Chapter 7

Conclusion

The preceding chapters have been concerned with textual analysis involving narratives by women writers. The complexities of textual and discursive negotiation so crucial to the development of the narrative have in a certain sense overshadowed aspects of style, generic technique and form, all of which enhance the literary value of the text. And the role of genre in evolving and framing an alternative female aesthetics and politics in turn draws attention to the social production of the text which is never without some kind of interpersonal or rhetorical purpose. Proof of this was provided in the foregoing analyses where the attempts of generic rhetoric to control and shape the heterogeneity of discursive networks intersecting the text were taken up for discussion. A related feature is the reappropriation of discourse or intertextual/interdiscursive referents through interactions that reinvest them with an innovative potentiality. Despite their formal limitations genres may thus be considered devices in rewriting, responsive to the power-play of institutions, ideological apparatuses, social configurations, and categories as distinct as language and gender developed in relation to patriarchal arrangements.

Women's engagement with the short story genre occur at more than one level, as thematic, stylistic and formal categories are placed under revision. An overview of this aspect of their writings concludes this thesis. It is difficult to make generalizations about the craft of short fiction on the
basis of the examples under analysis. When taken individually, each work is different from the other and limited in representational scope, but as an ensemble they make up a comprehensive cross-section of the genre.

Indian women writers are the political and moral historians of their times, investigating conditions as they demystify myths and abstract constructions through the medium of the short story in this particular analysis. Their explorations are not always unidirectional or uniform, nor do they necessitate a resolution, but more often than not they vary between intricate permutations of muted optimism, pessimistic denouncements, existential angst and a levity that borders on the ironic. All these, directly or indirectly insist on the pervasive potency of material reality that might be temporarily evaded but cannot be totally transcended. In doing so they give expression to what in Alfred Schutz's phrase are “finite provinces of reality” (qtd. in A. Ramanujan 33). And this interaction with the material is often accompanied by innovations in style, form, structure, theme and linguistics pertaining to the generic medium through which they express their historically shared experiences.

Women's writing is to a large extent a conscious response to socio-literary realities in spite of the popular tendency to view it as spontaneous, unpremeditated outpourings of the unconscious and of the body. Their works by no means can be treated in a monolithic fashion. There are differences in their approaches, attitudes and treatments. It will also be premature to assume that the various recurrent stylistic and thematic peculiarities in writing by women are solely due to biological specificity, or
socio-cultural positionality or a structural form attributable to the current reigning literary or theoretical philosophy. Such an approach would be reductionist and simplistic for it disregards individual differences in an attempt to bring them under one banner.

The short story in India, has its origins in the oral tradition of Indian languages. Its earlier forms can be discerned in narratives as diverse as the *Panchatantra, Kathasaritasagara, Aithihyamala* and *Totanama*. However, it is difficult to trace a continuous and accurate history of the short story due to a break in its formative and cultural traditions, under British rule. Although the specific nature of the interventions are not quite clear, what is certain are the inevitable generic marginalizations, miscegenations and mutations induced by intersecting cultures around the seventeenth century continuing through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries, and the re-emergence of the form as an independent and prolific literary genre from relative obscurity, in the later years of the nineteenth century. This has consequently led to the assumption that it was modelled after the Western and especially the English short story (Sankaranarayanan19).

Like any other literary form, the short story is amenable to variations congruent with the period in which it is being written. Its distinguishing significance from other literary genres lies in its hybridity, in the intrinsic quality to evoke its composite origins in fable, anecdote, fairy-story and numerous other forms, as well as its ability to establish affinities with other art forms by way of crossing generic boundaries. The diversity of possible narrative modes and formal approaches implies a powerful, liberal and far-reaching medium of expression. On account of this versatile and
multifarious nature of the genre it is near impossible to frame a single, comprehensive definition or theory in which the only familiar and mandatory characteristic seems to be the execution of narrative intent in a relatively concise space-time.

The short story's narrative flexibility, its almost unlimited range of subjects and its structural adaptability make it perfectly suited to the needs and intent of artistic expression. And the brevity of the twentieth-century short story is directly imitative of those fleeting experiences and impressions momentarily inscribed on a disintegrating consciousness in an alienating and discriminative milieu. The irregularities of form and the often subjective episodes reflect the restless quality of a world, the incoherence of which is negotiated and at times enhanced by drawing upon the elements of fantasy, the epic, the supernatural and dreams--sub-genres long associated with the short story. These stand in stead of the omission of rationally explicable motives for the actions and situations depicted. The generic restriction on word-usage accurately termed by Rudyard Kipling as "economy of implication" further has gradually whittled to spaces of reticence and the unstated, phrased by Henry James as "artful compromise" (V. Shaw 263). Implicit in these silences and breaks is a scepticism about language. The suggestion of narrative inadequacy and incompleteness this elicits, in a way focuses attention on the forced unity imposed by form. With the departure from what is considered the essential qualities of the short story--a crisis-point, a sustained tonal effect conveyed by contrived narrative means, and proportionality of composition--wholeness becomes a redundant feature. The rigidity of the frame gives way
to fragments of states, at times detached, at other times involved so that inconclusiveness and intimacy can be considered indices of conformity and of form.

The literature of the Urdu short story is marked by experimentation in both form and content. Qurratulain Hyder charts out a course quite distinct from her peers although she belongs to that era when the Progressive school dominated the literary scene. Her refusal to be grouped under any specific literary category confirms an autonomy of artistic position and choice of expression. In fact “My Aunt Gracie” fictionalizes an episode concerning the attempt to locate her within the burgeoning avant-gardist movement of the 1950s and 60s. On meeting the writer-protagonist years after the Partition in Lahore, Nasir Chacha asks her, pointing to an Urdu magazine which published “tasteless” innovative literature:

“...Do you also write this?...This balderdash...this piffle...this....Remember...Your father never wrote such...such....”

(Hyder, Sound 65-66)

There is a trace of self-portraiture here, in the protagonist’s denial of employing a seemingly frivolous and superficial literary style denounced by the “progressives” as being elitist and representative of the bourgeoisie, and alternately lauded by other critics of being a forerunner to the modern or else, the avant-garde. Critic K. Satchidanandan’s observation on modernism is of special relevance in this context. He asserts that modernism was not a directive from the West, but a necessity which arose from the developments of history (“Modernism” 20). And in the Indian
literary scene of the 1960s, frustration with the new cultural, economic, moral and social maelstrom effected by the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the nascent state was translated into “an ambivalent movement that had both an individualist, aestheticist, ‘high modernist’ stream and a radical, dialogic, national-popular, avant-gardist stream” (Satchidanandan, “Modernism” 22).

Many of Hyder’s stories dwell over a long period of time and encompass the entire life of a character or the saga of a family. While depicting with intricacy and precision such a life, they, in Hyder’s own words, “tend to cover a number of phases of a life-time, not just one little piece, or facet” (Kumar 21). Franz Kafka’s remark that the short story genre is not required to show “the effects both of action and of the passage of time” or to trace step by step the vicissitudes of the character makes it paradoxically the most appropriate medium to convey a sense of entireity (qtd. in V. Shaw 218). This contrasts with the tendency to view the condensed structure of the genre as being capable of only dramatizing or highlighting an intense moment of revelation.

Hyder’s stories are complex, consisting of several scenes not necessarily adhering to a linear chronology or spatial consistency. Their expansiveness of style owes to the employment of a number of devices a few of which have already been dealt with in the previous chapters. Barring a narrative device like the epistolary mode, Hyder’s longer pieces exhibit extravagant visual descriptions tempered by the succinctness of disjointed thought-processes. An approximation of the stream-of-consciousness
technique akin to that of Virginia Woolf juxtaposes with montage and serves to rein in stylistic expansiveness. They execute a disconnection in the linearity of narrative and effect a change in spatial-temporal perspective by means of which the narrative simultaneously restricts the universal and transcends the literal. A case in point is “The Exiles” in which, to cite one example, Aftab Rai’s historically-situated melancholic meditations find resonance in the change of seasons and unfolds as a follow-focus shot view of a topography that encodes the historical conjuncture:

He was feeling all hollow inside. Summer time was passing and the rose-filled winter was about to set in. Beyond the Thakurain’s Bagia there lay one of the Muslim neighbourhoods. Far away, across the trees, the Union Jack fluttered on the flag-pole of the D.M.’s bungalow. There was a certain weariness in the air. The minarets and forts of the medieval sultans’ times were faintly visible in the murky night....(Hyder, Sound 27)

The scene then cuts to the past to a decisive moment, the crisis unfolding in multiple perspectives through a combination of techniques such as interlocution, delineation and commentary.

The implication of extended periods in lapses of time necessitated by compression of form, very often indicate a crisis which momentarily halts the flow of time, leaving everything permanently altered once it has passed. For instance in “The Street Singers of Lucknow” the scenes comprising the story are divided into two parts. The first part consists of a set of episodic
junctures which while bringing the readers up to date, end on a critical note and beguile them into the false expectancy of a resolution. The epistolary mode of narration meanwhile embodies temporal lapses in the second section, and the failure of the letters to reach their target destination effects a non-accountability of time that defers communication and sets the stage for an inconclusive finale. And the accompanying shifts in perspective engender multiple interpretations enhancing indeterminacy. Like many of her stories, this one too ends on a note of disillusionment and tragedy, a sense of fatalism and stasis overseeing its conclusion. Hyder's characters' however are not inert. They undergo an essentially similar crisis in indecisiveness, being unable or rather unwilling to alter their situation. The same ideas occur again and again—the notion of recurrence and repetition, an impression of failure and incompleteness due to a lack of cohesiveness and irreconcilability of character and milieu. The advancement and evolution of characters confront a corresponding change in locale, marking a departure from the conventionally static geography of the short story genre. These patterns of inevitability and circularity knit the beginning to the end inducing an uneasy sense of déjà vu, and attempt to show the characters' inability to progress or change due to restrictive external forces, forces which accelerate changes in the social ethos.

Unlike the lapse in spatial and temporal dimensions, transgression of the space-time continuum in short fiction involves an element of the fantastic. The related return to its ancient origins in fantasy and legend accentuates the essential feature of the short story as a Romantic prose form. "Beyond the Speed of Light" (Hyder) introduces into the formal
parameters of the genre a textual confirmation of its romantic sources by adopting the mechanism of time-travel from science-fiction in order to return to the legendary Old Testament pharaonic era. This runs contrary to the stylistic economy and psychological interest of biblical narratives for they do not subscribe to the notion of fiction, not having been made out as literary creations although they anticipate the form of the short story. When appropriated into the modern genre, they exploit its ability to reflect the diversity of its constituent parts, generating divergent impulses in the same story characterized by an indifference towards unity of form and impression. In a different vein, the referential disciplines of anthropology and sociology along with the travelogue preclude structural coherence. Their juxtaposition lends itself to a certain interchangeability of intellect and experience that enables the fantastical to function in those interstices where logic fails to secure its validity. For instance, when Padma Mary's certainty about the superiority of the present age is challenged by Thoth, unsubstantiated "reason" is unable to withstand scrutiny and form evades and forecloses a crisis in ideas by executing a transgression of time-space. The finale thus reverts to the fantastic where the horror of being trapped in an ancient time is sprung upon the unsuspecting reader. The modern structure of the short story, then, relates to a certain disassociation with reality emphasizing human isolation.

Intertextuality may also be construed as a formal index and a distinct stylistic indicator of connections between texts that take shape in an arena of similar social and political relations they refract, institute or at times contest. If this is so, for a writer like Hyder working with another
literary culture in her stories, the unelaborated tautness of form then is a predicate of intertextual engagements. Both "The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi" and "I, Tiresias" are in their own discrete ways forms built on intertextual referentiality. Although their outer structures seem inconsistent and loosely structured around an incomplete dialogue between various discourse-systems, their inner frames strive to contain the individual endeavours at elaboration and the overstepping of definite parameters. Therefore, while the two stories engage in separate ways with local politics and determinate social bases employing postmodernist and postcolonial literary modes, "The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi" expresses this conflict of intentions through its esoteric mystic language and imagery thereby endowing the narrative with a sense of the absurd and the futile. And, the constant structural interruptions in "I, Tiresias" from European literary texts and travelogues that took shape within the dynamics of past interactions, convey a similar sense of disjunction.

By the time Sarah Joseph arrived on the literary scene, the renaissance movement in Kerala had ebbed and the once enervated forces of reaction were gaining momentum. Realism in expression had given way to experimental modes though social concerns made up the larger part of content. The singularity of Joseph’s writing lies in the poetic quality of her prose. A comment by Forrest Read attributed to the kind of prose imagism created by James Joyce also holds true for her prose style which is based on "the form of an emotion rather than the form of a short story" (qtd. in V. Shaw 238). In a story like "The Imminent Gospel" style is not a means of communicating experience but is rather an exercise by prose in capturing
and becoming experience itself. This manifests as the radical displacement of a narrative of events in favour of a narrative of sensations, sense-impressions and atmospheres. In fact the epiphanic intensity of Joseph’s craft depends on the friction between the preponderant instinctual or the anarchic subliminal attributes of her subject-matter and the artistic stringency with which the fiction is shaped and framed. The sharply registered sense-impressions in the manner of the Woolfian inner experience typically centre on the inward meaning of a crucial event invariably grounded in the material, rendering the short story a form ideally qualified to the examination of a subjective, internal reality. Transient impressions under the circumstances transcribe their sense of the inconclusive and the illogical into a fragmentariness of the form. And the sudden closures imposed on sensory rhetoric by the logics of dialogue provoke an atmosphere of anxiety:

My daughter laughs when the wind blows. Flower petals and stardust shower into her room....Dreams from her eyes frolick like butterflies and scatter through the latticed-window. They graze like herds of sheep within the blue folds of the mountains!

I am bereft of dreams. Neither yesterday nor many days prior to it, have I dreamt a single dream.

“Amma when will you speak to me?” (Joseph, “Imminent” 4)

Joseph’s own modern idiom with figures drawn from religion, Indian and western literature produces an abrasive literary texture interwoven with the redemptiveness of hallucination and rude awakening, that resists
any separation of present-day reality from time past or time immemorial as an act of historical oversimplification. Her style reflects these complexities in the conciseness of narrative, precision of language and abrupt closures. In making her characters serve the interests of "truths" that at times are meant to be more significant than the characters themselves, Joseph seems to be forging a modern alternative to religious myths and parables although moral tags or didactic purpose are not a programmatic feature of her short fictions. Fiction calls in question the authority of the sacred texts. No matter how opposed to religious doctrinal systems she is--and herein lies the paradox--her impulse is essentially a didactic one along secular lines.

The braiding of religious cultures--Sanskritic and Biblical--into vernacular formation has brought about alterations in the literary status of these prescriptive forms. An obvious impact is their arrogation to themselves social and cultural power to regulate morals and manners. Joseph's concern with the restructuring of principles regarding gender conventions induces her to de-localize such "travelling" authorities. The use of emblematic figures and situations to rein in the expansive tendencies of varied elements of the story helps her to adapt preceptive techniques to a specifically secular trajectory of fictional purposes. As for the short fiction, such a move extricates it from the context of religio-social morality by stripping away the accretive layers of its socially directed religious significance. This in turn forecloses the possible reversion of any religious element to its literary origins in the parable. Another feature of this mode can be seem in the non-linear, achronological, anti-causal narrative of "Ashoka" which refutes the classic chastity test--a practice constitutive of
the prerogative over truth—and in doing so pre-empts the epic source, the
Ramayana, as well as the authority through which it legitimates its
directives and decrees. The versatility of the genre to appropriate other
generic traits and functions is redirected, reimprovised, and subordinated
to the intentions of the writer.

Joseph's tightly-written but poetical prose disengages from the
principles of everyday language, but not necessarily from the materiality of
its origins. With its emphasis on the instinctual and the vagrancy of sense-
impressions, her works exemplify a type of neo-romantic writing
unburdened by the heroic scope and familiar passions of the romance. So
to speak of Joseph's art in the same breath as Virginia Woolf's treatment of
the short story genre will not amount to stretching the comparison. Her
writings also invoke a quality of the postmodern in its kind of inconclusive,
anti-discursive narrative paradigm that makes possible a free play of
probabilities. This effect partly derives from her preoccupation as a woman
activist from which fiction borrows ideas just as it contributes to feminist
theory as a practical application of feminist ideology and culture.

The realm of anti-realism these fictions patronize offers a variety of
motifs often drawn from a discourse of feminist psychoanalysis, or from
feminist-oriented concerns about the environment, or from an engagement
with the modern. Texts in this mode are generally organized around the
concept of the fractured self and explore the complex constitution of female
subjectivity and its inherent conflicts. Despite the perceived ahistorical and
a-cultural contextuality of the female protagonists, women are not rendered
as mere "essences" trapped within and between operations of linguistic language structures and gender laws, deprived of self-determining action. The psychological angle instead serves to maintain a sense of the imperceptible, that which eludes the epistemologies of logic, although the discipline of psychology itself is based on one such rationalizing system. In this respect, the fictions do not essay to displace or disprove the "rational." It nonetheless puts in a counter-claim for the subliminal and the arational.

Mahasweta Devi’s refusal to be compartmentalized as a mainstream or even an off-stream writer is suggestive of her unorthodox and non-conventional approach to the craft of short story writing. She claims the influence of sixteenth-century poet Kavikankan Mukundaram Chakravarty, in particular his work Kabikankan Chandi, especially in his employment of language describing the contemporary social scene, the common people and the tribals (E. Chatterjee 177). Documentary realism, the primary stylistic index of her creative writings also alludes to the complementary, multi-faceted aspects of her work in journalism and social activism. The well-researched accounts of histories, rituals, oral traditions, proverbs, folklores and customs it comprises not only imply Devi’s intimate, organic experience that lends authenticity to her works, but also constitute an independent subaltern epistemological system. It nevertheless is hard to ignore those journalistic qualities which contribute to the structure of the short story namely, “immediacy, compression and vitality” (V. Shaw 8). Devi’s use of jargons, idioms and patois confer on language a vibrancy that introduces looseness and profusion into the tight framework of the story and counterbalances an austerity of style induced by narrative realism. This treatment of language expands the dimensions of stylistic manipulation
through which ordinary events acquire an extraordinary import. The result is a deliberate reduction of reality into grotesque irreality.

In “Breast-Giver,” the doctor’s reflections on breast cancer interspersed with English words drawn from medical terminology—“seriously,” “drip glucose”, “toxemia” (Devi, Breast 72)—generate a sense of the unreal, a dissociation that heightens the state of insubstantiality to which the subaltern;u-e condemned. The redesigning of language underscores the margin for probable fallacy in reportorial “truth” and in the process makes allowance for internal resistance and debate. This strategy takes on a question and answer format in “Salt.” The unrealness of the situation in which a cheap commodity like salt is withheld from the tribals is reflected in the lack of direction, the incoherence and the tone of absurdity the exchange between the member of the youth-team and the incredulous Medical Representative acquires:

“What can go wrong if one doesn’t eat salt?”

“What can go wrong? If you eat high calorie foods instead, you’ll be able to make do with a minimum salt intake.”

“Arrey, there are people who have no connection with calories.”

“Yes, yes, Indian people don’t have proper food habits.”

......

Who are these people? Have you seen the new fillum?”

“No. Come on tell me!” (Devi, Breast 132-33)

Within the frame of the short story, length usually allows for authorial presence, opinion and impression as evidenced in several of Devi’s
stories, a detailed analysis of which at the level of discourse was attempted in the previous chapter. But the interventionary role played by the third-person narrator through a pseudo-intellectual commentary on what is presumably a factual account leads to a hyper-fictionizing of the genre. The contrived nature of the genre built up by irony, sarcasm and counter-statements thus oversees authorial distancing, a requisite to the effectiveness and objectivity of social criticism. "Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant" is a novella that demonstrates its fictionality from the very beginning. To illustrate the point it is necessary to quote at length:

The title is a bit misleading. The fact is, the elephant and two mortals, Somra Ganju and Bulaki, all three, through Jagmohan’s death, had reached ends which can be called incredible, yet very very credible. The last events took place in the October of 1977. The story also has blessings of miracle but that aspect is within the exclusive jurisdiction of the powerful brahmin Hanuman Misra of the village Buruniha. Believe it or not, fantastic and unbelievable happenings took place near Burudiha...The supporters of Misra claim that such events took place for the sole purpose of teaching a lesson to those fools who want to eradicate untouchability and torture to the Harijans through constitutional measures...[A] zealous supporter of Misra has already published a book, "Jagmohan the immortal" and it sells like anything in the stations between Gomoh and Dal tonganj and at the Jagmohan temple. (Devi, "Death" 9)
Devi's emphasis on unaffectedness and unembellishment in technique is balanced by an equal concern for what she has to say. The documentary-realist style, occasionally interrupted by the grotesquely unreal, does not in any way limit the scope of the narratives or the width of their purpose. Her craft, born out of a sense of social commitment, complements and supports her concerns. Stories are handled with a characteristic blend of dark humour, and outrage—a style that enigmatically juxtaposes the perversity of the comic with the grim horror of tragedy in attempting to elaborate a public space for debate. At its basic it is art as protest.

Vaidehi appears to be by and large unaffected in any obvious way by the major literary developments or involved in the many polemics of feminism. This is borne out by her individualized mode of writing, her original narrative style and her technical preoccupation with the interpretation of the gendered category of woman. Regardless of any kind of metaphysical or philosophical enquiry into life, her art is rather grounded in the intricate constructedness of the lived experience, especially with respect to the role of the larger social institutions in conditioning and constructing woman's reality. What strikes one on reading Vaidehi's stories is the similarity they share with Devi's in the tendency to replenish prose with vernacular dialects and a colloquial idiom, a trend of enduring significance to the development of the Kannada short story. Their "humorous and poetic" diction brings to her prose an eloquence, dynamism and ingenuity that is somewhat uncommon in "Grānṭhika [standard] Kannada," avers Vaidehi (Vaidehi, "Akku" 14).
Though rich in evocative detail, her narrative technique employs minimalist metaphors and extra-referential expressions in delineating characters, their sensibilities and concerns. Elaborate descriptions often juxtapose with stylistic understatement setting the tone of the story through a subtle exchange of ambivalent impressions and shifting perspectives. Several of these features are apparent in the introductory paragraph in "Akku":

Akku has a large vermilion mark on her forehead although she has no husband. There are black beads around her neck, but sometimes she will leave them in the corner of her box when she goes out. She has often devoured people whole, who have asked about her husband's whereabouts. Not always, though. Sometimes she will sit silent and tight-lipped. At other times she will burst out laughing through crooked mouth and nose-tip, shaking her head and looking at you from the corner of her eyes. (Vaidhi, "Akku" 15)

"A Day Scarred by a Kinsman" links a psychosomatic symptom with the arrival of an unknown, unwelcome guest, communicating a sense of human isolation, a foreboding of things to come and the inexpressiveness of form:
Shrouded in a cold. An irresistible urge to pluck the nose off and plop it somewhere. A fever coming on...There's a knock on the door.

When opened, there stood a man anyone could have described, eyes closed, as someone who had retired many years ago. Flat face, dry wilted body, a blanched umbrella rolled up and shoved under his arm, he stood as if rooted to the earth under his feet. (Vaidehi, “Day” 238)

Many of Vaidehi's stories are set to a formula of the arrival and departure of an unexpected person or stranger, whose presence precipitates, exacerbates an already existent but suppressed personal issue into a full-blown crisis. F'ardly ever do they conclude in a resolution, but they often culminate in the shock of inconclusiveness. If the unannounced arrival of the former maid Babi in “An Investigation” induces a psychological breakdown in the female protagonist, then in “The Confession,” the unsettling admission of matricide by Narmada's travel companion provokes nightmares about the notional integrity of the family long after the chance encounter. And in “A Day Scarred by a Kinsman” the old man’s perverse comments about his daughters trigger violent visions that leave his reluctant hostess mentally and physically incapacitated. A conversationalist mode often alternates with critical observations and stark imagery, building up to the climactic moment. The reader is time and again led to believe that a solution lies just ahead, only to be caught unawares in her
complacency, threatened by an unexpected turn of events or twist of the plot.

Consider “A Day Scarred by a Kinsman” once again in which conversation between the two interlocutors is restrained and one-sided. Form engenders, frames and sustains a general mood of disquietude through the absence of direction and purpose. The droning quality of the stranger’s speech amplifies the void generated by the woman’s monosyllabic responses and indifferent enquiries, and creates a climate of fatigue that suspends time:

What now? He appeared to be deep in thought about something else to talk about. The crackling heat of the afternoon sucked away the ticking of the clock. (Vaidehi, “Day” 243)

The narrative weighed down by lethargy, gradually gains momentum attaining feverish intensity with a deft contrivance by which the man’s senility transforms into a threatening fiendish cruelty. Just when the reader has resigned herself to a conclusion of horror, there is a final movement, usually an act amounting to retribution on the part of the protagonist. Therefore on the heels of the uninvited guest’s departure the antimacassar against which he had leaned is hurled into a bucket of water implying a symbolic cleansing of his presence. At this point, the stasis that pervades the form of the story till then breaks its hold with the resumption of interrupted time, although it need not signify a similar release for the woman:
She finally stood, holding on to the door.

As if she had not heard the clock strike two. Loudly.

(Vaidehi, “Day” 244)

Or, for another example, take “A Memory called Ammacchi.” The vigour of vernacular idiom colouring prose lends itself to a rustic blend of humour and earthy imagery, domineering and provocative in tone, so that Ammacchi’s rape by Venkappayya comes as a hard blow to the unsuspecting reader. Aversion to the assault at any rate arises precisely from its insinuation which paradoxically enhances the suppressed force of brutality. With the suicide of Venkappayya the crisis is defused and restitution alluded to in “the expression in Ammacchi’s eyes as she wiped her face with her pallu - she was laughing from the corner of her eye” (Vaidehi, “Memory” 94). To claim that this recuperative movement inflects form to effect a closure on the irresoluteness of plot is misleading. For, all crises ensure irreversible changes, nothing will ever be the same again. And this cue is taken up by style and structure, caustic rejoinders and witty remarks---verbal modes---giving way to visual significations. If one were however asked to identify distinct qualities of Vaidehi’s writing, it would have to be structural compression, consistency of tone, and ingenious manipulation of language.

“Fiction without artifice” approximately sums up the formal and stylistic character of Rajee Seth’s writings (Narasimhan 294). Perhaps the most versatile among the writers that we have discussed so far, especially in her employment of language, it is not ingenuity that sets her apart, but
rather her unusual ability to manipulate form and combine words in such a manner as to produce a corresponding vicarious response in the reader. Take this exquisitely crafted paragraph evocative in its detail, describing a dying woman and her watchers in “The Event,” for example:

Then the tension tires. The muscles relax, and the ageing sluggishness reclaims her face. The tempo of breath revives and with the soundless, calm, drip of cold sweat, everyone returns to life. (Seth, Against 8)

Most of Seth’s short fictions vary from one another at their thematic and stylistic levels. But if at all they share any similarity, it is in the lack of distinct form. In spite of that, there does not arise any internal incoherence or unwieldy constructions as is borne out in the clarity of their diction. Formlessness instead sustains conflict, the aesthetic requisite of short fiction, lending a rare kind of intensity and complexity to them. Reminiscences and introspections vie with and confront the present where the manifestation of truth acquires epiphanic dimensions, invariably tied to ontological concerns. This is nevertheless preceded by a slow, uncertain searching rhythm towards that evasive essence of a situation.

Seth’s stories without exception inaugurate a crisis-in-process against the convention of leading up to one in the course of the story. “Yes, Yours Only” opens thus:
Suddenly there was an unusual quiet. No hot discussions, no war of wits, no clashing of built-up egos. Everything seemed to stand into steely silence that smacked more of resignation than relaxed calm. (Seth, “Yes” 41)

Apart from an obvious crisis implied in this paragraph, what strikes one is the usage of a wide range of words and phrases to build up formal tension, words pertaining to sentiments, emotions and feelings. Or, consider “The End of a Journey” in which the death-throes of an extra-marital relationship are sounded with acuity. Passions though not distinctly obvious are intimated in abstract and contradistinct terms, inscribed on to form:

You had always insisted! That we will not relent to the petty, or the mundane. Only the sublime, the ideal, will fashion the planes of our relationship. Yours and mine! (Seth, Against 43)

These are consistently reiterated in the course of the narrative culminating in a crescendo of insight either through restrained, almost staccato dialogues resonating with the unsaid or in unvoiced thoughts fragmented by ellipsis. At times, form, as it does in “The Event,” performs a sleight of perspective by which it shifts suddenly from the main incident to focus on a lesser perceived but unsettling truth:

He cannot explain to anyone that this main event is not of someone’s breath stopping. Its not of a person dying! The event is that in this crowded world, in a dark, chilling room a living person will be left totally alone. (Seth, Against 12)
In a similar yet distinct way "Against Myself" opens at a critical point, gradually attains clarity of vision to reach an epiphanic moment:

"I know!" he sat down, looking shattered. What is it that suddenly crushes him? There was just no bond between my creativity and his being, and yet...

I suddenly knew that the writer in me was dying. (Seth, Against 71)

This in any case is preceded by the impulsive act of burning the book of poems which anticipates her eventual capitulation to the emotional and sensual demands of marriage. At this point it is important to note that stories which lack a distinct form are essentially vested with the authority to examine social conventions. Such formal non-adherence oversees endings which suggest "a sense of wasted rather than exhausted potentiality," of blighted hope brought about by conditioned self-depreciation (V. Shaw 18-19).

It is hard to put one's finger on the pulse of Seth's protean application of form in her short stories. Though contentious, it must be acknowledged that her skillful use of language empowers her with latitude to explore a wide range of situations, unconstrained by literary dictates to strictly conform to a fixed stylistic or formal frame, or arrive at any resolution at all. The islands of resonant silences amid an explosion of passions, the sheer unexpectedness of situational development, the forcefulness of spare yet emotive prose conveying an impression of curbed power compel one to assert that in Seth's craft language assumes the
function and dimensions of form. This is why although a story like "The End of a Journey" suffers from a thin storyline and appears deceptively trivial and superficial, or the loose structure of "The Bridge" overwhelms with a suffusion of sentiments--systemic drawbacks of her art--they hold the reader's interest by a treatment of diction that acts for and becomes form.

"You Too" is a striking story of conscience, atonement and requital. The graphic focalization on the ailing woman's death introduces a foreboding element into the narrative framework of claustrophobic guilt:

Mother died one night, suddenly. Her body was stiff, keeled over. One leg hung from the bed edge as if poised to climb down, her neck raised and the eyes glaring fixed. The sheets clenched under the body captured her struggle, perhaps she had tried to get up. (Seth, Against 52)

The sensationalism, extravagant characterization, digression from accepted custom and allegorical tone recall the short stories of nineteenth-century American master of horrors, Edgar Allan Poe. But the tale's tensile balance between the soul and the social, through its sustained unsentimental yet poignant portrayal of declining values, moral lapses and ensuing mental desolation brought together in climactic terror, bear similarities to certain works of the Russian master, Anton Chekov. It nonetheless holds special significance in the Indian context, given the inextricability of the religious, the social and the private spheres.
Seth uses short fiction to document social attitudes and the power of
convention, and attains it through impressive brevity and intensive enquiry.
Those of Seth’s writings that focus predominantly on women strike a
familiar chord with feminism in their unequivocal pursuit of the women’s
question and espousal of women’s causes. Feminist researches on women’s
problems, the kind of gendered notions they “rationalize” in collaboration
with various knowledge systems ranging from psychology to economics, and
the resulting theories they propound find parallels in fiction. Gendered
social codes regarding rules of conduct, moral principles and values
reverberate in the themes of guilt, despair, human isolation, re-evaluation,
self-assertion, redemption, retribution and self-abnegation. The stories
reveal creative and critical intelligence in their analysis of the complex
identities of women, who are “at war” with themselves against the hold and
demands of tradition (“Against Myself,” Against 73). In the process they put
in a counter-claim to those gendered directives which have been handed
down through the ages binding women to “the cross of accountability”
(“Eternity,” Against 35). This easy theoretical referentiality of the fictions
confirm their status as likely counterparts to feminist theory.

Mahasweta Devi and Qurratulian Hyder resort to the literary form of
the novella in a few of their works. The novella’s narrative proclivity towards
compression, on the one hand balances economy with expansion, a stylistic
device that may be viewed on the other as achieving a “total aesthetic
impression” (Reid 44). The writers’ critical application of this dual aspect of
the novella translates the inherent tension in the set of dyads into a
contradiction between practice and theory, that comes into play in any discursive engagement of the nation-state, even at the level of fiction.

In Urdu prose fiction, a definite shift from the short story genre towards those of the novel and the novella can be discerned in the period following the Partition (Ahmad, “In the Mirror” 195). The compulsion to capture a broadened time-frame comprising the processes of pre-and post Partition histories, social configurations, community affiliations and locations required a generic structure capable of accommodating these impressions. Both of Hyder’s longer pieces—“Housing Society” and “The Street Singers of Lucknow”—in various degrees and differing manners, at one level, proffer the narrative of an uninterrupted and composite culture that mirrors the nationalist aspirations of the pre-Independence era. Yet there are inevitable internal conflicts relating to the altering policies of interactive political fields, the collaborations and contestations over the character of nationalism, the challenges to the exclusivities and hierarchies of class and caste/race, and the exhaustion of a dwindling community through “minoritisation.” Similarly, the sites of narration are fractured and may shift from Mohammad Ganj to Kanpur to Karachi (“Housing Society”) or from Lucknow to Karachi to Bombay and back to Lucknow (“The Street Singers of Lucknow”) but there is a noticeable coherence and continuity in the structure of thoughts and feelings expressed.

Hyder’s persistent attempts to depict a nation’s unity and democratic integration fails to achieve formal expression in the novellas and is at most untenable and an ideal possibility; while her detailed elaboration of the
Muslim community bound through rituals, mores and shared experiences suffer an underlying disintegration. "The Exiles," to a lesser degree, also demonstrates this formal dualism, aspects of which were dealt with in the preceding chapters. Her comparatively small repertoire of plots, situations, and "type" characters actually seem to allow Hyder exceptional freedom to investigate the possibilities of short fiction and to improvise a wide range of tones and techniques. However, the recurrent patterns of repetition and change leave the impression that she is torn between the forms of the novel and the short story. This is a view made credible by the voluminous nature of many of her stories.

Devi by contrast brooks no illusions about an ideal nation-state. Her novellas, "Pterodactyl, Pirha, and Puran Sahay", "Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant" and "Douloti the Bountiful" demonstrate the isolation of subaltern communities and individuals, all of whom undergo a reifying process when subject to the de-sensitized and determinate theoretical modes of documentation. The fictitiousness that theory acquires when delinked from the lived experiences of the objects of its study reflects the duplicity of form. Through the incident relating the visit of persons from various social and political organizations to the brothel, in order to take depositions from prostitutes so as to compel the government to ban bonded labour in "Douloti the Bountiful," Devi draws attention to the dehumanizing and alienating principles of the documentary genre that are often taken as marks of "objectivity." These men subscribe to differing ideologies which prescribe representative resolutions to the problem. Father Bomfuller from the Mission is a sociologist: cum social activist whose report on the
"Incidence of Bonded Labour" aims to build a regional case for abolishing the bonded labour system (Devi, Imaginary 85). Prasad Mahato a harijan himself, advocates violent means: "They are shooting guns in Bihar to keep the honor of the harijan women in Bhojpur..." (Devi, Imaginary 85). Disillusioned with the Gandhi Mission and the Harijan Association, he joins the Liberation Party at the height of the Emergency, abandoning his original purpose to organize farm workers. Then, there is Puranchand from the Gandhi Mission for whom a non-violent struggle holds the key to resolving the wretched issue, the radical idealism of which is countered by Bono Nagesia: "Hey, you’re a strange bird? You’re explaining religion and by then he destroys the woman’s honor? No, no, this is very strange talk" (Devi, Imaginary 86). As for Douloti, her verbal frugality finds resounding expression in an act of servitude: “Douloti’s fingers said. Why grieve, Uncle Bono? Bondslavery loan is never repaid” (Devi, Imaginary 87).

The medial scope of the novella alludes to a restlessness that enables it to expand beyond the single incident usually making up the short story. One thus finds in Devi’s works a pattern of digressions recounting tribal histories, anecdotes and rituals. These formal elements designed both to intensify and to enlarge the action, lead surprisingly to a retrograde effect. Serious or tragic in tone, they affect to be comic, and serve to provoke satire and enhance paradoxes. For example the central plot of “Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant” is interspersed with several interconnected sub-plots: they comprise a history of the village Burudiha which is also a history of tribal and lower-caste dispossession and oppression by the upper-castes. The arrest of the seven tribal fugitives of Kenandra arraigned in the
sacrificial killing of the money lender Golbandan Sahu is expedited by their encounter with Jagmohan and Bulaki, his mahout. And the narrative of the illegitimate Etoa Ganju and his murder introduces a sketch of the defiant Somra Ganju, who is crucial to the final movement of the story. Each of these episodes deliberately proceed to augment and sustain the pervading sense of pathos to its culmination at the conclusion of the fiction.

Cataclysm and human tragedy over a protracted period in both individual and community life acquire formal outline in Hyder’s novellas through a series of thematic repetitions. They follow a cyclic pattern of chance occurrences, vicissitudes and reversions, very much in keeping with the tightly reined in form of the short story. But their spatial and temporal comprehensiveness widen the margin for narrative action. Both “The Street Singers of Lucknow” and “Housing Society” follow similar models. Change of fortunes in the life of the female protagonists initially resitutes them in different social configurations. For a few the transformation is outwardly enabling, while for others it brings about a drastic reduction in their ability to shape and direct the course of happenings. Basanti Begum (“Housing Society”) sheds her past identity as the victim of a feudal system to become Suraiya Husain the famous artist. But Chhoti Bitya the privileged daughter of the Collector enters the ranks of the working classes following the upheavals of the Partition. Principles and values are forsaken, relationships forgotten or disregarded as time and space enact an amnesiac effect. The recurring fluctuation in conditions sometimes etch a pathos-ridden, vicious circle of poverty and exploitation as in “The Street Singers of Lucknow” in which Rashke Qamar is relegated unwittingly to the margins of society.
whence she had had her origins. A fortuitous event like the party hosted by Jamshed Ali Syed in “Housing Society” at other times provides a purgatorial background to reparation, restitution of identity and redemption.

In view of the above factors, the novella shares with its parent the short story a single critical function that has to do with the economy their forms embrace. It pertains to a rehabilitative quality by which the limitations of form engender small, intimate spaces, empathetic in character. Their receptivity to all things or events considered outside the pale of conventions then is a structural necessity, so that intent of expression and the compulsions of form complement each other. The short stories of Hyder, Seth, Joseph and Vaidehi in a similar way comprise gendered spaces that reconstitute women from psychological, social and material oblivion. The novels and novellas of Devi and Hyder also perform an identical role, reinstating languishing and isolated communities from the margins of identity-crisis, displacement and dispossession always with reference to the larger sphere of the nation.

Now, the literary genre viewed as a dynamic factor in social and historical formation, performs a mediatorial role in stereotyping the social. This is how the subject, a configuration of multiple discourses and the permutations of their valences and positionalities within an assemblage of circulating cultural categories and materialities, then becomes typified within fixed, enduring definitions as a connecting link in the heterogeneity of the discursive chain constructed by language. The short story’s proclivity towards tightly controlling the direction and objective of its formal stylistics
expeditiously locks its characters within the predetermined frames of those discourse-structures advocating passivity, denying them mobility and self-determination. For those writers who do not subscribe to a discourse of inevitability, the limitations of form frustrate individual expression and intentions. The variations and modifications they bring to bear upon the representative status of women characters in their attempt to frame and legitimize alternative ideologies and counter-discourses, under the circumstances provoke fundamental changes in the structure of the genre itself.

In view of this it is not surprising that the reformulation of the female subject (dealt with in detail in chapter 4) occurs along linguistic and discursive lines in the provinces of literary aesthetics and devices, components crucially integral to generic identity. Works like “An Afternoon with Shakuntala” (Vaidehi), “Ashoka” (Joseph), several of Seth’s stories and even Devi’s “Draupadi” deal with subjects of iconic status or exemplify archetypes derived from particular religious and cultural discourses. Their re-telling within the frames of the short story bring about a revision in generic dimensions so as to allow for the expression of unfolding subjectivity. For example, in “An Afternoon with Shakuntala,” subjectivity or a subjective mood serving the need for self-justification dominates the narrative completely through the device of the dramatic monologue. The resulting displacement of the defining elements of genre by an anarchism of the reflective mode dispenses with the need for a descriptive or dialogic format. So much so that the very act of telling is the story and gains preponderance over against the aesthetic principles of either the source
dramatic form or those of the short story. What is of equal importance here is a certain redundancy attached to the implied audience in the monologic mode, that correlates to disjunctions and inconsistencies within social and normative formations.

The impression of historical continuity that is a distinguishing feature of Hyder's works necessitates a structural framework capable not only of expressing the changes through time but also of providing an explorative platform from where the evolving subject consciousness of the woman, especially the Muslim woman may be analysed. Hyder traces her development through a series of temporal and spatial movements, in the episodic elaborations allowed by the novella and conceded by manipulations of the short story genre. Thematic echoes and formal complexities mirror characters who though unaware of those motive forces outside their limited, local and regional field of cognizance are inextricably interconnected with the wider sphere of the nation. Disintegrating relationships and fractured individuals are thematic motifs as they are structural and stylistic rules. The isolation of characters and their angst-ridden, ontologically-directed search for an elusive feel of community beyond the bounds of communal and political affiliations (as in "The Exiles"), leave their impress on form as premature descriptive or episodic closures, lapses of time or irresolute endings. A moment of crisis showing persons on the edge of awareness often leads to a moment of revelation. But this need not raise the action, external or internal, to any momentous climax. Examples range from Jamila's expository but ineffectual letters in "The Street Singers of Lucknow" to the temporally deferred conclusion of
“The Exiles.” Or, the perceived moment of truth for the protagonist like the one in “Honour” may be deliberately anti-climactic building up to a considerable transformation of consciousness or potential realization only to regress in the irony of immutability, and entrenched parochialism exacerbated by dogmatism.

Hyder and Devi create characters whose inward reality is directly accessible to readers, but without sacrificing the material reality of the outer realm. The leading characters are of the sort not normally found in large narratives. They are inherently flawed, socially and culturally marginalized persons if not self-exiles within their own society, or they become so eventually. These lonely, itinerant figures evoke elements of the romantic in their subjective orientation, a throwback to the origins of the short story in poetry, novel and a more hoary source in the Panchatantra of the early sixth century AD. But the formal and stylistic evolution of the genre and its protean diversification into a mode like that of the novella dispenses with any trivializing romanticization, to convey with force the terrifying mediocrity of reality in which the protagonist’s fate is neither heroic nor trivial.

The female subject although ubiquitous in Devi’s texts, has difficulty in gaining access to it as a dominant, autonomous character. Barring a few exceptions like Mary Oracn (“The Hunt”) and Dopdi (“Draupadi”) women are usually employed as a representational strategy to unfold a process of discourse consolidation or else pose challenges to discourse but are hardly ever subjects of transformation endowed with social and historical agency.
This is because a mode like the documentary-fiction which has come to define Devi’s stylistic signature is overtly ideological in purpose. Here gender is subordinated, marginalized or reconstituted to meet the requirements of a master narrative of class/caste-based power or hegemony and oppression, rivalling the delineatory latitude of form. In such instances class functions as a metaphor for gender just as discourse superimposes and assumes the role of an especially biased form. Therefore the gendered subject-other finds expression only outside generic norms, and this accounts for the sometimes impossible form it acquires and the positions it occupies in the texts. Jashodha’s putrefying, cankerous breasts in “Breast-Giver” attain a subject-status of their own, the full particulars of which have been dealt with in chapter 5.

Sarah Joseph who writes from a feminist perspective, likewise, creates a strategy with a radical edge by identifying an alternative tradition that elucidates the complex self. Even when the development of subject-consciousness takes place in the psychological realm, the mode of characterization adopted by form is terse and objective, rooted in the tangible. Her “poetic” dramatization of nature is a relevant instance, very much part of the action rather than an unsubstantial stock of figures and psychological responses analogous to a state of mind. It intimates the relationship between the characters and their environment, of consciousness linked to the larger whole. In contrast to Vaidehi’s subtle descriptiveness, Joseph captures the inner turmoil of her women in bold relief. The distortions in nature track an apprehension of the self trapped between the several mediocre roles imposed by a conservative social
framework, and the repressed yearnings that overwhelm in frenzied outbursts of emotions and suicidal hauntings. They bring about an emotional insulation that translates to a withdrawal from society, personal relations and the broader aspects of life itself. The ideological co-ordinates of this isolation (discussed in the previous chapters) find a counterpart in the particularities of form. But the pervasive sexual explicitness at the same time render complicated any potential equivalence between nature and consciousness or between intent and expression, due to the insistence on the indispensability of the body and sensuality as ontological constituents. These contradicting factors wrest the short story genre from its limited scope of relatedness and effect, forcing a recontemplation of form itself. The attempt of the gendered female to evaluate or establish her subject-status is in that case accompanied by an indeterminacy of form, open-endedness of structure, narrative silences, illogicality and monologic sense-impressions.

Rajee Seth's short fictions are dark, disturbing portraits of turbulent processes; of violated norms and wills, of conflicting emotions and interests, of predetermined choices as the gendered individual confronts an intransigent society. All of these bear upon the constitution of her characters' subject-selves and lend direction to the multiformity of her stories. Gender and sexuality are dominant categories defining her works. Whatever the context--the Partition, love affairs, parent-child or husband-wife discord--there is no panegyric on womanhood. Her women protagonists and, for that matter the male characters too, are forced to confront and re-evaluate with critical objectivity their conditioning, hubris, momentary indiscretions and self-justifications within the chaos and absurdity of their
lived experiences. Moral integrity, philosophical asseverations shatter in the face of one's revealed hypocrisy, decadence, and in the case of men, it is the time-honoured conceptions of masculinity, superiority and strength which they are forced to confront and revise. The old man's self-reflections in "The Event" discloses startling facts about his assumed sense of independence and "the glory of being the patriarch" (Seth, Against 9) before closing prematurely on a restrained formal note of explosive quietus:

His (sic) could never see this woman beyond her total dependence on him. But he sees how wrong he was. He needs her for every tiny thing – for the milk, the newspaper, the medicines and the yawning solitude which has swallowed him.

(Seth, Against 10)

Or consider the protagonist Minni's ontological dilemma in "Eternity," which leads to a deferral of selfhood that is reinforced by the fragmentariness and irresolution of structural un-closure.

A rebellious undercurrent of earnest and involved reading and writing can be discerned in short fiction by women. The dialogism of these writers and their works, presupposed by the interaction between the texts and the several discourses--like history, sociology, eco-conservation, religion, power and hegemony, economics--that circulate in society engages the form of the short story to urges social change. The politics of gender is perhaps the single, common programme, any treatment of which necessitates employing strategies of intervention or subtle subversive manoeuvres to counter and delegitimate locuses of hegemony and
oppression. Instances of these reflect in reactive dialogues between the regional and the national, personal and public, and the self and the state. In narrower terms of its specific goals, relevant stories take the genre perilously close to the brink beyond which lies mere unadorned propaganda. Considering the manifest ideological moorings of Mahasweta Devi’s works, her art straddles dangerously the liminal zone of doctrinal exposition (although rarely offering models of resolution).

The writer’s relation to her milieu is a central concern underlying fiction. Stories with autobiographical echoes portray the troubled artist-figure who in the mould of the post-Romantic anti-hero, “heroically” opposes the disempowering and inequitable trends in society. Hyder’s works are self-investigative and reveal signs of a culturally schizophrenic persona partly due to her location as both diasporic and native, compounded by a division occasioned by the uncertainty of personal and collective identities fashioned in the convulsions of the Partition. For Hyder, the anguish of being an Urdu writer falls within the ambit of the latter context in which “realignments of region and class in the composition of Urdu literary culture” took place at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ahmad, “Some” 24). The despondency resulting from the cultural decline of language and the slow erosion of a community of adherents whose principal ideological position at the time of Partition was one of secularist conviction in the composite culture of Hindus and Muslims, is translated into questions about the self and the ethical responsibility of the nation-state. Here, the much critiqued element of nostalgia attests to an endeavour in “analysis and experience,” an incisive enquiry along socio-historical and
ontological lines into these dynamic pressures on the individual life (Jain, "Post-colonial" 166). In "I, Tiresias" and "The Sermons of Haji Gul Baba Bektashi" Hyder assumes the alternately elegiac and reproachful personal voice of a self beset by public terrors, tempted into cynicism but charged with the burden of bearing witness to history.

Women's writing should not be regarded mere imitations of everyday private or public rebellions, hopes or triumphs, but as attempts to deal with the multiplicity of forces and the inevitable conflicts that arise as they consciously review their ideological universes. Part of the project of feminist contradiscursivity, these enterprises intervene in reality through the frames of an aesthetics specifically adapted to convey the gendered nature of experiences, and in doing so overstep the templates of its materialities to chart a distinct course of political intent. To put it simply, women through their artistic literary expressions "are engaged in negotiation, debate, and protest, invariably in areas that directly concern or are closely related to what it means to be a woman in each historical moment" (Tharu and Lalitha, Twentieth 10). As writers who narrate stories about themselves and other women, they challenge dominant male ideas of cultural ownership and literary authority. The alternative knowledge systems, representational paradigms and discourse fields postulated in the process, signify the philosophical politics of a gendered aesthetics which repudiates historically-determined directives on rhetorics. And underwriting this reconceptualization of culture is the altered notion of the woman writer and her role within the nation.
The major political goal of these literary works is to alter traditional social institutions, cultural life, and normative gender stereotypes. To this end the relation between politics and society is the predominant latent theme on which are poised all other issues. Whether they make out a case for the implementation of progressive legislations concerning gender equality and empowerment, or for radical social measures, or address themselves to questions of gender by highlighting the psychological, historical, social, literary and linguistic investments in patriarchy, these fictions should be viewed at some level as contesting other centres of patriarchal powers, particularly that of political authority. The nation-state as one such nucleus of unchecked jurisdiction is constantly negotiated, recreated and defined by absolute political philosophies with a view to perpetuating its legitimacy. Just as the official discourses--of the nation, nationalism, legal authority and justice, and citizenship--attempt to maintain this status quo, popular social imagination of which literature is an expression, contests these closures that delegitimatize through authoritarian representations its referential status. Of course this is not to ignore the enormous dependency of the nation- concept on the discourse of culture and its gendered practices which draw on the emotional solidarity and subjectivity of its denizens. Therefore, women's writings in a way are expressive of struggles to build manifold perspectives, and of conflicts over power to impose a legitimate view of the world and of women. In bringing historico-political specificity into relation with the sexual differential in literary discourse, they invite us to begin effacing the images of women posited by western theoretical positions. And as the previous chapters have
shown, this has important consequences for the de-colonization as well as the de-institutionalization of women.

That the set of texts discussed in this thesis broadly cite one another is irrefutable. Their critical responses to an ideological tradition that expediently appropriates women as the legitimizing source of patriarchal constructs, their derivative practices, and allied formations, confer on them a sense of cohesion. Irrespective of their theoretical, literary and aesthetic affiliations, the expressions, referents and intentions of these texts are invariably gendered and region-specific. Besides, individual works also include observations or circumstantial descriptions derived in part from other texts or narratives--oral, epic, mythical, contemporary, historical--popular, societal or civil events as well as the experiential. Consequently, each text in a certain sense is a referent for another, as members of "semantic chains" (Sangari 275).

Literary texts as discursive formations are inscribed within configurations of the materialities of patriarchy and class structurings at particular historical intersections, and in the process assimilate the specific deviations, shifts and variabilities of each into the politics of their textuality. The writings by women discussed here not only trace such interactions but in addition vet the conditions of their production. The open-endedness, ellipses, variations and contradictions characterizing the writings contribute to a certain resistance in translatibility and in part arise from this reflexive practice. It is in these spaces of indeterminacy where ideological trajectories collide in contest, change and continuity that "the
possible," as Sangari terms it, is situated (xlix). The possibilities emerge in this thesis through different readings that critically engage textual performance: Conservatively, as the histories of marginalization and suppression, as the exclusions in ideologies of plurality and equality, as the friction between the opening of possibilities for women in ideologies of the nation and the hidden ideological closures that thwart female potentiality. Ambitiously, as refractory knowledge forms and an arationality of self-expressive or othered positions manifest at the concourse of manifold and often contrary structures of oppression, as the conditions of re-semanticization of traditions and prescriptions for women that were derived from other forms of repression, as the reconstitution of othering, as the redeployment of gender-specific agential modes in the establishment of female individuality, as the social possibilities for the democratic latent in the denied figurations of social institutions and relations that legitimatize gender and caste-based divisions of labour, as the renotation of the political Imaginary of the nation. Dynamically, as the translation of a preclusive citizenship into an aporia within the texts, as the dissonance between the semiotic and the literal, as a socially responsive and ethically responsible female aesthetics, as the co-ordinates of the historical circumstances of intertextual and intergeneric connections that enable the short story to take part in a radical political praxis.

Women's writings resolutely enter the political domain in conjunction with the overwhelming social or at times personal undertaking of the short story as genre at the level of its interaction with the contradictory authorities of gender, class and nation. In doing so, they take exception to
the ideological splitting of an "autonomous" terrain of art from the materialities that sustain it. Writing then is also creative activism, overseeing the transmutation of different spheres of experience through an involved process of translating the imagination and personalized impressions into the powerhouse of the performing text. This is text as praxis in its most dynamic form.

In bridging the disciplinary and discursive isolation of politics and aesthetics, social ideas and literary values, in resisting the split between the writer and the theorist-critic which has led to a certain disengagement with and subsequent rigidity in culture, these women writers infuse writing with a reformatory purpose. The questions they raise about gender, women, and the nation seek to project the dynamics of literature as an analytical and affirmative course to the obtuse, conservative trajectory of political, historical and material ideologies that establish the nation. If only to offer meaningful criticism than any substantive solution, they undertake the extraordinary, daunting task of reworking generic thought-forms, reformulating gendered spaces and reimagining stereotypes to propose the unexercised potentiality of that which can be a more liberal and equitable social polity. Therefore, from imaginings attuned to the requirements of their gender, women's writings engender a revisory notion of the nation. And this project defines an act that is at once an announcement and an affirmation of the arrival of the woman writer in the sphere of public debate.