CHAPTER VI
DIFFERENT DESIRES AND DREAMS

In all the four works taken up for study, the tone in which childhood is described is serious. There is hardly any nostalgia usually associated with this childhood. Further, ‘carefree childhood’, a term generally used to glorify the initial part of life, is conspicuous by its absence. The fun, the pranks, the half-serious spankings are all missing. Nowhere does the author look back and say—‘See, what a huge fuss I kicked up on that issue. And how trivial it all was!’ Maybe the impression that the writers want to convey is that life is a serious business. All along, they seem conscious that one never grows out of childhood completely because the mould is set right then. It is impossible for anyone, especially a girl child, to get out of that mould even when she grows up.

Love, family, and the child’s position within the family seem to be the overwhelming concern of all the child characters created by women writers—they might look as vulnerable as Bunty or might have built a cocoon around themselves like Raka. The twins animatedly learning English; Bunty behaving like a ‘good boy’, Jaya trying to be one of the sea of identical girls—all of it is the behavior calculated to get approval, again a ‘feminine’ concern. Not wanting any of it, as in the case of Raka, is an aberration, and leads to disaster. In all the novels, nowhere does one come across optimistic assertions like: ‘When I grow up, I want to be…’ Rather, the novels are a saga of crushed hopes and thwarted ambition. It is perhaps only Jaya who comes around to make a positive statement, but that is possible only when she has emerged out of childhood since a long time, and because her father had inculcated in her some confidence to aspire for victory.

The representation of the child by women writers does carry a unique stamp as it mirrors their concerns, their deep-rooted beliefs, fears, and notions. The child characters reflect the world of their creators. However, it is not women writers alone who have a claim to childhood and its representation. All writers are alive to its influences and even though the fact has already been established that a girl’s
childhood is characterized by a different kind of a trauma—either personal or collective—childhood is a stage that cannot be overlooked lightly in any case. Indeed, the burgeoning amount of literature on children, fictional or otherwise, only goes on to show how the importance of childhood in shaping the personality is being realized in all aspects of personality development.

A male child’s world is also replete with challenges, concerns, and trauma of its own kind. All of this needs to be blurted out probably all the more because as a male realizes his position of relative power in the course of growing up, childhood remains fixed in his mind as that phase which had its share of helplessness, weakness and powerlessness. The recent programme on a popular news channel featuring Ashok Banker, in which he recounts the painful experience of his mother’s rape when he was 12 years old, illustrates the point. As a man comes to grips with the real world, he analyses his past, specifically his childhood, and tries to relate the crucial happenings, the formative and destructive influences vis-à-vis his present position. A writer does it too and once again, the child in literature by male writers acquires a symbolic significance.

Both the male and female writers are driven by feelings of anger and frustration, but as per Rukmini Bhaya Nair (Joseph 154), these feelings are much stronger—the whole gamut of emotions like rage, lust and anger—among male writers. Further, they have the society’s permission to ‘show off’ their deepest feelings without any fear of stigma or of being branded a narcissist, in a language that is their own. There is an element of ‘heroism’ as Anamika calls it, ‘of making known’ without bothering at any kind of concealment because:

First of all they don’t face practical problems, even if they choose a certain kind of image they won’t get into trouble...No one will try to take advantage of their being open about their sexuality. Second thing is that sense of triumph, that we are open and frank. (Joseph 208-209)

With all these advantages, a male writer’s representation of childhood would also have certain defining and differentiating characteristics. Whether it is the delightful Pather Panchali by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay or Seven Summers by
Mulk Raj Anand or even *Last Train to Innocence* by Jayabrato Chatterjee—all the novels trace the growing up years of male protagonists. The narrative in *Pather Panchali* progresses at a relaxed pace, one day leading to another, each holding a variety of incidents with Opu, the protagonist, smug in his beautiful, little warm world, even though poverty-ridden. secure in his knowledge that he is invaluable to his parents:

> Who can set a price on the laugh that steals her heart, on his childish changes of mood, his face which looks as though it had been fashioned out of the moon, and the limping incoherence of his efforts to speak? These things are his wealth, and he barters them for his mother’s loving care. (27)

*Seven Summers* again relates in the first person the first seven years of a boy who looks at the world with ‘my thumb in my mouth, wondering [. . .]’ (7), watching life unfolding in all its newness everyday. His world is characterized by the ‘sweet smell’, ‘like milk and sugar’, about the neck and face of the mother; her hugs, kisses and endearments; the father’s ticklish moustache and the shower of his kisses, his singing a tune of ‘jocular, laughing, happy words of endearment’, which were generally a play upon his nickname, ‘Bully’.

In this case, the world is a benign place for the child and his confidence in himself is unbounded. “The young child has come to experience his core self as lovable: ‘I am lovable, for I am loved”’ (Kakar 82).

The ‘good mother’, considered largely a male construction, occupies the pride of position in both the novels discussed above. Of course, the usual see-saw swings in the relationship; the power-games in which sometimes the mother and sometimes the child wins, especially during meal times; the anguish at genuine conviction of the mother’s heartlessness; are also there:

> There had been a time when he thought his mother loved him, but though he had long since changed his mind about that, he never imagined, even in his dreams, that she could be so cruel, so like a stone. (Bandopadhayay161)
These observations add to the realism of the portrait. But the mother remains the kind, loving presence most of the time, as outlined by Sudhir Kakar in The Inner World—a person with whom it did not matter whether one was playing for or against in a game, she remains an ally; a person who builds up the world for them everyday, with stories, legends and myths.

In a way, Mulk Raj Anand writes in the genre of fiction what Kakar was to write years later in his sociological tract—the childhood experience typical to a male child. Anand captures the ‘rhythms of movement’ the ‘warmth and smell’ of his mother’s body, as a child would perceive it. He relives the ‘heady experience’ of ‘direct, sensual body contact, by relentless physical ministrations’, the terms used by Kakar to describe the experiences of an Indian boy’s infancy. He remembers the ‘peculiar sort of light about her dusky visage, half playful and half serene, which made her triangular profile fascinating’ for him (M.R.Anand 60). He also remembers the rock-solid courage, the naïve faith, and the ‘elemental relationship’ (179) that the two of them shared and brings it all alive in the novel.

In both Pather Panchali and Seven Summers, the novelists have tried to give words to the ‘otherwise archaic, wordless nature’ of the mother-infant dyad (Kakar 52). The mother plays the role of the sounding board, the first ‘other’ in the life of the child through whom he begins to develop his capacity to love in its widest sense and originates as a social being. Bully in Seven Summers and Opu in Pather Panchali are able to undergo this process of socialization easily.

It is precisely due to the absence of such a mother figure in The Blue Bedspread that the narrator is unable to forge healthy and loving social relationships and at best equates himself and his sister with the two cockroaches trapped in the photo frame of his dead mother. The world has ceased to be a benign place for the two of them. The mother’s death has lead to the death-like life of the siblings.

Moving to the other side of the coin, Annis Pratt’s words in Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction chalk out another theme of the male mind. She writes:
'In the male psyche the merging of the shadow and anima gives rise to the “dual mother”, feared and loathed as an archetype of maternal creation and destruction' (141). Kakar explains much the same thing in the Indian context:

The second life-long theme in the Indian inner world (more actual for men by far that for women) that derives from the special psycho-social features of Indian motherhood is the simultaneous, often unintegrated presence in fantasy of images of the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ mother. (108)

This ‘counter-ideal woman’, who takes rather than gives; the ‘bad mother’ is not the mother in both these novels. In Pather Panchali, it is Aturi, commonly known as the witch who plays this role. She shows the ‘destructive impulse’ associated with the bad mother: ‘everybody knew [. . .] that if she wanted to she could suck a little boy’s blood by just looking at him’ (Italics mine). When Opu comes face-to-face with her, ‘every moment he expected her to stop smiling and burst into a fiendish cackle’ (136). As everything fades into a mist while he looks into her cruel eyes, Opu, blue with fright, thinks that he could hear his mother calling him to eat his baked rice. Aturi, quite clearly, emerges as a contrast to Shorbojoya, the good mother.

Conversely, it is the mother who carries the duality of the good and the bad mother within herself in Last Train to Innocence: ‘She was the fecund earth one moment, rich and green and swaying with crop and laughter. And the very next, she transformed into arid desert, parched and dry and stormy’ (7). Her kohl-rimmed eyes are ‘intimidating’ for Ishan Roy, her son, and he equates her with ‘Goddess Durga, full of thunder and storm’. ‘If you went too close, you were bound to get singed. But if you kept your distance, a warm glow confronted you’ (173). He quakes in his shoes when she transforms into ‘fire and brimstone’ and wields her Shantiniketan slippers to thrash him. He bursts with excitement when he sits next to her, driving down for a movie or to visit a bookshop or a restaurant. However, his maternal grandmother, Laldida, and paternal grandfather bring an element of stability and plug the gaps of disinterest and neglect with their soothing, fawning presence. It is primarily due to them that ‘Mitali’, Roy’s home, seems such a haven to him.
Alternately friendly and isolated, Meerama, as she is called, paints in her turret and does not brook any disturbance. In a childish power game, Roy sneaks up to her room in her absence and squeezes out ‘trails of colored snakes from Meerama’s precious paint tubes’ (10). ‘The silly act made him unduly powerful, as if he were a pirate, extricating some of Meerama’s rage from her slender throat, pushing out the last vestige of venom in long streams of green and red and blue and gold’ (10).

Ultimately, however, Ishan realizes the lonely, helpless side of his mother when she is hospitalized and he sneaks up to the turret. There, he comes across her diary that chalks out the story of her life. It is symbolically through this diary that Ishan undertakes the journey on the ‘last train to innocence’. He understands the reason behind her spasmodic isolation and frustration as being the loss of love in her love-marriage. He also arrives at a sudden understanding of the half-finished painting by his mother that underscores her plight. He has no doubt that the ‘molten madness’ in the painted garden is his mother’s perception of her life. He also now knows that the girl, helplessly tied to the trunk of a tree and being pecked by a flock of birds with hooked and ugly beaks, is actually Meerama. In that ‘pagan and voluptuous’ painted garden, the birds are symbols of cruelty, selfishness, and ruthlessness. So moved is he by the terrible plight of the girl in the painting that he sets the painting on fire. The only immediate agenda uppermost in his mind, even though misunderstood this time by Laldida, is that of saving his mother. The letter from her, probably the last one, that Laldida hands over to him, becomes Ishan’s pillar of strength and wisdom for the rest of his life, making him learn ‘to accept sadness which is as real as the dreams’ (122).

In a similar vein, Opu also realizes the truth behind Aturi: that she was just a poor, friendless old woman, who had no one to look after her through life as well as death and was therefore ‘reduced to such a miserable, solitary existence’ (345).

As per the readings of these novels, it seems that it is through constant exchanges with the mothering person that the infant begins to discriminate and differentiate the opposites which are initially merged—that of conscious and unconscious, ego and id, ‘I’ and ‘not-I’—and take his first step on the road to selfhood. It is perhaps the exposure to the bad mother that indirectly makes the male child
realize as to who weighs less in the scale of binary oppositions. The male child watches from the margins as a sister gets the worst of thrashings, denied many things, and is restricted from moving outside (Pather Panchali and The Blue Bedspread). He is again a spectator as an old widowed aunt is turned out of the house (Pather Panchali) or a mother is beaten up (The Blue Bedspread). He is aware of the limited outreach of the women around him. Even though it does reinforce his sense of selfhood as he observes that he, as a male, is more fortunate of the two, it also gives rise to a bond of sympathy and protectiveness with the ‘other’.

For the sister, as Raja Rao writes in The Chessmaster and his Moves, the brother is ‘the protector, the Lord of Seven Isles, who with his magic wand creates images, frontiers, kingdoms, gives life to the paralyzed, tongue to the dumb, and now who was going to make her womb transformed, by a well known European medicine man’ (265). For Uma, the sister, ‘her brother was in every way such a superior being, and so he knew everybody important in the whole wide world’ (265). Filial relations are built in Indian families on this idealism.

It is because of the pull of these filial relations that as Opu stands on the deck of a ship as a grown man, the beauties of the infinite earth flashing before his eye, his memories take him back to the night when Durga had spoken to him from her bed of sickness and asked him: ‘when I get better will you take me to see a train?’ That is why, whenever, even as a child, ‘the fascination of distance took possession of him, his thoughts suddenly turned to his mother who always seemed to be left behind when he went on his long journeys. He felt worried about her and was in a panic to get back to her as quickly as he could’ (69). That is why Ishan Roy sets fire to the half-finished painting that spells out his mother’s pain. It is much the same for the unnamed man in The Blue Bedspread who wears glasses and whose stomach droops over the belt of his trousers, when he makes an announcement to the spectators in the Eden Gardens, most of who are known faces just as in Ammu’s dream. ‘I am the father of my sister’s child’, he says quite emphatically, because, to once again use Raja Rao’s words, there is in the filial bond and its intimacy, ‘a foreknowledge of what is oneself in the other.
though there is the one and the other, and yet in a way of speaking, the same—two halves of one whole [. . .)] (265).

The father represents the other pole of human existence: the world of thought, of man-made things, of law and order, of discipline, of travel and adventure. Father is the one who teaches the child, who shows him the road into the world. The male child observes a certain ‘reverential distance’ from the father. The father is such a figure in Pather Panchali. The sound of his footsteps ties Opu to his lessons. Of course, he also cherishes the time spent with the father and the gifts of books that he gets for him. In Seven Summers, even though the father is very loving and demonstrative, the distance grows as he grows older. The distance is physical in the case of Ishan Roy, as his father tours the world as part of his profession. The Omega clock, his father’s gift to Laldida, holds a special fascination for him. It reminds him of the missing father and also because, in Roy’s travel-thirsty mind, it ‘may have seen the Alps and smelt the fragrance of blue gentians before settling down in India [. . .]’ (8).

In The Blue Bedspread, the father does not play the usual role of the protector. He rather dons the mask of a cruel perpetrator who sexually abuses his little son, making him afraid of the streak of yellow light that falls on the floor from his father’s room through the door connecting their rooms. He also makes it difficult for him to speak out his inner thoughts, causing the words to be trapped in his chest and his lips to quiver. Once again, it is the fear of the father that makes him throw away the coin that he could not hand over to his sister rather than explain to his father. The scene when his father beats his mother is so deeply impinged on his memory that when he imagines his future with his family, he recounts the same scene, but transposes the arguments, the frowns and the violence with smiles, hugs and kisses. Ultimately the father is also one of the spectators to whom the narrator makes the announcement of being the father of his sister’s child. All the same, the inherent desire to be what the father wants him to be still remains as does the happiness of the moment when rain propels them to leave the windows and sit ‘like two friends huddled’ in the car.

Love, family, and relationships within the family are definitely some of the concerns with male writers as they are with women writers. However, since the
The upbringing of the male child is not as restrictive as that of the female child, the male child seeks to define himself and find his position within a wider social ambit. His standing amongst his peers is something that seems to bother more a child in works by male writers.

The world of a boys’ hostel, as created by Jayabrato Chatterjee, is boisterously male. It is a world of stealthy ‘pomelo raids’ and smoking sessions at night, subsequent canings in the principal’s office and elevation of the raiders to heroism. The boarding school bully, the boy with burnished skin and rippling muscles, Mamen Mamen, is the god dispensing favors and titles. It seems that he alone is above any nicknames. Otherwise, one comes across an array of Sexy Sahais, Sissy Anands and Baby Bahugunas, all assessing and reassessing their loyalties in the furiously altering scenario of new leaders and broken idols.

Conforming to and protecting the high ideals of loyalty and bravery, Ishan suddenly catapults to the status of a hero. He cannot savor enough his newly found star status and even sports a ‘movie star smile’ to live up to the image. He does not bat an eyelid when the penknife’s edge sears his index finger as a sign of loyalty and oneness with his ‘tribe’. ‘He[now] belonged to the coveted crowd, bully protected and thoroughly buffered’ (75), his 12-year old life-long dream now coming true. Overnight, all the heroes of religion myths and stories find a common representation in him:

Ishan Roy was Hercules, in search of the island of Circe; Ishan Roy was Arjun, victorious at Kurukshetra; Ishan Roy was Robin Hood, in the shade of Sherwood Forest. (143)

Opu too indulges in great deal of role-playing, staging mock-battles all alone in the forest. One by one, the most impressive characters from the stories told by his mother come alive as Opu alternately tries on roles of Karna, Arjun or King Dashratha. He sits wide-eyed when the village stage glistens with the brilliance of swordplay between the King of Kalinga and Bichitraketu. His ultimate fantasy is to play the role of ‘a general with a golden helmet on his head, and learn how to swing a
sword and fight battles’ (264), while nearer reality, he too stakes his claim to a position in the boys’ circle.

The child in Seven Summers also has a deep fascination for the glorious chariots of Sun God, the Rain God, the Kurus and Pandus, Rama and Krishna, Sikander, Rasalu, Vikramaditya, Akbar—the endless list of illustrious flag bearers of history and mythology. The desire to be like these heroes sprouts from the countless stories narrated by the mother and speaks of the way a mother conveys to her son her deep desire to see him with similar shades of character. The son, if not in reality, strives to mimic while playing the various roles that his mother spreads before him like a spectrum.

Slipping away from school or home; trying out forbidden pleasures like smoking; physical fights; the first awareness of attraction towards a girl, unmindful of the age difference and most of all a keen desire to explore the territories beyond the immediate and to partake of the freedom that such an escape promises, are some of the patterns that are common to at least all three novels except The Blue Bedspread. The Blue Bedspread is a different story probably because the childhood that the child undergoes is not a ‘normal’ kind.

The Blue Bedspread is definitely very overt and lays bare the life of a sister and a brother, pushed into sexual togetherness due to the incomplete family and the abnormality that has crept in. It is on the blue bedspread that the elder sister plays the role sometimes of the missing mother, sometimes the protective sibling and at other times, simply that of a girl. The blue bedspread, on which the infant lies sleeping in the beginning of the novel, is then a relic from the past, holding memories in its folds and creases. The narrator positions the story of his life and that of his sister from this bedspread.

The tensions and undercurrents of the relationship of the three “inmates” of the house are brought out explicitly, in a straightforward manner, without resorting to many symbols or metaphors. The myth of the benignant father is shattered. The father puking on the daughter’s dress when she is all ready to go out; his asking the son to lie down, naked, on the bed and the later reference to blood; his bullying the son into
compliance, hinting that he knows everything that goes on the blue bedspread, are the strokes that clearly bring out the violence, the cruelty, the diabolic and the sexual undertones in the father’s character.

There are unabashed references to many things usually considered taboo in *Last Train to Innocence* also. Chatterjee does not delve into descriptions and makes a breezy and casual mention of all the things possible in a boys’ boarding school, such as homosexual escapades and sexual bullying. He does describe Roy’s experience with a young girl, Minididi, but keeps his tone light hearted. Nonchalant terms for body parts abound. The boys’ interest in the family lineage of the principal’s pet cat; their awareness of the designs of their neighbour, major general’s wife on female teachers in the school; their almost reverent gazing at the cane-stricken bottom of Ishan Roy; the sexual jealousy that Roy feels against Michael Cameron, Minididi’s boyfriend—Jayabrato Chatterjee seems to be making a statement of the innumerable interests in the lives of boys growing up to an awareness of the world around them through these references.

*Seven Summers* also reveals how the supposedly innocent pleasures of the toddler are actually ridden with physical desire:

> It was curious that I should have become conscious of physical desire so early, but, as I clung to her [Rukmani, a twelve year old girl] neck, [. . .] as I rested my cheek against her cheek and felt the touch of her long hands, I became suddenly aware of a strange and wild rapture such as I had faintly felt in being fondled by my aunt Aqqi and Devaki (184)

Opu’s attraction towards Omola is tame by comparison and is in keeping with the dignified rendering of the rest of the narrative. Since *Pather Panchali* is hailed as a creation carrying significant autobiographical strains, it was perhaps Bandopadhyay’s consciousness of his being a ‘kuleen’ Brahmin that stands in the way of explicit representation of experience. However, this does not make the novel’s representation of childhood less authentic. T.W.Clark in his introduction to the English translation of the book credits Bandopadhyay for writing ‘without any trace
of adult condescension’ about the nature of a child. Clark opines: ‘the reader lives and
grows with them [the child characters--Opu and his sister, Durga], feels with and for
them, looks through their eyes, and knows the worlds and the people in it as they
know them’ (xiv). Once again, like *The God of Small Things*, part II of *Pather
Panchali* is based on life itself whereas part I is based on hearsay. Opu is born in part
I but is not old enough to participate in the life around him until part II. He learns the
stories of the past piecemeal by report. Part I is therefore casually organized and
disjointed. Even the paragraphs in places are isolated units. The author tells the reader
what happened and leaves the reader to integrate the different incidents as he reads
on, just as the author himself might have done or a person usually does with incidents
based on hearsay.

Part II is characterized by naturalness, realism, and faithfulness in detail, the
reason being that Opu’s childhood and environment are very much the author’s own.
‘Opu’s thoughts and fancies’, writes Clark, ‘his games and impersonations, are
projections of the author’s own, as are his love of trees, roads and rivers, his hopes for
the future, his love of stories and his interest in magic. In them all we sense the truth
of actual experience [. . .’ (xvi – xvii).

Clark finds the unity of the book in the fact that ‘even when Opu in
imagination soars into the far distances of the sky or follows the road of his dreams
beyond the horizon, he rushes back and throws his arms around his mother’ (xiv).
This shows a natural concern for the mother and makes the book more authentic in
representation of childhood. A male writer frequently retraces his steps to the house of
his childhood where his mother is the presiding deity. He is conscious of traveling
away from her in many ways, inevitable because of his being a male, and remembers
with remorse that he could not do enough for her. Surjit Pattar expresses a similar
sentiment in his poem written in Panjabi: ‘Aj Phir Bahut Udas Hai Atmaram’, where
Atmaram means the inner self. A translated excerpt from the poem is as follows:

Mother’s love
The house’s verge
Temples and wilderness vast
Everything—washed away in the flowing past
While he sits high, unworried and untouched
But at times, a sharp pain pierces his heart
And he tumbles down the city skyscraper
Lands, miles away
In the shade of the tree, sawed-away
In the courtyard of his village house sold years ago
Where his dead mother turns back the spinning wheel
Rakes up the time sealed
Unweaves the tapestry of sorrow…
Then
Why does Atmaram come here again and again
Maybe because
It was here he took the turn
That took him away from himself. (Translation mine)

The endings of the novels are significant. Both *Last Train to Innocence* and *Seven Summers* end on a note of sadness: ‘Our as yet timid, unawakened souls were bent, like our heads, in sadness’ (Anand 268). This sadness is the harbinger of growing up, becoming aware of the harsh realities of the world, the sense of boarding the last train to innocence, leaving behind the carefree adventures of daily life of a child when everything seems to be hunky dory. Ishan Roy is conscious of the milestones being left behind: ‘the train seemed in such a hurry! It crushed and gnashed and grinded its wheels on the rails, and rushed like a caterpillar through wounded landscape. Fields and lampposts flashed past’ (191). He feels the sudden pinpricks of tears stinging his eyes, aware of the lost world. *Pather Panchali* also ends on a journey and Opu shares a similar sentiment with Ishan. ‘The trees on either side were running past the windows. And how fast they were going!’ thinks the thrilled Opu. Then, ‘suddenly Opu’s heart was filled with a curious emotion. It was not grief, nor was it loneliness. He did not know what it was. It was compounded of so many
feelings, so many memories, that flashed across his mind in a single moment of time’ (356-57). The child may not be able to put his finger on the sentiment, but the reader knows that it is the pain of leaving behind his dead sister, Durga, and the known world that mars the thrill of embarking on a new journey and see new regions.

It is as if the child protagonists are going through the birth pangs of a different kind: being reborn into the real world at the age of 7 (in Seven Summers) and 12 (in Last Train to innocence) respectively whereas Bunty, Estha, Rahel, Raka and Jaya, the child characters discussed extensively in the previous chapters, were well into this voyage at the same age. They had had a taste of the real life and its intricacies by this time. They knew that bitterness is the taste that lingers and that the journey does not always unfold as expected. Rather, expectations are sometimes responsible for inciting Fate to deliver a cruel card: ‘Rahel knew that this had happened because she had been hoping that it wouldn’t’ (Roy 58). However, the boy in Seven Summers can look forward to the ‘joy of anticipation with a taste for the new, the immense and the marvelous that stretched before’ (268), aided perhaps by the unrestrained shower of love and attention through their early years that assures them that life cannot be very harsh. To use Kakar’s words again, ‘the reassuring sense of inner continuity and wholeness [. . .] predominate(s) over a sense of falling to pieces and life forever lived in disparate segments’ (53) because of the benign and reassuring picture of the world given to these protagonists during their infancy.

The protagonist in the end of The Blue Bedspread completes the journey of his cowering childhood on paper in one night through a ‘fractured narrative’, considered a feminine construct. In reliving it, he manages to put all the complexes, the loneliness, and the insecurity behind him. The coming of the child in his life strengthens him to a resolve that he would give that life to the child that was denied to him and his sister—a life protected and loved. This child is then the symbol of the collective protest of the siblings against the world handed over to them. With this child lying on the blue bedspread, the protagonist shakes off that part of the child within him that was weak and that clung to him, cutting him from others, forcing him into silence, making him ineligible as a man for the life around him. He now takes on
the ‘manly’ qualities, the first being the booming voice with which he makes the announcement. With this one assertion, he is also able to assert his being in control, being a ‘man’. Gone is the disinterested man with the drooping belly. He now ‘looks down to see the belt in his trousers firm and stiff’. He breathes in hard, adjusts his shirt, and walks down the steps that lead off the stage, a symbolic construct. He bothers neither for the clapping around him nor for the old man in the stands (symbolically the father), breaking free from his stranglehold finally. Clearly, the writer sees the breaking away from the feminine mode of silence and isolation as a kind of victory. The awareness of the weaker position of the female is inherent in this ending.

Even if there is a shared bond of oppression between women and children, male or female; even if language happens to be multi-accenual and polyphonic; even though there are traces of femininity in male writing, the male representation of childhood is definitely different because of the different upbringing accorded to an Indian male child. There are a few common factors and concerns, such as the urgency to escape to the green world as in *Pather Panchali* and *Last Train to Innocence*. However, the overall picture that emerges points to some differences.

Both *The God of Small Things* and *The Blue Bedspread* take up as their subject ‘the muffled … contours of filial worlds, long held captive and unexpressed… and to finally unknot and unremittingly expose the unpalatable truths through a sieve of memory’ (M.I.Singh 54). The coming together of the siblings in an incestuous union in both the novels is a reminder to society what is likely to happen to the children who are increasingly alienated in the ever-changing social scenario. In a way, the story of *The Blue Bedspread*, even though it has roots in its own past, picks up the threads from where *The God of Small Things* leaves them. Despite much outcry about Arundhati Roy’s bold, modernistic stand, the fact remains that *The Blue Bedspread* makes an even bolder statement. Arundhati Roy’s condemnation of the adult world leads to a stark experience for the reader who is faced with an emptiness that is both a precondition and a fulfillment of a deeper questioning of our human reality. Rahel and Estha then, might be lone cases, driven as they are by their curious ‘biology’ to seek a
reunion much like the one in their mother’s womb ‘before life began’. However, Jha’s protagonists threaten to spill over to all the cell-like, isolative urban flats surrounded by chaos and noise, waste and greyness, if such conditions continue to prevail. The author, in depicting the surroundings, reveals the psychological frame of the narrator, who is no longer waiting for a miracle or change. Something needs to be done. Hence, he makes the announcement in the Eden Gardens before a crowd of spectators.

*The God of Small Things* retains a child-like quality about its story-telling, probably influenced by Arundhati Roy’s need to blurt-out some ‘unpalatable truths’ from the real life. *The Blue Bedspread* is more of an isolative, clinical investigation undertaken in urgency in order to say it all to a one-day-old infant, tomorrow’s progeny. While *The Blue Bedspread* traces the root cause of the problem in the alcoholism of the father and death of the mother, *The God Of Small Things* courses through the themes of rejection and expresses it through the archetypal patterns of enclosures, Green World escape through the Green World hero, punishment and silence.

**Summing Up**

Distinctive structures of consciousness related to but not identical with the author’s ‘empirical’ or biographical self pervade a work of literature. In writing by women, the world of women coexists with the world of children. *The God Of Small Things* is undoubtedly an indictment of all totalizing systems—from aristocracy to Marxism, Hindu Casteism to Christian ‘moralizing’. and it all affects the lives of the twins in some ways, but what touches their lives most deeply and directly is the patriarchal suppression of women in their world. ‘The novel unleashes its most scathing indictments against patriarchal systems under whose sway women oppress other women, and some of the most horrifying atrocities are committed in the name of the Father’ (Saxena 281). In the words of Saxena, the novel is ‘a stark narrative, where the prison house of human systems are turned upside down to expose how all
Edenic thoughts ultimately became vehicles of oppression that serve the human ego’s urge to dominate and destroy’ (270).

Yet, the novel does not slip into moralizing. Even though the perspective keeps shifting, it never strays too far from the child’s eye. The child does not pass any judgments. The clarity of a child’s perception and the agony of the adult awareness serve the purpose of illuminating and deluding at the same time, which Neela Bhattacharyya Saxena recognizes as akin to Kali’s power. Portraying two children as the two responders to the social laws, Roy brings a fresh perspective to bear on an age-old subject. She uses her unusual language, deep feelings felt personally, and her ability to see even the smallest, meaningless details in the lives of the children to create a unique and compelling portrait of a set of children in Indian English writing. In a truly feminist strain, the ending seems to suggest that the ephemeral and enchanted moment of union and love between two subalterns—a woman and an untouchable—holds the key to harmony in nature and lives. Even the sexual union between the twins, just before the ending, is more like the primordial and perfect union of Shiva and Shakti as Ardhnarishwar, forged in order to create a new world order. This union (and that of Velutha and Ammu) springs from the flow of desire. This desire is the indicator of, to use Bhattacharya’s expression, ‘Kali’s footprints’ in the text, since Kali is ultimately the power of Desire. ‘Kali’s footprints’ illuminate the trace and echo of her immanent presence and these alone can save us from absolute despair.

Anita Desai’s protagonists are generally socio-psychic rebels, recalcitrant selves, who find it difficult to compromise with the milieu. The child, Raka, in Fire on the Mountain, also belongs to the same league. Unlike the child characters in the novels by male writers discussed earlier, who are eager to make their mark in society, Raka’s isolative tendencies and withdrawal are a type of another, feminine reaction. This reaction is akin to the reaction of the protagonist in The Blue Bedspread. Raka, however, differs in not going the whole hog to announce her arrival on the social stage with a bang but by setting the forest on fire to preserve her isolation.

Interestingly, Raka does not show any distinctive features of being a girl. Of course, we are introduced to her as Nanda Kaul’s great granddaughter. Ultimately,
however, it does not matter if she is a girl or a boy. Her behavior and body language, her forays into the forest, her quiet observation, and even her utterances do not slot her in any gender-category. Raka rather emerges as an androgynous symbol of childhood, at grips with life in a psycho-emotional encounter. Perhaps Anita Desai deliberately projects this androgyny to make a universal comment on the position of children in the society. This androgynous child becomes the vehicle of the writer’s fears and concerns for children as well as women. Even though the novel begins with Nanda Kaul, it is Raka’s arrival and the unfolding of her mind that truly reveals Nanda Kaul. Inversely, Raka is defined through Nanda Kaul in the sense that Raka is seen as her extension. By her vision, the author extends dexterously the frontiers of symbols, images, and metaphors to reflect not only the physical appearance but also the deeper psychic level of the child. Anita Desai brings this character alive with subtle language in narration to analyze the unconscious mind and the suppressed and latent desires of Raka.

The child in all the four novels then emerges as a symbol of the artist’s dissatisfaction with society, besides being a means for exorcising the ghosts of the past as in The God of Small Things. Jaya as a child in That Long Silence symbolizes little else than dissatisfaction. She stands for the average Indian girl caught up in the stereotypical image that is thrust upon her that threatens to gobble down her individuality and identity. Her struggle against this fails primarily due to the early death of her father, her ally, savior and hero. The adult Jaya takes up the struggle and emerges victorious, at least in the battle of her mind, because this time she takes the responsibility of winning upon herself. However, since her upbringing has been in the traditional mode, she does not discard her husband’s co-operation in it, in case it is forthcoming. For a person of Jaya’s background, the shaking of that clone-like identity that sticks to her from childhood and is molded into another clone after marriage, is the beginning of the fight. The adult Jaya’s fight is also a fight for the child Jaya.

Mannu Bhandari essays the turbulence and turmoil in the life of Bunty and attempts to find through it an identity for Shakun, the symbol of all those women who dream of finding a new life, refusing to treat divorce as ‘die-vorce’. The social
atmosphere till now is not conducive for unraveling the jumbled identities of the Bunty's and Shakuns in real life. The author seems to be making this statement, taking cue from Bunty’s confused escape in his dream towards the end. The real society still consists of nosy neighbors and cruel friends who raise certain awkward questions that are never directed at the remarried man, and make existence difficult for Bunty and his mother. Until the time the society does not widen its horizons and put an end to undue and prejudiced interference, a sane future for Bunty-like characters is in jeopardy.

Ultimately, all the women writers in their respective works strive to reflect their times and their environment. When the artist shows the suffering of children—the most porous and the most innocent entities in society, she not only lays bare some bitter social truths, but also inherently conveys how deep this system has seeped in, necessitating the rejection of the system and milieu. A new social order, a new way of living, has to emerge out of this environment. The writers paint a picture of that social order, fantasizing a different tomorrow in the apparently warped worldview that they seem to offer on the surface. The future lies not in an incestuous union of siblings but in giving the subalterns freedom to come on their own. It also does not lie in the crackling fire on the mountain but in not pushing the child to pick up that matchbox. Future is also not escape in dreams but in not letting life become a nightmare. Future is not breaking into hysterical laughter but in providing an outlet and giving freedom to express before insanity takes over. The women writers therefore hint at a counter-psyché that needs to be imbibed by the society so that the relationships and personalities that emerge out of it are happier, freer, and better integrated.