A FACE-OFF WITH JAI NIMBKAR

During the course of my research on Jai Nimbkar’s trilogy of novels, while reading and digesting the books, I was wonderstruck by the personality of the author of those books, as reflected in her writings, particularly her power of observation, the wonderful way she weaves the plots of the stories and the characters, and her facility of language. Then the idea suddenly came to my mind that it would be wonderful if I can go to meet the author and to get some insight from her in to the novels. I came to know from the website of Nimbkar Institute Of Agriculture that she was still quite alive and active and enjoying her life, still engaged in writing and managing a beautiful orchard of coconut and fruit trees. I also managed to get her phone number so, one fine morning I hesitatingly dialed her number, not still very sure of what response I would get or if I would get any response at all. I wasn’t sure also what would be the physical and mental condition of the octogenarian author (b.1932) and whether she would be willing and ready to receive and to talk to a young lady student intruding in to her solitude. However a pleasant male voice her husband’s, I think, responded from the other end of the phone. I told him the purpose of my call that I was doing research on MrsNimbkar’s novels and that I would like to meet her in that connection. He didn’t at all put me off, as I feared and, instead, encouraged me to call MrsNimbkar up in the afternoon when she would be available at home. I had thought that perhaps due to her extreme old age she would be limited to her home, if not bedridden. So, when her husband told me that she had just gone to their farm a few miles away to look up the fruit trees and the work going on there, I was very surprised. Of course I did dial her in the afternoon, as advised by her husband and was delighted to hear Mrs. Nimbkar’s sweet and pleasant voice. She was very pleased to know that was researching on her novels and gave a very welcome response to my proposal to visit her. She said that she would be only too happy to meet me at a time my choice. I also thought that as the theme of my research, i.e. ‘Woman’s Quest for Self Identity’ would be a congenial door for me to open up with the lady author of the novels I am researching on, who has brilliantly delineated in her novels.
So, for the above mentioned purpose, I made an appointment to meet Mrs. Nimbkar on New Year’s Day 2014 at her home at Phaltan, which is at a distance of about one hundred kilometers from Pune. I started my journey on 30th December in the evening from Gandhi ham, Gujarat, by train. I had the company of my husband who had, in fact, motivated me to do my PhD and has been rendering all possible assistance and that of my three years old daughter who has also been showing interest in my research work- but mostly negatively- and has been always trying
her best to disturb me so that she might get more of my attention as she used to get earlier before I undertook the research. Our train reached Pune railway station on New Year’s Day, early morning and we were all shivering particularly my small daughter, due to the intense cold. From Pune we took a bus that went by Phaltan. We alighted from the bus and hired auto-rikswa to go to the Nimbkar’s Bungalow which is about ten kilometers away. As I had phoned Mrs. Nimbkar earlier, she was waiting with a very warm smiling welcome at the entrance of her bungalow where she lives. When I met Mrs Nimbkar in person I was very surprised as she carried her very old age of eighty- plus years, very lightly. Her body looked youngish and well maintained; and she was agile and active. She carried an agile mind too as she exuded great vivacity and confidence. Her eyes sparkled with light and also looked very warm and kind.

Before I set on my journey to meet MrsNimbkar, I had prepared a questionnaire which I wanted to put her. The first question was about the theme of my research and also of the novels i.e. ‘women’s search for self identity’. So, I asked her if she had this theme in mind before she set out writing the novels or if it came out automatically as she wrote them. She answered that she couldn’t say exactly if she had it in mind before or if it came out during her writing. As she wrote the novels she was not conscious about this theme at all. She just wanted to write a longish story of domestic life and wanted to be true to the social reality which she tried to depict in the novels. Social reformation or reconstruction of social traditions in favor of women was far from her mind as she wrote the novels. But literature is always ‘criticism of life’ as Alexander Pope put it and so her writing too had a social purpose, indirectly to reform society with the regard to the condition of the women. Mrs. Nimbkar’s answer to my question ultimately meant that she was, in fact, more of a realistic writer than a feminist. In fact I found that she believed that nature has given men a dominating role in life. He has a stronger body and mind, the better, to protect human society. The women’s role is to give birth to life and to nourish it. And the man stands by protecting her and providing her with all the necessities of life. But that doesn’t mean that man has the right of domination over woman. Both are equal as persons. Mrs. Nimbkar also said that women are to some extent responsible for their own suffering as they do not get educated and fail to assert their individual rights.

When I asked Mrs. Nimbkar about her commitment to feminism and to what kind of feminism, she answered evasively and so as to avoid any controversy that she was not a feminist in the right sense of the term and she didn’t know the difference between western and Indian feminism. She just believes in the equality of man and woman in the family system. She just started writing honestly to show women’s real position in the social milieu, how she suffers when she is newly arrived as a young bride in her husband’s house and what her struggles in life are, in general and how she feels about it all. As she went on speaking I realized that Mrs. Nimbkar never wished to highlight the evil system of patriarchy in Indian society in her fiction but that she only wanted to show the social reality of the women’s position in the family and in
the society, as a whole. She refused to give her opinion on the progressed achieved by feminism in the social arena and even to discuss any thing about feminism itself. She said that in her personal life, her husband never said no to any thing she wanted to do and that she lived her life entirely as she wished. At the same time, fiction, she said, is always semi-autobiographical and that persons and events in her own life might have intruded in to her writings. She had, actually managed the business of 'Nimbkar Seeds' but after a long period she found that her business interest came in the way of her writing career and prevented her from concentrating on it. So, she simply asked her husband to take over the seeds business and she restricted herself strictly to her writing work. She further said that her husband has always been a very understanding person and never became a problem in the way of her realization of her identity. Mrs. Nimbkar had wanted a person with different interest from her own and that was how she found her husband a suitable one for her. So, after marriage she left the life in the city of Pune and came to live in the farm house at Phaltan, where they could have a quiet and peaceful life.

Left- Mrs.JaiNimbkar&Right- Mrs. RadhaChoudhary.
The next question I asked Mrs. Nimbkar was about her first novel ‘Temporary Answers’. The female protagonist in the novel is a widow who has lived a life of subjugation under her husband. But after her husband’s death, the young widow wants to live out her ‘new found freedom’ to the fullest potential of her femininity. But when she comes up against the social reality of a new marriage, she feels that it would really constrain and restrict her. So, she makes a conscious choice to reject such a marriage. She realizes that marriage, in any case, is only a temporary answer for all women’s problems. But she realizes too that man always needs woman for their emotional fulfillment. So she accepts this part of the inter-personal relationship between man and woman, within marriage or out of it. I asked Mrs. Nimbkar whether she agreed with this our reading of the novel or not. She answered that the character of Vineeta, as she conceived it, is very much a rational woman who takes her personal decisions after much thought. Before rejecting the marriage with her real lover Abhijit, she thinks of all eventualities. She compares her past with the present and the future, her past marriage with the likely future marriage with Abhijit, and thus has a comprehensive view of her situation. Only after this she decides the future course of her life. She thinks about marriage itself which she finds is just a human convention and subject to failure as all human conventions are. So, she doesn’t give any absolute value to marriage. That was why, Mrs. Nimbkar said, that she had given the title ‘Temporary answers’ to the novel. But it doesn’t mean, she said, that Vineeta rejects marriage completely. On to the end she continues to enjoy the inter-personal happiness with the male partner which is the more important element of marriage for her. It doesn’t matter whether it is called marriage or to use a modern term, live-in-relationship. What is important is that both the partners should enjoy individual freedom together with union of heart and mind.

Mrs. Nimbkar’s second novel ‘A Joint venture employs business symbolism to depict marriage relationship which adequately focuses on the subaltern role of the wife in the family as only the sleeping partner. Jyoti, the central character of the novel realizes, after spending a long period of an apparently happy married life, that the marriage has almost destroyed her own identity and that she should redeem it at any cost. Ultimately she realizes her identity much batter then that of wife, the identity of mother protector, which is the most meaning full identity for a woman and is akin to the divine concept of Goddess Shakti that always protects mankind. At last Jyoti returns to protect Ram and his business and thus revives their ruined business as well as their ruined marriage relationship, to live again in perfect acceptance of each other and of each other’s identity. Now I asked Mrs. Nimbkar what was her take on this reading ours of her novel. She replied that she doesn’t believe in goddess Shakti or any such mythological stuff. But woman has always been powerful and is still so she said that men and women equally powerful as both are the creation of God. They are created with the purpose that both should cooperate together and thus continue the creative work of god and the propagation of the human kind. She further said that as person’s man and woman should have
equal status and equal powers. About our own conclusion about Jyoti that she at last assumes the role of a mother in reward to her husband to protect himself and his business Mrs. Nimbkar said that it was quite a logical and wonderful reconstruction of the story. But in her simplicity the author said that she wouldn’t go so far we did and that perhaps we were putting up a too wander full theory for her to completely to take it as such.

Jai Nimbkar’s third novel ‘Come Rain’ tries out a unique way of feminine assertion of identity. The female protagonist in this novel is a young, idealistic and freedom loving American woman who falls in love with the Indian traditions and values and marries an orthodox Hindu boy from Pune. And she comes to India with her husband to live with his very conservative and orthodox family. This creates the background for an intense cross-cultural conflict. But ultimately the female protagonist Ann’s innate goodness and determination triumphs over the conflict. Ann’s character ultimately merges in to the Indian milieu which she adopts as her own, without giving up her own American values. I conveyed our understanding of the novel to Mrs. Nimbkar for her response. She admitted that the novel had some elements from her own life. Her mother-in –law was an American lady who married her father-in –law and came to live in India. So, the character of Ann is, to some extent modeled on Mrs. Nimbkar’s mother-in-law. In fact as in the novel after his marriage with the American lady and after staying a few years in India together with his wife, the father-in-law couldn’t adjust his life in his own country and went back to the U.S.A. And the mother-in-law who loved India more then her own native U.S.A. continued to live in India with their only son. So, in this way Ann’s character and a great part of the background of the story is part of Mrs. Nimbkar’s own autobiography. As Mrs. Nimbkar and her husband spend some years in the U.S.A. with her husband’s parents, she has, she said, seen very intimately the working of the American culture and their response towards alien culture. All these facts are reflected in her novel. Mrs. Nimbkar said that the character of Ann reflects largely, but not entirely, her mother-in-law. Mrs. Nimbkar had another American friend whose vicissitudes of life were also similar to Ann’s as she also was married into India and came to live her married life in the Indian environment. So, some shades of Ann’s character reflect those of this American friend of hers.

There are writers like Anita Desai and Bharti Mukherjee who have dealt with the question of women’s assertion of identity in the context of the Indian Diaspora in the West. But in the novel ‘Come Rain’ there is reversal of the Diaspora as here it is an American woman who comes to terms with the Indian reality. So, it is really the Western Diaspora in India. Ann as we have mentioned about is a reflection of the, to a large extent, of Mrs. Nimbkar’s mother-in-law who had married an Indian and come to live in India. Her mother-in-law was really very idealistic as Ann is in the novel and she was a very determined person too. So, she faced the cultural conflict involved in her marriage quite steadfastly and achieved a confluence of cultures. So, the novel is unique in the sense that it represents this theme of cross-cultural conflict. Another
important aspect of the novel is, it is the last of Mrs. Nimbkar’s trilogy of novels and is the most mature. In fact the three novels delineate a progressive maturity which is a result of her won growth as a writer. Mrs. Nimbkar agreed that writing the three novels has been a great experience of her and her life has become much more enriched through them as well as her writing too really has matured by the exercise of writing these three novels and other stories. It is why the first novel dealt with a simpler theme in a much simpler way. And the final novel ‘Come Rain’ deals with a complex situation of cross-cultural conflict and the delineation of plot and character is also much more complex and refined.

My next question to Mrs. Nimbkar was whether people didn’t ask her why she didn’t write another novel after her third. I told her that I wouldn’t ask this question as I already knew the answer. The three novels, according to me, is a complete statement and that nothing is to be added to it. I said that the main aspect of the theme of feminine assertion of identity are all represented and delineated in her three novels. So, I asked the author if she agreed with my view. To my question she answered that in fact she has never stopped writing. After ‘Come Rain’ she has stopped writing novels and writing in English. Mrs. Nimbkar said that, though she was not a prolific writer, still she has continued writing, even today in her ripe old age. Of course, what she writes today are mostly short stories in Marathi. Perhaps she still lived in old times and was not really much aware of the life styles and thinking of the progressive modern generation. So, she hasn’t ventured into the unknown world of the young modern women and so was satisfied with her three novels.

Next I wanted to know from Mrs. Nimbkar how much of her novels are autobiographical. A writer always writes from his or her experience of life though fiction is not always only a going into the writer’s own experience because all creative work is always more a product of imagination. Knowing fully well that the stories of her novels are mostly imaginative reconstruction, still I wanted to know how much, if at all, her autobiography has influence the flow of her fiction. But I was afraid and hesitant to intrude in to the space of her private life. Still collecting some courage, first I asked Mrs. Nimbkar whether her husband has any positive or negative resemblance to the male characters in the three novels. Mrs. Nimbkar’s male protagonists are all educated and well mannered young men. Violence or brutality towards their wives is out of the question here. But male chauvinism is always a fact of life in all marriages and so also in the male-female relationships in the three novels. Male chauvinism such as one can cull out from the stories of these novels is a more nuanced one, and more subtle; It is rather psychological, more an attitude of mind than a motive of action. So, I with a great hesitation asked Mrs. Nimbkar about the personality of her husband as affecting the stories of the novels. She was very forthright. She said that her husband is a perfect gentleman he respects her identity much as she also does towards him. She said that they both never interfere in each other’s ways of life. And her husband, while not interfering with her life, as
always been helpful. He has always encouraged her to live her own life and to concentrate on her career as a writer as well as a horticulturist. She also said that she and her husband have a very cordial relationship and have enjoyed a very happy family life of mutual love and respect.

There was another question I wanted to ask Mrs. Nimbkar about the generation gap in our present society. In ancient times children not only recited that parents are gods but actually did their best to fulfill every wish of their parents like Sravan Kumar who carried his blind and aged parents on his shoulders on their final pilgrimage, all the way to Kashi. But now—a-days the picture is entirely different children do not respect their parents and parents too do not really love their children. So, I asked Mrs. Nimbkar how she felt about this, weather her own children had any resemblance to Pratap and Smita in the novel ‘A Joint Venture’. Mrs. Nimbkar laughed and said that she never felt such a gap in her life, she was more a friend then a disciplinarian mother to her children. She never interfered and allowed the children the freedom to live their own lives. So she got an equal amount of love and concern from her children. She further said that parents are to some extent responsible for this generation gap. Now—a-days parents are very selfish and they want to control the lives of their children. They do not understand that children need really love and respect more than any thing else. When they do not get these things they turn rebels as deed Pratap and Smita.

Mrs. Nimbkar also said that from her early young age she was very interested in reading as well as in writing. Her mother Irawati Karve who was an eminent Marathi writer had a good library of books which her daughter avidly read. Regular reading of books from her childhood greatly influenced her and motivated her to write. At first she started writing articles and short stories and even reviews and later majored in to writing novels. Even her first novel was so well crafted that it didn’t look like the work of an inexperienced author. And Jai Nimbkar has been a very conscientious writer as the plots of the stories and the characters are always delineated in the classical mood. The novels are very realistic and bear out the author’s keen sense of observation and even greater power of imagination. Her language is both simple and highly imaginative at the same time. To my question I asked Mrs. Nimbkar the question if there were any qualitative disparities in the ideal of selfhood between that of women in the villages and women in the cities and if so, what was the reason for that. She answered that village women are more independent then city women in certain ways such as, perhaps, in the management of home and children and that city women more independent in some different ways such as in the matter of their career etc. So, Mrs. Nimbkar didn’t believe in any qualitative disparity in their ideal of selfhood. Both the kinds of women have a high sense of their identity although it is of a different type in different women and it is pointless to compare city women with village women. She said that she has observed her women workers insisting that their pay should be given directly to them and not to their husbands. It showed that even these illiterate women are really aware of their rights. She said that there is an awareness syndrome operative in the
realization of identity of women. Many women have little idea of their selfhood and of their individual rights. Naturally as they have no realization of their identity they fail to assert it. While other some women who have too high a sense of their identity and rights go out to battle with men who think that they have usurped many of their rights. In between these two groups are, perhaps, the large majority of women who have a correct sense of their identity as equal partners with men.

Women generally do not assert their identity due, perhaps, to the several inhibitions that they feel within themselves or due to their age old habit of submissiveness. Mrs. Nimbkar said to me that we can’t mix up all these women into a common pattern. Every woman, she said is unique and she has to find out for herself what that unique identity might be; some times that identity might be altogether different from what one thought it to be. Mrs. Nimbkar gave her
own example. She wanted to be a successful writer but actually she became a more successful horticulturist. So every woman has to find out her own way to get her identity. Mrs. Nimbkar further said that her husband never interfered in the question of her selfhood either way, either to be a writer or a horticulturist. But he always stood by encouraging, motivating and supporting. Every woman might not be so lucky as some husbands are not so cooperative. In the case, the woman would have to struggle a little more. But in any case the woman should take up her battle herself.

Next I asked Mrs. Nimbkar about the unsafety felt by women, now-a-days especially in the cities. Rapes and atrocities on women are everyday occurrences now. Such things have even brought a bad-name for our country. So, I asked Mrs. Nimbkar what she thought about this; whether they are in her opinion, just aberrations or whether they reveal a deep seated social malaise in our society and who is responsible for such things, the government and the law enforcing agencies or society itself. In answer Mrs. Nimbkar said that these atrocities are very bad for our society. She said she wasn’t sure whether they were aberrations or was a deep seated malaise. She was always shocked, as everyone is, of such incidence. She further said that she didn’t know what would be the proper way to stop such evils. But society should prevent such things from happening, at any cost. For this all have to work together the government and the people all together.