CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The image of a woman in literature has undergone a change during the second half of the twentieth century. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to the earlier literature, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. Thus, the work of contemporary women writers is significant in making the society aware of women’s demands.

The redefinition of the self through the writing of autobiography has placed power into the hands of the writers to share the self-identity with the readers. The writing of these autobiographies as self-ethnographic, cultural, and self-reflexive processes offers the implementation of a new and different approach to both the interrogation of the personal experiences of women and the exchange of cultural knowledge in multicultural educational settings and in other settings.

The writing of autobiography for the purpose of sharing with others who are different and who want to learn about the writer is significant in the multicultural setting because the writer is challenged to write about herself/himself as an individual and as part of the community. When the writers are challenged to recognize their connection to their community, their birth, their families, and their separateness as individuals, they are apt to learn something about themselves and their communities.

During the last few decades, women writers have considerably widened and deepened the areas of human experience with their sharp, feminine perception of life successfully transmuted into verbal artifact. The world body of literature would have been much poorer today but for the contribution of women writers.

The basic teaching imparted to every woman in a patriarchal society is to remain a silent spectator, even as a victim to any injustice meted out by the man and to be very careful of not going public with any personal crisis which may challenge the “honour” of her man. However, even social constraints have their limits and the autobiographies
of women writers cannot take them anymore. These writers are urging their readers and other socio-culturally repressed sisters to rediscover their marginal self and thereby gain emancipation and empowerment.

All across the world, especially in the Indian sub-continent, the act of writing for a woman is essentially an act of breaking her silence because her repressive patriarchal/racial society has taught her to be culturally silent. Feminism in India is essentially the marginalized consciousness that operates on the periphery of patriarchal discourse.

The present researcher has made an attempt to examine the autobiographies of Kamala Das [My Story], Indira Goswami [An Unfinished Autobiography], Tehmina Durani [My Feudal Lord] and Salma Ahmed [Cutting Free: The Extraordinary Memoir of a Pakistani Woman] in order to explore each author’s insight into the marginal self and their unending quest for social, historical, psychological, philosophical and cultural construction of their identity.

*My Story* is rightly looked upon as the best-selling woman’s controversial autobiography in the post-independence India. Kamala Das frankly talks about many untouched topics such as homosexuality and extramarital affair in her autobiography. *My Story* has a chronological order and it is written in a realist style. It gives Kamala Das’s life from age four through British colonial and missionary schools favoured by the colonial Indian elite; through her sexual awakening; an early and seemingly disastrous marriage; her growing literary career; extramarital affairs; the birth of her three sons; and, finally, a slow but steady coming to terms with her spouse, writing, and sexuality. She learnt to defy the pre-established canons of feminine identity; for her it was important to be a woman and a lover with a body and a soul. Her autobiography becomes a vehicle for voicing an “inner privacy” and a protest against the senseless restrictions which force a sensitive woman to lead an insipid life.

Autobiographical writing can prove to be cathartic as it can help the writer in coming to terms with herself. Das believed that she received the courage and pleasure by writing her autobiography. When we read her autobiography, we see that she revolted against the customs, practices and traditions of society and she tried to challenge the society in which man is always superior like a master and woman is always inferior like a slave.
Readers of *My Story* as well as her poems might have wondered at her frank confessions of varied experiences. A careful reading of *My Story* and her poems reveals that her varied experiences are her desperate attempts to search for the ultimate meaning of life. Centuries of suppression has killed what ought to have been only natural, and she is fully aware of it, which is her tragedy. So the writings of Kamala Das are a revolt against a society which deprived her of love as a child, as a young bride, as an adult woman, and it is also a revolt against her physical, economic and social inferiority.

The frank and confessional language which helped Das in transcending her ‘marginal self’ prompted her critics to brand her as an exhibitionist. She had viewed marriage through the tinted glasses of romance and thought then that love was flowers in the hair, it was the yellow moon lighting up a familiar face and soft words whispered in the ear. But at the end of the month, experiencing rejection, jealousy and bitterness, she grew old suddenly and she thought that her face changed from a child’s to a woman’s and her limbs were sore and fatigue.

Thus, Kamala Das, in *My Story*, recounts the trials of her marriage and her painful self-awakening as a woman and a writer. She became an icon for women, in India and elsewhere, struggling to liberate themselves from sexual and domestic oppression. Though it was supposed to be an autobiography (and indeed was provocatively subtitled "the compelling autobiography of the most controversial Indian writer") Das later admitted that there was plenty of fiction in *My Story*. Kamala Das’s autobiographical journey proves to be rewarding. Her heart might have felt liberated after recounting her past.

Though Kamala Das’s autobiography largely deals with her loneliness and alienation, but there were the moments of joy too in her life. Nevertheless she thought that she was like a house with all the lights put out. She passed through the months of intense depression and even contemplated taking her life when she found herself ‘dancing on the most desolate pinnacle of the world’. She wept like a wounded child when the shreds of unjustified scandals concerning her emotional life reached her through the well-meaning relatives.

The anguished and insatiated woman in “Composition” thinks about her relations as completely frustrating and disgusting. She believes that friendship/cannot
endure/the blood-ties which do not satisfy. She, however, continues making contacts 'with every interesting man' she meets and thinks that she must most deliberately whip up a froth of desire and a passion to suit the occasion.

Kamala Das’s autobiographical writing has not remained her personal demesne. It has acquired profound symbolic significance for the entire bruised and battered womankind.

Indira Goswami faced the life full of struggle and hardships courageously. Her fate challenged her to survive in the most pathetic conditions of her life. She plunged into the sea of suffering as a true fighter, struggled bravely with the strong waves of the fate, and reached to the shore with a more experienced outlook towards life. The misfortunes of her life led her to be a more mature person and made her to look at life from a wider perspective.

Often, Indira Goswami is termed as a feminist for speaking on behalf of those women, who have remained on the periphery and have suffered under the patriarchal control. She was very much a feminist writer stating her views strongly and effectively in story after story and engaging with the social injustices and the inequalities she encountered. There are very few Indian women autobiographers who have given such a beautiful and intimate account of their life in their regional language. She thought that writing her life was like an absorbing style-type that once one opens the pages he/she becomes impatient to go through the whole book as early as possible. By writing her life story, Goswami has critiqued the idea that an autobiography can only be written by a male writer.

Indira Goswami describes a series of actions of man's cruelty to his own species with exceptional mastery. Her autobiography conveys a sense of the pain, the restlessness and the suffering that she has undergone in various phases of her life. Writing was her way of overcoming these. With indefatigable energy and incessant effort, she rose above the circumstances that moulded her, but never lost her profound sense of identification with those who continued to suffer in the river of pain.

Indira Goswami's autobiography and her fiction offer a carefully drawn continuum of social change in Indian society. There are many more aspects to Indira Goswami's “womanism”. As a young woman she found tragedy and pain whereas she was born to happiness and privilege. Performing an act of self-withdrawal, she came

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out stronger with the realization of a map of social problems relating to women. Her restlessness springs from an urge to speak out her commitment to the causes of equity and justice.

In pursuit of her research project, she had to stay for two years in a dark, airless room teeming with snakes, totally bereft of any facilities. It was an uncommon step for an upper caste girl to live in a squalid dwelling. During her research, she witnessed the most sordid condition of the abandoned women and widows who crowded the state. Her keen observation of the miserable plight helped her to reconcile herself with her own grief. She found that the essence of life lay not in itself, but in our earnest endeavor to live for others.

An identification of her personal sorrow with the agony of mankind resulted in harmony of warring forces within her heart. A changed persona emerged and Indira was convinced of the healing power of compassion. She thought that the alone was the prime consideration and nothing else in her life. From a mere litterateur and scholar, she was transformed into a social crusader. That is one way of transcending the limits of one’s personal fate and personal circumstances.

Indira Goswami suffered from perennial depression right from her childhood. In the opening pages of her autobiography, she mentions that she always had the inclination to jump into the Crinoline waterfall located near her house in Shilong. It was the death of her beloved father, who she was extremely attached to, left her shattered. Persistent thoughts of suicide haunted her. Each succeeding bereavement left her in an ever-lengthening chain of tears.

Indira Goswami’s autobiography, very beautifully, brings out those aspects of her life which might have been burnt on the pyre with her corpse. However, the purpose of putting life into words is best served when somebody grows up through it and uplifts himself/herself above the common human being. Indira Goswami, too, decided to lead life on her own terms and conditions instead of adhering to the social conventions, traditions and values.

Indira Goswami’s task of writing her life story helped her in creating a distinguished place for herself amongst the other Assamese women writers. Also, she could look at herself and confront her inner self from which she had kept running away
most of her life. Her obsession with death turns into her love and zeal to live for others. It is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and from darkness to enlightenment.

A close reading of Tehmina Durrani’s *My Feudal Lord* makes the reader realize that it is not out of love for her but in the hope of a male heir that Mustafa is attending to Tehmina. Her endurance of his tortures is the result of an archaic patriarchal value which inculcates a sense of slavery into the essence of womanhood. This extends to sexual domination of the wife by the husband. Tehmina cannot but perpetuate her marriage bond with Mustafa, realizing fully well that in her society, a divorced woman is the most despicable of the human species.

Patriarchal discourse limits and transcribes the image and identity of Tehmina but she inverts the social and familial constraints to emerge as a new woman. She strives against all odds to escape all forms of essential categorizing that render the subaltern or minority woman both the victim and the unwilling perpetrator of damning stereotypical metaphor both by Eurocentric imperialism and the patriarchal tenets of her Islamic society, the power politics in Pakistani Govt. and the social ethos of Pakistani marital life.

Despite the knowledge that Khar is an oft-married feudal, Durrani does little to avoid an affair that would ultimately lead her to divorce her first husband, giving up her claim to their daughter and possessions, and moving in with Khar while he is still married to another woman, Sheherzade. Khar proposes to Durrani while dancing with her at a party, an offer that she accepts, and then follows an affair that is built on deceit and exploitation of privilege and power. Given his political clout, Khar arranges for her husband to be sent to serve in another province, paving the way for Durrani to move into the Governor’s House as Khar’s willing mistress while his wife is also living there with their daughter. As a result of her liaison with Khar, who has a wild and dangerous reputation as a womanizer and ruthless political animal, Durrani’s family severes its ties with her. The candid admission and expose of their romantic escapades while they are both married to other spouses is in itself a striking departure from the docility and privacy associated with Muslim women, both socio-culturally and in religious terms. Shattering socio-cultural gender taboos, Durrani volunteers intimate information regarding her heady affair while conspiring with Khar to dodge their respective spouses even in the face of their high profile social and political status.
Throughout her book, Durrani makes repeated references to her ‘class’ as opposed to the ‘feudal class’ that Khar belonged to. It is not so much a sense of class superiority over her husband that emerges out of the bitterness that she is subjected to during her association with him, but rather an honest and naive attempt to put her circumstances and resultant outcomes in perspective in order to decipher the root cause of her humiliation and misfortune. The insight she offers into her family background is important in understanding her and her family’s reactions and decisions in the face of socio-cultural pressures and expectations. Daughter of a high-ranking banker father, hailing from the Afghan royal family, and an affluent elite class mother belonging to one of Pakistan’s most politically prominent families as a result of her father’s knighthood for services rendered during British colonial rule in India, Durrani describes her lineage as both a source of social prestige as well as conservative when it comes to their women and their expected roles in society. Given these impeccable credentials of birth, both socially and politically, Durrani falls in love with, and marries, Khar, a feudal who, although wielding political and individual power in his own right, is frowned upon by Durrani’s class as an opportunist and upstart. She describes Khar’s feudal lineage in great detail as driven by a lust for political power and position through betrayals, intrigues, deceptions and violence. What comes across is a charismatic man who has no qualms about his ruthless modus operandi when it comes to getting what he wants, be it political or personal success.

Her own disappointment and disillusionment in the man whom she had begun to idolize as a leader and hope of the downtrodden in Pakistan are apparent as she tries in earnest to dissect his character and actions, and thereby the reasons for her own sufferings, through piecing together incidents from his childhood and political beginnings and how he maneuvered his political and social rise through manipulation of events and individuals. She details Khar’s consequent political status as a popular leader of the masses, while espousing and furthering his own rise and political ambitions at their cost.

The question that arises is: What does Durrani achieve by deciding to reveal her life of torture and betrayal, and how should her exercise be rated in terms of its relevance to feminist resistance against oppression?

Durrani’s dedication makes her intention of writing her life story clear. She reconstructs her tortured past primarily as a way of putting her side of the facts on
record, besides focusing on exposing the Pakistani feudal male elite from her firsthand experience. In doing so, Durrani rebels against Islamic doctrines that value women as the subservient bearers of children and caretakers of the men in their lives. Through the very act of writing her life story, Durrani ruptures the socio-cultural and religious pattern that places a tacit obligation on Muslim women to remain silent about their own longings and sufferings. In the process, she also breaks the feudal concept of women as a man’s property and honour as she comes into her own, and establishes her identity and honour by exposing and dismantling her ex-husband’s feudal mentality. Reflecting on her decision to break her silence Durrani believes that for a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, in our closed society, will be considered obscene by many, but silence is a greater crime. It condones injustice. It breeds in us subservience and fosters a malignant hypocrisy. Hence Durrani’s decision to write a book instead of wasting the other years of her life. She decided to share her life so that the people might become aware of the politics, the leadership, their values, their mentalities, their Islamic principles and their views on women. She further decided to cast a stone at hypocrisy that is endemic because of the silence.

Trained to endure a marriage in the name of social success, regardless of the emotional price exacted in the process, and the cultural stigmas attached to revealing one’s private life in any manner, Durrani’s decision to marry below her class both times, divorce and eventually pen her life-story proves her resilience and resolve to expose the hypocrisy and suffering that is camouflaged in the name of maintaining social status and appearances and upholding family honour in the Muslim patriarchal societies.

Durrani shatters the notion of women of privilege, who have everything to gain by maintaining the status quo, rather than rocking the boat, regardless of personal suffering and humiliation at the hands of a gender-discriminatory social and religious system, by using her class and social position to do just that. Born into the lap of luxury that could have rendered her just another high society socialite, Durrani takes on the task to shed this ‘convenience of subservience’ to a system that dictates her subordination as a woman in all her roles, and candidly reveals a life punctured by extreme humiliation, abuse and betrayals in spite of her class privilege. In the process, she also exposes the double standards and hypocrisies that are at play within her own class as a means of preserving a scandal-free social standing in society. The very act of
recording and sharing these experiences becomes an act of feminist resistance against patriarchy and bonding across cultures with women, regardless of their social class and cultural calling, who can identify with her gendered experiences of oppression.

*My Feudal Lord* serves as an example of a Muslim woman's independent search for ways and means to secure a life that would be free of fear and abuse in a society and class that endow her with gender-based restriction and social pressures to conform to the dictates and expectations of a patriarchal order that allows little room and opportunity for an independent identity for a woman. Even her own parents, all too conscious of the stigma of having a divorced woman in their family, discouraged her from leaving Khar, thereby endorsing a pattern conformity in the name of family honour and social acceptance. Durrani's refusal to succumb to a life, a man and a system that impose oppression on her as a woman is in itself a tremendous act of resistance when seen in her cultural, social and religious contexts. Further, her conscious decision to share her life story, knowing full well the consequences of opposing and exposing a system and a man who are too powerful to put hurdles in her path in society, serves as testimony to the utility and power of woman's autobiography as a means of feminist resistance. Durrani's expose renders her a transformed woman who has shed her docility and submissiveness at great personal price, and emerged as an individual who refuses to compromise or tolerate oppression in the name of socio-cultural hypocrisy.

Salma Ahmed's *Cutting Free: An Extraordinary Memoir of a Pakistani Woman* is truly an inspiring story of a woman who surmounted formidable odds to achieve extraordinary success in business and politics. The story of her personal life, often difficult and sad, is intertwined with an equally enthralling account of a public career that brought her much acclaim and reward. Her life is a life of a pampered child, an unhappy wife and a repentant mother. It is about Salma's three marriages—to a naval officer, to a scion of a leading feudal family, and to a cricketing star. It is also about her conflicts as a mother who made the agonising decision to give up two of her six children, and her efforts to build a career as a business entrepreneur and political figure in an emerging Pakistan. Salma recounts the events of a life filled with dramatic highs and equally painful lows and she does not spare herself any more than she does other players in her story. Her book unabashedly reveals many of the hidden taboos of the
contemporary Pakistani society, bringing into question customs that are an integral part of the sub-continental culture.

Salma Ahmed has fought a lot throughout her life to cut herself free from miseries and injustices meted out by the Islamic patriarchy. Salma lays bare her heart that she endures years of strife and struggle, joys and sorrows, successes and failures, of ambitions fulfilled, some not quite – perhaps a job well done, but yet retaining a strong conviction in her potential for tomorrow. Having been a single woman most of her life and having fought her battles alone, that too in an Islamic society, she knows only too well how prejudice, narrow-mindedness, and vindictiveness prevent women from achieving their full potential. Fortunately, she finds that attitudes are now changing. Society is not only more tolerant, but there is also an increased willingness to treat women as equals. She hopes her story will inspire women to courageously fight the battle of life in spite of the limits imposed by society, circumstances, fate and destiny. She also hopes that they will learn to believe in themselves, be always true to their inner beings, and never hesitate to shoot for the stars.

Salma discloses her vision for Pakistani women and she hopes to see them into the changing perceptions, altering the fabric of society, and fighting for their rights; she hopes to see them achieve excellence and perfection. She says that she brought up four children as a single parent, and gave them the best – perhaps that has been her most gratifying reward. She has learnt in her life one thing i.e. never to look back, but to always move forward. Thus, her tale might be over, but the story of her life continues – and continues with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. She has dreams to fulfil and her journey is far from over. No mortal can foretell what the future will bring, but she says that when she finally goes she hopes to go while still searching for her next challenge.

Thus, in Salma Ahmed's story of tumult and triumph, one can find wisdom distilled through a life of uncommon struggle.

To conclude, a study of My Story, An Unfinished Autobiography, My Feudal Lord and Cutting Free: An Extraordinary Memoir of a Pakistani Woman provides a glimpse into to the unsurmountable human spirit and its longing for freedom of self-expression. Kamala Das, Indira Goswami, Tehmina Durrani and Salma Ahmed broke their silence and let the world know about the male-dominated society and the plight and misery of the women and the victimization of women in a patriarchal society.
Though they were the women in power and strength, they were often mocked and scorned by men and women alike. They were at the top but faced their exile alone. They became aware of their own identity, freed from the stereotyped roles of daughter, sister, wife or mother and broke their silence and re-organized their life differently. They hoped that their stories would inspire women to courageously fight the battle of life in spite of the limits imposed by society, circumstances, fate and destiny.