CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

‘Every man’s memory is his private literature’—
Aldous Huxley

Childhood is, inarguably, the most important and impressionable part of an individual’s life. Each individual is a carrier of so many stories from childhood—smiling and sad; of scars which don’t heal; of concepts unfazed by science and logic—all carried from that part of life which is so vulnerable and yet so strong that it refuses to loosen its hold on our minds. What we remember from childhood, we remember forever—permanent ghosts, stamped, inked, imprinted, eternally seen.

Each one of us has a different story to tell because each one of us has perceived the world in a different way. The fact of being born either a girl or a boy largely differentiates the way our perceptions, reactions, concepts, expressions, and language are shaped. A woman has to begin the search for a firm footing and an identity right since her childhood—an identity that would not be a corollary of either the father or the husband. The Indian woman struggles with this search all the more because she is doubly marginalized due to her colonized past and due to her being a woman. Since writers are the product of the social milieu they breathe in, therefore, literature by women can be viewed as an ongoing search for an identity.

One is reminded of Maurianne Adam’s comment, reproduced in On Deconstruction by Jonathan Culler, that ‘our literary insights and perceptions come in part at least, from our sensitivity to the nuances of our lives and our observations of other people’s lives’. Literature by women writers, then, can also be considered from the viewpoint of being an expression of their dissatisfaction with the society—a dissatisfaction that belongs to and is felt by women alone because of their curious and unenviable position in it.

A woman writer’s bond with her childhood is singular and unique. Not only this, generally women and children share a few grudges against the patriarchal system. Both are relegated to the sidelines of society. There might be a difference of
the level, but a feeling of dissatisfaction does make its brooding presence felt in the lives of children too. The alienation, the travails, and tribulations in the lives of women and children are of the same texture. The representation of childhood by women writers, then, would not only bring out the inner world of the children with a different sensitivity but, in the process, would afford a greater glimpse of the world of women too. Since Indian childhood has a different tenor, color, rhythm, and richness due to its social, cultural, and historical peculiarities, its transposal to literature by women writers holds a special significance: a promise of a distinctive picture.

The present study is being undertaken to bring out the manner of representation of the world of children by the modern Indian women writers and how it co-exists with the world of women themselves. The texts that have been taken up for specific study are *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, *Fire on the Mountain* by Anita Desai, *That Long Silence* by Shashi Deshpande and *Aap ka Bunty* by Mannu Bhandari. A few short stories would also be analyzed randomly for the recurring images in them and their portrayal of common experience.

The thesis has been divided into six chapters. After the Introductory chapter of the thesis, chapter II titled ‘Prisms and Prisons’, deals with the different and restrictive world of a girl child, the lasting impressions of childhood on a woman writer, and the emergence of child as a symbol of her simmering dissatisfaction with the society. The child, because of being closely associated with a woman writer’s quest for identity, becomes a symbol of this quest too. In the process of transmutation of memory, a child also becomes a woman’s statement of not only what was not but also what should have been. The bond between woman and child, then, exists at various levels.

The world of fiction by women is brought alive by various archetypal patterns. Chapter III titled ‘The Recurrent Patterns’ would deal with the common motif of some experiences in the selected works of fiction. The commonality of experience is a pointer towards their near universality. The patterns that are discussed in this chapter are broadly based on the ones that Annis Pratt discusses in her book *Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction*. According to Pratt, the Green World is present in
retrospect in most women’s novels, something left behind or about to be left behind as one backs into the enclosure. Under the Green World Archetype, nature becomes an ally. The Green World allows the woman to pass beyond her limited horizons; it frees her from the restrictions back home and enables her to recognize a symphony within herself and with nature. It holds the same healing touch for the children.

In *The God of Small Things*, Ammu, Estha and Rahel find solace amidst nature. In *Aap Ka Bunty*, Bunty, the child of separated parents and without any dependable playmate, loves to be in his garden, a little of which he tends with the help of the gardener. Snubbed by the mother of his playmate, he tries and succeeds in his attempt to find a playmate in nature. A similar pattern is present in *Fire on the Mountain*. Here, Nanda Kaul has come to Kasauli for a respite from the binding existence of her city life. For Raka, even this house is restrictive and she keeps on quietly slipping out for walks without letting her great-grandmother know. Annis Pratt views the long walks as a quest for identity. The rowing of boat across the river signifies ‘Estha Unknown’ and Rahel’s quest for identity. Even Ammu moves out of the house to find the woman within her.

Another archetype Annis Pratt writes about and discussed in this study is that of a Green World Hero, who is the ‘initiary guide’ leading the protagonists into the Green World. This guide could be a friend, a lover and sometimes, even the father. His distinguishing characteristic is that he remains largely unshackled by social and cultural dogmas. Velutha in *The God of Small Things* emerges as the green world lover. He is a green world hero for the children too. The fact that the same man proves to be a liberating influence, even though a temporary one, in the lives of the children as well as their mother further signifies the innately similar needs of women and children.

In *That Long Silence*, the green world lover does not belong to the world beyond and is very much an occupant of the flat above. Jaya has to move up a staircase to meet him and in this movement; she temporarily leaves her mundane world down below. The world down below is the world of enclosures. Marriage is also an archetypal enclosure. For Raka, Carignano is like a cage and ‘she walked
about as a newly caged, as the newly tamed wild ones do, sliding from wall to wall on silent, investigating pads’. Bunty also feels trapped in the house of his stepfather. His flight to Calcutta also ends in dejection until he is prepared to be bundled to another enclosure—the hostel. Because the mother’s socialization is complete, she tries to find happiness in the house that has become hers after her second marriage.

Silence corresponds with the patterns of closed spaces. Shashi Deshpande describes silence at various levels in *That Long Silence*. The loudest silence is that of Jaya, which cannot be broken even while writing. However, she is aware of silence that pervades among women of all social strata. She is also conscious of the silence of her son and knows with the instinct of a mother that the noise which the girl in her neighborhood makes is also another face of silence. Estha in *The God of Small Things* and Bunty in *Aap Ka Bunty* also speak the language of silence.

Both silence and remaining inside enclosure have become so much of an accepted thing that breaking out of both of these leads to catastrophe and punishment. Ammu pays the price by dying at the age of thirty-one, alone, in a filthy room. Raka’s forays into the forest ultimately end up in the ‘fire’. Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* is a person whose tone is raucous, shrill. She questions the cruelty and injustice meted out to the women in Kasauli, questions male supremacy and while she is trudging on the winding roads of Kasauli, she encounters a man against whom she had spoken. He strangles and rapes her, thereby silencing her forever. Bunty longs to be out somewhere on the vast green plains but reality pushes him from one enclosure to another. Jaya’s silence-breaking laughter and her son’s protests at being considered merely an instrument threaten to rock their family life. The son, when sent to a trip with family friends against his will, runs back from there without informing anyone. Nevertheless, like his mother, he knows that he has to conform and reaches home safely.

The chapter also discusses the concept of rejection as felt by the protagonists. The children in *The God of Small Things* suffer rejection from various people. However, it is ultimately the rejection by the mother and the biting words used by her that ultimately drive the twins away before the drowning of Sophia Mol. It is not
merely a coincidence that the mother herself has to live with the idea of being an unwanted burden and of being rejected. Later she promises to the children that she would have them together when she is no longer a burden on anyone, when she is able to secure a job for herself. The grown-up Estha’s relationship with Khubehand, the dog, flourishes because he does not fear rejection there. Bunty in Aap Ka Bunty faces rejection from first his mother and then his father. His mother has felt his father’s rejection in divorcing her and remarrying. Jaya feels rejected by her husband’s going away after she has broken the silence with her laughter. Nanda Kaul has also escaped to the hills because of rejection and alienation.

By positioning the women and child protagonists within these motifs, the women writers bring their world alive: underscore their abiding concerns, emotional problems and limitations and point a finger at the existing, stereotypical social norms that play the role of chains at their feet even today. Despite the outward progress that the society has made, archetypes are still the order of the day.

Chapter-IV, titled ‘Imagery and Symbols’, is a study of the need and significance of images and symbols in writing by women. Images, besides imparting richness to the text, are the vehicles of those thoughts that a woman writer desists from expressing openly. Images are also significant in terms of which image belongs to whom—a child or an adult woman. The images that spring in the minds of children (The Earth Woman, The History House, the Lucky Leaf) are an amalgam of their own notions, conceptions, and the handed-down-half-truths from the world of the adults. Some images and metaphors are a tool in the narrative (fire, woods, river, Pappachi’s Moth); the children’s images are a pointer to their state of mind. However, the chapter concentrates on the shared perception of images and symbols between women and children. The writers paint a world for the protagonists with strokes of symbolism. The protagonists decode the meaning of this world and are decoded themselves in the process. The readers as well as the fellow-characters in the novel explore the many layers and nuances of the characters through imagery and symbols while the ambiguity that might be the intention of the author also remains intact.
Chapter V, titled ‘Voices—Remembered, Acquired, and Asserted’, would explore the narrative techniques used by the writers and whether the representation of child is really that of a child or a sensible, polished, pruned, and colored version of the adult experience of childhood. The fascinating world of children is brought alive primarily through language. The authorial voice is the voice that has been acquired—a language chiseled, shaped, and moulded by the patriarchal influences. In contrast is the language picked directly from the world of children replete with variant spellings, wrong usage etc.

According to Francois Rostand, as quoted in Maurice Merleau Ponty’s article, ‘The Child’s Relations with Others’, ‘There will be a profound link between the acquisition of language [. . .] and the child’s place in the family environment. [. . .]. At the bottom, it is not only the word ‘Mama’ that is the child’s first, it is the entire language which is maternal.’ There is then a commonality in the language of the mother and the child. The Mother supplies the child with not only nursery rhymes and fairy tales, but also, as an instrument of patriarchy, endless instructions and restrictions, which add up to create the child’s world.

In Aap ka Bunty the story is told from the point of view of the child as well as the mother. We have the view of a child’s world from the child’s stature. The language is replete with different aspects of a child’s moods—pleading, irritation, anger, and vexation. The events of the adult world—as seen by the child and his understanding of them have been beautifully captured in this book. The book also provides a ready contrast between the language peculiarities and thought processes of the child and his mother.

The God of Small Things brings out the child’s world by way of different techniques. Children restricted to many words which they hear but cannot differentiate as meaningful, or sometimes understanding words in the context of the words that already exist in their vocabulary (‘Dus to dus to dus’. ‘Locusts Stand’) are some of the strokes used by the author to make the children’s stream-of-consciousness more authentic. Roy also shows the constant widening of language (‘Too Briefly meant for too short a while’, the meaning of ‘illegitimate’) that widens
their understanding of the adult world. Backward reading, fragments of poems, movies, and sayings floating from experiences and settling down in the present consciousness, and repetition of some expression that has stuck because of some experience generalization (‘stopitted’) makes the child characters true to life. Looking for logic (cuff-links: ‘this to them, rivaled the precision and logic of mathematics’; bellboy: ‘the bellboy who took them up wasn’t a boy and hadn’t a bell’) has been brought out in such a way that it becomes the language of the children. K.V. Surendran, in his book *The God of Small Things – a Saga of Lost Dreams*, has talked about the imaginative use of language to convey the irregularities and peculiarities of the language of children. At places, we have the way a mother understands and feels her children (‘a surprised fountain in Love-in-Tokyo looked at her’) and then the way the author perceives them to show what even the mother or the other elders have missed (‘the puff was spoilt’). In this book, as also in *Aap ka Bunty*, we have children listening to the conversation of the elders and their own stream of thoughts co-existing in the background.

Shashi Deshpande in *That Long Silence* talks about Jaya’s childhood experiences the way they have shaped her personality. Childhood in her book then becomes a presentation of an adult’s language, colored with the inevitable experienced outlook. In *Fire on the Mountain*, we see Raka from the eyes of Nanda Kaul and the author. Her inner world cannot be peeped into. We can only form opinions of it. We are never shown what Raka’s thoughts and her reactions are at being the daughter of ill-adjusted parents. Rather we are guided on to an understanding of her through her gestures and her behavior.

Since the perception and the representation of childhood in women’s fiction are so unique, the images, language and situations used by male writers are bound to be different and make for an interesting study. Chapter VI titled ‘Different Desires and Dreams’ analyses the depiction of the child in the writings of the male novelists. The differing expectations from the male child, his understanding of the ‘good (m)other’, his natural bonding with her and the subsequent weaning away, the sudden forced entry into a bond with the father—all aspects are bought out lucidly by Sudhir
Kakar in his book *The Inner World: a Psycho-analytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. In the male child’s mind, understanding of the personality of the female is highly influenced by the images of the Mother Goddess on one hand and the carefully cultivated male superiority on the other. All these add up to the existence of a different world in a man’s mind that is explored in a brief comparative study of novels like *The Seven Summers* by Mulk Raj Anand, *Pather Panchali: Song of the Road* by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, *Last Train to Innocence* by Jayabrato Chatterjee and *The Blue Bedspread* by Raj Kamal Jha. The chapter deals with the interaction of a male child protagonist with the world around him. The male child protagonists that the male writers create have a different self-image and expectations from the world. The hub of the life of these child protagonists is largely the familial tie. However, the world beyond also holds a great deal of fascination, which they are able to explore, unlike their counterparts in writings by women, without any guilt pangs or punishment as an aftermath. The analysis of these four novels underscores the feminine concerns and perspectives of the women writers even further.

The inextricable bond shared by women and children gives rise to a literature that has a stamp of its own. It speaks of bondages and liberation, depending upon the personal experiences of the author. In *The God of the Small Things*, we have the twins coming together in a union that would be termed incestuous. This union can be seen as the end of the tunnel for them, the end of the quest for identity. The question that arises in the mind of the reader is whether this is the only identity available for the twins. The fire crackling in the woods in *Fire on the Mountain* is both the end of a search and beginning of a new one. The identity of the mother and the child in *Aap ka Bunty* is jumbled. In trying to add the role of a wife in her life, Shakun loses out her role as a mother. Bunty resists change and his lost identity looms like a question mark. *That Long Silence* ends with Jaya wondering whether, after a near catastrophe, things would revert to the “normal”, with life in the same paradigms, the same patterns. The complementary quest of the woman and the child then continues.