Chapter III

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Frank and open discussion of sexuality is very common in many modern novels but feminist movements have questioned such a discussion as it is done from the male point of view only. The feminist writers are against woman being presented as a mere object of male's sexual yearnings. Hence through their characters, themes and situations, they try to give a new interpretation to sex and sexuality, by looking at it from a purely female point of view.

Sexuality itself is a comparatively new term. Joseph Bristow says in Sexuality, that it is “a label that has for decades proved immensely difficult to analyze.”(228). An Indian text Divine Sexuality defines human sexuality as “an aspect of one’s personal identity that evolves over a lifetime”(30). The book further states that it includes sexual preference and sexual behaviour and also genital and reproductive health, and that it encompasses attitude, desires, beliefs, values and behaviour. (34)

Discussion of sexuality had been a taboo even in the western society until William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson published two medical textbooks: Human Sexual Response and Human Sexual Inadequacy which revolutionized human approach to the discussion of sexuality. They disproved the age-old dogma that women should not or even did not enjoy sexual act, and that they were mere receptacles for the male seed and for the growth of the foetus. As Clive Wood points out, Masters and Johnson
established that "an act of sexual intercourse is an act embarked upon by equal partners for their mutual gratification"(2520).

Still, in fiction, Freudian concepts of Oedipus and Castration complexes were reigning over the depiction of sexuality. These psychoanalytical concepts reinforced the male chauvinistic supremacy and a phallocentric paradigm. This psychoanalytic phallicism helped the male centered patriarchal society establish 'male's right' over the female in sexual act. Luce Irigaray says, "The 'feminine' is always described in terms of deficiency, or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex.... All Freud's statements describing feminine sexuality overlook the fact that the female sex must possibly have its own 'specificity'"(69). This led to the woman being viewed as a mere object and not as a participant and partaker in the sexual act. Jessica Benjamin stated: "Women's sexuality is primarily portrayed through object status, her ability to attract"(83). Simone de Beauvoir said, "We sometimes say 'sex' to designate woman. She is the flesh, its delights and dangers. The truth that for woman, man is sex and carnality, has never been proclaimed because there is no one to proclaim it"(175). This situation in turn led to further exploitation of women. As Luce Irigaray says,

Women are thus in a situation of specific exploitation with respect to exchange operations: sexual exchanges, but also economic, social, and cultural exchanges in general. A woman 'enters into' these exchanges only as the object of a transaction, unless she agrees to renounce the
specificity of her sex, whose 'identity' is imposed on her according to models that remain foreign to her. (85)

As a consequence, sex was discussed in fiction only from the male point of view, and no justice was done to woman's feelings, emotions and desire. Quite ironically, when man's idiom was applied to a woman in matters of sexuality, a different yardstick of value was used, and in many places the devouring passion of a woman was spoken of. Freud's contentions led to many of his followers stretching them to an anti-feminist stance. Following this, stiff disagreement came from feminist thinkers who opposed the contentions of Freud and his followers. In Sexual Politics, Kate Millet faulted the "penis-envy" of psychoanalysis. "Confronted with so much concrete evidence of the male's superior status, sensing on all sides the depreciation in which they are held, girls envy not the penis, but only what the penis gives one social pretension to"(187). The theorist who has become most notable for modifying the phallocentric paradigms of psychoanalysis to feminist ends is Julia Kristeva. Since her research concentrates on the channeling of the drives, Kristeva consequently has much to say about sexuality. Luce Irigaray is another feminist who examines the psychic and somatic dimensions of women's desires that Freud's work conveniently excludes or suppresses. Irigaray celebrates "the pleasure of caresses, words, and representations that remind woman of her sex, her sex organs, her sexes"(qtd. Bristow 111). In "Woman's Word" Annie Lecrec a French feminist breaks the long imposed silence on women and talks about the pleasures of her body: "... the pleasures of my woman's belly, my woman's vagina, my woman's breasts, luxuriant pleasures that you can't even imagine"(76).
Women’s movements in the West brought about a shift in the thought and attitude of novelists, especially those with feminist leanings. Feminist novelists started discussing sex, which until then was the exclusive right of the phallocentric domain. The feminist writers were constantly in search of a paradigm shift wherein the flowering of feminine sexuality could be witnessed. They wanted the world to know that women too have justifiable instincts, drives and desires.

Ann Oaklay points out that with the pioneering work in the USA of Alfred Kinsay and his colleagues in the 1940s and 1950s, the western world began to accept “not only that both men and women have similar sexual needs, but also that the range of sexual behaviour practiced by normal people is very wide” (2508). Feminists came out with assertions of the female libido. Luce Irigaray asserted, “Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide; her writing also can go on and on ... filled with these brief identifying hugs and kisses, she goes on and on infinitely” (qtd. Bristow 113,114).

Reproduction is linked with sexuality, and eventually, is looked upon as the duty of the woman in the process of perpetuating the species. Usually novelists describe it from a male perspective. Woman’s emotions, physical needs, and rights are never respected. Sexual act is described in a way to please the reader. Consequently, they serve as patches of erotic descriptions, often bordering on the terrains of pornography. Feminists record their objection to this, and reinterpret human sexuality to highlight the fact that all men and women are sexual beings.

Sylvia Plath, Alice Munro and Arundhati Roy uphold female sexuality, and register their protest against patriarchal society that uses sex as yet another means to
have dominion over woman. They are determined not to submit to concepts like castration complex or penis envy. The sentiments of a woman, hitherto sidelined, gain importance in their novels. We see assertion of woman's sexual freedom, revolt against stereotyped sex roles, and celebration of female sexuality. Menstruation, sexual initiation and childbirth cease to be matters passed over; but rather become part of the glorification of womanhood. These novelists recognize woman’s sexual drives, urges and needs, and present sex as an act in which woman is not merely an equal participant but also an initiator.

Self-expressive novels of Plath, Munro and Roy, were written during different periods of the second half of the twentieth century, and set against three different cultures. Plath wrote The Bell Jar a decade prior to the blooming of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the USA. Margaret G. Perloff says, “It is beautifully ironic that Sylvia Plath, who never heard of Women’s Liberation has written one of the most acute analyses of the feminist problem that we have in contemporary fiction.” Munro wrote Who Do You Think You Are? in 1978, after Canada started experiencing different waves of the feminist movement. Roy, primarily from an orthodox Indian social background that had not had the impact of the women’s movements of the West, wrote The God of Small Things towards the close of the twentieth century. But these three writers have looked at female sexuality and the woman’s right over sex from an inhibition-free perspective.

Till the middle of the twentieth century, American and Canadian societies, though accused of moral decadence, carefully avoided a discussion of female sexuality
in their literature. Indian social setting, though considered orthodox and conservative, has a slightly different history. It is a land where *Kamasutra* was produced. *Kamasutra*, a typical example of a male chauvinistic book on human sexuality presents the duties and responsibilities of woman. What is remarkable is that Indian culture has permitted a discussion of sexuality. Indian literature, art, and sculpture including temple sculpture celebrate sexuality. Bharatha Natyam, the traditional South Indian dance performed by ladies in temples and temple festivals allow them to present *mudras* or signs that have very rich sexual connotations. But, all said, Indian society has been maintaining a hypocritical silence in matters of feminine sexuality. Roy is a very rare Indian novelist who has underscored the reality of feminine sexuality in her autobiographical novel.

A focus on the representations of sexuality in *The Bell Jar*, *Who Do You Think You Are?* and *The God of Small Things*, in the light of gender theories and theories of sexuality, will generate a full understanding of women’s life in the past, and help to comprehend mechanisms through which ideologies of gender and sexuality can be reoriented. An examination of women’s sexuality will naturally lead one to view sexual relations with a balanced outlook and work for the liberation and empowerment of women. Seeing woman as a sexual participant will help us shatter the power relations that have so far remained exploitative.

Discussion of sexuality in *The Bell Jar* is purely from the personal point of view of the author. The biography of Plath presents her as a dejected soul, always aspiring for the love of her husband. She passed through traumatic experiences including shock treatment. When she was writing *The Bell Jar* her life was a struggle in desperation to
save her marriage from breakdown. She was longing for true and pure love. As pointed out by Elin Gyda Sjolie in a website, “Plath’s personal anguish and torment visibly manifested itself in her work”.

The Bell Jar shows how male domination persists even in matters of sex. It presents man as the initiator of sexual activity. It is as though woman is an object at the receiving end, and man has to teach her the rudiments of sex and sexuality. Man is presented as blunt when he talks sex to the female. After Esther witnesses childbirth, she spends some time with Buddy in his room.

Suddenly, after I finished a poem, he said, ‘Esther, have you ever seen a man?’

The way he said it I knew he didn’t mean a regular man or a man in general. I knew he meant a man naked.

‘No,’ I said, ‘Only statues,’

‘Well, don’t you think you would like to see me?’(70)

To Buddy, it is a matter of fact, prosaic, male activity in which the female emotion has no role to play. “I stared at Buddy while he unzipped his chino pants and took them off and laid them on a chair and then took off his underpants ....Then he just stood there in front of me and I kept on staring at him”(71). Having given the great shock to Esther, he takes everything easy and is in for giving a greater shock to her, “ ‘I think you ought to get used to me like this,’ he said. ‘Now let me see you’ ”(71).

To Esther, Buddy’s discussion of sex is highly nauseating especially when it comes to matters of virginity. Buddy serves as a representative of the hypocritical world
of male chauvinism. He applies double standards to virginity while talking about man and woman. S. Thillainayagam in an unpublished paper “Feminist Resentment in The House of Mirth and other novels of Edith Wharton” says: “What is sickeningly suffocating is that morality for women is always construed as sexual responsibility or chastity”. Esther who thinks that virginity is very important to her personal self expects that Buddy too should be like that. As he exhibits his nakedness to Esther, out of curiosity, she enquires about his chastity. “Suddenly I said, ‘Have you ever had an affair with anyone, Buddy?’ ... I expected him to say, ‘No, I have been saving myself for when I get married to somebody pure and a virgin like you.’ ... ‘You know, have you ever gone to bed with anyone? ... ‘Well, yes, I have,’ Buddy said finally”(72). This is a real shock to Esther as it exposes the hypocrisy of Buddy who used to present Esther as sexier and more experienced in sexual matters. Buddy tells her how the waitress in the hotel seduced him. Of course, in his case it was a real seduction by a woman. “Buddy had noticed her staring at him queerly and shoving her breasts up against him in the confusion of the kitchen, so finally one day he asked her what the trouble was and she looked him straight in the eye and said, ‘I want you’” (73). But, to Esther, it is not the story of a man being seduced by a woman, but a shameful incident in which a man has lost his pureness and his virginity. This incident makes the age long oppressed woman in Esther rebel and revolt against the society that has taught that virginity is for woman only and man has the right to hypocrisy.

Buddy considers a poem a "piece of dust" (58); he invites Esther to the Junior Prom and treats her like a cousin when she “felt dull and flat and full of shattered
visions" (63); he takes Esther along to see an anatomy dissection of a cadaver; he shows Esther a baby pickled in a jar; he makes her see a child being born; and finally Buddy offers to show himself naked to her in his room. When he does that, all that Esther can think of is “turkey neck and turkey gizzards” (71). She feels depressed. In the space of one day, Esther has seen death, birth and male genitalia. Buddy then admits that he has had an affair with a waitress the previous summer. The moment she reckoned the number of times Buddy might have had sex with the waitress, she just "froze up"(73). But Esther does not give vent to her anger at Buddy; she internalizes it and vows never to marry.

If Buddy Willard is a hypocrite, his mother is a fanatic. “Mrs. Willard was a real fanatic about virginity for men and women both”(74). But this Mrs. Willard has a strong belief that sex is a necessity for man, and what a woman needs from a man is security. She is a representative not of the modern woman struggling for emancipation but the vestige of the world that surrenders to male domination.

Plath presents sex from another angle through Eric “a bitter hawk-nosed Southerner from Yale”(82). Like Buddy, Eric also had his first experience with a middle-aged woman when he was a student, and now he looks at sex only as an animal instinct. “A million years of evolution. Eric said bitterly, and what are we? Animals”(82). As in the case of Buddy’s first experience, here too the woman is the initiator. In these two cases, quite shockingly for Esther, woman is presented as the seducer, and sex is performed not as an expression or fulfillment of love. “Eric’s whore hadn’t even taken off her dress. She was a fat, middle-aged woman … she wouldn’t turn
off the light ... it was nothing like it was cracked up to be. It was boring as going to the toilet"(82,83). This animal act of a whore has caused heavy depression on Eric, and makes him think how much a woman he really loves must be respected. “Eric said it would be spoiled by thinking this woman too was just an animal like the rest, so if he loved anybody he would never go to bed with her. He'd go to a whore if he had to and keep the woman he loved free of all that dirty business"(83). This is certainly not Esther’s view. She, at nineteen, believes that "purity" is "the great issue":

Instead of the world being divided up into Catholics and Protestants or Republicans and Democrats or white men and black men or even men and women, I saw the world divided into people who had slept with someone and people who hadn't, and this seemed the only really significant difference between one person and another. I thought a spectacular change would come over me the day I crossed the boundary line. (85)

Constantine whom Esther meets makes an interesting study. Esther is fascinated by the physical charm of Constantine and takes him for “the most beautiful man I had ever seen”(86), and wishes that Constantine must find her “interesting enough to sleep with”(86). But to her utter dismay, Constantine is not as she wants him to be: “… apart from holding my hand, Constantine showed no desire to seduce me”(86). Esther rationalises this failure by seeing him as "a bright, unattainable pebble at the bottom of a deep well"(89). This experience with Constantine does not make her disappointed but rather makes her justify her never wanting to get married.
Plath shows how woman has been taught that she should be different in matters of sex. To emphasize this point she brings in the article “In Defense of Chastity”. “The main point of the article was that a man’s world is different from a woman’s world and a man’s emotions are different from a woman’s emotions and only marriage can bring the two worlds and the two different sets of emotions together properly” (84).

Man thinks that it is his prerogative to teach woman sex. “The best men wanted to be pure for their wives, and even if they weren’t pure, they wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex” (84). Premarital sex, man thinks, is venial only for the male. “Of course, they would try to persuade a girl to have sex and say they would marry her later, but as soon as she gave in, they would lose all respect for her and start saying that if she did that with them she would do that with other men and they would end up by making her life miserable” (84,85). By referring to this article, Plath discusses safe sex that was then becoming a matter of hot discussion among feminist activists.

Rape is a universal problem of women discussed by feminists, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists and criminologists. In his book Atrocities on Indian Women, Dipangshu Chakraborty says, “Rape is the only crime in which the victim faces more degradation and social unacceptability and is often described as ‘Deathless Shame’ or ‘Living Death’” (19).

One of the major issues considered by feminist writers is what makes man a rapist. Everyone agrees that it can never be the outcome of the rapist’s love for woman or her body. It is universally acknowledged that mostly rape is the result of the male’s
affirmation of superiority over the female. Some cruel men, as Eileen O’Neil has expressed, think that woman “is to be subdued, dominated, plowed or fertilized by means of male physical power, technology or sexual potency”(76).

Plath has presented rape as the manifestation of man’s hatred for women. Esther’s encounter with Marco is to be analyzed in this perspective. For Esther, it is the first encounter with a woman hater. “I could tell Marco was a woman-hater, because in spite of all the models and TV starlets in the room that night he paid attention to nobody but me. Not out of kindness or even curiosity, but because I had happened to be dealt to him, like a playing card in a pack of identical cards”(111). Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life records, “Often the rapist shows very little aesthetic preference in his choice of sex objects. Sometimes he simply decides that he will rape the next woman he sees, conditions permitting”(389). Esther feels that Marco’s advances are not out of love but rather due to the intention of fooling her. “I began to see why women-haters could make such fools of women. Woman-haters were like gods: invulnerable and chock-full of power. They descended and then they disappeared. You could never catch one”(113).

Plath graphically presents Marco’s attempt to rape. The word “Slut” used by Marco has a terrible impact on the girl: “‘Slut!’ The word hissed by my ear” (114). As Cameron says in Feminism and Linguistic Theory, “Not only the acts of a rapist or batterer but his words too are experienced as terrifying and humiliating”(109). Regarding such abusive terms used for women, Muriel R Schulz observes, “Man’s fear of woman is basically sexual, which is perhaps the reason why so many of the
derogatory terms for women take on sexual connotations" (144). While discussing rape and reciprocal love in a Tamil novel, S. Thillainayagam comments in Feminist Literary Essays, "It hurts deeply to see how the sexual act, the most fascinating and the most pleasing of all, can be perversely twisted into tortuous forms. Callous men think a woman is to be valued only for the excitement she arouses" (83).

Marco displays not only his animal instincts but also his hatred for his prospective rape victims. All the men Esther meets in life or movies seem to treat women as either "sluts" or saints, preferring to marry the latter and have sex with the former. This confuses Esther. The movie she sees in New York stars "a nice blonde girl" and "a sexy black-haired girl". "Finally I could see the nice girl was going to end up with the nice football hero and the sexy girl was going to end up with nobody, because the man named Gil had only wanted a mistress and not a wife all along and was now packing off to Europe on a single ticket" (43).

Through many instances, Plath relates male sexuality with violence against women. She finds the two significantly linked. When Lenny Shepherd and Doreen are preparing to have sex there is a violent foreplay that even suggests rape. In the actual rape attempt on Esther by Marco, sexual violence is used as a means of asserting man's power over woman. When Esther loses her virginity to Irwin and suffers intense bleeding, the same is reiterated.

Plath presents the courage of Esther but at the same time shows how she is broken to pieces as a consequence of an aborted attempt to rape. The man who fails in his attempt to rape becomes stronger in his hatred towards his intended victim. "I started
to walk off. Marco sprang to his feet and blocked my path. Then, deliberately, he wiped his finger under his bloody nose and with two strokes stained my cheeks"(115). Instead of gathering courage and imbibing a determination to fight this cruelty, Esther helplessly becomes a victim of nervous breakdown. “Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one’s ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York”(117). As Ruth O’Saxton points out,

Contemporary protagonists such as Toni Morrison’s Pecola, Dorathy Allison’s Bona, and Jane Hamilton’s Ruth, endure physical and emotional abuse, and then “escape” into madness or narrate their own stories with a matter-of-factness that indites the culture while reconfiguring the reader’s notion of girlhood innocence, insisting on the young heroine’s value as a speaking subject.(xii)

Regarding such masochistic behaviour of young girls, Simone de Beauvoir says, “When she puts the snail on her breast, swallows a bottle of aspirin tablets, wounds herself, the young girl is hurling defiance at her future lover – ‘you will never inflict on me anything more hateful than I inflict on myself’. These are proud and sullen gestures of initiation to the sexual adventure”(377).

Women activists have all along been discussing safe sex, as pregnancy is the greatest threat to women, as a consequence of sexual intercourse. Simone de Beauvoir talks about the hostile aspect that makes the sexual act a serious menace: the risk of impregnation. “A danger of such magnitude constitutes a sexual restraint sufficiently
powerful to make many young girls keep to the prenuptial chastity prescribed by the
mores"(407). Esther is aware of this. “I knew I might have a baby, but that thought hung
far and dim in the distance and didn’t trouble me at all. There was no one hundred
percent sure way not to have a baby”(84). The dictum “better be safe than sorry”(84)
takes deep roots in Esther, and like many women’s liberation activists of those days,
Plath makes Esther opt for birth control. As she submits herself for this in the hospital,
she gets a feeling that she is really winning over the domination of men in the world of
sex. “I climbed up on the examination table, thinking: ‘I am climbing to freedom,
freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person, like Buddy Willard, just
because of sex…. As I rode back … I was my own woman”(235). To her, winning over
the fear of becoming pregnant is winning over man’s domination over her or hatred
towards her. It is this confidence which gives courage and determination to look for “the
proper sort of man”(235), the man with whom she could indulge in sex on equal terms.
She is determined to take up the role of seducer which man had been cunningly and
successfully playing so far. It is only when Esther takes control of her own sexuality that
she gains the sense of freedom that has till then eluded her.

To assert and affirm her emancipation, Esther does to Irwin, the well paid
Professor of Mathematics whom she meets on the steps of the Widener Library, what
men have been doing to women. “It was only after seeing Irwin’s study that I decided to
seduce him”(238). Her first full-fledged voluntary sexual encounter with a man is a
well-planned one. “I felt the first man I slept with must be intelligent, so I would respect
him.... I also needed somebody quite experienced to make up for my lack of it....
Then, to be on the safe side, I wanted somebody I didn’t know…”(240).

Plath believed that sexual relationships should be based on mutual trust, commitment and respect. Her protest against the double standard of the society comes in the strongest terms as Esther blows the bubble of the concept of virginity and succeeds in seducing a man. It is to be noted that when Marco tried to rape her she successfully fought against it. She now believes that her first experience of sex would free her from male prescribed purity for women. “I lay, rapt and naked, on Irwin’s rough blanket, waiting for the miraculous change to make itself felt”(241). Simone de Beauvoir compares feminine sex desire to “the soft throbbing of a mollusk”, and says,

Whereas man is impetuous, woman is only impatient; ... Man drives upon his prey like the eagle and the hawk; woman lies in wait like the carnivorous plant, the bog in which insects and children are swallowed up.... To the taboos and inhibitions contributed by her education and by society are added feelings of disgust and denial coming from the erotic experience itself.(407)

Esther had all along wondered whether the first sexual experience would hurt. Irwin tells her that sometimes it does, and in her case it does. The haemorrhage, which is very seriously affecting her, is taken casually by Irwin. But in spite of the pain and the suffering, Esther experiences a feeling of victory. To her, it is an experience that breaks the chain that binds woman, and blows off male hypocrisy. She feels equal to anybody. “I couldn’t possibly be a virgin anymore. I smiled into the dark. I felt part of a great
tradition, ... I wanted to brood over my new condition in perfect peace"(242). But a few scholars perceive this sexual act of Esther as a "de-feminizing gesture". In "Sylvia Plath: A Biographical Critique" in a website we read,

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood seeks a change in her life through "defilement." Greenwood seeks sex, she (falsely) believes that her life will change with the loss of her virginity. When she finally does the "deed," following a botched suicide attempt, Greenwood finds that post-coital life differs very little from celibacy (Unger, 534). Virginity is usually associated with femininity, therefore, this may be a symbolic de-feminizing gesture. (http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/7327/boheme/plath-critique.html)

The fact seems to be that many of Esther's problems issue from her conflicted view of feminine sexuality. Esther is preoccupied with her virginity throughout the novel. She views sexually permissive women such as Doreen as objects of fascination. Esther often expresses scorn, but believes that they enjoy some fun in life that she does not. She connects feminine sexuality with a sense of empowerment and takes it as a key to her recovery from depression.

Female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters. Luce Irigaray sums up the situation of a woman with the object status: "... not knowing what she wants, ready for anything, even asking for more, so long as he will 'take' her as his 'object' when he seeks his own pleasure"(23,25). Esther's giving up of her virginity symbolically suggests that she has broken all cords that have been
binding her in the name of chastity. She wants to tell Irwin, and through that the whole male world that man’s accountability does not end with the sexual act. When she has haemorrhage, she rings up Irwin. She very quietly but firmly and in an official manner demands that he too should take up the responsibility of the consequences of the act. This indeed can be taken as Plath’s warning that women should never allow themselves to be exploited by men. She seems to say that a revolt is needed, against the concept of attributing virginity to women alone. The idea of fixing the consequences of sex on women alone should disappear, if women are to share the world with dignity.

If a woman’s survival relies on a man, she is constrained to play a subservient role. The question whether woman can do away with the support of man is a matter of debate. Some organizations fostering women’s liberation suggest and even justify lesbianism as the alternative to woman submitting to man for sex and survival. Many feminist writers blow off the taboo and offer lesbianism as the answer. Plath discusses the lesbian tendency of Joan. But, to her, homosexuality and lesbianism are unimaginable acts of sexual gratification. Esther the ventriloquist of the author says, “Whenever I had thought about men and men, and women and women, I could never really imagine what they would be actually doing”(232). But she is curious to know the outcome of a lesbian relationship. Joan has formed a relationship with another inmate, DeeDee, and Esther catches them in a moment of intimacy.(231) She asks Dr Nolan what one woman might see in another.
‘I don’t see what women see in other women,’ I’d told Doctor Nolan in my interview that noon. ‘What does a woman see in a woman that she can’t see in a man?’

Doctor Nolan paused. Then she said, ‘Tenderness.’

That shut me up. (231)

However, despite her reservations about men, Esther remains avowedly heterosexual, and she tells Joan that she does not like her.

Plath wrote The Bell Jar at a time when the American women were opting to come out of their homes and take up a career, with an urge to prove that a career woman could always hope for an emancipated existence. Plath in her novel keeps the success story of a career woman side by side with lesbianism and analyses whether marriage stands on the way of a career woman. Esther is reminded of the famous woman poet in her college who lived with another woman as she thought that a woman could live with her husband only at the expense of her career. “I had told the poet I might well get married and have a pack of children some day, she stared at me in horror. ‘But what about your career?’ she had cried”(232). But to Esther, it is a strange, unnatural, detestable relationship that in no way enhances the pride of a woman.

‘I like you.’

‘That’s tough, Joan,’ I said, picking up my book. ‘Because I don’t like you. You make me puke, if you want to know.’

And I walked out of the room, leaving Joan lying, lumpy as an old horse, across my bed. (232,33)
Alice Munro views sexuality from diverse angles in her novel *Who Do You Think You Are?* The discussion of it gains greater interest, as she is one of the leading feminists of modern Canada. Sexuality as she projects in this fiction has to be considered with all seriousness because she is most self-expressive here, and her evocations of the past are directly her experiences shared in recollection. Eventually feminist themes, including unconventional way of looking at sexuality, are matters of interest in a scholarly discussion. As one discusses the theme of feminine sexuality in *Who Do You Think You Are?* it may appear to give cultural shocks but they are realistic from modern Canadian feminist point of view.

While presenting sexuality in her novels, Munro projects it not as an affair in which man has the final say. She does not tolerate woman being a passive recipient of man’s sexual advances. She looks at various sexual abuses to which women are victims. Credit should go to writers like Munro as well as to the feminist movements in Canada, for the formation of anti-rape movements and rape crisis centres. A recent development in Canada is men coming forward to fight for women’s dignity. Deirdre Gallagher writing in 1982 says, “It is true, as a measure of women’s success in the labour movement over the last ten years, that many men have supported the fight for women’s equality…. Women have been gratified by the support of men and have been exhilarated to see the changes in their attitudes and behaviour these last years”(155).

Chastity, virginity and pregnancy of unmarried women are matters of hot discussion in feminist literature today. In *Who Do You Think You Are?* Munro presents Franny as one who is abused repeatedly for the sexual gratification of the male. Franny
is a girl who does not really enjoy sex, and she suffers in the hands of Shortie. Presenting the case of Franny, the novelist puts forth her concept of female participation in sexual activity. Very often sex is an instrument of abuse used by the male. For all the abuses perpetrated by Shortie, Franny the representative of the female world suffers. "The use Shortie was making of her, that others made would continue. She would get pregnant, be taken away, come back and get pregnant again, be taken away, come back, get pregnant, be taken away again"(32). To make things worse, a figure like Frannie fascinates man’s thinking and captivates his fancy. The net result is, sex of this sort is the cause for aggravating women’s sorrows. "The welcome Frannie gave Shortie was not so saintly after all. She let out howls, made rripply, phlegmy, by her breathing problems"(32).

Munro looks at sexual crimes against women, like molestation and rape with deep concern. Women very often suffer at the hands of relatives, and this happens right inside the house. Rose is not safe when her father is around the place in the house. "She had to run then, she had to get away... and besides, what if he caught her? It would be terrible” (4,5).

According to the story Flo narrates to Rose, the deformed girl Becky's father was a curious butcher who ill-treated his daughter, and sexually abused her. Talking about such incestuous relationships as character or personality disorders, the book Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life says that they "occur in connection with serious mental illness on the part of the parent; senile deterioration, manic reactions, alcoholism, and paresis are some of the conditions leading to such a lowering of moral restraints"(390).
While thinking about Frannie and her brother Shortie, Rose understands that life is not safe even with one’s brother.

One thing was certain: the idea could not be Franny’s. She had to be caught for this, or trapped…. she showed unwillingness, had to be dragged, then pushed down where they wanted her. Did she know what was coming? She would know at least that nothing other people devised for her ever turned out to be pleasant. (31)

When sexual cruelties are meted out to women, they are invariably constrained to bear it, with no power to protest. A girl can seldom predict from which quarter the unwelcome sexual advance may emanate. The novel narrates incidents in which elderly people either give out lewd comments or make sexual advances. The bench outside Flo’s store is used by several old men from the area who throng there for gossiping, "drifting into aimless obscenity on the subject of women walking by, or any young girl on a bicycle”(4).

In the same way, Rose talks of the sexual attacks a girl has to bear in the school at the hands of bigger boys. This affects normal relationships and creates a fear psychosis in young girls. To them, places where boys linger are not safe places. To Rose, big boys look like wild dogs “capricious, jubilant in attack”(33).

Rose’s first journey from Hanratty to the city of Toronto is rather a horrible experience for her, as a lecherous elderly minister sitting beside her in the train takes it as his right as it were, to take liberties over the body of the stranger Rose. However
much she tries to avoid, it is the man who attains victory. He accomplishes his deed feigning to sleep. "She found it alarming.... It was a hand's pressure"(74).

The novelist presents the innocent girl as mute, helpless and powerless in a world where the male's sexual escapades go unquestioned and unchecked. "Please don't. That was what she tried to say. She shaped the words in her mind, tried them out, then couldn't get them past her lips. Why was that? The embarrassment, was it, the fear that people might hear?"(74,75). Rose, like any woman who is taught so, prefers to keep quiet for fear of other people hearing the complaint of a helpless woman in the society. While discussing this "deliciously irreverent story of initiation" in a website, Ann Barrow comments on the complex emotions of the adolescent girl: "As the scenery from the train window is erotically transformed, Rose exorcises her fear-fantasies by submitting to curiosity, more constant and imperious than lust - a lust in itself." W.R. Martin comments that it is a typical Munrovian irony that, in her first sexual encounter, Rose reveals a "complex and ambiguous attitude"(108). Though Rose never sees that man again, he "remained on call, so to speak, for years and years"(77).

Woman facing molestation at the hands of a man - a known person or a stranger - is a recurrent theme in Munro's stories. Her obsession with this is symptomatic of the ills of the society in which man exploits the vulnerability of women. To a man, it is not a serious act, but it leaves behind a strong and deep injury for a woman. It is this brutal behaviour that is reiterated through Rose's experience with a stranger in the library. "He bent and grabbed her leg, all in one smooth startling motion, and then was gone. She could feel for quite a while where his fingers had dug in"(90).
Munro shows through her characters and incidents that sex can never be an absolute domain of the male. She claims equal right for woman, as her sexual drive is as strong and powerful as that of her counterpart. She seems to say that any subjugation on this account is unacceptable. So, in her novels, we come across incidents where women make sexual advances and thereby confirm their sexual identity. Just as Rose takes initiative in *Who Do You Think You Are?*, Del in *Lives of Girls and Women*, as Sue Thomas points out, “celebrates the glory and marvel of sexuality, the fascination of ‘the world without names’ she shares with Garnet”(109). John B. Beston says, “The main theme that runs through Munro’s *Friend of my Youth* is consideration of a woman’s sexuality. In the first story which is the title story, sex permeates, preparing us for the other stories in the collection, and Munro tacitly assumes that a woman’s sex drive is as strong as a man’s”(182). It is a clear message that women can no longer be expected to take the subservient role.

Rose rebels to come out of the sexual role she has been taught by the society to play. She is not one who is fascinated by the sugarcoated words of endearment that men use. Eventually, she does not allow Patrick to play the role of the conventional initiator. She cannot accept what is believed to be the male's rightful words of compliments. To Patrick's words: "You're lovely. You have lovely skin. Such fair eyebrows. You're so delicate"(97), she quietly replies, "I'm not so delicate, really. I'm quite large"(98). Romantic love has always challenged and vexed feminist thought, as there seems to be an ongoing difficulty in maintaining equality in romantic relationships.
As Diane Turbide points out, "Her heroines are often sensualists, overwhelmed by desire, longing for intimacy, and yet constantly aware of how their life can be derailed by men – sometimes how they let them be derailed"(48). In the backyard of Dr. Henshawe’s, Rose is seen taking the upper hand and teasing Patrick. What the society expects man to do in matters of sexual advances, Rose, without any hesitation, does with Patrick. Society and literature have always presented man with exclusive rights over sexual advances, and the coy woman is expected to shy away. But Munro gives a role-reversal, and presents this as a process of maturation through which Rose succeeds in establishing her identity. An Indian text Divine Sexuality categorically expresses, “Exploring sexuality by the young is a natural process of achieving an identity”(35).

Only after affirming her female identity in sex, does Rose submit to Patrick. "As soon as he started to fight she was relieved - that was what she wanted from him, some sort of action. But she had to keep resisting, until he really proved himself stronger"(98). Rose is a novice who has her fancies stored in her, and the first time she meets Patrick in a congenial atmosphere, she submits to the dictates of these fancies. “Rose was doing the giggling. She felt a need to be continually playful. She was terrified they would not manage it, there was a great humiliation in store, a great exposure of their poor deceits and stratagems. But the deceits and stratagems were only hers”(100). Though Rose expects Patrick to initiate the sexual act, once initiated she realizes her “self” and reveals her joy. “She was pleased when it was accomplished; she did not have to counterfeit that. They had done what others did, they had done what
lovers did. She thought of celebration"(100). The author shows how Rose is “thrown out of gear”(100), and her passionate carrying on silenced, once the act is over.

Sex is glorified, but woman is viewed as a yielder or recipient in many male-authored texts. Women novelists like Munro have revolted against such popular concepts. Beverly J. Rasporich says, “Unlike male authors who tend to focus almost exclusively on sexuality as physical encounters, she, like Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood, interprets sexuality and sexual experience broadly, including psychological and social forces that shape sexual impulses”(86). **Who Do You Think You Are?** is a typical representative feminist novel in that it establishes the right of woman in matters of sex. Rose enjoys thoroughly her sexual relationship with Patrick before marriage, but when it comes to sex within marriage, it irritates her. "For a time between, before and after she was married, the thought of anything connected with sex irritated her, rather in the way Modern Art irritated Patrick”(141). Shulamith Firestone says in The Dialectic of Sex, “As long as we have the institution (of marriage) we shall have the oppressive conditions at its base. We need to start talking about new alternatives that will satisfy the emotional and physical needs that marriage, archaic as it is, still satisfies, but that will satisfy them better”(qtd. Miriam Schneir 256).

Rose’s aversion for sex within marriage is symptomatic of the protest of the feminist writers against the institution of marriage that oppresses women’s legitimate right to freedom and enjoyment. Like the traditional novelists, Munro does not want to glorify the sexual relationship between husband and wife. Rose thinks that through Clifford, her chosen male, she can fulfill her natural sexual instincts. Her hunt for
Clifford to seek sexual gratification is a revolt against the role society has assigned to women and celebrated in romantic fiction. Rose refuses to function within the limits set by convention and gender. Though she has to pay an emotional price for flouting these limits, she takes risks, as they help her in her search for identity and in asserting her right over the pleasures of sex. W.R. Martin opines, "Rose is trying to escape from marriage and Patrick and to achieve a fantastic and miraculous self-fulfillment" (112). Munro’s novel projects the idea of Pam Houston that “Men are dependant on feminine sexuality for their existence” (85), and rejects the society's role expectation of a woman as a passive receptacle for male sexual urge.

Novels written with a stereotypical male point of view demand that the male goes on a hunt for his female counterpart in sex. In them when a man and a woman are alone invariably the male makes the sexual advance. In Who Do You Think You Are? we see Rose breaking this kind of male chauvinistic thought and pursuing Clifford with the sole intention of subduing him in contrast to the prescription of the society.

“If we went ahead with this, what good do you think it would do anybody? Rose? Really?”

“Us,” Rose said.

“It would do us good.”

“No it wouldn’t. It would end up in one big mess.”

“Just once.”

“No.”
"You said just once. You said we would have a memory instead of a dream."

"Jesus. I said a lot of puke." (151)

To quote Ann Barrow:

By unraveling the prescribed roles women are forced to play within the masquerade of femininity - both overtly by patriarchal society, and by women's complicitous involvement within these roles--Munro exposes the underbelly of the feminine unconscious. Desire, lust, love, identity, loneliness, and frustration abound in Munro's stories; thus reflecting the extent these feelings are dominant in the psyche of modern women. (http://honors.org/AH_Zine/Sept2000/KnowledgeasConsequence.html).

The extra marital relationship of a woman is not a matter to be glorified or ridiculed, but rather one to be understood. To Munro, Rose has a legitimate right to this kind of relationship. "What was she in love with, then, what did she want of him? She wanted tricks, a glittering secret, tender celebration of lust, a regular conflagration of adultery. All this after five minutes in the rain"(138). This relationship, which the society calls adulterous, is taken by Rose, as a fulfillment of her love needs. "Rose did wonder why she always seemed to be on the wrong end of things .... She thought of love, to reconcile herself. She was loved, not in a dutiful, husbandly way, but crazily, adulterously, as Jocelyn and her neighbours were not"(153).

In mid-life, as an independent woman, when Rose revisits Clifford and Jocelyn, she plays with them the romantic triangle - a drunken experience of sexual intercourse,
and Munro gives a vivid description of this episode. Whereas many liberal feminists would condemn this as pornography, radical feminists would believe, as Joseph Bristow says, that “Some types of graphic sexual representation can allow women to explore and emancipate desires otherwise suppressed in a patriarchal society”(9).

Munro’s views on female sexuality are radically different from many of the modern thinkers including some feminists. She believes the concepts of virginity and female chastity and even the institution of marriage can never curb the right of the woman over sex. She projects extra-marital and pre-marital sex as acceptable as she believes that the institution of marriage should not be another means of oppressing the woman especially by suppressing her right over sexuality. This has resulted in the author depicting extra marital infatuation as natural in many of her stories. In “Walking on Water”, a story in *Something I’ve Been Meaning To Tell You*, the simple, unpretentious country bred girl Edie married to an old man, experiences an intense infatuation for a qualified pilot. The airman treats Edie with considerable tenderness, but flies away from her. Though disappointed, she is sensible enough to face life with a smile. She reflects: “If there were women all through life waiting, and women busy and not waiting, I know which I had to be. Even though there might be things the second kind of women have to pass up and never know about, it is still better”(65).

Such presentations may be shocking to conservatives. But this kind of iconoclastic approach is justified from the point of view of feminists. They believe that this kind of outlook is necessary for the flowering of a real feminism that recognizes the sex drive of a woman. As Maggie Humm points out in *The Dictionary of feminist*
Theory, Kate Millett uses the term “sexual revolution” (208) to describe the large-scale changes which are required in contemporary sexual relations, and Ellen Willis gives a definition for sexual revolution. She argues that

... sexual liberation must involve not only the abolition of restrictions but also the positive presence of social and psychological conditions that can foster satisfying sexual relations. Sexual freedom, she claims, will only exist within a coherent feminist politics when individuals are not oppressed by a socially constructed sexuality based on biologically-determined definitions of sexuality. (qtd. Maggie Humm 208)

Arundhati Roy deals with sexuality with the Indian traditional society as the background. It is a society that has laid down very strict code of conduct and morality to people, particularly to women. Women are, by and large, yet to see a world in which they have any chance or right to discuss sex and sexuality. Love is considered something to which womenfolk ought not to have an access and any woman, who tries to cross over the rigid boundaries prescribed, is looked upon with suspicion. The author and her mother belong to a class of Indian women who, to a great extent, succeeded in breaking the many chains that fettered womenfolk, and naturally Roy’s novel is replete with suggestions that it is a hypocritical society that prescribes hard and fast and inhuman laws to women.

When many western novels like The Bell Jar, and Who Do You Think You Are? discuss female sex and sexuality without any reference to marriage, The God of Small Things discusses sex and sexuality, either within marriage, or at least with reference to
the code of conduct prescribed to a married woman or a divorcée. Roy tries to say that basically the emotions of women are the same – be it the old Baby Kochamma or Ammu. She also projects how casteism that is exclusive to India, sexism, and the difference in social status have their impact on human sex and sexuality.

Roy shows how the conservative Indian society prescribes unnatural love laws, and how this proves detrimental to the dignity of women. In this society, love and sex are not to be chosen but rather prescribed and allotted. “That it really began in the days when the Love Laws were made. The Laws that lay down who should be loved, and how. And how much”(33). Roy’s novel is an attempt of an emancipated Indian woman to fight the artificial code of conduct that oppresses women and shatters womanhood. The author presents that breaking of the laws of love has been a part of history because they are man-made and are harmful to women. Through Ammu she argues that it is quite legitimate and reasonable that a woman breaks this law even at the face of strong opposition from the society. “They all broke the rules. They all crossed into forbidden territory. They all tampered with the laws that lay down who should be loved and how. And how much.... It was a time when the unthinkable became thinkable and the impossible really happened”(31).

Roy probes female emotions and sexuality, and explores the collective unconscious of women’s mind. A flashback, as it were, takes the readers to the natural turbulence that was taking place in Baby Kochamma who later pretends to be a paragon of virtues, one who could have never thought of sex. The novelist says, “Baby Kochamma tried to seduce Father Mulligan with weekly exhibitions of staged
charity”(23). The Bible and the forced doubts arising from the Bible become excuses for the exchange of love between the unquenched passion of a girl and a man who had taken the oath of celibacy. “Every Thursday, undaunted by the merciless midday sun, they would stand there by the well. The young girl and the intrepid Jesuit, both quacking with unchristian passion. Using the Bible as a ruse to be with each other”(24). To the novelist, Father Mulligan is a bundle of contradictions and an example of hypocrisy. “Father Mulligan was more than merely flattered by the emotion he aroused in the attractive young girl who stood before him with a trembling, kissable mouth and blazing, cold-black eyes”(23). Whatever be the code of conduct prescribed to her by society, Baby Kochamma is deeply in love with Father Mulligan and defies her father, the orthodox Rev. John Ipe. “Displaying a stubborn single-mindedness … Baby Kochamma defied her father’s wishes and became a Roman Catholic”(24).

The writer sees through the vow of celibacy taken by the Catholic nuns and priests. She hints how this vow crushes the sanctity of human sexuality. To her it is not a victory over sex but rather an inhuman suppression of it. In her scholastic life, what Baby Kochamma dreams of is a romantic life with Father Mulligan the celibate by her side always. “She hoped somehow that this would provide her with legitimate occasion to be with Father Mulligan. She pictured them together…. Just to be near him. Close enough to smell his beard. To see the coarse weave of his cassock. To love him by looking at him”(24).

This satirical attack on celibacy and suppression of sexual desire reaches its height when she mentions the life of the elderly priests and nuns. “She found that the
Senior Sisters monopolized the priests and bishops with biblical doubts more sophisticated than hers would ever be, and that it might be years before she got anywhere near Father Mulligan"(24,25). It is this despair born out of unquenched sexuality that makes Baby Kochamma remain a spinster and turn to television programmes. It is her unfulfilled dreams that get a soothing effect in her old age as “she presided over the World in her drawing room on satellite TV”(27). She is sore when women in TV shows succeed in seducing men.

On weekdays she watched The Bold and The Beautiful and Santa Barbara, where brittle blondes with lipsticks and hairstyles rigid with spray seduced androids and defended their sexual empires. Baby Kochamma loved their shiny clothes and the smart, bitchy repartee. During the day disconnected snatches of it came back to her and made her chuckle. (27,28)

She cherishes Father Mulligan in her memory. “In her memory of him, he embraced her. Just her.... (Her senses feasted between changes, on that lean, concave, Christ-like body.) ... And every night, night after night, year after year, in diary after diary, she wrote: I love you I love you”(298).

The marriage of Ammu, its breakdown and aftermath make an interesting study of Indian society’s concept of sex and sexuality especially with reference to women. Though outwardly Ammu is a rebel in her choice of husband, her marriage is a marriage of convenience. The blossoming of their love is quick, and their marriage takes place without the consent of her parents. Like any Indian woman Ammu appears to be
passive. “Ammu didn’t pretend to be in love with him. She just weighed the odds and accepted. She thought that anything, anyone at all would be better than returning to Ayemenem”(39). She is heading for a disappointment. “Ammu realized that the slightly feverish glitter in her bridegroom’s eyes had not been love, or even excitement at the prospect of carnal bliss, but approximately eight large pegs of whisky”(39).

Hollick, the manager of her husband’s company, looks at Ammu as an object for sexual gratification. He is not able to look at anything beyond her physical beauty – “an extremely attractive wife”(43). With colonial pride and the white man’s audacity, he thinks that he can very easily possess the body of the Indian manager’s wife. To him, it is like a matter of fact business deal when he suggests “Ammu be sent to his bungalow to be ‘looked after’”(42).

Roy presents Ammu as one who is not conditioned by the dictates of a hypocritical society. Never does she try to put artificial restrictions on her emotions.

On days like this, there was something restless and untamed about her....

Even her walk changed from a safe mother-walk to another wilder sort of walk. She wore flowers in her hair and carried magic secrets in her eyes. She spoke to no one. She spent hours on the riverbank with her little plastic transistor shaped like a tangerine. She smoked cigarettes and had midnight swims. (44)

It is this, which later makes her transcend the restrictions imposed by the society and experience the real sex of her concept through Velutha. It is this passion that makes her “temporarily set aside the morality of motherhood and divorceehood”(44). Kulpana
Wilson says, “Ammu is shown throughout the novel as conscious not only of her own sexuality, but of her emotional needs and capable of acting on this basis” (http://www.indiaworld.co.in/home/rdc/index/html).

The real passion of the woman is bubbling inside Ammu. “An unmixable mix. The infinite tenderness of motherhood and the reckless rage of a suicide bomber…. To use by night the boat that her children used by day”(44). Ammu as a married woman would have had similar dreams, but none of her dreams got fulfilled. Roy as a spokesperson of the modern woman raises her voice against the violence, the drunken behaviour and Baba’s attempt to pawn his wife for bettering his prospects. Ammu’s dream of her experience with the one-armed man holding her close by the light of an oil lamp could be seen as her dream of an ideal relationship not confined by any social prescriptions. The man with the high wax body polish can do only one thing at a time as he has only one hand.

If he held her, he couldn’t kiss her. If he kissed her, he couldn’t see her.

If he saw her, he couldn’t feel her.

She could have touched his body lightly with her fingers, and felt his smooth skin turn to gooseflesh. She could have let her fingers stray to the base of his flat stomach. Carelessly, over those burnished chocolate ridges. (215)

Ammu and Velutha are experiencing orgasm. “She could so easily have done that, but she didn’t”(215). It is the prying eyes of the people that prevent them from attaining sexual consummation, but sharing love is an unparalleled experience for them. “She
could have touched him with her fingers, but she didn’t. They just stood together. Still. Skin to skin”(216). It is this dream that later gets fulfilled in her relationship with Velutha.

Roy presents the love and sex between Ammu and Velutha as an ideal one. Their sexual act is the consummation of their love. They participate in the union together and share the pleasure equally. Ammu does not become in any way subservient to the male. This kind of iconoclastic union shattering all the barriers of casteism is not even imaginable for women of any male chauvinistic society. Mammachi, as a representative of this traditional orthodox male dominated society, cannot take this as an act of a woman and a man coming together in love. “She imagined it in vivid detail: a Paravan’s coarse black hand on her daughter’s breast. His mouth on hers. His black hips jerking between her parted legs. The sound of their breathing”(257). With her male oriented casteist conservative outlook she cannot understand that love and sex are beyond the domains of caste, and that Ammu as a woman has the right to have love and care, and also sex! “His particular Paravan smell. Like animals. Mammachi thought and nearly vomited…. She had defiled generations of breeding”(257,58).

Roy exposes the pretentious behaviour of the upper class Syrian Christian community. Mammachi who facilitates her son Chacko’s affairs with the poor women of the area, may be even paravan women, and justifies it as “Man’s needs”, is not able to understand that sex is the need for a young woman. Beauvoir says, “Patriarchal civilization dedicated woman to chastity; it recognized more or less openly the right of the male to sexual freedom, while woman was restricted to marriage”(395). While
talking of “the sexual double standard” Cameron Deborah says in *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*. “Women should have no sexual desires whereas men should be insatiable; if women get out of line by expressing autonomous desire or refusing to cater to men, they will be censured”(108).

Like Mammachi, Baby Kochamma is also projected as hypocritical. She says, ‘*How could she stand the smell? Haven’t you noticed, they have a particular smell, these Paravans?* ”(78). Roy attacks the hypocritical casteist society with concentrated sarcasm when she refers to the reaction of Baby Kochamma. “And she shuddered theatrically, like a child being force-sped spinach. She preferred an Irish-Jesuit smell to a particular Paravan smell”(78).

Ammu experiences all the natural emotions and passions of a woman. She worries about reaching old age without using the beauty of her body.

Ammu looked at herself in the long mirror on the bathroom door and the spectre of her future appeared in it to mock her. Pickled. Grey. Rheumy-eyed. Cross-stitch roses on a slack, sunken cheek. Withered breasts that hung like weighed socks. Dry as a bone between her legs, the hair feather white. Spare. As brittle as a pressed fern.

Skin that flaked and shed like snow.

Ammu shivered. (222)

“The spectre of her future” – her old age, makes her shudder. She is still young, and when she realizes that her body has all the glamour of a young lady she is thrilled. She realizes that she is capable of sexual stimulation. She views her sexuality in a positive
way. It is this that makes her come close to Velutha, breaking the codes of law of male oriented tradition. Pam Morris points out, “Male authored texts tend to construct female characters as passive objects of a masculine gaze, which is frequently voyeuristic…. Writing by women can redress this balance, celebrating women’s sexuality and articulating the pleasure and beauty of the female body without shame or apology”(63,64).

When Ammu meets Velutha in the riverbed, as a woman who is aware of the beauty of her body and conscious of her worth, she is able to enjoy his beauty.

She could see his smile in the dark. His white sudden smile that he had carried with him from boyhood into manhood. His only luggage.

They looked at each other. They weren’t thinking any more. The time for that had come and gone. Smashed smiles lay ahead of them. But that would be later.

Lay Ter. (334)

Ammu is an unconventional woman and sex is her need too. She goes to Velutha and presses her body against his. He doesn’t touch her, but cold, terror and desire mingle and make him shiver.

She unbuttoned her shirt. They stood there. Skin to skin. Her brownness against his blackness. Her softness against his hardness. Her nut-brown breasts against his smooth ebony chest. She smelled the river on him … Ammu put out her tongue and tasted it, in the hollow of his throat… She
pulled his head down towards her and kissed his mouth. A cloudy kiss. A kiss that demanded a kiss back. (334,35)

The age-old custom has always trained the woman to be submissive and be at the receiving. Man alone is expected to make advances and be the architect of the sexual act. Roy presents that true love and sex cannot be cramped by marriage and the decision of the male. Sexual union is an act of love, and there is nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to hide. The sexual union between Velutha and Ammu can be considered ideal because Ammu frees herself from all restrictions imposed on woman. “Ammu naked now, crouched over Velutha, her mouth on his. He drew her hair around them like a tent. Like her children did when they wanted to exclude the outside world. She slid further down, introducing herself to the rest of him”(336). As Nirmala C.Prakash says, Ammu-Velutha relationship is “the only relationship which germinates from the innermost core of two human hearts. It is the perfect kind of man-woman relationship, and the only one which is illustrated with scenes resonant with love, sex and feelings of mutual fulfillment”(82).

We see that all along Velutha the male is gripped by fear, especially at the thought of “what he had done. At what he knew he would do again. And again”(337). But to Ammu, it is a blissful moment, and it is as though she has had a great experience. “Seven years of oblivion lifted off her and flew into the shadows on weighty quaking wings. Like a dull, steel peahen. And on Ammu’s Road (to Age and Death) a small, sunny meadow appeared. Copper grass spangled with blue butterflies. Beyond it, an abyss”(337). Roy has, no doubt, succeeded in establishing that sex is not man’s need
alone as the society believes; it is woman's need too. Ammu breaks all social, cultural
and moral barriers imposed on woman and enters an ecstatic experience in her union
with Velutha. Kalpana Wilson in a website points out Aijaz Ahmed's claim that, "In
her portrayal of the relationship between Ammu and Velutha, Roy has defined sexuality
as 'that transcendence which takes individuals beyond history and society, straight into
the real truth of their beings', overcoming barriers of class and caste by creating a
'phallocentric utopia'."

As a contrast to this idealized sexual union, Roy also presents human sexuality
from different angles, showing it as the gratification of the animal need of a male – an
act in which many women do not play any role. Often, the female feels an alien in the act
of sex, and the male is brutally selfish. The Orangedrink Lemonade man in Abilash
Talkies is a paedophile and abuses the male child Estha. The author presents this
incident to show how the male can be dictated by selfish emotions in matters of sex.
This indeed is in sharp contrast to the way Velutha handles and accepts Ammu.

The sex life of Rahel and Larry McCaslin also serves as a contrast to Ammu-
Velutha relationship. "Rahel drifted into marriage..."(18), and there is no romance in
the marriage of Rahel and McCaslin. Whereas Ammu wants to enjoy the whole of
Velutha, and experience him in every pore of her skin, Rahel displays indifference.
McCaslin acts as the initiator and tries to enjoy even the slightest throbbing of her pulse.
"He held her as though she was a gift. Given to him in love. Something still and small.
Unbearably precious"(19). Their sexual union lacks the essence. It is not an act in which
the male and the female meet on the same plain.
But when they made love he was offended by her eyes. They behaved as though they belonged to someone else. Looking out of the windows at the sea. At a boat in the river. Or a passer-by in the mist in a hat.

He was exasperated because he didn’t know what that look meant. He put it somewhere between indifference and despair. (19)

Rahel’s lack of involvement can be interpreted as the consequence of the trauma experienced by her as a child. It can also be seen as her longing for her twin-egged twin-brother Estha. Perhaps, it is this absence of accepting each other on an equal footing that leads to the breakdown of the relationship between Rahel and Larry McCaslin. As said in Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life, “Frigidity may be the end result of a long process of repression.... The primary causes of frigidity are psychological, and the frigidity apparently represents not an absence of sexual desire but a blocking, due to emotional conflicts”(382,84).

Roy raised a storm in the political circle of Kerala and the literary circles of India, as there is a suggestion of incestuous relationship between Rahel and Estha. The opposition from these circles would not have been so strong if it had been only a suggestion. The author goes to the extent of justifying it, and contrasts it with Rahel’s response to Larry McCaslin. She gives a vivid description of Rahel and Estha “Not old. Not young. But a viable die-able age”(327), lying together in an embrace.

Quietness and Emptiness fitted together like stacked spoons. Only that there was a snuffling in the hollows at the base of a lovely throat. Only that a hard honey-coloured shoulder had a semi-circle of teeth marks on it.
Only that they held each other close, long after it was over.... Only that once again they broke the Love Laws. That lay down who should be loved. And how. And how much. (328)

This makes us ask the question why the author should introduce such a theme that shocks the Indian conscience. It is an idea that would never be accepted by the Indian society that swears by values. No Indian writer dares to treat this theme, leave alone justifying it. This has made critics like N.P.Singh remark, “Rahel is not a good, traditional woman. She is a transgressor. She is guilty of incest as well- a taboo not to be violated even in contemporary society”(70).

Looking at it from a feminist perspective, Urbashi Barat feels, “In a world in which socially accepted forms of love remain only forms without substance, true love can find expression only in unacceptable relationships”(93). She accepts that incest is the most tabooed of all relationships, but opines that the union that seems natural, desirable and fulfilling, “could have functioned like lesbianism in the African American women novels, as an agent of emotional healing and growth” (94). She also points out that “Rahel and Estha’s relationship has its own ironic parallel and foreshadowing in the evidently incestuous love that Mammachi feels towards Chacko”(94). To support this argument she quotes, “The day that Chacko prevented Pappachi from beating her ... Mammachi packed her wifely luggage and committed it to Chacko’s care. From then onwards he became the repository of all her womanly feelings. Her Man. Her only Love”(168).
Perhaps Roy argues through her character Rahel that a woman’s emotions should not be reined by the society’s prescriptive code of conduct. As Jacob George C. says, “She shocks and delights her audience by confounding traditional expectations, especially the ones which are related to the myth of patriarchy”(75). There is no distinction between the male and the female with regard to emotions, and through the case of incestuous relationship, the author may be attempting to shatter masculine complacency. Roy is critical of the pseudo ethical values of the Ayemenem House that crush the individual’s emotions, especially woman’s sexual emotions. As Nirmal C. Prakash has pointed out, Roy emphasizes “the need of understanding man and woman beyond the simple biological relationship”(83). She also feels that it is essential to understand human psyche especially female psyche.

Rosemary Tong says, “Cast off your old, tired and repressive sexual mores and delight in the erotic celebration of the body”(112). Such a revolution in thought has made women novelists describe sex organs, female orgasm, and sexual intercourse, not as the male world expects it to be presented, but purely from a female perspective. Naturally, womanhood is celebrated, and never presented as an object for male gratification.

Humanity has been taught that the main responsibility and the duty of a woman is childbearing. This is either presented in plain words or glorified in a circumlocutory way as a God given responsibility of the woman. But, all these compel a woman to take her life partner in marriage very seriously, which ultimately leads her to be oppressed and exploited. Plath demolishes this concept and attempts to show that real liberation of
woman can take place only when she takes responsibility for the reproduction of the species. That is why she makes Esther go in for birth control device even before marriage. Shulamith Firestone, who regarded biology as an impediment and the primal cause for the subjection of women, says,

Nature produced the fundamental inequality, - half the human race must bear and rear children of all of them – which was later consolidated, institutionalized, in the interests of men. Reproduction of the species cost women dearly, emotionally, psychologically, culturally, but even in material terms. (qtd. Miriam Schneir 246)

Roy hails from a society that upholds the sanctity of marriage and professes that any talk of sex outside marriage is a perversion. As she presents different generations in her novel, we can see how she revolts against linking sex with marriage. Rev. John Ipe and Pappachi convey a silent message that they have the right over their wives in all matters including sex. When it comes to the next generation, Ammu revolts against the idea of woman being exploited and abused as an object of sex even within marriage. She boldly comes out of the social restrictions, and asserts her right over sexual experience outside marriage through her relationship with Velutha.

The God of Small Things is set in the traditional family set-up where sex is believed to be a man’s need. But Roy establishes that sex is a woman’s need too, to which age or marriage or religion or caste or any social restriction is not a barrier. She is iconoclastic in the sense that she breaks the myth that assigns stereotyped roles to male and female, and explodes the myth that attributes normality and abnormality to sexual
actions. Her novel, as Khushu Lahiri puts it, “is indeed a taboo-breaking protest novel which provides a trenchant critique of the present-day Indian society and the patriarchal structure as a whole”(118).

Ammu, the otherwise quiet lady, takes sex as a physical as well as an emotional need, as opposed to Chacko’s need of it as a physical one. The emotions expressed by Ammu at the time of sexual union are mutually reciprocative. Munro portrays the sexual relationship between Rose and Patrick as one in which this kind of reciprocation is absent though it is within marriage. When Ammu is pilloried by the society, and her sexual contact with Velutha is seen by the male dominated society as obnoxious, Munro makes her protagonist totally liberated and projects her as one who transcends male perception of sexuality, and goes in search of sexual satisfaction. Whereas it is casteism and class distinction that serves as barriers on the way of Ammu fulfilling her sexual needs, in the case of Rose, it is man-made limitations. Through her protagonist, Munro presents a rebel who has liberated herself from all man-made restrictions – be it Patrick’s or Clifford’s or Tom’s or Simon’s. These men are never allowed to seduce Rose whereas it is she who plays the role of the seducer. Joanne Kates a Canadian feminist journalist proclaims “the idea of women’s rights to sexual pleasure” to be “one of the victories of the women’s liberation movement.” She adds,

A powerful woman is a sexual woman. Our new power is the power to demand our pleasure, to say: “I want…”, to say: “Touch me here…”, to say: “Not like that.” These are words I never uttered ten years ago and
now, in this bed of struggle, I say them often. And it is the power vested in those words that is awakening my sexuality.

Plath’s treatment of female sexuality has many things in common with Munro’s and Roy’s portrayal of it. Her protagonist Esther is one who would not submit herself to men’s needs. She would not allow the male to have rein over her body, and would protest the machinations of the male as Ammu does when she is coaxed to satisfy the sexual needs of the estate manager. These authors belong to three different cultures and live in societies that follow different value systems. But all of them contend through their heroines that in a society with empowered women, sex can no longer be taken as a means of asserting male superiority. Through their sexuality and sexual experiences, their protagonists mature into women who can be never pushed over. Their sexuality and sexual experiences are their attempts at establishing, affirming and asserting their female identity. They have followed what Betty Friedan states in *The Fountain of Age*: “What had to be changed was the obsolete feminine and masculine sex roles that determined sex roles that dehumanized sex”.

Though shocking, in the perspective of the conservative and male oriented sex laws, the three novelists present love laws from the feminist point of view. When Plath’s Esther breaks the society’s love laws of prescribing chastity only to women, Munro’s Rose jumps over the artificial boundary imposed on women. They no longer want any man-made prescriptive restrictions – be it the concept of female virginity as in the case of Esther, or the institution of marriage as in the case of Rose – to stand in the way of the woman establishing her identity as a liberated human being. Roy goes a step
further in showing that a woman has every right over an ideal relationship in which woman is on par with the man of her liking. “Clouded eyes held clouded eyes in a steady gaze and a luminous woman opened herself to a luminous man … she danced for him. On that boat-shaped piece of earth. She lived”(336-37). Of all the sexual relationships, Ammu’s can be considered the most satisfying and ideal because she frankly expresses the desire for similar experience in the future also. Ammu turns to Velutha to tell him that they would meet again the next day. “‘Naaley.’ Tomorrow”(340).