjali has to content herself in a life with a homosexual. These women though are exercising sexuality in unconventional ways and relations; they hardly seem to have a right over their bodies. In contrast to Karuna who becomes an epitome of the liberated woman by dissociating her sexual life from the financial one, Ritu and Anjali use their bodies to get the attention of men who would be able to provide for them, and rather than liberating themselves become victimized. By
providing such contrasting pictures in the parallel narratives, the novel underlines the complexities involved in the celebrating the assertion of body and sexuality as a means of empowerment.

*Starry Nights* features Asha Rani as its protagonist, a character who seems to be a developed version of the sexually overactive Anjali of the earlier novel *Socialite Evenings*. Cast against the backdrop of the glitz and light, deceit and corruption of the film industry, the novel follows the story of Asha Rani as she rises as a film star and descends as an individual. It gives detailed account of her innumerable sexual encounters but futile search for true love; her peaceful and settled married life far away from the madding crowd and her restlessness to belong to her roots; her frequent failures and eventual reconciliation with the self.

The story line hardly has much in it. Since her childhood days Asha Rani is a victim of situations. Born as an illegitimate child, her life is deprived of warmth, intimacy and security. Living under extreme poverty her mother pushes her into the ‘blue film’ industry. Later on she is forced to sell her body to Kishen Bhai, a small-time film distributor in order to manage a break for herself in the film industry. And, thus, she is initiated in to the world of ‘sexploitation.’ What makes the story subversive is Asha Rani’s transformation from being a puppet in the hands of others to becoming her own mistress. She knows well that without selling her body she would not be able to survive in the world she has entered. But she refuses to remain a passive victim. Rather, she uses her sexual charms to gain more and more success and pleasure for herself. And that is her challenge to the male dominated world. As she tells Kishen Bhai, “All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all, beat you at your own game” (8). Here is the politics of the assertion of the
body as one's own. Because of her talent and her mastery of the act of employing her physical charms, she soon reaches the top in the film industry. What follows in the novel is Asha Rani’s innumerable sexual encounters with people like Seth Amirchand, Akshay Arora, Abhijit, film director Jojo and many others whom she either wants to use or desires in order to overcome her pangs of loneliness. The novel is so full of explicit details of the fleeting sexual encounters Asha Rani goes through that it verges on the point of being almost pornographic. What makes this novel by a woman radical is its unprecedented frankness in giving the details of the sexual orgies ranging from willing copulations, coercive and sadomasochistic sex to lesbian encounters. Besides, in most of these encounters, Asha Rani is an active partner and asserts her rights to have pleasures, however, ephemeral these may be. This, nevertheless, does not free her from being cheated by those men whom she loves. After a series of such disappointments, at the end of the narrative, Asha Rani emerges as a more composed woman determined to take her life into her own hands and even shape the lives of her dear ones. Thus, the novel is unlike the ones discussed above. Here the affirmation of the rights of body does not lead to the transformation of the destiny of the protagonist. In fact, one cannot say for sure if Asha Rani is fully in control of her sexuality at any point of time in her life. At the same time, it must be recognized that the way she transgresses the expected norms of feminine sexual behaviour is her way of resistance, even if limited, to the male dominated world.

Snapshot by far seems to be the most subversive of the texts by Shobha De with regard to the politics of representation of the female body and sexuality. Set in a metropolitan upper middle class background, the novel presents “snapshots” from the life of six women who were friends at school. Woman’s
body and sexuality, and its position in the socio-cultural scenario are the central issues of this novel. Although crude in its treatment, there are many instances when the narrative undermines the cherished ideals and institutions of patriarchy that keep woman’s sexuality under control such as monogamy, submission and fidelity in marriage, heterosexuality, kinship, motherhood and the like. Interestingly enough, none of the six major characters in the novel – Aparna, Reema, Surekha, Rashmi, Noor, and Swati fulfill the conditions of being a conventionally ‘virtuous’ woman. All of them overtly or covertly transgress the rigid sexual roles traditionally assigned to them. Actively choosing for themselves, they undercut the myths of sexual passivity and self-sacrifice. In flaunting their sexuality, they validate female sexual desire. Besides, by bringing to the fore the oppressive edicts of the patriarchal system within its design, the narrative compels a reconsideration of the value system of the society. It projects the transgressions of sexual norms by these protagonists as a form of resistance to the discriminatory cultural conventions. The story is told in the third person and the past of all the major characters has been recorded through a story telling method with shifting points of focalization.

We first have Aparna, who had married Rohit thinking that he was a “New Man” who would “care and share” only to discover that he was also “like any other husband. The same old double standards. The same hypocrisies” (22). In fact, a pattern had got established in their relationship where – “he erred – she forgave. It was taken for granted that all the differences were to be settled in just one way – his. And each time they fought, it was Aparna who was left feeling rotten and vaguely guilty as though the whole thing was somehow her fault” (18). Of course, such a relationship does not last long. Having had such a bitter
experience within marriage, Aparna becomes seasoned. After divorce she decides to enjoy herself, without giving a damn about the social norms. The narrator tells us that spending a “dirty weekend” in Goa with her already married secretary, “Aparna was only just beginning to discover her sexual potential” (7). Her rebellious attitude becomes evident when we are informed that “she had stopped trying to analyze her out-of-character conduct” (7). Now she could easily say to herself “if I’m being undignified, so be it” (7).

Then there is Reema, who after having an adolescent “misadventure” (100), had decided to capture a “prize catch” in the “highly competitive market” of marriage (71). Although prosperous, her married life proves to be boring and unsatisfactory. There was an utter lack of warmth and excitement in her conjugal life which left Reema “completely cold emotionally and physically” (106). Reema’s husband “didn’t interest her. Never had” (14). Under such circumstances, Reema does not mind compromises, subtle subversions, and negotiations. She believes that while family life must not be disturbed, they (women) should quietly enjoy themselves (214). As for herself, she has a romantic liaison with her brother-in-law, Randhir. Thus, remaining within the institution of marriage, she undercuts it.

The married life of Surekha is not very different from Reema’s. She too has a boring and insensitive husband to handle, and a tyrannical mother-in-law keeping constant watch on her movements. The narrator tells us that her husband would demand his “conjugal rights periodically,” and even as she hates every single coupling with him, Surekha continues to sleep with him only to keep the marriage going. Though she is unable to think of life beyond marriage (because of
Noor is a product of uncaring parents, repressive family values, and a tragic past where she barely survived an accident, was ditched by her boyfriend and became disillusioned about the nature of marital life. Having no friends and relatives around, the only succor in her life is her “rakish” brother Nawaz, with whom she had developed a “peculiar sexual equation” (121) She is involved in an incestuous relationship with him, but finds nothing wrong with it. Her argument is “he is my brother. And I love him. What is wrong with it? ... She would ask herself why it was bad. Wasn’t it better with someone from your own family than with a stranger?” (120-21, emphasis added). These justifications not only startle the readers but also force them to consider the logic underpinning the cultural taboos that leave no room for individual comforts.

Rashmi and Swati emerge as more radical transgressors for being comfortable with their bodies and accepting its needs publicly. Rashmi is an unmarried woman who after giving birth to an illegitimate child and after many failed attempts to “catch” a man, knows that she is “too honest to be tolerated by any men for long” (49). Living life on her own terms, she is not ashamed of her sexual needs (132). “I love sex as I love food. It’s the same sort of hunger. Earlier it used to scare me, it doesn’t scare me now” (139). Though a mother, she feels that she has a duty towards herself as well, she has the right to enjoy her own life. She says- “Yes, I sleep around. But I do it openly. And not for money or a fucking bauble. I get nothing out of it, except may be a sexy evening” (214). Her honesty and frankness towards this furtive zone of life challenge societal conventions.
Swati, a star, is an ambitious woman who wants to enjoy life to its fullest. The others regard her as loose woman and even as a “whore” but she is not ashamed of her liberated ways. A woman capable of enjoying the pleasures of erotica, she says, “...we rejoice in our sexuality ... we don’t suppress it. We don’t dismiss it. We don’t find it dirty. Sex doesn’t threaten us. I am not afraid to fuck. I feel sorry for all you women hanging on so desperately to outdated ideas of purity, morality, chastity: It’s pathetic” (165). Despite her hollowness, Swati ‘shocks’ because of her unconventional ease with sexuality.

However, as was the case in most of the narratives discussed above, these women, despite their transgressions are hardly able to create a new world that would accept them without inhibitions. Therefore, Reema, Surekha, and Aparna keep their radical sexual transgressions personal and shroud them from the public view by denials and euphemisms. Hence, when asked, Aparna denies her affair with Prem (150), Surekha defines her lesbian relationship with Dolly as “spiritual bonding” (155), while Reema has to keep her liaison with her brother-in-law a secret. These women have apparently chosen to remain within the patriarchal norms and roles assigned to them while undercutting the same secretly. They seem to have realized that open battle with social forces would make existence itself difficult, so the better option is to hide or misrepresent sexual desires. On the other hand, Swati and Rashmi have only gained “terrible reputations” (214) and are thought to be no less than “whores” (61) for publicly accepting their sexual need and flaunting their bodies. Thus, their resistance remains contradictory in nature. Moreover, within the narrative, even those characters who at one point of time emerge as the most radical transgressors- displaying their violations, have their moments of weakness. Despite the fact that Rashmi and Aparna try to project

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themselves as liberated women having an independent existence, they have their own vulnerable moments. While Rashmi is convinced that “all men are bastards,” she is also aware that to be “manless is a big shame” in the society and she must work hard to find one for herself (50). And we see that even as Aparna knows that her husband has ditched her, she is never able to overcome her infatuation with him. Last but not the least, like many other novels by De, this one is also full of ‘steam details’ of sexual encounters, which again have ambivalent resistive character.

Second Thoughts, unlike Shobha De’s earlier novels, deals with the mundane life of a middle-class woman, her desperations and the efforts to achieve freedom and happiness. Maya is a young, vibrant Bengali girl who marries Rajan, a handsome, educated young man from Bombay wishing that it would bond her forever with her dream city of liberty and joy. But what she actually gets is just “desperation and deceit,” another dominant feature of Bombay (1). Soon after marriage she discovers that despite his stay in the USA, her husband is a conservative, suspicious sneak who can hardly understand her desire for a liberated life. Though she is provided with a decent house and four square meals, her emotional and libidinal needs remain unfulfilled in marriage. She is almost caged inside the four walls of the house and her husband constantly keeps an eye on her moves. Rajan is not at all like the “romantic companion” she had fancied for herself (252). Rather he is “impersonal, distant and cold” (227). Worse still, he is not able to satisfy Maya sexually. When Maya longs for physical proximity and intimacy Rajan just shirks her off. If she makes sexual overtures he calls her “cheap woman,” “behaving like a prostitute” (259). As Rajan is a poor “performer” in bed he claims that sex is not important for happiness. But Maya
remains unconvinced. She hates the idea that they live under the same roof as two siblings or flatmates would have lived. She desires the pleasures of freedom, care and sexual proximity which Rajan denies her. Despite such a pathetic situation, however, she is unable to take any radical step. Traditional values are instilled in her and she has got nothing else to fall back upon. All that she can afford are little acts of resistance like, not picking up the phone when Rajan calls, eavesdropping and ruining Rajan’s concentration when he is busy talking to his mother, etc. When desperation surges beyond the level of tolerance, then, she decides to do what her conscience does not permit initially. She starts responding to the flirtious advances of her young neighbour Nikhil. When Nikhil asks her to “stop pretending to be someone you want the world to believe you are” (171), she realizes that she had been pretending all this while. In fact, she was “not cut for domesticity” (121). This realization instigates her to get real, enjoy the moment and live in the present. This liberty which she allows herself with Nikhil makes her know what it is to be a woman. Nikhil introduces her to the pleasures and beauties of the body and sexuality. Though at times she feels guilty of betrayal, she has justification in her “desperation” and “desires” (195). Her satisfaction of the sexual desires come as natural to her as breathing, “Is it a sin to go out and breathe in the air?” (195). She is even ready to start a new life with this newfound love in her life. But soon she discovers that it was just a mirage. Nikhil is not interested in sharing his life with her. The news of his engagement comes as a shock to her. However, the transgression which she had undertaken, even if secretly, has made her bold. She knows that her life is not going to change drastically. She will have to bear with her husband for some more time. Nevertheless, this does not discourage her. She just finds this futility of her effort
funny and though she knows that she would have to start “again from scratch,” she is not bothered as she has “all the time in the world” (289).

Thus, the novel enacts the little but substantial rebellion of a young woman through her body. By asserting what was denied to her within the permissible boundaries of matrimony Maya takes her chances of happiness and, in fact, gets it as well. Though it lasts for a brief period, it makes her wiser and the Maya with whom the narrative closes is a much more confident and self-assured Maya than the one who cannot help crying silently. Despite not being able to cross the threshold like many conventional heroines, Maya undercuts the patriarchal codes by her determination. Her resistance through the assertion over the right of body, though inconsequential at the material level, marks a substantial growth in her character.

Like the ‘literary’ fictions discussed in the earlier section, ‘popular’ fictions have also frequently represented sexually assertive women. These novels are different from the conventional popular romances, which either project marriage as the solution to all the problems in a woman’s life, or teach the value of “learning to adjust” to women as that which alone can bring peace and happiness in life (Tyagi and Uberoi 1994: 115). The message appears to be that restlessness and ambition is precarious in a woman’s life. These contemporary novels tell an alternative story. They mostly project gender hierarchies and mismatched marriages as the root of unhappiness for women. Their ‘modern’ female protagonists challenge this discontent in their own individual ways. Just as many of the feminists have insisted that because women’s oppression starts and finds extremely vulnerable ground in the female body and sexuality, women’s liberation (must) start from there (Cixous 1997; Gotfrit 1991; Irigaray 1997;
Lewallen 1992; Lorde 2001; Shaw 2007: 13; Thapan 1997, 2009; Vance 1984), these women seem to have learnt this lesson from their individual experiences. Hence they challenge the system sometimes furtively and sometimes flaunting their violations of sexual norms. Without a feminist flag in their hands they are individuals in search of happiness and freedom. Though the ideal eludes them frequently, as they are abused and exploited at different levels, they at least do not accept their fate as victims passively. However, in these unconventional narratives of the realistic genre, these ‘new women’ still remain the products of this society and their challenges to the system through celebrating the rights and pleasures of body and sexuality come tagged along with anxieties, dangers and limitations. The most significant source of these limitations lies in the patriarchal capitalist rule that pervades the world of these narratives both materially as well as ideologically. Thus, we see all the protagonists making temporary or eventual compromises for the sake of safety and security. Whereas Karuna and Asha Rani are able to comparatively free themselves by the end of the narrative, the rest like Priya, Maya, Rashmi, Aparna, Surekha, Anjali and others are hardly able to rise above the system they challenge through their sexual rebellion. Ketu H. Katrak in her study of the body politics in postcolonial women’s narratives says that rather than glorifying each and every instance of non compliance, the narrative instances must be evaluated in terms of their outcome. Seen from this perspective, though real, the transgressions of these women remain confined.

Another major paradox of this genre of ‘popular’ fiction lies in their explicit depiction of the sexual encounters and experiences. Most of these novels contain frank portrayal of the various types of sexual practices ranging from heterosexual encounters to lesbian experiments, masturbation to sadomasochistic
practices. In presenting these women as active and desiring subjects in many of these instances these novels undercut the sexual polarizing of subject/object positions and the rules of ‘who does’ and ‘who is done to’; yet not all such depictions are non-sexist. Though written by woman writers these portrayals highlight role reversal, but in doing so, the language and expressions, which generally remain seeped in the ‘standard codes,’ often tarnish the quality of subversion.

III

In the Indian context the very recognition of female desire for bodily pleasures is in itself revolutionary.

- Bose 2000: 252

The dividing line between compliance and subversion is rather thin and women’s embodied self is often the conflicting site of both giving in to, as well as resisting, dominant ideologies and ways of being.

- Thapan 2009: 169

Assertion of rights over one’s body and sexuality, its pleasures and desires on the part of women is laden with paradoxes. Whereas it promises empowerment to women, it also makes them vulnerable to social discrimination and symbolic violence. Contemporary women’s novels of both the genres discussed above enact the drama where “women’s sexuality is caught up in a series of oppositions – sex as sin versus sex as pleasure, sex as self expression versus dependence, and sex as individual right versus cultural compulsion” (Shaw 2007: 8). Though one can not deny the resistant potential of these sexually desiring women protagonists transgressing the norms of society and undercutting its sexual codes of shame and honour, purity and pollution, fidelity and monogamy that still govern and shape
the lives of most of the Indian women (Deshmukh- Ranadive 2005; Thapan 2009; Vishwanath 1997), and for opening up spaces for alternative ways of thinking and being, their limitations also can not be overlooked. Caught up in a realistic world, “their life experience is a mix of strategies- of acquiescence, subservience, resilience, resistance, manipulation, domination, pretensions, subversion, simulations and so on” (Kalpagam 2000: 170). And when they are exercising their sexual rights resistance and compliance with the system emerge simultaneously (Gotfrit 1991). The success of the assertion of the body from feminist perspective depends on its capacity for transformative resistance. It entails female agency. However, both are complicated categories. While remaining within the system, resistance is mostly reactive and hardly transformative, and the human subject caught up in power equations with others all the time can barely claim to be autonomous (Basu 2000; Foucault 1980; Kalpagam 2000; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Sunder Rajan 1993, 2000; Thapan 1997, 2009; Waugh 1989; Woolf 1990). The fictional characters discussed above attest to this point. Their resistance through the body and pursuit of sexual pleasures essentially remain individual and mostly private and hence preclude any socially transformative power (Sunder Rajan 2000). Besides, their continued existence in the patriarchal capitalist world rules out any independent agency as such. However, though their resistances remains framed with the power structures, and at times seem inconsequential and self destructive, we must recognize that these, nonetheless, disrupt the “modes of conceptualizing and categorizing the world” (Merry 1995: 18).
Notes:

i. I call these texts contemporary in a relative sense. The first one in has selection was published as back as in 1984 and the last ones chronologically are *Shakuntala* and *Mistress* published in 2005. What I emphasize here is their difference from the earlier novels like Anita Desai’s *Cry, The Peacock* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer* Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terror* and *That Long Silence* Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* and Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*.

ii. Twenty-first Century has witnessed the emergence a new genre of popular fictions written by Indian English women writers called *chick novels*, novels written by (young) women, for (young) women and from the perspective of (young) women. It is a genre inspired by its Western counterpart popularized by *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and *Sex and the City*. These novels are for mass consumption and by definition also meant for light entertainment. These formulaic novels relating the story of a ‘not so young’ single urban woman in search for romantic love and Mr. Right while coping with the problems confronted in the career display a different sort of foregrounding of body and women’s sexuality. The protagonists of these novels are romantics. But unlike the heroines of traditional romances who passively wait for the hero to arrive and save from dangers, they are pro-active. They are demanding not just in career but also in their relationships. They do not mind experimenting and choosing the best available option (financially as well) even while having love affairs. Thus, they are not the objects of desire; rather they are subjects of desire. For them ‘love’ and lust are hardly separate from each other. Most comfortable with their sexuality, still, most conscious about their weight and looks, they represent the contemporary woman, who resists the patriarchal norms while still caught inside. They question the double sexual standards of society by undermining traditional standards of monogamy, virginity, and coyness. However, marriage still remains an important goal of their life. Sexual slang, obscene language is not a prohibition for these protagonists, but *explicit* depiction of sexual encounters remains a taboo in these fictions. Meant for light reading, controversial issues are just passed off here. Thus, their sexual politics is not as conspicuous or sharp as of those discussed in this chapter. Some examples of chick fictions are: Advaita Kala’s *Almost Single* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009); Rajashree’s
According to Jasbir Jain “The ending of a novel is again a narrative strategy: it is never the logical conclusion of a tale as the ordering of the plot would lead us to believe. The way a novel ends is a statement of the self- on its ability or inability to survive, especially when the ‘self’ is a woman cornered in a world, which does not provide for her self-expression”(35). In contrast to the options between madness, death or coping available to the transgressive protagonists of traditional novels, the ‘survival’ of these sexually rebellious protagonists in the contemporary novels thus can be read as a statement of their feminist sexual politics. Jasbir Jain has given an overview of the relationship between women and narrative strategies in “Gender and Narrative Strategy” in Between Spaces of Silence: Women Creative Writers, ed. Kamini Dinesh (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers’ Pvt. Ltd. 1994. 29-37.).

iv. Deniz Kandiyoti coined the phrase “patriarchal bargains” in 1988. It refer to the ways in which women negotiate and strategize to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of patriarchal oppression. In her proposition Kandiyoti emphasizes that women exercise agency within a set of concrete constraint and frequently become invested in patriarchal systems that do not appear to be favorable to women in general.


different perspective on the subversive power of the body and sexuality in this novel and Paro.

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