Chapter 6

Authoring the Text, Authorizing the Woman Writer

The relation of women as writers to writing not only problematizes social and literary conventions, but also forces the issue of the act of writing and the end towards which it is directed. Here, gender assumes significance at the point where culture meets aesthetic principles. Language and writing as signifying and discursive practices are exercises in knowledge application and power. Their formal patterns are therefore encoded and ordered to effectively express that discourse, especially where it intersects with the category of the genre. And genres, in turn, are the architectural frameworks overseeing the constitution of texts.

Authoring the text and authorizing the woman writer are the subjects dealt with in this chapter. To the writer, writing is important because it functions as discourse's agent in shaping the quality of experience as well as in organizing its political and material contours. The writer and the literary text are in their own discrete ways implicated in the production and reproduction of discourse, having always-already been embedded in the ideological process. Any effort at re-writing or writing as performance under the circumstances will need to discipline and also retrieve autonomy from the hegemony of discourse. One might dispute the viability of this project, for, to write outside of discourse indicates a certain ineffability that invokes incomprehensibility and illogicality. This is because discourse is never innocent. It always relates to people's thoughts, interests and relations of
power. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity operate at the interface of cultural and social dynamics, presupposing linkages between diverse orders of discourse in the representation and establishment of realities, at the sites of their origin. Their strategic intervention in writing maps the antinomies of self and subject, text and discourse, narrative and genre, and the tensions in the interactions of these binary categories with gender and with each other, so that a practice of reinterpretation and re-writing emerges from the matrix of historical knowledge. It is in this context that the present chapter looks at an assortment of issues relating to the self-representation by women as writers, including the significance of writing to them, the gendered nature of their literary aesthetics and its effect on their writings, and their general impact on the short story genre.

Discourse in the Foucauldian sense consists of a body of knowledge that invalidates the authority and presence of an authorial self. This is because the origins and institutor(s) of discourse can never be effectively or directly traced, considering the complex stratifications and deferral strategies inherent in forms of discourse. Literary texts, although inscribed in discourse, can never remain disinterested for long. The transcendental authority of a non-representational/non-objective discourse in such a case contends with the narrative authority of the text, the conflict especially becoming manifest in the problematics of the autobiographical element within the text.

Like most other forms of writing the autobiography labours under the retrospective illusion of being independent of knowledge formation and
conceives of its emergence vis-à-vis an autonomous referent, the author. The validity of this notion is called into question by the historical compulsions impinging on the constitution of its referent object, the questing protagonist. Here, the subsequent interrogation occurs in the indeterminacy of the autobiographical moment which oversees a coming together of method and subject matter, the presumed individual and the social, writing and selfhood. Implicated here are the mechanisms of subjectivisation established in discourse, autobiography being a discursive mode that has its origins in modernity. With its narcissistic preoccupation with one’s history and one’s identity, autobiography promotes idealistic notions of the self substantiated by truth-claims embodied in the linear progression of a singular history.

The authority of the autobiography is susceptible to contestation contingent on the state of the author: the “I” embedded in discourse and the subject who writes, the “I” who in speaking of itself becomes object, striving against its representative status to maintain its perceived autonomy, precedence and control over the narrative. Writing inevitably bears the imprint of an elusive stability and the mark of attrition and displacement characteristic of the interaction between different situations of the self and its projected identities or images. In the circumstance, as Louis Renza points out, “I” is a word “authorizing and authenticating the discourse of fictional as well as autobiographical narrative self-references...” (qtd. in Smith 58). Gender is an important factor in these mediations because it evaluates the nature of authority and the status of the text. It becomes a determining issue at the point at which culture, broadly defined in both psychic and social terms, meets aesthetic principles (Benstock 1048).
History wrestles with autobiography in the texts of Hyder. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity, from which the writer in the course of the narrative draws her inspiration, consolidates her ideological premises and brings forth into comparison frames from various texts and discourses across time and space that bear directly or indirectly on the text. By this means they exercise an "extra-literary" influence on claims to singularity and authority made by these texts (Holquist 88). In "When the Prisoners were Released, the Times had Changed" Hyder’s intertexts for both writing history and writing fiction are a prison-house of discourses. That Europe figures as a silent referent in literary and historical knowledge becomes obvious through the subculture of Eurocentric literature--popular British literary texts and the information medium of newspapers--framing childhood memories:

It was the fictional world of Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. London newspapers had just printed photographs of Gandhiji, the 'naked fakir,' with his goat, and Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* had been published a long time ago....(Hyder, “When” 239)

In fact, literature in alignment with other disciplinary fields had an active, constitutive agency in the history of political colonization. The ethnocentric language of imperialism and Orientalism underpinning these different generic texts, in many instances, were tempered by a critique of the violence and insensitivities connected with empire-building, and indicate the imbrication of several, often conflicting, discourses in the transitional, pre-
Independence era. For instance, Somerset Maugham's censure of the
government for its role in World War I and the resulting confusion, has
echoes in Graham Greene's preoccupations with Machiavellian categories of
“good-or-evil” and “right-or-wrong,” and Evelyn Waugh’s fictional and non-
fictional accounts of imperialistic designs and the post-war generation
(Oxford Companion to English 631-32; 414-15; 1049-50). These texts have to
be viewed in juxtaposition with the earlier overwhelmingly Orientalist
treatise of Katherine Mayo and more recent colonialist response to the
native demand for self-governance. The intertexts of western writers in
Hyder also refer to the continuing characterization and institutionalization
of English in the 1950s and even in the 1960s, and its literary status in the
curricula of the university English departments where the syllabi were
mainly along classical/neo-classical lines. As Gauri Viswanathan argues, in
the context of colonialism the “humanistic functions” traditionally
associated with the study of literature were also essential to the process of
socio-political control (qtd. in Tharu and Lalitha, Twentieth 27). Literature's
intervention in the moulding of character and the development of an ethical
discipline, in an ambitious programme thus extended to shaping Indian
literary and critical sensibilities in the period following the dissolution of the
empire. The choice of these literary criteria were, it should not be forgotten,
simultaneous with the resolution of the complex problems pertaining to
national identity and citizenship.

Hyder's negotiations with history are crucial in defining the subject
status of the autobiographical “I” of her text. They are even more pertinent
to textuality which, despite its supposedly independent existence from the
author, is a decisive factor in ascertaining her identity and integrity as a writer. An amalgam of oral and literate narratives about the Andaman and Nicobar islands constitute her initial awareness of the multiple possibilities of historical knowledge. Her lack of formal instruction during the early years of childhood is signified by the discontinuity of narrative and inscribed in a value-based distinction between the unreality of the historical narratives and the “reality” of her lived experiences on the island (Hyder, “When” 241). This seeming disinterest in (official and non-official versions of) history however betrays itself by the conscious selection of a historical position:

... [M]y brother read in his geography book that the arrogant Aryans had treated the dark-skinned inhabitants of the south rather contemptuously, and used to call them monkeys....The tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were the descendants [sic] of those ancient settlers. I, however, preferred havildar Ramchander’s story about Hanumanji. (Hyder, “When” 241)

In other words, her stand within an assemblage of probable historical discourses enables her movement out of the realm of possible indeterminacy through the social dimension of language, into the realm of the individual “I.” Her preference for a history of mythic origins to the ethno-political history of the islands also suggests, by its lack of a correlative in “reality,” her immediate non-performance as subject. The truth-claims of these several discourses moreover implicate them in the engineering of willing colonial subjects. An important consequence of the interdiscursivity of
history is the retrieval of concurrent, cognate discourses. The cameo
depiction of a prisoner like Noor Mohammed, the sweeper, in the penal
colony generates a corresponding discourse of crime and punishment in
India. His presence redirects attention from the prevalent narrative of Indian
nationalism to the existence of “thousands of prisoners [who] worked as
bonded labourers in the fields” (Hyder, “When” 242). For the colonial state,
the purpose of a uniform legal structure was the transformation of the
arbitrarily termed criminal classes into loyal and conforming subjects. The
state, therefore, developed “a regime of predictable punishment, an agenda
of reform and rehabilitation and assumed a monopoly on punitive authority”
(Mahajan15).

Hyder’s assertion as a writer is inscribed in her text as the moment of
her initiation into formal education. The emergence of a national culture
from colonialism preceded by the reform movements of the early decades of
the nineteenth century witnessed the revitalisation and establishment of
new authorities via an “authentic” Indian culture and the constitution and
dissemination of new provisions of Indianness. Following the episode of the
author’s initiation into formal education, that brought to an end “[t]he days
of...[her] shameful ignorance” (Hyder, “When” 245) are excerpts from
Jawaharlal Nehru’s *An Autobiography* (1936). Having entered the world of
writing which endows on the written word ascendancy over speech, the
writer as child-protagonist is an accomplice in the discursive regimes
representing the historical subject. The subsequent devaluation of the oral
history of the Andamans in the face of the more prosaic historical narrative
of the geography textbook would not therefore surprise anyone. A record of
Nehru’s disapproval of terrorism as a strategic means of achieving freedom, these selected passages are at once a foil to, as much as they are a validation of the writer’s observation on the incarceration of the pacifist satyagrahis during the nationalist struggle. The two narratives subscribe to the visible discourse of nationalism and identity, although at a more subtle and personal level their autobiographical elements are exercises in gender and identity negotiations within the context of the nation. Also implicit are the truth-claims that are synonymous with the intersecting authorities that strive for control of these discourses.

The transposition of one text with another is always accompanied by “a consequent difference in enunciative and denotative positionality” (Threadgold 66). The shift is striking in Hyder’s text where the “I” of discourse, the subject who writes, differentiates herself from the subject who is written about, the “he” of history, subsequent to the restructuring of cognition in language. “He” cannot enter the discourse of “I,” appropriated and underwritten as it is by the writer, projected by her as history and as historical object. It marks a significant departure from the epistemological origins and purpose of the autobiography which intimately linked the genre with individualism to facilitate the expression of the “modern” self at the time of a transitional colonial phase. For Nehru, the autobiographical genre provided a linguistic pattern indisputably relating the historicity of his self with the history of the nation. Despite the object status of this autobiographical self being a matter open to dispute, what cannot be ignored is the legitimacy invested with his text, one which aspires to the truth-claims of discourse.
To disclaim the primacy of a text of such epistemic status can only suggest a move aimed at democratising intelligence and knowledge where a choice of position is necessary. Here, gender is a formative constituent in the democratisation process of rewriting the text. Not only does it redefine and reposition the identity of the female writer, but more momentously, it reinscribes her within the nation as a political entity. The writer as subject on this account is interpellated by the discourse narratives of exclusion and inclusion, and the elite and the subaltern, is translated and interpolated into the lived experiences of a period encompassing the nationalist movement, the Partition and Independence. Nehru’s account of history hovers over the story as Hyder chooses to tell it, as a comment on her differing version, language and ideological position. This implied comparison and categorization reflects state and academic intervention in the compilation of “valid,” linear and methodologically sound histories. The revelation of women’s active participation in the violent struggle for freedom and a chance encounter with an ailing terrorist freedom-fighter draw attention to the political, historical, and literary amputations brought about in time by lost authorities and usurped legitimacies. To be unable to narrate the story one set out to write however points to a crisis in identity—one of self-possession and self-representation—as a writer, a woman and an intellectual:
I wanted to tell him that he should tell me his story and the story of his elder brother. I wanted to tell him that I longed to write the story of India. But that one borrowed life was not enough to tell it, besides would there be anyone who would listen to that story? (Hyder, “When” 253)

Intertextuality, then, enacts a corrective function by reinstating a more comprehensively constituted other in discourse and genre. Here it does so by bearing upon the linguistic and cultural specification of history. If historicity in a manner of speaking is precariously poised on textuality, and the text as discourse is called into question by an inherent strategy of endless deferral carried into execution by intertextuality, then received history becomes a casualty engendering the possibility for alternative readings. The self-division of the gendered historical subject, her dislocating cognizance of the present as the site of an overdetermined teleological narrative of history, and the move away from this space in desiring to establish a narrative of memory that can only exist ironically in a deferred but “historical” future, is acted out in the context of the analysis of the autobiographical “I” and the transition narrative she authors. A historical construction of temporality counteracted by the discontinuities in textuality is precisely the trajectory that occasions the split in the gendered subject. Or as Dipesh Chakrabarty in another context has pointed out, this “split is what is history; writing history is performing this split over and over again” (354). For Hyder, located at the intersection of subject and history, writing herself as a literary practice holds the key to a possible knowledge of the self.
Hyder the writer is to a large extent interpellated by the hybrid global culture to which she has been exposed during her extensive travel and expatriate residence. The heterogeneity of experiences and identities find resonance in the rationale of the autobiographical "I," interwoven, as it is, with a chain of pre-existing narratives and a series of discourses that bring her into existence. "I, Tiresias" comprises a mélange of impressions, history and textual interplays within the narrative of her travels in Egypt. The text brings together apparently discrete elements of cultural production, periods and discourses in order to reveal the unusual kinds of interconnectedness which make up the "reality" of the present world. Such a view must however also take into account the role of textuality in shaping or modifying the object(s) it describes, rather than merely constructing it. Here, the intertexts should be viewed as "strategic formations" which by their referential power bring to the text and to culture at large their multiple experiences, plurality of viewpoints, political affiliations, personal ideologies and generic and disciplinary limitations, thereby defeating any attempt at totalization or categorization (Said 20). The text decentres authority and thwarts any attempt by mainstream hegemonic systems of knowledge to contain it.

Allusions to women such as "Salammbô-like, waiting for Carthagian slaves" (Hyder, Sound 210), "Thais, before she repented" (Hyder, Sound 210), and "the ageless Queen of Egypt, whose blood was made of the Nile water" (Hyder, Sound 217) are intertexts drawn from historically-particular Orientalist imaginations and induce discursive fermentations within the text. The discourse of the "worlding of the third world," disseminated
through the institution of the empire-state is implicit in these cultural representations (Spivak, “Three” 798). Not only do these narratives act in alliance with other discourses of imperialism, controlling, manipulating and directing the organization of society and notion of the colonial self through their portrayal of the representative colonized, but they also at times critically contest those claims to ascendancy by creative and philosophical means.

One of the masters of nineteenth-century fiction, Gustave Flaubert’s works are a specific reaction to the problems of the early modern world, the growth of industry and the culture of democracy. His *Salammbô*, issuing out of the Napoleonic campaign, records his stylistic intention to “fix a mirage” and provides a glimpse into the politically and culturally driven imaginative compulsions to appropriate the enigmatic (qtd. in Barzun 1385). Despite his reservations about modern European culture, the sources he resorted to for interpretation of the Orient, the ensuing lineaments of perspective and his own ideas for the revivification of fiction, all exude Eurocentrism. *Salammbô* recreates Carthage in the third century before Christ and the eponymous female protagonist of this textual creation, in Edward W Said’s words, is “[l]ess a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity” (Said 187). This is not the least surprising, given the fact that Flaubert’s aesthetic endeavour to compose an alternative world was a consequence of his contentious negotiations with the limitations and licences inhering in the discourses of sexuality, desire and sensibility and whetted by his travel to the Middle East and Egypt.
Such historically imagined literary counterparts to the policies of the empire-state in their delineations of femininity followed a similar project of invasion, appropriation, domination and subsequent rewriting of native texts--across time, space, cultures and genres. One such text that interdiscursively shapes "I, Tiresias" is Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*. "Borrowed" from Greek mythology, the romantic drama narrates the tale of the legendary Greek hero Pericles and his fortuitous separation from his wife Thais (*Oxford Companion to English* 754; *Who's Who* 164 and 204).

Shakespeare's play and Flaubert's novel, though differing from each other in their epistèmes, discourse systems and narrative patterns, share common features in their exoticisation and feeble representations of Eastern femininity and women. An air of tragedy, sacrifice, forbearance and resignation envelop these female figures. The inevitable transformations and dislocations underpinning the literary recreations generate a silent and unaddressed loss which is resurrected in the course of the writer's excursion in Egypt. Egypt's burden of antiquated history exists uneasily with its more recent history of colonialism, monarchy and the nationalist sentiments of a nascent republic. (Hyder's story was published a little after 1960). The claustrophobia, neglect and crass commercialisation while orchestrating the mystique of the Pyramids only serve to dilute and destroy its historical and cultural significances. A move paralleled by the intrusion of a sense of despair, dilution of identity and the end of an age, it renders the present within determinate, "modern" definitions. The writer admits to her travel-companion:
“You ought to know that I’ve just groped through the darkness and loneliness and the terror and the distance of five thousand years...and that the Pyramids are a colossal fraud.” (Hyder, *Sound* 212)

These temporal and spatial shifts have a dispossessing impact upon the gender of the autobiographical “I.” The immortality and the ambiguous nature of the Sphinx—whose female aspect is corrupted by the aspects of the beast and the divine—finds resonance in the mythological figure of Tiresias who brings his gifts of prophecy, prescience and lived experience as both man and woman through the text of T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*. A work that inaugurated the modernist era in English poetry, Eliot’s poem is imprinted with the images of a rootless society and the alienation of the modern individual. The discourse of modernity is a recurrent feature and finds expression in the lengthy monologue of Julius Caesar on first sighting the Sphinx and his initial meeting with Cleopatra, in Bernard Shaw’s 1889 play *Caesar and Cleopatra*. The play was Shaw’s answer to Shakespeare’s romantic tragedy, *Antony and Cleopatra*. It is a brilliant satire on contemporary Britain and on its theatre that upheld classical morals and virtues as well as a shallow and ostentatious treatment of romance at the expense of the intellectual and realistic elements of drama. A severe criticism of the colonizing mission of England is also implicit in the prologue to Shaw’s play. His portrayal of historical events and persons are steeped in the fierce political and philosophical debates ranging in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe, specifically the crisis in the very definition of the predominantly male human being. Despite the entirely variant
literary, ethnographic and geopolitical milieu in which the text makes its appearance, it bears upon Hyder’s text in one pertinent aspect, the constitution of the intellectual writer. Shaw considered himself a non-romantic and his views reveal him to be a champion of the thinking man. Contrary to his political views Shaw’s depiction of Caesar is an incipient delineation of the potent individual and human (male) will, and would in the future legitimize the modernizing claims of colonialism (B. Shaw 252).

It is the representation of the Sphinx which however merits attention. The Sphinx as a figure of mystic authority, as an immutable symbol of the past, is reduced to a sign in which significances are negated. Gender and history become casualties here. Caesar’s exposition of the unsubstantiality of the Sphinx is based on a dialectics of the precedence of the human race, of human intellect and praxis in the fashioning of (male) ambitions and volition:

...My way hither was the way of destiny, for I am of whose genius you are the symbol, part brute, part woman, and part god...Have i read your riddle Sphinx? (Hyder, Sound 213)

But Hyder’s representation of the Sphinx leaves no room for doubt as to its feminine gender or to its historicity:

She had been watching the world for I don’t know how many thousands of years. (Hyder, Sound 212)

It calls for an essentialistic reading in the manner of Sandra M.Gilbert and Susan Gubar of The Maci-Woman in the Attic fame. Here, the Sphinx is transformed into a symbol of the monster woman, one who refuses to
divulge her secrets or let her consciousness be delved into or be subjugated by male domination (Moi 58). The interplay of the textualities of Eliot's blind Thebian seer Tiresias, Shaw's enigmatically silent Sphinx and the continually disrupted autobiographical "I," accentuates a crisis in textual authority concerning the authorial status of the gendered writer. A phrase like "Eyeless in Gaza" (Hyder, Sound 214) attempts to establish common grounds of reference between the omniscient blindness of Tiresias and the panoptic view of the female writer who discerns a panoramic history of the past in the reified culture of the present. References to historical and religious players and events from the post-Abrahamic biblical era to the years prior to the establishment of the Egyptian Republic construct a narrative of Egypt that serves to express her authority as writer, to interpret and compose reality. As part of her aesthetics, she presumes a connection between the crisis affecting the metaphysics of identity and the politics of the Exodus, a recurring phenomenon in Egypt--from the ancient Hebraic/Jewish persecution to the new tribe of displaced Palestinian refugees--and translates it into the corruption of a familiar prayer of protection and assurance, the King David's Shepherd Psalm:

...As I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear all evil. My cup runneth over....(Hyder, Sound 215)

Closer to home, the demographic dislocations, territorial sunderings and the internal reorganization of the nation were experienced at the time of Partition, as ruptures in cultural and literary ideologies. And their effects are perhaps most evident in a certain disarray of textuality.
What is significant about the narrative structure of the story is that although the whole of it is an exposition of the epistemology of the self, the writer-protagonist’s attempt to assert her authorship of the text and to claim female seerhood is marked by a narrative impasse. The interleavings of diverse texts from other literatures only enhance the absence of a language adequate to the needs for self-expression. With the disintegration of the realities and identities of the characters, as well as that of the writer-protagonist, as the certainties of the world fall apart textually, the narrative structure degenerates into a montage of various textual fragments, a miscegenation of genres indicating quite literally how realities and identities are made interdependently of blocks of texts that the writer has “experienced” or known. The contradictions inhering in the representation of a nation as it moves from colonization to monarchy and eventually to a republic-state, also traces the evolution of the Third-world, ex-colonized as writer. If one were to overlook the borrowings from the literary canons and aesthetic discourses of hegemonic cultures and the at times stifling sentimentalities of prose, Hyder’s stories reveal a sustained critical reconsideration of their knowledge forms through her travels in a former colony. Intertextuality then serves to re-read and re-imagine these impressions which are central to the re-orientation of the gendered self within discourse.

The text of “The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi” demonstrates how orders of discourse restrict and regulate the expression of lived experiences. One should also consider the fact that there exists strategic differences in the subjectifying mechanisms of the autobiographical self (the
author/writer) and the living self (the person). If this particular text takes on surreal dimensions, it is primarily due to the quasi-mystic style and the "Bektashi terminology" employed by the narrative. But underlying this surrealistic veneer is a deeper crisis that centres around the "will to truth." These truth-claims are synonymous with the intersecting trajectories of power at play here.

The overarching legitimacy of the state institution marginalizes and at times even forcibly suppresses and renders illegitimate certain forms of discourse that threaten its authority. The autobiographical "I" of discourse presides over two disparate historical events in the public realm which are geographically and politically distinct though they share a common temporal framework. Framed by the 1947 Partition, the first event relates to the 1971 Bangladesh war of liberation when the invading Pakistani army oversaw widespread massacres of opposition activists and sympathizers including intellectuals, students, teaching professionals, trade union leaders and artists. The demographic upheavals ensuing from mass migrations of refugee populations and internal displacements have had reverberating effects in the private domain. These events echo in Hyder's chance encounter with a Bangladeshi drama student whose detached account of his artist-father's death is in direct contrast to the "incoherent, hysterical" letter from a female acquaintance, a self-professed rationalist who following her husband's killing had been reduced to a distraught devotee (Hyder, Sound xv).
Hyder's travels abroad unravel a history of state repression in the sudden disintegration of various Sufistic communities across Europe and the ex-USSR, and constitutes the second event. What is effectively underscored is the oppression and violence accompanying the advent of the state, even that of a sovereign, modern nation-state with its discourse of equality, citizen's rights and self-determination. With the establishment of the Socialist Republic of Hungary in 1945 and the prohibition on religion under communist rule, the Bektashi, a Sufi mystic order, gradually disappeared or went underground. Meanwhile in Turkey, Kemal Ataturk's vision of a modern, secular nation superintended over the demise of mystic orders like that of the Dancing Dervishes of Maulana Jelaluddin Rumi, their essence having been diluted by their transformation into popular tourist icons. And in the Samarkand Museum is a glass-enclosed model of a Bektashi dervish “signifying the end of religion and mysticism in the USSR” (Hyder, Sound xv).

Interdiscursivity as a textual strategy projects arbitrary and irrational social and political systems as strange and alien. In doing so it sets up interstices which harbour marginalized discourses that have the potential to function as anti-discourses. The other's discourses as an unsettling element invalidates the order of identity, leaving the autobiography and its subject “I,” in this case, untenable as truthful records and sources. It is at these sites that the truth-status of the autobiographical text becomes suspect.

Mystical discourse with its stress on esoteric imagery, abstruse language, elevation of consciousness and the loss of subjecthood opens up a
space for women to speak, act, claim equality (before the non-representation of god) and membership of a transcendental society. Mysticism dissolves all oppositions within its realm of ecstatic union with the Universal Spirit, suppressing any assertion of the ego by withholding its demand for the differentiation of an object (Rastogi 81-82). The particular school of mysticism depicted here is Sufism, the mystic branch of Islam. It developed as a monistic belief in contrast to doctrinal Islam. Subjective and non-rational, Sufism expounds the surrender of individuality, affections and the will before the Divine. The non-existence of the self should theoretically disallow the subjectifying mechanisms of discourse by its location outside of referentiality, thereby facilitating the endless deferral strategies inherent in all discourse formations. But the autobiographical “I” in miming the questing mystic and his language, generates a textual discrepancy that consequently betrays the exercise of power behind every truth-claim. To thus highlight the contradictory ideological forces motivating her quest is to write into the text those alternative sets of discourses marginalized and negated by the dominant discourse. The autobiographical element betrays this moment of conflict in which the purported narcissistic self and the other wrestle with each other for textual control.

At the start of the writer’s journey in search of the missing man, and her inquiry into the “truth,” she removes her “everyday mask” (Hyder, Sound 240). The mask figures as the subjectifying discourse that denies the protagonist suitable knowledge structures to evaluate truth and a corresponding language to express it. The unifying issues at the heart of the quest as matters stand are the attempt to locate the gendered self and to
possess an appropriate self-expressive language. Haji Selim and his spiritual alter ego's mystical intervention on behalf of the unfortunate female supplicant excludes the participation of the protagonist-writer. This is typical of Sufism in which women are barred by tradition from membership to Sufi orders and are forbidden to take part in the mystical meditations of the brotherhood. She however makes her presence felt and her dissent heard:

I stepped back from the window and raised my face to the sky and shouted another Bektashi prayer... then cunningly added my own message: "O Bektash, You do not hear the cries of the oppressed and the exploited...." (Hyder, Sound 242)

This is despite the obvious resistance of the mystic discourse towards any deviation and variation:

But my voice drowned in the chants of Selim Effendi and his alter ego. (Hyder, Sound 242)

Marginalized discourses hence need not necessarily be equitable, for they may contain their own principles of exclusion and inclusion.

One such attempt to possess a suitable, alternative language capable of addressing the aspirations and assertions of gender is alluded to through the allegory of the beauty parlour run by "She," and to which the protagonist is directed when she seeks a place to mend her worn-out mask. It is important to note that Carl Jung employed "She," the eponymic heroine of Sir Henry Rider Haggard's novel She: A History of Adventure (1887) as a striking example of the anima concept in his psychoanalytic theories. The
anima is the essence, the breath and liquid of life (Jung 100). “She” symbolizes the feminine form of the “phantasies from the unconscious” the personification of the male unconscious (Storr 86). The protagonist’s rejection of a discourse in which woman comes to signify an insubstantial other--either essentialized or desexualized (Hyder, Sound 247)--through the mediation of the male consciousness, and therefore deprived of female autonomy depicts the struggle over self-representation and subject-constitution. It also asserts her gendered differences--as woman, as individual and as intellectual--from the universalizing categories and objectifying discourses of psycho-social identity systems and practices.

Interdiscursivity enables seditious and radical narrative intrusions through the interstices of ordered and authoritative narratives, often as “something quite irrelevant” (Hyder, Sound 242), as “something equally off the point” (Hyder, Sound 243). The digressive juxtaposition of the incompatible narratives of cultural production and publication of books, and of Divine decree belie an incongruity, when in fact they elicit and comment on a politics of writing and of textuality within the text. The historically and ideologically disparate truths each narrative lays claim to engage with one another at the level of discourse in an elaboration of the conflict between textual and discourse authorities. Orientalism’s mediation and hegemony in production and publication during the colonial era was instrumental in the interpretation and shaping of native knowledge forms and lay the foundations of the colonial state. These western (Anglo-European) interventions as a matter of fact retained their hold over the political and intellectual imagination till recently. An Orientalist discourse of “recovery”
and preservation underlies this narrative and bespeaks a variety of intellectual colonization:

"...In my far-away land, in our crumbling old ancestral house, we have a large basement. In the basement there are stacks of old books...And intellectually-inclined mice nibble at the books printed in Constantinople, 1872, London E.C.4, 1873, and Russell Square, 1952. And...in his publishers' office in Russell Square, the Great Sufi of the Feringhees had discussed with me the Dancing Dervishes...." (Hyder, Sound 243)

Selim Effendi's reply, foretelling his death, calls attention to the dissolution of his mystic community by the state, and its rebirth and translation within the immutability of the text. The truth-claims of his narrative moreover derive its authority from a discourse based on Islam with its emphasis on the inviolability of the Quran. The two discourses then complement than contradict each other even as their respective narratives strive for authorial hegemony of the text. These implied contests over language draw out in particular the tensions induced within the text by a writing that seeks to locate gender at the core of textuality. The exchange that follows encapsulates as well as validates the central concerns regarding writing elaborated here, and incorporates the anxiety of the female writer:
Suddenly he shouted, “Ali has said: whatever is written shall remain.”

“Effendum, whatever has been written can be dangerous. Here as well as There, because, every letter, as you know, has its power.” (Hyder, Sound 243)

The constructedness of reality in a postcolonial Indian sub-continent where everything is a simulacrum and “pictures of pictures continue to exist,” parallels textuality comprising of discourses that instinctively refer to one another (Hyder, Sound 248). This doubling effect of interdiscursivity and intertextuality is dramatized in the way the text is produced for the “I.” They imply the places where the narrative and the body have been before. The realization that far from being autonomous she still is a subject of discourse does not escape the protagonist:

...But I had this odd feeling that I was not even pretending. I was a puppet or a character in a Noh play which nobody understood. (Hyder, Sound 249)

Interdiscursivity and intertextuality in negotiating the liminal regions between the masculine and the feminine, between the intellect and the body, as well as between modernity and tradition (a feature observable in “I, Tiresias” too) convey a sense of urgency, thereby legitimating the writer's personal quest. Through the use of imagination and the power of dissent Hyder's texts strive towards elaborating a counter-culture that debates the nature of reality. Writing and seizing control of one's own discourse
according to this premise is an activity that establishes the role of the woman writer as a political and intellectual interlocutor.

In Sarah Joseph's writings the crisis in identity of being a gendered female and a gendered writer is depicted as pathological, emerging from the interplay of the psychological and the social, in response to the conflicts between the historical (personal, societal and national) and the developmental. "Inside Every Woman Writer" projects writing as the need to perform one's self. A text on the constraints imposed on writing by institutional, political and disciplinary/aesthetic structures, it parallels the writer-protagonist's difficulty in giving coherence to her identity. The narrative under the circumstances attempts to negotiate between the desire of the writing self and the demands on it made by authoritative sources.

On her husband's imperative that she "need not write anything different...[and] continue writing the same old stuff," she is compelled to restrict herself to themes revolving around "hymns, songs of praise and love poems" (Joseph, "Inside" 95). The Radha-Krishna archetype as the quintessence of love speciously participates in the inscription of female desire by a specifically feminine discourse of self-abnegation, self-sacrifice and subjugation that grounds it in the spiritual realm. This calls attention to the extra-authoral mediations in the fashioning and securing of cultural authorities deployed in the making of the historical projects of women's writings, the nature of woman as writer, her identity as a woman and her role within the community and the nation. The politics that function in the production and consumption of literature by women is also closely allied to
the aforementioned discourse of femininity but one which is more original, and rigorously aligned along the axis of sexual differences. In this context, the excoriating critical reviews by male writers about the social irrelevance of love as "an extra expenditure" lay down canonical norms for creative writers (Joseph, "Inside" 95). They additionally serve to promote a spurious concept of masculine aesthetics that is profoundly intellectual in dimension, and a feminine aesthetics that "naturally" tends towards the emotional. The involvement of such reductive formulae in the construction and configuration of social and cultural categories through the medium of literature cannot be overlooked.

The reluctant receptivity of writings by women and the related claims made upon the realm of literary criticism as a preserve of the male writer/intellectual correspond with a fundamental discourse of maternity and the female body:

It's a shame to be kept off from recognition in the name of a tender skin and plump body. Since my mind can take in anything, keeping off for the sake of skin care should not be repeated. (Joseph, "Inside" 99)

The imposition of a defining aesthetics bankrupt in rational and intellectual faculties, and prodigal in passions intimately linked to the body and to memory entail a ghettoisation of women. Ghettoisation itself implies a negative self-consolidating other that is the core of any construct. And the fact that "[t]here would always be an audience for these [male] poets" is an extension of this pattern of ghettoisation into the public, but in many ways
esoteric, domain of market demands, publication, distribution, consumption, poetic fraternity and literary fora (Joseph, “Inside” 98).

Finding one’s voice as a woman writer is doubly challenging. It necessitates the questioning of sexist biases that have insidiously become the norms of the aesthetic mainstream.

In Joseph, one can detect a deliberate female aesthetic that opposes the dichotomy of emotion and intellect. This sensibility assumes a personal, psychical quality and is infused with sexual symbolism. Writing is inscribed in the body and the text in turn engages with the body, the politics of gender having been always-already imprinted on it. The body is constantly under attack: it is crushed by walls that steal upon it, is overwhelmed by putrid scraps that force it to disgorge the entrails, and is smothered by stinking male underclothes. It is also a branded body, a gendered body indoctrinated to perform in accordance with cultural prescriptions:

I could never take part in writer’s discussions till the end because the *panchaloha* ring I wore on my ankle had sunk into my flesh. My mother had got this ring specially made for me when I was born. (Joseph, “Inside” 97-98)

The debilitated body signifies the sort of intellectual incapacity conventional aesthetics has always required of women. But here, the narrative purposefully checks any ideological split between the intellect and the body.

The text however reveals a distinct rift in the autobiographical “I.” For, the self who consciously writes and disclaims the hegemonic templates of a male-gendered aesthetic discourse is edged out, as the other *is written*
into the shift of what is a metanarrative on writing itself. Writing acquires the embodiment of a live entity. Its stylistic and aesthetic departure from established modes alternatively sets up an inspired, desire-laden, anti-formal structure:

Aunt Mable’s house has no walls. It is built of thin, beautiful, mysterious screens. It has no grilles or bolts. Only nerves. And throbbing veins and arteries. (Joseph, “Inside” 95)

This approximative cerebral narrative paradoxically employs a language of the womb:

If I can curl up in the primordial darkness and silence of my mother’s womb, I can bring out my words in great secrecy. What I need is a labour room. A labour room which has nothing to do with the outside world. (Joseph, “Inside” 95)

The correspondence between the process of writing and of giving birth to oneself as a writer is too obvious to be ignored. Phil Powrie referring to the alternative and positive use of the womb-metaphor says that “the womb-room is less a trope for confinement and monstrosity, and more a sign of independence and a locus of transformation, usually linked with writing, a necessary extension to the prison-house of patriarchal language” as figured in Plato’s originary cave of philosophy (qtd. in Walker 12).

The discourse of rationality to which the male intellectual stakes claim as rational subject, either rejects women’s claim to subjectivity (as intellectual subjects) or restrains them within structures of thought and reason that deny other forms of expression. Their attempt to speak
inevitably acquire confrontationalist postures which manifest as transgressions of rational discourse. The text by identifying the womb as psychic territory, in effect re-writes women as intellectual originators, outside phallocentric languages and ideologies.

The narrative nevertheless demonstrates an anxiety of authorship, a fear that the act of writing will isolate the female writer as well as the gendered text. An elaboration of the history of Joseph's own line of female precursors in Malayalam literature, is beyond the scope of this chapter. The search for a female model or a precursor who will legitimize the particular aesthetics the writer resorts to also seeks to locate the text in an imaginative continuum and prompts the apprehensive urge to attend "meetings of contemporary writers" (Joseph, "Inside" 97). Her need for an audience (or readers, which is debatable) is linked to a similar concern about the impropriety of female artistic self-expression and the potential of a female aesthetic as against the authority of the patriarchal aesthetic. The necessity for self-assertion therefore requires a stand in the polemics surrounding women's writings, and participation in the exchange of ideas at literary fora:

At Aunt Mable's place the first thing she asks me would be about my performance in the debate. Then...I could sit down to write with a mind fully awake. Or perhaps, I could stay there listening to the roar of the sea and thinking deeply about my work (Joseph, "Inside" 99)

Writing is inevitably oriented towards performance. The text is performance.

In the light of the above arguments, Joseph's "The Masculine Gender of the 'Maiden'" is a text that enacts a performance of writing through the
strategies of intertextuality and interdiscursivity. The female protagonist around whose unaccountable pregnancy the narrative revolves "comes straight out of my [the writer’s] soul" (Joseph, "Masculine" 44). This invocation of desire parallels the evocation of a presumed audience of readers for whom the "I" of discourse then proceeds to systematically deconstruct the text:

Nevertheless the readers should know that the daughter is getting engendered from the yellow bone of a white lady a hundred and ten years old. They should also know how painful it is to carry in one’s mind a bone that does not decay or otherwise crack up. I have nothing to hide. Let us not keep up the pretence of story-telling. (Joseph, "Masculine" 45)

The shift in narrative perspective from the third person to the authorial first person challenges textual authority which defines and appropriates female authorship, by tracing its textuality. The "I" transgresses her own subjectivisation to disclose the historical composition of her poetics, and to effect a closure on the polemics of her authorship by creating a niche for herself within an imaginative tradition of women writers. For Joseph this involves drawing from her literary heritage a personal legacy comprising the affinities and sympathies she shares with other women writers across traditions and cultures. She declares her affiliation by an allusive method of bringing other artistic voices into the fabric of her writings. And these in turn serve as representatives of alternative narrative possibilities that corroborate her own practice in this sphere.
The ancient white lady indisputably recalls nineteenth-century English writer Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette*. Lucy Snowe, the protagonist, has ghostly visitations from an ancient nun, supposedly buried in a vault at the root of the old pear tree in the garden of Madame Beck’s pensionnaire, which was once a convent. The vault imprisoned “the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive for some sin against her vow” (Brontë 112). The appearance of the apparition coincides with moments of great mental and emotional upheaval, for which there are no apparent resolution. These are also periods of self-discernment calling for choices to be made.

Charlotte Brontë’s works resist simple reading, for their ostensible designs contravene the strictures laid down by the male literary tradition and conceal deeper and less socially acceptable representations of femininity, contrary to the demands of nineteenth-century English culture. They revel in the disclosure of the suppressed, the sense of the hidden and denied. The writings were a response to “socio-critical constraints...creating symbolic narratives that expressed their common feelings of constriction, exclusion and dispossession” (qtd. in Todd 28). *Villette* the most thoroughly autobiographical of Charlotte Brontë’s novels is an anti-romance, uniquely innovative for its time, indulgent in its formal eccentricities. A summation of contemporary social themes, among the issues it voiced were demands for the intellectual and emotional rights of women, and paradoxically for compatibility between the needs of the impassioned individual and fidelity to conscience, and a sense of duty in conformity with Christian principles (Stonyk 128-29).
However this is where the similarities end, the imaginative reach of the “precursor” declines, and where the epistemic differentia of a submerged female culture reinscribed as a subculture in the present context effects a radical revision of writing practices and aesthetics. Intertextuality poses one text against the other. It draws correspondences between them but it also refers to their differential origins and deviations in culture. While the daughter is a corporeal refiguration of the spectral, putrescent old nun, the figure of the nun symbolically evokes the image of the Bride of Christ, of virgin conjugality. Biblical and mythological imagery refer to a whole, unified and enclosed world that at times borders on utopia. Such a discourse presents a universe where all complexities, differences and struggles in the end are supposedly resolved. The textual association of the discourses of mysticism and eroticism sets them against the authority of a discourse of theology. When mysticism is conventionally theologized, as in Christian religion, it takes on teleological dimensions just as the self-reflexive structure of theology. Christ as the object to be desired by the mystic imitates God’s desire for his son. But, as Luce Irigaray notes, the effort towards male restoration of mysticism may contradict itself, because the human incarnation of the son is the “most feminine of all men” (qtd. in Moi137).

The nun as mystic, by the manifestation of the stigmata presumably derived from a sub-conscious identification with the suffering of Christ, re-enacts his passion. And a space thus opens up where the mystic’s desire unfolds in her self-representation as a positive reflection of a gendered feminized divine and where a critique of a male, monotheistic god takes
shape. This textual depiction of the nun not only differs from the spectral nun in *Villette* on account of the former's corporeality, but also due to an element of the erotic manifest in her "lying naked like a gecko glued to the muslin-covered bed and among several muslin-covered pillows...with an incredible number of stuffed crows on the walls and on stools all around" (Joseph, "Masculine" 47). A gothic atmosphere imbued with sexual desire marks the delineation of the nun. The erotic, states Robert Smith, is the division of the human and the divine (116). Intrinsic to it is a desire for the divine that cleaves identity into self and other, but which despite attempts to simulate a prior unity cannot hold against the invasion of the divisive erotic. The above premise by a reverse argument presupposes an eroticism in religious imagery and symbology. The nun as female saint, as mystic, consequently is a representation of sublimated female sexuality. Even so, the variant historical configurations she occupies together with the conflicting discourses that converge on her preclude her reformulation into transcendental or essentialistic categories—as the desexualized virgin Bride of God—and further discourages stereotyping. There is a certain pleasure to be derived here in the open-ended textuality framing a reconstitution and revision of traditional structures of knowledge. From a Foucauldian perspective this pleasure is denotative of power, for both are correlative, and reciprocal, not unequal, in effect (Visker 84-85).

A self-conscious reference to critics not taking "kindly to any relaxation of the prescribed norms relating to unity and tension" is tempting enough to posit the text as a metanarrative (Joseph, "Masculine" 45). But the intertextual and interdiscursive strategies call attention to another
feature—the timbre and rhythm of the poetic prose so characteristic of Joseph’s writings. This in turn raises questions as to whether these writings can be categorized under what is now commonly referred to as “feminine writing” (écriture feminine). Feminine writing combines in various forms and degrees the appropriation of psycholinguistics and the application of Derrida’s concept of différences. Inseparable from a vocal presence of the pre-Oedipal mother, the act of writing is conceived to be “an extension of this self-identical prolongation of the speech act” (qtd. in Moi 114). By this postulate the woman writer inscribed in desire gains substantial presence as an almost-subject in the mother’s voice/language. Broadly defined, this form of writing, initially identified in poetry by women, is marked by sudden shifts, ellipses, breaks and an apparent lack of logic and continuity outside of a chronological framework, all of which indicate an irreconcilability with normative stylistics and aesthetics.

Joseph’s writings do not strictly elaborate the aesthetic mode mentioned above. The texts nevertheless are seized by intermittent rhythms of contradictions, disruptions and silences which impede the fluidity of narration. Birth-fantasy imagery and disjointed voices effect a recall of the maternal body and the mother. But whether this implies total identification with the pre-Oedipal relationship is uncertain especially since Joseph’s craft does not execute a disconnect with the material. Its stylistic and linguistic patterns rather facilitate and oversee intertextual and interdiscursive exchanges and evidence a certain socio-political engagement that challenge the closure imposed by traditional linguistic theory and aesthetics. The refigurement of the objectified female body as a textual practice in writing
and aesthetics embodies the politics of this poetics. Agency is located at the juncture of this bodily and textual practice where passionate adherence to codes and dictates are questioned, identification with institutions are disrupted and prevalent ideological relations are severed. And therein exists the possibility for radical changes. This negotiation and engagement with a variant set of principles project the gendered writer, the gendered text and gendered writing as instrumental to social and political reconstruction.

While Joseph exploits the subterfuges in the discourses of literary aesthetics to forge a style that so distinctly reflects her dilemma as a writer and as a woman, Rajee Seth’s texts struggle to negotiate an aesthetics that is evasive on the concept of female imagination and declines to provide any frame of reference for the expression of a potentially autonomous self. Writing as creative performance is intimately associated with the “soul” and echoes Sarah Joseph (Seth, Against 71). As the writer-narrator expands on the notion to her husband in “Against Myself”:

“...What is created is an integral part of one, you know that.”

(Seth, Against 71)

In a manner that compares with but is distinct from Joseph’s quest for a precursor, the female writer identifies with her husband, “my partner,” the ideal critic, artist and patron (Seth, Against 69). Male patronage in the production and publication of women’s literature is a recurrent theme:

“...What do you understand of the commercial world? you think talent is enough?” (Seth, Against 69)

questions her husband. It offers a unique perspective on the insidious liaison between the economics of gender and the economics of the market
prevalent in contemporary Indian publishing industry. And underlying this partnership is a discriminative separation of the male writer and the female writer. The compositions despite “being written with my blood,” in the circumstances become a self-critical undertaking that entails self-censorship and aesthetic restraint in keeping with received literary standards, and effects a closure of the imaginative:

In the second reading I was reading through Shyam’s eyes. In the third round I would see his face beaming with pride and praise and by the fourth, I felt like running to him with my little treasure! (Seth, *Against* 71)

The subscription to a male criterion of creativity as a necessary condition for literary approbation and recognition compromises writing and results in the objectification of the female self.

Writing is identified as arising from an “inner rhythm,” engaging the mind/intellect in a critical evaluation of textuality (Seth, *Against* 68). The contradictory shifts in narrative imply subject positions and configurations of memory that dispute and undermine the subject who speaks in the name of discourse, that is, the autobiographical “I.” The text is precisely the site where the struggle goes on to appropriate on behalf of the modern individual (autobiography being a genre intimately linked with individualism) the other of violative desire. And this status of the unified individual self is rendered suspect through the several mediations and appropriations it undergoes in the course of textuality. In contrast to the obvious discrepancies in the textual narrative that question the autonomy of this self, the autobiographical “I” asserts her “whole”-ness against the “split” conceived by
her husband (Seth, *Against* 72). For, to try and explain “the inevitability of my two parts” is to be appropriated into a dialectical discourse of the self and the other, a discourse that she refuses to lend herself to (Seth, *Against* 73). In spite of the fact that “myself” is envisaged as a unitary being characterized by individuality, it fails to translate into writing by the autobiographical “I.” Those instances where the narrative fleetingly deals with the imaginative are inevitably marked by ellipses and indicate the desire of the female ego. This particular unexpressiveness points to the lack of a suitable language in discourse against the assertion of a female imagination and the gendering of the creative process. Besides, the reluctance to carry through a total break with a male-centred aesthetics manifests in the writer’s elliptical remark that “there was just no bond between my creativity and his being, and yet...[sic],” compromises the desire to individuate, and threatens the validity of the female imagination, its exclusivity, unity and monistic ontology (Seth, *Against* 71). Seth’s thoughts on the role of the writer and of writing is worth noting here. This is what she says of her own work:

> A creator’s truth is her effort. Her indebtedness to life is creative endeavour, with all her skill, her constancy, her sensitivity. The effort to pour out from within herself the share of her vision that belongs to the world. And her only possession is her lone faith in her labour. (Purewal, Introduction xii-xiv)

The premature closure of the text accentuates its inability to perform and demonstrates an anxiety of authorship, a fear that the writer-protagonist cannot create and become a member of the imaginative tribe:
...I see the promise in my soul grow barren, hear it banging its head and calling at my closed door. (Seth, Against 73)

It acquires an especially gendered significance against the context of the ailing elderly writer Devji and his selfless dedication to the "principle" of "creativity" (Seth, Against 66). Ruchi's act of consigning her book of poems to the fire--a reprisal provoked by her husband's apathy towards her creative ability--is symptomatic of what may tentatively be termed a "flight from authorship." In this case it denotes a conflict about the status and identity of the woman writer intensified by a realization of her own predisposition to repress herself in compliance with the needs and demands of others, eventually leading to self-resentment and self-depreciation. As she watches her husband's shock and perturbation not only is she convinced of the unique quality of her writings, but also acknowledges her participation in the discrimination and misogyny underlying literary production and receptivity:

Somewhere I knew, that I had wanted to punish him, but had, instead, punished myself. (Seth, Against 72)

Seth's "Face to Face" should be viewed as a social text exploring and questioning the role of the writer as a social and cultural preceptor. It remains an indisputable fact that women writers must overcome external, material obstacles to writing, like limited access to literacy and means of literary production, lack of time and leisure to write, given the battle for daily survival in the private realm of domesticity, and/or the public sphere of the workplace. The text attempts to construct the female writer by poising her on a discourse of individualism. This discourse interpellates a self-
possessed and independent individual who cannot be dissociated from the notions of freedom, equality and rights. It is this appropriation and assumption by the writer-protagonist that enables her to thus instruct her children:

...I had...tried to explain to them that self growth must override all. I had often argued that nothing must ever stop one's right to grow. (Seth, *Against* 26)

But the exclusiveness of the rational tradition, of liberal humanism, stands exposed when confronted with the individuating aspirations of the domestic help. The role of domestic labour in the re-expression of women's political and social economies is a seldom examined subject in writings by women, specifically in relation to the social constitution of the woman writer. The tension between the anxiety over her "novel [which] hung midway" and the disruption of "domestic balance" is a telling comment on the challenges faced by woman as writer (Seth, *Against* 24). It additionally draws attention to the construct of the gendered writer as a class individual whose narrative embodies an axis of power aligned along class positions. A marginal yet pertinent discourse functions here--the discourse of relativity. It is a crucial factor in the division and hierarchization of the social necessary for the deployment and maintenance of power in the field of labour and production. And when this discourse is adapted to the need for self-validation, it authoritatively posits a non-substantial other to the self.

The realization that "the domestic help ‘was critical for keeping our dreams and ambitions within reach’ reveals the structures of dependence
on which the valency of self-determination is founded (Seth, Against 24).

These self-critical and introspective narratives pose as counter-discourses that re-evaluate the notion of the autonomous individual and carries forward the ontological enquiry of the autobiographical "I":

> He had so easily shaken this carefully constructed individual in me. So what should I call this self, this individual who is precariously balanced on other people's toil, and who can so easily be imprisoned in her own principles. (Seth, Against 26-27)

Woman as gendered individual and writer occupies a precarious position in society. In fact the assertion of the female self does not hold against the rigours of critical scrutiny due to the explicit association of domestic labour with writing:

> Once like him, I too had rebelled against Anand's anger and oppression, and had won through sheer stubbornness. (Seth, Against 25)

The indices of individualism--independence, free will and authority--do not carry quite the same connotations and values for women as they do for men. The responsibilities incumbent on woman as writer and as individual remain more or less identical--they are gendered. For a woman to compromise on the domestic sphere is to endanger her location as a writer. The discourse of individualism is a patriarchal derivative. Interdiscursivity dismantles the absoluteness of the writing self as well as the certainty of the text. But the fallacious yet overpowering discourse of individualism
checks the social potential of the text and that of the writer as preceptor through the abrupt closure of textuality.

Mahasweta Devi’s texts, despite being in the third person, can be termed autobiographical on the strength of their themes espousing causes she passionately campaigns for as a social activist. The third person narration even so is indicative of an absent “I” who “speaks, who tells,” a he or a she (Threadgold 30). He/she is constructed by that “I,” projected by “I” as history, thus strategically placing him/her beyond the potential reach of appropriative discourses. In any case, it is imperative to distinguish a possible autobiographical-authorial consciousness from the narrative voice. It is the authorial presence that draws from the lived experiences of the writer. The ubiquitous narratorial presence mediates the translation of these experiences within the frames of textual practice. For Devi, the text is the context of the application of emerging knowledge. Her protagonists embody the image of the quintessential artist-intellectual caught up in the contradictory forces of their obsessive ambitions and a mental inertness which they can never satisfactorily explain; the dilemma of men coming into consciousness and discovering to their horror the duplicity of their discursive selves.

“Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha” dramatizes the problems that the Third World intellectual faces in representing indigenous cultures and their predicament to the wider public. An urban journalist, Puran’s dilemma as to how to represent the prehistoric beast—a scientific anomaly—in his report parallels his struggle to comprehend the equally incongruous and
ancient tribals, their belief systems and their ways of life. Through a strange
turn of events he is drawn into and becomes part of the community's quest
to understand and interpret the strange omen of the pterodactyl. The
inability to communicate with the mourning tribals is intensified by the
incommunicability of the pterodactyl. In the end Puran finds no rational
explanation for the appearance of the creature. But he is nonetheless
convinced of its import as a mythical message which his differently
structured intellect cannot grasp:

We belong to two worlds and there is no communication point.
There was a message in the pterodactyl, whether it was a fact
or not, and we couldn't grasp it. We missed it. (Devi, Imaginary
195)

His conviction presupposes the tribals as an always-already unfathomable
other within the self and society. And for all his ethical sensibilities and
involvement in the autochthonous heritage--he is unwittingly assimilated
into tribal myth and immortalized in oral history--his narrative is severely
constrained by a politics of postionality and conceptual perspective. The
limitations of language expressed in the inability to translate and provide a
logical framework for his experiences then require Puran's withdrawal from
positions that endorse journalistic objectivity, institutionalized cognitive
structures, and a selfhood founded on a compromised other.

As a journalist, Puran is interpellated by the institution of the
information media, specifically the print media. He therefore perceives his
self through a system of enquiry based on facts, logic and argument. And
more significantly it is in the act of writing, of performing this knowledge that he acquires embodied status:

Puran must keep unshaken his faith in paper, pen, and the printing machine. Puran has nothing else. If there is no pen there is no Puran. (Devi. Imaginary 186)

His firsthand report on the problems facing the tribal villages in the Pirtha area deviates from the third person narrative of the text and negotiates his transformation through the language of discourse. The invisible, seemingly neutral and “objective” stance taken by the media disguises the truth-effects of its discourses and the enormous power invested with this institution. It gradually shapes public opinion, personal beliefs and people’s self-perception by selectively interpreting, disseminating and reinforcing values, attitudes and behaviour, directing thought and thereby influencing the process of socialization. This inherent quality of indoctrination leads Kamla Bhasin to view the role of the media in society as a “conservative force” directed to maintain the status quo and avoid major changes (134).

Devi seems to imply the necessity for intellectuals to remain alert and sensitive to the tribal and subaltern questions. The inability to relate to the tribals or to the subalterns on account of the hegemonic positions of the intellectuals can prove to be suicidal. Puran’s reflection on his inability to connect with tribal ritualistic experience following the mourning period, demolishes any illusion of him as society’s conscience or his potential as an “organic intellectual” (Spivak, Translator’s Preface xxvi). The problem is endemic to postcolonial societies which find it difficult on the one hand to
dissociate from an epistemology of civilization-based dialectics, and on the other to define and locate their knowledges within native/indigenous epistemological systems in the present.

Writing with its roots in culture has great implication for the social, especially when designed to change the nature of hegemonic discourse and opinions. Culture being the medium through which most human engagements are negotiated in daily life, the act serves the transformation of social consciousness. Puran’s report on the near-extinct status of the tribals does not strictly fall within the documentary genre. But its interventionary capability in everyday practices is great because it endeavours to function extensively in the public realm through the truth-inscribed discourses of the print media. In doing so it poses a challenge to the ascendant discourses of the state and its institutions. Puran’s critique recommends practical measures towards alleviating tribal poverty and contains suggestions for the revitalization of indigenous cultural resources to counter the dominant culture. The embedded quest for social justice is inseparable from the obligation to alter the character of public discourse. His writing insinuates an act of responsibility towards himself, towards others and towards the collective that, because it carries no motive for self-advancement, may be termed ethical responsibility. This responsibility is however compromised by the subjective flaw of Puran’s inability to intimately relate and exchange information with the object(s) of his ethical action. Or, to employ Spivak’s term, Puran lacks “ethical singularity” that results in the othering of the tribals (Translator’s Preface xxv).
The construction of the citizen-subject(s) of the postcolonial, post-Independence nation by Devi is reflected in the frames of the text through the narratives of tribal resistance to appropriation, and by Puran's journalistic agenda. The two narratives engage textuality with their differing and opposing rhetorics and discourses. A primordial past prior to history, and a continuing history of the nation simultaneously complement and resist each other's authority. Rhetorical spaces outside of time foreclose the assertion of the self and defer identities. Puran takes off from the time and space of the present to a more cosmic point of view. The cave shrine and the burial cave--where Puran is assimilated into the community--are indeterminate spaces that evade rational cognition, where identities blur, the nation recedes and ethical responsibility is momentarily accompanied by ethical singularity. Its anti-discursivity, anti-historicity and anti-temporality are a foil to the linear progression of the third-person narrative on Puran, and delineate the differential composition of the citizen subject(s) within a historical discourse of the nation's alienation of its indigenous populations. Puran's compilations on the tribals which aspire towards the documentary accentuate the breaks between the narrative and generic constituents of the text, and bear out his inscription in discourse. These fissures where shifts in genres and narratives, and interdiscursivity occur are precisely the sites where textuality and discourse confront the absent "I."

Devi's "The Witch" also follows the textual and narrative pattern of "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay, and Pirtha." For Sharan Mathur, teacher-researcher-professed intellectual, the investigations into the incident of the daini are self-indulgent explorations in the domains of knowledge. His self-
representation presumes a temporal and epistemological disjunction with the tribals:

I was a twentieth-century spectator at that stone-age battle, where stones were weapons...people like me stand apart and, even after watching the battle, note the facts and reasons to construct theories out of them. (Devi, Bitter 100)

This othering of the tribals is further substantiated by the disciplines of anthropology, ethnology and history with their structured logics and empirical methodologies that guide Mathur's project of retrieving a lost history of tribal rebellion, in his pursuit of a doctoral degree. As a result, a discourse of civilizational and cultural ascendancy is latent in his social intercourse with the tribals. The narrative here criticizes the scholar-ethnographer, who as intimate observer and agent for documentation is implicated in the possible corruption of the primitive. Despite the "explosive truth" about the economic marginalization, social rejection and the threat of extinction that force a psychological transference of subaltern anger, fear and impotency to an embodied symbol from among themselves, Mathur does not and cannot identify with them on equal terms (Devi, Bitter 115). The issue is not only one of caste and class, but also includes an entire substratum of irreconcilable ideological and ontological affiliations that are in danger of being compromised through their mutual interaction:

There is no chance of their meeting. Mathur and pahaan are like the river and the railway line, if they meet at some point, disaster is inevitable. (Devi, Bitter 114)
There exists no possibility for the reconciliation of differences or for assimilation into either one’s epistemological systems. Mathur’s “humane” shock and revulsion at the vengeful violence he is witness to and his inability to forge an ethical singularity with the adivasis markedly contradict his unwitting and involuntary participation in their collective ritual in a moment fraught with menacing implications for his identity:

Is Mathur himself swaying together with these people? Does the Stone Age exist somewhere deep within him, too? (Devi, *Bitter* 118–19)

Within this temporal space identities shift, coalesce and separate, and rationality is a brittle defence against the fears evoked about the validity of the self.

This transitory lapse of identity which holds much potential for the re-evaluation of hegemonic epistemologies is however prematurely arrested and Mathur’s tearfulness fails to find an echo in the stoic taciturnity of the pahaan. It is in the textual interstices of aborted occasions and untranslatable silences that a critique of institutionalised intellectualism with its derivative rhetoric of “progressive” humanism—a central discourse in the framing of state policies on the rights of the citizen-subject—is mounted. The interdiscursive and inter-generic mode of report by Mathur on the daini episode comprises self-criticism and admission of complicity in the network of knowledge and power that one is surrounded by. Resistance to equating knowledge with elitist education moves toward a delinking of the two, an act of acknowledgement that “true” knowledge equally resides in the oral
narratives of the subaltern. Mathur's continuing interest in the history of the ancient Kol rebellion in spite of his abandoned doctoral thesis bears out the above assertion.

"Behind the Bodice: Choli Ke Pichhe" should be considered Devi's critical commentary on aesthetics, the social politics of art and the role of the artist-intellectual in society. Aesthetics is never neutral, but is overtly political in that it legitimates what is conventionally considered aberrant by elevating it above the mundane, and rendering it acceptable as a form of refined discrimination. Its ostensible claims of being independent of ideology contradict its diverse epistemic origins in the sphere of art, artistic expressions and their appreciation. The emphasis on a "universal," abstract and esoteric sensibility in that case entails a break from the twin precepts of conservatism and conformism as well as the evasion of the limitations and regulating pressures of censorship. But the dangers inherent in aesthetics lie precisely in the above assertions which project it as innocent, unbiased and non-gendered.

The photographer Upin Puri's aesthetics objectifies the gendered subaltern Gangor's breasts through the lens of the male gaze. Gangor is first introduced in the role of a mother suckling her child, a commonplace scene which soon loses its human touch as the breasts gain in artistic value, attaining the fetishised significance and referentiality of the erotic sculptures of Konark and the cave paintings of Ajanta. The breasts as scopic objects to be documented and preserved for posterity due to the mortality of the human host demand perpetuation against the inevitability of their ruin. The
language, in keeping with this objective executes an almost mystical
dehumanisation and a simultaneous humanisation of the objects under
consideration:

...can't keep such a bodyline...not a thing will remain – do you
realize that the breasts of the girls at Elora are eroding?

Gangor is fantastical (Devi, Breast 147)

declares Upin passionately to Ujan. Upin’s solitary campaign to rescue the
imperiled breasts of Gangor therefore cannot but acknowledge the gendered
human although in a highly reified manner. This mediation however situates
the breasts outside the socio-cultural construct of woman, and relocates
and redefines them as esoteric subjects of desire within high-art. What his
aesthetic ideology cannot or rather will not acknowledge is the very thin line
between “pure” art and the vulgar, contingent as their respective value-
codings are on diverse cultural qualifications. The uninitiated may
consequently assume the technique of insinuation rather than that of
representation induced by the subtle yet provocatively speculative text,
which in turn can be extremely damaging in the social.

His rallying cry takes the edge off the violent crime of rape, alienating
it from its sexualized material origins and socio-political associations, and
instead displaces it into the realm of aesthetics, into the appreciation and
conservation of art:

“The halfnaked amplebreasted female figures of Orissa are
about to be raped. Save them! Save the breast!” (Devi, Breast
142)
Reams have been written and much fervour spent on debates over the ethics of artistic licence. But hardly if ever any attention has focussed on the accompanying responsibility of the artist and the ethics of aesthetics. Upin cannot bear the revelation of his responsibility in Gangor's rape:

Gangor's developed breasts are natural, not manufactured.
Why did he first think they were the object of photography?
Why did it seem that that chest was endangered? (Devi, Breast 154)

Even more significant is his implied criticism of the fallible and specious aesthetics structuring an ego-centric high-art. It renders visible the propensity for creating fetish objects which are gender discriminative and insensitive to social consequences, reinforcing cultural norms and thereby encouraging repression, disciplining and backlash.

The uncertain circumstances surrounding Upin's solitary death—whether of conscious intent or an unforeseen mishap—is in comparable ways, a reflection of his own elitist intellectualism. Archivalist photography and responsibility: the humanity of the representative gendered icon preserved in print and time is incumbent on the artist. If this is so, then absence of responsibility amounts to a denial of humanity in the representations of the subaltern by the artist—writer or photographer. It also suggests, in an extended sense, the disassociation of humanism as practice from its discursive origins in state ideology. Behind the incident of the bodice "is a rape of the people" (Devi, Breast 157). Here the breast becomes a metaphor for failed state policies, a victim of police violence, the police as
representative of law in a democratic state. State discourse on humanism is relativist, hierarchical and contentious, historically associated to a notional status of the citizen-subject, with far-reaching consequences for the polity, the class/community, as well as the gendered individual. Devi wrests the concepts of the human and of humanism from a state discourse of political philosophy and links them to a politics of aesthetics that acknowledges essential differences and power-imbrued perspectives. Aesthetics presupposes responsibility, responsibility enacts ethics, ethics anticipates a reconstrued humanism, and humanism compels the artist-intellectual into social and political performance.

It is through Shital Mallya in “Behind the Bodice” that Devi critiques the new Indian intellectual. A documentary film maker, she is representative of a class of pseudo-cultural experts who claim authority on the basis of limited, selective knowledge through exposure to state-sponsored programmes. Needless to say these affairs and their producers are totally subordinated to the general state policy which attempts at monopolising the means and content of cultural production. An instance pointed out by Spivak confirms this divorce from social reality:

The running commentary offered by Shital [on the etymology of the name Gangor] has rather little to do with the name suggested. Perhaps this relates to the documentation of 'ethnic' India being in the hands of intellectuals who know no Indian language. (Devi, Breast 159)
Such essentialistic differentiation by overinterpretation denies the element of the human.

Devi’s writings integrate her creative urges as an artist-writer and the journalist-activist’s quest for social justice. In the texts, reportage attempts to interpret the fictionality of the real whereas “reality” resists its reconstruction as document and thus evades mediation by literary and social discourses. This underlying quality of self-evaluation that alternates between affirmation and refutation can be traced to the unusual ethical responsibility-in-singularity Devi demonstrates through her sojourns among the tribal populations, the intimate exchanges with them and her wide acceptance as one among them. Like the writer, the works too traverse the spheres of journalism, academia and activism constituting a praxis and a performance that move away from the politics of theory into the realm of political intervention. Devi’s activism is a living protest against the notion of intellectual activity as an instrument of self-knowledge, personal liberation and professional ambitions. In an interview she describes the reason for her association with the tribals as a “pilgrimage” for “the remission of...sins” amassed by a materialistic culture (Mitra and Deb 108). There always exists, she hints, the danger of vulnerability and inaction in educated persons. Institutionally, Devi writes from the place of the other.

The aesthetics of Devi’s writings is directed towards a means of conceptualizing decolonization as restitutory discourse against the segregative and discriminative neo-colonization of both the literary and political spheres. Her texts comprise a critique of those delineations of the
nation-state built on the borrowed ideas of colonialism, postmodernism and globalization which serve to promote the Third World cult of the alienated personality. Decolonization essentially seeks to amend the false consciousness arising from these ideological interactions. It is in effect resistance to certain “western” cultural values, social and economic models imbibed and carried into execution through the discourse of nationalism. The so-called national culture is precisely based on the assumed universal translatability of the above systems, existing in contestation, alliance and miscegenation with other more indigent but marginalized cultural narratives that do not look to the privileged discourse of the nation-state as the ultimate construct of identity.

Indian nationalist character and the policies it occasioned were often inadvertently infused with residual features of colonialism, specifically the paternalistic and missionary zeal reified as a national programme of protectorship and progressiveness. Through her narratives Devi criticizes this ideological blurring of Indian nationalism and colonialism in the postcolonial, often misinterpreted as confrontation, and sets the stage for literary decolonization without regressing into nativism. Nationalism, especially of the partisan and rabid variety, should not be confused with decolonization warns Devi. For in the guise of culture lies the political intent of sabotaging the interests of the subaltern by denying them access to their rights.

In order to crack open the politics of Vaidehi’s creative writing, one has to take into account the interplay of discourse, literary history and
prevalent social concerns in her narratives. Vaidehi’s struggle to define and represent herself is linked to the collective plight of other women, across temporal and spatial differences. Her text on poet Kalidasa’s fourth-century Sanskrit classic *Shakuntala*, written after watching an open-air performance of the play, is a startling revelation in two aspects. One, its strategic shift in perspective effects a radical representation of the iconic figure of Shakuntala through the mediation of her twentieth-century journalist-visitor. In the process, it also affords insight into the vested patriarchal interests at play in the composition of such archetypes. Two, perhaps incidental, yet of significance to Vaidehi’s location as a woman writer, is the literary genealogy of Shakuntala the text elicits; the links between culture, gender, literature and history, their epistemic features and discursive interdependencies, through an intertextual juxtaposition of sedimented versions of the Shakuntala narratives from a repertoire of texts and translations of the play in India and Europe.

Linguistic indeterminacy in Vaidehi’s depiction of Shakuntala forcefully entails a retrospect on its precedent textual authorities from other epistèmes:

*Who is she? Lover? Loner? Or yogin?*

*Or the essence of all three?*

*Or is she pure nature?* (Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 546-47)

It is a given fact that any narrative interfaces with the historical moment through the adaptation of its cultural symbols, idioms and icons in compliance with current discourse contexts. Shakuntala as personification
of womanhood in Indian literature and culture provides a narrative focus for a discourse analysis of the manner in which she is presented in different versions, and a subsequent assessment of her evolving or alternatively diminishing significance in these various interpretations. The aim of reviewing the various texts is to trace the possible influences such a non-contiguous literary tradition has on a writer like Vaidehi, assuming she falls within the tradition of writers negotiating the Shakuntala narrative. Her deviation from or correspondence to them marks the peculiar trajectory of her constitution within an assemblage of ideological configurations.

Romila Thapar in a fascinating analysis of the genealogy of the Shakuntala narrative tracks its initial version to the oral performances or bardic recitations of origin-myths and genealogies, legitimizing claims to clanship. "The oral nature of the epic made it prone to narrative stereotypes, repetition of actions and formulaic verses" (Thapar, Šakuntalā 8). These narratives themselves were composite creations of earlier "origin." Hence they are not historically cohesive or temporally linear, the existing versions having been subjected to editings, interpolations and additions with concomitant changes in the socio-political or even religious order, done often in response to the need to validate their legitimacy.

The conversion of the oral epic into the epic narrative found in the Mahabharata, in the form of poetry or kāvya is dated around 400 BC to AD 400. Yet it remained a part of high culture, although more as popular narrative along with the later Puranas. But its inclusion in the Puranas introduced a religious uncertain to what was initially an extract of the
legend of descent. Shakuntala in *Mahabharata* is an outspoken, assertive and autonomous young woman who insists on the fulfillment of the conditions stipulated by her at her marriage. It demands that the son born from her be successor to Dushyanta. This version of the tale in the *Mahabharata* however is not immune to interpolations by the discourse-systems of patriarchy that frame the epic, for such a strategy would have been an effective means of mediating a different, later social ethic. One such instance is Shakuntala's reference to the various functions of a wife intended to appease the husband, couched in the arguments for her rights. Not only does it stand out from the rest of the narrative, but also resonates with the male-dominated pronouncements defining roles for women in a patriarchal society.

Kalidasa's treatment of the epic version in the fourth century AD refined it in the tradition of courtly culture, to produce the romantic play *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*. The epic was converted into a *nāṭaka* or heroic drama of a romantic nature, the old narratives being positioned in a different genre. “The dramatic form was a deliberate distancing from the epic since the two genres reflected diverse literary and social interests” (Thapar, *Sakuntalā* 5). Such a radical change in form is a pointer to a historical context where chiefdoms had given way to kingdoms with emphasis on dynastic rule and the legitimacy of succession. In fact masculinity at this juncture is closely associated to altering modes of male authority and royal legitimation. Changes in the context and the story are overshadowed by a more pertinent change in the character of Shakuntala who is a contrast to the woman in the epic. The play follows the outline of the epic story but
introduces some changes, weaving in generic paradigms from other sources like folk literature, the whole being structured into a primed, well-devised dramatic form. Introduction of sub-plots involving a curse and a signet ring--episodes absent in the epic--are stylistic devices evocative of romance and enhance the emotional range of the narrative. Such interventions of the romantic incorporate elements of fantasy--the supernatural and the magical--which in turn introduce the unpredictable and the irrational. The erotic too is evident in the depiction of Shakuntala, especially in the motif of the bee hovering around her face in the play. Primacy of the romantic and the erotic in the dramatic narrative glosses over the disempowerment of woman in the transition from the epic. The king's rejection of Shakuntala therefore does not acquire moral dimensions as it does in the epic, given Kalidasa's artistic licence which brings in diversionary tactics that occlude any comments on the injustice of Dushyanta's treatment of Shakuntala. The ring not only exculpates the king's repudiation of Shakuntala but also upholds masculine authority and "disguises the crux of the dilemma, the question of the paternity of the child" Bharata (Thapar, Śakuntalā 54). In fact Kalidasa's aesthetics "indirectly endorses requirements stated in the dharmasastras," pertaining to the duties of the king, the rhetorics of political power and of succession, and the behaviour of a wife in her husband's home (Thapar, Śakuntalā 48).

As for the Shakuntala of the play, she is not the spirited woman of the epic who imposes conditions or forcefully argues the social, moral and religious aspects of her rehabilitation as a wife. Instead she is portrayed in the romanticised mould of a woman of upper-caste culture, shy, innocent
and disconcerted by emotions of love and awakenings of sexual desire. The production of sexuality, femininity and masculinity here coincides with the production of social and gender differences established at a particular political conjuncture. Upper-strata masculinity and male sexuality receive sanction and is simultaneously exempt from scrutiny by stylistic interventions that shift the focus to a sexualized Shakuntala. Kalidasa’s depiction of Shakuntala reinforces notions of female submission, self-abnegation and inferiority. For instance, when she leaves for the palace in the drama, among Kanva’s advices is one that requests her to live in amicability and sisterhood with her co-wives. This is echoed in Vaidehi’s narrative, refigured as a critique of patriarchy’s conceptualization of the role of a woman:

"'Karu priya sakhi vrittim sapatni jane,' Kanva pronounced ....Why did father, who knew all, pronounce this? Perhaps that, too, was a line that came easy on a tongue that spent the whole day in contemplation and chanting...." (Vaidehi, "Afternoon" 542)

The reputation of Kalidasa’s play as providing the criteria for erotic-romantic aesthetics was established by texts and commentaries on literary criticism and aesthetics composed from about the ninth century onwards. These theoretical analyses were predominantly exegeses on the theory of rasas delineated in the authoritative Sanskrit manual on drama, the Natyasastra. They critically acclaimed the play as the paradigm of either sringara-rasa (the erotic-romantic) or vira-rasa (the heroic) or the interplay
of these two elements. This was in addition to the already established distinction of its textual structure and the ideational prototypes of the heroic protagonists in accordance with the *Natyasastra*, which instituted the text as a norm fit to be imitated by subsequent playwrights and poets.

Interpretations and translations of Kalidasa’s play which became part of the colonial experience, oversaw a change that took the form of a disjuncture in both historical and discursive contexts. These re-workings were modified in terms of language, literary and cultural aesthetics to meet the concerns of the society they were written for, although they retained the structure of the original work. Prior to colonialism, Orientalist scholarship in its attempts to define and comprehend the culture of the colonized in European terms, influenced the perception of what was regarded as the Indian cultural tradition. Perhaps the most important among these works was that of Sir William Jones in 1789. An officer of the East India Company at Calcutta, he translated Kalidasa’s play from its Bengali version into Latin and subsequently into English as *Sacontalâ or the Fatal Ring*. His appreciation of Sanskrit culture and poetry/literature and the wish to convince readers of the greatness of Indian civilization were tempered by personal prejudices and knowledge of the moral reservations of the English sensibility towards erotica in literature, leading him to modulate or delete some of what he thought were the more erotic passages and sections. An outcome of this was the omission of certain dramatic strategies of structural significance to characterization, which were to influence notions of the erotic in literary criticisms by the Indian audience.
The impact of the play in Europe during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served to invigorate the romantic movement following the "positivist, materialist, teleological and other universalist schemes" of the preceding neo-classical era (Thapar, Šakuntalā 214). What was considered the image of India provided for the distinctive features of Romanticism--the exotic, the fantastical, the irrational, the emotional and the creative--as against those of neo-classicism, namely the representative, the rational, the factual and the literal. For the English Romantic poets who drew inspiration from the writings of William Jones, Šacontalā provided an echoing board, reminiscent of an idealized Victorian England. In Europe the German Romantic movement found in Kalidasa's play an elaboration of its aesthetic principles. Shakuntala was conceived as the exemplar of womankind in this idealizing phase, more so because of her association with nature and portrayal as the uncorrupted child of nature. Though debatable, it can be argued that the Germans were the exponents of the golden-age theory of India through their expositions on Oriental Renaissance.

Colonialism's strategy of control intervened in the colonized's cultural sphere with the interpretations forwarded by Orientalist scholarship. Here it was Monier-Williams's translation of the play, published in 1855 and entitled Šakoontalā or The Lost Ring, which held sway. This version negotiated two significant discursive shifts: first, the play came to be viewed as a literature on Hindu custom and culture. Second, the nineteenth-century debates on the morality of the woman, in particular the Indian woman, were a decisive factor in the evaluation of Shakuntala. Romance and its figurative association with the innocence and uncertainty of nature had by this time
been displaced by the norms and codes of culture, specifically the high-
culture of the Victorian era. Viewed in this light Shakuntala’s actions came
under moral scrutiny, her innocence defiled by the coarseness of sexual
passion. Under the circumstances, the text was subject to censoring as a
measure against the diffusion of undesirable ideas concerning relationships
and values considered violative of nineteenth-century codes of behaviour.
And the choice, publication and inclusion of the play’s translation(s) in
academia were a response to this historical and epistemic disjuncture.

The nationalist resolution of the woman’s question in the nineteenth
century postulated a golden age, at the core of which was the theory of the
Hindu Aryan. It sought legitimization in the classical tradition interpreted in
positive terms, and the retroactive vision looked to female characters who
would endorse the notion that the spirituality of the “nation” was invested in
its women. The Aryan woman alone was conceived to be capable of moulding
and spiritually reinvigorating the nation. In this context it was the
Shakuntala of Kalidasa rather than the epic Shakuntala who met the
requisite, redefined norms of womanly virtue, now imaged as the “ideal
grhini” with her qualities of submissiveness, self-denial, chastity and
patience (Thapar, Šakuntalā 255). And it was Rabindranath Tagore in an
essay written in Bengali in 1907 titled “Sakuntala – Its Inner Meaning,” who
read the drama as a text in moral and spiritual progression.

The apparent concern with negating the erotic in Shakuntala and
representing her in the image of motherhood and as the model of wifely
devotion rendered central the question of morality in Tagore’s reading. The
intrinsic value of Shakuntala then lay in the sublimation of passionate physical union into a spiritual union. This was in keeping with the reigning discourse on women’s sexuality when the expression of sexuality came to be identified with the socially and culturally inferior. Therefore it was imperative to underplay those sexually-inclined episodes and passages in the relationship between Shakuntala and Dushyanta. Tagore’s emphasis on an implicit opposition between the unrestraint of Nature and the Moral Law reproduces the ongoing refiguration of woman in a discourse that comprises a formula of pre-Independence nationalism:

The drama *Sakuntala* stands alone and unrivalled in all literature, because it depicts how Restraint can be harmonised with Freedom. (Tagore reproduced in Thapar, *Sakuntala* 244)

What is of interest though is the extent to which the Shakuntala narrative in Tagore’s critical intervention reflects the social and moral concerns of a transitional period, the mediation between the colonial and the national cultures, and Tagore’s own ambivalent response to both orientalism and nationalism.

Vaidehi approaches an old text from a new perspective, the intervention posing a radical challenge to the historical authority of the original work as well as to the representation of the protagonist. The implied presence of the journalist-writer who holds the status of an autobiographical “I” along with the protagonist Shakuntala, draws out the story from the latter. The temporal and historical fissures produced by intertextuality render Shakuntala and her female interlocutor dominant participants who
direct the course of textuality. Barbara Stoler Miller's reading and interpretation of memory in the context of ancient Sanskrit literary criticism invests memory with "the power to shatter the logic of mundane life: it makes the invisible visible, abolishes distances, and reverses chronologies" (Thapar, *Sakuntala* 55). This is especially relevant in the sub-text of the interview where the kind of queries that a contemporisation of the play would raise, elicits responses which subvert the authority of the original dramatic text. In fact, the twentieth-century window on the text brings to bear upon Vaidehi's text a history of the Shakuntala discourses introduced by the recollections of Shakuntala, so much so that intertextuality shares with memory mediatory roles imbrued with connotations of power. And the silent presence of the interviewer--as confidante and participant--in the largely monological narrative lends direction to the discourses determining textuality. A recurrent feature in several of Vaidehi's stories, memory is not merely a stylistic device but is inextricably bound with the expression of desire so that there inheres in it a structure independent of the larger conditions of generic or narrative forms. It is this expedient in composition, which subserves one's prerogative as a writer, that is emphasized in "A Memory called Ammacchi":

But whatever it is that I remember today...conforms with what I desire to remember....(Vaidehi, "Afternoon" 94)

As evidenced in the above analysis, the notion of romance in the Shakuntala literatures had undergone an epistemic change from its idealistic origins into a critique of women during colonialism and the pre-
Independence years. Vaidehi’s narrative and depiction of Shakuntala deviates from the concept of romantic literature and is a retelling of the Kalidasa version. Kalidasa’s infinite emotional range is severely curtailed to allow for the expression of lust/love and anger. Here Shakuntala is not ambiguous about her feelings and desires. In fact, until after the birth of Bharata there is hardly any distinction between sexual desire and the emotion of love. In this Vaidehi perhaps adheres closest to the *Mahabharata* narrative especially in her depiction of a defiant and indignant yet restrained Shakuntala at the court of Dushyanta. Shakuntala’s self-determination and individualistic ways focus attention on the patriarchal interests of Kalidasa and lay bare the discourses woven into the Sanskrit play. For instance, her indifference to and detachment from Dushyanta’s reclamation of Bharata concede the politics of *dharma* duty being framed by the discourse of paternity and patrimony, a fact the Kalidasa text seeks to disguise:

“It became known that the emperor was worried about an heir to his throne. Bharata received the blessings, grasped his father’s hand, and climbed onto the chariot.” (Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 546)

This incident in a way also rehabilitates a related, crucial episode from the *Mahabharata*, in which Shakuntala makes a succession agreement at the time of marriage that her son should succeed to the throne, an event that disappears from Kalidasa’s version.

Or, consider the motifs of the curse and the ring, stylistic devices in Kalidasa’s play which exonerate Dushyanta from moral blame. In Vaidehi,
the incident of the curse is exposed for what it is—a romantic strategy serving to further gender, social and caste prescriptions. It also draws forth an emerging system of legitimization of kinship and arbitration of a king’s dharma which are related to the structures of authority that were being referred to in the monarchial state—the conflictual power axes between the ascetic (Durvasa) who with his moral authority could control human destiny, and the deity (Indra), who in the future was to be intimately linked with the divinity of the king (Thapar, Šakuntalā 67-68):

"With some story of a curse, the poet hid man’s careless debauchery.... A tale of forgetfulness, concocted by a man."

(Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 54)

The episode of the ring is recovered from memory and divested of its fantastical accretions, authoritative implications, hegemonic positions and misogynist associations to disclose an act of independence, a defiance of convention and reinstatement of dignity:

"But am I one so self-denying that I would beg love with the show of a ring?... I pretended, duly upset, that it had been lost."

(Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 544)

The generic specificities of the short story preclude the tension between erotic love and asceticism designated in the dramatic division of the Acts. The erotic undertone in the play, indicated among others by the motif of the bee hovering about Shakuntala’s face, instead acquires metaphysical dimensions and initiates an enquiry into selfhood crucial to carving out a subject position:
"Why did that bee appear there that day? To weave a snare of illusion around me?...but was it the bee that circled around me or did I circle the bee?....I was ensnared of my own will. That is an irrefutable truth." (Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 536)

Retrieval of desire implicates the expression of self and literally translates into the structure of the text. Textuality's deliberate anti-historical and anti-idealistic practice induces a break with the socio-politics of aesthetic and critical traditions that appropriate and reproduce the Kalidasa text. Therefore despite all attempts to contemplate a continuity in literary tradition, the negation of gendered ethics comprising the heart of romantic discourse (for that is what the dualistic nature/culture paradigm expresses) effects a disconnection in the project. Also rejected in the process are the moral and spiritual accretions of the Kalidasa text through which the domesticated image of the native woman came to attend the reinvigoration of a “nation” aspiring to self-determination. The elapse of this epistème anticipates and demands a re-reading of the text, as proposed at the beginning of this analysis, which is to come full circle. And the generic form into which a selective genealogy of the Shakuntala narrative is integrated is conducive to the elaboration of a certain social pattern and culture of the present.

Nevertheless, in Vaidehi’s text the presence of two simultaneous first person narratives enacted by a retelling as well as a rewriting in the autobiographical mode run counter to one another. Intertextuality's blurring of boundaries introduces an element of indeterminacy and ambivalence in
the discourses of both the autobiographical protagonists. While the Shakuntala narrative appropriates to itself the visionary resistance of feminism towards partisan politics, the journalistic commentary reverts to an essentialistic categorization of the female, typical of radical feminist discourses. This perhaps is the text's greatest weakness. Or, given the contested positions within feminism, it intimates the site of a potential gender discourse that incorporates the two disjunct discursive standpoints.

Vaidehi's re-critique of literary tradition involves a selection, redefinition, innovation and consequent contestation of what is handed down or accepted as normative. The literary heritage of the Indian woman in postcolonial, post-Independence India is indisputably male-authored. To lay claim to this heritage would mean conforming to an aesthetics which is discriminative in practice. Text as performance involves a rewriting, reinterpretation and translation across history, culture, genre and language. This does not entail subscribing to that which is directly opposed to what is conventionally considered the product of male rationalization and imagination. For that would be artistic suicide. Female aesthetics should rather seek to deliberately make visible, within the framework of literary forms, its own repressive strategies and practices. It must disclose the manner in which literary aesthetics collude with discourse-systems by assimilating conceptual structures, language patterns and other possible (if at times subversive) categories of thought and expression into the projects of imagination and criticism. Such an aesthetics, which repudiates any definitive tradition and lacks a systematized structure, will be situated outside of institution. Vaidehi's text by exhibiting through its indecisiveness
the problematics of such a female aesthetics, tentatively situates her as a woman writer outside literary tradition and establishment.

In conclusion, the intermingling of orders of discourse and the liberation of the text from within a limited area of scholarship enact a process of change or transformation. This agency is variably located at the juncture of intersecting bodily, social and textual practices where instituted identities, relations and principles are effectively challenged. An especial purpose of this strategy is to render the particularity of these women-authored texts intelligible and to reorient their aesthetics towards admitting into the text allusions to locations of patriarchal authority. The resulting tension underlying these texts enable one to understand the dialogue between politics and aesthetics, content and form that frame the historically constituted genre of the short story. The short story as a text that self-dramatizingly makes itself out of the remnants of other books and discourses thus not only approximates to an enactment of meta-fiction. It is also the site where woman as writer recreates herself consciously.

Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in short fiction draw attention to the presence of the writer as a more comprehensive other in the genre. The textual discrepancies and ambiguities generated as the writers converse or debate with other texts or writers contradict the organized framework of the genre within which they are situated and unfold a problematic self engaged in a range of discourse-systems. For it goes without saying that the writers are positioned in and by the text in discourse. And it is at this conjuncture that the decisions which shape the aesthetics and poetics of their work(s)
are taken. To have control over one's discourse then is to wield power over what is known of any knowledge system and the way a history, culture or for that matter a nation is perceived, rather than accepting what others profess it is or should be. As for the genre its expansive accommodation of the intersecting discourses is complemented by the intensive gendered practices of aesthetics brought to bear upon it by this mode of writing.

The relation of women as writers to writing problematizes social and literary conventions. Their resistance inhabits the realm of ideas and of imaginative life. It is covert and intellectual, shaping their aesthetic practices. Transmuted into textual practice, they dispute the assertion of a transcendental, atemporal selfhood, any intellectual system not embedded in the history that nurtures it and art without ethical designs. Consciousness of one's craft, creative potential and imagination demand intervention in the structures of a literature inscribed in the hegemonic ideology. This takes the form of artistic sovereignty and proposes a variant literary and critical enterprise tangential to a genealogical, historical project of women's writings established by male authorities. And it also involves the effort to secure through writing a niche for oneself within an imaginative continuum of women writers.

Writing introduces a performative model of critique within which truth-claims are assessed on the basis of the role they play in the creative process. The universality, fixity and internal coherence of knowledge forms ordering literary discourse, particularly those decisive to determining the gendered quality of women's writing are shown to be built on a politics of
exclusion, indiscriminate appropriation and power orientation. To write, then, in discourse or despite discourse, is to engage the text and the self across an entire spectrum of dominant but invisible ideological systems. Given such circumstances, the truth of identity the autobiographical pronoun "I" sets out to delineate is always deferred, to be attained only in the interstices of writing, in those blurred boundaries between fact and fiction, history and memory, truth and imagination, text and the body. What is ultimately recounted is a staged projection of that which is desired, a conscious depiction of its formation in textuality.

The radical politics of its aesthetics provoke adverse criticisms about a category like feminine writing. They centre around its narrow range of language and experience that restrict women writers. Some critics base their opposition on the overdetermined implications the proposition of women being trapped within patrilocal, man-made languages and assumptions generate, given the lack of any scientifically observable distinction between the language forms used by men and by women (Robbins 114). Others like Nina Baym argue against the idea of an alternative language, taking into consideration the materiality and philosophy of its origins, of it being "as much an apotheosis of the modernist creed as a residue of exclusion from modernism" (159). While the first argument denies the gendered nature of creativity, literary expression and literary production, the second perspective is untenable in the Indian context due to two factors: one, the visible absence of what may be termed a definite feminist literary or critical tradition/phase either in the regional or national literatures, and two, the complex and staggered effect of modernity in Indian literature, which is
ambiguous and made of several, independent strands. What is certain though is that modernism which is intimately connected with the advent of the modern state along with the notion of the individual (the idea of a "universal" individual in India being a highly contested one), simultaneously initiated and nurtured qualifying spaces within prevalent literary aesthetics. And inhering in these was the possibility of a female aesthetics which inevitably invoked the socio-political and cultural contexts.

This is in part borne out by the writers under analysis for whom literary aesthetics irrespective of theoretical categorization is tuned to their gendered philosophies, negotiations and engagement with the real, the experiential. Feminine writing then performs at times subtly or on other occasions radically, conceptualizing and elaborating a poetics of the female imagination, sometimes inscribed in the body, or figured as a birthing, resisting purist categories of differentiation and appropriative male-authored literary traditions but invariably presenting a critique of the social, the political and the cultural. Due to its cultural specificity this writing however does not approximate to the essentialist feminine writing advocated by western feminist critics although the two may share common stylistic features based on the female body. For the woman writer, writing enacts the sovereignty of response that is inseparable from a politics of choice, and executes the re-alignment of empathetic identification and individualistic expression with the historical project of writing. In short, it is the interaction between women writers and the society they live in, and the ensuing ramification of experiences which shape female literary perspectives and the female literary continuum.