CHAPTER II
PRISMS AND PRISONS

A veritable treasure that mankind possesses is literature. Literature expresses experience and chronicles history. The hallmark of great literature is that it endures the onslaught of time. Shakespeare eulogizing his friend’s beauty and promising that he would live eternally in his poems does not seem an empty boast considering the fact that more than four centuries later, people wonder about the beauty of the Earl of Southampton in classrooms and in armchairs. Literature enjoys the stamp of permanence that other arts, such as Architecture, do not carry. The supposed statue of Ozymandius might have turned to dust and mingled with the sands of time, but it would continue to live in a state of suspended destruction in the minds of the readers, thanks to the poem by the same title written by P.B.Shelley.

Literature pertains to life of the mind. The mind is like a prism that reflects in different hues the various experiences of pleasure and pain collected by it. It looks at relationships and explores their every facet. It stores up ‘beauties and feelings’ that are, as S. T. Coleridge put it in ‘This Lime Tree Bower My Prison House’, ‘most sweet to [. . .] remembrance’. Long after a moment is over, the mind continues to relive it from various angles, forward to backward, backward to forward. The ‘inward eye’ once again goes over an expression, an utterance, or an action and once again the eye fills with tears; lips break into a smile; the ‘heart dances with the daffodils’. Literature freezes such moments, expressions, and utterances. As the potent speck of life in a fossil, the tiniest reference or a fleeting moment depicted in a work of literature holds promise of a lifeful of experience.

It is an uncontested fact that apart from the life of the mind and the personal experience, literature reflects the cultural and social milieu in which the writer breathes. Therefore, the opening of a book is like pushing a door into a new world. A glance here would reveal the Bingley sisters dressed in all their Victorian finery, busy with their game of cards at the table with an expression on their faces that reveals shallowness, the younger of the two making eyes at Mr. Darcy who sits in a corner.
writing letters. A few flips of the pages of another book take us to another continent
where Hester Prynne emerges in the sunlight wearing the dress with a gloriously
embroidered letter ‘A’ which stands for the word ‘adulteress’, while her lover, the
clergyman, lingers in the shadows. Another door opens to a politician making use of
his wiles somewhere in Africa. The next book off the shelf introduces us to the
contemporary Indian settled in America, trying to shed the overcoat-like burden of his
unusual name—Gogol, walking up the stairs of the office where a brief formality
would change his name to Nikhil. The variegated characters peopling these worlds are
part fancy and primarily experience. Similarly, T.S. Eliot’s Wasteland, Hardy’s
Wessex, Arundhati Roy’s Kerela, despite brilliant strokes of imagination, are also
real and felt.

Milieu and experience can be considered as cross-connected. Experience is
grounded in the milieu, that is, milieu becomes the spawning ground, the bedrock of
experience. In turn, milieu is a collection of personal experiences and situations.
Experience and milieu, thus, run parallel. The peculiarity of this term—‘milieu’—lies
in the fact that though on the surface the factors might remain the same for a number
of people, yet the impact of it is as diverse as there are individuals.

The major diversification, or more aptly, bifurcation of this impact is rooted in
that distinction which arose with the inception of the world and would continue until
eternity—the distinction between a man and a woman. Nancy Chodorow writes in her
essay, ‘Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory’ that our experiences as men and
women come from deep within our pasts, the deepest structures of unconscious
meaning, and the most emotionally moving relationships. The cross-connection
between experience and milieu gives rise to completely divergent personalities when
we talk about men and women. Men and women, even though they occupy the same
world, have a different experience of it, because in it, man is the reference point,
woman is the corollary. Man is the being; woman is the ‘other’. The collective
memory that has been handed down over the ages, classifies woman as the one who is
not a man and not as an individual, complete entity. A woman suffers discrimination
even today. She has not been able to shed off the burden of the myth of being born out of Adam’s rib.

The path-breaking and by now legendary work by Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, discusses extensively and explores deeply the shaping of a woman affected primarily by that age-old difference in the upbringing of boys and girls and the lower position accorded to the female section on the social ladder. Early in her life, a girl becomes aware of two things that characterize the whole of her womanhood, namely: her grasp upon the world is less extended than man’s and she is more closely enslaved to the species. Gradually, she can read clearly the writing on the wall. ‘She learns all too soon the limitations this estate imposes upon a human being’ as also the ambiguity of her position. She realizes that the world is primarily masculine, ‘those who fashioned it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men’.

Left to its own devices, a child would consider the body ‘merely as an instrument that makes possible the comprehension of this world’. There would not be any ‘natural’ feeling of inferiority or superiority. It is the social and the cultural milieu, peopled by completely socialized adults, which confers a gender-based existence upon the child, one that is based on their biological and physical attributes. While the boys are reared upon the ideals of aggression and assertion, the girls are indoctrinated to passivity, coquetry, and maternity. Boys are gifted with toy guns, mini replicas of automobiles and mechanical games; girls receive dolls, kitchen sets, and frilly dresses. Boys are encouraged to be outgoing and play rough games whereas the protective ambience of the four walls of the house is considered just right for the girls. Any show of softer, ‘weak’ emotions from the boy is sternly admonished, accompanied by that phrase which becomes an anthem in his life: ‘Boys don’t cry’. Sibling fights are resolved by making the girl ashamed of her violent behavior. She is told not to act like a would-be-boy. So deeply is this lesson ingrained into her mind that a girl feels guilty even when raising her voice in an unjust situation. A girl is also not encouraged to be a decision-maker. Every period of her life is pre-decided for her and the graph of her life moves in accordance with pre-determined reference points. This process of shaping a woman into a pliant being, who would accept her relegation
to the background without a murmur of protest, begins as soon as she is born, and continues through childhood. It is this initiation which makes the female evaluate herself as socially inferior to the male and understand the ramifications of being a woman. Beauvoir has expressed the matter succinctly in the phrase—‘One is not born, but becomes a woman.’

Since Beauvoir, one feminist after the other has described the entity called woman as being the product of culture. For a woman, to quote Judith Butler from her essay ‘Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire’, ‘culture becomes destiny’. Monique Wittig in the essay, ‘One is not Born a Woman’, writes as to how women are compelled to ‘correspond [...] with the idea of nature that has been established’ for them. Women are supposed to adjust to the concept of selfless, sacrificing, and docile roles as wives, daughters, and even mothers. Submission is designated their virtue. Any woman not conforming to the chosen ‘natural ‘ standards of femininity is promptly labeled as ‘unfeminine’ and ‘unnatural’.

This deep-rooted and long- practiced role specification through imposition of certain social standards of femininity on all biological women has been given the term ‘patriarchal oppression’ by Toril Moi in her essay ‘Feminist, Female, Feminine’. Such is the hold of the patriarchal order that femininity derives its very definition from it. The patriarchal order, thus, emerges as the factor that shapes gender identity.

Another factor responsible for construction of gender identity, according to Nancy Chodorow is the relationship of the infant to the female parent. This, however, can be regarded as an offshoot of patriarchal oppression. Watching the scenario around, the child’s psyche absorbs the female parent as the ‘trifling auxiliary’. For the male child, his being a boy means being ‘not feminine, not womanly and not mother’ (Beauvoir), whereas for the female child, the inherited universe of a woman is nothing if not problematic. As a result, the female child tries to look for an identity in the male context and struggles to ignore and displace her mother. The female child’s whole endeavor then, according to Chodorow, is self-effacement, and displacement of the mother is one way of doing it. For the male child, things are relatively easier as there is no contradiction between his being a human being and a male. His identity is fixed.
He does not need to suppress his natural impulses and expression to the extent of a
girl. Consequently, he develops a sense of superiority, self-esteem, and social
good-value. This sculpts him into a decision maker in his future life.

Mothers also become instruments of perpetuation of social duality and
discrimination. The ‘ideals’ of womanhood have seeped so deeply into the psyche of
a woman that each generation of mothers struggles to rear up clones of themselves in
the shape of daughters. The daughters are trained to exist in accordance with the
archetypal roles they are expected to play—that of daughters, wives and mothers. Miti
Pandey in her book *Feminism in Contemporary British and Indian English Fiction*
quotes Michele Roberts from *The Woman Who Wanted to be a Hero* where she refers
to four archetypes that exist within the female psyche—the virgin, the mother, the
companion to men, and the sibyl. Cooking, sewing, and housekeeping are marked out
to be their vocation and looking pretty, cultivating pleasing mannerisms and a
‘graceful’ gait their ambition. The mother, though resentful of the lack of freedom to
be herself and express herself, has already been socialized and therefore, ironically,
becomes an ally of the system. In charting out the usual course for her daughter and in
chiding any digression quite vocally, the mother, in a way, tries to avenge her own
humiliation, felt when she was a child herself. This way, the girl is not only bearing
her own burden as is being thrust on her, but also that of her mother. The mother,
therefore, ‘saddles the child with her own destiny’ (Beauvoir) and proceeds to kill the
spontaneity and freedom of the child.

As in the rest of the world, the lack of self-esteem and ambiguity of position
are pronounced phenomena in the Indian context as well. This is underscored by a
marked preference for the male child and also the fact, as pointed out by Susie Tharu
and K. Lalita in *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, that the Indian
woman has been doubly ‘Other’—as a woman and as a colonized person. Her struggle
for freedom is dual; the ideal of self-esteem is doubly removed from her. Her plight
has to be viewed in the individual as well as the national context.

The modern Indian woman has been a witness to many widespread changes in
the society. Her participation in the freedom struggle, grant of equal rights by the
Constitution has put her at par with her male counterpart at least theoretically. Yet, for an average sensitive Indian woman, the world is still characterized by hostile realities such as female foeticide, female infanticide, deprived childhood, restrictive attitudes towards her in her parental family as well as the family of the husband and the enduring thought that the ultimate aim of every ‘decent’ girl is marriage and divorce is the negation of her merit altogether. Right to equality appears to be mere candyfloss in this scenario.

As an Indian woman grapples with the complexities of being a woman, she suffers from many psychological and emotional problems. Renuka Singh in her book The Womb of Mind presents the emotional and psychological problems such as insecurity, fear, displacement, feelings of being unloved, being faced by women in Delhi. However, it is quite clear that almost every woman feels the problems spelled out by these few women at one stage or the other of her life. These feelings become the bedrock of various other problems in the future such as nervous breakdowns and depression. The so-called on-the-move urban Indian woman, like her Western counterpart, suffers from the feelings of worthlessness and inferiority induced by the turning-in of aggressiveness felt at her cultural devaluation. The rural woman, grounded in superstition and illiteracy, lacks the expertise for even identifying her problem but expresses her pain through folk-songs in which she prays to God that she might not be cursed to be born a woman again. The situation thus, remains the same in both the cases. The Indian girl, rural or urban, continues to internalize the ideals of submission, docility, conformity, and silence in order to win over the love and approval of her family.

To make matters even more difficult for her, always in the background are the myths of the ideal women such as Sita as reference points. The expectations emanating from the stories of such idealized and idolized mythical women make the girl incorporate the ideals of purity, chastity, and singular faithfulness into her inner world. Patience in the face of even the direst lapses of behavior on the part of their male counterparts is laudable. Anger and aggression are taboo. A Draupadi can seek respite from her anger and contemplate vengeance, but only if her ‘husbands’ oblige.
Always, the woman has to follow the path charted out by a father figure or the husband. If, for once, Sita does not listen to Rama, it is only to follow in his footsteps to the forest. She pays the price of not listening to her brother-in-law by being abducted by Ravana.

The male child internalizes the idealized womanhood as reflected in myths and consequently, as he grows to manhood, he looks for these high ideals in the women around him. In a single woman, the male comes to expect the beauty and devotion of Sita, the patience of Draupadi and the cheerful acceptance of misfortune of Damyanti. The mother, too, for the Indian male child is always the ‘good-mother’, constructed in the child’s mind according to the ideal of goddess Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Gauri. She is benign, nurturing, supportive and extremely loving.

The girls may or may not sentimentalize their mothers in this way. ‘For daughters, the mother is not an adoring figure on a pedestal: she is a more earthy presence, not always benign but always there’ (83), writes Sudhir Kakar in *The Inner World*. However, in later years, the very fact of the mother being ‘always there’ generates a dependency and a nostalgic wish for her benevolent presence as was experienced during infancy. Shreya, the main character in *Shreya of Sonagarh* by Uma Vasudev longs for the security and warmth of her mother’s womb in order to escape the tediousness of the present. Her mother’s smiling countenance with the diamond nose-pin sparkling is a memory carried from childhood and is a stabilizing factor whenever her world threatens to get disorderly. As Shreya, the daughter, becomes a mother, the figure of the mother looms large in her psyche with which she tries hard to identify. Even in getting to chart a different course for herself, she considers better the simple existence of her mother in which she had spent all her time in looking after the children and the family. The image of the nurturing mother is firmly imprinted in her mind. There is a contradiction forever in her mind between her identity as a politician, which is thrust upon her by dying mother-in-law, and her identity as a simple housewife. Apart from this, she also longs for another identity, the identity of a beloved. The result, however, is only pain, guilt, and turmoil.
For a woman then, there is a network of various identities which emerge as possibilities. Some of these are within the framework of patriarchal injunctions, thrust upon her by arbitrary social rules and some are beyond the “natural” social ideals. Enmeshed in this vast network of multiple identities, a woman gropes for an identity of her own and precisely because the search for that firm footing is not yet over, women’s identity has been described as ‘fluid’ and ‘roving’. It is as if a woman floats from one identity to another, performing a subtle balancing act where a few roles sometimes overlap and sometimes bitterly confront each other.

The connotations of being a girl child and then a woman color and shape her conduct, her reactions, her perceptions, and the representation of the world. Literature by women also bears a stamp of that distinct female sensibility. Elaine Showalter has underscored the point in her essay ‘A Criticism of Our Own: Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro-American and Feminist Literary Theory’ that ‘the imagination cannot escape the unconscious structures and strictures of gender identity’. The literary energy of a woman writer cannot be separated from her sexual identity. A woman writer’s work has to be studied keeping her in mind as a woman. Her work would reflect her anxieties within a patriarchal literary culture. Even a denial of her femininity would be significant to an understanding of her as a woman and would be an indicator of the precarious social position in which she finds herself.

Women, according to Beauvoir are ‘heirs of a burdensome past’. It is because of the inheritance of ‘difference of view, difference of standard’ that the chunk of the world which is shown by women writers is so different from the one presented by male writers. Shashi Deshpande in her article ‘Of Concerns, Of Anxieties’ published in *Women in Indo-Anglian Fiction-Tradition and Modernity*, writes:

There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are:
That my father was a writer.
That I was educated exclusively in English.
And that I was born a female.

Even though Shashi Deshpande confesses to having had freedom to think, to live and work her way, yet it is true that most of her writing comes out of her ‘own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society’.

For a woman, the act of writing is not merely a means of escape from the grind of the present. It is not mere sublimation of anxieties, anger, and fear either. It is an expression of her dissatisfaction with the society—a dissatisfaction that belongs to and is felt by women alone because of their curious and unenviable position in it. 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 then turns out to be singular because of a different sensitivity, because of a different life.

The singularity of literature by women is enhanced also by the fact that the road to self-expression is not an easy one. A woman’s ingrained timidity looms large on the horizon as an obstacle. The fear that her ideas might project her as a displeasing woman constantly haunts her, blunts her ire and displaces her from her original experience. Very often then, a woman writer undertakes the flight away from this world but with clipped wings. When she gingerly steps into the world of thought, ‘she is on her best behavior; she is afraid to disarrange, to investigate, to explore [. . .] She relies on the sure values of conformity’ ( Beauvoir). For this reason, it is not always possible to understand a woman’s mind from her work. Cora Kaplan brings out this confusion over the act of writing in her essay ‘Speaking/ Writing / Feminism’. Since she belonged to a ‘Jewish, middle-class intellectual family’, where the father also wrote, writing was an approved activity. In taking to writing, Kaplan found herself echoing her parents’ ideas—political and social. Writing thus became an act of a dutiful daughter and Kaplan perceives all her writing as being haunted by ‘the language of others’ and endorsing the ‘given’ social relations. It is only later when she
gives up the conformist attitude, refuses to be tied down by the patriarchic injunction, moves beyond even the feminist thought and writes ‘in opposition’ that she discovers her own voice sans any alien overtones. By becoming the ‘ungrateful child’, she finally arrives at her mode of expression.

Elaine Showalter has charted a similar course of feminine tradition of writing in _A Literature of Their Own_. She divides it into three phases—the first one is that of limitation which means emphasizing the feminine role and living up to it, the second of protest which means rejecting that role and the third one that of self-discovery. Elaine Showalter has categorized the period from 1840-80 as belonging to the first phase, that of 1880-1920 to the second phase and 1920 onwards to the third phase. According to this chronology, modern Indian writing falls into the third phase. Jasbir Jain in her book _Stairs to the Attic: the Novels of Anita Desai_ infers from this chronology that the earlier two phases do not find a fair representation in the tradition of Indian writing in English. She goes on to say that even the feminist writing in Indian languages has skipped this middle period. She cites a variety of reasons for this lacuna such as the participation of women in the Indian freedom struggle, the theoretical sanction of equality by the constitution which tends to camouflage the inequality inbuilt in the social structure, and also that women writers generally belong to economically secure sections of the society and do not face the problems that characterize the lives of lower class women. However writing, even though it strongly reflects the spirit of the period to which it belongs, cannot be restricted to it like fashion in clothes or health fads. In a wider perspective, the three phases spelled out by Showalter can be seen corresponding to the inner experiences of many a woman on an individual plane. Each woman undergoes all the three phases in varying degrees, depending upon her personal circumstances, irrespective of economic security. Modern Indian Writing by women, even though belonging to the third phase, reflects not only self-discovery but also limitation and protest.

In each of the novels undertaken for a detailed analysis—Shashi Deshpande’s _That Long Silence_, Anita Desai’s _Fire on the Mountain_, Arundhati Roy’s _The God of Small Things_, and Mannu Bhandari’s _Aap Ka Bunty_—the female protagonists are
prisoners of their past. This past belongs as much to them as it does to their creators--the writers. In each novel, the woman writer presents that slice of the world, replete with limitations, which is impinged upon her consciousness since childhood; which has been felt, lived, and often resented by her; which is made of all the peculiarities that propel her on the path of self-discovery. The four works of fiction are a journey through limitation, to protest and then finally to self-discovery which is arrived at in each novel in its own distinct way.

Shashi Deshpande

Shashi Deshpande’s novels are directly related to all these three phases. Dr. S.P. Swain’s article titled ‘Roots and Shadows--A Feminist Study’ traces the three-tier movement of the ‘incarcerated psyche’ imprisoned within the four walls of domesticity. In the novels of Shashi Deshpande, the female protagonist is ‘sandwiched between tradition and modernity, [. . .] illusion and reality, [. . .] the mask and the face. Thus positioned, the Deshpande woman disowns a ritualistic and tradition-bound life in order to explore her true self. [. . .she] is all agog to retain her individuality in the teeth of disintegrating and divisive forces that threaten her identity as a woman.’ Jaya, the female protagonist in That Long Silence is a perfect representative in this context. Jaya is her pre-marital name and means ‘victory’ whereas the name given to her after marriage, Suhasini, means ‘a soft, smiling, placid [. . .] woman. A woman who lovingly nurtured her family. A woman who coped’ (15-16). The change of name, in itself an identity-mutilating practice, also signifies the end of any tantrums, raised voice or protests that Jaya was able to resort to in her parental home. In Jaya’s case, her father had been indulgent and she misses his warmth, his pampering ways, his hopes and expectations in her, signified in his naming her Jaya. The mother on the other hand disapproved of so much attention being showered upon her. She preferred to ignore her because she was a daughter and focused her love and attention on her sons instead. Jaya’s childhood memories consist of a big family teeming with relatives--a family where ‘cooking, clearing up had been
exclusively female operations’ (81), but where even the bubbly ambition of the male child was nipped in the bud by overbearing mothers to bring up disinterested, self-centered, maladjusted men.

Particularly disturbing for Jaya is the memory of her grandmother, Ajji, who lived the austere life of a widow in a room bereft of any comforts. More than the uncomfortable chairs from which nails poked from about every corner, it was Ajji’s claustrophobic attitude that was a punishment for Jaya. In Jaya’s life, Ajji stands for socialized, ritualistic woman who would not tolerate any digressions. She is the one who feels sorry for an unknown man who would be Jaya’s husband because Jaya is in the habit of questioning everything, a behavior very unbecoming of a girl.

When Jaya gets married to Mohan, the parting advice that she is given by one of her female relatives, Vanitamami, is: ‘Remember Jaya, a husband is like a sheltering tree’ (32), thereby underlining that she is now moving out of the parental authority fold into the realm of husband’s authority and protection. In her husband’s family, she finds that there is a definite pattern for a woman to follow. She realizes that there are certain things which she must do, such as cooking even if not feeling well, and certain others which she mustn’t, such as getting angry. It is there that she learns to make a distinction between ‘womanly’ and ‘unwomanly’ behavior. It is there that she comes to know that in case there is a missing button on her husband’s shirt, it is a disgrace for the wife. An ill-cooked meal, an inefficiently run house are some other bad references in a woman’s portfolio. Therefore, Jaya gets down to polishing, scrubbing, cleaning, cooking, mending and also controlling her anger and gagging her retorts. She knows instinctively and also by experience that the ‘sheltering tree’ has to be watered and manured assiduously, even with deceit and lies if necessary, even though she is aware of plants dying sometimes due to excess of both.

Ultimately, Jaya becomes Suhasini, a woman with ‘hesitant, wavering, uncertain’ (16) eyes; ‘a woman in a crisp cotton sari, with huge dark glasses, shaped eyebrows and short hair’ (142); a woman who her husband assumes would accompany him wherever he would go and takes for granted her acquiescence with his plans; a woman who is no longer Jaya. Jaya has become almost invisible and feels
annihilated. Not exactly a trodden worm (‘but have I ever been a trodden worm?’ [6]). but definitely not her real self within the cribbed confines of an incarcerated domestic life in which she has no say. ‘It was Mohan who had a clear idea of what he wanted, the kind of life he wanted to lead, the kind of home he would live in, and I [Jaya] went along with him. But I cannot blame Mohan, for even if he had asked me—What do you want? --I would have found it hard to give him a reply’ (25). It is against this pre-ordained role of a woman where she has to be in agreement with the husband; the role which eventually blunts even her thinking, that Jaya revolts after remaining passive for a long while.

Anita Desai

If Shashi Deshpande projects the society where transition is taking place, a novelist like Anita Desai, who belongs to a generation previous to Shashi Deshpande, projects women caught and subdued in a patriarchal society. This woman is typical of Anita Desai’s growing-up years. In her novel Fire on the Mountain, Nanda Kaul remains a mute spectator to her husband’s adulterous digressions, while deftly, carefully and unceasingly fulfilling her duties as wife of the Vice-chancellor. Once again, it is the same mundane mending, polishing and bringing up children as in Suhasini’s world. Nanda Kaul goes about this mechanical round with the aid of servants while she has to look ‘splendid’ in a silk sari, seated at the head of the long, rosewood dining table, because her husband wants it that way. The husband is always ‘Mr. Kaul’ for her. Nowhere do we find her referring to him or even thinking of him by his first name. Introduced to the reader when she is a great-grandmother, Nanda Kaul’s memory of her children is a blur of cut lips, bruised knees, broken teeth, and tears. They signify a mass of demanding, screaming, crying voices to which she had attended with a ‘still, ironic bow to duty’ (19). Even the praise extended by the guests to her had her seething inside and her eyes flashing ‘like a pair of black blades’ (18) because she recognized this praise as flattery.
Surrounded by a clamorous, demanding world which moved at a furious pace, she clung to her own self and sanity by shutting herself up in her room for an hour every afternoon, even though assailed by guilt all the time. Yet, the voices of the world never ever completely left her. Her settling at Carignano later in life is only an extension of that retreat, a retreat from that ‘whirlpool of which she was the still, fixed eye in the center’ (24). Looking back at her life, Nanda Kaul can sift just one instance, one memory that cooled and calmed. It was when she was out alone in the garden of the house, watching the light in the small dressing room where she had shifted her husband’s bed. This is the one memory of ‘private triumph’ that sticks to Nanda Kaul in the whole of her long life. And yet, how small this protest seems in the light of a life full of routine, drudgery, a life consisting of too many “too-manys”: too many guests, too many servants, too many trays of tea, too many meals, too many dishes and so many children, so many tutors—a life of ‘nimiety [. . .] disorder [. . .] fluctuating and unpredictable excess’ (30). *Fire on the Mountain* is about Nanda Kaul, her vulnerability, her exhaustion, and her assertion in trying to cling to her loneliness.

**Arundhati Roy**

While *Fire on the Mountain* and *That Long Silence* explore the inner world of married women, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Aap ka Bunty* by Mannu Bhandari narrate the misery of a lonesome woman. Divorce and separation were real-life concepts for Arundhati Roy. Ammu, a Syrian Christian in *The God of Small Things*, belongs to a society where the age-old subjugation of women and the indescribable humiliation of the under-class persist; where there are not many choices for the woman; where a young girl cannot do much except wait for marriage proposals—indeed, a ‘wonderful, male-chauvinist society’. Existence in her parental home is claustrophobic for Ammu and she longs to escape the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter, long suffering mother only to land in matrimony with an alcoholic who does not hesitate from pawning her to his boss in order to save his job. Divorce follows. Ammu is back, along with her twin children, in her parent’s home
where she has grown up seeing her father beating her mother regularly and even more frequently after she is successful in her pickle-making business. He grudges the recognition it brings for her. Ammu has seen him break the bow of his wife’s violin and throw it in the river because she has the talent to be an excellent player. The mother is unable to defend herself but is at last delivered from the daily routine of beatings by her son, Chacko. Chacko manages to bully his father into not only refraining from physical violence but also into a massive sulk. No longer can the father unburden on his wife the frustration of recognition denied to him. Therefore, he breaks a rocking chair into pieces and later buys a sky-blue Plymouth in order to make people notice him.

Burdened under the double guilt of first marrying out of caste and then divorcing, Ammu’s temporary forays into the world of love accompanied by Velutha, the untouchable, end in disaster and tragedy. While Chacko’s ‘man’s needs’ are considered natural and the comings and goings of various women to his room ignored, all hell breaks loose when Mammachi comes to know about Ammu’s liaison with Velutha. “Her tolerance of ‘Men’s needs’ as far as her son was concerned, became the fuel for her unmanageable fury at her daughter” (258). Velutha is killed in the police station after being beaten mercilessly on framed charges. Ammu becomes the outcast and is shoved outside the family circle to fend for herself with her meager educational qualifications. She has to leave her daughter, Rahel, at Ayemenem in her parent’s house and ‘return’ Estha, her son, to his father. She grapples with life and disease, trying to make it light for children, talking about choices when there are none, painting a rosy picture of the future where all three would be together, willing the children to remain suspended in their childhood till she could have them with her and see them growing in front of her eyes.

Her suffering and that of Velutha, as perceived by her seven-year old twins, a boy and a girl, leaves a lasting impression on their minds. Estha and Rahel learn how history negotiates its terms and collects its dues from those who break its laws. Velutha is killed and the mother dies in a dingy room sometime later and it seems so would the children as they grow into adults. The twins seek to put an end to the
turmoil and trauma of so many years when they break the rules of the society by coming together in an incestuous union. It is through this union that they forge a new identity for themselves.

Mannu Bhandari

There is no such escape in Mannu Bhandari’s *Aap Ka Bunty*, neither for the mother nor for the child. Shakun is a successful workingwoman; she is the principal of a girl’s college. Her professional life seems to be in order but her personal life is not. She is a divorcee, bringing up her son, Bunty, on her own. She represents the dilemma of an educated woman who refuses to be moulded according to her husband’s wishes, likes, and dislikes. On the contrary, there had been efforts on her part also to mould, negate, and make the husband a zero. Both of them had realized their mutual incompatibility soon after marriage. Shakun was not ready to surrender herself and Ajay, her husband, was not ready to surrender his archetypal position of authority. Quite naturally, then, their married life was characterized by arguments and a never-ending cold war. After a separation is decided upon, Ajay moves on in life, forging a new relationship with another woman, Meera. Shakun is left waiting at that very juncture with her memories, foolishly hoping for Ajay’s return. The arrival of the divorce papers snuffs out this hope and makes way for even more bitterness. The ten-year long married life was like a long tunnel for Shakun. The signing of the divorce document is the beginning of another tunnel. She cannot lean too much on the small shoulders of her son because her relatives as well as her ex-husband remind her of the pitfalls of letting Bunty cling too much to her. Even though she has to bring up the child single handedly, she cannot be a suitable role model for the boy. Her feminine influence would make him unsuitable for the masculine role-playing expected of him. Since Shakun is an educated woman, she realizes that it is as much clinging on her part to Bunty, due to lack of any other emotional support. However, her desire to curtail this and her search for happiness by getting married again dooms her relationship with her only child. The transition of a mother to a once-again-married-
woman is beset with difficulties. It is no easy job breaking the mould of an ideal woman.

The four novels thus explore the different shades of a woman’s world. The female protagonists are the sum total of the fragments, the bits and pieces of women known to the writers since childhood. The bond of a woman writer to her childhood, the bond of the women characters to the woman writer, and the bond of the women characters to their childhood comprise the three-tier, cyclical, eddying whole, the fluid churning of which gives rise to some unique fiction by women writers.

Shulamith Firestone in her book *The Dialectic of Sex* talks of another bond—a bond between women and children, the bond of oppression. According to Firestone, both women and children are oppressed classes. Consequently, there emerges a bond between them. Women and children share some grudges against the patriarchal society. There might be a difference of level, but a feeling of dissatisfaction does make its brooding presence felt in their lives. Both suffer from devaluation; frustration of dreams, desires, and ambition; the pain of being put in place; the inability to express opinion and make decisions. Both follow the course charted out for them by others. Due to empathy between the woman and the child, a child understands the world of a woman in a better, sensitive way. Due to sharing of this bond, the alienation, the travails and tribulations in the lives of women and children are of the same texture. Jhumpa Lahiri hints at this bond in *The Namesake* when Ashima is about to give birth to a child in a hospital in America. Alone in the maternity ward, a sense of alienation invades her when she thinks that she is probably the only Indian in the hospital. A ‘gentle twitch’ from the baby reminds her that this feeling is not entirely correct. It is as if even before the baby is born, it has found a likeness in its mother. Many a times, though, women themselves become the executing agents of patriarchy. Countless instances from day-to-day life exhibit the wilting of childhood exuberance under the scorching, searing, but veiled-with-love, maternal eye. A mother resorts to wiles, tricks, and tears that ensure her sway on the child. If probed deeper, these tools aim at simulation of authority in a patriarchy-restricted arena.
Apart from soaking in the harsh reality of their existence, routine life also illustrates how children become a willing audience to the stories narrated by their mothers from their own childhood. If most of the time these stories serve to draw parallels and cite examples, at times they also bring forth some of the heartfelt and heartbreaking incidents from the past. It is in those latter times that the child can perceive the mother as a person who was also a child once. A girl specially, can begin to contextualise her restrictive upbringing. She now realizes that the mother too, before entering the fold of her husband’s authority, was firmly ensconced in the parental authority fold. She can now visualize for herself a similar course, complete with all the limitations or devise ways to escape it, consciously or subconsciously. For the boy, the experiences of women and with women become reference points for future.

Almost all of Anita Desai’s novels begin with the characters having attained adulthood. Desai then moves backwards to describe their childhood and the associations that have shaped them up. In Fire on the Mountain, this technique has been used a little differently. Nanda Kaul’s peaceful retreat to Carignano is made meaningless by the arrival of her great granddaughter, Raka. Both these females share a bond—the bond of abhorrence for the noise, complexity and shallowness of the world where all that matters is projected happiness and a semblance of order, of things being hunky-dory; where people are dazzled by rustling silk and conveniently miss the tired, vacant, expression in the eyes. Both of them, after experiencing its oppression, retreat from it in their own way.

Raka has seen her drunken father beat her mother mercilessly, stench and abuses pouring from his mouth. She has seen her mother, Tara, cringe, and cry in pain, bearing all the onslaughts like ‘helpless jelly’. Tara’s own mother prefers to ignore all this: ‘He is not really so bad as Tara might make you believe, she simply does not understand him. […] she really is the wrong type of wife for a man like him’ (15). In other words, she falls short of the ideal ‘successful diplomat’s wife’: fit to be put away out of sight and treated as an embarrassment. Despite all knowledge of her son-in-law’s numerous affairs, his alcoholism, his violent ways, Tara’s mother, Asha,
asks her to ‘try again’, thereby meaning that she should brush up her act and try to cultivate a befittingly glamorous image for herself. Here the mother is more concerned about the semblance of happiness, the outward appearance of domestic bliss. She writes in a letter to her mother: ‘All I want is Tara to be happy and lead a good life’ (15), so that she is not left with an abandoned daughter on her hands. Raka soaks in all these experiences and therefore when she comes to Carignano, Nanda Kaul notices ‘something despairing in her attitude’ (39).

There have been other reactions also to the trauma. The sight of her mother being beaten by the father makes her cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright. The sight of drunken revelry later in the Kasauli club, disturbs her greatly and as she runs away from the scene, the memory of her mother crying with her eyes closed chases her. She can feel ‘the flat, wet jelly of her mother’s being squelching and quivering’ (72) under her feet. The terrified child mistakes the crying of a jackal for the crying of the mother. When a band of raucous langurs comes to Carignano, Raka holds on to Ram Lal’s arm and prevents him from throwing a stone at a mother monkey with a young one clinging to her belly. Perhaps the image reminds her of her own mother. When she comes to know about her mother’s illness, she looks composed outwardly but later runs to the comfort of the burnt house not only because of its silence but also because it symbolizes failure and devastation. Away from her, she tries to build in her mind the image of her mother as a once-happy child who merrily sang ‘rainy days are lily days’ wondering whether it was the same person who now read out stories to her in a ‘sepulchral’, ‘martyred’ voice.

Initially, Raka finds no place in Nanda Kaul’s sympathies. However, as Nanda Kaul realizes that Raka is but a smaller, mirror image of herself, ‘a finished perfected model of what Nanda Kaul herself was merely a brave flawed experiment’ (47), she tries to build bridges by telling Raka stories from her childhood, but fails. Conversely, the camaraderie that Raka shares with the servant, Ram Lal, has been made possible, even though the tales spun by him also border on the fantastic, because he is able to substantiate her already existing, imaginary world of ghosts and churails, and share her glee and fear upon spotting the langurs. Nanda Kaul’s backward journey into an
imagined childhood does not bring Raka closer but serves the same purpose as it does in other novels—that of making the present and her position in it clearer. The Real was perhaps always so unpleasant for her that she chose to push it to the background, preferring to resort to lies instead. In painting a dashing, adventurous father who was ‘not academic’, Nanda Kaul seeks refuge in a father figure who did not hurt her as her husband had done. This imagined childhood becomes a symbol of Nanda Kaul’s lingering grouse and dissatisfaction with life. However, Nanda Kaul is unable to strike a chord with Raka. Raka, the child of ill-adjusted parents, the child of a mother who is a neglected wife, emerges as a symbol of a worried, scared and embittered childhood.

Bunty has a similar kind of role to play in Aap Ka Bunty. In the beginning of the novel, the mother and son share a loving bond. Bunty is sensitive to the tiniest flicker of emotion that crosses his mother’s face and also her mood swings. The mother also loves Bunty but somewhere along the way, she had thought of Bunty serving as a bridge between herself and Ajay. He could be a tool in her hands that would make Ajay forget his false pride and come back to her. Her illusion is shattered when Ajay sends her the divorce papers. After the divorce, she means to use Bunty as a tool again. She thinks she would be able to torture Ajay by not letting him meet Bunty. Gradually, she realizes the futility of this. She takes stock of her personal life, her physical and psychological needs. Acting on the advice of some well-meaning relatives, she decides to get married to a widower. She shifts to her husband’s house after marriage, taking Bunty with her. Bunty could have bonded with his stepfather, but the presence of two children of his own, specially the son, impedes this. In the child’s perception, the mother in getting married to another man becomes an ally of this hostile world, in league with his stepfather and his son. In the child’s perception at least, the bond between his mother and himself is now broken.

For the twins in The God of Small Things, the mother remains united with them in the bond of oppression (‘We be of one blood, ye and I’). The three are lost in a world where they have no rights. Each suffers in his/her own separate way. They take in their stride Kochu Maria’s cruel reminders of their being the outsiders (‘these are not your beds’), Mammachi’s despondency at the family honor been compromised
by Ammu’s divorce and Chacko’s terming them millstones around his neck. They are able to take it all because they are sure of their mother’s love and aware of the fact that Ammu is with them through it all. Things go topsy-turvy once the twins get the feeling, in their child-like way, that Ammu does not love them any longer. It is then that they decide to leave Ayemenem and ‘terror’ strikes. It scatters the already muddled lives of the threesome besides leading Velutha to his death. Ammu’s ignominy and financial pressures, Estha’s guilt and uprootment, Rahel’s state of insecurity and lovelessness—each of the protagonists struggles with his or her punishment alone.

Jaya’s looking back to her childhood in That Long Silence prepares her for her protest, which she calls ‘guerrilla warfare’ (9), against the efforts at her subjugation and annihilation of individuality. Her childhood then becomes a starting point of her quest for an unfragmented identity, an identity which does not slot her as only Mohan’s wife but acknowledges the whole of her, right from her childhood and what it taught her to her constantly evolving present self. Jaya realizes that the child, hands in pockets has been with her throughout and will remain with her forever.

Jaya remembers Kusum, her mad cousin sister who had stayed in her flat a little before her death. Born in a house where the father’s only concern was smoking and watching movies and the mother could not care less because she had a bunch of children to bring up. Kusum’s fate was sealed right from the beginning. ‘She carried the aura of defeat about her from her birth’ (23). She was fated to jump in the well and die. As for her brother, Dilip, things were easier as he was a male child. A ‘detestable, brash boy’ in his childhood who failed his matriculation examination, he turns into a suave, successful man, probably because his mother had boasted of everything about him, even his failure. His brashness leads him towards becoming a leader of unions and ultimately winning a seat in the assembly elections. He comes to make for himself a new pink and green bungalow where he hangs his mother’s picture, garlanded with fresh flowers. Even then, the lack of warmth and softness of his mother’s lap (she always laid her babies on her outstretched legs instead of her
lap) makes Dilip scatter overstuffed sofas, bolsters, and cushions all over his new house.

While Dilip shows much reverence to his dead mother and Mohan considers his mother a tough woman for never answering back his father, other sons in the novel move away from the overbearing impact of their mothers. Their lives are described as ‘battlefields of dead hopes and ambitions’. Jaya’s father, her Appa, despite being the ‘best loved’ child of his mother and despite the copious tears that his mother sheds at his departure, builds a separate house for himself after getting married. Jaya understands his going away because she empathizes with the smothering burden of clinging that he must have felt—the burden of being the only hope of a widowed mother. Jaya is also aware that her grandmother had nipped in the bud Appa’s dream of joining Gandhi’s ashram. Under his mother’s pressure, he had given up that dream but had refused to resume his studies and take up a job either. However, despite his going away, he had stuck to his habit of visiting his mother everyday. Death, too, came to him in his mother’s presence.

There is a mention of Makrandmama, Jaya’s maternal uncle, who was the outcast of the family because he chose to be an actor. His mother never talked to him or even about him after he took that decision. His mother also turned Chandumama, Jaya’s other uncle, from ‘a lively, ambitious young man who wanted to do his F.R.C.S. into a small town doctor’ (83). His arranged marriage to a woman of his mother’s choice turned out to be a loveless one and became the cause of his various extra-marital affairs.

Jaya’s elder brother feels the same burden as his father—the burden of his mother’s overwhelming, possessive love for him; a love that Jaya was never able to partake as a child. He leaves for the States along with his wife and Jaya knows that it is a kind of escape. The younger brother, Ravi, grows up to be a person who ‘teetered on the narrow line between success and failure, belonging nowhere’ (110). His married life moves along the same graph, wavering between success and failure.

Motherhood in all these relationships is more interested in staking claim on the son’s affection, leaving out the daughters. It seems the mothers seek to fill up the
emptiness in their lives by the male presence of the sons. Their clinging, controlling ways however lead to distancing and efforts to escape. The mother turns to Jaya after this distancing from her sons, but since Jaya’s childhood has fed itself on maternal lovelessness, this sudden show of emotion leaves her untouched and unmoved.

The world of That Long Silence has three child characters. Rahul and Rati--the children of Jaya and Mohan; and Nilima, the teenaged daughter of a widowed mother who lives with her grandparents in Jaya’s neighborhood. Born after her father’s death, Nilima was ‘supposed’ to be a boy who would bring solace to the family in the absence of the dead son. Not only does she turn out to be a girl, but also dark-skinned and unattractive, making her even more unworthy of love. Nilima is a reactionary, a thorough chatterbox. She refuses to be cowed down by the jibes at her dark skin or for that matter by the unfortunate fact of her being a girl. She bounces off her grandmothers’ nagging remarks by putting on an exuberant exterior and continues to be happy with her gaunt, graceless, blunt, and chirpy self. Even though she might not approve of her mother’s old-fashioned ways, the musical cadences of her voice when she calls out to her are proof enough of a deep affection both share. Their bond of understanding is intact in the face of all oppression of the grandmother.

In the case of Rati and Rahul, the bond of understanding is conspicuous by its absence. Like almost every other teenaged child, both complain about their mother’s lack of understanding. Rati is less sensitive of the two, at ease with the world and confident. She does not need her mother’s guidance on the threshold of adolescence. She gets along very well with the upper-crust families and finds the flat at Dadar a dingy place. Rahul is a far more sensitive child, concerned to the point of being ‘hysterical like a girl’ to poverty and hunger. He understands the shallowness of putting up appearances--be it fetching good marks through a good tutor or maintaining ‘warm relations’ with high class families. His father, anxious for him to be successful, dismisses his interest in comics and listening to music as trash. He feels that there are better things that he can do with his time. Rahul turns into a person extremely quiet for his age and sometimes does not react at all. The mother watches all this: she herself has felt ‘chained to the dream’ of her husband, the dream of an
educated and cultured wife. She feels that the chains have now extended to grip Rahul. While Rati is oblivious to all this, Rahul squirms under their heavy burden. Mentally, he relates more to his father’s less successful, ‘irresponsible’ brother, Vasant, than to him and it is with him that Rahul comes home after leaving Ashok and Rupa on a holiday. Having secured his mother’s forgiveness and the assurance that things would be fine, there is a spring in his step as he joins Vasant. Jaya notices this and somehow Rahul’s buoyancy is transmitted to her. She finds herself released from tension.

All the selected four novels have the common thread of a shared bond between women and children. In fact, the vicissitudes in this bond form the content of the novels. Each novel revisits childhood and deals with the child and childhood imagination to shed light on how the world is a difficult place for them as it is for the women characters. This world is characterized by enclosures—both physical and psychological. The women and child characters seek to escape these and go to another world, a green world. Usually, however, the consequences of this escape are unpleasant, once again binding the women and children in a common thread of experience. The next chapter explores how the different stories of the women and child protagonists by the four different authors unfold through common archetypal patterns hinting that life remains the same in essence for women writers.