Chapter VI

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"Feminist Themes in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*, Alice Munro’s *Who Do You Think You Are?* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*" is a methodological and systematic study of novels written in English in three different cultures. These novels are the outcome of intensely felt emotions of women who are feminists in their outlook. To make the study a serious and logical work, efforts are taken to base the analysis on feminist theories. Further, to give a methodical documentation, MLA Handbook VI edition is followed. To make the dissertation a well-structured one, it is divided into six chapters namely “Introduction”, “Misogynistic Patriarchy”, “Female Sexuality”, “Mother Daughter Conflict”, “In Search of a Feminist Idiom” and “Summing Up”. Each chapter is well defined and presented after consulting the secondary sources available in the form of books, essays, articles and websites.

Annis Pratt states that feminist critics need to develop two skills: “... the textual analysis necessary to determine which works are novelistically successful, and the contextual analysis which considers the relevance of a group of works, even if artistically flawed, as a reflection of the situation of women.” The dissertation is based on this observation of Annis Pratt about feminist criticism, and makes a textual and a contextual analysis of three feminist novels written in patriarchal cultures, to study the situation of women in three different nations. As Mary Eagleton expresses in the Introduction to *Working With Feminist Criticism*, “If feminists do not try to make
women visible, the historical record shows that nobody else will. My experience is that it is still necessary to remind the world that women exist’(5).

The first chapter “Introduction” introduces the purpose of the study. The chapter contains a crisp presentation of what is meant by feminism and feminist studies. It also gives a glimpse of various feminist ideologies and theories that serve as the basis for the interpretations in the present study. It also places the three writers – Plath, Munro and Roy – against their respective social background, and looks at the different women’s movements and gender issues of their societies. A fairly detailed analysis of the lives of these novelists is also given, as the novels under discussion are autobiographical in nature. The scope of the study is also defined in the introductory chapter, and the possible line of analysis in the successive chapters is presented. To give focus to the study, the thesis statement is mentioned in the first chapter.

An attempt is made in the chapter “Misogynistic Patriarchy” to define patriarchy showing it as an exploitative structure reinforced by governments, religions and social practices. The oppressive nature of patriarchy has its manifestation as sexism. Man in his attempt to affirm his domain over women, has caused untold damage to the personality of woman. Having realized this, feminists demand that women should be treated on par with men in all respects.

Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir object to women being defined on the basis of what they lack, and not by what they possess. Elaine Showalter, the chief exponent of feminist criticism sees feminist criticism as an attempt to expose power relations and explode patriarchal thoughts. It also aims at rescuing
women from the inferior position to which they have been pushed. The second chapter
of this study has looked at the three novels chosen for discussion, as the attempts of the
authors to reaffirm the worth of women. As Manmohan Bhatnagar has pointed out,

The feminist perspective in literature - creative or critical- whether in a
third world country or elsewhere, has led to confront issues of similar
persuasion: male chauvinism, sexist bias, psychological and physical
exploitation, hegemonistic inclination in not merely the male but also the
female sections of society, the utter disregard for the female’s
psychological, cultural, familial and spiritual quests. Predictably enough
the ways suggested subtly and propagated most avowedly have ranged
from mild protests seeking accommodation through moderation, love and
persuasion to carving out of a self-sufficient exclusive self.(2)

Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar seen in this light is a typical feminist novel in the pre-
feminist era. It projects the predicament of the trapped and the oppressed woman of the
American society of the fifties. Plath presents woman as being crushed under an
institutionalized system of male power and strength. To drive home this idea, Plath uses
the effective image of arrow. Feminist ideology of Plath is well pronounced in her
protagonist Esther Greenwood who breaks male dictated restrictions and tries to be an
arrow that shoots off in all directions.

Esther Greenwood is seen fighting against sex and the institution of marriage that
have long been used as tools of suppression by the androcentric society. Instead of
accepting chastity as a quality prescribed exclusively for women, she looks for that
quality in a man too. She does not want to get caged in and burdened by the institution of marriage. When a career woman gets married, she is doubly burdened and is crushed. Very often marriage obliterates a woman’s identity, and chokes her to suffocation. To highlight the idea of woman experiencing a sense of entrapment in a male-designed life, Plath uses the symbol of the bell jar.

The Bell Jar expresses the strong reaction of a writer to the various modes of constraining a woman, besides marriage and sex. There is a discussion of rape as the most heinous crime committed against women by a society that swears on the might of man. This novel is not a plea for free sex, but it advocates proper protection of women against pregnancy. Birth control, Esther thinks, is a boon to women to safeguard her against the oppressive forces of male society that uses sex as a tool to subordinate women.

Alice Munro’s Who Do You Think You Are? though deeply rooted in feminist ideology is different from Plath’s novel in its depiction of feminism. Munro presents the marginalization of women in every walk of life. In her fiction, oppression is not confined to marriage and sex alone. It is rather a broader plain where masculinity itself serves as a tyrannical force. She shows how the physical power of the male coupled with cruelty becomes the cause of harassing a woman. The man does it in his capacity as a father or as a husband. Rose’s father is a representative of the tyrannical male who exercises his superiority over women using his muscular strength. He expects Rose to stay at home and help her mother with household chores. Munro shows that man feels secure only when he makes his wife solely dependent on him.
He insists on the wife to sever all relationships with her family, and he is callous towards her feelings.

A man whether young or old, looks at a woman as an object. Consequently, sexual harassment has become the order of the day. Male aggression is possible anywhere and it is symptomatic of man’s dread of woman coming to the open and moving about freely as any man would do. *Who Do You Think You Are?* is an attempt of Munro to empower women so that they regain their self worth and determination. It is a plea to women to lead a successful life independent of men.

Arundhati Roy’s debut novel set against the conservative society is viewed in this chapter as an Indian feminist novel. Like Alice Munro, Roy also presents physical violence against women as an atrocious crime. *The God of Small Things* is a strong protest against wife battering which the Indian society has hitherto accepted with complacency. She also sends a message that domestic violence persists, as women have not protested. Roy has projected marriage as an institution that has sealed the fate of women, making them play a secondary or subservient role. Instead of making a woman happy, it forces her to play stereotyped set roles slavishly. A typical Indian male expects the woman to take care of all the work connected with housekeeping. Not only men but also many women in Indian society are chauvinistic and fix into the mould. It is ironic that only a woman like Kalyani, who prefers to be mute, survives as a wife. Woman in India is taught to put up with the tortures of wedlock unquestioningly if she wants to avoid a “Man-less” life.
The society is misogynistic in that it prescribes two different rules to man and woman in matters of sex. When a Woman-less man has sex outside marriage, it is justified as "Man's needs", but the love and consequent sexual relationship of a Man-less woman is seen as an act of a "bitch on heat". The society that is able to understand the sexual needs of a divorced man, pillories a woman who is a divorcée. Much of the blame for such a condition rests on the tyranny of patriarchal culture.

Roy shows that there is an inherent jealousy in men when women come up in life, as in the case of Pappachi who cannot tolerate Mammachi becoming a concert class violinist. Roy makes it clear that education and financial independence through employment can empower women. As a feminist novel, The God of Small Things stresses the equality of women, and advocates the right of a woman in parental property that the patrilineal society refuses to give her.

This chapter has shown that though the three novels belong to three different social moulds, they are written by three feminists who want to contribute their share to the liberation of women from the misogynistic trends of an oppressive society. The feminist throbbing in awakened and empowered novelists is not confined to linguistic or cultural boundaries, but is universal. Subjugation of women as perceived by writers in different cultures is the same. The difference is only in manifestation and degree. The plight is the same for women though there is a difference in the forces of oppression. The three novels are seen as an intense plea to women to realize their self-respect and an attempt of the novelists to restore their human dignity. The issues
despite differences have a commonality, as oppression of women by misogynistic patriarchy is universal.

Literature, like society, has been treating sex as a male prerogative. Sexuality has always been considered a means of oppressing women. Frank discussion of sex and sexuality from a female point of view is carefully avoided as it is deemed to be a matter to be ashamed of. But feminists have objected to this age long concept and celebrate female sexuality as a means of liberating womanhood from oppressive patriarchy. They oppose social attitudes that deny women their own sexuality. Seeing woman as a sexual participant helps to shatter power relations that have so far remained exploitative. So, feminists contend that man cannot claim exclusive right over matters connected with sex, as woman is an equal participant in it. This approach is iconoclastic, and has shaken conservative thinkers.

Feminist writers in general, and the writers under discussion in particular, are seen protesting against women being projected as mere objects of male sexual yearnings. Through their characters, themes and situations they give a new look at and a new interpretation to sex and sexuality. Their fictions show that a novel and daring presentation of sex is required as description from a male perspective results in a lot of damage to women’s physical and emotional needs. The third chapter of this thesis “Feminine Sexuality” has shown how Plath, Munro and Roy view sex and sexuality through the spectacle of their respective societies, and assert in their novels the rightful place and role of women in sex. These writers highlight the fact that only if sex is understood from a woman’s point of view, it will enable the liberation and
empowerment of women. This chapter has attempted to analyze their presentation of feminine sexuality in the light of feminist and gender theories, and theories of sexuality.

In *The Bell Jar*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *The God of Small Things*, there are some common features with regard to feminine sexuality. There is an assertion of woman's right over sex and a revolt against the stereotypical sex roles assigned to women by their societies and literatures. Menstruation, sexual initiation, childbirth etc., which were considered to be taboos are hailed as celebration of womanhood as they are vital parts of a woman's life. These novels show that equality of woman can be assured only if her role in sex is understood and appreciated, and her active participation and her emotions are recognized as reflections of her erotic potentiality.

Sylvia Plath blasts the view of her character Mrs. Willard that sex is the need of a man, and what a woman wants from a man is after all security. She exposes the double standard practised by men. Buddy is a representative of the hypocritical world of male chauvinism. He nurtures a double standard with regard to virginity as applied to man and woman. Plath in very strong terms condemns rape which is a universal problem of women. She has presented rape as the manifestation of the inherent hatred man has for women.

With the support of feminist theories this chapter shows how man tries to control reproduction and sexuality conceptualizing them on the basis of masculine parameters. Usually in fiction man is the initiator who has no responsibility over the consequences of
sexual union, including pregnancy. But Plath exhibits her ire over this attitude of man. Though some feminists appreciate and justify lesbianism, Plath strongly disapproves of lesbianism as a substitute for sexual act. She considers it an unnatural, detestable relationship.

While discussing the consequences of sex especially pregnancy, Plath suggests that birth control is an option before women. Esther Greenwood feels liberated from the domination of men when she opts for birth control. She takes up the age-long role of seducer, which man so far has thought to be his exclusive prerogative. Her deliberate attempt to seduce Irwin is the result of the rebellion that has been going on in her, consequent to her experiences with hypocritical men. Birth control, connected with her decision to take up the role of a seducer, asserts and affirms her emancipation. Despite the bleeding and the suffering after her first sexual experience, Plath's heroine has a sense of victory, as she believes that she has broken the chain of hypocrisy with which patriarchal society had so far been binding women. She experiences the dignity of a human being.

The unconventional way in which Alice Munro projects sexuality in Who Do You think You Are? may give cultural shocks to many readers. Her character Franny is a victim of male sexual aggression. Sex is not a pleasurable experience for Franny but an instrument of abuse by the male. She views sexual crimes against women, like molestation and rape as matters of deep concern. She shows how woman suffers suppression right inside the house and in the case of Frannie it is her brother Shortie. Munro condemns in strong terms the lecherous old men who make sexual advances and
give out lewd comments. The Minister travelling with Rose to Toronto serves as the detestable male who creates a fear psychosis in young girls. In spite of Munro’s assertion of feminism, she presents how male aggression on helpless women goes unquestioned.

Munro shows that sex can never be the unquestionable domain of man as woman has an equal right over it. To show her protest against male monopoly, we come across her woman character Rose making sexual advances, and confirming her sexual identity. Giving a shock to the readers, Munro gives a role-reversal to her protagonist in which she breaks the age-long law of romantic love. She takes this to the extreme when Rose does not enjoy sex within marriage as she takes the institution of marriage itself as curbing women’s right to freedom and enjoyment. Munro seems to be against glorification of sex between husband and wife. She rebels against the concept of virginity and chastity imposed on women. She views pre-marital and extra marital sex as part of woman’s right over herself. Rose refuses to function within limits posed by convention and gender, and the relationship which society calls adulterous, is taken by Rose as a fulfillment of her love needs. She rebels against the stereotyped roles assigned to women prescribing laws of love and codes of morality and it is through such rebellion she asserts her power and identity. She lets loose desires that are suppressed in a patriarchal society.

Arundhati Roy’s novel also contains shockingly rude concepts of sex and sexuality totally unacceptable to a society steeped in strong beliefs regarding feminine sexuality and imposes strict moral codes on women. Roy blasts the vow of celibacy taken by religious sects as it crushes the sanctity of human sexuality. She sees celibacy
as an inhuman suppression of the natural human emotions by the unnatural restrictions imposed by society.

Roy shows that it is sheer hypocrisy when people view sex as Man’s Need. The love and sex between Ammu and Velutha that the society brands as profane, vulgar and immoral is raised to the pedestal of an ideal relationship. Ammu’s dream experience of holding the one-armed man close by the light of an oil lamp is her dream of an ideal relationship not confined by any social prescriptions. Roy establishes that every woman has the right to have sex as a consummation of love. She glorifies the sexual union between Ammu and Velutha on the banks of river Meenachal as an ideal one that has transcended the barriers of all man-made restrictions like caste and love laws. Ammu who is despised as divorcee wins over the role she is expected to play as a single woman and enjoys the consummation of her love with Velutha who is despised as a man belonging to low caste. She asserts her sexual freedom by flouting all norms imposed by society thereby asserting that woman has an equal share. Ammu is the initiator- a role hitherto considered the monopoly of a man.

Roy presents the incident of the paedophile – the Orangedrink Lemondrink man in Abilash Talkies – to show how man can be dictated by selfish emotions in matters of sex. She breaks the hypocritical silence in matters of feminine sexuality and frankly discusses female orgasm and sexual intercourse purely from a female perspective. Woman can never be just an object for male gratification, and so in her novel, womanhood is celebrated. Pam Morris says, “Male authored texts tend to construct female characters as passive objects of masculine gaze…. Writing by women can redress
this balance, celebrating women’s sexuality, articulating the pleasure and beauty of the female body without shame or apology"(64).

Plath, Munro and Roy fight against society-imposed restrictions on feminine sexuality as it alone can signal a real emancipation of women. Their assertions are unconventional and shock many a person who swears in the name of morality. What they really affirm is that every woman has a right over herself. These writers are not ineffectual rebels, but effective revolutionaries who have succeeded in demolishing barriers of any kind imposed on womanhood. They view sex as a woman’s need that cannot be curtailed by any antagonistic force on earth.

Woman’s experience as a daughter as well as a mother is unique, and the relationship between the two is puzzling. In This Sex Which Is Not One Luce Irigaray says, “In our patriarchal culture the daughter is absolutely unable to control her relation to her mother"(143). Cutting across different cultures, one could perceive that the tussle in the mother daughter relationship usually has its impact on women and their formation. An analysis of the mother daughter bond with the dilemmas involved in it, is very relevant to the present study, as all the three works under discussion – The Bell Jar, Who Do You Think You Are?, and The God of Small Things - are autobiographical novels, and have mother daughter dilemma as an important theme. Plath, Munro and Roy see mother daughter relationship as a complicated one that curbs and cabins a woman, and has detrimental effect on the growth of a girl into womanhood. These novelists do not glorify motherhood as a valued position demanding a lot of sacrifice. A girl matures
into a woman only by passing through a mire of conflicting and complicated love hate relationship between her and her mother.

Sylvia Plath with all her psychological problems as a result of “Oedipal complex” never had a smooth relationship with her mother Aurelia Schober Plath, and this has its impact on the portrayal of the mother daughter relationship in her novel. She has portrayed Mrs. Greenwood as a mother who fails to understand, accept, appreciate and acknowledge her daughter’s growth. Her love does not seem to be a selfless and sacrificial one, but rather the consequence of her intense desire to assert her authority over her daughter. This results in the daughter nurturing hatred for her mother. Esther Greenwood is able to see her mother only as an impediment to her growth and emancipation. Just as a male chauvinist refuses to accept that a girl is capable of thinking and taking decisions and exercises a negative impact on a girl, according to Plath, the mother too has the same impact on a girl’s maturation. In such a situation, an adolescent girl seeks her models in other women, but no one can be a proper mother substitute. A series of separations from these women nurture some important aspect of the girl’s evolving identity.

Alice Munro’s experience in real life with a sick mother with Parkinson’s disease is reflected in the Flo – Rose relationship in Who Do You Think You Are?. The relationship is charged with emotional tension as Flo tries to keep Rose always under her control thinking that she is not capable of taking care of herself. Flo imposes restrictions that hamper Rose from flowering into an independent woman. This tension continues until Rose discovers herself and finds her identity. In Anna also we see the girl child
getting crushed under the fanciful thinking and independent ways of her mother Rose. Anna is a typical girl in a broken family, torn between the love for the mother and the love for the father. In the case of Anna also, instead of relationship and connection, separation and objectivity become the indication for identity.

Theme of mother daughter relationship gains significance while discussing The God of Small Things as Roy’s mother Mary Roy is considered one of the greatest feminists Kerala has seen. Roy as a child imbibed a rebellious spirit from her divorced mother. This gets reflected in Mammachi – Ammu and Ammu – Rahel relationship. Mammachi the widow finds it difficult to relate with her daughter Ammu the divorcee. Though they live under the same roof in their parental Ayemenem house, they relate with each other in a vacuum as it were where they do not have a sense of belonging. This leads to tensions in relationships.

Mammachi’s fear regarding Ammu’s ability to cope in the adult world makes her think like her husband that Ammu need not have higher education. Like Mammachi, Ammu too has apprehensions about her daughter Rahel entering the world of adults. Rahel loves and at the same time hates Ammu, and she has an urge to get separated from her mother’s clutches. Witnessing the cremation of her mother, Rahel feels that she is getting a kind of liberation from a life that is hitherto prescribed by her mother.

With varied experiences against the background of their cultural beliefs and social contacts, Plath, Munro and Roy have commonness in highlighting the tension prevailing in mother daughter relationship. What is usually glorified and idealized as sacrificial love is seen by the three novelists to be as harmful as male oppression, as the
mother's overprotective love stands on the way of the daughter's individuality and emerging as an independent human being. The relationship is not one of domination and obedience, but one of emotional interdependence frequently disturbed by clashes and turbulence. Feminists and psychologists say that to attain freedom, the daughter extricates herself from the clutches of the mother, and the tension in the mother-daughter relationship and the consequent liberation are essential for the blooming of the woman in the daughter. They offer a message of comfort reassuring a daughter that others too have experienced the pain and confusion of growing independent, and what she finds puzzling in her personal experience is in fact a condition shared by all women. In the same way, they have shown that the right way of looking at a mother is neither as an angel nor as a monster but as a human being with desires and aspirations as well as limitations. Rightly does Pam Morris write, “Writing by women can tell the story of the aspects of women’s lives that have been erased, ignored, demeaned, mystified and even idealized in the majority of traditional texts”(60). Patriarchal societies hold the mothers responsible for the life of their children, but ironically deny them the power. In The Feminine Mystique, Friedan argues that millions of mothers and housewives find the destiny that society mapped out for them stifling, repressive and even dehumanizing. And, as S.Thillainayagam writes in “Stifling of Female Creativity : A Comparative Study of Lee Maraacle’s The Laundry Basket and Vasanthy’s Thedal”: “Patriarchal beliefs which are embedded as culture’s conscious ideology could be exploded only by feminist writing and feminist literary criticism”(51).
Chapter V “In Search of Feminist Idiom” has analysed how feminism has an influence on the stylistics of Plath, Munro and Roy. It is established that the three writers have avoided a sexist language and are in search of a new idiom that would suit their themes.

Plath has used a language to counter the semantic derogation of women and verbal violence. She has used an intrinsically female language and distinctly different images and symbols to present feminine emotions. Even the word “virginity” gets new connotations as it is applied to men also. Many of the images used by her are so powerful that they clearly portray the emotions expressed by women. The very title suggests the vacuum and suffocation experienced by women in a world that gazes at them as objects. The various images like kitchen mat, doll, a poodle in a basket, babies pickled in bottles and fragile thermometer are aptly used to highlight the plight of women.

Instead of the conventional soft language, Esther is made to use a plain, straight and tough language. A plain language is necessary to make an effective presentation of the pains and sufferings and even the aspirations of women. Plath makes a realistic and graphic presentation of childbirth bringing in all emotions, pain and sufferings of a woman. She creates a new style and structure of discourse when she presents the first sexual experience of Esther. In her venture to uphold the dignity and equality of women, Plath uses new stylistics. Plath is one of the early feminist writers who endeavours to be bold, original, and iconoclastic in handling her themes, and also the language.
Alice Munro in *Who Do You Think You Are?* uses a non-conventional style, technique and narration that are unique, to present complex plot, distinctive characters, and also feminist ideologies. Her attempt to go deep into psychological reality of women make her use Flo and Rose as storytellers. Their stories highlight the problems girls face in a world dominated by men. Munro, without hesitations, deals with gynecological subjects and experiences so far known to women only. She has created a writing that is subversive by bringing her language close to the body. To present the private experiences of women, Munro has experimented with unconventional themes artistically and used untraditional expressions effectively. Descriptions of woman and her body are never from the male point of view and never to belittle the image of woman. To shock the phallocentric society she describes the male organs. She has used satire and sarcasm to explode the myth of male superiority. Her language reflects the contempt a woman usually has for men who indulge in crimes against women.

*The God of Small Things* has won the admiration of readers for the non-conventional use of language. Roy has gone in search of a new idiom when she ridicules the age-old concepts of male superiority. She is not able to see marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of a woman's dreams, but only as "polishing firewood"(44). The potentiality of Ammu and the rebellion brewing within her are brought to light with the image of a "suicide bomber"(44).

*The God of Small Things* is one of the rare Indian novels where sexual consummation is effectively understood from a female point of view. The portrayal of the consummation of love is aesthetically pleasing and also suitable for asserting the
woman's right over sex. In literature rooted in androgyny, descriptions of the body or sexual union border on vulgarity as woman's emotions are ignored. Roy makes a graphic description of the sexual activity between Ammu and Velutha with a language that doesn't smack of vulgarity. She does not belittle the female body. Through powerful images and highly evocative terms, she shows the initiation and gratification to which woman is entitled. The free wheeling narrative technique helps the novelist not only to present various emotions experienced by Rahel at different stages of her life but also to peel different layers of a woman's consciousness. Roy has successfully handled the language to suit the age of the narrator. By employing sensual description, and dense metaphors and similes, Roy creates a new style and structure of discourse that truly represents the female experience.

Plath, Munro and Roy are using an idiom and narrative techniques that are different from those used by writers who are not concerned with feminism. These writers have heavily relied on a new idiom, a new imagery and a new technique as they are essential for the feminist themes they want to drive home. The gynocentric approach of these writers demands a language and style that are different from those familiar to the readers. By deconstructing stereotypical images and using ingenious images, they boldly shatter androcentricism and raise the status of women.

The world has seen several waves of women's movements that have tried to strengthen the position of women in society, fighting in various ways to establish their dignity and equality. Politicians, social workers and leaders of women's movements have tried to create a society in which women are no longer oppressed. Women have
broken many chains in the last century and they are able to compete with men in all spheres. Institutions of higher learning are showing interest in women’s studies, and several books dealing with gender issues are being brought out. As Angela McRobbie says,

An increasingly large number of women students have been, over the last few years, enrolling for higher degrees - all of which entail the setting up of a research project. Slowly this has generated a feminist ‘intellectual’ culture, or to put it another way, a strongly feminist critique has found its way into the orthodoxies of sociology, history, psychology, politics and so on.(119)

Voices of protest are heard whenever women are denigrated or subjected to male aggression – be it in real life or in the media. Feminist debates have become complex and diverse in the scholarly arena and much research has been done on feminism. Litterateurs cutting across national, cultural and linguistic boundaries have taken up women’s issues as a major theme in their writings. Women writers have written works exclusively on women’s issues to highlight to the world what the throbbing of women around the world are.

Feminist critics have formulated theoretical base to analyse feminist works of art. The present study is done bearing in mind feminist ideologies and theories. In “The New Feminist Criticism” Annis Pratt states,

The new feminist critic should be a ‘new critic’ in judging the formal aspects of individual texts; she should be ‘feminist’ in going beyond
formalism to consider the literature as it reveals men and women in relationships to each other within a socio-economic context, that web of expectations in which women are enmeshed. (qtd. Sharon Spencer 161)

After having analysed three novels from a feminist perspective, following suggestions and recommendations are made so that they would reach litterateurs, critics, academics and activists. For any effective liberation to women, women must realize their potential and strength. They must feel empowered to take and enjoy the fruits of liberty instead of making pleas to male sensibility. As understood from Rose, Ammu and Rahel, education and employment will not only empower women but also make them economically independent. Educated and enlightened women must take the liberty to reorganize their lives through affirmative and positive ways.

Women must shatter the shackles that have confined them so far, and come out openly against forces of oppression. A liberated woman need not suffer molestation like Esther in a social gathering or like Rose in public transport at the hands of an unknown co-passenger, or like Ammu in the Police Station. Woman has been indoctrinated to be mute and bear uncomplainingly assaults of any kind. Her voice is normally suppressed. The new generation women Esther, Rose and Rahel as presented by Plath, Munro and Roy are enlightened women who can no longer be silenced. As Mary Eagleton points out in Working With Feminist Criticism, “Women are not condemned to silence. Speech can empower women” (29).

Silence of women has been often misunderstood as their incapability and lack of feelings. So, violence of different kinds is unleashed on women. Roy focuses the
attention of readers on domestic violence and wife battering borne silently and uncomplainingly by Indian women. Mammachi is a battered woman who realizes the brutality behind her husband's attack, but gets used to it and learns to bear it. Ammu on the other hand does not submit beyond limits. She reacts. American and Canadian novelists do not present wife battering but their concern about violence against women is intense. It is man's beastly craving for physical violence on women that results in crimes not only like wife battering but also rape. What Franny and Ruby Carruthers suffer in Who Do You Think You Are? and what Esther undergoes with Marco in The Bell Jar are examples to this. These writers highlight violence not only to show the brutality of men but also to raise awareness among men and women. Dispangshu Chakraborty says,

Sexual crimes against women occupy a significant place in the penal status of every country and the most shocking crimes against human conscience and morality, are the sexual crimes against women. Rape is perhaps the most damaging and heinous crimes and has been recognized as the most serious offence against the dignity of women. It is one crime which a woman cannot undo to a man.(19)

As H. L. Kapoor has written in Woman’s Era (February 2004), “Several studies have been undertaken on rape during the last few years, the latest being in 2001. It was found that in 88% of rape cases, the rapists were either relatives of the victims or people who had access to them”(124). He has also recorded, “The Hon’ble Supreme court has
held that rape is a heinous crime, not only against an individual but also against society and that it is the violation of the right of a woman to live with human dignity”(125).

Rape is indeed the worst crime against women but wife battering is a very common crime against women in a nation like India. Women’s organizations and service agencies should raise their voice against such heinous crimes and create awareness among all sections of society. Legislations and their effective implementation should be ensured to protect women from such harassment. Special studies must be made on how different writers belonging to different nations and cultural backgrounds have reacted to crimes against women. Academic circles should show interest in studying the physical, emotional and psychological impact of these crimes on women. As a society, all efforts should be taken to prevent such crimes against women. Such studies will help establish mass movements that will assure dignity to women in the family as well as the society. Building a base of power for women through mass movement is essential. Consciousness raising and group participation are very important to change women's feelings of isolation and individuality. Collective actions will win reforms that will objectively improve women's lives. As personal problems are in fact social ones, solutions must also be social ones. As Muthu Chithambaram says, “Feminism is primarily to uplift the society without any gender discrimination, where men and women should be regarded and treated as human beings”(167).

Our legal systems should censure abuse of female body in the media and check pornography so that women get the respect they deserve. Any message that is sent by
the media as pornography is to be opposed if it humiliates women. If this is not done, sexual crimes against women will go unabated.

Women must move towards new lifestyles within women's culture. Seeing common interest with other women, they must develop awareness of common oppression. Hating the oppression that binds women, they must express love for other women bound by the same conditions. To reach out to most women their real needs and self-interests must be addressed. Reaffirmation of human values and ideals of sisterhood will help in identifying the felt needs that would move women to fight for just causes relying on one another as they struggle to gain self respect.

A manifestation of sexism is the male chauvinistic ideologies that are deep rooted in society. Even some women are biased and have imbibed male chauvinistic ideas. Instead of realizing the potentialities of women, they submit themselves to the dictates of men and internally justify whatever be the thought and action of men. Typical examples to this are Mrs. Willard, Flo, Baby Kochamma and Kalyani. It is bigoted tendency in women that gives an easy access to phallocentric ideologies to oppress women. This makes women to justify verbal, physical, mental and sexual assaults, and silently put up with cruelty of any kind. Annie Leclerc says in “Woman’s Word”,

Women will not be liberated as long as they do not also want to be liberating, by denouncing and by fighting all oppression, those that come from man, from power, from work, but also those that come from themselves and operate on themselves, on others, and particularly on their children.... As
long as we (women) are in complicity with man’s oppression, as long as we perpetuate them on to our children, turning them into vigorous oppressors or into docile victims, we will never, never be free. (Cameron ed. 79)

Hence it is obligatory that both men and women are aware of the dangers in cherishing male chauvinistic ideologies. Thinkers, academicians, activists and even curriculum designers have very important roles to play in dispelling such obnoxious ideologies from the society. As done by these three novelists under discussion, creative writers in the modern era must incorporate feminist themes and struggle against those institutions, social relations and ideas that divide women and keep them powerless, and subservient to men. They must pave way for women to wrest control of the institutions that now oppress them. In “Women and Fiction” Virginia Woolf prophesies, “Women in time to come will write better novels; and not novels only, but poetry and criticism and history. But in this, to be sure, one is looking ahead to that golden, that perhaps fabulous, age when women will have what have so long been denied them – leisure, and money, and a room to themselves”(Cameron ed.40).

If women should fight oppression and injustice, there should be a conscious confidence building exercise for women. Women should realize that they should not be budging to the dictates of the male dominated society and be ever ready to play a subservient role. This is what Esther does when she disagrees with her mother when she tells her to take a course in shorthand. She realizes that she has the potentiality to dictate letters rather than take down dictations. Rahel boldly walks into Ayemenem house as a divorcee as she is aware of the rights of women. It is this confidence that helps Rose in
transforming into a successful career woman. Society should formulate ways by which women who are endowed with capabilities like men are in no way hampered when they exercise their rights and competence.

Modern feminists want to ensure that marriage does not degenerate into an oppressive institution. Women should not only have the freedom to choose but also the right to leave. Once married Mrs. Greenwood has not a moment's peace. Living with a beastly husband, Mammachi feels crushed in marriage. Rose, Ammu and Rahel walk out of marriage when they find it suffocating and torturous. Ammu finds life miserable as a Man-less woman. Rose spends the rest of her life longing for love and acceptance.

Our social systems, religious laws and legal structures have all along worked against women, making separation, divorce and single life difficult for them. Hence legislations and facilities should be there for women to come out of wedlock if one finds wedded life humiliating and strangulating. In many cases, women have no real choice but marriage for survival, self-respect and security or love. There should be the possibility for women to discover what their real alternatives are and in what their happiness is, and thereby live the rest of their lives with dignity and purpose.

Different societies have different attitudes to sex but all have a double standard. Many societies are capable of seeing sexuality only from male point of view. Woman does not have a say or choice, and is looked at more as an object than a human being. Inside marriage, sex is an obligation and woman's feelings and views are seldom respected. Buddy Willard swears on the chastity of women whereas he has scant respect for it and, Baba gets ready to barter his wife for personal favours. Such attitudes and
double standards justify Chacko’s activities as “Man’s Needs” and opposes Ammu’s love for Velutha. The three novelists demand a right attitude to women and their sexuality. Modern world should witness a paradigm shift in the society’s attitude to female sexuality. As Kate Millet makes it clear in Sexual Politics, sex shouldn’t be a tool to oppress women. Moreover, instead of considering sex as a taboo subject, female sexuality should be celebrated Cora Kaplan says,

When women are freed from constant reproduction, when they are educated equally with men in childhood, when they join the labour force at his side, when wealth gives them leisure, when they are necessary and instrumental in effecting profound social change through revolution – at these points women will protest and break down the taboo.(63)

In a society like India remarriage should be encouraged, as women should not be allowed to suffer like Ammu. A reexamination must be made of laws and mores governing marriage and divorce.

In their endeavour to get empowered women go for education and eventually get economic independence through employment. But very often instead of enjoying liberation, career women double their burden. They are constrained to take up their jobs and domestic chores simultaneously. Whatever they do to earn, has no bearing on their responsibility at home, and they are expected to take care of their dull routine of domestic responsibilities. In many a culture, motherhood is glorified, and this leads to exploitation of mothers. Mothers are expected to perform tireless work and selfless sacrifices for the family. This indirectly bears a negative impact on women as in the
case of the mothers in the chosen novels. Women are overburdened and their health is spoiled in various ways. With double responsibility on their shoulders, workingwomen have no time for recreation. Esther’s mother and Buddy Willard’s mother in *The Bell Jar*, Flo and Rose in *Who do You Think You Are?* are examples of this. Mammachi and Ammu, though they are involved in the running of the pickle factory, never get due respect. To Chacko, whatever women do in the factory, factory can never belong to them. Education and employment should not become another cause for oppression. An answer to this problem is true partnership between the sexes, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens. Proper recognition should be given to the economic and social value of home making and childcare. It should be ensured that education and consequent employment which are essential for equality should not be made to counter human dignity and self respecting partnership with men.

An SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) Statement of December 1965 is one of the earliest documents in America to use the term “women’s liberation”. It points out that women, because of their colonial relationship to men, have to fight for their independence. Only the independent women can be truly effective in the larger revolutionary struggle. Suggestions given by these women are creation of childcare centres, sharing of work at home, and exercising the right of women to choose when they will have children.

In India, there exist deep-rooted prejudices against women. Cultural practices such as the payment of dowry serve to subordinate women. The traditional roles of
women in Indian society also result in a low level of participation in political and public life and a low socio-economic status. Indian government must work to remove traditional practices that subordinate women. The endeavours of women’s grassroots organisations and non-governmental organisations are vital to improve the quality of life of women in India, and to put an end to female infanticide and violence against women. Those responsible for crimes against women including rape should be brought to justice, and women must be treated with respect during legal proceedings. Women who are victims of crime should be fully compensated for the trauma that they have suffered. In the case of abuses committed against women by law enforcing authorities, as in the case of Ammu in the police station, it is vital that the government ensures that these abuses are promptly investigated, and that anyone found guilty of molestation, rape or any other crime against women is promptly brought to justice in accordance with existing laws.

Phallocentric society uses sexist language to reinforce a patriarchal outlook. Adrienne Rich says in “On Lies, Secrets and Silence”: “As long as our language is inadequate, our vision remains formless, our thinking and feeling are still running in old cycles, our process may be ‘revolutionary’ but not transformative”(247-48). Hence many feminists are in search of a new idiom that is nonsexist and emancipatory. A new language that does not smack of male chauvinism opposes any stereotypical gender reference. Plath, Munro and Roy have handled English language in such a way that it helps them to deal with feminist themes efficiently. Like them, feminist thinkers and ideologists should make deliberate use of a language that is not misogynistic.
“Feminist Themes in Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar, Alice Munro’s Who Do You Think You Are? and Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things” has been a challenging and rewarding academic deliberation. Such a study provokes one to recommend to the Universities and institutions of higher learning all over the world to encourage academic exercises on feminism. There have been many novels written down the centuries in all cultures that try to project gender issues. Scholars should evince very special interest in such writing so that attempts to reinforce male chauvinist tendencies through literature – be it character portrayal, theme or language – can be curbed.

As Sarah Gamble suggests, psychoanalysis and feminism should “be used in a politics that would fight to see the end of the patriarchal phallocentricism that produces sexism and misogyny”(178). This indeed is essential to establish gender justice and ensure dignity and self-respect to which women are entitled.

The present study is only a small attempt to understand how three novelists – Plath, Munro and Roy – who belong to three different cultures, have become conscious of the feelings of the marginalized women, and to see how their self-expressive fictions assert the status of women and establish their self-respect. These novels are not literary accidents but conscious literary efforts of three women writers who try to present their intensely felt emotions about women’s experiences. Any sensitive reader would appreciate the undercurrent of feminist themes in these novels, and no doubt, their writings will go a long way in upholding the nobility and dignity of women.