Chapter V

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Feminist thinkers, activists and writers are conscious of the role played by language down the ages as an instrument for oppressing women. Male oriented language is symptomatic of the patriarchal thinking that has gone deep into human attitude. It is a known fact that language determines human perception and controls thinking. Eventually the use of androcentric language reinforces patriarchal attitudes. Feminists therefore raise their voice against sexist language that oppresses the individuality of women. In *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Deborah Cameron says, “Feminists do not consider language a side issue or a luxury, but an essential part of the struggle for liberation”(1) and, “Feminism has so much to give linguistics as linguistics has to give feminism”(35).

Studies have been conducted with linguistics as a key to understand the beliefs of the misogynistic society. This has led to very poignant discoveries that have urged feminists to search for a new idiom that is not oppressive or discriminatory. When feminist writers started discussing emotions and experiences kept outside literature till then, search for suitable images and symbols became necessary. As Elaine Showalter says in “Towards a Feminist Poetics”, when women give expression to special experiences, they would “assume and determine distinctive forms in art”(qtd. Christina Gomez 93). Many scholars have delved deep into the conscious and unconscious use of a new kind of language by feminist writers. They have also shown interest in the
linguistic and stylistic study of feminist writings to see whether such writers use an idiom of their own, necessitated by their themes. As we read in a website,

“There is no essential male or female language, immediate and inevitable, determined by the sex.” Yet at the same time critics believe that feminine writing – i.e “writing attempting to break the dominance of the inscription of...male positions”(Heath) is more likely to come from women. Cixous points to “historio-cultural reasons”; Heath claims that “the force of their experience” will provoke such writing; Eagleton speaks of “complex psychoanalytical reasons”, while Kristeva privileges the link between the semiotic and the close contact between the child and the mother’s body. (http://www.umanitoba.ca/cm)

Semiotic studies have been conducted to find how writers use stereotyped signs and symbols to perpetuate gender inequality. Such studies show that use of sexist language and idiom has led to description of even female experiences like menstruation, childbirth, lactation and suckling from a male point of view. This consequently leads not only to improper presentation, but also to misrepresentation. Male attitudes have made depiction of love, love making and orgasm from female point of view appear as taboo. Injustice has been meted out to women by using male perspective even while presenting crimes against women like molestation and rape. Feminists have very sharply reacted to this kind of discriminatory use of language and have come heavily on semantic derogation of women and verbal violence.
Annie Leclerc in “Woman’s Word” says, “Things made by man are not just stupid, deceitful and oppressive. More than anything else, they are sad, sad enough to kill us with boredom and despair” and so she suggests invention of a new language to express the peculiar experiences of women which she terms “the woman’s word”(74). In the Introduction to “Prostitution: A Quartet to Female Voices”, Kate Millet says, “If indeed we are saying something new, it does seem to me, we ought to say it in new ways”(qtd. Christina Gomez 93). Today we find that many a woman writer has succeeded in finding her own aesthetics. It will be a rewarding academic exercise to study how Plath, Munro and Roy have used language and images to present female experience in their novels and how the intimate experiences of women have their impact on the use of language.

The different linguistic stance adopted by Plath is clearly discernible from the way the word “virginity” has been used by her in The Bell Jar. The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines a virgin as a “girl or woman who has not experienced sexual union” and “virginity” as “the state of being a virgin”. Dr. Webster’s Complete Dictionary of English Language defines the same term as “a female of unspotted purity; she who has preserved her chastity, or who has had no carnal knowledge of man”. Though it also defines it as “a person of male sex who has not known sexual indulgence; one who is perfectly chaste”, for “chastity” the only meaning given is “the quality of a virgin; undefiled purity or chastity; maidenhood”. Through lexicons and grammar books also sexism creeps into language. Cheris Kramarae and Paula Treichler say that “Multiple mechanisms act to exclude women’s usages from dictionaries…. A dictionary not
merely reflects sexist social attitudes but (also) acts in a variety of ways to preserve and recreate stereotypes as well"(149). Cultures, reflections of which are found in literatures, speak of virginity and chastity as requisite qualities of women, blissfully forgetting that they are physical and are applicable to men too. Applying the noun 'virginity' exclusively to women has led to discrimination and oppression of women and this is evident most notoriously from Tess of the D'Urbervilles and The Scarlet Letter. Plath revolts against this discrimination while referring to Buddy’s affair with the waitress: “and that’s how Buddy had lost his pureness and his virginity” (73). She shows how it looks when “virginity” is applied to the male: When Esther calculated the number of times Buddy slept with the waitress, it seemed to her “beyond all reason” (73).

Mariana Birnbaum points out that prejudicial language “always mirrors generalized tabloid thinking which contains prejudices and thus perpetuates discrimination”(qtd. Schulz 144). Plath raises her voice against the language of prejudice, or what Muriel Schulz calls “the semantic derogation of woman”(134). She is critical of the linguistic phenomenon that gives rise to sexual double standard, always allowing women to be exploited. Buddy’s mother Mrs. Willard is a woman with a difference when she attributes virginity to men and women alike: “I knew Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both.”(74). The male chauvinist society expects women to use a stereotyped language that enshrines only a misogynist view of the world. Some words that characterize masculinity and toughness of the male are not supposed to be used by women. Otto Jesperson in his book Language: Its nature,
Development and Origin says, “Women speak more softly than men, have smaller or less varied vocabularies, use diminutives like ‘teeny weeny’, construct their sentences ‘loosely’ and leave them unfinished, all the while jumping from topic to topic” (qtd., Cameron 43). All these have been proved to be wrong by feminist writers and theorists. Mary Ellman presents masculine voice as not necessarily the prerogative of the male writer, nor is the feminine voice possibly only for women ... there is an advantage in the woman writer allying herself, with “a literature at odds with authority”. Rashness, daring mockery, “sudden alternations of the reckless and the sly, the wildly voluble and the laconic” are stylistic qualities that can undercut the “established masculine mode” (qtd. Mary Eagleton 1986, 201).

Literature that represents male dominated society puts “soft words” in the mouth of the female. Plath, on the other hand, makes her heroine Esther Greenwood use definite and authentic language when she speaks to Irwin about the hospital bill. “I have a bill here, Irwin” (254) is the plain statement she makes over the phone. “It’s a bill for twenty dollars for emergency attention on a certain date in December and a check-up a week thereafter” (255). Man exploits woman when she uses the conventional soft language that she has been taught to use. Linda Hutcheon in her conversation with Kathleen O’Grady says, “Women are often in the position of defining themselves against a dominant culture or discourse. One way to do that, a way with great subversive potential, is to speak the language of the dominant (which allows you to be heard)” (http://www.english.ucsb.edu/). Plath makes Esther use a plain and tough language which misogynist society thinks is the monopoly of the male: “The hospital says they are
sending me the bill because there was no answer to the bill they sent to you" (255). The response of Irwin to this hard-hitting language is immediate. Though a male he understands instinctively what Esther means when she uses this kind of strong and straight language. His reaction is that of submission: “All right, all right, I’m writing a cheque now. I’m writing them a blank cheque" (255).

In Feminist Critique of Language, Deborah Cameron asserts, “One does not have to be in the least determinist to accept that language is in many ways sexist. Language could be seen as a reflection of sexist culture” (14). Plath wrote at a time when feminists were not very much conscious of language being sexist nor was there any conscious effort at using neutral or non-sexist language. Plath consciously avoided using stereotyped imagery or language that would internalize a male reality. Feminist ideology was so strong in the author that she used a different imagery as part of her stylistic device. Her images are from varied sources. A study of these images serves as a pointer to the feminist thinking of the author. As suggested by Edward Said in his introduction to Orientalism, “The images, themes and motifs that circulate in a text can be useful indicators of its ideological underpinning” (21).

The Bell Jar shows how male chauvinistic society has turned woman into a commodity. Women’s basic emotions are conveniently forgotten for perpetuating the selfish interests of the male. This idea is reinforced with the powerful image of the kitchen mat. “And I knew that in spite of all the roses and the kisses … what he secretly wanted when the wedding service ended was for her to flatten out underneath his feet like Mrs. Willard’s kitchen mat” (88-89). Mrs. Willard made an attractive rug and
instead of hanging it on the wall, she put it down as her kitchen mat, and "in a few days it was soiled and dull" (88).

Animal imagery used by the novelist very clearly points to what she thinks of man and woman and what she wants the woman to be. The card that falls from the book the people from Ladies' Day had sent, powerfully describes the comfort the woman is used to receive from the exploitative protection the male dominated world willingly offers to the woman. "The front of the card showed a poodle in a flowered bed jacket sitting in a poodle basket with a sad face"(56-57). Simone de Beauvoir in the chapter on "Myth and Reality" says, "No doubt, it is more comfortable to submit to a blind enslavement than to work for liberation"(292). Plath does not want women to feel comfortable in the protective care of men. She is critical of the complacency of women who find pseudo security under the care of men, and comfortably curl under restrictions. Women, she contends, are like the poodle in a male determined basket so long as they are not confident of their potentialities and feel secure in such restrictions.

Joan who finds it difficult to locate the reason for Esther's haemorrhage, reminds her of the "myopic owl"(245). When a woman fails to seize the opportunities that come her way she is like "a dull cart horse"(13). When a girl is treated as an object to be looked at she is like "the great white macaw in the zoo"(11). When Esther thinks of Marco, the woman hater, she is reminded of "a snake I had teased in the Bronx zoo"(111). She associates Lenny Shepherd with a horse and Buddy Willard with a panther.
Broken fragile articles also serve as effective symbols in the novel. Society has made the woman believe that she is fragile. Breaking of the thermometer and scattering of tiny mercury balls which “trembled like celestial dew” (194) symbolically suggests the breaking of the fragile and brittle self of womanhood lurking in Esther. But the novelist will not allow woman’s self to be totally annihilated.

I opened my fingers a crack, like a child with a secret, and smiled at the silver globe cupped in my palm. If I dropped it, it would break into a million little replicas of itself, and if I pushed them near each other, they would fuse, without a crack, into one whole again. I smiled and smiled at the small silver ball. (194)

Plath has projected the stifling and suffocating emotional experience of the suppressed woman through the use of the powerful image of the bell jar. Elin Gyda Sjølie says,

The title of the novel is pointing to that this is a feminine text as well. The image of a 'bell jar', to be placed under a glass enclosure, a confined space for the purpose of being observed, caught in a vacuum, separated from other lives, would surely be a negative experience. To be such an observed object, and woman, indicates the image which is to be used often by the later feminist movement, that all too often women are looked upon as objects of their men and their culture. (www.geocities.com)
The title of the novel very powerfully presents the vacuum that surrounds the female world. The novelist ironically says that woman who is delicate and has to be protected under a bell jar is to be watched and taken care of by the male dominated society.

For a woman the experience of being confined inside a bell jar is recurrent, and she may constantly attempt to come out of it: “The air of the bell jar wadded round me and I couldn’t stir” (197). “Wherever I sat – on the deck of a ship or at the street café in Paris or Bangkok – I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air” (196). “Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort” (251). “How did I know that some day – at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere – the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” (254). The novel can be seen as an attempt of the writer to pull woman out of restriction imposed by the society. The image of the bell jar pervades the novel so overwhelmingly that the psychological emancipation of Esther can be interpreted as coming out of the stifling bell jar. “All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air” (227). Woman who has been denied the ‘circulating air’ is considered lifeless. “To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream” (250). This connects the bell jar with the unborn babies kept in the bottles that she saw with Buddy: “After that, Buddy took me out into a hall where they had some big glass bottles full of babies that had died before they were born” (65). Woman inside the bell jar and not “open to the circulating air” is like pickled lifeless unborn babies deprived of life, thinking and movement, and meant only to be seen through the walls of the stifling glass bottle walls. The author’s
presentation of the preserved babies, "pickled" as she calls them, serves as a powerful symbol.

This kind of confinement and suffocation necessitated the presentation of woman's experience through other images too. To present this feminist idea Plath uses other images of confinement like "black, airless sack with no way out"(136) and "stupid cage"(168). The novel is replete with images of darkness and grayness that symbolically suggest the state of mind of women. Esther is dressed in a black coat when she attempts to commit suicide. While Doreen and Lenny are dancing Esther feels that she is "shrinking to a small black dot"(17). References to "black bottom pies" "black shoes", "black coffee", "black fig trees" and "black wagon" add to the darkness that suggests the plight of the woman.

While reviewing Dale Spender's "Man Made Language", Maria Black and Rosalind Coward point out Spender's suggestion that "Male meanings are now dominant; women's definitions can hardly be heard. Childbirth, for example, is defined by men as the ultimately satisfying experience for a woman. All references to pain and fear are obliterated." Her argument is that "Women's accounts would not conceal the pain and the difficulties"(113). True to Dale Spender's statement, Plath makes a realistic and graphic presentation of childbirth bringing in all emotions, pain and sufferings of a woman. The novelist presents the harrowing traumatic experience of woman at the time of childbirth.

The head doctor ... kept saying to the woman, 'Push down, Mrs. Tomolillo, push down, that's a good girl, push down,' and finally through
the split shaven place between her legs, lurid and disinfectant, I saw a dark fuzzy thing appear.

But the baby’s head stuck for some reason. ... I heard the scissors close on the woman’s skin like cloth and the blood began to run down- a fierce bright red. Then all at once the baby seemed to pop out. (68)

This language becomes necessary to blow up the male misconception about the ability and strength of women. Plath gives her caustic criticism that men think that women who can even withstand the labour pain do not have the power to see that. “You’ll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn’t to let women watch. It’ll be the end of the human race”(67).

Sex is usually glorified in novels and projected as the epitome of pleasures. Male thinking blissfully forgets the possible pain, trauma and bleeding after a woman’s first intercourse. Plath creates a new style and structure of discourse when she presents the experience of Esther. “But all I felt was a sharp, startlingly bad pain. ‘It hurts,’ I said.... A warm liquid was seeping out between my legs. Tentatively, I reached down and touched it. When I held my hand up to the light streaming in from the bathroom, my fingertips looked black”(241).

Plath has been successful in finding a language that is suitable for expressing female experience without any interference from the dictates of the misogynist linguistic mould. Stereotyped set roles are assigned to the female in androcentric literature, and readers are made to believe that “What a man wants is a mate and what a woman wants is infinite security”(74), and that a woman must always rely on a man. Though an early
feminist novel, *The Bell Jar* succeeds in shaking the society out of this thinking by making the protagonist come out of the boundaries imposed by the bigots: “The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July Rocket” (87).

Munro’s fictions have a reminiscing, autobiographical approach and self-expression seems to be essential for the emotional survival of the author. Munro’s intensely personal as well as feminist ideologies necessitated a style, technique and narration that are unique, distinctive and non conventional. She has used autobiography as an ideal vehicle for expression and has succeeded in projecting the peculiar female experiences of the protagonist through memories, reveries and fantasies, and they are mingled with conventional expositions.

In Munro’s writings it is a girl or a woman who takes the centre of the story, and men are relegated to the periphery. This has necessitated the creation of powerful and strong women characters. Munro has presented the peculiar experiences of a growing woman in her *bildungsroman* *Who do You Think You Are?* through memories, incidents and dreams. As pointed out in *The Canadian & World Encyclopedia*, characteristic of her style is “the search for some revelatory gesture by which an event is illuminated and given personal significance.” Creation of the heroine Rose enables Munro to present to readers what the feminist rebel in her wants to say. As Ann Barrow says in a website, “Munro utilizes personal crises as catalysis in order to bring about consciousness in her characters.”
Many incidents that we find in *Who Do You Think You Are?* have parallel ones in the life of the novelist. This enables the novelist to use a heightened language to describe her heroine. While discussing Munro's narrative techniques Margaret Gail Osachoff says, “The most straightforward way to deal with the retrospective view of a past event is simply to set it down as a fictional autobiography or memoir. But if the emotion that charges the memories of a particular event is stronger, the story becomes a confession” (63).

Munro describes an unexpected meeting between Rose and Patrick, in Toronto airport, nine years after they were divorced:

She had seen Patrick; Patrick had seen her; he had made that face. But she was not really able to understand how she could be an enemy. How could anybody hate Rose so much, at the very moment when she was ready to come forward with her goodwill, her smiling confession of exhaustion, her air of diffident faith in civilized overtures?

Oh, Patrick could. Patrick could (120).

This is an intensely personal experience for the novelist, but common to many women. The novelist wants to show how insensitive the male sensibility is towards the emotions of women and she uses the technique of memory.

Munro turns to fantasies, memories, reveries, dreams and meditations that are put forth to the readers like a succession of tableaux. She is naturally constrained to search for an idiom, a complex plot and characters with psychological depth to achieve this. This is the uniqueness that John Updike sees in her fiction. He says that her fiction has
been characterized by “well-meditated complexity and multiplicity of plot, an intense clarity of phrase and image, an exceptional psychological searchingness and honesty”. In “Privilege”, Rose recapitulates the transformations in West Hanratty.

The school changed with the war. It dwindled, lost all its evil energy, its anarchic spirit, its style. The fierce boys went into the army.... Roofs got shingled all over instead of in patches. Houses were painted, or covered with imitation bricks. Refrigerators were bought and bragged about....

The school itself got fixed up. Windows replaced, desks screwed down, dirty words hidden under splashes of dull red paint.... Mr. Burns died in the summertime and the people who bought his place put in a bathroom.... Cora’s grandfather had to retire, and there never was another honey-dumper. (45)

This technique is used by Munro to take a snapshot of woman’s thought process. This technique is revelatory in nature and serves as a release both to the novelist and to the protagonist.

One of the techniques Munro adopts to go deep into psychological reality is story telling. Flo, to begin with, and later Rose, tell stories, and these stories highlight the problems girls face in a world dominated by men. “Flo and Rose had switched roles. Now Rose was the one bringing stories home. Flo was the one who knew the names of the characters and was waiting to hear”(49). Flo waits to hear stories about a country girl who drops kotex in the High School and is teased by boys (48), or about Ruby Carruthers “a slutty sort of girl”(49) who was raped by Horse Nickolson, Del Fairbridge
and Runt Chesterton, or about Franny who “let out howls made r IPPLY, phlegmy, by her breathing problems”(32), when abused by her own brother Shortie. In all these stories the victim is a girl, and realities of female experiences are displayed from a feminist point of view. Throughout the book, Rose is associated with imitations, acting and story-telling - all seen as expression of some psychological impulse that is very strong in a woman.

Looking at the male chauvinistic world from a personal perspective has encouraged Munro to take up gynecological subjects that have hitherto been considered a taboo by writers of both sexes. Her writings defy the artificial restrictions till then imposed on writers. As Helen Hoy comments, there is in Munro an “uninhibited discussion of bodily realities”(17). The feminist in her rebels against accepted descriptions of sexual advance by a male, and presents it as the female kicking off an act of sex. She has to invent a new description that would send a signal to the world that female body is no longer to be described, as a male would want it nor is it justifiable to present the female as taking a passive role when the male makes sexual advance. Though shocking, Munro has made it realistic and convincing by inventing an idiom suitable for the reversal of role: "Her bullying hand went for his fly. To stop her, to keep her quiet, Patrick had to struggle with her. He got a hand over her mouth, with the other hand beating her away from her zipper. The big loose sleeves of his overcoat beat at her like floppy wings"(98).

Female experiences, wants and desires are often repressed or misrepresented in a phallocentric society, and writers often give expression to them in such a way as to fit it
into a male-oriented conscience. These writers find recourse to stereotyped images, language and expressions that are insensitive and detrimental to the interests of the women. In *Who Do You Think You Are?* Munro revolts against the traditional mode and goes in search of a new aesthetics. Bringing her language close to the body, she has created a writing that is subversive. She has very boldly presented some of the private experiences of Rose. “Walking across a snowy downtown park, her bare hand snuggled in Patrick’s, in his pocket. Some outrageous and cruel things were shouted, inside her. She had to do something, to keep them from getting out. She started tickling and teasing him”(96).

Relying on new aesthetics new idiom and new expression, Munro deals with unconventional themes. Novels down the ages are known to gloat over extra marital affairs of males. Munro in powerful, convincing and justifiable way blasts this kind of a male portrayal and presents the extra marital affairs of Rose. “During the rest of the evening, she (Rose) was playing the game of watching Clifford while pretending not to watch him, ... She saw him quite differently now. His body that had seemed small and tame now appeared to her light and slippery and full of energy; he was like a lynx or a bobcat”(135).

To write such experiences of women that have not found a place in English novels so far, Munro has to go in pursuit of non traditional expressions, though they may be unpalatable to male dictated aesthetics “She wanted tricks, a glittering secret, tender celebrations of lust, a regular conflagration of adultery. All this after five minutes in the
rain"(138). Such a language enables her to discuss genuinely and deeply felt sentiments and feelings of a woman without making them sensational.

Epithets and eulogies have been used by male dominated culture as an instrument of oppression to make women look like men's possessions. Munro has no patience with stale and meaningless idioms to which readers are used. Rose can never be carried away by the sugarcoated words that men use. "She would look at herself in the glass and think: wife, sweetheart. Those mild lovely words. How could they apply to her? It was a miracle; it was a mistake. It was what she had dreamed of; it was not what she wanted"(96).

The feminist in Munro makes a downright rejection of niceties of expression with regard to men. At times she uses very strong adjectives and expressions while referring to men. Rose's father is a "king of the royal beatings"(1), and Becky's father "skinfint, a family tyrant"(8). The big boys in High School who are insensitive to the decency of girls appear to be "wild dogs ... just as quick and strong, capricious, jubilant in attack"(33).

Descriptions of women and their body not only belittle the image of woman but also distort it. Munro is not prepared to graphically describe a woman's body to make it a pleasant reading to men. Such descriptions are disgusting to her. Her descriptions shock readers into reality. She describes male organs without any inhibition and unsettles male oriented sensibilities. Flo sees it as "a baloney sausage"(13), Rose sings, "Two Vancouvers fried in snot! Two pickled arseholes tied in a knot"(14) and school children watch Mr. Burns in the toilet and find "Something like a cow's udder, which
looked to have a prickly surface, like the piece of tongue before Flo boiled it"(30). Munro uses these descriptions with a vengeance to show the phallocentric world how it has been maligning the female world by its moronic descriptions of her body.

Female desire is often repressed and misrepresented in a phallocentric society, and its expression is highly man-centred. It is women writers who have to bring language close to reality and create a writing that is subversive. Even while describing a scene of rape like the one experienced by Fannie, men writers are fascinated by the act. Munro condemns this attitude of men, when she writes,

Men who made books and movies seemed to have a fondness for this figure ... They cheated, ... when they left out the breathing and the spit and the teeth; they were refusing to take into account the aphrodisiac prickles of disgust in their hurry to reward themselves with the notion of a soothing blankness, undifferentiating welcome. (32)

Phallocentric writing celebrates the sexual energy of men and is indifferent to the disgust experienced by women while depicting a scene of molestation. But Munro renders graphically the nauseating incident in the life of Rose when an elderly co-passenger in the train molests her. Her language is strong, straight, pithy and even telegraphic. It displays the current of thought in the writer.

She did feel disgust. She felt a faint, wandering nausea. She thought of flesh: lumps of flesh, pink snouts, fat tongues, blunt fingers, all on their way rotting and creeping and lolling and rubbing, looking for their comfort. She thought of cats in heat rubbing themselves along them top of
board fences, yowling with their miserable complaint. It was pitiful, infantile, this itching and shoving and squeezing. Spongy tissues, inflamed membranes, tormented nerve-ends, shameful smells; humiliation. (76)

Stylistic features used by Munro to explode the myth of male superiority are satire and sarcasm. Her language reflects a woman's contempt for men who indulge in crimes against women. Munro gives the reaction of Rose garbed in sarcasm when the stranger's hand "that she wouldn't ever have wanted to hold, that she wouldn't have squeezed back"(76) went up her thighs. "Please remove this, she said out the window. Stop it, please, she said to the stumps and barns"(76). The novelist here uses irony with sarcasm. The first part of these two sentences reflects the real response of the girl, but the second half shows how helpless she feels. In reality, "This was disgrace. This was beggary"(77). Kathleen O'Grady's Conversation with Linda Hutcheon points to a shared pattern of irony and parody in texts by women writers in general and Canadian fiction in particular. According to Linda Hutcheon, this is "a Canadian response to marginalization"

The title has a sharp focus on the nature and significance of the book. The question "Who Do You Think You Are?" is addressed to the protagonist Rose twice – once by Flo in the opening story, and the second time by her teacher Miss Hattie Milton in the last story. This question universally put to every woman whether at home, in the work place or wherever she goes highlights the feminist vigour of Munro's fiction. Who
Do You Think You Are? is unique and can be treated as one of Canada’s radical feminist novels that uses a feminist idiom to assert the rights and individuality of women.

The God of Small Things due to its non-conventional and subversive themes demanded a lot of skill from the author, especially in the use of language and style that is suitable for handling iconoclastic themes. The novel is in search of a new idiom. Like many Western writers, Roy too ensures that the novel does not fall into the rut of patriarchal misogynistic idiom. The non-conventional use of language, breaking all the rules of accepted linguistic conventions, comes naturally to her. She says, “Language is a reflective thing for me. I don’t know the rules, so I don’t know if I have broken” (qtd. R.K. Dhawan 21).

In a society where male chauvinism has social and religious sanction, the novelist blasts age-old concepts of male superiority, and to achieve this she uses English language – words, expressions, sentences, and various stylistic features – with nonchalant daring and mastery. As Cynthia Vanden Driesen has pointed out, “Roy’s text constantly breaks the conventional rules of grammar and syntax, abandons orthodox punctuation, coins neologisms, imports typographical devices, runs sense impressions together with synaesthetic richness” (365). All these project the peculiar subversive power of the female artist.

Quite contrary to Western system, marriage is very often fixed for a girl without even getting her consent. Her dreams and aspirations get scant respect. But Indian literature may paint a different picture, giving it a halo of sanctity as well as romance. This kind of male perspective generally depicts marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of a
woman’s dreams. Roy demythifies this. While presenting Ammu’s marriage, Roy shows the lack-lustre, non-romantic experience of an Indian woman. Ammu does not find anything beautiful in her being decked as a bride: “a foolishly decked bride … she had permitted herself to be so painstakingly decorated before being led to the gallows. It seemed so absurd. So futile. Like polishing firewood”(44). Through this effective imagery, Roy projects her criticism of the marriage of an Indian girl, which is “not something, that could be avoided altogether”(44). To show how women are exploited and betrayed through marriage, she says that since the breaking of Ammu’s marriage “She advocated small weddings in ordinary clothes. It made them less ghoulish, she thought”(44). For Rahel also, marriage is rather an inevitable prosaic process. Roy brings this out through a powerful imagery: “Rahel drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in the airport lounge”(18).

Misogynistic society maims women’s lives by coupling them in matrimony with strangers. The feminist in Roy consistently revolts against this, and this is evident through other images too. Even while presenting the reaction of Baby Kochamma when she saw the Communist procession, the novelist says, “She was looking down at the floor of the car. Like a coy frightened bride who had been married off to a stranger”(80).

The treatment Ammu receives at the hands of the Police Inspector shows how pitiable the condition of a divorcee is in the society. To bring out the sanction our society has given to brutish men who are at the same time custodians of law, to humiliate helpless women, Roy uses an apt imagery: Inspector Thomas Mathew taps Ammu’s
breast with a baton “as though he was choosing mangoes from a basket”(8). The force of this figure of speech points to the fact that a woman’s body is perceived only as an object over which man has absolute and unquestionable right and authority. The imagery and language of Roy are suffused with an emotionalism and intuitive perception and as Tapan Kumar Ghosh says, they act as “a short hand for thinking and mouthing beautiful thoughts”(185).

Roy believes that society is totally male centred and it considers sex and sexuality as male’s domain. When Chacko the divorcee goes after his sexual pursuits in which love has no role to play, it is condoned or rather accepted or even admired. Roy using her caustic language blasts the hypocrisy calling it “Man’s Needs”(168). But when Ammu the divorcee, whose love breaks the barriers of “love laws”(33) prescribed by society, even her aunt Baby Kochamma, though a woman, sees it only as “a bitch on heat”(258). Using her powerful language she juxtaposes these two identical emotional responses of a male and a female and shows how unfair, biased and partial the society is while viewing the emotions of a woman. She succeeds in capturing the emotional responses in the deepest chambers of Ammu’s heart. “Occasionally, when Ammu listened to songs that she loved on the radio, something stirred inside her. A liquid ache spread under her skin, and she walked out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place…. Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk”(44).

Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous have observed an essential connection between women’s body and women’s writing. Helene Cixous said, “Write! Writing is for you,
you are for you. Your body is yours, take it” (qtd Cameron 205). In Feminist Critique of Language, Deborah Cameron clearly states that “For many women, the kind of writing that addresses female sexuality and experience requires a new form of language, a radical remaking of literary style in the image of woman rather than man” (8). Ammu is a rebel struggling inside her to cross the boundaries that restrict Indian woman. The language of Roy beautifully captures this rebellion that is going on in her. “It was what she had battling inside her. An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber. It was this that grew inside her, and eventually led her to love by night the man her children loved by day” (44).

The non-conventional love affair between Ammu and Velutha that is engulfed in intense eroticism has to be projected by the novelist in a language that doesn’t smack of pornography that belittles womanhood. Roy ensures that at no point her language gives the least suggestion that sex is male domain. Even sexual consummation in this novel is portrayed from female point of view. “She danced for him. On that boat-shaped piece of earth. She lived” (337). As Bijay Kumar Das says,

The liberation from old bondage and tradition needs not only courage but a new language. Arundhati Roy describes Ammu’s (a high-caste Syrian Christian woman) love for Velutha (a Paravan, a low caste man) in poetic prose.

She has fashioned a new language for fiction (38).

The novelist’s mastery of language quite artistically and aesthetically weaves a cultural background into the novel. To achieve this, she makes use of images like
“Chappu Thamburan” (339): “Part of a cobweb. Dust. Leaf rot. The empty thorax of a dead bee. Chappu Thamburan. Velutha called him. Lord rubbish” (338 – 339). The same image runs through when Roy ironically suggests that Ammu will not be able to have Velutha, the man of her choice. “They were wrong about Chappu Thamburan, though. He outlived Velutha. He fathered future generations” (339).

The God of Small Things is culture specific and Roy’s language takes the reader to that culture. The novelist describes the nocturnal meetings of Ammu and Velutha in a socially forbidden atmosphere. Ammu succeeds in reinforcing her right as a woman though far away from the oppressive society on the sandy banks of Meenachal at night.

She kissed his closed eyes and stood up. Velutha with his back against the mangosteen tree watched her walk away.

She had a dry rose on her hair.

She turned to say it once again: ‘Naaley.’

Tomorrow. (340)

Though the writer is well aware that misogynistic power structure would never tolerate the breaking of Love Laws - “The laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much” (33), the feminist in her asserts the rights of a woman in matters of sex. Through effective and potent images she shows initiation and gratification to which woman is entitled. “She touched him lightly with her fingers and left a trail of goose bumps on his skin. Like flat chalk on a blackboard. Like breeze in a paddy field. Like jet-streaks in a blue church sky” (339). In highly evocative terms the novelist expresses the intensity of emotions experienced by woman. After the consummation of
love, Ammu “moved closer, wanting to be with him, to touch more of him. He gathered her into the cave of his body. A breeze jilted off the river and cooled their warm bodies. It was a little cold. A little wet. A little quiet. The Air.”(338). For Luce Irigaray, women’s sexual pleasure cannot be expressed by the dominant, ordered, “logical”, masculine language. According to her, women’s *jocus sance* (sexual pleasure) is more multiple than man’s unitary, phallic pleasure, so the language expressing it is more diffusive than its masculine counterpart. (Nancy Walker ed. 160)

Descriptions in literature of the female body usually border on vulgarity, and are aimed at exciting the instincts of a male reader. As Annie Leclerc says in “Woman’s Word”,

> The whole of feminine literature has been whispered to women in man’s language. The whole range, all the melodies, of femininity, have already been played out.

> Is it possible to invent anything new?

> We have to invent; otherwise we will perish.

Leclerc continues, “I must talk about the pleasures of my body…. I must talk about it, because only by talking about it will a new language be born, a woman’s word”(76). Roy revolts against the oppressive use of language and shows how woman’s body can be presented in an artistically pleasing way and with no offence to womanhood.

> Ammu undressed and…. Where she touched herself her flesh was taut and smooth. Under her hands her nipples wrinkled and hardened like dark nuts, pulling at the soft skin on her breasts. The thin line of down from
her belly button led over the gentle curve of the base of her belly, to her
dark triangle. Like an arrow directing a lost traveler. An inexperienced
lover. (222)

The narrative technique of the novel helps the novelist peel multiple layers of a
woman’s consciousness. Action of the novel moves backward and forward and it ends
long after Ammu’s forlorn death in a hotel room. Free wheeling technique enables the
novelist to present feminist views as perceived by the child Rahel and through her
growth into a young lady who is determined to fight the oppressive male society. Sarah
Willcocks has rightly put it,

Roy plants clues throughout the compelling narrative which are unearthed
in a series of mysteries and revelations. The novel is at times poignantly
moving and humorous as Roy convincingly encapsulates the world
through the eyes of a seven year old child. Roy consciously reiterates
certain motifs throughout the novel which echo like memories. The
narrative is designed like a stream of consciousness, the flashbacks add to
the sense that you are reading a snapshot of someone's mind. In places the
novel sounds autobiographical as it recalls a child's eye view and
memories cloudy with innocence.

Roy has successfully handled language to suit the age of the narrator. Alice Truax who
compliments the quality of Roy's narration that is “so extraordinary - at once so morally
strenuous and so imaginatively supple” comments, “Throughout her book, she shuttles
between the twins’ past and present, continually angling in. What sustains us through
this dread-filled dance between the calamitous past and the bleak present is the exuberant, almost acrobatic nature of the writing itself" (http://www.bookpages.co.uk/twist/twist).

Swinging back and forth, Roy recaptures the emotions of a girl child bubbling with enthusiasm, quite unaware of the forces waiting to stifle a human being for being a woman.

Rahel was like an excited mosquito on a leash. Flying. Weightless. Up two steps. Down two. Up one. She climbed five flights of red stairs for Baby Kochamma’s one.

I'm Popeye the sailor man  dum dum
I live in a cara-van  dum dum
I op-en the door
And Fall on the floor
I'm Popeye the sailor man  dum dum (98)

Society that is favourably disposed to male aspirations crushes the emotions of a woman. While narrating Ammu’s coming back to Ayemenem house as a grown up divorced woman who has undergone heavy emotional pressures, Roy uses a language that is heavy in diction, tone and syntax.

Within the first few months of her return to her parents’ home, Ammu quickly learned to recognize and despise the ugly face of sympathy. Old female relations with incipient beards and several wobbling chins made overnight trips to Ayemenem to commiserate with her about her divorce.
They squeezed her knee and gloated. She fought off the urge to slap them.

Or twiddle their nipples. With a spanner. (43)

When Rahel returns to Ayemenem as a divorced woman but with confidence and determination, Roy uses a language that brings out Rahel’s confident reaction to the male chauvinists around. She perplexes the caustic Baby Kochamma with her silence. “The silence sat between grand-niece and baby grand-aunt like a third person. A stranger. Swollen. Noxious”(21). To the curious Comrade Pillai, Rahel gives a sharp, blunt and bold reply: “We’re divorced”(130). Lakoff says that women have a subservient way of talking and they are “socialized to hedge their meaning in language for fear of giving offence to men” (qtd Cameron 44). But Rahel’s strong and direct language proves that she is an independent woman, a different woman who cannot be cowed down by the dictates of the male dominated society. By her assertive reply Rahel astounds Comrade Pillai, a typical representative of male chauvinist society. As Deborah Cameron says, “Silence is a symbol of oppression, while liberation is speaking out”(8).

The reply of Comrade Pillai is in typical sexist language:

‘Die-vorced?’ His voice rose to such a high register that it cracked on the question mark. He even pronounced the word as though it were a form of death.

‘That is most unfortunate,’ He said, when he had recovered. For some reason resorting to uncharacteristic, bookish language. “Mo-st unfortunate.’(130)
Cameron has rightly observed, “Sexism in language is one manifestation of the system, and it works to the disadvantage of women not men”(100).

Not only a man saturated with male chauvinism uses sexist and repressive language, but also a woman caught in the ideologies of a misogynistic society echoes this language. Baby Kochamma’s is the typical language of a woman soaked in bigotry. She subscribed wholeheartedly to the commonly held view that a married daughter had no position in her parents’ home. As for a divorced daughter- according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And as for a divorced daughter from a love marriage, well, words could not describe Baby Kochamma’s outrage. As for a divorced daughter from a intercommunity love marriage – Baby Kochamma chose to remain quiveringly silent on the subject. (45,46)

In Feminism and Linguistic Theory, Deborah Cameron points out the belief of feminists and sexists alike that “Linguistic behaviour is one of the keys to understanding the nature and status of women”(38). It is through a variety in language and style that Roy succeeds in presenting female experiences and emotions, and their nature from childhood to adulthood. As Cameron says, “Creative use of word structure, word spelling and word history is a feature of feminist writing both in a radical tradition and in the more postmodern, semiological tradition”(111). American radical feminist Mary Daly demonstrates that...

... hyphenation may operate as a means of exposing the veiled meanings in words, to dis-cover language, as it were. Judicious installation of
hyphens can reveal hidden meanings in words and invite the reader to look at common words in new ways. Similarly revitalization of common metaphors also points to a feminization of language (http://www.findarticles.com).

With innovative use of punctuation, ingenious wordplay, description of a deeply Indian environment by employing a language infused with sensual elements, and dense metaphors and similes, Roy creates a new style and structure of discourse which truly reveals female experience, and deconstructs stereotypes. To break away from the patriarchal structure long established in literature, she has successfully used a language and style that is new in Indian Literature in English. As George Lear says, “A distinctive voice and vision rule this book” (http://www.bookpages.co/uk/twist/twist).

Karen Kuehnle observes in a website that Cixous' theory on women's voice and writing become fully activated in Roy's text. Roy's novel demolishes phallocentric boundaries on societal expectations regarding gender roles and sexuality. “The language and structure of the narrative itself is crucial to Roy's deconstruction, because it tells the story away from the accustomed boundaries of language and linear usage, ... Roy breaks down the boundaries of language and cultural expectations” (royfan (@202.88.2329).

No message can be conveyed in a vacuum and no literary movement has successfully conveyed its ideologies without inventing aesthetics of its own. Plath, Munro and Roy, though belonging to different cultures and feminist experiences, have tried to reinforce their ideas on women and womanhood through style and technique that
are novel and unique. They seek the help of a new idiom, as they want to make sure that their novels with a clear feminist message do not fall into the misogynistic linguistic and stylistic mould and thereby propagate male chauvinist and patriarchal thoughts. They employ language and literary devices in such a way that their signals reach the readers without interruption. Not only the feminist themes but also the narrative techniques and the language they have employed to suit the message make the reading of their novels a pleasurable experience. They have deconstructed stereotypical images, demythified existing power relations, and reassured the status of women.