CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Words are often no more than silence, and silence has its voices.

Simone de Beauvoir.

Physical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story.

Elaine Scarry.

This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone...Withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death.

Margaret Atwood.

The above quotes from Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Scarry and Margaret Atwood illustrate how best this dissertation can be captured in a nutshell. The twentieth century women writers- Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Shashi Deshpande, whose novels the present writer has taken up for study, speak as members of the modernist and postmodern literary periods, which have been peculiarly characterized by silence. The protagonists of these writers belong to a class of members on whom silence has been imposed.

Silence or effective silence, not being heard or not being free to speak authentically, is a mark of women's repression in a masculinist culture. It is, indeed, a mark of victimization. The myth of Philomela, the raped girl whose tongue was cut out off so that she could not speak to accuse her attackers, has been, for all its grotesqueness, a pattern of the actual experience of women in the real world. It is therefore the victim, not the perpetrator, who must keep quiet.
The novels of Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Shashi Deshpande testify to the above. The protagonists in the chosen novels are meek and submissive, until realization dawns in the end. The authors represent different cultures but what brings them together is how they present their characters in a similar predicament. It is interesting to see how these women given their limited capabilities either succumb to or overcome a tight situation. But their failures, in most cases, do not deter them from pressing ahead to meet life's challenges. A thematic approach has been adopted for this study.

A brief account of the life and achievements of the three authors helps the readers to understand what shaped the writings of these women, and what makes their writings truly universal. Born as Chloe Anthony Wofford on February 18th, 1931, in the northern Ohio City of Lorain, Toni Morrison was imparted a strong sense of black identity by her father George Wofford. Her mother Ramah Wofford constantly counseled her against crippling hatred, and thus became a model for the powerful and resourceful women, a repetitive figure in Momson's fiction. From the black community's oral tradition Morrison heard "terrifying and inspiring stories" about black history and the Underground Railroad (Bloom 10). About her roots as a writer, Morrison would later remark, "The range of emotions and perceptions I have had access to as a black person and a female person are greater than those of people who are neither... My world did not shrink because I was a black female writer. It just got bigger"(10).

Her wide reading of English, French, Russian novelists, writing and accomplishments of African Americans made her an accomplished storyteller from a young age. Beginning with The Bluest Eye in 1970, almost all her novels written so far have received recognition of some kind. Every possible award a writer could aspire for, is a part of her collection including the most prestigious of them all, the Nobel Prize for Literature in
1993. Apart from honorary degrees from a number of Colleges and Universities, Morrison holds the distinction of being a member of a number of Academies. Besides Literature, she has written lyrics for Jessye Norman and has collaborated with Andre Previn for songs by Kathleen Battle.

Most of us know that Margaret Atwood writes novels but many are not aware of the diversity of her literary achievements. She writes poetry, short stories, screenplays, literary criticism and operettas besides novels. Throughout her career several themes and interests have developed, including the impact of literature on national identity, the role of the artist, and the relationships between men and women. Often when researching a writer's work, we examine their lives to gain insight into their work.

Margaret Atwood like Toni Morrison derives her inspiration to a great extent from the female literary tradition. Her studies, both academic and informal, began with an interest in the nineteenth century British novel, a genre dominated by female giants such as Brontes, Jane Austen and George Eliot. Born on November 18th, 1939 in Ottawa, Canada, Atwood spent most of her childhood summers in the wilds of northern Quebec and Ontario bush. Dividing time between the bush and the town helped "develop a sense of dual identity and allegiance" which has informed both imagery and ideas in her work (Wisker 7). Like Morrison, Atwood has gained recognition right from the beginning. Poetry and fiction have both won praise and prizes for Atwood. Her first privately printed, self-published poetry collection Double Persephone won her the E.J.Pratt Medal in 1961. With the publication of her second novel Surfacing and her prose work Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature in 1972, she consolidated her significance as a novelist and cultural critic. Like Morrison, Atwood too has received a number of awards for poetry and fiction. To name a few, in 1966, The Circle Game
received the Governor General's Award for Poetry. In 1986, she won the Los Angeles Prize for Fiction. Shortlisted for the Booker several times, she finally won this prestigious prize for her novel *The Blind Assassin* in 2000.

Shashi Deshpande, born in 1938, is the daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangacharya. Although her early years of marriage were largely given over to the care of her two young sons, her writing career began in earnest in 1970 initially with short stories, of which several volumes have been published. A recipient of a number of awards, Deshpande's greatest recognition came with the publication of *Roots and Shadows*. It was voted as the Best Indian Novel in 1982-83 and the novel also won the Thirumathri Rangammal Prize in 1984. In 1990, she received the prestigious national Sahitya Academy Award for *That Long Silence*. With the publication of *A Matter of Time* in 1996, she had four books for children and more than eighty short stories to her credit, besides detective fiction and a screenplay.

Born in a small town in the southern Indian State of Karnataka, Deshpande grew up surrounded by books and literary personalities. Their house was redolent with an atmosphere of discussions, of teatime conversations on books and ideas, a place where play readings and rehearsals were a daily activity. Sanskrit classics and Kannada greats were as much an influence as Ibsen and Shaw. Her parents ensured that she was exposed to the best that English had to offer. As a result, Deshpande today is one of the most published women writers in English in contemporary India. Her work has been published in English in India and the United Kingdom and has been translated into German, Russian, Finnish, Dutch and Danish.

A study of the predominant themes, concerns and influences of the three writers enables the readers to have a better understanding of the
similarities and dissimilarities in their writing. There are certain themes that recur in the fiction of these novelists. Their protagonists are "always explorers" through tradition and myth in search of a new identity and in "search of a voice, a tongue, a language, an art, with which to proclaim that identity" (Rigney 10). Particularly in this sense, they can be seen as 'feminist' writers. All the three are concerned with the psychological and physical survival of women. Their concept of feminism is very comprehensive and is chiefly concerned with all the modes of victimization of women all over the world and their liberation from the chains of oppression and bondage. However, in the end, the protagonists in these novels "refute the illusion of their own innocence," recognise their complicity in the destructive cycle of power and victimization, and thus confront their own reality, "divided and schizophrenic as the reality might be" (3).

Secondly, these writers largely influenced by powerful mother figures, incorporate the theme of the mother in their fiction. Rigney notes that "the theme of the rediscovered mother," is a "pervasive concern in feminist literature as whole from Jane Eyre to Adrienne Rich" (11). Morrison, Atwood and Deshpande displace the mother from the "'hallowed' altar of worship" and install her among us: not as a deity but a woman, living and facing the realities of existence (Bande 135). As Rigney mentions in Margaret Atwood, they "are human women rather than witches, goddesses or Demeter figures, and it is the protagonist's recognition of their human status which is a key to the discovery of their own identities" (11).

Violence against women has continued through the ages, especially in the form of wife beating and rape. Sunaina Singh notes that the status of women can well be seen from the old legal definitions of Western laws. For instance, rape was seen as " 'simply theft of sexual property under the
ownership of someone other than the rapist" (qtd. in The Novels of Margaret Atwood and Anita Desai: A Comparative Study in Feminist Perspective 4). It is significant to note that in the old legal definitions woman was considered as the property of either her father or the husband. Hence even if raped, she has no say in the matter. It is highly ironical that the property, in this case the woman, is completely ignored, although she is the worst affected victim (5). All the writers repeatedly mention this idea.

Reading these writers one wonders why Morrison, Atwood and Deshpande having enjoyed the luxury of a happy family life are presenting in their novel women who are unhappy. Certainly, all this is for a purpose. By consistently keeping the family unit at the centre of their fiction, these writers drive home the importance of endurance and reconciliation in the lives of every individual.

A common contemporary issue facing every country is the question of women. So it is not only common to Morrison, Atwood and Deshpande. Legal, economic and social restrictions on the basic human rights of women have existed throughout history and in all civilizations, affirms Sushila Singh (22). Women too, down the ages, have protested against such inequities. As a result of these protests, a feminist thought system evolved. The feminist consciousness is "the consciousness of victimization." It is a concept of "raising of the consciousness' " of an entire culture (22). But when analyzed down to its complexity, one discerns that theoretically, feminist thought becomes an impossibility. It can be seen as an "agnostic struggle against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression," but the thought will cease to exist once conditions of oppression are removed (23).

The present day feminist thought aims to emerge as a holistic, anti-militaristic and life-affirming philosophy. But how well can we achieve
this goal? To find an answer, one has to take a detour into the evolution and development of feminist criticism.

From its infant stages, feminist criticism has been intertwined with political events. Feminism emerged as an important force in the Western world in the 1960s. The sexist attitude of the male colleagues led to the formation of all women groups. Women realised that the strategies used to oppress the blacks were similar to those used to keep them subservient. This revolution became necessary in order to fight racism, sexism, capitalism and patriarchal society. The same awakening spread to literature as well. Since the domain of literary criticism and literary theory were male-dominated areas, women writers protested against this exclusion of women. Feminist criticism thus "emerged as an off-shoot of the Women's Liberation Movement, sharing its polemical force and activist commitment" (Singh 38).

Some pioneering works that stimulated this movement were Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1927), Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), Mary Ellmann's *Thinking About Women* (1968) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969). Virginia Woolf has always fascinated feminist critics because they find her ahead of time thinking about women. She is hailed as the mother of the movement by most. However, critics like Elaine Showalter are unable to accept her, without questioning the validity of her writing. She certainly accepts Woolf's historical and representative importance without any doubt but finds it a serious limitation of what she wrote about. As a privileged woman in society, Showalter argues that Woolf would not have had negative experiences, which becomes essential for a woman to write about the problems of women.

Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* "is espoused to socialism" but is based on the existentialist philosophy of Sartre (Pandya 40). Her argument is that women have always been treated as objects that satisfy the
needs of men. They are relegated to secondary roles, and denied individuality and responsibility. As a result, women accept these assumptions and enact them in real life. They become what they do because society expects them to behave in a particular fashion. Beauvoir's now famous statement, "One is not born a woman; one becomes one" is a generally accepted idea today. Mary Ellmann argues in her book *Thinking About Women* that "Western culture employs a very obsolete and ridiculous sexual mode of thought and discusses the insidious effects of thinking by sexual analogy" (40). It is largely believed that women, whether they are readers, critics or writers can only be weak and passive, whereas men are always strong and active. She "advocates" an effort to resist and subvert this mode of thought. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* is a combination of detailed analysis of literary works and political argument. In "raw, polemical style," she traces the history of women's symbolic oppression (41).

Karen Offen in a ground-breaking study attempts to group feminism in two ways: Relational and Individualist. The relational feminist thought stresses women's rights as women in terms of their childbearing and/or nurturing capacities in relation to men. It insisted on women's distinctive contributions in these roles. Individualist feminist thought, by contrast, emphasized the individual, irrespective of sex or gender. These theorists celebrate the quest for personal independence. The interplay of these two strands can be seen in the late eighteenth century British writer on women's rights, Mary Wollstonecraft and then the nineteenth century American suffragist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

The Anglo-American feminist tradition however, advocated the individualistic thought as the only "politically correct" form till the 1970s. But with the advent of new ideas, the situation changed. Finally this thought has come under attack. In France, the relational feminism led to
the paradoxical doctrine of "equality in difference" (Singh 28). The French theorists argued that equity is distinct from equality. It combined a case for moral equality of women and men with an explicit acknowledgement of differences in women and men's biological functions in society. Simone de Beauvoir rejected "the feminine" as a purely cultural construct and rejected the social role implications of women's psychological difference. But the avant-garde French feminists consider Beauvoir's type of feminism as male-identified. "If autonomy is to be purchased at the price of womanliness, the French reject that goal, insisting and prizing la difference" (28).

Feminism thus must be viewed as a rapidly developing critical ideology. The concept incorporates a broad spectrum of ideas and possesses an international scope. In its early stages it was largely dependent on male-centred political and intellectual discourse. But today, feminist thought seeks to destroy masculinist hierarchy but not sexual dualism. It is pro-woman but not anti-man. This makes it a humanist philosophy.

It is this humanist philosophy in these writers that make them popular not only with the common man but with the many men and women who have associated their own academic careers with them. But in the recent years the interest in Morrison, Atwood and Deshpande has doubled. This is clearly evident in the ever-increasing publications on these writers. Some deserve mention. Toni Morrison edited by Harold Bloom is a perfect introduction to the author. In addition to providing analysis of the texts, a biography of the author, a listing of additional critical works about the novels, and an index of important themes and ideas makes this book an important reference for researchers, as well as a learning tool for all readers of literature. Jan Furman's Toni Morrison's Fiction traces the recurrent characters, themes and settings in Morrison's works, which unify
her writings and create fine portraits of black experience. Ron David's explanations of Morrison in his book *Toni Morrison Explained: A Reader's Road Map to the Novels* is more an attempt to provide readers with enough information and insight so that they can explain Toni Morrison to themselves. The focus of his commentary is on Morrison's books - the beauty of her language, the subtext of her novels. This book provides a good sketch of her most formative moments and experience.

*Toni Morrison's Fiction: Contemporary Criticism (Critical Studies in Black Life and Culture)* edited by David L. Middleton is a collection of contemporary criticism, which explores Morrison's concerns with racial and gender issues. It analyzes Morrison in relation to other major modern authors, her philosophical and religious speculations, and her preoccupation with the process of fiction making. Patricia Bryce Bjork focuses on the cultural and communal traditions embedded in Morrison's five novels. In her book *The Novels of Toni Morrison: Search for Self and Place Within the Community*, Bjork explores how communal traditions influence the search for self and place within a given African-American community. Thoroughly researched, the book examines historical and ideological aspects of African-American literature while offering in-depth critical analysis of each novel.

More than any other Canadian writer, Margaret Atwood has attracted maximum critical attention from various parts of the world. There have been a good many full-length studies on her works. Barbara Hill Rigney's *Margaret Atwood* examines Atwood's poetry, fiction and critical essays, as well as her artistic and political views, and affirms their relevance within a feminist context. Professor Frank Davey's discussions of Atwood's poetry, fiction, short stories and criticism in *Margaret Atwood: A Feminist Poetics*, offers a 'glossary' of the author's recurrent images and symbols that can open hidden levels in nearly all of her
writing. But this book seems to be biased and offers a male perspective. Coral Ann Howells published *Margaret Atwood (Modern Novelists series)* in 1996. It is an outstanding critical study, which makes an assessment of Atwood as a poet, a colonial writer and a feminist.

**Feminism/Postmodernism:** *Margaret Atwood's Fiction* by M. Prabakhar is an analytical study of Atwood's eight novels. The book explores Atwood's feminist perspective both as a concept and a reality with reference to her fictional world. Coomi S. Vevaina's *Remembering Selves: Alienation and Survival in the Novels of Margaret Atwood* and *Margaret Laurence* focuses upon the patterns of alienation and survival in their novels. *Margaret Atwood: Vision and Forms* edited and published by Kathryn Van Spanckeren and Jan Garden Castro is a comprehensive anthology of essays- a study of Atwood's first six novels, poetry and non-fictional prose. The book focuses on the enduring concerns in Atwood's works, namely feminism, ecology, the Gothic element, the theories of Frye and Jaynes and cultural politics.

Apart from Mukta Atrey and Viney Kirpal's book *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of Her Fiction* and R.S. Pathak's *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande* (to name a few), the ever increasing publication of articles in various books and journals goes to show that Deshpande enjoys a wide readership around the world.

The next chapter studies at length three novels of Toni Morrison. An analysis of the novels of Toni Morrison drives home the message that human authority figures can have only limited control over other human beings, no matter what measure of suppression and cruelty they may employ.

The third chapter discusses three novels of Margaret Atwood. What the writer attempts to convey is that as long as one remains silent, one becomes powerless.
Chapter four takes for study three novels of Shashi Deshpande. The circumstances of women's lives and the choicelessness that characterizes their situation are highlighted through a microscopic— but not unsympathetic examination of the familial and domestic, the so-called natural domain of women.

The fifth chapter explores the similarities and dissimilarities of the three writers taken for analysis. How their narrative techniques and stylistic strategies suit the theme is also mentioned.

The final chapter sums up the findings.