Chapter I

Introduction

Women’s entry into the phallocratic world of letters has been unwelcome, as a spiky carpet has been rolled out to them. Nonetheless, undaunted, encountering stiff resistance, they storm or sneak into the male bastion of phallogos to get a strong foothold for themselves. But they are disparaged unfeminine and aggressive, and called, to use an expression of Sandra Gilbert, “wild-eyed rabid rabble-rousers” (XI). This underlines that “the road to authority is tough for women, and once they get there it’s a bed of thorns” (Parikh and Garg 104). Social embarrassment, concerns about risqué, cultural, social, or legal factors limiting their access to publishing, the gender-based critical reception of their literary works are some of the obstacles strewn along the way for women. Such hostile conditions have prompted a significant number of female writers to publish their work either anonymously or pseudonymously. The names of a few women writers who masked themselves under male pen names may be cited here: Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot), the Brontë sisters (Ann, Charlotte and Emily as
Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell respectively), Antonio Susan Drabble (A. S. Byatt) and Phyllis Dorothy James (P. D. James). A few of the early women writers were ‘accepted’ by the phallocratic world; however, they were regarded as ‘de-sexed’.

In course of time, women writers, having sneaked into the male fort, started undermining the phallocratic authority over letters. Feminists engage themselves in deconstructing the patriarchal notions of sex and gender. The misogynous adage ‘woman is nothing but a womb’ (totamulier in utero), motivated by masculine envy and fear of the creative maternal, encapsulates women’s status in the patriarchal social order. Men treat biology as the fundamental argument to generate inferiority in women and to make them believe that ‘gender’ is a ‘given.’ With a patronizing attitude they have attributed all the negative qualities to women while reserving the positive for themselves. It is apparent that ‘masculinity’ in an androcentric social set-up is associated with superiority, and implies strength, action, self-assertion and domination, whereas ‘femininity’ is linked with inferiority, which implies weakness, passivity, docility, obedience and self-negation. Gender, therefore, is a social division of power.

Gender, thus, restricts women, irrespective of cultural, geographical, temporal differences. Women realise that ‘gender,’ unlike sex which is biological and natural, is but a social, cultural, and psychological ‘construct’ of the patriarchal world that can be ‘deconstructed’. In *The Second Sex*, one of the foundational texts in feminist philosophy and gender studies, Simone de Beauvoir decries the essentialism which claims that women are born “feminine”. She asserts that ‘women’ are rather constructed to be so through social indoctrination: “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman . . . . It is civilization as a
whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine” (295). She is of the view that the history of humanity is the history of systematic attempts to silence the female.

This awareness made the feminists kill the ‘Angel of the House’ by dethroning the myth of ‘femininity’. The image of a woman as a passive sufferer, an embodiment of self-effacement has been constructed using Silence, a highly potent weapon in the hands of men. Silence, thus, becomes a symbol of woman, of oppression, of self-extinction. But the ways in which the silenced subordination of women work are not always visible. The perception of woman as the ‘talking sex’ continues because of the implicit norm of Silence, suggests Dale Spender. It becomes obvious that women are conceptualised as a culturally muted group. Silence has to be broken, rather paradoxically, through words, the language of the phalloslogos, the very oppressor of woman.

Hence desilencing is an important mode feminists use to establish women’s existence. French psychoanalytic feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray is of the opinion that encouraging women to think, say, and write the ‘feminine’ is a gesture of self-legitimation. It breaks the centuries-old phallocentric thought which silenced women. She says it is by writing, from and toward women, that women can assign themselves a place other than Silence (qtd. in Braidotti 99). That is, when women begin to write the subversive nature of the act begins to shatter a rigorous Silence: a silence that is ideological, maintained through force and consent, a silence that is invisible and inexorable.

Creative writing, for that reason, is simultaneously, a chronicle of the times and an instrument of change (Joseph et al. 12). This is why French feminist philosophers,
Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément in their work *The Newly Born Woman* exhort women that, if they are going to partake in history, they must write themselves into it, overcoming the obstacles of a dominant male culture, emerging in spite of it through their writing rather than by virtue of any biological essentialism. They say the route should be one of writing rebelliously, thereby bringing a feminine subject into existence and history, that is, the ‘newly born woman’ (qtd. in Wright 149). British feminist writer, Virginia Woolf believes that woman needs only be ‘herself’ now; she is closer to freedom than ever before, and until she has expressed herself in all the arts and professions open to human skill nobody can know what a woman is. Woolf strives for the removal of the chalk marks of division and dualism – public/private, intellectual/emotional, social/individual – between human beings, and for the promotion of the world as a single fluid entity (Fullbrook 84-85).

The dualistic and stilted roles of man-woman in an androcentric society are maintained by perpetuating the archetype of the fallen woman. The American heroine is bifurcated into “Fair Virgin and Dark Lady”, observes Leslie Fielder in his seminal work, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (Anand and Sidhu ix). Examples of women depicted as paragons of feminine virtue, or as domineering viragoes or shrews abound in literature written by men. One can easily discern the power of pen in propagandizing the stereotyped picture of woman (slave or sorceress, sex object or mother goddess), thus, giving it a universal dimension. In her book, *Introducing Feminist Thought*, Mary Evans states that knowledge is deeply gendered, in terms of both who produces it and – more significantly – what is produced.
Hence feminist critics and writers have to deconstruct the distorted images of women created and perpetuated by male writers and artists, and reconstruct the true image of women, the one that would prompt Charlotte Perkins Gilman to cry out: “Here she comes, running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman” (qtd in Sinha 159). Since gender assumptions are being interwoven into the very fabric of our culture, religion, myth, etc., unpicking the strands of gendered bias is a crucial task.

In her work, *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* Alice Jardine, reviewing the eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, observes that though women have literally been present both as authors and as subjects their very being has been defined in terms of a fixed and rigid masculinity. Women writers were supposed to conform to patriarchal ideals: to exalt feminine values, and to view female characters from the male perspective. In male-dominated literature women’s experiences are narrated only from a male angle and ‘her’ experiences are almost trivialised. Citing the examples of *Madame Bovary, Anna Karenina* and *The Mill on the Floss*, Jardine points out that if women attempted to negotiate their relationship to masculinity, and indeed their own femininity, then the story ended in tragedy and tears (Evans 79). Some of the early writers depicted characters (monstrous characters) like mad women (psychic characters) to express the writer’s subversive ideas. Bertha Madison in *Jane Eyre* is a fine example.

In general, the early women writers differ little from their male counterparts. They dare not transgress the boundaries set by the androcentric society or recast the ‘feminine’ image created to fetter women. They replicate the stereotypical images of
women set by the male writers. They tend to internalise the culturally conditioned and received image of woman since the male point of view has been accepted as the norm. Therefore, even women-authored texts present images of women, which conform to the male typecasting of women: sometimes idealised, sometimes denigrated, woman is invariably the Other. Ruth Yeazel has relevantly observed that such stereotyping results from seeing women as “flat embodiments of a particular force or theme”, and “mythically, allegorically, symbolically, but never realistically as fully rounded complex human beings” (qtd. in Walia 3).

This phase of women’s writing is categorised as the ‘feminine’ by Elaine Showalter in her critical treatise “Towards a Feminist Poetics”. The narratives of this period fail to explore the psychic and emotional realities that characterise women. In the Indian cultural context a woman’s status is paradoxical, as she is venerated as a goddess on one hand, but on the other, she is undervalued, overworked and oppressed. The early Indian English novelists like Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao have portrayed women in a sensitive manner and have probed into the problematics of women to some degree. Nevertheless, most of the male writings and early women’s writings fail to diagnose the aches and agonies of a subjugated woman.

The task, therefore, of deconstructing the prevalent negative images of woman in fiction falls to women writers with feminist consciousness. At this stage, we find the ‘feminist’ writers throwing their feminine decorum to the winds. They make a paradigm shift: they observe the realities of life from a different vantage point. The writings of this period cater to consciousness-raising.
Instead of essentializing the feminine, women writers now transgress boundaries, using their pen to gain access to areas once forbidden to them. They fill the gaps and silences in history and bring to light the unknown, dark corners in the lives of women. Pam Morris says: “Writing by women can tell the story of the aspects of women’s lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized in the majority of traditional texts” (60).

They reconceptualize the phallocentric dichotomic divisions of ‘man – woman’ where man is always privileged. Marriage, motherhood and such other patriarchal institutions which keep women under a cloud of mystification disappear. Fiction becomes an effective tool to erase the traditional image of woman and install the ‘real.’ The women writers redraw and extend the boundaries to include new meanings and dimensions of their personality, raising a challenge to the androcentric world. They portray characters that break the barriers set up by the patriarchal society. They deconstruct and reconstruct the distorted images of womanhood through the process of ‘exorcising the male mind that has been planted’ in women. They focus on the psychic and existential dilemmas that characterise a woman’s life.

The modern writers, accordingly, portray authentic women who raise their voices of protest against the age-old inequities, work out the problems that torment them, and rise triumphantly like phoenix. They rupture the good – bad dichotomy. These women are in quest of their self-identity. The twentieth century writers like Simone de Beauvoir, Margaret Fuller, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing register their sense of outrage in no uncertain terms. The Women’s Liberation
Movement of the late 1960’s has also contributed to the emergence of the empowered and self-confident New Woman.

The twentieth century, consequently, witnessed a spate of fictions of the ‘unhomely’, initiated by Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* (the 1899 novel ‘rediscovered’ during the Second Wave Feminism) which ‘unmake’ the home with its heroine who is a woman categorically unsuited to be a mother. Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, explodes the myth of ‘woman’ as a paragon of virtues, and demystifies the image of a ‘happy,’ ‘contented’ wife to the shock of the morally-prudish-society.

Though female protagonists figure in the novels of many male writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe, and George Meredith, the emphasis had been on their romantic and sexual relationships. Virginia Woolf takes a big stride with the novel *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) portraying a middle-aged woman as the protagonist, doing apparently trivial tasks as buying flowers, arranging for food and drink, etc., which make it possible for the male characters to perform ‘serious’ activities like decision making. Barbara Pym’s novels offer good examples of women’s lives being led through their involvement in the little joys and satisfactions of everyday, ordinary existence which made Philip Larkin appreciate Pym’s “unique ear and eye for the small poignancies and comedies of everyday life” (qtd. in Walia 6). Rosalind Miles asserts in unequivocal terms the indisputable success of women in the field of fiction in her critical work, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of Novel*: 
Singly and in numbers they have established the novel as the female form. As writers they have repeatedly demonstrated their outstanding mastery of it; as readers they have continuously turned and returned to it for the vital task of making sense of their experience as women, and harmonising the often unbearably painful conflicts of their lives (19).

The women’s novel freely expands upon subjects which are an integral part of women’s lives. Intricate details of food, drink and clothing form part of their narrative. An emphasis on feelings and human relationships and the small trivia of daily life are common features. Relationships of all kinds, between women friends, lesbian lovers, sisters, mother and daughter, other family ties and especially heterosexual relationships, are explored, with an accent on the emotional aspect. Lesbian writers like Adrienne Rich consider the relationship between women not merely important but crucial. For example, Margaret Drabble compassionately examines the emotional conflicts resulting from the experience of maternal love, which is absorbing as well as restricting for educated women who wish to lead a full life. Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962) highlights the stable and secure friendship of the protagonist Anna with Molly. Many contemporary novelists, including Doris Lessing, Penelope Mortimer, Jean Rhys, Barbara Pym and Anita Brookner, deal with the experience of ageing women. Margaret Laurence’s *The Stone Angel* depicts Hagar Shipley, a ninety-year old woman as the protagonist.

The whole gamut of women’s experience, including female bodily functions, like menstruation, contraception, pregnancy, post-puerpial depression and mothering, are beginning to be openly mentioned and explored in women’s novels. In *Days* (1974),

With the second half of twentieth century the range of women’s writing encompassed not only creative writing also literary theory. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Mary Ellmann’s *Thinking about Women*, Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch*, Hélène Cixous’s *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of Their Own* and the like have broke new ground in exalting women’s experiences to the level of theory. The developments in feminist literary criticism from woman as reader / consumer (feminist critique) to woman as writer / producer (gynocriticism) are an index to the growth of women’s writing.
Female literary histories have been attempted by Virginia Woolf and Elaine Showalter. Woolf traces the growth of female literary tradition from the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century in British Literature in her work *A Room of One’s Own* (1928). Showalter also reads women’s writing as a continuously developing female tradition from the Brontës to Doris Lessing, and not as isolated special cases in her pathbreaking work called *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (1977).

A new genre: women’s ‘quest fiction’ emerged from the combined growth of fiction, feminist literary criticism and the Women’s Liberation Movement during the early seventies. This genre has a pattern, even a formula: woman seeks freedom from the traditional roles that culture and literature have set down for her; she roots her past to solve the present crisis, and rejects the endings of the past (a disastrous ending with a Villain or a satisfactory ending with a Good Man), instead, she finds an ending of her own, different from the traditional one of marriage or death. As Drabble suggests in “A Woman Writer,” we write and read in order to find patterns or images for a possible future, to create “a new pattern, a new blueprint”. “We do not want to resemble the women of the past, but where is our future?” (qtd. in Greene xiv) This is precisely the question that many novels written by women try to answer. The protagonist tries to define herself against her mother, and also to avoid repeating the wretched fate of her mother who is seen as a representative of tradition. Thus, ‘matrophobia’ (fear of becoming the mother) is a common characteristic of this new genre. And indeed, bad mothers are everywhere in it: in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, Lessing’s *The Grass Is

In the writings of the later stages the ‘reconceptualised woman’ redefines women’s nurturing roles, rethinks the maternal, and re-evaluates the mother-daughter bond. By insisting on the right not to have children, women not only declare their right of experiencing of motherhood, but also redefine motherhood on their own terms. This changed attitude towards maternity distinguishes the first and the second stages of Women’s Movement. Julia Kristeva and other Franco-feminists describe maternity as a potential challenge to phallocentrism.

As part of the quest for ‘something new’, some alternative to the nightmarish repetition of history, women have explored as well as exploited the genre ‘novel’ and all its variant forms such as realistic novels, gothic novels, fantasy, science fiction, utopian novels, etc. Gothic novel (a form that flourished in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries) is a favourite among women as it provides the exploration and dramatization of secret fears and emotions, perhaps of elements of the unconscious; it offers an alternative to the factual, pragmatic, masculine world. Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein (1818), though having no central female character, questions values associated masculine culture. By depicting a world that we are unfamiliar with, these genres help to de-internalise or de-mystify the ‘natural’ or the ‘given’. It calls for more
than autonomous women or alternative narrative forms, but a very new way of seeing, a new kind of knowledge, a new system, a new world. They represent a new and better social order, a different world with different cultural values. For this reason Lessing, Ursula K. Le Guin and other feminist writers have tried their hand in fantasy and science fiction. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Herland* (1915) depicts a self-sufficient world of women. Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) presents a dystopian world that sounds a warning that certain trends have to be halted.

Women writers use language innovatively to reconceptualise female areas of knowledge and to rethink traditional attitudes. Using a diversity of voices, styles and forms they explore aspects of experience which are specific to their lives as women. Consequently, the women’s novel tends to implicitly alter the values of patriarchal society and to accord the central importance to what is generally considered ‘peripheral’ or ‘marginal.’ Morris remarks upon “the special pleasure of recognition that comes to women readers when they find their own emotions, circumstances, frustrations and desires shared, named and shaped into literary form…” (60).

According to Morris, this realistic rendering of women’s lives in words creates in many women a belief in their collective strength to resist and remake their own lives. Illustrating from Agnes Smedley’s *Daughter of Earth* (1929), Morris has shown how women’s novels give an insider’s account of women’s mundane and gruelling unacknowledged work, as well as their determination and courage to survive against hardship (60-61).
Women’s writing, though it was in existence much before the advent of Feminism, receives an impetus now with its emergence, and gathers not only momentum but also undergoes revolutionary changes. A spate of fictional and non-fictional work followed Kate Millett’s SexualPolitics (1969), which uncovers the pervasive feminine stereotypes which male writers have populated their fictional worlds, and challenges the orthodox and conventional assumptions about women. The new fiction by women prioritises women and women’s experiences, redefining the boundaries of fiction. Erica Jong’s Fear of Flying, Lisa Alther’s Kinflicks, Marilyn French’s Women’s Room Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, and Alice Walker’s The Colour Purple are a few of the novels by women that explicitly mark a new standpoint in fiction.

Gender and sexuality, taboos till recently, are now at the fore in their writings. Women consider that it is equally legitimate for them to represent sexual experience, and they are uniquely placed to write about their own sexuality. It is acknowledged that poet and dramatist Aphra Ben wrote fairly directly about women’s sexual desires as early as the seventeenth-century. Lessing in her The Golden Notebook explicitly discusses female sexual response and how it is different from men’s expectations. But women writers, generally, avoid the physical aspect of passionate love.

Apart from indulging in themes of personal, emotional relationships and sexuality, women writers also pen on the social issues of the times. In Britain middle-class women writers are the first to take up the social problems of the nineteenth century like industrialization, migration, and urbanization. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s
*Cabin* (1852) has a pivotal role in abolishing slavery in the United States. Women’s writing, whatever the period it is set in, reflects the contemporary social and political situation.

Nicola Beauman observes in *A Very Great Profession* (1983), an account of the early twentieth century women’s novels, that there is a category of fiction written for women ‘the women’s novel’ “which in some way or another illuminates female attitudes to experience, throws light on the texture of women’s lives” (qtd. in Walia 5). In fact, women have revitalised the realistic novel, by exploring and sharing their distinctively female experience and preoccupations. The women’s novel offers the possibility of focussing on women through an understanding from within. Miles has aptly commented: “The task of interpretation of women’s experience cannot be left to male writers alone, however sympathetic they may be. The female perspective, expressed through women’s writing of all kinds, is more than a valuable corrective to an all-male view of the universe. For women readers it is a lifeline” (x).

Women’s writing of recent times purports going beyond a critique of gender ideology to a critique of culture. Many women writers do not attempt to transform language and forge a new discourse. But they critique the very forms of their culture while writing within those forms, and challenge precisely the very tradition while using linguistic and literary conventions forged by that tradition. To be precise, they work within the dominant discourse while deconstructing it. They deploy feminist strategies that expose systems as capable of being changed. They do this by exploring the scope of metafiction (self-reflexive fiction that self-consciously addresses its status as an artefact). That is, they make their protagonists either readers who contemplate on the way fiction shape their lives or writers
who attempt to forge new fictional forms to suit their expectations of life. Lessing’s Anna Wulf of *The Golden Notebook*, Laurence’s Morag Gunn of *The Diviners*, and Atwood’s Joan Delacourt Foster of *Lady Oracle* are writers who engage in a search for new narrative forms. Examining fictional systems, incorporating aspects of both theory and criticism, intruding to comment on writing, directly addressing the reader, rejecting conventional plot, subverting conventions to transform ‘reality,’ etc., are some commonly availed of metafictive devices.

The women’s novel has its own collective character. In her quest for artistic self-expression within a dominantly patriarchal set-up, the woman writer gives voice, visibility and validity to aspects of female experience. The difference of perspective in the women’s novel can be comprehended only when we attempt to understand the specificity of women’s writing as a fundamental and continually determining reality, says Showalter (“Wilderness” 350).

In this context it would be pertinent to point out the mere fact that a novel is authored by a woman does not fulfil the criteria of a ‘women’s novel’ which concerns itself with an articulation of women’s experience, and the warp and the woof of their lives. While explaining its nature, Beauman has remarked upon its “unmistakably female tone of voice”, “little action and less histrionics”. Its ideology is that the novel mirrors life. It deals with “the drama of the undramatic, the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships” (qtd. in Walia 5). For this reason, the novels of Iris Murdoch and Ayn Rand cannot be considered as women’s novels.
The emphasis on female experience as a framework for the analysis of women’s literature, as well as the development of new models, has been gauged as mainstream Anglo-American literary feminism. Women writers, amongst the many themes that they use, include their own problematized relationships as writer, the difficulties they encounter in their career through the depiction of writer-characters in their works. This has led to the growth of *künstlerromane* novels which depict the career and growth of writers.

Showalter, focussing on women’s literature and women’s tradition, expounds ‘gynocriticism’. The Anglo-American theory and practice assume an unproblematic relationship between women’s writing and women’s experience. This view is at odds with the French feminist theory. When the Anglo-American criticism attempts to liberate women from the confining stereotypes, the French seeks to dismantle the very terms and assumptions of the system that subordinate woman. It also argues that language is not a value-free tool, but a ‘construct’ inscribing patriarchal ideology. If language is an ideologically complicit male construct, woman cannot represent herself in it. There is some disagreement about whether women can, as Mary Jacobus puts it, adapt traditionally male-dominated modes of writing to the articulation of female oppression and desire or whether we should “rather reject tools that may simply re-inscribe our marginality and ... forge others of our own” (14).

The French feminist school headed by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva define writing which is typically feminine in theme, style and approach as *écriture feminine*—writing the female body. They see the complex sensations and rhythms of female desire as the basis of a ‘new insurgent writing’ that subverts cultural
structures and wrecks partitions, classes, rhetorics, regulations and codes thereby changing the rules of the old game (Cixous “Laugh”250-256). Irigaray describes women’s language as figured by the female genitals, and therefore as multiple, diffuse, fluid, and open (“When Our Lips Speak Together”). Kristeva maintains that women’s experience of jouissance (pleasures repressed by patriarchal culture) can be the source of subversive energy and of an alternative discourse.

A vibrant interest in a ‘female literary tradition’ has gradually shifted the emphasis from “revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women”, says Showalter (“Wilderness” 335). Attempts to trace a “sisterly genealogy”, to use an expression of Reynolds (3), have, thus, caused a spirit of sisterhood and universal solidarity to develop among women, pushing Feminism beyond the limits of a literary movement.

In the post-modern era, women’s writing has clearly steered out from the phallogocentric features of fear, submission and anger. They are being replaced by transcendence, authenticity, integrity, aesthetic excellence and freedom in women’s writing. They not only expose gender inequality, sexual / textual politics and marginalization, but also instil confidence and courage in women to speak out in their true voices. “No more masks, no more mythologies” (122), Muriel Rukeyser’s clarion call, can be regarded as the appropriate and significant slogan for women’s writing since the 1970’s.

All the variant forms of feminism (like radical, liberal, socialist, black) have reconceptualised ‘woman.’ And the emphasis on the fact that ‘the personal is political’
has led women to seek their self-identity. The awareness that the dichotomy like public–private, man–woman is but a construct of patriarchy is aroused in women. Women realise that marriage which gives the illusion of equal footing for man and woman is but a hierarchical relationship, and motherhood is a biological trap. With many a myth about woman being exploded, it becomes apparent that heterosexuality, marriage and motherhood are not the only possible lifestyles for women. These feminist issues are showcased in women’s writing of the latter half of the twentieth century. Black women writers, besides a realistic representation of the sexist issues, raise racist problems also.

Women writers of Indian English Fiction have evidently made great strides, matching the pace of the world. Their works are appreciated for their originality, versatility and the indigenous flavour of the soil. These Indian women writers, through their rich and varied writings, have an unmistakable edge over their male counterparts who have disparaged their writing as kitchen sink literature. Their sensitive portrayals of flesh and blood women from middle and upper class entangled in real life situations have a sense of credibility.

The two-volume work of Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, a voyage to rediscover women writers of the Indian subcontinent as far back as to the sixth century B.C. Buddhist nuns, has enlightened a tradition of female creativity of almost infinite variety of over 2500 years. It also demonstrates that fictional creation is no male territory and women are no trespassers in it. The selections of letters, poetry, fiction, and autobiography (written in the country’s regional languages) that they retrieved bring out the voices of the persistent and determined Sheherzades. The painstaking work throws
light on many archaic and destructive traditions including the horrifying ritual of sati. It is, indeed, a window that opens onto new vistas of women’s writing.

Though engaged in some form of literary activity in Indian English on a sustained basis for over a century and a half, Indian women writers are still on the margins. R. K. Dhawan’s contribution is significant, as his anthology of *Indian Women Novelists* in three sets (each in five to seven volumes) is a veritable encyclopaedia, especially, on post-independence Indian women writers (including regional and diasporic), the nature of Indian women’s writing, its problems and possibilities. These women essentially write from their experience as women. Apart from articles on feminism, this collection discusses the achievements of Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Gita Mehta, GithaHariharan, Shobha De, Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamla Das, NamitaGokhale, Jai Nimbkar, MayahBalse, Nina Sibal, NergisDalal, Dina Mehta, AttiaHosain, Tara Ali Baig, Shourie Daniels, Santha Rama Rau, Meena Alexander, RajiNarasimhan, Uma Vasudev, Indira Goswami (Asamese), Rajee Seth and Krishna Sobti(Hindi), IsmatChugati and QurratulainHyder(Urdu), Lakshmi Kannnan (Tamil), MalatiChendru(Telgu), Amrita Pritam, AjitCour and DaleepTiwana (Punjabi), Sita Devi, Ashapurna Debi and Mahashweta Devi (Bengali), Gauri Deshpande and Kamal Desai (Marathi) and others. Most of these women novelists focus on the existential predicament and miserable plight of subdued women in a male dominated society governed by rigid traditions and restrictions. The portrayals of these persecuted women characters are unmistakably from a feminist perspective.
Indian Writing in English generally reflects the experiences of the elite class, and women’s fiction mostly depicts the psychological suffering of the frustrated housewife, a subject matter often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women of the lower classes that we find in native languages. Furthermore, though writing in English gives the author an advantage of reaching an international audience, the purpose of consciousness-raising, which the lower, illiterate class badly needs, is barely attained.

We see writers like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Deshpande, just to name a few, have left imprints in the international literary front. Anita Desai has been short listed three times for Booker Prize (*Clear Light of Day*, *In Custody* and *Fasting, Feasting*). Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize for her first novel *The God of Small Things* in 1997, while Desai’s daughter, Kiran received the 2006 Booker Prize for her second work, *The Inheritance of Loss*.

A fine feminine sensibility pervades the fictional world of Kamala Markandaya, who shot to fame with her very first novel *Nectar in a Sieve*. Settled abroad, this writer also deals with the East-West encounter and the resultant identity crisis with which she is familiar. Most of her novels, set against the industrial growth of the 1950s and 60s in rural India, analyse the social and cultural impact on the working class. Her women characters are touchstones of tradition.

Nayantara Sahgal’s works project her highly political familial background and the gendered social structure of post-independence India. She can be singled out from her
contemporaries by her bold, unconventional and subversive attitude towards sex and individual freedom. Her feminist consciousness is overt and grows strident as her career progresses. The women characters of her second phase like Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) have no sense of guilt or remorse in flouting the social conventions, unlike those of the earlier phase who are but products of a parochial society. In the third phase Sahgal moves ahead to portray her women as strong-willed, courageous and emotionally independent. They seek self-realisation unaided by any man in contrast to the women of the previous phases that depend on their male friends. Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985) marks Sahgal’s coming of age.

Anita Desai’s novels focus exclusively on the individual psyche, the damage in women characters from patriarchal pressures and social iniquity. She projects this through incompatible couples – very sensitive wives and ill-matched husbands. In her early novels women are portrayed sensitive, emotional misfits trying to maintain their individuality. A change in attitude comes with *Clear Light of the Day*. Most of Desai’s women characters register protest against circumstances which oppress them.

A change in the trend of topics and treatment is noticeable in the post-independent women’s writing. Markandaya’s focus was on social issues and Sahgal’s on independent women; with Desai the change is markedly on the individual psyche of her women characters. In the 1980s’ novels the emphasis is on psychological issues related to family and career. Deshpande, who started writing in the 80s, highlights the psychological aspect. She portrays a women’s world. Her characters are from an orthodox Brahminical family and as girls have been subject to social conditioning. As a
result of this they have internalised patriarchy. Hence it is the influence of self-
internalisation that is more perceptible in their lives than the direct intervention of
patriarchy. In Indian social context the joint family system still holds sway. Much of the
conventions and customs of patriarchy are followed in nuclear families as well. Hence
the family gains priority and prominence over individuals. This implies that the
educated middle class Indian women experience the conflict between tradition and
modernity. They encounter challenges from both the familial and career fronts. Career-
role conflict thus becomes a relevant topic, and Deshpande draws on this. Women
writer-characters figure in six of her novels. This theme of woman-as-writer is not dealt
by any other Indian English writer so extensively.

Women’s writing after hundreds of years of struggle has reached a stage where
its voices can be heard reverberating across countries. The challenge of the patriarchal
assumptions has resulted in a large scale reconceptualization of the world and the
experiences of women. According to Mac Kinnon, this tells the story of woman’s
ascension: from victim to victor, resulting in a trope of antithesis: “The woman / object
(of masculinist discourse) becomes subject; the man / subject becomes object (of a
feminist discourse)” (qtd. in Kauffman 104). Woman is transformed from being the
shattered and negated victim of male power into becoming a subject in her own right.
Thus the role of women is no longer only to inspire but also to create. The ideal of self-
sacrifice is replaced by the ideal of self-assertion. On the whole, women writers have
geared up into the twenty-first century with unprecedented aplomb.
But with the androcentric society still reluctant to relinquish the long-standing powers and privileges, not discounting the cultural variations, the apprehensions of women regarding gender hierarchy will continue, and hopes of an egalitarian society will be a far cry as ‘the guarded tongue’ still holds sway. Women writers of more than eleven different languages of India that attended the National Colloquium held at Hyderabad in 2001 reported of their oppressive status. Apparently a decade is too brief a period for centuries-old customs to become redundant; writing is still no easy victory for women.

In this context the theme ‘woman-as-writer’ is an interesting topic for analytical study, as it brings to light the challenges women encounter as writers, and the counteractive measures taken to surmount them. Despite the acknowledgement of the numerous hurdles they cross in seeking self-actualisation in interviews, conferences, workshops, etc., not many have elaborated on them in their works. Among the women novelists in Indian English it is perhaps Deshpande who has taken it up seriously. ‘Problematisation of woman-as-writer’ is a pet theme of Deshpande; she deals with it either in a full-fledged manner or touches upon it in about six novels out of the ten she has authored. It is notable and significant that Deshpande has deep concern in the matter of women writers’ freedom for she deals with the problematization of woman writer in six of the ten novels she has authored. Perhaps in the Indian context the question of the woman writer’s freedom is pertinent. The conventions of family and society are too rigid that a woman writer sacrifices much for her career (elaborated in Chapter II). In the West several women writers have touched upon this topic but it is just in a single work. For example, Doris Lessing has created a writer-character Anna Wulf in The
Golden Notebook; Margaret Atwood has Joan Foster in Lady Oracle. Margaret Laurence has Morag Gunn in The Diviners. But it is very significant that Shashi Deshpande goes back to the presentation of woman-as-writer in six of her novels.

The present study on ‘Problematization of Woman-as-Writer’ focusses on the writer-characters depicted in the novels authored by Deshpande and Laurence. It is discernible that these two women writers encode their problematized life and career into the texts through the writer-characters that they depict. When gender discrimination is apparently strident in both Indian and Western societies a comparative study of an Indian English writer like Shashi Deshpande and a Canadian writer, Margaret Laurence, with all their cultural, regional differences and similarities of experiences would be a fruitful and rewarding exercise.

Deshpande was born as the daughter of Shriranga, the renowned Sanskrit scholar and Kannada dramatist in Dharwad, a small town in the state of Karnataka in Southern India. Educated in Dharwad, Bombay and Bangalore, she holds degrees in economics, law, English literature, and journalism. Married to neuropathologist, family took up most of her time in the years that followed. According to Shashi Deshpande herself, she did not make a conscious decision to be a writer but stumbled into being one out of ennui. Her novels are deeply rooted in India: the characters, settings, and the conflicts, inherently Indian. Besides ten novels, she has written four children’s books, a number of short stories, and several perceptive essays published in a volume entitled Writing from the Margin and Other Essays. She is the proud recipient of several honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award for the novel That Long Silence in 1990 and the Padma Shri in
2009. She has also won international acclaim when Virago Press, London, published *That Long Silence* in 1988 and *The Binding Vine* in 1993. With a casual entrance into the world of letters, and a humble start, writing children’s stories and publishing short stories in women’s magazines like Femina, and Eve’s Weekly, she has branched out to the more serious writing of novels. Many of her novels are being translated into several European and Indian languages. Women writers in India, hence, can no longer be claimed as the exclusive property of India; their work and their art belong to the world.

Deshpande provides insights into the lives of Indian middle class women writers and the hurdles they cross in seeking self-actualisation. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is a journalist who, sick of the hypocrisy and power games in the male-dominated world, turns to her long cherished dream of creative writing. Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) is a creative writer who limits herself to a columnist owing to her husband’s entrenched patriarchal views. Mira, a poet, nipped in the bud by the misogynic, phallocratic hands, is ‘discovered’ by Urmii, her daughter-in-law and narrator-protagonist of *The Binding Vine* (1993). Sumi, narrator-protagonist of *A Matter of Time* (1996), who is contented to erase her self-identity in the role of a housewife, receives a jolt when her husband walks out on her and their three daughters. Taking on her newly assumed role of a breadwinner she discovers her latent talent to write. *Small Remedies* (2000) is the (auto)biography of the journalist Madhu which is embedded in that of SavitriBai Indorekar, a ‘singer woman’ who strives to become the doyen of Hindustani music. Like the heroines in the other novels who are in quest of self-identity,
Madhu, the biographer, also grapples with problems associated with the social and literary construction of personal identities.

In *Moving On* (2004), Deshpande presents three writer-characters. Vasu is a short story writer. Her husband Badri Narayan, a professor of anatomy, used to writing only serious / non-fictional articles, urged to unleash his suppressed feelings and thoughts, and defy the brevity of human existence during the autumn of his life, indulges in personal writing. Jiji, their daughter, upon her father’s death, comes across his diary, and joins him in shedding light into the fears and joys that lay hidden in her life. In her diaristic writing Jiji says about her mother’s problematized life as a storywriter and her diarist father who breaks certain notions of ‘masculinity’. In the diary she does not hesitate to divulge the passionate side of her character – the moments shared with her husband when she unleashes her sexual desires, and the fling she has with a young tenant. Through Vasu (Mai), Badri (Baba) and Jiji (Manjari), the three writer-characters’ point of view Deshpande draws our attention to sex, one of the natural instincts of human beings. In this novel Deshpande is more inclined towards androgyny than feminism. Unlike the male characters of her other novels that are but sketchy, Badri Narayan is depicted as a prominent one. Further, he is the first male writer (diarist) of Deshpande, whilst her other writers are all female.

Margaret Laurence, née Jean Margaret Wemyss, lived in the 1950s in Somaliland, Ghana with her engineer husband who worked as a dam builder. Her African experiences provided the raw material for her early works: *A Tree for Poverty* (1954) a collection of Somali poems and stories, *This Side Jordan* (1960) her first
novel, and *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963) a collection of short stories. All her African fiction reflects the determined budding writer’s passionate belief in the dignity and potential of every human being. Back home she revised her memoirs of the Somaliland years and published as *The Prophet’s CamelBell* (1963), and then turned her attention to the Manawaka sequence that include the novels *The StoneAngel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), and *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969) and the stories collected in *A Bird in the House* (1970) and *The Diviners* (1974).

Laurence creates Manawaka, a fictional town based on her own prairie town Neepawa in the Canadian province of Manitoba. She sets up the five novel sequence in this fictional region. *The Stone Angel* tells the story of stubborn, self-reliant, ninety-year old Hagar Shipley struggling against being put in a nursing home, which she sees as a symbol of death. This story that celebrates the triumph of the spirit was a landmark event for Canadian literature and the keystone of Laurence’s career. *A Jest of God* is the story of Rachel Cameron who, trapped in a milieu of deceit and pettiness, struggles to come to terms with love, death, herself and her world. She longs for love and contact with a human being who shares her rebellious spirit. Through her summer affair with a schoolmate from earlier years, she finds a fragile but sustaining selfhood. Smart and witty, Stacey MacAindra of *The Fire-Dwellers* is Rachel Cameron’s sister. But she is overwhelmed by the responsibilities of raising four children and loving her overworked husband who is a salesman. She thinks of herself as commonplace and ordinary, but Laurence helps us to rediscover all the richness of the commonplace. *A Bird in the House*, a collection of eight linked stories from the
perspective of a young girl Vanessa MacLeod is based on Laurence’s own experiences. It tells of Vanessa’s journey from ignorance to knowledge. All the characters in the novel are trapped in the pain of their memories and regrets. The culmination and completion of the celebrated Manawaka cycle, *The Diviners* is an epic novel which portrays Morag Gunn, a writer, in whom Laurence has created a symbol of all dispossessed people in search of their birthright. She embodies courage and endurance, and the instinct to survive and protect one’s rights.

Laurence’s novels explore themes such as freedom and responsibility through her strongly etched heroines. She is best known for depicting women striving for self-realisation while immersed in the daily struggle of living, overcoming the limitations of the male-dominated world of western Canada. She was stung by controversy over her last novel, *The Diviners*. Since then, she produced three children’s books and had campaigned for nuclear disarmament. Laurence’s magazine articles are collected in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976). Her children’s books include: *Jason’s Quest* (1970), *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980). Her book, *Long Drums and Cannons* (1968) is a critical study of Nigerian writing in English. Her final literary legacy, the memoir, *Dance on the Earth*, which she finished before she died, was edited by her daughter Jocelyn and published in 1989. During her life Laurence received many honours: the Governor-General’s Award for *A Jest of God* (1967) and *The Diviners* (1974), Companion of the Order of Canada (1972) and fourteen honorary degrees from Canadian universities.
For the proposed dissertation, which examines the issues of ‘woman-as-writer’, Deshpande’s novels wherein writer-characters appear are selected and scrutinised. Hence her novels such as *Come Up and Be Dead, If I Die Today, The Dark Holds No Terrors, In the Country of Deceit* are not considered. Along with Deshpande’s novels Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners*, which portrays the life of writer-mother Morag Gunn, is put to scrutiny. The eleven-year old Vanessa McLeod, the narrator of *A Bird in the House*, though a budding artist, is not taken up for she is yet to face the demands of the phallocratic world.

In these novels Deshpande and Laurence explore metafictive devices to examine various issues regarding writing fiction through the creation of a reader-character or a writer-character. These novels fall also into the category of *künstlerroman* (a novel that traces an artist’s growth to maturity) for they portray the developing sensibilities of the writer-figures – Indu, Jaya, Mira, Sumi, Madhu and Jiji – that Deshpande, and – Morag – that Laurence have created.

The thesis “Problematization of Woman-as-Writer: A Study of Select Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence” is an endeavour to study the problematized relationship of a woman writer to her art as reflected in the selected novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence. This leads to an analysis of the factors that create an uncongenial atmosphere for female creativity as well. Further it examines the strategies Deshpande and Laurence adopt to surmount the impediments to self-actualisation. The thesis is divided into five chapters.
The introductory chapter is an overview of women’s writing. Women’s writing has now come of age after years of struggle, breaking aeons of silence, with stories of oppression, suppression and repression. Erasing the distorted image of woman deeply inscribed by phallocentric thought is an enormously difficult task for women writers. Modern women writers break the binary division of good-bad woman and portray their female characters as quite down to earth ones. Modesty is no more a virtue in their world. The authors selected for study, Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence, are introduced and placed within their respective traditions.

The second chapter is entitled “Politics of Creativity.” It deals with the problems and issues women writers have to grapple in seeking self-expression. Women’s writing encounters exclusion, marginalisation and trivialisation in the phallocentric world. Denied access to the main(male)stream literature, women writers fight back to create ‘a space of their own’. The writer-characters of Deshpande and Laurence encounter various impediments in exercising their creative talents. An analysis of the factors that stifle female creativity is made in this chapter.

The third chapter entitled “Writing the Body” essays to examine how women reclaim the ‘body’ from which they are alienated in a phallocratic set up. Women are the possession / property of man; sex, sexuality and fertility are all male prerogative. Reclamation of the female body, thus, is inevitable; a woman who seeks selfhood or self-expression has to work through the body, deconstructing the ‘roles’ imposed on her. Therefore, the modern woman in quest of self-identity and self-actualisation outsteps the boundaries set for her by flouting the rules of chastity,
demythifying marriage, and demystifying motherhood. This chapter examines how Laurence and Deshpande expose the unequal status of women, how female bodies are disciplined to become docile bodies, and how they struggle to retrieve the female rights.

The fourth chapter “Writing the Self” examines how the authors have encoded their personalities into the texts. The authors, Deshpande and Laurence problematize their relationship to art through the writer-characters they have created. A parallelism can be traced in the life of the author and her writer-character as they flounder in the bog of tradition and culture, and finally discover their identity and voice. Both the authors and their writer-characters reach the altruistic level of self-actualisation through writing. This chapter also examines the various literary techniques the authors use to create a distinctive feminine space in the phallocentric world.

The concluding chapter sums up the ideas of the foregoing chapters of the thesis, which is based on the select novels of Shashi Deshpande and Margaret Laurence. It examines the repressive forces that act on female creativity and the counteractive measures that the select women writers adopt in their quest for selfhood and self-actualisation. The chapter also notes related matters like the progressive growth of Deshpande’s writers, the contribution of their mentors in promoting their career, and the significance of social commitment to the development of a woman writer’s self. It also attempts to trace the parallel growth of the authors and their writer-characters as they discover their true voice and resolve the crisis in their career.