CHAPTER 4

Women in gendered enclosure and its reflection in the selected novels.

Sex is a biological construct and gender is a social construct. But when one uses the biological differences between men and women to establish the superiority of men over women, it is called biological essentialism\(^1\). This conception of women as born inferior to men has led to the discrimination against women in all societies from the beginning of human civilization. Since women are considered as weak and inferior to men, it has been assumed that women need protection of the male. Consequently certain security parameters have been created for the women to ensure their safety in the society, and these parameters constitute the enclosure.

In the context of North-east India, which is the home of many indigenous tribes, it will be rather difficult to provide a uniform detail about the restrictions imposed on women because of the heterogeneous nature of the tribes. However, it can safely be asserted that the restrictions and limitations imposed on women in the rest of India are almost absent in this region. Restrictions like the *burkha*, *purdah* or veil, or social evils like dowry and child marriage are almost absent among the tribal population in North-east India. But other forms of discrimination against women are found in the north-east region.

Easterine Kire Iralu’s short essay published in the *oxford anthology* seems like a rejoinder to the mainland discourse from a disgruntled writer who has been denied enough space, but the observation that she makes there is worth mentioning: “We have always lived on the periphery. This is my experience, I have been marginalized simply because I am a Naga, twice-marginalised because I am a woman and thrice
marginalized because I am a tribal, a member of an indigenous community” (Aier 273). Iralu further says that most of the Naga society is a highly oral society and the rich oral tradition carries the corpus of the Naga tradition, culture and literature. Having said this, it is imperative that the gender role of the Naga people can be traced in their oral literature as well. Anungla Aier maintains that the Naga society is a patriarchal and patrilineal one where the “structure of the relationship between the genders normally gets the legal sanctions through institutions such as the customary laws.” (Aier 303) These customary laws are upheld as supreme among all the Naga tribes, and the dominance of the male in this becomes quite evident from the position they share in the folktales. Aier states one such folktale which talks of the origin of the Naga tribe:

Nagas clearly demarcate the universe into three parts: one is controlled by men, the other by wild animals, usually symbolized by the strength of the tiger, and the third part by the spirits. The story depicts the woman as the mother who gave life to them all, but she is always depicted as a weak, sickly woman who was constantly under the threat of the tiger unless under the care and protection of the man. Eventually she dies and is buried under the hearth to protect the body from being devoured by the tiger (Aier 304).

The position of the woman described in the folktale is analogous to the position that Simone de Beauvoir has cited in her book The Second Sex. The woman is portrayed as vulnerable despite of her reproductive capacity which is symbolic of regeneration. Although the female is the seat of reproduction, the carrier of womb, it is the male who actually protects it. The male gets double benefit as the carrier of the sperm that fertilizes the ovary, and as the protector of the female. Verrier Elwin, in his autobiography maintains that ‘head-hunting’ is a ritual to ensure good crop and better
babies (Elwin 227). The male gets the advantage of being the protector as well as the
progenitor. This is also the reason that the folktale instructs to bury the women in the
hearth, a safe place. At all instance the female should only live under the protection of
the male and she is invariably at the beck and call of her male counterpart. Because of
the reproductive capacity of woman, she is also considered as a caregiver and a
nurturer. Most of the Naga folk tales are centered round the male dominance, be it
exploration of new territories or war or creation. Ruth Lalsiemsang Buongpu in her
essay entitled *Gender Relations and the Web of Traditions in North-east India* cites
the various forms of discriminations that exist in a Naga society. It is believed among
the Zeliangrong Naga men that one should abstain from sexual intercourse with one’s
wife before any hunting expedition, which otherwise may fetch ill fate to the entire
group. Among the Zemei Naga males, the superiority of the male is so intense that
they do not touch the meat of an animal hunted by a female (Buongpu). Hunting is
exclusively a masculine business and headhunting is predominantly a male affair.
Anungla Aier in her essay cites that even the government reservation policy for the
women in the Municipal Council could not remove gender disparity because there has
been strong protest from *Ao Senden* (An Apex tribal organization) against such
reservation policies. According to them, head hunting and village protection are
essentially masculine job and so politics is also their privilege. As a result of the
protest no nomination papers have been allowed to file in the elections. Aier also
maintains that not a single woman has ever been elected to the state assembly; such
has been the gender based discrimination.

Among the other tribal communities the problems are as acute. Jogesh Das, in
his book *Folklore of Assam*, cites that the *dimasa-kacharies* consider the men to be
superior to women. For the same offence, the woman has to pay double of the amount of the fine paid by the man. There are stringent laws for the widowed women in both tribal and non-tribal societies. Since it is considered somewhat a dishonor to marry a widow, a Bodo widow does not usually consent for remarriage. And the man who marries such a widow is referred to as a ‘dhoka’. The women enjoy considerable liberty in Mikir and Rabha societies. Women are held in high esteem and widow- remarriage and divorce are allowed among the Rabhas and Mikirs, whereas the same is proscribed in the Deuri community (J. Das). Despite of liberty and honour, the female is treated as a commodity in these societies. The tradition of bride –money prevalent in these societies somewhat relegates the women to a inferior position, to that of a commodity which can be possessed and dispossessed at the will of the bride-groom. Easterine Kire Iralu has also highlighted this issue in her novel *A Terrible Matriarchy*. Moreover, the polygamous nature of the tribal society sanctioned by their customary laws, render the women in such societies quite helpless. In his characteristic humourous style, Verrier Elwin tells about the polygamous nature of the North-eastern tribes-

My interpreters had wives with them and we went along stimulated by the constant crackle of matrimonial discord. They were all polygamous. One of them had three wives with him in the camp- he had four altogether, three he said to work in the house and one for sex. He hoped for eight and explained that he actually wanted twelve but, owing to the new-fangled ideas of the Government, he supposed he would have to be content with less. (Elwin 267)

The polygamous society where the man is allowed to take several wives, can never assure an equal status to women. The women are bound to suffer. She is treated
as a commodity that exists only for the need of the husband. In the novel, *A Terrible Matriarchy*, one can see Lieno’s mother appreciates her for having the qualities of a perfect wife-material, “They like their wives to be good workers. You are a good worker, Lieno. But you must try to be more docile.” (E. Iralu, *A Terrible Matriarchy* 272). The statement is somewhat ironical because Leino being an educated girl is suppose to be empowered to voice her opinion of what is right and wrong. The books which talk about the equality of men and women guaranteed by constitutional rights seem to be fairy tale in reality. The position of women is further weakened by their early marriages in a polygamous society. Early marriages mean less qualified, and hence a lesser possibility of having a job. In due course of time if the wife is divorced, or she is widowed, she has to live through abject penury. Such circumstances have also forced woman into prostitution and other promiscuous social evils.

Verrier Elwin, who has always championed the cause of the tribal people in India, is an interesting case study in this regard. The BBC news informs ‘British scholar's Indian widow in penury’. Elwin has married a 13 year old girl from the Gond tribe, when he was 37 years old in the year 1940. “So Verrier resorted to what he termed 'love marriage by capture' - he got married under the Special Marriages Act, designed for such inter-religious and inter-racial unions, followed by a four-day Gond wedding," writes Elwin's biographer, Ram Guha” (Shaini). After India’s independence, he has taken the Indian citizenship and so did he take ex-parte divorce from Kosi. Recounting her life with Elwin Kosi reminiscence- “He suddenly went away. And he never came back,” she says. Elwin would initially send 25 rupees (now
55 US cents) every month to keep her family going, but that "stopped very soon". She took to working in the farms to keep the home fires burning" (Shaini).

The issue needs no further explication, as one can well see into the helpless condition of women, who is more a victim of the society than of the individual. Without proper education and without rights to land and property women become vulnerable. The gendered enclosure which has been designed for the protection of women has pushed her into modern and sophisticated slavery. In order to rectify this historical blunder, the Indian government should legislate strong laws and must have strong reservation policies which will empower women in decision making process. The absence of a uniform law in India is also the cause of this failure to empower women. No doubt, the customary laws must be respected, because the tribal groups are undergoing a transition in the present times, and a sudden impression of law might upset their society, leaving them vulnerable. However, such customary laws which relegates woman to a miserable position should be debated and revoked. Only the gendered enclosure can be dismantled.

The subsequent subsections will focus on the identity of women under gendered enclosure, the representation of such women in the literature of North-east India, and the difficulties encountered while empowering women.
4.1 **Identity.**

Indians call me “ching chong”, the Chinese arrested me when I walked into Tibet, beat me up in jail and threw me out and said “Get out of here, you bloody Indian.” Who am I? I am born and brought up in India and speak four Indian languages, love Bollywood, have more Indian friends than those of my tribe. Who am I? My identity card is called Registration Certificate. It says you are a foreigner, and your nationality is Tibetan (Tsundue).

The quotation above problematises the complex issue of identity formation. Identity is not always the one which one seeks, but identity is something which is often construed by others. In the power dynamics, Identity is constructed by the one who sways the world with power, the one who wields it. Speaking of the indispensability of identity, Philip Gleason says that questions like ‘who am I?’ and ‘where do I belong?’ has become inevitable in today’s world (Gleason). Identity is about the relationship between the individual and the society. Identity has multiple layers: The identity of an individual within the community, with in the household, within the workplace; the identity of that community within larger context. The identity which is conceived by the individual in contrast with the identity given by others; the identity of the male and the female and their differences etc.

Each community in a society is ascribed certain social and cultural features which gives them a distinct character and it forms the identity of that community. For example, Esther Syiem in her essay *Social identity and the Liminal Character of the Folk* describes that a simple but multidimensional term ‘Khublei’ is so highly charged with meaning that
…it has formed the basis for the construction of Khasi identity in the link that it has had with the orality that is synonymous with society. Khublei contains within its contours the face of a community that has striven to organize itself around a body of philosophical, socio-cultural and folk discourses…that have never actually been classified in writing. (Syiem 129)

Identity is also a matter of recognition. In the opening lines of this section, Tenzin Tsundue is identified as an Indian by the Chinese, and as a Tibetan by the Indian government. Tsundue is born in India but he conceives himself as a part of the imagined Tibetan community waiting for the imaginary homeland to become a reality. Tsundue is eligible for Indian citizenship, and once he settles the disputes at court, he can live peacefully as an Indian forever without any hassle. But he cannot. He sees himself as a part of the imagined community which awaits a homeland in the distant future. He is the son of Tibetan refugees and his Tibetan identity makes him crave, fight in Gandhian way, and seek for a homeland. They take to protests worldwide to move the world to recognize the independence of Tibet as a nation. Thus identity depends on the recognition of others as well.

In the case of North-east India, Identity issue has not only caused regional dispute but has also left the region fragmented. Edward Gait’s comment on the Assamese Identity has already been discussed in Chapter 3 of this book. In an attempt to assimilate the disparate population, the centre always tries to assimilate the people living in the territory. The idea of homogeneity has been foisted on the people of north-east India by considering the tribal people as homogenous groups. Such attempt of nonchalant homogenization has led to internal strife which has eventually resulted in the creation of borderlines with new identities springing up, and more on the go: the
Bodo, Rabha, Mishing, Tiwa, and Karbi are all struggling for independent identities and for the right to self-governance. This has also left the populace embittered towards the administration. Birendranath Dutta in his essay, *North-East India and its Socio-cultural Milieu*, talks about the distinct identities of these communities residing in these regions for centuries. This is but one face of identity formation. At micro level when separate identities of the tribal population have been recognized, it caused other complications which have been dealt in the sixth chapter of this book.

An understanding of the culture and life style of the people in north-east India is imminent in order to understand the identity issues. With the changing time, the contours of identity are also changing constantly. During the early part of 20th century, when Mahatma Gandhi asked the women of the nation to come out of their homes and participate in the freedom struggle, the womenfolk did respond to that. The national identity was a bigger cause than regional identities or identities within the home or community at that point of time because of the national crisis and struggle for nationhood. In north-east India too, the brave heart female soldiers have sacrificed their lives at the altar of freedom struggle. Freedom has been won; but struggle continues. The struggle is a unified effort of both the male and the female to secure a common identity for the cause of a ‘nation’. However, this effort does not win her a space to create a separate identity. On one hand, it jeopardizes the women, and on the other hand, it continues to keep the women at a subservient level within the homestead.

Temsula Ao in her collection of short stories *These Hills Called Home* presents the strife of the women who have participated in the Naga struggle for the identity of a new nationhood. The character of Khatila in *The Jungle Major*, the first story in the
These Hills Called Home by Temsula Ao, reminds one of Portia in The Merchant of Venice. She is “tall, fair, slim and possessed of the most charming smile” (Ao, These Hills Called Home 1). She is a sharp contrast to her husband who is short, dark and buck teeth and amid much protest from her family and clan she goes on to live happily with Punaba as a housewife. In the due course of time Punaba leaves his job as a driver and joins the underground forces and thereafter starts living in the forest hideouts to avoid arrest by the Indian Army. On one occasion when he comes to visit his wife in the village, the army getting a hint of it cordons off the area to trap Punaba. It is then that the onus of saving her husband automatically falls on Khatila: “Khatila was in quandary, what should she do? How could she save her husband, herself and the entire village from the approaching soldiers?” (Ao, These Hills Called Home 5). With her ingenuity and presence of mind she takes control of the situation.

She fished out some of her husband’s old cloths and ordered him to get into them, then she smeared his face, hands and feet with ash from the hearth, hid his sandals, ruffled his hair and began shouting at him, ‘you no good loafer, what were you doing all day yesterday? There is no water in the house even to wash my face. Run to the well immediately or you will rue the day you were born’ (Ao, These Hills Called Home 6)

Saying thus she presents her husband as a servant, ignoring the presence of the army captain, and helps him to sneak out of the situation thereby saving his life. Her captivating beauty and charm, relaxed disposition and intelligence do not make her arrogant, nor does she claim any recognition in respect to the tremendous job she has accomplished. Rather her cool demeanor and charm is fortified by her humility to her husband. Her courage seems to be mightier than the ‘mighty Indian army’; and her
momentary ingenuity is more effective than the ‘planned operation’ of the army. The writer describes thus:

The young and inexperienced army officer did not realize that the beautiful but simple village woman had thus foiled a meticulously planned ‘operation’ of the mighty Indian army and that a prized quarry had simply walked away to freedom.” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 7)

Later in the story the heroic exploits of Punaba becomes a favourite subject of discussion among his friends. The writer states that “the escape of Punaba and his party that day was, however, construed differently by the underground bosses and the credit was attributed to his shrewd planning.” (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 8) However Khatila doesn’t seem to mind about to whom the credit goes so long her husband is safe and sound. At the end of the story the true story is revealed to the friends and the husband says playfully, ‘Aren’t you glad that your jungle major is so ugly?’ (Ao, *These Hills Called Home* 8)

In another short story ‘A Simple Question’ from the collection *Laburnum for My Head*, the narrator comments thus:

The petty thievery which would normally have been ignored, once again reminded him how a coarse and illiterate village woman had managed to unsettle his military confidence by challenging the validity of his own presence in this alien terrain. (Ao, *Laburnum For My Head* 87)

The context of this situation is like Khatila’s; Imdongla the wife of Tekaba is a simple but ‘worldly-wise’ woman who comes to the rescue of her husband, a ‘gaonburah’, when he has been arrested by the Indian Army. She manages to convince the army officer by evoking pity and mercy in him leading to the subsequent release
of her husband. The writer extols the virtue and strength of the formidable Naga woman who despite of her beauty, intelligence and strength readily accepts the authority of her husband out of humility and as a requirement of the social structure of subordination.

Women like Khatila and Imdongla are the products of a system where they are, right from their childhood, taught to be subservient to the husbands and their world begins and ends with them. They are capable, physically and intellectually to be independent, nevertheless they accept the superiority of their husbands and submit themselves to the patriarchal structure of the society. Their identity lies in being the wives. However, there is also a strong desire that they nurse in their heart. That desire is to be free. The last story, *Flight*, in the collection *Laburnum for my Head* is an allegory that sees the true freedom of women in a flight away from bondage. The protection offered by the husband or the family is no doubt a boon for the female, but her true happiness is only realized in her freedom from that bondage of protection because the four walls of protection at times seem to be suffocating. It is so because while accepting the protection she also accepts her own subordinate status as a dependent. At times even her economic security cannot guarantee her an independent life. She is free and yet she is in chains- by the customs of the society where she is brought up and which has trained her mind to submit her ‘self’ always to the husband.

One such character is Nivedita, in Anjum Hasan’s novel *Lunatic in My Head*. Nivedita is a teacher, who despite of her husband’s infidelity and her own economic independence cannot divorce the husband and accepts him the way he is. Flossie says about Nibedita,
She lies alone in bed from six to eight in the morning – just lies there, mind you, she’s not sleeping, while her husband is running around like a maniac on the Don Bosco basketball court, teaching kids how to throw a ball into a ring. She lies there thinking her life is wasted- no children, a husband who is not repentful enough, a mother who blames her for letting her husband go astray, a mother-in-law about whom the less said the less better, and then college, which bores her she says. By the time her husband gets back home, she’s already left for work. When she gets home, her husband is out there coaching people in some other sport, track running or something, and she cooks dinner and watches TV. Then her husband comes home, they eat and sleep. This is the life of Nibedita Sen. She keeps complaining about it and you can’t blame her. (Hasan, *Lunatic In My Head* 215)

Mitra Phukan in her novel *The Collector’s Wife* too presents the moment of crisis for women created by the internal conflict for nationhood. She refers to the student agitation of Assam that has taken a toll on the education system and has deprived the women from their due status as well. She gives a regional identity to the women participating in the student’s movement by removing the petty identities that separates mankind:

The girls in the group, who usually wore the ubiquitous and practical salwar-kamiz to college, were now dressed in simple yet traditional mekhela-sadors to emphasize their regional identity. As she looked at the eager, bright young faces of the boys and girls, she couldn’t help noticing the facial features and contours before her. The almond eyes, the golden skin of the mongoloid, the curly hair of the Austric, the dark complexion of the Dravids, the fine features and fair colouring of the Aryans, were all present in the crowd of young faces before her. And they wanted to rid the land of foreigners! (Phukan 91)
The novelist no doubt deals with the foreigner’s issue in a simplistic way in her novel without going into the political rhetoric of who the foreigners are. However, she has made the point that the regional identity is ascertained by the common dress code of the female belonging to different racial backgrounds. Since Assamese language has been in a privileged position in the north-east India, and because of Assam’s close contact to the mainland India she has witnessed the growth and development quite rapidly when compared to the other frontier North-eastern states, the Assam agitation has in a way hampered the student community at large and the women in particular. Gender disparities are ignored, and a common cause brought to the foreground- the regional identity. Bondona, one of Rukmini’s students, in the novel says,

My mother knows what I am doing- running around organizing processions, moving out on the streets at all hours of the day and night, spending so much time with men who are not related, and she knows that this will jeopardize my chances in the marriage market, probably quite irrevocably. But she supports what I do. So does my father. (Phukan 181)

The consequences of Assam agitation have far worse effect on the female than their male counterparts. Life for a spinster in the Assamese society can be very difficult. The far reaching implication of crossing the gendered enclosure can be seen in the life of Aideo Handique, who dared to act in the movie Joymoti. The entire family has been ostracized by the village and poor Aideu has to live a life of isolation-

Even her family was boycotted till they sought forgiveness for their daughter’s “misdeeds”. “It was a terrible time. People shunned me. They would not fetch water from the same pond I went to. Their taunts hurt me. I
used to lock myself in my room and cry. For three years I did not even step out of the house,” Aideu said…. As for marriage, she said sadly, “Who would have married me' I had already addressed my co-star as Bongohordeo (dear husband) (Tirkey)

The price is far greater than the act. Such have been the social taboos that the price is often to be paid by the female, whereas, the male enjoyed a much greater mobility and freedom. Therefore, in matter of collective identity, women enjoy freedom to participate in mass movements, social rallies along with the male. But when it comes to the personal identity, where the self needs to be asserted, women have faced the hitch. Indian society does not recognize the individual identity of the female, because her identity is linked with her family.

Anungla Aier maintains that a female is born “not only to a set of parents but also into the clan unit and the construction of his/her social identity is primarily drawn from their membership into that clan unit.” (Aier 306) This identity attached to the female is temporary, because she will soon acquire a new identity that will be given by the new family setup into which she will marry. Since women have no fixed place in the father’s house, she is treated most often as a burden which needs to be disposed off. The comodification of women and attaching a value to women in the form of bride-price in almost every tribal society, as discussed earlier has reduced women to a secondary being whose identity will keep changing. It may be mentioned here that bride-price also prevailed not only in tribal societies, but also in communities belonging to lower caste as pointed out by Flavia Agnes. This means that the lower caste women and tribal women enjoy greater freedom in matrimonial relationships. Although they are treated like commodities to be purchased, they can actually return
the bride-price and earn their freedom. However, this is a dialectic that only exists within the parameters of the limited tribal or communal world; in a larger context belonging to tribal group and lower caste communities have their own ramification as seen in the ostracism policies of Brahminism and Higher caste Hindus. The absence of property rights is also responsible for this condition of women. As a result, the women may suffer from rootlessness, identity crisis, and conflicting identities.

Critics often refer to the matrilineal societies to contrast the privileged condition of women in those societies. Those societies are Khasi, Garo and the Nayar. Whereas the Nayar women have already lost their rights to property (Menon), Patricia Mukhim explains how women are only the titular guardian of the property, the actual control is with the maternal uncle and the actual bread winner is the husband. She also maintains that “the urban middle class educated elite … has no problem about altering the matrilineal status and adopting traits of patriarchy in respect of taking the father’s surname instead of the mother’s…” (Mukhim, *Myths, Tradition and Identity* 189)

From the discussion above, it can be surmised that the female identity has been construed in terms of exclusion in the discourse which is essentially patriarchal. The representation of this ‘other’ in the myths, folktales, histories, and other literatures has offered a pseudo-identity to woman which is coercive in nature.

Women have been assigned plurality of identities through literature. In the 21st century, these multiple identities have become topics of debate owing to the numerous atrocities committed against them. At least two identities have caused serious political debate between the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) on one hand and the more liberal parties on the other regarding the *Issue of Bharat Mata Ki Jai* (Victory to Mother India). Whereas zealous news channels are trying to locate the
point of conflict in the debate about nationalism, one can trace it into the literatures produced in India during the 19th and 20th century when India has been swayed by the ideals of nationalism. Interestingly, Jawaharlal Nehru gives us a more holistic and broad view of this slogan: Bharat Mata Ki Jai. Nehru has asked a group of people whom he addressed, mostly peasants, what does this ‘bharat mata mean’? The peasants after looking confused for some time, one among them, a Jat, replies, it is the dharti, the good earth of India. Nehru writes, “Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people, and victory to her meant victory to these people. You are parts of this Bharat Mata, I told them, you are in a manner yourselves Bharat Mata, and as this idea slowly soaked into their brains, their eyes would light up as if they had made discovery” (Nehru 53-54). Nehru has added a new meaning to the phrase, thus subsuming the populace into the land, to seek victory for themselves, or metaphorically for the land in which they inhabit. Meanings are easily soaked into the rain-starved sand of time. Our great leaders have attached new meanings and significance like the patriarchal society did in the past. In this world only change is constant. The world has been constantly changing in its inherent values, and in this constant change and flux, meaning, phrases, people, communities, everything else acquire new meaning by dispensing off its old meaning, of course faded reminiscences may be traced but only as a routine or ritual.

At a time when the Indian nationalism has been garnering the nation as ‘mother’ through slogans like ‘Vande Maataram’ derived from Bankimchandra’s novel Anandamath, there has been an alternate representation of Indian nationalism through the Urdu literature. It is not surprising that the nation has been divided on the basis of two religions, both having contrary ideologies of how they perceive the
nation. Aamir R. Mufti maintains that Saadat Hasan Manto, the Urdu short story writer has rendered “an account of national modernity” quite contrary to the idea of Hindu writer and leaders. His account has not been inscribed with affirmation of identity and subjectivity, but with displacement and difference. Therefore, against the nation as mother, the literature of Manto depicts the Muslim experience of Indian modernity through the impoverished and exploited prostitutes: a kind of interrogation of nationalism in the words on Mufti. It will be pertinent to note here that, the North-east region of that time has also perceived the nation as a mother which has later on inspired artists like Bhupen Hazarika to compose such beautiful lyrics like **Axomi Aii Rupahi**. The State song of Assam, an adaptation of the lyrical composition by Laksminath Bezbaroa, also addresses the land as mother. The concluding Stanza goes thus- **O Mur Upoja thai, O Mur Axomi Aii, Sai Lou Tumar, Mukhoni Ebar, Hepah Mur Polua Nai**.

Unlike the Hindu conception of identifying the condition of the territory with mother, Mufti is of the opinion that the relation of the Muslim minority to the national culture is perceived through the figure of a courtesan. Apart from Manto, other Muslim writers like Ismat Chaghtai, Miraji, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Iqbal hasve taken similar path that has set paradoxical trends to the Hindu version of Nationalism (Mufti). This staging of the Other in the national discourse is a result of the treating of women as a commodity, where the women is not men’s peer, but male are posited against each other. In the words of Beauvoir,

> For men, the counterpart- or the other- who is also the same, with whom reciprocal relationships are established, is always another male individual.

> The duality that can be seen in one form or another at the heart of society pits
one group of men against another; and women are part of the goods men
possess and a means of exchange among themselves...she is always under
men’s guardianship (S. d. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* 82-83)

The entire discourse of identity formation and translating it to a metaphorical
national identity is a part of the male power dynamics, where the female is the ‘good’
and men are the guardian of that good. Things are not much different in Europe,
where women are symbolically conceived as ‘fortune’ to be won by the men. The
women are not the peers, the men are and the prize is women. Norman Jacobson
writes, “Fortune is a Woman. If you wish to master her you must be bold...The young
man cannot rest until he has gained the bed of beautiful women, wife to a respectable
but impotent old fool” (Jacobson 41-42). Jacobson quotes a poem *Fortune* by
Machiavelli-

Have you perchance seen veer in a field
What the behavior of an eagle is,
When fast and rage and hunger make her wild?
And how she grabs a turtle, takes it up,
Then makes it fall to break its bony shell,
And then swoops down on its dead flesh to sup?
Thus fortune takes somebody to the spheres,
Oh, not to leave them there- to hurl him down,
So that she may enjoy his fall, his tears. (Jacobson 21)

The woman figures in male imagination as a cruel fortune, which needs lot of
skill to be handled. Fortune in this sense is the source of power and pleasure, a prize
for which the man vie. Such kind of identity formation in the male discourse on
politics has relegated women to her present plight. There has been no female
participation independently in this discourse on identity formation. The only participation that has come is only acceptance and internalization of what is given by the men. As Meena Shirwadkar puts it in retrospect to the condition of women, “The only way left for woman till the early twentieth century was to suppress or spiritualise her natural desires”. (Shirwadkar 145) This plight of women has been expressed by Sashi Deshpande in her novel That Long Silence. The central character of the novel Jaya reflects on the indictment of women’s life by reflecting upon her own life where she has to play different roles as a woman (S. Deshpande). She is a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, a friend a mistress and also a writer. The long silence of women is a question on the identity of women and her participation in the identity formation.

This trending and representation of women with a new role and identity assigned to her by the imaginative writers during the course of freedom struggle has produced the image of women in its binary opposition, so that her identity now exists only in two roles (the formation of a new other within the other): The prostitute (courtesan, a bad woman, a sexualized and commodified body) and a Virtuous wife (mother of nationalist imagination, a desexualized and idealized body). Thus both these identities/images are inherent to the female who can either be despised/ abhorred or be worshipped/protected.
4.2 Women conforming to gender defined roles in literature.

Theory and practice may not be compatible with each other always; because what is professed is difficult to practice. The example of Aideu Handique discussed above is an illustration of the consequences of digression from established norms in society. Sisir Kumar Das, in his exhaustive research on the Indian writing in English, provides us with ample examples from all communities in India where women tried to give vent to their artistic imagination through writing. Das mentions that most women had little experience of the outside world, and hence their narratives have been confined to personal lives of sorrow and joy. Since the entry of the women has been quite late in the Indian scenario, they started writing initially under the male patronage as cited by Das. Only a few decades ago writing has been a taboo for the women, as exposed by one of the stories called *Khata* by Rabindranath Tagore. The female protagonist has been meted out cruel treatment because of her urge to write. Therefore the entry of women in the world of literature has been quite welcoming in the wake of nationalism. Nationalism, being imported from Europe it is but imperative that the Indian women under this new trend of nationalism should read and write like their European counterpart to display their modernity. Clearly, these women belong to the privileged class and have been in an advantageous position in life. They are not the subalterns. They cannot represent the subalterns. This new generation of women writers mostly conformed to the norms set by the patriarchal society. As Das puts it:

These writers, many of them as gifted as their male counterparts, came from the educated middle-class; and none not unexpectedly, from the lower middle class or the socially depressed class. Among them were Anurupa Devi (1882-
1958) and Nirupama Devi (1883-1951), a widow, both from conservative Brahmin families, both defending the traditional Hindu Values, particularly the norms of Conjugal life or widowhood. (S. K. Das, *A History of Indian Literature* (1911-1956) 15)

The literature produced by the female Assamese writers has also been within the confinement of the similar dialectic. Writers like Nalinibala Devi, Dharmashvari Baruani and Sneha Devi constitute the new contingent of Assamese writers. They all belong to well-to-do, well educated and respectable families (S. K. Das, *A History of Indian Literature* (1911-1956) 15). However, their works talk of the role of virtuous women in some way or the other as cited by Umesh Deka in his book *Post-War Assamese Novel*. These women belong to enlightened families who supported the voice of women in the society, very much like Sarojini Naidu. Most female writers of this period belong to the well to do families which is why they are not acquainted with the problems of the average women who come from a deprived social class, and whom we call subaltern. This issue has been separately discussed in the chapter on subaltern.

Sisir Kumar Das further points out that most of the female writers till the past century write exclusively on the image of ideal Hindu womanhood, hence they did not form a separate feminist discourse like the one advocated by Simone de Beauvoir. However, one category of literature has seen the growth of radical female writers who occupied equal status as writers along with their male counterparts. This is the Malayalam literature which witnesses the coming of age writers like T. Ikkavamma, Balamani Amma, Lalithambika Antarjanam, Madhavi Kutty and Kamala Das (S. K. Das, *A History of Indian Literature* (1911-1956)). These are but exceptional writers in
a wider context, and did not make much difference instantly. With conventional writers who adhered to the conventional role of women, the stage has been all set to produce such ideal characters through literature that the women in present and in posterity will have perfect examples to emulate. These are the mythological characters drawn from the Indian mythologies and best suited the purpose of nationalism as well as ideal women: As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “The truly modern housewife, it was said, would be so auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principle embodied in goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic well-being by whose grace the extended family lived and prospered (Chakrabarty 15). The justification of male hypocrisy indeed sounds hilarious, but such patriarchal imagination has been devised only to keep the women under control despite of its inherent contradiction.

The mythological characters- Sita, Savitri, Chitrangada, Ahalya, and Draupadi- are the five Satis who are constantly evoked in literature to eulogize the role of virtuous women. The women in Indian Hindu society, irrespective of their background or education are often expected to take these virtuous characters as their role model. Therefore, Sati does not only stand for the tradition of immolating oneself in the funeral pyre of the husband which has been banned by Bentinck in 1829, it also means a virtuous and righteous woman who has been divinely ordained to stay loyal to her fortuitous husband. Since these characters have been taken from Indian epics, they have a pan Indian affiliation and as such are used as tropes in every regional literature.

The plausibility of such self-inflicting asceticism and servitude in the female has never been questioned or doubted because the creation of these characters, in a male produced literature, has religious sanctions hence beyond doubt or beyond
question. Don’t all religious scriptures unequivocally declare that anyone who doubts the words of these scriptures will be doomed? Thus, to strive and be like these mythological characters are considered among one of the greatest virtues that a woman can seek. The qualities of Sita: “sacrifice and forbearance, devotion and faith, fidelity and nobility all contributing to the making of the most venerable character in poetry that has acted as the ideal of womanhood in Hindu society for the last several centuries” (S. K. Das, *A History of Indian Literature* (1911-1956) 127). Not only in poetry, but also the characters in the novels and women in everyday life are taught to be like Sita. Nibedita, in *Lunatic in My Head*, is a fading picture of the servitude of a wife to her husband. Anjum Hasan, no doubt invests this image with lot of irony and satire evoking self-pity in the character. The story of Sita has now become a part of the collective consciousness of the Hindu or Sanskritised communities and a slight reference to it makes the occasion affected with intertextuality. Any variation or deviation from what has been crystallized as a composite trait of Sita cannot be altered or revoked.

Next to virtuous Sita, stands Savitri. Her role has been canonized by the Hindus as one of the Satis for her fidelity and devotion to her husband. Writers like Atul Chandra Hazarika and Pampu Sinha has used this image in their respective works in Assamese literature. Savitri is famed to have reversed the principal of predestination by bringing the dead alive after persuading Yama⁸ to give back the life of her deceased husband. Since then a new myth has also been constructed that a true sati can immortalize the husband through her deeds.

Another image of Sati is Draupadi. This is quite an exceptional image of the woman and is celebrated as a defense mechanism to safeguard the women. Draupadi
is not only a dedicated wife, but also courageous and a revengeful woman. She is presented with the aim to show the other face of woman. Her episode reveals, in the words of Sisir Kumar Das:

The Shamelessness of the wise and the powerful, the utter helplessness of a women and the total collapse of all moral norms of a society leading to a violent repercussion and death and suffering of all involved in it have haunted the Indian memory through all changes of literary forms. (S. K. Das, A History of Indian Literature (1911-1956) 132)

It is a veiled threat to the people who attempt to trespass the threshold of someone else’s home. It teaches men not to be discourteous to women, and especially to someone else’s wife. The story is a parable which has the moral that if one tries to seduce or outrage the modesty of other women, someone else’s wife, and that too in a public place will meet the doom. Draupadi and Sita has caused the fall of the Kaurava and Ravana, both have tried to violate the chastity of the women. The curse that they have cast has become the cause of destruction. However both Sita and Draupadi are helpless and it is only a male savior who can rescue them. In case of Sita, Rama rescues her with the aid of Hanumana and others; in case of Draupadi, Lord Krishna comes to her rescue. The image of Draupadi is invested with the other image of women who can be free and bold, ruthless and devastating like Goddess kali. When these mythological figures have been inspiring awe and reverence among the Indian audience, where the populace sought, through hard toil, to imbibe these qualities in their daughters and wives, simultaneously regional mythical characters have also been developed in the similar line to give it a local hue and make it appear more realistic.
Two characters that appeal to the readers, among many instances that are available in regional literature, are the stories of Joymati Kunwari and Bhodori.

Lakshminath Bezbaroa, an Assamese Litterateur of great repute, has sarcastically presented the plight of a complacent house-wife in his short story called Bhodori. The story is about a hot-headed farmer husband and a typical Assamese village lady. On one afternoon, Sisuram, the husband, after returning home finds that the food is not yet ready, and starts rebuking the wife. But the moment, the wife retorts justifying the cause of delay and the trouble to light the moist wood, Sisuram attacks her with the moida, injuring her fatally but not mortally because of the timely intervention of his brother Raseswar. The fainted wife is immediately transported to the hospital and Sisiram to the police station. After regaining her consciousness on the third day of the incident, Bhodori cannot but only ask for her husband: The man who tried to take away her life only the other day. There is no irony in the speech of Bhodori, but there is enough irony in the selflessness of the female character as typical of Indian households as presented by the writer. Bhodori pleads with the Justice to absolve her husband in utmost humility: “My Lord. Almighty. He has no fault. Please free him. This slave pleads with you in most humble manner. While scaling the fish, this slave stumbled on the moida and injured herself.” (Bezbaroa 28) Bhodori addresses herself in the third person to show how humble she is, and indeed she is. Her speech moves everyone inside the room to pity, and Sisuram is moved too. Sisuram burst into tears; and in a tearful voice confesses his crime. After the judge pronounces his sentence, Sisuram proceeds to the Jail with smile in his face, and Bhodori returns home with tears in her eyes. Thus the story ends. Bhodori is the example of extreme tolerance, patience, and humility that a wife must display for her
husband. It is a *stree-dharma*\textsuperscript{12} to protect her husband from all impending disaster, after all she is supposed to emulate the sati-savitri tradition: one who has brought her dead husband alive. But life is not a myth, and nor does British justice has any scope to pay courtesy to mythological whims. Neither justice has been delayed, neither denied (Bhodori did not seek justice). She tries her best to wrest out her husband from the clutch of the law but with no avail. Laksminath in another story, *Laukhola*\textsuperscript{13} (*Skull*), addresses the violence and injustice meted out to women. However, the setting is in Bengal. Laksminath, who married the niece of Rabindranath Tagore, has a close connection with Bengal, and very often the women of Bengal figured in his stories and essays. This story is about a widow who has lost her husband even before returning to the Bride-groom’s home. She becomes a victim of the society and the debauchery of her brother-in-law. After sexually exploiting her and making her pregnant, the brother-in-law murders her and throws her dead body into his Bagan-bari\textsuperscript{14} pond. The narrator encounters the skull of the deceased thirty years later in a visit to the new proprietor of that Bagan-bari, and the ghost confides to him her plight when she has been living. She pleads to the narrator to leave her alone at least now after death by throwing away her skull back to the pond from where it has been fished out during one fishing expedition by the narrator and his friend. The story starts and ends humorously, but leaves behind the message about the social exploitation of women which often go unreported or unnoticed.
4.3 The social impasse for women’s emancipation.

When Indian women have been reeling under the Hindu conservative dispensation that made some allowance to the Indian women for education but under male supervision; the European women have been on a different conversation and debate if not a discourse. Mary Wollstonecraft does not argue, but pleads for opportunities that are to be given to women. An eighteenth century woman, already tasting the results of enlightenment, can thus seek for a vintage of this knowledge for her likes. She feels that the path that leads to freedom and independence can be achieved through education and knowledge which have been denied to women- “why should they be kept in ignorance under the specious name of innocence?” (Wollstonecraft 178) The word innocence according to her, “is but a civil term for weakness” when applied to adults. Wollstonecraft maintains that the path of virtue which is directed for women is not the same path of virtue which is meant for the men, as she says- “Women are not allowed to have sufficient strength of mind to acquire what really deserves the name of virtue” (Wollstonecraft 178). In fact women should be allowed to pursue such virtue which will make them truly independent, but sadly enough the definition of virtue or what is virtuous is decided and dictated by the men. The women are not allowed to follow their own reasoning, but to follow the path of virtue which is sought out by male reasoning. Women have never been allowed a place in the male hegemonic discourse of the world view, and whatever discourse is available on the female education and manners are from the pen of prejudiced men: “from Rousseau to Dr. Gregory, have contributed to render women more artificial, weak characters, more useless members of society” (Wollstonecraft 181). She rationally justifies the cause of
female education, but such knowledge should not flow from the fountainhead of biasness; Female education should flourish from the new knowledge (nonexistent at that time) that comes out of reasoning and not out of authority; or perhaps she is urging the creation of a new body of knowledge which will empower women. Precisely, she admits the idiocy of women, but blames men for such deprivation because men have deprived women from knowledge and understanding. Men expect virtue from her, and the lack of which is the actual cause of ignorance; but on the other hand virtue is not possible without understanding/reasoning. This is the first phase of social impasse for women’s emancipation.

To continue to the next phase of impasse for women’s emancipation, it will be pertinent to quote the final observation made by Wollstonecraft in her essay on *The Rights of Woman*-

Let women share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man; for she must grow more perfect when emancipated, or justify the authority that chains such a weak being to her duty. If the latter, it will be expedient to open a fresh trade with Russia for whips: a present which a father should always make to his son-in-law on his weeding day, that a husband may keep his whole family in order by the same means; and without any violation of justice reign, wielding this scepter, sole master of his house, because he is the only thing in it who has reason; - the divine, indefeasible earthly sovereignty breathed into man by master of the universe. (Wollstonecraft 189)

The shortcoming of this pronouncement is to think man as virtuous, the one who has deprived woman from having equal rights. Notwithstanding that however, first point to be made here is that if a woman can emulate the so-called virtues of man,
why is there not a possibility of emulating the vices as well? A reflection on Mamang Dai’s novel *Stupid Cupid* will in some way relate that how the vices, if not the virtues, can affect the life of women. The novel deals with the urban life which provides the women with sufficient freedom in respect to moral laxity, which has been the exclusive vice of men for ages. With less knowledge of contraceptive methods, the women in the pre-modern society have abstained themselves from a debauch life. Moreover, they have been under the constant supervision of the male in a joint family system. In the modern system, with increased mobility of families, people often move to the cities in search of jobs or for education. This gives ample freedom to women when they are outside the household bondage of a hierarchical family structure. With education, freedom, entrepreneurship opportunities and mobility, women have also become a part of the anomie and modernity of the male world today. Adna, the protagonist, has no qualms and scruples about running a guest house for lovers who would like to spend some hassle free intimate moments. She not only follows the footsteps of her aunt, but also makes provision for others who would like to have a similar experience. She sees opportunity in it. She can make money, a business of course, by putting the beautiful bungalow of her aunt to right use. At the same time she will also be helping people like herself who are in need of a secluded place. Household sanctum, divinity, love, marriage, social sanction and fidelity seem remote in this novel and both men and women are lost in the lustful world without transgressing each other’s rights. The novel depicts the 21st century Indian life: A time in 2009 when living together in the cities are on the rise and sex before marriage is no more a taboo.
In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the struggle for women’s liberation has been growing strong, the European women have started seeing her own condition better and different than from her Indian counterpart and about which Margaret Fuller remarks, “women cannot be silenced (Fuller 196).” One hundred years later, advancing the cause of women, and sailing through the rough waters, Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) expresses in a more vehement way, unlike Wollstonecraft, her scathing accusation on the men: “Scarcely a human being in the course of history has fallen to a woman’s rifle; the vast majority of birds and beasts have been killed by you, not by us, and it is difficult to judge what we do not share.” (Woolf 221). However the instance of Kurdish Women, in the 21st century, fighting the dreaded militant organization like ISIS, belies such statements. Denis a 30 year old fighter says, “You and me, we are free, I am a fighter, you are a journalist but our sisters around the world- they suffer under the power of men, In Africa, in Asia, in Europe and American women suffer like the Yazidi. The fight of our women is a fight for all women (Costello).” Simone de Beauvoir, Woolf’s contemporary, who outlives her further comments on the condition of the women in the Victorian period- “Victorian England isolated women in the home; Jane Austin hid herself in order to write; scientists proclaimed that woman was a ‘sub-species destined only for reproduction’ (S. d. Beauvoir 247)” Actually the world that the women have produced in these literatures is but partial truth. They have been producing literatures through the limited confines of their household, despite of that they have been capable of producing the illusory world, which George Eliot, aka Mary Ann Evans says, are the “primary truths” for them15.
Here is the second impasse. The European women have been fighting her battle against the patriarchal society and about their individual rights in a way that best suited their society and culture. The problem has complicated in the Indian case because, they have taken the Victorian women as their role model in an attempt to emancipate their lot. How can this be functional under a different socio-politico-religious setup? No doubt the society has seen some transformation from previously agricultural societies with joint or extended family system to the newly emerging nuclear family setup occasioned by the mobility of the modern industrial society. But this cannot opportune the women to take the European women as their role model. Partha Chattarjee observes:

It is striking how much the literature on women in the nineteenth century concerns the threatened Westernization of Bengali Women. This theme was taken up in virtually every form of written, oral, and visual communication—from the ponderous essays of nineteenth-century moralists, to novels, farces, skits and jingles, to the paintings of the patua (scroll painters)… To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of memsahib … was a sure recipe calculated to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences (P. Chatterjee 122)

Whether the Indian women resembles their European counterparts or mimic them is not the question here; the point to be noted is the resistance to the situation by the patriarchal society by pushing it down to a caricature as a butt of the joke, something to be scorned. According to Partha Chatterjee, writers like Ishwarchand Gupta, Michael Madhusudhan Dutta, Dinabandhu Mitra, Jyotindranath Tagore, Upendranath Das and Amritalal Bose- all saw triviality in it- “What made the ridicule stronger was the constant suggestion that the Westernized woman was fond of useless
luxury and cared little for the wellbeing of the home. (P. Chatterjee 122)”. The idea of
the ‘home’ and the ‘world’ which correspond to the idea of the ‘inner-spiritual-self’
and the ‘outer-material-interest’ respectively has transpired the Indian patriarchal
society to create new dialogues through which they can shun the world and protect
the home. Time and again this has been evoked and the Indian spirituality justified.
Swami Vivekananda in one of his messages says, “O India! Forget not that the ideal of
thy Womanhood is Sita, Savitri, Damayanti (Vivekananda 94).” Mahatma Gandhi,
too, says the same in one of his addressing speech at Bhagini Samaj, “… we will have
to produce women, pure, firm and self-controlled as Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi
(M. Gandhi 114).” The home is a consecrated sanctified domain of the family
symbolized by the women and is to be protected from the profane material world.
Gandhi further exhorts the Indian women, while commenting on the need of English
education, “True, English is necessary for making a living and for active association
in our political movements. I do not believe in women working for a living or
undertaking commercial enterprise (M. Gandhi 115).” One hundred years later, after
Gandhi, one can see the importance of English and the Education system as presented
in novels like Stupid Cupid, A Terrible Matriarchy, The Collector’s Wife. Education
Empowers women like Jia and Adna to earn their livelihood without being dependent
on a family or the husband. They live life independently and make their choice freely.
In A Terrible Matriarchy, one finds the grandmother as an obstacle in the way of
emancipation; her feelings of dependency is rooted in her lack of education and ideas
of women empowerment, as we see later the female characters talk of taking up jobs
at offices. It has the same effect in Mitra Phukan’s novel too. Education is a means to
ascertain a job, however this is a contestable idea and outside the purview of this
research. Mitra Phukan raises serious doubt about the utility of the obsolete syllabus taught in the colleges. One can see that the degrees earned in Colleges do not correspond to the nature of jobs which people later on take in their lives. A graduate in Arts can be seen taking the job of a Medical Representative.

In a country like India, where knowledge/education has been valued as a path towards salvation, the changes in the economic structures altered this idea, as one can see that knowledge is power, the power to be independent, to be in control of your life and destiny to some extent. One can attenuate the patriarchal domination by possessing this power of knowledge. Partha Chattarjee cites Bankim, ‘‘knowledge is power’: that is the slogan of western civilization. ‘Knowledge is salvation’ is the slogan of Hindu civilization…that is the key to their advancement. We are negligent towards power: that is the key towards power (P. Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* 57).” This is also one of the reasons that whenever the British conquered a country, they not only colonized them mentally and spatially; but they also translated the native literature into English so that they can be in possession of that power as well. Later on one has witnessed that this power is fed exclusively to the Indian male, systematically depriving the female. In the Indian English, the deprivation of the female from education is a recurrent theme.

Contrary to what Gandhi says is Mahadevi Varma’s opinion. Whereas, Gandhi does not favour the working of female, because he can see the only possible salvation of men and wife in their holy union and divinely sanctioned consummation of a married life; Ms. Varma talks about the possibility of economic independence for women to allow them true emancipation. It brings us back to the philosophical speculation about the meaning of life. In this, the Indian philosophical system differs
from the western philosophical schools, and beyond the scope of this research. The traditional Hindu society forces marriage because it believes in the divine principal of holy Union; whereas the west has already started counting on the utilitarian values of marriage as pointed out by Margaret Fuller in her essay Women, Friendship and Marriage. Economic dependence closes the doors of independent life for her, and Gandhi has not perhaps thought about the alternatives. The returning of male reasoning and the enslavement of women is evident in the social setup, as Ms. Varma says, “Whether she is physically incapable or mentally unprepared for married life, she has no means of livelihood other than marriage (Varma 227). The impasse for women’s empowerment is full throttle.

This comes to a full circle and limits the possibility of emancipation of women in India. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati (1858-1922) in her essay entitled Women’s place in Religion and Society cites two such instances to prove the failure of the effort to emancipate the women owing to patriarchal resistance in India en mass. As child marriages have been the tradition till the first quarter of 20th century, one close relative of Saraswati has been given in marriage in her childhood to a boy. It has been agreed that the boy would be educated with the girl and live in his father-in-laws home till the completion of their studies. However, soon after the marriage ceremony concluded, the boy has left for his father’s home. Thirteen years later, the woman grows to be an elegant educated lady; and the boy a ‘beggar’ who can neither protect the wife nor support her through honest living. When the wife has thus refused to go with the husband, he files a suit against her. He is supported by the orthodox people in his community who even help him raise money for the legal procedure; eventually they succeed in bringing her to the husband, her rightful owner. Soon the wife dies of
cholera. Although the story seems somewhat concocted, yet one cannot deny the limited opportunities that have been available for women. In life and in fiction as well, the only escape lay in death: Be it Matangini 16 or this lady. In another case, involving a similar petition against Rakhmabai, the poor woman is not only forced to live with the husband but also is forced to pay the cost of the dispute. The patriarchs have come together to defend one of their brethrens by invoking Hindu laws, which in the words of Rakhmabai 17 – “The learned and civilized judges of the full bench are determined to enforce, in this enlightened age, the inhuman laws enacted in barbaric times, four thousand years ago (Saraswati 214).” Seeing the condition of her relative, Saraswati sadly surmises:

Taught by the experience of the past, we are not at all surprised at this decision of the Bombay court. Our only wonder is that a defenseless woman like Rakhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty-nine million men and the three hundred and thirty million gods of the Hindus, all these have conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India. (Saraswati 215)

Witnessing such poor state of affairs in matter of justice to women, and the impasse of women’s emancipation, Katherine Mayo writes about the atrocities of Indian men, the crime of child-marriage, the pain of widowhood in her accusatory book *Mother India* in 1927. This also made Mayo to argue against giving Independence to the people who are not civilized/sane enough for self-rule. Quite obviously, E.M. Forster depicts the dislike of the brown men for the white women in his novel *Passage to India*. Quickly there have been rejoinders against Mayo and
eminent nationalists/personalities dismissed Mayo’s argument as a kind of civilizing mission. An anonymous book under the title *Sister India* has also been published which rubbishes the claims of Mayo. The arguments that are presented in this book completely nullify the European Women’s effort to civilize the Indian women on one hand, and the discourse that has been fomenting for sometime about the role model of European *memsahib*. With these arguments the flickering lights of patriarchal social sanction to educate their women has come to be critically reviewed: “It would be an evil day for India if Indian women indiscriminately copy and imitate Western women. Our women will progress in their own way… We are by no means prepared to think that the Western woman of today is a model to be copied (L. Gandhi 95)”, quotes Leela Gandhi from *Sister India* in her book *Postcolonial Theory* while writing about postcolonial feminism.

The Indian way of emancipating the woman seems a farfetched cry. The impetus that the society has being trying to draw is but from the same old well. As Mahadevi Varma has observed that the condition of women has become weaker and despicable instead of growing stronger and better. The world has progressed rapidly within the span of a few decades and the condition of women too improved worldwide. However it is sad that in India, very little has been done until recent times to ameliorate the emaciated condition of women as evinced from the literature and news reports. Factual data reveals a very disturbing statistics which is not only abominable but a blotch on the reputation of one of the oldest civilizations: UN report tells that a staggering number of 92 percent women in Delhi have faced some kind of sexual violence in public spaces in their lifetime (Women). Khushwant Singh writes in his little book entitled *We Indians*, published in 1982, that the Indian parliament has
more women representatives than the United States Congress; and that “India has more women in important positions than any other country in the world. But it would be wrong to deduce that the women in India are more emancipated than women of other countries (Singh 70).” From the research conducted by Singh on the Indian women, it can be said that in a vast country like India with numerous tribes and communities with their peculiar customs, it is a herculean task to emancipate the women with a uniform law. There is the wretched Muslim mother who has been ostracized by her husband, yet she believes that education for her daughter will prove baneful. Women are bought and sold for bride-prices, and barren women are returned to the father’s home. There are societies where some males are designated as stud bulls, and are used to impregnate women, whose husbands are impotent or sterile. Women are primarily used as a fertile commodity to reproduce more male heir, so giving birth to a daughter has been considered ill fated. It has also been observed that the tribes and communities in India have exchanged their vices if not the virtues. When the Muslim started ruling India, they entitled women to property rights. But the new conversions to Islam continued to control property in the Hindu patriarchal style by depriving the women. The tradition of using ‘purdah’ or the veil by the Muslim women is soon imitated by the Hindus in Muslim dominated areas. Imitating the Muslims’ ‘harem’, the Hindus also started incarcerating their women in the Zenann’s. It is not surprising that Bankim Chandra’s novel Rajmohan’s Wife has a chapter named A Letter- A Visit to the Zenana. Khushant Singh observes that “In 1955 polygamy was outlawed, and after 2,000 years, the right of divorce was restored to Hindu women. In 1956 Hindu women were given equal property rights.” But very little effect has this theory on reality.
Mahadevi Varma observes that whereas, the plight of the European women, and for that matter women from other nations have shared the same plight like that of the Indians; the conditions of women in other nations have improved, but the condition in India has deteriorated. The instance of Russian women has already been narrated earlier. Once upon a time, a country like Russia has had a proverb – “Beat your fur and make it warmer, beat a woman and you make her wiser” which now sounds like a myth when we see the Russian women holding the post of soldiers (Varma 233). The reason is that women still carry the burden of divinity in India as pointed out by Ms. Varma.

The sad plight of the Indian women can be well seen in the novels undertaken for this research. This deplorable condition is caused by the continuous tradition that lives in the collective consciousness of the Indians. Ms. Verma alleges that the Indian man chooses a woman to domesticate and rear her just like a useful animal. The utility becomes one of the objectives and the child is groomed in a similar manner since her childhood to meet the requirements for the prospective bridegroom. In the novel A Terrible Matriarchy one finds Lieno’s mother and grandmother endorsing this belief. They see the futility of women’s education in a Naga society because there are rare job opportunities in a backward state like Nagaland. However, in a metropolis setup, the education of the women is considered as one of the important criteria for making her perfect marriage material. Mitra Phukan’s The Collector’s Wife abounds in such characters. The women in the narrative mostly belong to the middle class or the aristocratic class. They are well dressed and well educated which is revealed by the rich assortments of jewelry they sport, and the English they speak. These women do
not really occupy an important position in the society, but just exist as the showpiece of their husbands. The novelist presents them thus:

Though it was called the Parbatpuri Ladies club, memberships were strictly restricted to the wives of the government officers...there was a definite pecking order there, which depended not on the achievements, age or even qualifications of the member, but upon the rank and position of her husband (Phukan 164).

Rukmani, the protagonist, cannot but help noticing the wife of the Superintendent of Police, Nandini laden with jewelry- two heavy necklaces, armful of bangles, large looped earrings, and several rings on her knotty fingers. All gold of course, on a sweltering morning. The writer is critical of her position when she puts a rhetorical question whether it is her ‘English medium’ background which actually makes her appear distanced from the other ladies in the club and also the cause she is espousing. These ladies did some sort of social work in their small possible way like collecting used cloths for the flood victims, among many. Ironically, she has to leave this social work because her husband gets killed by militants, and there she has to face the reality of life. These charities and social service is meant for those who live a life of ease and comfort, and whose husbands occupy powerful position in the society. With the husband gone, reality dawns on her. She is pulled down back to the earth, where she has to face the trials and tribulation of not only living but also learning the tactics of surviving. Soon we see, she is stripped of her social status, and also the jewelry, and she becomes the widow who has to take care of the children and the household. She thinks of opening a bakery and hopes to run it well. She says to Rukmini, “…I think I can manage a small confectionary. I have always wanted to own
a shop, be an entrepreneur, you know, but of course after marriage it wasn’t possible. Now I’ll need and income too… (Phukan 192).” Another lady, Priyam, who is a close friend of Rukmani, for Rukmanı thinks so till she discovers Priyam’s incestuous relationship with Siddharth, her husband, is a snobbish figure. Priyam refers prostitutes as ‘sex workers’, and informs Rukmini about the ongoing sexual licentiousness, orgies, wife-swapping and the red-light areas have infected the small town of Parbatpuri. However, she never shows her face to Rukmini once she is caught. She not only resigns from the job, but also leaves the place but not for the prick of conscience for having moral laxity.

The educated and powerful wives of powerful men, who feature in Phukan’s novel, are actually powerless. They drink from the power of their husband’s status but they have no real say or position. They just become guests of honour to attend charitable parties. The husbands never discuss any issue with them. Rukmini’s husband never discusses any official matters with her. Despite of being educated and a lecturer, her husband does not think it appropriate to discuss official matters with his wife. The novel shows that how all the meaningful and real works like reporting, police action, administration, business, entrepreneurship etc are all men’s work and are solely to be done by man without any intervention or suggestion from the women. The women are kept busy with other charitable works. No woman is allowed to take an important position in their life. It is the absolute dependence on man which actually makes the women helpless and weak. What Mary Wollstonecraft has said almost two hundred years ago in European context, still holds good in Indian context, after all we are one of the oldest continuing civilizations and we celebrate our epics and smritis in a big way.
The wives are presented in literature in a little coquettish manner, who are full of affectation like the children. In \textit{Rajmohan’s wife}, we see Champak beguiling her rouge husband Mathur to throw out the helpless Matangi. Her manner of presentation by the novelist at once brings to the reader’s mind what Lord Chesterfield has observed in his essay \textit{Upon Affectation}: “If Sometimes our common parent has been a little partial, and not kept the scales quite even; if one preponderates too much, we throw into the lighter a due counterpoise of vanity, which never fails to set all right (Chesterfield 9).” Bankim Chandra shows this character of woman is built up through contrivance of male effort. Women are what men want them to be: alluring sexual objects. She will be whipped on her folly, and will be cajoled when being good and coquettish. Her ornaments are thus symbolic of the male pampering the child (a woman is treated like a child). In \textit{The Collector’s Wife}, the SP’s wife’s jewelry and dress are the instances of this pampering that has continued since the time of Manu. Mahadevi Varma, commenting on the plight of women, says, “She is forced to live only as an exhibition of man’s wealth and a means of his recreation. No value is attached to her life as an individual and as a citizen. Motherhood is revered because it keeps the society alive and wifehood is lauded because it caters to man’s fulfillment (Varma 227).” This is the continuation of the tradition which has been religiously sanctioned and codified in Hindu law- “hence men who seek their own welfare, should always honour women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, cloths and dainty food (Saraswati 206).”

The role of the media is also by and large responsible to create an image of the conventional role playing by Indian women. Culture lives in media and creates the illusion of reality. Indian movie goers are often influenced by the themes and stories
depicted in the movies. Influenced by the images in the movies, they try to emulate those silver screen personalities. Walter Benzen talks about this immediate ‘aura’ created by art in his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. The popular commercial successful movies and soaps are so influential that they create an immediate aura of willing suspension of disbelief among the citizenry. Rohintan Mistry, in one of his travelogues recounts the effect of television serials in a humoristic style if not hyperbolic-

…when Ramayana … was made into a Hindi TV serial, sixty million homes began tuning in every Sunday morning, and those who did not own TVs went to friends who did…before the programme started, people would garland the TV with fresh flowers and burn incense beside it…Classified ads in newspapers would read: Car For Sale– But Call After Ramayana…Ministerial swearing-in ceremonies were also known to be postponed…But the story does not end there…people began mobbing the actor who played the role of Rama genuflecting wherever he appeared in public, touching his feet, asking for the blessing (Mistry 71-72).

The mass impact maneuvered by the media productions cannot be overlooked in the brewing of a new discourse on the condition of women effectively. It is another way of educating the uneducated population in India and moreover, because of its fantastic appeal it easily captivated the imagination of Indians en mass. So much so that Rajib Gandhi actually tried using Arun Govil as a star campaigner for the Congress party to cash on his Rama image, but with no avail. Perhaps the voting population is not so naïve. With this, Indian politics has seen a new era of the artist’s entry into the political arena. The mega starts already have a ‘god-like’ image created
through the silver screen, so they need a little push to establish themselves as the savior and leader of the Indian people waiting to be emancipated.

The Indian cinema has created stereotyped images through movies where the female are mere reflections against strong male personalities. The commercially successful movies are not made for any altruistic purpose, but solely for commercial gains. They often present the men as the authority and try to create a traditional image, much exaggerated, of the Indian societies. Movies like Sholey, Zanjeer, Bulandi, Suryavansham, Mard, Coolie, Saudagar, Singham, Border, Ghayal, Gadar to name a very few can only cast men and replenish a macho world fit to be ruled by the dictates of men. Such stereotypes can not only retard progress and growth, but can also convey wrong images, because of mistaken identity and wrong representation, owing to lack of knowledge on the subject. Jasbir Jain, in this connection, says:

The term ‘identity’ has always been problematic and in the case of the tribal, it becomes even more so as the first battle is against stereotypes. I recall, the films of the Late 50s and 60s presented a strange image of half naked people immersed in song and dance, magic and superstition, in fact a world that represented a contrast to the filmic mainstream of Urban middle class representation. It is only in the 1970s that a whole range of NDFC films, mainstream media and writers like Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi enabled a different vision approximating a more realistic representation (Jain, Tribal Identities, Literature and Contemporary Reality in North-East India. 1).

There is a class of film called ‘art movies’ or ‘parallel cinema’ which deals with realistic issues that ail our society. These art films are suffocated by the paucity of funds because they are not commercially successful movies and it often leaves the
producers with less or no profit because of the absence of ‘masala\textsuperscript{20}, that Indian audience seek. Nishamani Kar is of the opinion that Bollywood movies “often spice up its flow of events with battered women for the protagonist to rescue. It is, as if, the man is always the savior and for that matter the women have to be beaten every time, every time everywhere. That is why the votaries of feminine cause question the portrayal of women in commercial Indian films, even though nobody bothers their off-screen life (Kar 71).” According to the India today report, the Rockefeller Foundation in association with UN Women has alleged that Bollywood is objectifying women through sexualised roles. The popular image of women in Indian cinema is that of ‘Abala Nari\textsuperscript{21}, who is constantly pleading with the villainous men ‘bhagawan key liye mujhey chor do’\textsuperscript{22}, ‘Sansari ladki/ Bahu/Ghar ki lakshmi’\textsuperscript{23}, ‘Maa’\textsuperscript{24}, ‘Naakchari Ladki/Chudhel/Dayen’\textsuperscript{25}. A counter culture is also noticeable in the past couple of decades as a change in thought and image making enterprise by male directors is initiated by venturing women directors who are cutting a niche with radical images of women. This will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.
4.4 **Women and Changing Values.**

The question posed by Khuswant Singh and Temsula Ao about the necessity of ‘marriage’, as an institution or a social contract which undermines the freedom and emancipation of women, has already been discussed in the last section of the second chapter. The women writers in India have already started experiencing the jouissance, in their creative process. Parallel with the written literature, the visual media also braved the silver screen with the radical idea of challenging the very image of ‘Sita’. The point of reference is Deepa Mehta’s *Fire* released in 1998 in India (Bandyopadhyay), just a year before the publication of Khushwant Singh’s novel. According to Bandyopadhyay, “*Fire* disrupts the legal-moral economy of sexuality… Fire systematically writes over a text which is one of the fountainheads of Indian masculinity: the venerable family epic, the ‘mahakavya’ *Ramayana*. (Bandyopadhyay 283)” The film destabilizes and challenges the very idea of the modal woman often sought in the Indian households. The two female characters pose a challenge to the hegemonic male discourse about the ideology of Bharatya Nari, as Bandyopadhyay says: “Since her modesty is never seriously threatened, Radha goes on ceaselessly reproducing the role of a model woman: soft, quiet, and demure, she is the emblematic ‘Bharatiya Nari’. On the other hand Nita/Sita unlike the traditional Sita, doesn’t passively accept the rejection of the husband, and gets emotionally involved in lesbian relationship with Radha, the wife of her husband’s brother. The film has caused sufficient hue and cry in India, especially in Mumbai. Feeling betrayed and seeing their masculinity being challenged by an alternate world which undermines the phallo-centric domination and nee, the *shiv sainiks* with their clarion call *Har Har Mahadeo*
has jumped into the streets and vandalized the theatre halls. Bandyopadhyay ironically presents the condition: “The men may go ‘West’ and be hell-bent but the Sainiks are dead earnest in their agenda of rescuing the other half of the Indian population: the Bharatiya Nari (Bandyopadhyay 277).” At last came Bal Thackeray’s comment. Bandyopadhyay cites Thackeray’s declaration that he will have no problem if the names of the two protagonists are changed from Radha and N/Sita to Shabana and Saira. This comment obviously has a double implication; on one hand it targets the actor Shabana Azmi who played the role, and the Chairmen of the Censor Board, Asha Parekh who accented the screening. The other implication is the in the Hindu masculine/patriarchal national imagination, there can be no other role model for the Indian house wives other than the one sanctioned by the Indian mythologies: the five Sati-s as already discussed earlier. The changing of the names to a Muslim name, will mean to conform the idea of women as conceived by Manto which has also been discussed earlier. What Thackeray and his sidekicks fail to understand is that, the situation depicted in the movie can only rise in the advent of the circumstances that are very much steeped into religion.

Thus is how the 20th century ended, and with the 21st century there is more to come, the first one is Mamang Dai’s Stupid Cupid.

**Endnote**

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1 Louis Tyson explains Biological Essentialism precisely in her introductory book *Critical Theory Today*. 
Khushwant Singh observes that “the breakthrough came in the nineteen-twenties under the inspired leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Women by the thousands joined the passive resistance movement, including many women leaders of today- and, of course, Indira Gandhi (Singh 69).


Dharti is the Hindi word for Land/Earth.

O my land of birth
O my mother Assam
Let me have one, look at your face
My heart hasn't been sated. (Translated by Krishna Dulal Barua)

There are five Satis according to Sisir Kumar Das (S. K. Das, A History of Indian Literature (1911-1956) 131)

Sati was declared illegal since 1829 as pointed out by Suresh Kumar Ghosh (Ghosh 35)

Yama is the King of Death in Hindu mythology.

As short story by Laksminath Bezbaroa (Bezbaroa)

A curved-single-edged sharp kitchen instrument to cut vegetables and fish.

My Translation.

Stree-dharma (nari-dharma) is almost a cliché in Indian Hindu society which means the religious duty of a woman.

Loukhola is an Assamese word for Human skull. It is also the title of the short story (Bezbarua).

Baganbari is a private farm-house, usually found in Bengal.
George Eliot in her Silly Novels by Lady Novelists deals with the kind of novels
that women have produced because of their limited access to the real world (Eliot).

The protagonist in *Rajmohan’s Wife*.

The case of Rakhmabai has created a lot of uproar among the Hindus in Bombay in
1887. This has been decried as a cultural sabotage of the west on the Indian culture.
Although, Rakhmabai has had a strong case, the verdict has been decided against her
because of tremendous political pressure from the orthodox Hindu society. Pandita
Ramabai Saraswati tries to bring home the point that the western education cannot
fully enlighten the Indian masses because they have been under the spell of Manu, the
Hindu lawmaker, since several centuries. “She quotes from Manu to show how the
women have had to live under the protective measures of the male authority, and any
other prospect is not conceived of in the Indian society at that time: Her father protects
her in childhood, her husband protects her in youth, her son protect her in old age; a
woman is never fit for independence.”- Manu, ix, 2, 3. (Saraswati 208) Contrast this
to Bacon’s view expressed in 16th Century, in his essay *Of Marriage and Single life*,
where he exhorts male readers on the utility of marriage by saying “Wives are young
men’s mistresses; companions for middle age; and old men’s nurses.” Both East and
West dominate women, one through religious sanction, the latter through
companionate marriage.

Leela Gandhi discusses this brief stint in her book *Post Colonial Theory*.

This instance is cited by Khushwant Singh in his book *We Indians*. The Bishnoi
community which inhabits the desert tract, located to west of Delhi, has this custom of
choosing ‘gama shah ka Saand’. This means ‘A stud bull of Gama shah’.
Masala is a Hindi word which means spicy. The Indian are filled with unrealistic details to fill in the taste of the audience. That is why they are sometimes termed as masala movies.

Abala Nari is a Hindi phrase for Helpless woman.

‘Bhagawan key liye mujhey chor do’- Leave me alone for Christ’s sake.

This is the good image of women which is synonymous with good omen, wealth, prosperity and often sought in Indian households.

The most appealing figure in Indian cinema. The role of Nargis has been immortalised in Mother India; and The dialogue of Sashi Kapoor, “Mere Pass Maa hain” (I have mother) in the Film Deewar, starring Amitabh Bacchan, has presented the Mother as the prized possession which is priceless against the entire worldly wealth.

She is the vamp in the Indian cinema: sometimes an educated and arrogant female displaying western ideologies and modernity(eventually subjugated and humbled down to Indian tradition by the hero), and sometimes the villainous counterpart of the Indian mythological characters like ‘Shurpaneka’ (Ravan’s sister who tried to entice Lord Ram in the Indian Mythology Ramayana) on whose insistence Ravana kidnapped Sita, and the destruction of ‘Soney Ki Lanka’ (Golden Lanka, the present day Sri Lanka) ensued.
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