Introduction
Chapter One

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The prose writing—both fiction and non-fiction—created [in contemporary India] by Indian writers writing in English is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the eighteen ‘recognized’ languages of India . . . during the same time; and indeed, this new and still burgeoning, ‘Indo-Anglian’ literature represents perhaps the most valuable contribution India has yet made to the world of books. (Rushdie)

Indian English Literature is not a contemporary phenomenon. Its history dates back to Thomas Babington Macaulay’s “Minute on Education 1835”. It is a crucial document that asserts the innate superiority of English culture mainly through its key sentence, “We [the British] must at present do our best to form a class of interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect” (Macaulay 11). However, Macaulay did not anticipate that this class of interpreters would put the master's language to subversive use. It was Macaulay’s expectation that the Indians would renounce their past history, tradition, and culture. He dreamt of completely anglicizing India mentally and intellectually. But it did not come true. This was because he had completely ignored the fact that India had an ancient culture and her own heritage besides
having her own languages with their literatures. But the scheme resulted in the adoption of English as the official language of India and helped to revivify the vernaculars.

Indian English Literature that covers all forms of writings in English and translations of vernacular writings is growing to be the largest entity among the literatures of the world. In this branch of literature there appears a hybridization of the English language with judicious use of Indian words, phrases, and syntax. This subject has been interdisciplinary in nature and there has been an assimilation of History, Politics, Psychology, Ecology, Films, Journalism, Culinary art, Geography, and Sociology.

The cliché “Indian English” has been accepted since 1980. The Indian English tradition that witnesses rapid development in the twenty-first century is primarily concerned with the pressing cultural issues and anxieties that pervade the Indian society. Culture, identity, gender, sexual orientation, urbanity, feminism, and imperialism are some of the issues that permeate the writings which conform to the markedly fluid Indian English tradition. The publishers like Oxford University Press, Penguin, and Heinemenn have begun to notice the increasing interest in Indian English Literature both at home and in the West. They have started to put more resources into promoting Indian English writers. Indigenous independent presses are also responsible for the burgeoning Indian English writers.
The rapid increase of Indian English writers has won global recognition for Indian English Literature. New writers seem to emerge every few weeks. Their works are of diverse shapes as do their regional identities and readers who take into account the constructiveness of literature are not disillusioned. They feel satisfied to note that a considerable number of these mushrooming writers give voice to what they want to hear. In Rushdie’s assessment, “On the map of world literature, India has been undersized for too long; that age of obscurity is coming to an end” (“India” 14). Indian English literature has gained a new impetus with the emergence of yet another talented generation of Indian English writers fifty years after India's Independence.

The upsurge of Indian writing in English in the recent years has been supplemented by a renewed interest in regional literatures which are becoming increasingly available to English speaking readers through translations. The impulse behind many of the translations reflects a desire to rediscover women writers who have often been ignored in the past. Among these translations, the anthology, *Women Writing in India* by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha is a path breaking publication. It traces the history of Indian women's writings from the sixth century BC.

In the nineteenth century India, there were two dominant streams of colonial thought concerning Indian women. The Orientalists like Max Muller believed that Indian culture had declined after the Aryans, while the Anglicists such as Macaulay and John Stuart Mill claimed that Indian culture had always been primitive and crude. The outcome of these two ideologies was reflected in
the literary endeavours of Indian nationalists who responded to Anglicist attacks on Indian culture by reviving the image of the high caste Aryan women.

The efforts of the Indian intellectual elites to enliven the Aryan woman image gave rise to the idea of representing her through a middle class, home-bound Hindu woman of the nineteenth century. It is ironical that the poor women who had to work outside the home to eke out their living enjoyed more freedom than their middle class sisters who were often kept at home. The lower class women sang and danced outside during popular festivals. This kind of freedom to make public performances was not allowed for the middle class women. However, as the art forms perpetuated by the inferior women were seen as threatening to middle class ideas of femininity, the Indian intellectual advocates of women’s emancipation supported sanctions which the British began to impose on these lower class artists. Banerjee’s survey shows, “as the 1891 Bengal Census indicates there was sharp drop in the number of actresses, singers and dancers from 7023 in 1891 to 3527 in 1901” (“Contentious Tradition” 146). The sanitization of “the Indian woman” was won at the cost of several alternative woman-centred narratives.

In the nineteenth century, both progressive and orthodox reformers supported female education in India as they believed that social evils could be eliminated only through learning. The Indian intelligentsia feared that exposure of women to the western culture through education in English would degrade their significance as Indian women. Therefore they were reluctant to expose the middle class women to the English medium schools started by the missionaries.
However women had the opportunity for learning, but the concept of education was limited to producing good homemakers and perpetuating orthodox ideology as women were believed to support the traditional values of Indian society. As Tharu points out, in the nineteenth century “it was the women, their commitment, their purity, their sacrifice, who were to ensure the moral, and even spiritual power of the nation and hold it together” (Women Writing in India 64). This image of the unsullied, selfless Indian woman continues to hold good till the present day.

The Christian missionaries and the British rulers started girls’ schools in India in the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1880s, Indian women started to graduate from universities. The village girls, however, did not attend school as education for women was mainly confined to the larger towns and cities. English was the language of the privileged elite classes in India. English having no place in the daily lives of those women who form the subject of the writings in English, it just remained a medium through which many Indian authors in English expressed themselves and could reach an international audience.

As the Indian women of the nineteenth century received education, they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of incompatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, the resentment against the male-oriented ideas of morality and behaviour, the problems at home, at the work place or in the society—all came up in a welter for projection. It is paradoxical that despite women literacy and the significant advancements in all walks of life, not much change is visible in
the sphere of women’s freedom. As Chakrabarty theorizes, “. . . because the edifice of national culture was propped up by ideals of purity, selfless love, and sacrifice, the decapacitation of women was the result” (“Whatever Happened” 143). A woman born free is still in chains of tradition. As in the past, even today women are made to carry the burden of their nation's honour at the cost of their own autonomy. This predicament has awakened the feminine literary world that they have taken it as their mission to regain for their folk the glorious status enjoyed by the women in ancient India of the Vedic period.

Indian women enjoyed great freedom and high social respect from the Vedic Age to Manu’s time. Women of the Vedic period spanning 1500-500 BC were kept in a high position. They were free, well-educated, and respected members of the society. Girls received their education at home with the help of the teachers engaged by their parents or at educational institutions along with the male students. In the Vedic age women were equal partners of men. The wife of the Vedic period was the supreme member of the household. She had the freedom to exercise her views. A wife shared all her husband’s privileges. She was his companion and helpmate in his activities. No ritual was complete without the participation and co-operation of a wife.

In the Vedic times women could sew, chat, sing, and dance. Early marriage was not in practice. Widow re-marriage was permissible. *Suttee was not an early Indian custom. Child marriage was unknown. Girls had the freedom to choose their own husbands. Love and virtues were given more importance than wealth in the matter of marriage. The standard of morality was
high and a marriage was indissoluble. A young wife was not ill-treated by her husband’s people. The gentle, chaste, courteous, and kind heroines of the Indian epics illustrate the glorious condition of women in ancient India.

The ancient Hindu women were not vengeful, but forgiving. They possessed a calm philosophy and a tranquil outlook on life. Neither prosperity nor misfortune led them away from the righteous path. A woman’s chief occupation was domestic. They could do outdoor work also. Some women took up men’s professions too. There were women scholars, poets, philosophers and priestesses. The Vedic period was a golden age for women in India.

The position of Indian women gradually deteriorated from the fifth century BC, the period of *Manu. During his period which is known as the period of codification of laws, women were bracketed with the *Shudras and were denied the right to study the Vedas. They were regarded as chattels. Women lost their high position as the golden Vedic ideals of independence and equality began to fade off through the passage of time. The Hindu moral code known as *The Laws of Manu* denied women a role other than that of a wife and a mother. The old privilege of choosing an independent life of celibacy and asceticism were denied and domestic life and marriage were the only course open to them. According to Manu, a woman must live under the protection of her father, husband or sons. She was deprived of freedom at all phases of life.
The codes of conduct set for the women of Manu's time continue to be valid till today. To keep the women deferential and restricted, mythical ideals are quoted and propagated. In the Hindu society, the ideal woman is presented as Sita, the heroine of the epic, *The Ramayana*. She stands for wifely devotion in the minds of most of the Indians, regardless of religion, caste, social class, and education. This shows the popularity of the traditional ideal of womanhood. Such values advocating perennial devotion of women to men are instilled in the minds of Indian women since childhood. Indian culture permeated by religious images of virtuous goddesses devoted to their husbands, still project cultural ideals for women. The upholding of the womanly values get firmly planted in their tender minds that they grow up with the notion that men despite their shortcomings are like gods to their wives.

As an Indian wife is bound to serve her husband, the daughter in the Indian society is burdened with the household chores. Puberty, the sign of womanhood weighs her further down into a state of silence which is taught to be her strength. The hushed up introduction into the world of womanhood where she is supposed to be unclean, embarrasses her. She is forced to deal with the changes in her body secretly. It becomes a subject never to be discussed and the tension, pain, and discomfort are to be dealt with in silence. Hence the girl's freedom of speech is never encouraged. For ages, the Indian woman has lived an inarticulate life. The glorification of silence in a woman has caused the ultimate suppression of women. Navarro-Tejero notes:
In mythical terms, the dominant feminine prototype is the chaste, patient, self-denying wife, Sita, supported by other figures such as Savitri, Draupadi and Gandhari. When looking at these narratives silence/speech can be a useful guide to interpreting women’s responses to patriarchal hegemony. Silence is a symbol of oppression, a characteristic of the subaltern condition, while speech signifies self-expression and liberation. ("Modern Indian Women Writers")

Accordingly, tradition has assigned a lower and subordinate position to the Indian woman in its social set-up. She is obliged to surrender her interests and desires to the collective will of her community and in particular to the male members. The constricting and narrow social norms constrain her to obliterate her “self”, her individuality, and separate identity.

National independence, education, westernization, and urbanization have contributed in bringing about a change in the status of women. The rise of the feminist movement in the liberation of oppressed women is a vital factor in the history of Indian women. Gamble in her essay, “Gender and Transgender Criticism” draws attention to the oppressing gender inequalities that provoked the feminists:

The motivation behind much of the twentieth century feminist movement stems from such a view: the belief that, while men’s and women’s biological difference is an inescapable fact,
inequalities between them stem from culturally generated biases concerning the gendered categories of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’. The idea that gender is culturally constructed was invaluable to feminists of the second wave, such as Kate Millet, who in *Sexual Politics* (1970) drew on Robert Stroller’s work in order to argue that women’s oppression is rooted in social conceptions of femininity. (38)

The notions of freedom, self-assertion, and due identity and the stimulating ideas in the works of the feminists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Germaine Greer and Betty Freidan have begun to affect the consciousness of many educated Indian women. They have succeeded, but not considerably in their protest against the oppression of women. “The women of India have achieved their success in half a century of Independence; but if there is to be a true female independence too, much remains to be done” [Rollason 183). Despite the encouragement of women’s education in modern India, the womanly virtues of devotion, submission, and patience are still viewed as the social modes that are to be inculcated in women. In spite of the challenges from women against male hegemony, the general patriarchal attitude remains the same. Even today male domination is the bitter reality in the life of the Indian women.

However, the 1960s heralded a significant change in the perception about women and their calibre. The aggressive rise of feminist movement in the sixties succeeded in subverting some of the entrenched male attitudes and
practices, giving women a chance to acquire solidity and specificity. In the seventies, writers like Raji Narsimhan’s *The Heart of Standing is You Cannot Fly* (1973), Veena Nagpal’s *Karmayogi* (1974) and *Compulsion* (1975), Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* (1975), and many such writings have come to develop the trend in general. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Tiger’s Daughter* (1973) and *The Wife* (1976) dealing with the frustrations of an Indian wife have gained a remarkable place in the field of women’s emancipation.

The women of India are standing at the cross-roads in the modern age. They face the dilemma of the choice between the old and the new; eastern traditionalism and western modernism. The ancient ideals of spiritualism and home-bound life seem to be out of date. Indian woman of today is trying to break away from the ideals of Indian womanhood. The change in her attitude to the Indian values is due to the contact with the westerners and their culture. Exposed to the liberated and independent individual of the western countries, the woman in India too is on her journey of transformation from the timid, dependent, and dumb person to a self-respecting, self-confident individual. She wants to rise in protest and shake off the sloth that prevented women of the past from revealing her personality for centuries. In her urge to assert individuality, she needs to equip herself with economic independence, the stepping stone to success in her endeavours of liberation. This predicament of the “New Woman” is an important concern of the contemporary women novelists.
The experience of being caught between two cultures has remained a prominent theme in the writings of Indian women writers. Many of these authors such as Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai are based in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other parts of the world. They write about their situation in cross-cultural contexts and the state of “in-betweenness”. An Indian woman caught in the traditional versus modern bottleneck is the familiar region for Manju Kapur. The contradictory progress and non-progress with regard to women and gender roles is Kapur’s central pre-occupation in *Difficult Daughters*. The clash between tradition and modernity is the impulse behind the works of acclaimed migrant writers such as Meera Syal, Uma Parameswaran, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anjana Appachana, and Kiran Desai.

Varying and conflicting images of Indian women occupy the domain of Indian English fiction. On the one hand, Indian woman has been extolled as *Shakti* and on the other hand, she is undermined as a second class human being. However, in the recent years Indian women writers writing in English repudiate these images. Since the publication of the first Indian English novel *Rajmohan’s Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a significant number of authors have portrayed Indian women as long-suffering wives and mothers silenced by patriarchy. Dhawan opines, “Many of the Indian women novelists focus on women’s issues, they have a woman’s perspective on the world” (10). The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers of the recent times have moved away from the
tradition of delineating women characters as enduring and self-sacrificing victims towards the modern type of conflicted female characters searching for identity. Such women characters who assert themselves and flout the long-standing Indian customs move about in the realm of fiction of the 1980s. Womanhood was the absorbing theme of the novelists of this decade. The novelists were recognized for their originality, versatility, and the indigenous flavour of the soil that they have brought to their works.

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s, producing novels which revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. The English language had no colonial associations for these writers. They generally wrote about the urban middle class, the stratum of society they know best. They have explored a wide range of experience of the world, identifying themselves with a wide range of characters and a variety of existence. According to Kirpal, “Their novels are imprinted with a feminist sensibility, although the treatment varies from a western style feminism as in Namita Gokhale’s Paro to the nativized Indian variety as in Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Desai” (10).

Traditionally, the works of Indian women writers have been undervalued due to patriarchal prejudiced assumptions about the superior worth of writings by men. It is assumed that their works dealing with the enclosed domestic space and women’s experience within it rank below the works of male writers who deal with more serious themes. Moreover, Indian women writers in English are victims of a second prejudice vis-à-vis their regional counterparts.
Since proficiency in English is available only to writers of the intellectual, affluent, and educated classes, their works are considered as belonging to a high social strata. The subject matter of majority of their novels being the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, the novels are considered superficial compared to the novels of regional authors which depict the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes.

Despite the biased attitude of the society to women writers, they have made their permanent mark in the field of Indian English fiction. In the last two decades, there has been an astonishing flowering of Indian women writing in English and the literature of this period got popularity both in India and abroad. The writers are mostly western educated, middle class women who express in their writings their discontent with the plight of the upper-caste middle class traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, women’s education, arranged marriages, and enforced widowhood.

The Indian women writers have proved their literary magnetism by grappling with the grave and complex issues such as sensuality, servility, subjugation, and society. They have handled them with a sense of balance, never disregarding their Indian tradition, yet realizing their needs in the fast changing world. They have proved that they are potential writers with stern and serious stuff. They are involved in redefining the personal and domestic roles of women all over the world; the basic thrust is on the breaking of taboos and
recasting of identities in the mould of their own expectations. In the discussion on the women writers in India, Thirugnanam observes:

Women writers in India not only sweep you off your feet with just their down-to-earth attitudes, but they also have you nodding with wisdom and agreement. Their leading ladies jerk the average Indian readers out of their typical Indian complacency regarding gender issues. One might tend to think of women writers only in a Mills and Boon context, but women writers in India have proved that they are made of sterner and more serious stuff than that. ("The Status of Women Writers in India")

Recent writers depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. The novels emerging in the twenty-first century furnish examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure and the caste system as the key elements of patriarchal social organization. They also re-interpret mythology by using new symbols and subverting the canonic versions. In conclusion, the work of Indian women writers is significant in making the society aware of the demands of women and in providing a medium for self-expression and thus re-writing the history of India.
Women were the chief upholders of a rich oral tradition of story-telling through myths, legends, songs, and fables. But the prejudiced society did not recognize this significant role of women and it went unsung. This state of affairs of women is presented by Gokhale as:

The history of men is however distinct from the history of women. The history of men is recorded in wars won and lost, in reigns of kings, in edicts and transcriptions, in ruined fortresses and other such grand and exterior things. The history of women is left to us in folklore and tradition . . . and cautionary tales about the limits of a woman’s empowerment. (Mountain Echoes 15)

Women who have for long remained at the margins of the literary world are today dominating the literary scene of modern India. In the Introduction to Inner Line, Butalia writes, “As everywhere else, however, women. . . . have resisted, confronted and negotiated with the world of patriarchal writing” (xi). Women who have been unofficial story-tellers for a very long time have come to create a tradition of women’s writing. While talking on the emergence of women writers in Indian English literature, Iyengar, a renowned Indian critic comments, “It was almost a case of more women than men qualitatively as well as numerically . . . (435).

The opening up of Indian offices by foreign publishers provided South Asian Women writers with an opportunity to express their suppressed demands and feelings. Gokhale marks, “Ever since the sari-rippers tore off the veil of
discreet silence which swathed the Indian literary establishment, books for, about and by women continue to proliferate” ("Women’s Writers” 42). International recognition of the Booker prize to Arundhati Roy, the Onassis International Competition prize to Manjula Padmanabhan and the Pulitzer Prize to Jhumpa Lahiri unleashed writings by women authors.

Women’s writing in the twenty-first century is a new sort of writing and it is noted for its boldness and experimental nature. It marks a big shift from the conventional novel writing. The women writers go beyond the domestic space and sphere in their works. They are now expressing freely and fearlessly on a variety of themes related to the middle class men and women who draw their special attention. Advani’s article to Australian Humanities Review points out, “the rising Indo-Anglian novel is inextricably tied to the rising Indian middle-classes . . .” ("Novelists in Residence”). In the 1970s and 1980s feminist readers were possibly pleased to see themselves and their milieu analysed. But today they demand revolution and subversion in the feminist world. Women characters showing lack of ability to innovate or subvert are disappointing the readers. Today's reader surely seeks to know not just what we are fighting, but how we can win. Therefore modern Indian women writers have to fight with the set image of the selfless woman like Sita or Savitri, as Virginia Woolf had to repudiate the image of a pure white woman. Feminism which has started as a mere “consciousness” in the writers like Kamala Markandaya has now assumed a more emphatic voice in the new generation writers.
The new generation writers who have proliferated after 1980 represent a revolutionary force that brought about radical changes in the perception and projection of social reality. Kirpal avers, “Deconstructing the hidden ideologies of patriarchal society that mould a woman and making a frontal attack on long-revered traditional assumptions about women is common to the many woman-centred, feminist Indian English novels of the 1980s” (29). Indian women writers have broadened and deepened the genre of literary fiction. The desire for personal fulfilment forms much of their literature. There is also a trend to write frankly about sex and man-woman relationship. Women writers, in Phillips’ quote of Pringle’s comment, “aren’t confined any more. They have a sense they can do anything. There’s a trend for novels that explore different kinds of female experience” (“Is there such a thing as feminine writing?”). Women writers like Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Shoba De and Namita Gokhale are some of the Indian women writers who are making the host of new generation writers and moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching the pace of the world.

It will not be out of place to give an account of Namita Gokhale’s contemporaries to realize their thematic concern and awareness of the challenges of the present day women. Notable among them are–Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Shoba De, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Gita Mehta, Nina Sibel, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai. These writers have been engaged in critiquing the socio-cultural issues that had remained unquestioned for centuries.
Anita Desai, a world renowned Indian English novelist and pioneer of feminist writing brilliantly exposes the grinding suppression and lack of identity in Indian women. She comments, "... a beast of burden bearing an endless string of children, putting up with any brutality or disloyalty or failing of her husband – she has no alternative" (72). She, like most women writers, turns her eye inward and writes about the flickering psychic reactions. The bored, lonely wife in the urban complex, the unbearably restrictive family and the prejudiced attitudes of society towards women, the wish to revert to childhood and the suicidal or murderous inclination of an ultra sensitive mind are the materials for her fiction.

Exploration of the real self is the trait of the protagonists of Desai, the grand dame of Indian English literature. Her protagonists are all presented as married and alienated. Desai’s Nanda Kaul in Fire on the Mountain is like Henrik Ibsen’s heroine, Nora who walks out of her “Doll’s House”. Nanda Kaul’s husband has extra-marital affair. She does not want to create a scandal because of her middle class morality. But she comes to Kasauli in search of freedom from her cluttered and choked past. Maya in Cry, the Peacock is trapped in a joyless marriage to Gautama, an older man. She fails to communicate her emotional needs to him. Her barrenness coupled with suppressed emotions drives her to despair and pushes her towards insanity. In the end, she kills her husband and commits suicide. But Sita in Where Shall We Go This Summer? is shown as resignedly accepting her joyless life rather than committing suicide. Bim of Clear Light of Day, in spite of emotional shocks
continues to face life with courage and determination. Through such hypersensitive characters, Desai makes a plea for a better way of life for women.

Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, and Nina Sibel in their novels, “represent the new Indian woman’s voice, her self-identity spelling a refreshing break from the mythological image of Indian women in earlier fiction” (Kirpal 8). Like many prospective women writers, Deshpande began her work with national magazines such as *Femina* and *Eve’s Weekly* and slowly branched out to more serious literature oriented magazines like *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Junior Statesman*. As a novelist, Deshpande finds interest in demythologization of the archetypes like Sita and Savitri through the search of her protagonists for self-identity and self-expression. Her novels reveal her insight into the feminine psyche particularly that of the educated, urban, middle class women. “Deshpande creates spaces from and into which silenced voices can emerge” (Kottiswari 102).

Deshpande not only deals with the topic of women as marginalized figures but also precisely examines fiction written by women. Split subjectivity is the theme of her novel, *The Dark Holds No Terror* in which Sarita, the central character tries to rediscover her true self. The protagonist is fed up with the norms and values set up by the society. In her wish to explore the potential hidden within herself, she transgresses the conventional norms. To defy her gender biased mother and indifferent father is one among the many acts of violation of customs of the society. The economic and social power that she
wields paradoxically causes her marriage to go to pieces. Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* deals with a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. Indu, the protagonist symbolizing "New Woman" resents womanhood and considers marriage a trap or a cage with "two trapped animals glaring hatred at each other. And it's not a joke but a tragedy" (61). At one point, she flees the familial trap of tradition and religiosity but to find herself in another trap. Indu's self finds its roots in the home and with her husband. Indu returns home and decides to be in command of her family but discriminatively and judiciously.

Githa Hariharan, Anjana Appachana and Gita Mehta are the other well known writers whose writings confirm the quality of contemporary writing by Indian women. Githa Hariharan, one of the modern women writers in India was born in Coimbatore in 1954 and was brought up in Manila and Bombay. Her literary career began with her debut, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the first Common Wealth Award winning novel. She has written four novels and a collection of stories. Though she dislikes to be identified as a feminist author, her writings have become a key part of post-modern women's literature in India.

Hariharan attempts to renew the whole community of women through representation of myths in the novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, a polemic attack against the patriarchal world where women are treated as worthless beings. After spending a few years in America, Devi, the protagonist of the novel, comes to India to live with Sita, her widowed mother. She is married off
to Mahesh. He cannot accept her liberty to take up a job. Devi feels cheated like the mythical Gandhari who was cheated into marriage with a blind man. Her interest in life is renewed with the arrival of Gopal, the classical singer. She accompanies Gopal’s troop but, as months passed, she no longer enjoys his concerts and becomes restless with this life too. She discovers that he is a flirt. Her life has come full circle with Devi choosing to come back to her mother to begin her new life afresh. Hariharan in her article “New Voices” writes, “This is the sort of cultural heritage we have to reinvent for our own times. But so untouchable has this common heritage become in recent times” (10). Devi’s mother, Sita too is reborn as she retrieves her lost self by returning to her music. The novelist re-orient the patriarchal myths and re-constructs them to her favour. In the other novels, *When Dreams Travel* (1999) and *In Times of Siege* (2003), Hariharan turns to her familiar theme of women’s oppression and repression.

Manju Kapur is a professor of English at Miranda House College, New Delhi. Her novels dealing with man-woman relationship present the changing image of women, moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive, and ambitious women making society aware of their demands. Kapur has her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her women protagonists. They are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Being women of independent thinking they strive to carve an identity for themselves. Her three novels present women who try to establish their own
identities. The first novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) that received huge international acclaim deals with the theme of travails in self-identity versus socio-cultural identity. This is a story of sorrow, love, and compromise. In her quest for identity, Virmati the central character of the novel, rebels against tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. As she is in search of an identity, she is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. She falls in love with a Professor, a man who is already married and becomes his second wife. Virmati is caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Finally she gives way to her heart and body. She readjusts to her life situation albeit as a difficult daughter.

Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman* (2002) is also a great achievement from the point of view of contemporary women's issues. Set in Delhi against the backlash of Babri Masjid debacle, the novel tells the story of a married middle class woman who becomes increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional role of the dutiful wife and mother. Astha is an educated, upper-middle class working woman. Her marriage is settled with Hemant who belongs to a bureaucrat family. After giving birth to two children, she is fascinated by the multi-faceted personality of a communist, Aijaz. Following his murder, Astha feels great empathy for his widow, Pipeelika and a powerful physical relationship is established between them. This relationship is a challenge for her husband and family. Astha is on the verge of loosing her
conventional marriage. At this point, Pipeelika leaves India to study abroad and Astha returns to her family.

Kapur’s third novel, *Home* tells the story of a large joint middle class family of Delhi that has a flourishing business in the clothes trade. The main character, Banwarilal is a patriarch. He believes in the old ways and is a firm believer in the notion that men work out of the home while women within. Men carry forward the family line and women enable their mission. Banwarilal’s two sons unquestioningly follow their father but their wives do not. The family environment changes after the death of Banwarilal. The family patriarch Yashpal is too mild. The husbands are lethargic. The wives are free and happy. The family norms are ignored by the new generation.

Jhumpa Lahiri is a London-born Indian woman writer who at present lives in New York. Her first book, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) which is a collection of nine short stories, was awarded the most prestigious American literary Award of the Pulitzer. The book reveals the predicament and alienation of the millions of immigrant Indians, mostly Bengalis, living abroad. Her novel, *Namesake* portrays the agony of rootless Indian Americans called ABCD.

In the short stories, Lahiri seems to be preoccupied with finding a way out of the socio-politico-emotional noose which holds her women characters in the stories. “A Temporary Matter”, the first short story in the collection, focuses on the emotional void that separates a young couple and concentrates
on the bond of marriage which is slithering down under the exhaustive pressures and the needs of the western world. A brief but deeply adulterous relationship constitutes the core of the short story “Sexy”. The author comes up with a strong bicultural sensibility on the issue of marital relationship.

Shoba De is one of the most eminent Indian novelists of contemporary Indian fiction. She is a controversial writer who concentrates on women’s problems and lends a new approach to them. She recognizes the displacement and marginalization of women and attempts to turn this pattern upside down through her writings. She has broken new grounds by exposing the disturbed psyche of modern Indian women. Her woman is an embodiment of liberal views. She hammers out new moral values in which she offers a new turn to sex. All her novels are based on a rather flashy, elite society in which extra-marital affairs find notable space.

De’s first novel, Socialite Evenings (1988) is about the journey of a prominent Bombay socialite, Karuna, from being an aspiring middle class girl to become a self-sufficient woman. The protagonist, Asha Rani in Starry Nights (1990) is so strong that she takes bold decisions to survive in a male dominated society. She struggles, survives and finally achieves success. The story of Sultry Days (1994) is that of Nisha who is a mixture of opposites. The insightful comments she makes on man-woman relationship in marriages will do a lot of good to the average Indian women of the Indian society. Currently, De has switched over to a more mature and rather philosophical work on life and the myriad of twists and turns in relationships.
Regional fiction seems to be very popular with women writers. Arundhati Roy and Anita Nair are two of the few women writers who have put the southern state of Kerala on the fictional map in the last decade. In the 90's Arundhati Roy arrived on the literary scene to the accompaniment of a loud fanfare. Her novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997) was a phenomenal success. It is full of ambition and sparkle. The novel set in Kerala in the late 1960s tells the story of the twins Rahel and Estha and their family from a child's perspective. The restrictions of Indian family life and the breaking of social taboos are dealt with in a poetic style.

Anita Nair's writings deal with all facets of female life. Her first novel, *The Better Man* (1999) is a welcome change from the hackneyed theme of East-West encounter. It is perhaps the only novel written by a woman, which is not about an Indian woman; nor is it freely peppered with incest or some sex relationships. The second novel, *Ladies Coupe* (2001) is the story of a woman's search for strength and independence. Nair's next novel, *Mistress* (2005) highlights the celebration of a woman's identity.

The Indian-born novelist Kiran Desai is a permanent resident of the United States. Her arrival in the literary scene establishes the first dynasty of modern Indian fiction. Desai's first novel, *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) won the 1998 Betty Trask Award and she won UK's precious literary award, Man Booker Prize as well as the 2006 National Book Critics Circle Fiction Award with her second novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006). The novel that explores the contemporary international issues such as globalization,
multi-culturalism, economic inequality, fundamentalism and terrorist violence, is replete with "loss".

Sense of loss is an integral part of the life of every character in *The Inheritance of Loss* that takes back and forth from the Himalayas to Manhattan. Sai, the westernized young Indian girl loses the indigenous cultural traits as the western values enter her blood through her education in a convent school. She is romantically involved with her tutor, Gyan, a descendant of a Nepalese Gurkha mercenary. Sai’s education and privileged position force her lover back from her and their love comes to a dismal end. His love for a girl of western values proves disagreeable because of the Nepalese insurgency. Biju, the illegal immigrant in New York, returns to India due to homesickness and traumatic experiences in America and finds that there is total loss of peace, law and order in the native country. Despite the multiple issues of multi-culturalism, modernity, gender-bias, racial discrimination, changing human relations, and impact of globalization, the novel as Singh comments, “. . . is essentially a study of losses—the loss of culture, loss of identity, loss of human relations, loss of emotional binding, loss of human values, loss of rationality, loss of peace and harmony, loss of human beings’ faith in each other etc.” (“Diasporic Experience” 24).

Though the Indian women writers in English write on various subjects, the issue of women stands out to be the prominent theme. Nimsarkar notes:
For instance, Nayantara Sahgal, Shoba De, Namita Gokhale etc., present women belonging to upper class society, most modern and contemporary in their outlook. These women attach no values to morality, consciously maintain extra-marital relationship, desire to consummate sex before marriage, and hardly care for consequences. (101)

All the contemporary women novelists write about the women’s world and share the voice of assertion. The voice of assertion and self-dignity is perhaps the biggest contribution of the novels of 1990s. As Mouli in his Preface to *Indian Women’s Writings in English* writes, “. . . ‘gynocritics’ is no longer a new term. The major concern of ‘gynocritics’ is to retrieve and formulate a female tradition. Now, women creative writers have established a distinction of their own” (vi). They project Indian women from different viewpoints based on their interests and ideologies.

A remarkable feature that women novelists of today share is that they all believe in affirmation of one’s womanhood. The thematic concern of their novels is not to deny, but to depict womanhood in its glory. Singh in his essay, “Literature as History’s ‘Other’” observes, “Nonetheless, their novels transcend the Indian cultural scene and deal with the complex relationships and human predicament. These writers view life with a keen perception, sharp sensibility, an acute sense of observation and a fine sensitivity” (40). Their women are individuals with freedom of choices. They refuse to be suffocated by their environment.
Namita Gokhale, an eminent novelist has carved a niche for herself in the firmament of this new generation of writers through a similar brand of writing. Her mission of writing is advocating modernity and dignified femininity for women. In the essay, “Aesthetics of Feminist Novel” Mouli states:

Namita Gokhale has mastered the art of surviving both as a writer and as an individual. The themes of her novels are as distinct and vibrant as she is. She herself realizes that she is in the process of evolving as a creative writer. Her heroines are all strong-willed, stout-hearted women challenging traditional stereotypes. They all emerge stronger, more courageous and convincing. She, for one, keeps constantly ‘structure re-engineering’ carrying the burden of her characters within herself. (5)

Gokhale, a multi-faceted Indian English novelist and publisher was born in Lucknow in 1956. She is a Kumaoni Brahmin by birth. She spent her childhood in the foothills of the Himalayas lying between New Delhi and Nainital. While recalling her childhood, Gokhale in her work of non-fiction, Mountain Echoes says:

I grew up in the mountains, bounded by love and admiration to a band of extraordinary women, aunts and grandmothers and friends of grandmothers, who symbolize for me the ultimate in dignity and strength and integrity and indestructible grit. In my
upbringing, in the subliminal code I imbibed from these women, femininity never stood for weakness, and my gender was never congruent with anything but the strength, physical, emotional, moral, of my sex. (10)

Gokhale had a happy childhood in her home town, Nainital, with her grandparents and a posse of unmarried aunts. She continued to visit the town every summer till her grandfather sold his house off, leaving all the members who had grown up there in a state of permanent exile. Her emotional attachment to her childhood locality is best revealed through her essay “Nainital”. It reads, “For me, Nainital is not a place on a map, it is not even a geographical location. It exists continually for me wherever I go. I live out a part of my life there wherever else in the world I might be” (227). Gokhale is full of nostalgic memories of the childhood house and her home town. She is proud of her link with the town. The attachment to the hills, especially for its peace and quiet, is so strong that most of her writings are set in the soil of the hills.

After her school education in Nainital, Gokhale joined Mary and Jesus College for her graduation in English Literature, but she could not complete her studies and she remained an undergraduate. Even though the disruption of her academic education made her a little unhappy, it turned out to be a blessing as she got ample time to spend on reading and writing. She was an avid reader. As reading consumed most of her time, she could not concentrate on her passion for painting.
Gokhale met her future spouse, Rajiv Gokhale, the son of H.R. Gokhale, the law minister in Indira Gandhi's cabinet, when she was a seventeen year old college girl. After they were united in marriage, they shifted to Bombay where Gokhale worked as a film journalist. The two years in Bombay gave Gokhale a new dimension in life. A few years later her husband, who had been drinking heavily, died of cirrhosis of the liver. Gokhale was stricken with cancer of the uterus while finishing her first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and barely survived. Her inner resources and survival strategy helped her pull through the ordeal. However, this brush with death took deep root in her psyche. It was a traumatic period in her life yet she could overcome all trials and tribulations. It was possible because of the emotional support she had from her family members. Bhandari expresses his admiration of Gokhale’s equanimity of character, “Seeing Namita’s ever-smiling face and listening to her animated, machine-gun speed chatter one would not suspect the tortured soul within. Despite tragedies in her personal life, she finds a lot of magic in everyday life which is to be discovered . . .” (“A woman of talents and guts”).

Gokhale witnessed more incidents of death following that of her husband. Her mother-in-law died in her arms and her sister-in-law succumbed to cancer. Naturally and understandably death became Gokhale’s obsession next only to love. These two obsessions resulted in two books—*Gods, Graves and Grandmother* and the non-fiction, *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women*. These two books did not win for her much popularity but her next novel, *The Book of Shadows* which sums up Gokhale’s mental
preoccupation with love, lust, and death in equal proportions, earned a position in the Indian best sellers’ list. While bringing up her two daughters, the author wrote four books and also continued to work as a journalist in Delhi.

Gokhale made a foray into the journalistic world in the late 70s, as the manager-cum-editor of a film magazine, Super started by her husband and herself. During this period she got the fortune to meet the writer H.R.F. Keeting whose habit of taking notes inspired her. This sowed the seed of creativity in Gokhale. In the interview with Mohanty, she admits that she got the basic rule of writing, “Just carry on” from Keeting (“Out of the Shadows” 21). Before writing novels, she had attempted at writing poetry which was later described by herself as bad poetry. Some short stories written during this period were pretentious in her assessment. Paro: Dreams of Passion, her first novel was a break. Since then she had not looked back.

The first novel, *Paro: Dreams of Passion* (1984), an instant success in India and abroad is a satire on Delhi's upper class. It is a depiction of the pretentious and ostentatious life of Delhi and Bombay society which Gokhale had observed at close quarters. Naik observes, “Paro deals with the upper crust of contemporary Indian society in metropolitan towns and the characters change sexual partners quicker than their clothes” (“A Room of their Own”). The novel is a successful portrayal of the urges, dreams, desires and passions of the two central characters, Paro and Priya. Paro the upper-middle class woman is the prototype of emancipation and Priya, the middle class woman who aspires for emancipation. As they are women obsessed with sexuality, an area in which they have been much repressed, they transgress and step out of the bounds drawn by patriarchy. Anantharaman, in her review of the novel opines, “Gokhale’s *Paro: Dreams of Passion* was dismissed by one critic as only an attempt . . . to turn the value system of male dominated society upside down” (“Protest and Pleasure” 4). The protagonist, Paro replicates male behaviour and deserves to pass for an aberrant woman.

*Paro: Dreams of Passion* with its explicit depiction of sexuality is said to have created a stir among readers. Gokhale has even been branded as a writer who pioneered the sexually frank genre in Indian Writing. The strands on sex remind the writings of Shoba De. However, the novelist considers it a descent work which can survive on its own. After the publication of *Paro*, a love-story with erotic overtones, Gokhale has been treated in some quarters as a writer of pornographic novels. She has been criticized for betraying the class
she belongs to. Owing to huge and sensational public reaction, the author had to withdraw herself from social life altogether. But this hard time did not last for long. People have begun to accept her as a writer rather than a sexual oddity.

The second published but third written novel, *Gods, Graves and Grandmother* (1994) is a humorous representation of commercialization of religion. It was written at the time of the demolition of Babri Masjid when religious instincts were going a little haywire. The novel is a social as well as a religious satire. Material incentives that lead to the temples being built on road side is humorously pictured by Gokhale in this engrossing novel. Though the author is a highly religious person, she cannot overlook the absurdity of religion and all the troubles it causes. In this novel, she tries to throw light on the rigidity of religion and the subsequent irreligious practices.

Set in the backdrop of semi-urban Delhi, *Gods* is a story built around a street temple in Delhi that suddenly turns into a huge temple. The story effectively moves between the everyday details of poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy and the supernatural realm of the temple which forms the focal point in the life of the protagonist, Gudiya. An old Muslim grandmother at the centre of the novel and a strong group of women characters left to fend for themselves prove it to the world that they can do well and maintain feminine decorum without the patriarchal support.
The novel, *Gods* has a lot of humour about it. Incidents as well as characters are amusing. Fascinated by the belief that Kalki, the incarnation of the Lord comes to the world riding on a white horse, the author gives that name to a less significant *bandwallah* in the novel. Gokhale humorously depicts the man of a very low status as a handsome young man riding on a white horse. Kalki in the novel is a carefully created character meant to be a bit of a spoof. The novelist's mere interest in the legendary story of Kalki results in a parody.

The second written but the third published novel, *A Himalayan Love Story* (1996) has Nainital as its background. The author has projected her nostalgic love for the locale where she roamed around in her childhood days. In Nainital, she had met with a number of beautiful but poor Kumaoni women to whom life had been so unkind that they had to be in depression all through their life. This pressing experience is the inspiration behind the novel *Himalayan*. The story of the novel is unravelled through the perspective of a very unfortunate, beautiful, and doomed woman Parvati, a Kumaoni Brahmin in Nainital. She is poor and has had a raw deal in life. Through the portrayal of Parvati’s life, Gokhale conveys the message that a life that begins with promise can end up in nothing.

*The Book of Shadows* (1999) by Gokhale is an esoteric novel of startling originality. It is a novel woven of two equal strands of erotic romance and ghost life. The part of the novel dealing with ghost came first into her mind. When the idea of turning it into a novel occurred to her, the main part of the novel dealing with the story of Rachita Tiwari got constructed for the purpose.
The novel is set in an abandoned bungalow in the midst of a forest in the Kumaoni hills. The ghosts of some murdered people and that of some wicked men devoured by wild animals are portrayed as inhabiting the house. They partake of human emotions, get drunk, and indulge in sexual orgies. The house of shadows in the novel is metaphorically significant. It symbolizes the soul inhabiting the body. The struggle of Rachita to realize a harmony between the physical self and the spiritual search for the inner self is allegorically presented through the house and the haunting ghosts.

The primary part of the story in *Shadows* is told by the young woman Rachita, a lecturer in English in a college in Delhi. After being disfigured by her lover’s sister who flung acid on her face, she flees to the ancestral home in the hills to avoid the glances of the society. Rachita listens to the horrible stories narrated by a spirit hiding in the house. These stories trouble her composure that she feels compelled to dispel the superstitious beliefs and preserve her sanity in the confronting ghastly atmosphere. Through Rachita’s story, Gokhale could objectify her own personal sorrow of losing her husband. Like Rachita, the writer also thought of retreating into a world of solitude for a cathartic effect. There is a world of psychic phenomena in the novel which is beyond the doors of perception.

Gokhale’s last novel, *Shakuntala: The Play of Memory* (2005) first appeared in Hindi translation before the English edition was published. It cannot be read as the modern version of Kalidasa’s *Shakuntala* as it bears similarity to the epic only in its forest milieu and in the presence of a low caste
fisherman. Though the protagonist of Gokhale is named after Kalidasa’s Shakuntala, no similitude can be traced in their parental history, personal story or characteristic features. Gokhale’s *Shakuntala* foregrounding the conflict between Buddhism and Hinduism is the story of a dynamic girl questioning gender inequality and the long-standing Hindu customs still being practised in the orthodox Brahmin households. Through the character of a Rig Vedic priest in the novel, Gokhale gives expression to the drawbacks in Hinduism. The priest is a good and kind person on the one hand and on the other hand, he casts spells and kills animals. This self-contradictory nature is dealt with by the novelist in a comic manner. Krithika, in her review of the novel notes:

> Set in medieval India, when Buddhism and Hinduism were both aggressively trying to outdo the other, when foreigners were making inroads into the country, when Adi Sankaracharya was striding about the country trying to rejuvenate Hinduism, the novel brings to life customs, rituals, superstitions that still linger centuries down the line. (“Story of another Shakuntala”)

*Shakuntala* is a curious mixture of history, mythology, and philosophy. The story of Shakuntala covers her girlhood life in the forest hills, her marriage, her capricious travel with a low caste Greek traveller and her subsequent sexual lot. Behal in her contribution to *The Hindu Magazine* says, “According to Gokhale, the story is about Shakuntala's sexual destiny. Her book, she adds, takes off from the original *Shakuntala* but is the story of a
young woman who lived a long time ago” (3). Therefore, the novel is in the form of flashback recounted by Shakuntala’s spirit.

The play of memory is the core of the novel, *Shakuntala*. From the meeting with a blind priest, Shakuntala learns about the mystery of her life in the previous birth. The priest explains that she can find release from repeated births and memories of past life only by remembering and accepting her past. As she must now reconcile herself to her past life, the same is played to her. The author reveals her consciousness towards the construction of the novel:

I have past life memories. They formed the core of the book in *Shakuntala* where I have fictionalized them. The anger, the ‘paranormal’ thoughts on birth and rebirth are not constructs, they are several dimensions of how I see life. I don’t believe in anything but I do sense them intuitively, that there are things I have deep and prior knowledge of. . . . The whole book of *Shakuntala* came out from my subconscious mind. (Personal Interview)

Shakuntala in her previous birth was a Brahmin hill girl. Out of love for travel which men are privileged with, and freedom from the traditional household confinement, Shakuntala takes the rebellious step of abandoning her husband, home, and duty. She unties herself from the bonded caste and cultural taboos. She flings off her identity of a Brahmin wife and rode with a low caste Greek traveller who treats her as his sexual object. When the desire for travel is
quenched, she feels penitent for her disgraceful and daring steps and wishes to go back to her husband, but she cannot fulfil her wish.

Of the works of non-fiction, Gokhale’s *Mountain Echoes: Reminiscences of Kumaoni Women* (1998) comes as a tribute to four extraordinary women who with their courage and resilience have always been a symbol of a rich cultural heritage. In this significant work, Gokhale evocatively records life in Kumaon hills as recollected by these talented and highly individualistic women, all in or approaching their eighties. Their lives mirror the way of life that has dissolved in the mainstream of modernization and emancipation.

Gokhale’s non-fiction, *Mountain Echoes* and the novel, *Shadows* outwardly intertwine with each other as they are books written around the same time. The same is said about Gokhale’s non-fiction, *The Book of Shiva* and the novel, *Shakuntala*—another two books written almost at the same time. *The Puffin Mahabharata* written for readers of all ages is an addition to Gokhale’s works of non-fiction. Matchless in its content and presentation, it is an exciting new retelling of the great Indian epic, *The Mahabharata*. The paradoxical elements of defeat and victory, humility and courage that permeate the story explain why the epic is timeless and always relevant. Shattar, the reviewer opines, “She [Gokhale] retains the anguish of the family drama at the centre of the story and captures the epic sweep of the Great War and its bitter aftermath” (“Review”). As the best gift for children, *The Puffin* shows the author to be a skilful and mellifluous storyteller. Like a modern storyteller, Gokhale brings to light India’s richest literary treasure of the timeless tale of Mahabharata for
today's young readers. Her knowledge of Indian philosophy and legends is wide and deep that she finds interest in handling archetypes in her writings.

Another sphere of interest that Gokhale evinces is writing reviews for literary works and translations. In her review of Anitha Devasia’s translation of *Indulekka*, a novel in Malayalam and Vasantha Surya’s translation of *Muthumeenakshi*, a novella in Tamil, Gokhale is drawn to the protagonists of both the works and concludes, “both Indulekha and Muthumeenakshi were ushers of change, equity and assertion” (“Love and Life” 28). They are proclaimed as books of value providing rich mining for students of sociology, political and legal study, gender studies and other branches of trans-disciplinary researches. Gokhale’s reviews of *A. Madhaviah*, a biography by Sita Anantha Raman and K.R. Usha’s *Sojourn*, a novel of ideas are the most outstanding.

Gokhale is the Founder Director for Translating Bharat and her association with literary festivals is remarkable. She has organized literary festivals in which many eminent writers have participated. She has played a significant role in organizing the first ever International festival of Indian Literature, Neemarana 2002 and the African-Asian writers’ conference Neemarana 2006. She also helped design and programme the annual Jaipur Literary Festival for 2006 and 2007 and coordinated the festival for 2008 and 2009. Gokhale is keen to see that all writers who are worth their names get a chance to be heard. She tries to create opportunities for them in the way she can. At present she is the director of “Yatra” books which get published by
Penguin in Hindi, Marathi, and Urdu. The works of the writers in various Indian languages get published in this way.

According to Gokhale every writer uses his life experiences as a source of inspiration for writing. A writer has a certain responsibility—social responsibility as well as responsibility to himself. The reader's responsibility is to judge these two parameters truthfully. Gokhale does not use writing to earn her livelihood. She believes that writing for a living implies commitment. She wants to be free from such commitment and responsibility to the society. The author considers her writings the products of the compulsion from inside. While writing, she does not wait for a perfect beginning or perfect ending. Once the books are complete, she as said in her interview with Swapan K. Banerjee, “leaves it for the readers to reactivate them if they want.”

As a writer emphasizing one's "roots", Gokhale has been assigned a place along with "Firdus Kanga, I. Allan Sealy, Githa Hariharan, Amit Chaudhuri, Shoba De, Shashi Tharoor, Shashi Deshpande, Ashok Banker and others who represent the tradition of repatriated Indian English writing that celebrates the glories of India and Indian roots" (Das viii). A crucial issue of the modern times is the rebellious disregard for the cultural values by Indian women in order to gain their due status and identity in the patriarchal Indian society. Gokhale treats this modern Indian situation in her novels by means of the interplay of reality and fantasy.
Growing up in the midst of women who conducted themselves with utmost dignity and moral strength, Gokhale has imbibed from them, their pure femininity. Hence, her characters are shaded with a femininity of this nature. They are assertive, articulate, and resilient. Yet they could not achieve the desired goal of fulfilment in life. The hold of the native culture is too strong for them to break and they have to back track. It is the sense of Indian “roots” that prompts the writer to show the defeat and disillusionment into which her women characters fall in the end. Gokhale is not a feminist in the rigid sense of the term. She advocates women liberation and sexual equality, and yet she does not approve of any inordinate freedom exercised by women who are frustrated and despondent.

Gokhale is an experimental writer with a matter-of-fact attitude. She expresses freely and boldly on the themes of womanhood, sexual miseries, and woes in marriages, emotional alienation, life, love, and death without constraints of any sort. Her novels are marked by reasonable share of stormy scenes and sexual identities which form an integral part of the psyche of her characters. She dislikes distinction between sexes in terms of the traditional practices. She desires that women are to be treated as human beings. In her essay titled “Women’s Writers” she states:

Both sexes have to prove themselves anew in the information-environment of the virtual world. It is absurd for the feminine literary sensibility, if indeed there is one, to be trapped in a male-modulated role simulation. The worst excessive of ideological
feminism have coloured and distorted feminine literary sensibilities. The increasing exoticization and commodification of women’s issues for a tailored market makes things worse, and leads only to an inevitable marginalization of these ideas and writings. (41-42)

Though Gokhale turns her attention to all sections of the society, her major concern is with the educated upper-middle class women. She chooses the cities of Bombay and Delhi, the main centres of cultural degradation as the backdrop for a few of her novels. Nainital, Benares, and the Himalayan surroundings associated with spiritual heights are the common soil of locale for her novels. Of all settings, Bombay is the author’s highlight as it thrills her to see how Bombay makes room for everybody. Migrants, businessmen, perverts, politicians, holy men, gamblers, beggars, wherever they come from, whatever caste or class, the city welcomes them and turns them to “Bombayites.”

Gokhale in her essay, “Gender and Literary Sensibility” expresses her option for the paraphrased words of Blake, “Great things are done when men and mountains meet. This is not done by jostling on the street” (65). This sensibility suggests her outlook as a woman novelist. She does not support the confrontational attitude of women, rather the author believes in the conciliatory formula of androgyny. Gokhale does not favour the excessive ideological feminism that demands voice for women at the cost of their femininity. All her novels are illustrative of the need for sexual morality and dignified femininity on which stands the edifice of Indian culture. They are documents of the
repression of the feminine psyche that in the long run bursts out into rebellion and subsequently regresses to the “roots” (Dwivedi 115).

Gokhale sees no harm in a frank attitude to sexuality which remained a prohibited topic in the orthodox Indian set-up in which sex was a taboo and public display of love was immorality. Such attitude to gender has become flexible now in India. In the essay, “Gender and Literary Sensibility” she observes, “In India, too, women’s voices moved out of the hushed silences of the upper-middle class drawing rooms into the real world with my own first novel, Paro being a case in point, followed by Shoba De and other users of the genre” (65).

Though Gokhale is not superstitious in terms of her beliefs, she cannot root out the cultural mores that have been accumulated in her subconscious space. That is why she cannot completely do away with things concerning the spirits, rituals, conventional practices, and the like. These supernatural elements present in her novels are not endowed with any significance; rather she uses them as funny and exciting portions which would make her writings more alive and enchanting. Gokhale believes, “If you are an Indian, in some ways religion is found to be central to your understanding” (Personal Interview). This explains the presence of religious elements in Gokhale’s novels.
Religious spirit can perhaps border on superstition and being a Hindu it is irresistible to her. Superstitions, spirits, customs, and conventional beliefs occupy a considerable space in her novels. They themselves seem to enter into her novels. She does not try to write about them. The author confesses, “I am a Hindu to the core. I consider Hinduism as one of the great religions in the world. At the same time I can point out some drawbacks in it. First of all it is full of compromises; stupid, blind, and barbaric customs” (Personal Interview). Gokhale believes in the *Law of Karma not because she is a Hindu but because she sees logic in it. According to her, the Law of Karma makes the people responsible and cautious individuals.

Gokhale has no qualm about writing on prohibited topics such as homosexuality and heterosexuality. Homosexuality is not an obsession with her. The introduction of homosexual characters is not pre-planned but incidental and an involuntary reflection of the knowledge that homosexuality is a common trend in the West where the persons concerned are accepted by the society. Recently in India also, people with such anomaly have shed their inhibitions and have come out in the open from their withdrawn state of life. Gokhale does not want to shut her eyes to what happens around.

Gokhale’s women are not cognizant of sexual morality. They consider men as the source of enjoyment. They have adopted the men’s role as theirs. They are assertive, questioning, resourceful, and resilient. In every step of life from earning a living to fulfilment of sexuality, they act like their male counterparts. Critics observe that these characters pass for “aberration” as
Shoba De’s characters do. In terms of their challenging attitude they deserve to be called new women. Srivastava opines, “Hence by borrowing a metaphor from the male world and treating the men’s value system as theirs, they are actually doing nothing new” (21). However, when those parameters which prove the women characters of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai to be new are applied to Gokhale’s women, they are not new women but appear to be aberrations.

Gokhale is a novelist much concerned with gender equality and self-dignity. The writer favours the new approach to the predetermination and inflexibility of gender roles. She proclaims, “Post feminist thought has already accepted the position that androgyny and a looser, more flexible attitude to gender and role playing is the way of the future” (“Gender” 64). She understands that aggressiveness and long stride in the process of individuation cannot heal the repressed psyche of women.

As a novelist, Gokhale’s mission is to create a new world of hope for the Indian women to live in. She envisages strong women who can manipulate the society to their own advantage. Women exercising unlimited freedom to the extent of losing their identity of women do not succeed in the world of Gokhale’s vision. Unstained femininity and accommodating tradition are the poles on which her world of anticipation rests. In an attempt to project her image of a woman, Gokhale shows the protagonists of her novels as passing through the three stages of repression, rebellion, and regression in their quest for release from the traditional discriminating and dishonouring shackles. The
women who are repressed by gender constraints and conventional taboos go in search of greener pastures, attracted by the pleasures of urbanized city life. In the name of liberation, social order is overturned by them. Finally they feel pressed either to end their life or retreat to their old routine of life. This sequence of behaviour commencing with repression and ending in regression is the focus of the following chapters.