Chapter 4

Deconstructive Strategies and the Literary Discourse

Women signify their presence in both material and intellectual domains through a variety of enabling modes, going beyond male-prescribed limits, often asserting their self from unauthorized positions. All spaces, irrespective of location, are ideologically imbued and by that very fact harbour rifts and contradictions at any particular period of time. These fissures contain transgressive possibilities specifically due to the submerged categories of knowledge forms inhering in ideology, and which evade attempts at regulation and homogenization. Narrative strategies by their very nature are subjective and operate in the interstices of plot, structure, language and genre. They implicate authorial intent in highlighting and altering received poetics, as well as the patterns of ideology qualifying the text. As part of their endeavour in describing or reimagining society, women writers deliberately manoeuvre conventional narrative modes and devices to challenge existing orders of tradition, introduce alternative politics and histories, mediating practices and knowledge systems that recover marginalized and suppressed aspirations, intellects, identities, sexualities, perspectives and presences. Such revisory undertakings attempt to refashion cultural assumptions and postulate alternative logic systems that will preclude ahistoric: or essentialist views of women, and enable their subsequent historicization.
This chapter seeks to address the issues related to the reformulation of women's identities: What are its effects on the status of female subjecthood and subjectivity? Are there attempts at cultural reorganization as figures, institutions, events, knowledge formations and codes that set up the new world of the female subject(s) are constituted? And, do these women writers clearly envision possible solutions to the problems of excluding ideologies and systemic disparities?

The textual status of epics and myths in Hinduism eternalized them as epistemological reservoirs. But even more so, the prescriptive functions and the ascriptive moral values they bring to bear upon their knowledge forms and discourse structures direct the materialities of social practice. Prescriptive texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata with their grand narratives of cosmic disintegration and redemption propound desired ideals of social formation, codes and archetypal models. In the process they elide the histories of contestations and dissent between various ideological groupings, and accentuate those histories of hegemonic ideologies that compel cohesiveness through naturalized inequalities and "rectified" social deviations. As part of female knowledge, these narratives proffer preceptoral figures, among whom Sita and Draupadi are prominent models who function as comparative indices and hence produce structures of anxiety that encourage conformity and submission.

The extensive reach and influence of epics and myths as legitimate history in the popular consciousness make them even more potent forms. Women's responses to these genres demonstrate the nature and valency of
their embeddedness in ideological and epistemological structures. The confrontationalist postures implicit in the engagement of different generic forms with one another enable the evaluation of patriarchal structures and open up the text for counter-hegemonic readings. The short story framing an epic or mythical consciousness dismantles textual codes and formulary prescripts, liberates the text from generic overdeterminism and essentialism, and makes it amenable to reinterpretation. By bringing forth into comparison frames from diverse temporal and spatial discourses that have a bearing on the narrative, the writers attempt to establish in the text allusions to locations of patriarchal power which they then systematically proceed to subvert.

The innovative use of epics and myths by women writers as modes and sites of resistance are directed towards specific purposes: in order to provide structural parallels which act as ideological foils by highlighting inherent inconsistencies, to destroy the fatalism promoted by embedded systems of knowledge, to see women as “evaluative agents” of patriarchal structures in terms of the form and manner of agencies they exhibit, and thereby to historicize women against the parameters of conventional and essentialist notions of women (Sangari 379).

Devi in “Draupadi” forecloses the mythicization of her character Dopdi by distancing her from her Puranic namesake Draupadi of the Mahabharata tale. Though depicted as a proud woman endowed with keen intelligence and intellectual propensity, Draupadi occupies a socially subservient position within the epic narrative as wife of the five Pandava
brothers. Her *vastraharan* or disrobing following the loss of a wager between rival cousins, is seen by Irawati Karve as a “struggle for inheritance,” and signifies the decisive moment that lends disputable reason and cause to the resultant battle between them (qtd. in Ghosh, “Refiguring” 93). Male honour, translated and encoded in the spiritual-philosophical vocabulary of moral ethics and justice, consolidates codes of fraternity, underscores dharmic duties towards one another and compels the retrieval of the kingdom. However, these ontological indices converge on Draupadi, who in embodying patriarchy’s constitutional valency is reduced to an evaluative construct. Draupadi’s dependence on male protection especially manifest in her appeal to the god Krishna further reinforces gendered norms. In a deliberate ideological reformulation of the categories of kinship, gender, caste and politics that had creatively directed the source-epic, Dopdi Mejhen, therefore is by birth a Santhal tribal outside of the Hindu caste system and belongs by choice to an outlawed and radical political outfit, the Naxalites of the late nineteen seventies. If she resists gendered classification as wife and mother, it is in order to accentuate her equitable and pluralized relation with fellow male Naxals. Even so, she shares with Draupadi a certain quality which is crucial in determining their differing contextual valencies and is critical to the outcomes of the two narratives. Just as Draupadi performs the obligatory function of ensuring the unity of the brothers, the very role that lays her open to the epithet of prostitute, Dopdi is the linchpin whose intimate knowledge with its potential for destabilizing the movement, leaves her vulnerable to torture and rape.
Dopdi's multiple rape under the pretext of information retrieval strategy on the express orders of Senanayak the authoritarian government agent to "[m]ake her" and to "[d]o the needful" (Devi, Breast 34), steers and oversees the unmaking of dominant stances. She is transformed by her "refusal to act predictably" (Ghosh, "Refiguring" 98), into a potent subject who by interpellating herself as "[t]he object of your search" (Devi, Breast 36) resists objectification. The mutilation of her body and her refusal to be clothed defies any attempt at appropriation into a discourse of victimology. The naked, disfigured breasts instead emerge from the complex of misogynist and punitive ideologies, refigured as the site of agential potentiality and self-determination: "Draupadi pushes Senanyak with her two mangled breasts, and for the first time Senanayak is afraid to stand before an unarmed target, terribly afraid" (Devi, Breast 37).

Her aberrant response to the rape transgresses conventional victim politics and prescribed notions of feminine and subaltern behaviour. It disrupts the hierarchical structure, the regimented order and leaves ineffectual the chain of command in the military camp. It strikes at the very root of Senanayak's rational constitution shaped and endorsed by the epistemologies of war-literature as well as warfare, renders him unable to speak to Dopdi, to articulate the ontological question that will confirm his hegemonic subject-status: "What is this? He is about to cry, but stops" (Devi, Breast 36). This is precisely the moment Dopdi stops taking orders as a recruit of the peasant movement and executes her own resistance conceived differently from conventional guerilla tactics. And in doing so, her rebellion acquires a distinctly gendered significance that derives from the
resurgent defiance of the humiliated female body. Devi's text departs strategically from the epic at the site where Draupadi's aborted confrontation with patriarchy and her subsequent containment within its boundaries take place. In contrast, Dopdi's individuating agency erupts through this site of paternalist protection and its withdrawal, of identity constitution and inhibited individuation.

Hypothetically considering this a parable of India after decolonization, Dopdi's mimic vernacularization of the oppressor's language, "[c]ome on, kounter me..." (Devi, Breast 37), delegitimizes the authority represented in language. Her enunciation interrupts a systematic practice of modernist politics by taunting, interrogating and displacing through a mutated language of power the functioning of democracy. Dopdi's status as subject is complex and problematic, involving what Terry Eagleton describes as "a release from being possessed" in order to participate in and struggle for an alternative world order (qtd. in Bhabha 172). In breaking out of established political discourses, in prevailing over prescribed gender norms, in overturning expected response-patterns and in exceeding the categories of otherness she asserts her extra-discursive placement. Dopdi resists re-induction into the mainstream unlike Draupadi, her mythical alter-ego. In fact Dopdi can neither be rejected by nor appropriated into the polity. She occupies a wider canvas than the epic, reveals greater depth and resilience of character and attains a larger dimension than the Pandava queen.

In Vaidehi's "An Afternoon with Shakuntala" myth has been problematized as fiction in a temporally distorting interview of Shakuntala
by a lady visitor. An interlocution of women apparently sharing a bond of sisterhood throws open the original text to critical reading from a gendered point of view. The compact form of the short story in this instance, reins in the heroic extravaganza of dramatic plot and structure that help institute a formulary set of characters and values, and also functions as a conscientious whetstone in conceiving counter-patriarchal strategies. The monologic structuring of the narrative in addition retrieves hidden discriminations, pinpoints sites of power contestations, examines knowledge formation and sustains a discourse of emergent individuality. The story-line and characters are all from the original play by Kalidasa, but as Vaidehi recreates it the perspective shifts to disconcerting questions of political partisanship, hegemonic caste and class privileges, prejudiced gender and sexual norms, and their literary productions (much of which have been elaborated in chapter 6), revealing an as yet unrecorded story which is Shakuntala's own (Tharu and Lalitha, *Twentieth 534*).

Kalidasa's Shakuntala narrates the story of Shakuntala, the offspring of the apsara Menaka and the ascetic Vishwamitra, participants in a divine intrigue involving power struggle and its consolidation over the heavens. Abandoned at birth, she is brought up in a hermitage as the foster-daughter of sage Kanva, and marries King Dushyanta whom she meets during one of his pleasure-trips to the forest. Reluctant to accompany him to the kingdom without taking leave of Kanva who is away on a journey, she is given a signet ring as a token of the king's love. A pregnant Shakuntala, encouraged by Kanva, goes to Dushyanta, but is rejected when she claims her rightful position in the royal establishment. The king's failure to recognize her is
romantically linked to the sage Durvasa’s curse and the lost ring, incidents which directly inculpate her and call her morality in question. Shakuntala is carried away by Menaka to the abode of the demi-gods where she gives birth to a son, Sarvadamana, at the ascetic Marica’s hermitage. With the recovery of the ring and the consequent restoration of the king’s memory, Shakuntala and the child are reconciled with Dushyanta through the mediation of the gods. Kalidasa’s depiction of Shakuntala underscores the importance of woman as an integral companion to man in the performance of his duties as a householder, and by the act of which he fulfills his dharma. As for Shakuntala, she is never delineated beyond the figure of the pativrata, the ideal wife. She does not develop a sense of individuality, but instead is constrained within the subject positions conferred on her by patriarchy.

In Vaidehi’s fiction Shakuntala asserts herself from a location of self-exile, and in contravention of classical notions of female innocence with its overdetermined association of woman and nature. Nature here, either assumes its elemental form or acquires a metonymic function that invests the closure inscribed in the silence of Kalidasa’s Shakuntala with self-possession, and transforms it into a productive space of significant silence in Vaidehi’s work:
"...[He] said, with a casual wave of his hand, 'I've never seen this girl in my life.'

..."I became fire itself."

...  
  
  "Not a single world could find breath. Speech had burnt itself to dusty ash. I was struck, dazed."

...  
  
  "I was not Menaka's daughter, nor offspring of a royal rishi, not even Kanva's foster child. I was Nature herself. I could only stand and stare in shock and stunned disbelief. No, no... What more shall I say about a forgetfulness that can plunge the entire world into darkness? Words would lose all meaning."

(Vaidehi, "Afternoon" 543-44)

Vaidehi's re-telling revises Kalidasa's disempowering portrayal of Shakuntala, by endowing her with the capability for decisive agency. Her aversion to present the ring as proof of intimacy, for it could never be "an antidote to a memory so conveniently erased," thus amounts to a rejection of Dushyanta's gendered authority and ascendancy over the temporal realm (Vaidehi, "Afternoon" 544). The material as well as symbolic value of the ring in the political and literary economies of the original text accordingly situate the struggles over power and its practices. The episode of the ring is not as much a structural device as an ideologically infused space where object-identities are constituted and hegemonic positions consolidated. Shakuntala's act of withholding the ring under the pretext of losing it,
exhibits a self-determination that denies the interpellative authority vested with the ring and the subject positions it proffers. Even more transgressive is her refusal to be appropriated into paternalistic social arrangements with their heavily invested monopoly of reality:

“I stood and pondered the edge of the truth that I need not be indispensable to him, just because he was to me. But until I was...I thought to myself, I should not go to him.” (Vaidehi, “Afternoon” 546)

Perhaps a singular feature in Vaidehi’s depiction of Shakuntala is the ontological repudiation of definitive and essentialistic subjectivities. The alternative knowledge forms adopted and identity location(s) established throw open the dyadic categories generally brought to bear upon critical readings of women in epics and myths to multiple applications and interpretations that inevitably plot a politics of subversion.

For centuries now, Sita has been the heroic female on whom Hindu society has long modelled its concepts of female virtue. She is the idealized and deified counterpart to the Ideal Man, a character who unproblematically performs within prescribed cultural norms. Joseph closely follows the original plot of the *Ramayana* in focusing on events leading to the incident of Sita’s trial by fire following Rama’s conquest of Lanka. But like Vaidehi she accords narrative authority to the archetypal protagonist.

In the epic, Prince Rama, the heir to the throne of Ayodhya is exiled to the forests for fourteen years through the machinations of Manthara, Queen Kaikeyi’s nursemaid. She incites Kaikeyi to claim the kingdom for her son
Bharata on the basis of unfulfilled boons. Rama is accompanied by his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. On one occasion, Shoorpanaka, sister to the *rakshasa* king Ravan, being enamoured of Rama attacks Sita. Shoorpanaka is insulted by Rama, mutilated by Lakshmana and driven away. In order to avenge his sister’s dishonour as well as retrieve the prestige of his race, Ravana assumes the guise of a golden deer so as to entice Sita whom he then carries away to Lanka. Rama, assisted by the *vanars* (monkeys) and the gods, launches an attack on Lanka with the aim of rescuing Sita. Meanwhile, Sita is subject to Ravana’s threats and deceptions in addition to his repeated overtures of marriage. She is however assured of imminent release by Hanuman, a monkey-warrior, who seeks her out at the behest of Rama, and hands over Rama’s ring as proof of confidence. An all-out battle then issues between the armies of Rama and Ravana in which Vibhishana, Ravana’s brother, joins forces with Rama, culminating in the death of Ravana and victory for Rama. Rama sends for Sita, but raises questions of her morality and refuses to take her back, yet justifies the battle as a redemption of racial and familial honour. A distressed Sita orders for a pyre to be built. Her attempt at self-sacrifice is however stayed by the god of fire who bears witness to her chastity and innocence. She is reconciled with Rama and both of them return to Ayodhya ending their period of exile.

In Joseph’s re-reading of this cultural tradition, the narration of the subject-self actuates a constant struggle between the epic and the short fiction genres. The enormous ethical and political investments in the discourse of Sita’s chastity in the source-myth, is countered in the short
story by her keen observation which re-frames the circumstances leading to Rama’s order conveyed through Vibhishana that she observe the purificatory bath before coming into his presence. The ritual predicates the accusation of Sita having co-habited with Ravana, her abductor:

Who then was the sinner? Was it the prince, the epitome of Aryan masculinity, who had cut off the nose and ear of the dark-skinned woman who had committed the grave mistake of begging for his love? Or was it he who, as the embodiment of popular justice, had laid hands on the woman of the Aryan and on his earth, in revenge? And who was to suffer the consequences of that sin? (Joseph, “Ashoka” 136)

The uttered questions operate at various ideological levels. In fact, a contextualization of the epic suggests heterogeneous origins, not only in terms of the extended period of centuries through which it was composed, and the consequent incorporation of an entire though variable social continuum, but also due to the structural layering of different versions implied in the shifts and traces within discourse (Sangari 387).

In historicizing the epic, Shoba Venkatesh Ghosh views the *Ramayana* as a record of the social hierarchies, moral vision and expansionist political strategies of an agrarian civilization in the process of attaining indisputable supremacy under an ideal ascendant leader (“Refiguring” 93). The epic indirectly represents and legitimizes the claim to divine right, dynastic rule and class-based monarchy through consanguineous consensus, the loyalty and allegiance of the submissive
subject (Hanuman), and the subjugation and negation of the other. The rakshasas Ravana and Shoorpanaka, accordingly, carry traces of tribal civilizations that were increasingly being encroached upon and usurped by emergent state forms and monarchies. For instance, Shoorpanaka’s declaration of her desire for Rama presumes an individualistic sovereignty: “...[I] am a free person – free to do what I like and please myself ...” (Rajagopalachari 135). To be able thus to articulate her aspirations and interests, to define and thereby enact her agency, and to represent herself entails a socially authorized language embodying a more equitable gender ideology.

Any potential female culture that emerges under supposedly independent circumstances contains elements which corroborate patriarchy or alternatively critique the violence and prejudices innate to the patriarchal order. In constituting a community of women bonded by the uniformity of their experiences, the fiction elaborates this historical interstice within the epic. Sita empathizes with the desolation and devastation of war and participates in the rituals for the dead along with Mandodari, Ravana’s wife, for she “heard someone within her clap hands and call” (Joseph, “Ashoka” 137). Similarly, the rakshasa women share Sita’s grief:

The women comforted her. They moistened her eyes with milk from their breasts and held her in a caress that came like a cradle song to her heavy heart. They held her on laps which were large enough to hold the whole universe. (Joseph, “Ashoka” 136)
Joseph is of the opinion that Valmiki’s *Ramayana* was narrated predominantly “from the point of view of nature and the underprivileged” (Dharmarajan 270). But Indian readings of it has consistently been from a male-centred, upper-caste perspective. Sita’s relation to the earth as the daughter of goddess Earth assumes metaphoric dimensions in Joseph’s reading. Whereas she had borne an originary and elemental association to the earth in the epic, in identifying herself as Earth, Sita is invested with agency in the short story:

Earth’s daughter stepped into the fire, her right foot first. I am Sita, the earth that can destroy fire! She who carries in her womb the rains that have always fallen over the earth....She who must receive rain and seed, fuse them with fire, and lay them out, a fresh, living green. (Joseph, “Ashoka” 140-41)

The discourse of ethics and justice underlying the purificatory fire ordeal undergoes a radical review in the transformation to a fertility ritual in which the patriarchal politics of the state and the social are yoked to ecological degradation and women’s oppression. The corresponding shift in semiotics signifies the moment of epistemological reformulation, cultural reorganization and deinstitutionalization. Sita as earth refutes the notions of marginalization and disempowerment conventionally associated with the trope of land as woman. While male identity and sexual potency are linked to praxis, ownership of land and political power, woman becomes the repository of man’s significance--he assigns her functions, names her--and her experience as woman is trivialized, distorted and obscured. Sita thus
evades the ideological rigours of determinate social, racial and political categories, and of prescriptive ontologies. Her overcoming of the *agni-pariksha*, in a historical sense, however recalls the ancient Shakti cults where woman was viewed as an embodiment of power. This factor as pointed out by Romila Thapar, possibly influenced those innovations which substitute an illusory or shadow Sita for the real Sita in other versions of the *Ramayana* ("Ramayana" 73-74). The epic as a literary form has its origins in societies in which diversity, change and social difficulties are barely acknowledged or are actively suppressed. Therefore, rather than being confined to a time in the distant past, the genre "represents an always-still-available possibility" (Holquist 77). The short story genre exploits this historical undercurrent through changing idioms in the narrative of Sita's cross-examination and sacrifice, to address mythic themes that resonate in India's public life--ecological devastation, repression of women and the denial of their rights, and state-sponsored pogroms.

Any reading of insanity has to contend with its relative differences in contradictory situations. It is incomprehensible and ambiguous, but at the same time is open to scientific analysis. Although it evades logical structuring, it demonstrates a haphazard planning and aberrant consciousness. Therefore, insanity is a notion that fluctuates between indeterminate readings as well as various forms of control. This is reflected in the psychopathology of insanity which arises from the tension of the self's struggle with the other for authority over expression and deed, and is further complicated by the recourse to an external agency for the legitimization of self-identity. The overwhelming forms of interdictions
imposed on utterance and action determine the modes, the terms and the 
agent of communication, and effectively shut the avenues for dialogue. For 
women, these prohibitions execute the politics of patriarchy through a range 
of systems as varied as the psychological to the societal.

Akku the eponymous protagonist of Vaidehi’s fiction exhibits an 
indeterminacy of identity typical to insanity. Her othered location within the 
social formation presupposes a certain disembodiment couched in terms like 
“evil sprite” (Vaidehi, “Akku” 16) and “poor soul” (Vaidehi, “Akku” 19). As for 
Akku, she resists the authoritative attempts of dominant ideological systems 
to interpellate and define her:

“Why do you say that? Poor soul indeed! Why do I need your 
pity? I’m not a widow like you [Dodatte]. Are you pitying me 
because my husband went off to eat what he could beg at the 
roadside, leaving me behind?” (Vaidehi, “Akku” 19)

Her implicit denial of the schism between the mediated self (as a proper 
noun) and the other however is marked by ambiguity, for in representing 
herself elsewhere as “[e]ither Akku or her shadow,” she accentuates this rift. 
It is due to the equivocality of the utterances that she loses her status as 
the author of her own deeds and expression. Yet, these spaces of ambiguity 
serve as the means of “speaking otherwise,” a notion introduced by Luce 
Irigaray (qtd. in Walker 10). For instance, Akku’s apparently irrelevant 
comment to Siriyatte on her marriage, frames a logic that carries 
philosophical overtones: “No one who marries you for your beauty alone will 
keep you happy. You may write that on a wall” (Vaidehi, “Akku” 17). If the
equation of rationality with masculinity allows no voice for the feminine (Walker 10), speech becomes a sphere infused with male desire. In that event, female desire can be expressed only beyond or outside of masculine logic. Here the semiotic asserts itself from the place of the other as disconnected and condemnable speech. This seditious site is governed by an *arationality* that derives from the female (intellectual) experience, circumvents the appropriative structurings and vocabulary of (male) reason and philosophy, and is voiced only in association with the female body.

Akku’s speech falls in the category of “linguistic excess” compiled as it were of curses, diatribes, couched criticisms, confessions and revelations (Rajan 88). But the semiotics underlying this language derive from and are located on the body, expressed in charges of the supposed extra-marital affairs of those around her in addition to claims of her own illicit relations with other men. Her feigned pregnancies occasionally accompanied by psychosomatic illnesses are bodily symptoms typical to the hysteric, itself a form of language that escapes the linguistic terminology of the masculine estate (Walker 132). It becomes an expressive medium by which she is able to articulate and assign significance to an otherwise silenced desire. Such deliberate speech—discredited as lies, fantasies, desires or hysteria—signifies unspoken or unutterable truth, and consolidates as well as relocates the disembodied female self within a substantive knowledge-structure tangential to prevailing ideological systems. From this location, she challenges the phallocentric injunctions pertaining to the politics of communication and the social codes it puts in force. This kind of reading suggests that insanity is not necessarily opposed to logic, but may be part of a paradigm of
rationality that has its own gendered “other.” Patriarchal retribution being inevitable in such circumstances, Akku’s incessant screams repulse disciplining and containment by the techniques inherent in established speech-structures.

Sarah Joseph’s depictions of insanity invariably draw attention to the fine line that divides sanity from insanity, the forms of violence specific to both states and the volatile nature of the self under related circumstances. In “The Last Sunflower” the peculiar violence underlying sanity upholds the elements of logic and the rational at the expense of desire. Susanna’s apparent soundness of mind therefore belies the schism in identity and projects as substantial what is in fact a self compromised by the other. This is manifest is Susanna’s attempt to “visualize” her self in the mirror. The mirror figures a process of evaluation and identification, and functions as a psychological gateway in the consolidation of the self. For Susanna, the mirror however becomes the focus of anxious, ungratified narcissism due to the denial or lack of a corresponding narcissistic image:

Susanna sat in front of the mirror.

The mirror let her down. (Joseph, “Last”19)

Consequently, cession to the other confers on Susanna the freedom and autonomy to pursue a desire which is a mixture of physical pain, madness and death.

Contrary to the psychological melt down that is symptomatic of the other, the protagonist’s frame of mind reveals a variant consciousness and perception of reality manifest as dreams or as a montage of sensory
experiences and images. The spectral sunflower along with “the seven wounds on her ribs made by a painting knife, and the ear tattooed on her chest” are projections and workings of a masochistic desire that evades, yet implicates, regulating institutions and systems, and pinpoints defining historical moments (Joseph, “Last” 21). In imaging Susanna’s crazed lover as the artist Van Gogh, Joseph employs art or pseudo-art as a medium of psychological reconstitutition. The strategy evokes the ethical, personal and creative sensibility of the nineteenth-century Dutch impressionist painter Vincent Van Gogh, in order to make out a case for the redemptive power of insanity. Subject to fits of insanity, Van Gogh’s tormented and relentless search for self finds expression in each of his works. His most “sacramental’ images” nevertheless derive inspiration from among “the poor and destitute and other outcastes and rejects of industrial society” (Honour and Fleming 569). Van Gogh’s signature painting, the predominantly yellow “Sunflowers” is an extension of these passions, and was inspired by the sunbaked, violent landscape of Arles, France. Not only does Susanna embody these aspects of Van Gogh’s art, but in doing so she also becomes the exorcized other of her artist-lover, the body on which his desire is inscribed. The double othering she undergoes, far from rendering her an indeterminate object, endows her with multiple significances and mediatory functions that enable her to manipulate different “realities” through a logic of the other. And in this capacity as the other, she intervenes in the real in an effort to rehabilitate her lover from his catatonic stupor induced by institutionalization. The family who “would reclaim Susanna like a lazy yawn” (Joseph, “Last” 19) and the mental asylum where she locates her listless, depersonalized lover
are institutions complicit in the ordering of identities and organization of
reality, authorized to confine and discipline intransigent and deviant
persons.

The protagonist Minni in Seth’s “Eternity” displays a certain loss of
meaning that is typical of women in a patriarchal society. Compelled to
abide by inviolable codes of morality and duty in compliance with a set of
roles within which she must order and re-order her choice of identities, the
nature of Minni’s self is predetermined and posited as whole. But her
ontologically relevant inquiry into identity registers an underlying schism,
for she lacks the kind of privileged knowledge about herself that is the most
conventional response to her self-directed questions:

Why couldn’t Minni separate her from herself?
....

If that woman wasn’t Minni then who was she? Who was she
that was still grappling?....who was she.... (Seth, Against 35)

The alternation between the interpellative proper noun and the third person
in attempting to articulate the self highlights an uncertainty, a fissure in the
composition of the conscious self. This crippling state of self-consciousness
is further evidenced by the missing pronoun “I.” The narrative emphasizes
this condition of depersonalization in the inability to sustain the
biographical tone or prevent its inflection into an open-ended indeterminacy.

The interpolation of narratives with epistolary modes and diarist
techniques are strategies in narratology. These generally serve as a comment
on the inevitability of events, mark the passage of time, depict changes in
circumstances, act as a medium for multiple perspectives or merely substantiate certain viewpoints. But their spatial significance arises from the incorporation of desire, beyond the domain of the body, into the text. In doing so, they emerge as platforms from where suppressed female, and occasional male, dissent and aspirations are enunciated.

As pieces of autobiographical narratives addressed purposefully to a particular person, letters are not meant for wide readership. In contrast to the heterogeneous textual narrative within which it is composed, the genre of letters presumes an intent and existence independent of narration. Suraiyya’s letters to Salman in Hyder’s “Housing Society,” disrupt the continuity of the narrative and creates a textual break that parallels her gradual disillusionment with idealistic politics as well as her precarious location as a displaced dissident-artist. The letters which are destined to be locked away or destroyed signal “a loss of self, as if the self were a letter gone astray” (Smith 190). This aspect is borne out by the epistolary notations written under pseudonyms for fear of state censorship and repression. It also indicates the inexorable erosion of her individual self due to the incompatibility of her class position and politics. The unedited, uncensored thoughts and ideas that are autobiographical in tone, however paradoxically create a personal space unrestrained by “vague illusions and circumspect references,” comprising a “literature” of its own (Hyder, Sound 165). The question of Suraiyya’s identity then is tightly enmeshed in a chain of narratives. It is embodied through a hybridity of narrators and a compound of genres constituting the larger frame of a text that seeks to contain her.
The nameless woman, mother and wife in Rajee Seth's "Trapped in Our Pens," though dead, is resurrected through her son's perusal of her desultory jottings in a notebook. A woman whose creative potential is largely unexplored and stifled by marriage to a man who considered reading, writing and the arts as "sentiment" (Seth, Against 64), she is rendered silent within "this social compromise where...[she] can neither die, nor can...live fulfilled" (Seth, Against 63). The resultant anxiety engenders an elusive identity and translates into irregularly dated cryptic writings comprising a single word, a single line or aphoristic constructions that question their own perspicacity. Interrogation marks, apostrophes and ellipses liberally punctuate these sentences. Argumentative, assertive, interrogative, confessional and contemplative in tone, they keenly ascertain her strengths and weaknesses, and record her protests against the gendered nature of marriage:

..."I never wanted to raise my pen against you but...the anger, the outrage against your cruelty, your callousness and your suspicions. Without overcoming it nothing can ever be normal. Without freeing myself from it nothing can ever be called beautiful, or inspiring again. Doomed to this slow extinction, which can be stretched from one end to the other." (Seth, Against 62)

The diary-like form of the entries chronicle particular periods--days and months--of her life. But there exists a palpable tension between the coherence of the methodically recorded dates as they unfold with all the
logic of chronological sequence, and a damning uncommunicativeness underlying the apparent accessibility of the entries. Derrida describes the date as a "notch" or an "incision" the narrative bears in its body, the memory of an experience that marks its source, a temporal and spatial reference unique to it (376-78). This point of reference encloses a mystique that generates a desire in the reader for appropriation, and for monopoly in the writer whose relation to it is one of primacy and intimacy. The diary as the generic medium of the mother's utterance revives her identity, because it is a form which predicates the author's selfhood and therefore addresses the absent other. In fact it demarcates a conceptual space where self and other can interact in simultaneity. The author of the diary nevertheless withholds essential knowledge of herself by repudiating the very agency through which the self is rehabilitated:

17 August: "There is so much that I want to say but...

the pain of life is much larger than the expression needed to capture it. and writing seems meaningless...a hollow cacophony." (Seth, Against 63)

Her frustration at being unable to exceed the inscription of desire and to realize a corresponding practice of self-determination in her personal concerns reflects the limits of this agency. But if the son's resentment towards the father is any indication of the retributive effect of the autobiographical jottings, then the writings in a reading framed by overdetermination signify the vicarious agency of the suppressed.
To the indigenous peoples with a tradition of phonocentrism, absolute authority vests with that which is heard in the absence of a script for their language. Speech structures, evaluates and authenticates the existence of an event, imprints it on cultural memory and makes it a part of the lived experience of the community and its history. Rumour as an aspect of speech shares common features with the oral tradition. Lack of a referable historical source or a linear paradigm with their time frames and periodical compartments adds to its mythic quality of self-sustainability. It also evokes a sense of solidarity among the target “audience” and participants complicit in its sustenance. Since rumours are always amenable to introspection, change and revision, re-composed as each momentous subjective event bears upon the existent version, new meanings may be given to old patterns whereby they function as incubators and circuits for rebellion.3

The Arjun tree revered as an aspect of the divine by the Shabar tribe of Purulia is a reservoir of collective memories, and is symbolic of their precarious existence as marginalized peoples. Therefore, the perceived threat to it provides cause for rebellion and retrieval of identity. Rumours of Diga's oracular dream elevates the Arjun tree from a culture-specific sacred icon to a fetish object of pre-eminence, a “gram-devta,” and mobilizes networking and unity among various indigenous communities (Devi, “Arjun” 187). As a result, the cutting down of the tree is pre-empted despite the orders of the powerful land-owner. The transgressiveness of such unprecedented defiance, purportedly ritualistic in objective, has a restraining effect on the aggressor, introducing an element previously quite alien to him: “Fear. An uncomprehending fear gripped him” (Devi, “Arjun” 187).
The open verbality of rumour when manipulated by those in power can prove detrimental to the interests of subaltern peoples. A redeeming feature of rumours however is their structural liability to “being restricted by...[those] who are also under the influence of phonocentrism – by an apocalyptic horizon,” a mode employed effectively by Devi in “The Witch” (Spivak, In Other 214). The notion of the daini or witch, an integral part of the subaltern belief system, is exploited by the upper caste/class Hanuman Misra to draw attention away from the rape and the resulting pregnancy of the mute and mentally challenged Somri by his son. It is possible to identify here a custodial act of prescribing opinions, prejudices and values for a subordinate group in order to perpetuate its subservience and depression.

Rumours of the daini fuelled by a calamitous presage sounded by the brahmin Misra create discord among the various tribal groups and engender an atmosphere of suspicion that turns them against each other. Discursive displacement ensues from a moment of awareness about the abused cognitive culture and degraded identity they share with the supposed daini. It enables their transformation from a state of victimization to one of rebellion and marks the interception of rumour:

“Not a daini!”

These are...his last words on the subject of the daini.

Thereafter, the pahaan of Hesadi’s words are the first spoken in connection with Somri, the daughter of the pahaan of Tura.

(Devi, Bitter 120-22)
The subsequent decision to deny--tribal or external--labour to Misra indicates collective praxis and agency. Perceived as an aspect of struggle and resistance, it demonstrates an incipient assertion of collective selfhood that sets the stage for recovery of identity and prerogative over their lives.

The self-imposed mourning of the tribals on sighting the "unquiet soul" of their ancestors, in Devi's "Pterodactyl, Puran Sahay and Pirtha," is a form of collective response to the crisis of becoming "unclean" due to the intrusion of the oppressor-outsider into their sacred spaces (Devi, Imaginary 120). This hint of the messianic coincides with the sense of alienation the community experiences owing to the failure of the "democratic" machinery to apply itself to their problems, and it imposes a structural parallel on the short story. The episode of the pterodactyl shares its thematic content as well as formal structure with the myth: it relates to a non-linear, sacred time, tends towards the collective and the supernatural, provides an introduction into a radically different state, and serves a socio-ontological narration. In this context mourning signifies a refusal to communicate by choice and conveys an impression of power as it poses a deterrence to the knowledge of the self and its appropriation by an unconversant, assumed interlocutor. The inscrutable silence of Bikhia which is linked to the presence of the anachronistic pterodactyl then refers to an original epistemology of the self--with its ascriptions in prehistoric cosmology, ancestral and animistic belief-systems, collective ontology and mythic consciousness--that evades the cognitive structure of an outsider like Puran, allowing for "[n]o point of communication" (Devi, Imaginary 158).
It is often a perceived past which contributes to the construction of history, although what is postulated as history may well derive from the perspectives of the present. In the process it excludes other possible, equally valid histories or events. Seen in this context, the interventionist role of the past in the form of myth or ritual creates a rift in the smooth course of the present, thereby introducing into this fabric of time experiences that regulate identification as well as initiate an interrogation of modernity. This Fanonian “time-lag,” a historically transformative moment, inaugurates the emergence of the subject from an often tragic experience of discrimination and subordination (Bhabha 168). It attempts to articulate social contradictions and differences in culture and power relations for, the acceptance of status quo is the suppression of history and of political opposition, the end of the subject, and the superseding of the individual or the collective by the systems that govern them. The effect of the time-lag in the literary text produces a “violent turning from interrogation to initiation” which results in the transformation of a static, decaying moment or situation by the individual or collective into a meaningful actuality (Bhabha 168). Henceforth, there can only be participation, not exclusion, on one’s own terms, conditions and within the respective conceptual frameworks.

Reduced to a mere relic of an erstwhile flourishing and vibrant culture, the original purpose and meaning of the hunting ritual in Devi’s “The Hunt” is lost in the depredations of time through changing political ethos, and habituated tribal deprivation and oppression. Mary Oraon’s killing of the rapacious contractor Tehsildar Singh on Jani Purab, the year when women performed the hunt, resuscitates and transforms the primitive
ritual into a symbolic vehicle of transformative identity and gendered agency. Abstracted from the social grounds of its origin, Mary appropriates the ritual, re-enacting it in her present economic and political milieu in order to address persistent gender and subaltern issues. She de-romanticizes its ethico-cultural connection to a pre-capitalist way of life, exposes the underlying social antagonisms and contradictions, and invests it with the power of resistance and retributive justice.

In a straightforward reading, Mary’s struggle is against the forced usurpation and consequent annihilation of indigenous consciousness and values by a tacit alliance of discriminatory, expropriative national (read as upper-caste/class-administrative) culture and an insensitive, pauperizing capitalist market-economy in which, ironically, she is a willing participant. Mary’s investment in the modernist culture is substantial, evidenced in her individualistic ambitions for the future. It is the perceived threat to their fulfilment which provokes the savage enactment of the ritual hunt:

Mary was getting tired of Tehsildar’s tireless single-minded pursuit. Jalim [Mary’s Muslim lover] might get to know….He might go to Tohri market to kill Tehsildar….He can destroy Jalim by setting up a larceny case against him. (Devi, Imaginary 12-13)

Marriage as social security conceived differently in opposition to the elusive membership of organized communities, is collateral in value to financial security. The augmentation of “her own savings” with money stolen from the victim’s wallet serves to realize these twin goals (Devi, Imaginary
17). Precariously located at the conjuncture of an increasingly isolated tribal community and an aggressive neo-imperialist culture, Mary's ambivalent attitude clearly arises from the ambiguous nature of identity. The situation is further complicated by the illegitimate legacy of an absconding colonial father that situates her at the peripheries of both social structures as an object of desire, nevertheless denied membership to either one of them.

Having come into the consciousness of the need to represent herself, it is not surprising that she rejects the object positions assigned her by the chauvinistic discourses or the deterministic conceptual frameworks provided by the nation-state. The time-lag paradoxically initiates a process of decolonization, emancipating her from the burden of histories, racial genealogies, cultural and political identities. Identity however remains firmly entrenched within the conservatisms of modernity characterized by self-determination and a turning inwards, yet breaks free from the different dependencies enforced by existing institutions. Devi's construction of Mary Oraon, despite her hybridity, even so typifies the general status of the tribal. It reveals the differential incorporation of tribal groups into caste-stratified formations, into wider, changing economic and political arrangements, as the object/unconscious of caste and class patriarchies, their histories of marginalization, and their engagement in various forms of economic, political, and cultural endeavours which have made available to them a range of contemporary class-based self-definitions—Hindu, Christian or primitive. But the particular construction of Mary's sexual desire as that which is withheld and therefore refuses appropriation by upper-caste, middle-class morality, in fact presumes a desire that is self-willed, and thus
confounds a conflation of sexuality and the unconscious. The undeniable expression of sexual desire and pleasure following the killing, “[a]s if she had been infinitely satisfied in a sexual embrace” (Devi, *Imaginary* 17), instead roots her sexuality in a substantive present and correlates it with power:

She will awaken Jalim....They will go away somewhere. Ranchi, Hazaribagh, Gomo, Patna. Now, after the big kill, she wants Jalim. (Devi, *Imaginary* 17)

Power and pleasure are reciprocal, not unequal in effect.

Mary Oraon’s singular capacity as an organic agent locates her outside the hegemonic discourses of the nation. She literally evade containment and positions herself on a self-determined trajectory of limitless possibilities precluding marginalization, appropriation and repression.

The time-lag in “Death of Jagmohan, the Elephant” itself is evidence of an antihistorical consciousness. That is, the narrative entails subject positions and configurations of retrieved oral accounts that challenge and undermine the subject(s) that speak or act authoritatively in the name of history. As a public textual discourse, history is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation-state and therefore elide narratives of “mythical” kingdoms and pasts. Post-Independence nationalism’s orientalizing and anthropological categorization of tribal communities “mythicized” their histories and cultural traditions, and denied legitimacy to these potential sites of latent resistances. The sacrificial killing of the local moneylender during the ceremonial cleansing ritual revives the myths about past tribal rebellions:
Now, for the first time ever, they realized with awe that the old people’s tales about Kol rebellion, Kheroar rebellion, Hul of the Santhals, Ulgulan of Birsa Munda, were not idle tales but truth. This new realization gave them a jerk. (Devi, “Death” 43)

The attempt to write over the given and authoritative narratives of a disabling history other narratives of belonging and empowerment, is to repudiate those mandatory protocols of citizenship: conformity to a homogeneous form of public identity, renunciation of alternative socio-political formations and groupings, and the shift in ideological affiliation along with the transference of unconditional loyalty to the state. Taking into consideration the impossibility of (infra)structural sites where any potential autochthonous identity can exist independent of state intervention, the narrative text constitutes a movement in this direction.

Sarah Joseph taps into the spiritual and metaphysical “Passion” of self-realization and the fictional ontologies of nature to develop liberal referential structures to counteract the conservative order of tradition. In doing so she specifically calls attention to women’s desire for personal and civil liberties, and freedom of expression.

Dreams and visions are pre-rational, non-egotistic psychological processes that involve a free flow of psychic energy and evoke forbidden pleasure against the expression of logically ordered thought. From a metaphysical perspective, they are expressive aspects of the hidden
processes of individual consciousness. The apocalyptic visions of the aged female protagonist in “The Imminent Gospel” is steeped in violent, carnal exhibitionism. It follows the coercive measures and punitive sanctions confronted by the protagonist and her family for violating communal codes of purity. A projection of insular religio-cultural politics, the terrifying figure of the possessed man intimidates with its patriarchal virility. It effects an imaginary mutilation, a “decay” (Joseph, “Imminent” 9) of the female sexual body that is experienced as a psychosomatic disorder inhibiting free will and speech:

I seemed to want to vomit violently. It seemed my eyes would protrude and jump out. I want to wail loudly. But my tongue is tied up. I was writhing. (Joseph, “Imminent” 9)

The metaphysical aspect of identity here, is intimately linked to a spiritual crisis couched in religious terms and symbolisms. Biblical echoes of the Temptation of Jesus, the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, the exorcism of the demoniac, and the supper with the Gentiles act as referential nodes where the metaphysical and the socio-political realms interact with each other. This induces a peculiar kind of temporal indeterminacy in which sacred time and historical time transgress each other’s boundaries. Events arising at this juncture articulate a humanistic discourse that sustains a politics of tolerance and multiculturalism. In this process, the knowledge forms they constitute uphold a secular formula against an eschatological discourse underlying customary principles of justice. The contradictory juxtaposition of the metaphysical, the historical
and the spiritual effects a displacement of the ethical responsibility for one's actions from the public sphere to the inherent potentiality of the liberal individual. Joseph's strategy also executes a gender transformation in the employment of religious figures. She not only demasculinizes the sacred, but also demystifies it by establishing its ethico-social relevance in the present. In experiencing temptations and tribulations analogous to that of Christ, the protagonist is figured as the female present day Christ who must overcome an oppressive, conservative society:

Outside, the devil-ridden fellow clamoured boisterously.

Thrice, I heard it simultaneously one after the other. (Joseph, "Imminent")

It recalls the temptation of Christ. Jesus was tempted thrice by the devil after a fast lasting forty days and nights in the wilderness. And in the paraphrases of established religion is a feminist rendering of personal religion.

Women's identity for Joseph is closely linked to the struggle to legitimatize certain fundamental principles of perceiving life. It envisages a philosophy of being that seeks to be beneficial to all humans irrespective of gender. Into this pattern falls the feminine connectedness with nature, not as an essentialistic symbol, metaphor or signifier but as a vital component of a more equitable system. Procreation and parturition under the circumstances function as ontological resources rather than as biological specificities in "Prakasini's Children." They also embody the social ethics
and values of an inclusive, gendered philosophy that is opposed to a masculinist ideology comprising of non-sustaining economies and discriminative practices. The consequence of such a patriarchal politics of insensible domination and arbitrary resolutions is imaged by an Armageddon-like wasteland inhabited by decrepit scavengers:

....mothers waited for their turn with empty tins, their faces covered with rags.

....

[They]...pointed to rooms that had been reduced to ashes where hungry, weeping children lay heaped together. (Joseph, “Prakasini’s” 107)

Prakasini’s decision to terminate the relationship with its demands for a “son [and]...heir” who is to inherit “endless wealth...rice fields, laboratories, ammunition stores, soldiers” (Joseph, “Prakasini’s” 110), a legacy founded on the ceaseless exploitation of both nature and humans, and in particular of women, should not be construed as a rejection of the project of the nation. It should rather be viewed as a commitment to alternative political strategies that are sensitive to women’s problems, their exclusion from the framing of economic policies, the denial of the right to dignity, to their bodies and lives which are closely related to their ecological systems. However, the emphasis on “feminine” qualities like sensitivity, sympathy, cooperation and the ability to nurture should not be interpreted as a regressive step towards the consolidation of traditional categories and roles. These in conjunction with women’s assumption of responsibility for social action represents instead the beginnings of an attack on patriarchy.
For Joseph nature is not an inanimate stage setting but a living, organic, localised entity fundamental to the survival of the protagonist, or more accurately, of the human race. Such an inclusive cultural aesthetics upholds a holistic view of creation and reinforces the idea that living beings are supposed to coexist in complex relationships. It works towards retrieving the silenced and marginalized presence and rights of the land—in this specific case represented through the lone, sane voice of a woman—along with those of its other co-habiting living entities.

A parallel revisory aesthetics of cultural “ecologicalism” in “The Symphony of the Forest” regards the heart as the seat not only of emotions but also of cognitive faculties closely associated with the subject-correlative in nature. This implied intellectualization of sensibility proposes knowledge forms that are inalienable from experiences involving women’s participation, opinions and interests in conjunction with nature. Through their intervention in patriarchal formations they seek to abolish centres of power, establish equitable gender values and develop a more comprehensive definition of the self.

Joseph’s delineations on the concept of love is deliberately anti-rational, anti-heroic and affective without being maudlin or subjective. Its immoderate capriciousness and irrationality effect a deliberate corruption of the relatively “pure” and inspired romantic love predominant in literature. This transgression of the generic typicalities that constitute the Romance also results in the subversion of its gendered ideology of selfless and subjugated female love. The Romance’s representation of women as “other”
renders them into objects of love and pleasure, a feature it generally shares with other ideological structures. For instance, the discourse of romanticism and rationalism share similar assumptions in their depiction of women even in the Indian context. If the female in romantic literature was figured not as a creating subject but as a symbol of otherness subservient to the male, the source of inspiration for male creativity and transcendence, she was silenced or rather denied existence in the terrains of intellectual and philosophical thought which are but exercises in reason (Todd 116; Walker 32). The particular complex of discourses complicit in the production of language thus makes it impossible to encode women’s experiences other than in set dialectical terms.

In Sarah Joseph’s “Love,” the semiotic is one of relocating female desire by making it the space for sexual pleasure, and of instituting an anti-logic epistemology. The notion of love accordingly takes on violent and obsessive connotations that foreclose the appropriation of the female protagonist as the objectified other, a marked departure from the foundations of romantic and logical discourses: “It is not necessary to have a flawless, logical cause to kill. Love, itself is reason enough” (Joseph “Love” 41). Love in this instance constitutes a “logic” itself. The implied connection between love and death is a recurrent theme which elsewhere elicits a perverse relation between sexual pleasure and mortal pain:
The most cruel pain the most enjoyable love experience were one and the same. All my nerves quivered in a single shudder and all my life bloomed up for the caress of death. (Joseph, "Love" 46)

Joseph's narrativization of love disrupts the social consensus and stereotypes developed around female desire, gender relationships and moral values. There consequently arises a discrepancy in the narrative, in the contradiction between the absence of moral absolutism and a latent misogyny. If a misogynist male desire attempts to possess the transgressive or "sinful" woman and thereby de-individualize her, then the very elaboration of female desire in the narrative redeems her individuality. This tension is apparent in the following lines:

I was the soil which he fenced in, and he alone ploughed and upturned and he himself harvested from! Its loss always made him take up arms.

"You are my boundary and dispute." (Joseph, "Love" 42)

As a rule, the gaze is a patriarchal device that acts out relations of domination and subordination between the sexes. A visual strategy through which the male voyeur exerts control over the passive, female object of his gaze, the mode also concedes in an amplified sense an advantage of narrative standpoint. But the soundness of the identities established and enforced by this means is not always consistent nor admissible, since to a certain extent authority is dependent on a latent hostile other who may or may not return the gaze. Vaidehi exploits this inconsistency in the visual
economy of the gaze in “He” so as to effect a narcissistic voyeurism in the protagonist Sumana. A vague familiarity about the stranger’s eyes sets off a train of thoughts in Sumana as she awaits her husband Manisha. His unfaltering gaze challenges and induces an indeterminacy in her assumed status as an observer:

If I wish, I too will look at him, if it will make him happy.

It is not wrong. How can it be wrong? In a sense it is right. After all, how long will he be able to look at me?

(Vaidehi, “He” 110)

These introspections are inscribed with the projections of a desiring self that resists objectification through the othering of the stranger who takes on, at different moments, the features of her former male acquaintances. Their imagined desire for her paradoxically accentuates the limitations imposed on her desire and hence the circumscribed potentiality of her identity. The moral undertone that inheres in this anxiety of the self, in a similar manner, rather than emphasize the illegitimacy of her desire, draws attention to the specificity of female desire expressed in the body:

Why doesn’t my body respond to his thought? Why doesn’t thinking of him rush my blood to my face? (Vaidehi, “He” 110)

Female sexuality and desire, “womanhood” and its compulsion to be “complete and be thrilled” are strategic forms of self-knowledge that lead to the ontological question: “Am I complete with Manisha?” (Vaidehi, “He” 111). And despite Sumana’s eventual capitulation to the gendered politics of sexual norms imposed by the gaze, the short-lived assertion of her desire
survives the tension that overwhelms the movement towards the establishment of her self.

Hyder’s dystopian vision in the science fiction “Beyond the Speed of Light” explores the sexual politics of science, and questions its authority in the social and political spheres. The dehistoricization and depoliticization of science and technology within the genre according to Derek Longhurst, repoliticizes them as having their own logic, history and evolution (193). The positivism underlying their reconceptualization also structures the protagonist Padma’s cognitive identity as a scientist in this particular case, and interpellates her as a unified and autonomous person. Padma’s transgression of the time-space continuum in travelling to 1315 BC Egypt thrusts upon her the role of a heavenly being that clashes with her self-professed agnosticism. In the process it sets up two contrary knowledge systems, each the derivative of an immutable truth-order: scientific rationalism based on discovery, invention and progress contends with the eternity and transcendental logic of religious dogma. This ideological rift which impinges on the self is evident in her recapitulation of biblical history to the enslaved Jews of ancient Egypt:

“We cannot shift history back and forth. I am telling you all this like Deborah of Israel, who will be born in your society after a few centuries. However, I have come from the age of scientists, not of prophets.” (Hyder, Street 122)
The authenticity of the truth claims refers to an authority in a future time, one which is brought under and appropriated by Padma's epistemic “omniscience,” where knowledge of other epistemic eras are readily available to her, and so authorizes her to speak as proxy for history. However in resorting to a religious discourse she risks her status as a rational subject.

Padma’s reluctance and the narrative’s unwillingness to address the issue of her sexuality in a sustained manner draws attention to the dilemma of women as sexual beings within institutionalized heterosexualities. Her silences and a mock-romantic tone such as “Has the poor boy [Thoth] fallen in love with me?” (Hyder, Street 115), forecloses the expression of desire, and conforms to what Gita Chadha observes as the necessary effacement of the sexuality and gender of women scientists in the course of their socialization within an ideology of science (82). And in the Pharaonic world, the imposing identities—of virgin celestial messenger and prophetess—Padma assumes in effect maintains her desexualization, a pattern manifest in the absence of corroboration from the narrative signification of woman as gender. Despite the apparent autonomy of their religious functions, these female “others” are denied subjecthood. The refusal of speech is a corresponding representative mode that locates them as objects. Thus, even as a divine messenger, Padma cannot challenge the divine right of the Pharaoh to marry her. Nor can she claim affiliation by spiritual descent to the enslaved race of Hebrews, or utter a prayer of thanksgiving, for to do so is to repudiate an ideology that proffers reason and free will as strategic means of engagement in an age of gods and divination.
Hyder's intrusion as author into the narrative through the impersonality of a demonstrative adjective, is a means of pulling apart the apparently tightly-woven narrative ideology that defines gender relations and rationalizes the social project of technology. It introduces an element of fictional skepticism, a hint of the implausible:

This writer does not know either the ancient Coptic, or Aramaic or Syriac, or Hebrew, but it came to pass that [Padma] Mary Kurien understood what Michael said. (Hyder, *Street* 108)

This deliberate interruption exaggerates characters and events, and creates a fissure in the "reality" of science fiction so that "truth" becomes a problematic notion. Science then shares with fiction a common feature in being merely another story of the world and not the story. The ensuing defamiliarization and estrangement undertakes a historical reconstruction which articulates unconscious fears and doubts about the potentially liberating effects of technology. The story begins with the motif clearly located in the realm of the "progressive" and ends with a reversion to a past of oppression and exploitation. Thoth's critique of the defining philosophies of the twentieth century—rationality, humanism and liberty—when juxtaposed with the excesses of the nuclear bomb, "wars, religious, and racial, and political bloodshed, taking place all over the world" alerts one to the dangers of carrying forward certain regressive forces disguised as a discourse of progress and civilization (Hyder, *Street* 126). The present is seen quite clearly to be predicated upon the past, upon the choices made by self-appointed or elected oligarchs. As a space scientist employed in a specialized
research institution funded by the state, Padma is unwittingly co-opted into the politics that shape the programme of science "redefined as dramatic technology" (Nandy, Science 3). In working towards national goals, such professional scientists often condone the larger human aspects and responsibilities of a democracy. But Padma is also a historical victim of hidden gender prejudices. Here the narrative becomes quite ambiguous, and the uncomfortable questions concerning political and in particular sexual conflicts are subsumed within the traditional resolution of a culture clash.

In conclusion, the female subject is by and large reorganized along linguistic lines, recovered from a range of discourses in which the substantive individual or collectivity participates. Speech however is merely a facet and not a condition for subjectivity and subjecthood. Subjectivity is both produced and inhibited in discourse. In fact, it is a matrix of subject-positions that may be inconsistent or even incompatible with each other. It is contingent on circumstances in which women participate in the liberal discourse of freedom, self-determination and rationality as also in the delimiting feminine discourse of submission, gendered relativity and irrationality. The heterogeneity of conferred, available and improvised placements ensuing from such discursive engagements enable the subject to comprehend itself and its relation with the material and holds the possibility of transformation and change.

The narrative techniques that re-frame the texts are expressly directed towards cultural reorganization. Counter-discursive strategies such as the reinterpretation of canonical texts or intertextuality propose revisory
cultural philosophies. They question received truths, “eternal” assumptions concerning customary codes and practices, as well as their foundations in social configurations and value systems. The writers in this way critique on the one hand calls for the cultural relocation of women and the abolition of gender hierarchies, and on the other a certain indifference to the finer aspects of essentialistic gender and sexual representations and socio-legal inequalities. As for the transformations effected in the identities of the female iconic victims, these undertake historical and cultural revisions, and bring to the master texts a perspective previously omitted, that of gender difference.

Knowledge forms silenced by the dominant systems of ideas and buried by official histories, which still continue to thrive in the interstices of institutional structures, provide the possibility for change. It is these mavericks of cultural production which do not have a proper place that function as tactical devices and subvert the prevailing discourses and their marginalizing processes. The forgotten systems of “reason” they imply are located outside the masculine logic of rationality in forms as varied as inarticulate speech, silence, insanity, dreams and visions. As significant sites of consciousness and knowledge production with their anti-logic epistemologies deriving from the experiential at the interface of culture and the unconscious, they establish female desire and sexuality as ontological components of a self that has its own “other.” In another departure from accepted logic, the intellect is brought into relation with sensibility so that knowledge is inseparably linked to experiences espousing women’s concerns
in conjunction with their ecological surroundings. The shifts in notions and relations of power that such thought-systems corroborate are crucial to a restructuring of culture. An important factor also contributing to these innovations is the strategic interaction of various generic modes and the short story form within the literary text.

Woman's identity is marked by ambiguity. The discursive-field displacements and dissenting knowledge forms that engender alternative ontologies of the self most often lead to altered consciousness, but need not necessarily culminate in selfhood. Or, in instances wherein female desire evades the delimitations of patriarchy, it expresses itself from a position of arationality through the medium of the body. Individuality is most conspicuous in the representative, aspiring female figure who resists appropriation by mainstream politics. Her thought processes and actions create an irresolute tension between the hegemonic ideologies that attempt to interpellate her, the textual discourse that registers the presence of her self, and her socio-political history that limits the choice of subject-positions available to her. Woman as subject-individual nevertheless need not be an agent for action or agency. The concept of agency is invariably associated with action or praxis and promotes persons as "instrumental actors who confront an external political field" insists Judith Butler (qtd. in Rajan138). Readings from a gender perspective implicate the characteristic linking of action to agency as doing a disservice to women, in view of the fact that masculine identity is unequivocally considered a derivative of self-edifying actions. Women writers in emphasizing the emancipatory potential of a certain gender-specific conservative agency and that of transgressive speech,
assert a variant form of agential power and ability inherent in women. Female individuality in such cases steers a precarious course through the interstices in formulary roles, prescribed practices and theoretical positions.

Agency as a collective act of dissidence by a group or community of people rearranges categories of thought and knowledge. It reinvigorates the fossilized sets of codes that call a people into existence and function as the mainstay of their identity. Fixed, repetitive, meaningless practices therefore are charged with new connotations and are validated through conscious action.

The narrative depictions of the subaltern woman's struggles for self-determination and selfhood, in the context of the nation, emerge as a tension between native discourses and the excluding socio-economic politics of modernity that devalue claims to equality. The reinscription of repressed histories and social experiences of the marginalized under the circumstances, are a strategy in "postcolonial contramodernity," an expression from Homi K. Bhabha (qtd. in Moore-Gilbert, Stanton and Maley 35), for it forces one to acknowledge the "fierce, regional, religious, class and gender struggles that have accompanied decolonization and nascent nationhood" (Hegglund 126). These anti-dialectical and anti-teleological narratives cross-hatch the fictional narratives to elicit the emergence of organic collectives or beings from the hegemonic discourses of the nation-state. The externality of such subjects however is evident especially in their inability to reconcile with the principles of citizenship or to realize its stated prerogatives. If citizenship is a practice in agency which postulates self-
determination in the realm of politics, then a revisory reading of agency along with the category of the individual (and in an extended sense the collective) throws open for discussion the definitions of citizenship and the democratic state. In general, the depiction of women's decolonization with its attendant ethico-historical dilemmas and ideological complexities, exceeds its political urgencies underscoring the often ignored aspect of gender.

The subversive devices and strategies that engage the literary discourses, on the whole, do not prescribe any explicit measures for the problem of ideological determinations and exclusions, or of systemic inequalities. Their employment by the women writers instead propose the need to reformulate women's identities and roles, as well as re-semanticize their historically-constituted agential valences within oppressive realities so as to induce a re-consideration of existing evaluative modes that define and categorize women.
Notes

1For details of the Naxalite movement, see Duyker; for gendered perspectives of women’s participation in people’s movements, see Sen and Stree Shakti Sanghatana.

2An introduction to the published translation volunteers the information that the short story was inspired by an open-air performance of Kalidasa’s fourth-century Sanskrit classic play *Sakuntalam*.

3Spivak observes that the illegitimacy of rumour makes it accessible to insurgency especially in view of its open-ended structure and maintenance by a common will (In Other 213).

4The tribal hunting festival which served a cohesive function by bringing people together in a ceremony, was primarily a Festival of Justice. As a forum for administering justice, the elders would discipline or penalize offenders after the hunt. But with Independence and the subsequent imposition of a highly formalized, linearly structured and protocol-ridden law enforcement system, the social relevance and efficacy of the festival gradually attenuated into fossilized ritual.

5The revolts of the Kol took place in 1832.

The Hui or the Santhal Insurrection (1855-1856) was also an agrarian revolt by the Santhals against the purveyors of an exploitative and alien market economy—the usurers, medium landholders and the British colonialists (Duyker 5).
Birsa Munda's Mundari rebellion (1895-1900) was based on a messianic call for self-elevation and the removal of the colonial government and its supporters, the landlords, who were identified as responsible for various socio-economic problems affecting the people of the region. Like the leader-heroes of the Santhal Rebellion, Birsa claimed a divine mission which conferred legitimacy on the violent uprisings (Majumdar 9: 904–07).

6For the episode on the Temptation of Christ see Matt. 4; the feeding of the five thousand, Matt. 14: 15–21; the exorcism of the demoniac, Mark 5:1–13; and see Matt. 9:10–13 for an account of Christ partaking of food with “tax–collectors and sinners” (Bib.).

7Deborah was a prophetess who presided over “Israel” after Moses’s time. A woman of temporal and spiritual authority, she was instrumental in summoning an army to dethrone a king. In the verses known as the Song of Deborah, she is referred to as “a Mother in Israel.” For more details see the Bib. Judg. 4 and 5: 216-18.

8The similarity between science and fiction according to a constructionist interpretation of science relieves it of a metaphysical need for truth by maintaining truth to be that interpretation which satisfies a certain requirement and expectation in the lived world. Any science-based discourse hence becomes a “classification of things essentially mirror[ing] our ways of speaking rather than an extra-linguistic reality” (Maleuvre 125). In the context of ideology this would indicate an inherent differentiation of value systems.
This contradicts the stand taken by a theorist like Jacques Derrida who cannot conceive of "a silent and intuitive consciousness" (qtd. in Belsey 595). Such a perspective suggests the primacy of language taken as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, over subjectivity.