

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Women's fiction in English has flourished by and large during the post-Independence period and it constitutes a major segment of contemporary Indian writing in English. Some of the well-known novelists like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, and Nayantara Sahgal have assimilated the Indian sensibility in their novels and their novels have carved out for themselves a niche in the field of fiction. In their novels they have documented female resistance against the patriarchal Indian culture. The term, the "New Woman," in Indian writing in English has come to signify the awakening of the woman to a new realization of her place and position in family and society and to a new recognition of her identity in a patriarchal power structure. The new woman has been trying to assert her rights as a human being.

Nayantara Sahgal stands out in the field of women's writing in English as a prolific writer revealing in her fiction a concern with contemporary social and political changes in India. She is essentially a writer who enriches the Indian creative tradition, a tradition upholding the humanistic values. Her novels show a remarkable degree of continuity in their thematic concerns. They are first unified by the background of Indian politics. This background supplies one

major thematic crux: the plight of the individual in the power-hungry and materialistically oriented society witnessing a rapid retreat from Gandhian ethics. Nayantara Sahgal's portrayal of the Peace Institute in *This Time of Morning* reveals a basic dichotomy found at the heart of the contemporary political and social situations. In novel after novel, Nayantara Sahgal shows her concern with the themes of sacrilege and sacrifice and the efflorescence of immaterial non-utilitarian values as opposed to stultifying materialistic values. In her latest novels, *Rich Like Us*, *Plans for Departure*, and *A Mistaken Identity*, she has established herself as a writer with a growing concern for the novel as an art form. In articulating some of her concerns, Sahgal offers us valuable fictional correlatives of urban Indian life in a phase of industrial development but marked by a transitoriness of the immemorial values of the human heart enshrined in Gandhian ideology. Nayantara Sahgal does not however adorn the role of a feminist.

Anita Desai's novels belong to the modernist phase and they have been favourably analysed for their formal coherence and lyrical texture. The lyrical texture of her novels unravels the complexity associated with women who are burdened with problems arising from familial relationships. Nanda Kaul expresses her feeling of loss of privacy she experiences while discharging what is assumed to be her social responsibility as the Vice-Chancellor's wife:

There had been too many guests coming and going, tongas and rickshaws piled up under the eucalyptus trees and the bougainvilleas, their drivers asleep on the seats with their feet hanging over the bars. The many rooms of the house had always been full, extra beds would have had to be made up, often in not very private corners of the hall or veranda, so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash after.

They had had so many children, they had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors – one for mathematics who was harsh and slapped the unruly boys, one for drawing who was lazy and smiled and did nothing, and others equally incompetent and irritating. Then there had been their friends, all of different ages and sizes and families.¹

Similarly, *Clear Light of Day* reveals the family as an essential part of a woman's consciousness and the past always has an inextricable link with the present. Bim in this novel is in a mood of reminiscence and thinks of the house and the family in the expanding awareness of the complexity and richness of family life. She sees with her inner eye how

“her own house and its particular history linked and contained her as well as her whole family with all their separate histories and experiences.”² While the obsessions of Anita Desai’s protagonists arise from a disharmonious family background, her protagonists in general suffer from self-introversion as can be seen from *Voices in the City*, *Clear Light of Day* and *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* As V.V.N.Rajendra Prasad rightly observes, Anita Desai’s “themes seem to direct her narrative mode which may be called psycho-narrations.”³ Anita Desai’s novels centre around city life in India in all its variety and detail. *Voices in the City* dramatizes *The Waste Land* motif of the city as a place of intense aridity of feeling which strikes at the roots of all values of life. Her narratives emerge from a family saga and show a wounded self in particular socio-cultural matrices.

Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal look at women through their sensitive psyche, their emotional breakdowns, and psychic turmoils. Women in their novels “pass through a process of transformation which signifies for them a change from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion and from weakness to strength.”⁴ Women in Anita Desai’s novels make a journey through the landscapes of their inner psyche and finally arrive at a moment of discovery. As the journey advances, the novel constitutes the conflicts, tensions, confusions, uncertainties and indecisions on the part of the protagonists. The novels of Nayantara Sahgal are by and large a social

phenomenon. Sahgal acknowledges that "... Each of the novels more or less reflect the political era we are passing through",⁵ and has established herself as a contributor to the "genesis of the political novel".⁶ Her novel *Rich Like Us* is set against the backdrop of the emergency in India. In this novel, both Rose and Sonali struggle against the hardships and injustices imposed by social and political conditions. Their struggle to retain their individuality and foster the values that they cherish makes them emerge as strong-willed independent individuals in a patriarchally dominated society.

Other novels that throw ample light on the direction of sensibility that women novelists have been carving out for themselves are Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nector in a Sieve* and *A Handful of Rice*. In almost all her novels Kamala Markandaya has a particular end in view: "autonomy for the self, nurturance for the family and thorough feeling for the community of men and women".⁷ Kamala Markandaya won international recognition with the publication of her very first novel *Nector in a Sieve* in 1954. When she started writing novels, the theme of hunger and degradation, East-West encounter, rootlessness, politics and human relationships had already been dealt with by a number of Indian English novelists. In her novels the themes include life in the villages and cities, social conflicts and the lure of modernization. In *Nector in a Sieve*, Nathan and Rukmani symbolize the East whereas

Dr.Kenny who dislikes the Indian philosophy of fasting for the purification of the soul symbolizes the forces of industrialization and the West. If *A Silence of Desire* reflects Kamala Markandaya's depiction of the conflict between Indian spiritualism and western modernism, *A Handful of Rice* projects the East-West encounter in terms of cultural differences which cause disharmony. H.M.Williams says of *Possession* that "the novel is one of the most forceful artistic explorations of the distortion of India's national character in the British embrace."⁸ While *Possession* is a commentary on Indo-British relationships, as Meenakshi Mukherji terms it, Kamala Markandaya's characters are "particular human beings rooted in their narrow regional identities".⁹

After Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, and Anita Desai come Shashi Deshpande, Rama Mehta, Bharati Mukherji and others. Shashi Deshpande in the eighties has published interesting novels on contemporary themes that make absorbing reading. In her novels, she has tried to project a realistic picture of the middle-class educated women who are financially independent and who represent a larger part of the contemporary Indian society. Her novels deal with the problems of the adjustments and conflicts in the minds of female protagonists who ultimately submit themselves to the traditional system in a transitional society. In an interview Shashi Deshpande reveals that all her characters are concerned with themselves and they

learn to be honest to themselves. Her women present themselves as women who go in self-quest. Her *Roots and Shadows* deals with a "woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom".¹⁰ The predicament of Deshpande's heroines "is one of identifying their uniqueness as opposed to the imposed social roles and of integrating this uniqueness within the norm so as to be whole persons".¹¹ Her novel *That Long Silence* tells the story of an Indian house wife who maintains her silence throughout her life in the face of hardships that threaten to break it. Jaya, the protagonist of the novel, gives us a new image of the Indian woman who seeks to break the age-old silence by refusing to continue the silence of her frustrated married life. She lives to come to terms with herself by trying to write about herself and her family and is determined to break a long, chilling silence with regard to communication and communion.

As with R.K.Narayan, so with Shashi Deshpande: the middle class milieu finds its voice which brings to life the average, common insignificant happenings in the lives of ordinary men and women. Their protagonists are humble and modest, un-selfconfident but sensitive members of the middle-class who are conscious of their own limitations and their environment. The women of Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal belong to an upper strata of society, whereas Deshpande portrays the average middle-class woman with her deeply-felt experience of life's little ironies.

The image of a cribbed, cabined and confined woman has been delineated among women novelists by Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande, Namita Gokhale, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De and others. Shashi Deshpande is not a strident kind of feminist, though her relentless probing of the man-woman relationship makes one see a definite feminist stance in her literary representations. She creates a familial and social world in which women not only voice their frustration and disappointments but also confront patriarchal power structures. In *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, in the portrayal of Saru, a "terrifying trapped animal," the novel dramatizes the reaction against the traditional concept that everything in a girl's life is shaped towards the social end of pleasing a male. If Shobha De and Namita Gokhale portray the challenges educated socialite women in an urban society face, Shashi Deshpande deals with the middle class Indian woman who represents an overwhelming majority of Indian women in general in her struggle to launch a self-search and assert herself, and break her silence rather than deviate from the traditional norm. In *Roots and Shadows* explores her quest for an authentic selfhood through the portrait of Indu. *That Long Silence*, dealing with a crisis in a middle class family, depicts Jaya who seeks to free herself from male chauvinistic ideas such as the husband as a "sheltering tree". Shashi Deshpande's novels, among other things, address the question of marginalisation of women and they are an important landmark in the field of Indian writing in

English for their gender articulation. She expresses her views on feminism as follows:

But to me feminism isn't a matter of theory, it is difficult to apply Kate Millet or Simone de Beauvoir or whoever to the reality of our daily lives in India. And then there are such terrible misconceptions about feminism by people here. They often think it is about burning bras and walking out on your husband, children, etc. I always try to make the point now about what feminism is not, and to say that we have to discover what it is in our own lives, our experiences. And I actually feel that a lot of women in India are feminists without realizing it.¹²

While the protagonists of Jai Nimbkar and Shobha De walk out of marriage or refuse to re-enter it, those of Deshpande do not take rebellion against the patriarchal order to its bitter end.

If the focus is on women and their quest for identity in many of the novels mentioned in the foregoing discussion. Arundhati Roy who bagged the Booker for her novel *The God of Small Things* is deeply interested in the exploration of female psyche and experiences but yet there is a wider view of society in her novel which deals with a Syrian Christian family in Ayemenen. Arundhati Roy talks about *The God of Small Things* where if God needs pity, kindness, love and fearlessness, then He is nowhere. She shows how a pattern of frustration sustains

perpetual suffering in the lives of her characters. The novel ends with the word tomorrow and as Arundhati Roy herself comments on the ending of her novel, even though it is terrible it is wonderful that it happened at all. With *The God of Small Things*, the emergence of a post-colonial text seem to have taken place.

In her books on English women writers, Elaine Showalter traces the evolution of a female tradition from Bronte to Lessing. According to her, the developmental phases of this tradition correspond to those of any subcultural art. She calls these phases the Feminine, the Feminist, and the Female stages. During the Feminine phase, dating from about 1840 to 1880, English women writers wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture and internalized its assumptions about female nature. This is the phase of imitation. In the Feminist phase, from about 1880 to 1920, women were historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and to use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood. This could be termed as the phase of protest. In the Female phase, ongoing since 1920, women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency – and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous act, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature. This is the phase of self-realization and containment. In the consciousness of the protagonist of Jai Nimbkar's *A Joint Venture* one can find the

evolution of the above-mentioned three phases of imitation, protest, and containment. The protagonist initially is an independent woman earning for her and her family's livelihood. She then gets married, and almost after thirty years of marriage, is dissatisfied with her married life, parts from her husband, gets isolated in the hope of finding feminist experience, and ultimately returns to the family. In fact, one can say that this is quite a reversal of the theme of *That Long Silence*.

Gita Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* has won the 1993 Commonwealth Prize for the best first novel from the Eurasian region. "Gita Hariharan's world of the south Indian extended family is to me more accurate than R.K.Narayan's,"¹³ as Kushwant Singh writes.

Gita Mehta has been acclaimed as an international cross-cultural critic. Also she has a secure place as a contemporary novelist. She has provoked divergent critical opinion and is recognized as an incomparable story-teller. "Her lack of complexity and well-organized propelling narrations have provided sustenance to her craft of fiction."¹⁴ Pradeep Trikha observes. Her three works *Karma Cola*, *Raj* and *A River Sutra* are powerful critiques of modern life exposing the shallowness of the spiritual, political, and secular modes of living, while the fourth one, *Snakes and Ladders*, attempts to illustrate modern India by illuminating the country's great saga of cultural heritage.

Karma Cola conjures up the mystic east. It is a poignant study of the pretentious gurus who ostentatiously profess and promise enlightenment to the Westerners coming to India in search of the "missing magic" in their lives. When this novel was first published, an article in *The Hindu* observed: "There's a Madison Avenue tongue in cheekness about Gita Mehta's titles. You've got to give it to her the girl who murmured a mutated mantra over the spiritually thirsty hordes flooding the sub-continent in restless streams of ochre and orange in the throes of *Karma Cola*."¹⁵ The novel, according to *The Illustrated Weekly*, is "a short taut savagely satirical account of the hippies and western star freaks on a spiritual quest in India."¹⁶ Gita Mehta points out with a historical perspective about the impetus provided for the writing of this novel as follows:

It was the product of my own experience. I was at university when Ginsberg arrived and there was the business of the Dharna Bums. And I came back from university when John Lennon and the Beatles hit India. I had been watching this whole caravanserai arrive and also the anticipation of Indians who said, at last the West is coming to us; at last the rock'n roll show is on.¹⁷

The arrival of the disillusioned spiritual questers from India was a matter to be discussed with much graver concern.

And then they arrived dressed as Indians mouthing Indian platitudes and mantras – the book is about that and our shock when we didn't find it. And the occidental longing for salvation and their shock when they didn't find it. It was a sad misreading of the goals and desires of other civilizations. The Westerners wanted every Indian to be non-materialistic and engaged in higher metaphysical activity. Clearly we weren't. We wanted Levis' and ghetto blasters and to zip around in cars with headlights that went up and down like eyelids.¹⁸

The culture shock is for both the Westerners and the Indians. The novel captures the cultural collisions of the East-West encounter, the materialistic gurus and their spiritual casualties. The central issue in the novel is the gurus and their "spiritual bedlams," as Gita Mehta calls them. In the "Introduction," to the novel Gita Mehta says:

When *Karma Cola* was first published, critics from as far afield as the United States and South America to Europe and Southeast Asia reviewed it less for its merits than as an occasion to describe their own encounters with such casualties of spiritual tourism. The tales the critics told could easily have been added to the original text, further illustrations of the price paid by those who confused the profound with the banal in their attempts to levitate above reality. And yet those days seem now an

age of such innocence – when global escapism masquerading as spiritual hunger resulted at worst in individual madness, at best in a hard-won awareness that the benediction of the jet-stream gurus was seldom more than skywriting, and that the mystic east, given half a chance, could teach the west a thing or two about materialism.¹⁹

With its fund of irony, satire, and acerbic wit, the novel probes the ashram life where spirituality for all its wheeling and dealing in Karma has turned into the most practical joke of all.

Like *Karma Cola*, Gita Mehta's second novel *Raj* is a poignant study of the hypocrisy and sham of the princely class in colonial India. Here again is a parade of political leaders, Raj gurus, cultural consultants apart from the Maharanis, Maharajahs, captains and so on. What strikes one is the apparent shame in the life-styles of almost all these leaders. Appearing as *Die Maharani* in Germany, the book is an insightful study of India's political turmoils under the British Raj and spins around the central character Jaya Singh who is born as a princess in the Royal House of Balmer. Spanning nearly half a century before India's independence, the novel takes in its sweep both Jaya's coming of age as the ruler of her state as well as the drama of India's struggle for independence. Starting with Jaya's birth and childhood, the novel moves on to describe various experiences of Jaya as an

adolescent, wife, and mother at a personal level, as princess, maharani, and regent at a political level, and as a candidate getting to contest the elections in free India. With history and fiction combined, the novel presents “a montage of modern India,” according to *India Magazine*. It is an endlessly fascinating first novel about India from Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee to the bloody Civil War of Independence.

Anit Chandmal writes that in *A River Sutra* Gita Mehta “has created a new language of literature and has recreated India for Indians.”²⁰ “The spiritual turbulence of *Karma Cola* the political perturbations of *Raj* are replaced by the tranquility of a new kind... In many respects reminding us of Hesse’s *Siddartha*, the novel has been reckoned as a spiritual touchstone.”²¹ Published in 1993, the novel has been widely spoken of as an Indian *Canterbury Tales*. It is a sequence of lyrical stories, their connecting point being that they take place on the banks of the river Narmada. It is not an unlinked episodic novel or a Bildungsroman. The Narmada river is the sutra, the thread, that weaves the six stories that come across the narrator who carries the thrust of the novel because of his physical situation close to the Narmada and his spiritual preoccupation as “a Vanaprasthi, someone who has retired to forest to reflect.”²² And the novel “derives its strength from his curiosity to know and his capacity to listen.”²³ About the essential function of the narrator in the novel, Galle says:

Gita Mehta's point in *A River Sutra* is embodied in the progress of a man undergoing a series of experiences resulting from his hearing stories, which act on him as teaching anecdotes in the spirit of the sutra.

He exists as a link between the stories, and as the stories are connected with the Narmada, has to live close to it, meeting people who live in its vicinity or come to it on pilgrimage or else attracted by its spiritual or historical values.²⁴

In this novel the author passionately and pervasively shifts her concern to Indian sensibility. She offers authentic interpretations of Indian cultural values, music, art forms and heritage. Concerns and contexts in *A River Sutra* are as varied as they are complex. The stories unravel the deep feelings of the inner cognizance of man. These are stories of the unsettled nature of man swinging between happiness and despair. Asit Chandmal says: "These are stories of obsession and renunciation, desperation and destruction, desire and death."²⁵ Mehta's major preoccupation in the novel is with the centrality of human experience amid orchestrations of the eternal archetypes. The novel opens with an epigraph from *Love Songs of Chandidas*, 'Listen, O Brother. / Man is the greatest truth. / Nothing beyond'²⁵ and centres around the dominant myths of Shiva and the Narmada.

Karma Cola has hordes of Westerners in quest of spiritual India. *Raj* is an extravagant saga of the last half century of colonial India. *A River Sutra* insightfully examines the Indian aesthetic and experience. *Snakes and Ladders* offers a key to modern India, modern India as the world's largest democracy, as an economic superpower in the making, as a home to the world's oldest religions, as a country living through its fifty traumatic years of nationhood. In the form of essays in this collection Gita Mehta gives an unflinching assessment of India today. The essays are entertaining and informative and reflect Indian cultural values and attributes. In the "Foreword" to the collection, Gita Mehta says:

Perhaps historians will make sense of India's early years of freedom. I find myself able only to see fragments of a country in which worlds and times are colliding with a velocity that defies comprehension. These essays are an attempt to explain something of modern India to myself. I hope others may also see in them facets of an extraordinary world spinning through an extraordinary time.²⁷

The traditional Indian game of snakes and ladders was played ritually as "Gyanbaji, the game of knowledge, a meditation on humanity's progress towards liberation."²⁸ The collection, subtitled "A View of Modern India," presents a kaleidoscopic mosaic of an ancient

civilization celebrating fifty years as a modern nation. It opens with an epigraph:

I should be sorely tempted, if I were
ten years younger, to make a journey to India –
not for the purpose of discovering something new
but in order to view in my way what has been discovered.
(Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, 1787) (V)

Gita Mehta in these essays in *Snakes and Ladders* illuminates India by frequent glimpses into the history. Her vision is holistic. It visualizes an intricate pattern of continuity.

Gita Mehta's works are a powerful critique of modern life and they expose political, secular and spiritual hypocrisy. In a sense she has recreated India for Indians.

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