CHAPTER-4
FEMINIST FICTIONS
For the discussion of the chapter FEMINIST FICTIONS, Jaishree Misra’s The Ancient Promises (2000), Anita Desai’s Fasting, Feasting (1999) and Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies (2000) have been chosen for the study. But before going deep into the study of these novels, a brief introduction of feminist-centred texts has been given foregrounding valuable views offered by eminent feminist critics of the times. Feminism can mean different things to different people. Arshia Sattar in her thought-provoking article on the position of the feminist movement at present observes: “Feminism is no longer a single voice that speaks for all women irrespective of creed and colour. It is, rather, a ‘rainbow coalition’ of rights, desires, agendas, struggles, victories. Not all issues apply to all women, our battles need not be the same and, more and more, we tend to speak for ourselves rather than for all of us.”

We may term a novel ‘feminist’ for its analysis of gender as socially constructed—for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it. Feminist fiction is the most revolutionary movement in contemporary fiction—revolutionary both in that it is formally innovative and in that it helped to make a social revolution.

The repressive force that governs women’s predicament is patriarchy, which is defined by Adrienne Rich, as “The power of the fathers, a financial, social, political system in which men---by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labour---determine what part women shall or shall not play and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.” The concept of patriarchy expresses the fascist ideology that men are, and should be, superior to women. In India, patriarchy is constituted along a complex
ideological grid in which gender, race, caste, class, religion, colonialism and nationalism all have a determining role.

Family is a repressive force. Accordingly "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family" in which we find marked hierarchial structure, the man controls sexuality, labour or production, reproduction and mobility of women. The psycho-social conditioning within the family impart the lessons in gender discrimination and differential valorization of male/female experience.

The institution of marriage is the site of the most insidious form of sexual politics. Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault argue that "marriage works effectively as purdah ..... preventing her from achieving selfhood and individuality." Simon de Beauvoir in The Second Sex says, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered by society." In the sophisticated middle-class or upper middle-class ethos, what is foregrounded is the psychological repression created through a male supremacist ideology which consumes any possibility of mutual love and concern, corroding the woman's self-esteem and devouring her sense of identity and self-hood. Marriage thus becomes an institutionalized form of domination of women by men within the most personal of relationships.

Sexual stereotyping, which Kate Millett describes as "a most ingenious form of interior colonization" is another form of repression more subtle and pervasive than physical brutalization and economic deprivation. It is a psychological conditioning in which not the individual male but the norms worked out by a particular culture through the ages work as the defining, repressing force. The victims themselves participate in their own oppression, unconsciously internalizing the very code which
keeps them subjugated, trapped in an image of ideal perpetrated through centuries.

In India, what Betty Friedan termed as the feminine mystique—"the notion that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of her own femininity" has been raised to a status of religious belief in the popular imagination among the Indians who consider the mythical models of Sita, Damayanthi, Savithri and Draupadi as the embodiments of ideal womanhood. All this, according to Sudhir Kakar, adds up to "a formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood which, inspite of many changes in individual circumstances in the course of modernization, urbanization and education, still governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community."8

In the sphere of female sexuality, that is woman as a flesh and blood individual and her urges for sex, there have been restrictive taboos. A natural expression of a woman's sexual nature—within and outside the hallowed precincts of marriage, is summarily branded as immoral. Interesting variations on this theme are found in the texts being studied — ranging from rigid male disapproval of any pre-marital or extra-marital relationship to interiorization of the social mores which leads women to guiltily suppress any spontaneous expression of their sexuality. The Indian society maintains double standards favourable to men and biased to women. Fidelity and purity are the qualities patriarchal society habitually demands of the female, not the male.

Patriarchy which is the ruling social system almost all over the world ordains that woman's place is the home, her role as a wife and mother is quite often synonymous with her total human existence.
Feminist fiction contributed progressively to the definition of the feminine identity and aesthetics. Undoubtedly, the interaction of gender identity and national identity is an important aspect of postcolonial women's writings. The postcolonial women writers are faced with a dual situation—rejecting essential national metaphors of feminine identity and simultaneously constructing a collective national identity for women.

The emergence of feminist ideas and feminist politics depends on the understanding that, in all societies which divide the sexes into cultural, economic or political sphere, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consiously and collectively change their social place.

In the Indo-Anglian fiction, the crux of feminism is the Indian woman caught in the transition from tradition to modernity. The women in fiction reflect the writer's sense of bewilderment and vulnerability. On the one hand, they are portrayed as symbols of growth and fertility and on the other, they appear as symbols of withdrawal and regression. Obviously, these works do not offer solutions, they represent the crisis arising from the women's situation. Much of Indian women's writings have focussed on the man-woman relationship to describe, analyse and define the Indian woman's identity.

The Indo-Anglian fiction of 1960s and 1970s have opened new doors for women. Cultural, social and economic patterns have altered the nature of reality for women. The modern woman has been confronted by a feeling of guilt, frustration and pain as her innerself seeks to assert an identity and freedom through a career while her sense of responsibility makes her reconsider and compromise when issues like marriage and motherhood are
in question. The new found freedom of women has also affected the social lives and the psychological makeup of man. While man is not ready to face the onslaught of feminism and hand the power over to woman, the woman is at a loss trying to accommodate herself and yet assertively demand her due. The fiction of 60s and 70s has delineated the male character in a biased view and yet giving him a role to be analysed by the reader. The woman is not projected in an image to conform or in conflict with the world of men, but they have been projected in an attempt to be themselves.

In the fiction of both 80s and 90s the novelists have substantially demystified women and helped to construct the individuality of women even in their physical and sexual dimensions. Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Jaishree Mishra, Shashi Deshpande and Salman Rushdie, through their female protagonists, have an important message to convey: 'that female sexuality can be a liberating and empowering force for women’. They defy the stereotypical image of woman of wife, an age-old ideal of pativrata----a belief in the total submission to the will and welfare of the husband.

In the last 20 odd years clear critical approaches have come to define feminist criticism. The shifts from the poetics of suffering towards a poetics of individualistic empowerment is a noticeable trend in recent Indian women’s writing in English.

In an article on the need to decode gender consciousness, Sukrita Paul Kumar makes an important observation. She refers to Elain Showalter’s well-known differentiation of the feminist consciousness into three separate phases – “feminine phase of internalization, the feminist phase of revolt and the female phase of self-discovery.”9 "Feminine is the concept of womanhood, the traditional role of the woman, in relation to the patriarchal society where she is understood always in connection to the male."10 She has
no identity of her own but is venerated as a mother in relation to the father, as a sister in relation to her brother as a wife in relation to her husband and as a daughter in relation to her father. "In the Feminist phase or the winning of the vote, women are historically enabled to reject the accommodating postures of femininity and use literature to dramatize the ordeals of wronged womanhood." Feminist is the concept of the theory that they are fighting for their rights, trying to break from the ideological form. Feminist was a stance or tone of women libbers striving for the recognition of their rights and the fight for their identity as individuals in the society. "In the Female phase women reject both imitation and protest—two forms of dependency—and turn instead to female experience as the source of an autonomous art." Female is the concept of the theory that the woman is an individual, woman as herself, the movement towards the understanding of woman as a female, woman as power, woman as an erotic symbol of desire, that within herself she has power, the recognition of power gives her maturity.

But Elaine Showalter's well-known differentiation of 'feminist consciousness into three separate phases- the feminine phase of internalization, the feminist phase of revolt and the female phase of self-discovery' may not be applicable to the Indian context because in the words of Sukrita Paul Kumar "there is no such historical linearity; what is witnessed here is the simultaneous existence of all three. A long cultural history, diverse live mythology combined with a fairly long exposure to western education lend a strange complexity to the modes of existence here."

However it is significant to note that there are three categories of women as projected in Indian fiction. First, we have rural women, poor, hardworking and sincere, as portrayed by Kamala
Markandaya. The most representative of these is Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve*. In the second category, we meet educated, middle-class women who are married and are working as well like Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1989). And finally, we meet women of the upper strata society from the urban milieu. These are women who are socialites, have easy morals and do not mind extra-marital relations like Paro in Namita Gokhale’s novel *Paro* and the female protagonists of Nayantara Sahgal and Shobha De.

Feminism in Indian literature is a by-product of the western feminist movement but it got sustenance from various native sources such as Indian freedom movement, independence, spread of education, employment opportunities and laws for women’s rights. The indiscriminate application of western theories may be misleading because cultural contexts should not be overlooked and the application of western critical models and paradigms for a literature having its roots in a different native tradition is neither judicious nor desirable. This is necessary because our history, our ethos, our cultural and social milieu have been different. The vastly different scenario in India encompasses contradictions of a kind undreamed of in the mainstream (western) feminist philosophy. Factors such as caste, class, economic deprivation, sectarian fragmentedness, overpopulation, fundamentalism, superstition and Hinduism are necessary for the appreciation of the Indian society. The western individualism may prove impractical in the Indian context because the collective unconscious still operates on the principles of faith and dogma. John Oliver Perry recognizes the unsuitability of an arbitrary application of the essential values of a European-based culture in Indian context which is entirely different and composed of various and mixed cultural value systems. What he says about
Indian poetry criticism may well be applied to the feminist parameters as well. R.K. Gupta is also of the same opinion. He says, "Not having graduated to the militancy of the West, literary feminism in India has also largely escaped the excesses of the Western model—its reductionism and at times simplistic view of reality which turn it into what one might call 'vulgar' Marxism, and 'vulgar' feminism."¹⁴

However there is every need of studying the Feminist Fiction for according to the historian Linda Gordon, feminism is "an analysis of women's subordination for the purpose of figuring out how to change it".¹⁵ In India the first generation of Indian writers in English—Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao missed out a great opportunity. A wealth of material in the form of the freedom struggle and the women involved in it seemed to have escaped their notice. Anand, obviously, had been deeply involved in championing the cause of the underdog in society to pay attention to the travails of women. His protagonist Gauri in The Old Woman and the Cow (1960), however, is a fine example of his idea of women's emancipation. However, at least some of Narayan's woman characters of everyday life try to assert themselves in their desire for a career or their need for physical gratification. If he has portrayed the meek and submissive woman in Margayya's wife in his novel The Financial Expert (1952) and Savitri in The Dark Room (1938), he has also created vibrant and sometimes radical woman characters like Daisy and Rosie in his novels, The Painter of Signs and The Guide (1958) respectively. These heroines, however, are not role models whose experiences are meant to be emulated. Talking of Daisy, Shanta Krishnaswamy says: "She is unique in that she is able to cast aside all culturally imposed feelings of guilt and shame on womanhood and sex. Narayan, however, in depriving her of personal fulfilment in marriage and domesticity, warns us about the excesses of
rampant feminism which would lead to a destructive or deathlike androgynous blurring of the two sexes.”

The women in Raja Rao’s fiction are reduced to mere automatons. His women characters aspire for more and end up feeling bitter like Saroja or settle for passivity like Savitri, dutifully playing her role as the wife of a government officer in *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960). The women in his novels are victims of domestic injustice and tyrannical tradition, but he proposes no solution to their dilemma. This may be because as Shanta Krishnaswamy says, “The culture he springs from and which he has imbibed so thoroughly in his entire being, precludes Rao from resolving the woman’s issue in concrete terms.” In Bhabani Bhattacharya’s novels, woman is the epitome of all virtues and plays an important role in bringing about social reform. But inspite of being pure and noble, she is victimised. Kajoli in *So Many Hungers* (1947) reveals an unconquerable spirit in the face of endless suffering and misery. The city-bred Mohini in *Music for Mohini* (1952) transforms the village, Behula, symbolic of a country steeped in superstition and obsolete customs, into a model village with the help of her progressive-minded husband. However, it may be said that “the picture he paints of the woman is idyllic, tender and charming, sometimes even too optimistic to be realistic.”

Some women writers on the other hand are more honest in their portrayal of women in their novels. Kamala Markandaya very successfully portrays the double pulls that the Indian woman is subjected to—between her desire to assert her dignity as human being and her duty as a daughter, wife and mother. She also points out how the distortions in the economic and social order affect women more than men. Through her protagonist Rukmini in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), she proves that within the traditional
role, she can accommodate her other roles as a human being, and not through alienation and self-laceration, but through expansion and communion a deeper self-knowledge can be attained. Another example is Sarojini in *A Silence of Desire* (1961), who is determined to overcome her problems in her own way. It is perhaps only in *Possession* (1963) that Markandaya transforms the traditionally suppressed woman into a domineering and tyrannical possessor. In most of her other novels, however, the woman is a source of dormant strength and shores up the male protagonist from collapse.

Anita Desai explores the disturbed psyche of the modern Indian women. Her protagonists are usually highly intelligent and sensitive women who end up exhausted on the verge of mental crises in their attempt to a home and children and find emotional fulfilment. They usually resort to drastic steps when their predicament reaches a climax. Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is a highly sensitive, caring woman bound in marriage to the practical, down-to-earth lawyer Gautama, who remains totally oblivious to his wife's emotional needs. Physically and emotionally, her body and mind crave for attention, the denial of which leads to dire consequences with Gautama being pushed to his death by her.

*Where Shall We Go This Summer?*(1975) describes the gnawing void in the life of Sita by reviewing her life as a woman, wife and mother. It is an intense story of a middle-aged woman torn between her desire to abandon her comfortable, albeit boring existence and the realisation that the bonds that bind her to it cannot easily be broken. Desai, in all her novels, presents the predicament of sensitive women characters, who find it very difficult to adjust themselves in the present mechanical and urbanised set
up. She, however, makes no attempt to find solutions to their various problems.

Nayantara Sahgal has dealt with problems concerning women which went on to become major issues in the feminist movement. She writes sensitively of the way women suffer owing to sexist bias in a patriarchal set-up. In *The Day in Shadow*, she gives an account of the suffering of a woman in Indian society when she chooses to divorce her husband. The protagonist, Simrit, feels diminished and humiliated not only by the stigma attached to divorce but also by the cruel consent terms of the divorce which compel her to pay a staggering amount of tax on an income she cannot even use. The novel, however, cannot be labelled feminist because Simrit, in spite of her liberated way of thinking, does not have the courage to stand without male support. If it is not her husband Som, it is Raj, who she later depends on to solve her problems. In *Rich Like Us*, Ram inflicts great emotional violence on both his wives Mona and Rose. Though both the women are aware of the injustice done to them, habit makes them willing victims of exploitation and injustice. Sahgal works out her feminist ideas in a limited world. She makes a close and sensitive study of the sufferings of the women of this class and shows how they refuse to remain chained to their subordinate roles and how they defy traditional norms in search of emancipation.

Nayantara Sahgal displayed in her work a concern for the domestically confined traditional status of Indian women. She tried to portray, even if on the surface, the restlessness, the percipiently accumulated ire, personal screams and simmering revolt in the minds of the women characters she tried to create. Maya in *A Time to be Happy* (1957) refuses to carry the corpse of a relationship on her shoulder of an unsuccessful
marriage and breaks into an illicit love affair. Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* (1965) hates the idea of bearing with a wrong marriage, whereas Uma with her over-sexed libido gives vent to her disapproval of the institutionalized marriage system. At the thematic level, the post-1947 novels of Nayantara Sahgal show a pointed concern for the cabinned, cribbed Indian women compulsively spread-eagled on the floor-board of a labelled marriage, and no one cares if it succeeds or fails. We get a hint how these hapless women inwardly bled. A woman herself, the novelist wanted to support a forward step towards liberated world even if by means of an affair beyond wedlock. She scored by bringing to the foreground the inner reality of an individual belonging to the female species, seeking to be free in Free India, from the cobwebs and tentacles of false social taboos, and desiring to tentatively tear away from her household role, in order to search for a sexual freedom, self-respect and a satisfactory inner realization.

Shashi Deshpande shows concern with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her protagonists are modern educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their sufferings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle. She however maintains that her novels are not intended to be read as feminist texts. This is evident from what she says: “A woman who writes of women’s experiences often brings in some aspects of those experiences that have angered her, roused her strong feelings. I don’t see why this has to be labelled feminist fiction.”

Urmila in Shashi Deshpande’s novel *The Binding Vine* (1992), is the most rebellious protagonist. She works as a lecturer in a college and is thus financially independent. Self-reliant and highly self-confident, she has an
identity different from that of her husband. She neither wants to live on her husband’s money nor submit before him. She takes up cudgels on behalf of Kalpana, the rape victim. This perhaps prompts Indira Nityanandam to comment thus: “The hope for Indian women lies in the happy fact that though there are Miras and Kalpanas and Shakutais, we also have our Urmilas.”Talking to an interviewer, Deshpande says: “having a life outside the family is very important for women.” Accordingly all her woman protagonists—Indu, Saru, Jaya and Urmila—succeed in constructing a self through individual professional achievement. They also manage to come to terms with themselves by redefining their relationships, accepting at the same time social constraints and emerge as fully developed individuals doing justice in their domestic as well as professional fields.

Gita Hariharan’s novel The Thousand Faces of Night(1992) presents Devi, who passes through a lacerating process of identity crisis and emerges victorious. Married to Mahesh, a Regional Manager in a multi-national company, she tries to fit herself in the role of a wife and daughter-in-law just as his mother Sita did some years ago. But, while Sita has succeeded in reaching her goal of wifehood with a dogged determination and relentless self-discipline leading her husband more like a ‘conductor’ than ‘an accompanist’, Devi shrinks into being a cipher. The vast empty, ancestral house surrounded by a large wild garden becomes a focal point of her existence. Devi pines that her heart remains untouched and not even sought for by her husband. Whenever she expresses a wish to do something she really desires, like learning Sanskrit or taking up a job, or atleast learning to play cards, she faces Mahesh’s disapproval. She feels that her education has not prepared her for “the vast, yawning chapters of her womanhood.” As an act of rebellion, Devi turns herself to the “blissful numbers” of Gopal’s music, which open a way out of the ‘lush prison’ around her. Banishing the
images of a virtuous sacrificial wife Sati, Parvati, Haimavathi and Gowri forever from her mind, Devi rejoices in imagining herself a Durga or a Kali, ready to avenge the assault on her inner case. Condemning Mahesh to a lonely life without wife or child for trampling on the marital vows, Devi goes away with Gopal hoping to find her own emotional voice through music, which in itself is “a non-conformist mode of spiritual expression.” Soon she realizes that Gopal is also a beautiful despot, who cannot see beyond either the passion of a raga or the various masks of her discrete lives. She returns home to join her mother with an offer of love. She subverts the prevalent dictates of the patriarchal system and seeks to re-empower herself by giving a new meaning to the mother-daughter relationship. It is in this relationship to her mother that Devi hopes to find anchorage, an identity for herself. She walks towards her mother to learn about her womanness. Instead of sinking into a despairing isolation, Devi has resolved to rewrite female-female-bond. The past is erased and the present becomes an experience to build a future. In place of a poetics of victimization, a poetics of empowerment is created by Gita Harihan through the character of Devi.

Shobha De's women insist on to obtain social acceptance for a free expression of their libido. They think, talk and act sex crossing over the patriarchal phallocentric sexual politics and project their passions on to others as a female power play in order to deconstruct the male ego. They want to destroy the existing malist social structure by resorting to radical lesbianism and uninhibited sexual play with men. They use marriage as merely an insurance against social aloofness and sex as calculated strategy to gain social and financial benefits. The new woman shatters the patriarchal hegemony in the Indian society fed on well-known injunctions of the Manusmruthi. They symbolize the over-powering materialism and lack of
spirituality, that characterised modern age”. Asha Rani, in *Starry Nights* (1991), after a long struggle of sexual exploitation, grows into a prominent film artist of great wealth and finally secures existence, belongingness and identity in the world. Instead of escaping from life’s responsibilities for yielding to the problems, Aasha chooses the right way of struggling and surviving through it. Shoba De also offers no solutions to the problems of the Indian women in the androcentric society. The path of liberation is fraught with frustration, exploitation, mental break down and disasters.

Manju Kapoor in her novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) presents the protagonist Virmati as the budding of a “New Woman” who does not want ‘to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed’. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce a woman towards domesticity, she asserts her individuality and aspires for self-reliance and social emancipation through education. She is not a silent rebel but is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. She finds intellectual fulfillment in her marriage to the already-married professor and drives herself locked up in the prison of domesticity. However, she clings to the married life with stoic resignation bearing all the insults from Ganga, the first wife of the professor. Though Virmati is symbolic of a new woman she has not experienced real freedom as pointed out by Vandita Mishra in *The Pioneer*: “Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as she breaks, free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the Professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows.”²¹ Rita Felski opines that *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist Bildungsroman—the growth of a female adolescent into maturity, arriving at a sense of identity, having experienced
the roles of class, religion, education, family, patriarchy and romance in the society. "It is only after the experience of marriage that the heroine is able to see through and reject the seductive myth of romance as the key to female self-identity so that the journey to self-discovery frequently occurs at a relatively later stage in the protagonist's life."  

Shashi Deshpande's heroine in the novel *A Matter of Time* (1996) is Sumi who experiences the indifference of her husband who walks out of family seeking ephemeral quality of happiness and to free himself of all bondage. She, having been aware of the bliss of human relationships, accepts the harsh facts boldly and maintains that "Gopal is going his way and I have to go mine" (161). She asserts "I just want to get on with my life" (61). She looks after her daughters with great concern and in the trial of getting for an employment she meets with an accident and dies.

Ammu in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997) is rebellious and defiant and defies the norms of patriarchy and dares to love and mate outside the bounds of race and class. Breaking the bonds of marriage with a male chauvinist husband and not minding the honour of the family, she trangresses the rule of ancient love laws and the role of submissive wife. Love with untouchable Velutha seems to sublimate the latent wrath of Ammu for the societal conditioning. In Indian culture, a woman is expected to be totally faithful to a man---alive or dead. But Arundhati Roy has forcefully raised the question of "woman's needs".

Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963 holds the view:

For a woman, as for a man, the need for self-fulfilment---autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality, self-actualisation------is as important as the sexual need,
with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Women’s sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfil her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfilment ignores.  

Now some important novels of the nineties have been discussed with reference to feminism. At first, Jaishree Misra’s *Ancient Promises* is studied. The change in the attitude of women towards marriage is a big step forward. Shobha De put it thus:

“The terms underlying marriage have been redefined in recent times. With some amount of economic freedom, women changed the basic rules some what. If a self-sufficient woman with a roof over her chooses to marry, it is because she wants to share her life with some one in the fullest sense, not because she is looking for a life-long meal ticket. Divorce, too, has got to be viewed in this light.”

Jaishree Misra’s novel *Ancient Promises* (2000) begins with the following words uttered by the protagonist Janu.

“My marriage ended today. Without the lighting of oil lamps and beating of temple drums, but in a little cramped divorce court....that it had been my fate.”

The very beginning of the novel *Ancient Promises* suggests feminist perspective of the novel. Loveless/traditional/ conventional/ forced arranged marriage ends in divorce reflecting the fate of the woman, Janaki(Janu). It is definitely a sign of the times that our stories today begin with marital breakdown only to find new alternative points of equilibrium.
An adolescent romance is squashed by parental autocracy and we find ingredients such as estrangement, forced conventional marriage of the Indian middle class, boredom, disaffection with the in-laws, a passion simmering beneath the quotidian motions of life and the final leap of the shackled woman into the arms of freedom and love.

Janu was a proper middle-class Kerala girl born and brought up in the easy comopolitan ambience of Delhi and with prejudices against northy-southy divide. Even as a school girl of adolescence she fell in romance with a Punjabi boy called Arjun. But Arjun was definitely the wrong sex as he was just her friend in her parent’s eyes. Her dad would shout at love scenes and stories. Besides, Arjun was the wrong age (too young), wrong community (Punjabi, not Malayali) and came at the wrong time (Janu was too young). However, Janu and Arjun savour a few stolen moments in Chor Minar, a private rendezvous point. Janu’s mother happens to be a role model of traditional moorings of patriarchy and naturally worries about her daughter’s love and things like pregnancies for “the reputation of families were carried on their daughters” (AP-46). Meanwhile, Janu was offered a place at Miranda House for a B.A. in English and Arjun was offered a place at Hull University, England.

In the Indian male-dominated society, women have no say in the matters of love, marriage, freedom and education. At the prospect of arranged marriage Janu says- “I don’t feel ready for marriage- I am looking forward to going to college”, (AP-54) but it is totally rejected by her mother who says- “Why? So that you can waste more of your father’s hard-earned money pretending to go to college while roaming all round town with boys?” (AP-54)
The world seemed to be conspiring against her love for Arjun. Soon Janu is pushed into forced arranged marriage at 18 with Suresh, a successful highly-placed business official of the Maraar family of Vallappad Town of Kerala state. Even as a bride, her heart began its familiar drum-beat of the discipline of don't's:

"Don't trip don't go and ruin it all, Don't cry don't say I should not be here at all." (AP-73)

Janu begins experiencing sufferings and humiliations in the hands of matriarchal mother-in-law. When Janu says “Yes, please” to the query of having tea from her mother-in-law, the latter rattles vehemently: “Look, you're not in Delhi any more. Like it or not, you now live in Kerala, so I suggest you drop all fashionable pleases and Thank yous. Here we don’t believe in unnecessary style” (AP-80)

Janu was better off pretending to be a bashful bride. She had a “Copper-T” fitted so as not to conceive as she had to pursue her B.A. course. Love didn’t seem to play much of a part in her newly-married life. She was no nearer either to feeling loved or to wanting to love. It was getting clearer that it was the clan of Maraars that she had married, not Suresh. Suresh had not been unkind, but had not seemed to want to spend much time alone with her. So she had to spend her time with her in-laws. Usually, in the tradition-bound Indian society intimacy between husband and wife is controlled so that the greater interests of the family could be prioritized. Sudhir Kakar says, “customs, traditions and the interests of the extended family demand that in the realignment of roles and relationships created by marriage, the roles of husband and wife, at least in the beginning, be relegated to relative inconsequence and utter inconspicuousness.” The resultant effect is the development of emotional vacuum in Janu.
“All brides in India cried and then stayed and got loved” (AP-94). This saying proves itself rather deceptive in the life of Janu. Nagging, insulting with irony of words, making fun of Janu’s relatives – have become the way of the Maraars. Very often, Suresh followed the art of silent escape on the pretext of work and business tours. He did not mind the likes and dislikes of Janu. She felt a strange sense of alienation. She wished to complete her B.A. and get a job which would keep her busy. But instead she inclined towards motherhood thinking that her problems would be solved as the mother of a son. She reflects:

“...............I’d receive a sort of instant double promotion.....elevated to the position of Good Mother and Good Daughter-in-Law. And spin out the rest of my days basking in a kind of reflected glory and blissful motherhood.” (AP-113)

She pulled her copper-T out and soon got pregnant. Even then what wonders her most was the avuncular half-amused irritated attitude of her husband towards marriage. However she delivered a female baby. Janu thought that “She was going to be my Transformer of Bad things to Good,” “My potential best friend” and “Hope for the future.” (AP-117)

The Indian society suffers from patriarchal prejudices. If a son is born, woman as mother is seen and treated rather comfortably. But so unfortunate and bleak is the crisis of Janu that Riya the newly-born baby happens to be mentally handicapped with speech disabilities. Suresh and the Maraars remained untouched by Riya’s apparent problems. Janu, totally vexed with the domestic situation, decided that she had “neither to struggle for their approval anymore” (AP-132). She breeds avenging attitude towards
her in-laws and decides to become a thorn in the Maraar side. Breeding subdued anger within herself, she enjoyed a sort of mother-hood happiness in Riya’s company. To escape the cramping atmosphere of the in-law’s household, she not only admitted Riya in a special school but also did some hours of voluntary work in it. She confirmed that her husband Suresh, the only one to whom she could reveal her feelings, could neither bring her solace nor find out a way out for the crisis of her life and that of Riya’s. Janu was sure by now that the unhappiness of her marriage would continue. After completing her M.A. she wanted to do M.A. in Special Education in Arizona University of America. She wanted to take away Riya with her for better speech therapy and occupational therapy. Meanwhile, she meets her teenage lover Arjun at Leena’s house in Delhi. Again she begins her private rendezvous with him all the while relishing freshly their long-ago adolescent unions. Janu finds love in Arjun. She looked for traces of guilt infusing that cocktail of pleasure and pain, but could not find any. Perhaps, ‘because of some promise so ancient’, she had been inured to guilt. Her marriage to Suresh felt a whole life time away even though technically it wasn’t. She thought of asking Suresh for a divorce as Arjun’s occupation of her future had emboldened her with a sense of security and love and mutual understanding and emotional compatibility. On Arjun’s request she agreed to go to England instead of America. She could not betray her lover Arjun for he “was waiting for me, in that promised future somewhere. He had made no demands, extracted no pledges.......”(AP-210). On disclosing the plan of her divorce to her family members, her mother took to bed with silent grief. Strong-spirited grandmother thought Janu had gone mad. However Janu asks for a divorce for she says to Arjun “We’re just different. We seem to need different things from life”(AP-210). Here it is to be noted that Suresh simply runs after material prosperity at the cost of marital bliss creating a large vaccum of the emotional in Janu. Janu on the other side
needs marital bliss, care, concern and affection which she is deprived by Suresh. Finally Janu was so daring and frank in her opinion that she revealed to Suresh about her premarital love with Arjun and her intention of starting a new life with him on a clean slate. Suresh got silent. He is a smiling villain. The Maraars, in collusion with Dr. Sasi, enacted the play of showing Janu as mad to the world. Her thought of scholarships for going abroad with Riya has been stamped as madness. She has been hospitalised and given heavy doses of sedation. It is Janu’s mother who makes Janu recover to normalcy with her ‘mother’s sympathy.’ Suresh has successfully nurtured the chauvinistic idea among his household members that ‘Family honour would be better served by a daughter-in-law who went mad than one who had run away with another man’ (AP-229).

Janu’s mother, having realised the Maraar’s conspiracy, outrightly tells Suresh to lose the trial of regaining Janu into their fold and further advances the final solution of divorce—a divorce not only from Suresh but from the whole family of Maraars. On the ground of marital incompatibility the much aspired divorce is granted. Delhi girl with her Delhi idea of arrogance wins the freedom struggle. Janu asserts herself that “What needed was a healthy dose of arrogance, actually!” (AP-250). Suresh resorts to avenge Janu’s divorce by taking away with him his daughter Riya, saying that he can’t have a prostitute bring up his daughter.

Softening herself with all the milky kindness of filial and motherly feelings and responsibilities and consoling herself with the truth that “Bonds that are forged even before the first breath is taken cannot be broken with the passage of a few thousand miles, especially when ancient promises wait unredeemed” (AP-263). She left for England. Again she comes back to India, gets her divorce legally, takes her child Riya and again flees to
England to live a life of love, affection and freedom with Arjun. “Tomorrow, the next chapter would begin” (AP-305) -- life with Arjun on a clean slate begins.

Thus, *Ancient Promises* is not only about the pain of a life that goes awry but a story of conviction which Mishra feels will do away with prejudices. Even in literate Kerala where matriarchal order is stronger, there are a lot of prejudices about what women should be. Woman’s life is not roses all the way. Janu’s long and traumatic journey of self-discovery from the world of her husband’s families’ indifference and loveless marriage to that of love, concern and dignity in the hands of Arjun makes her a feminist champion and it makes her stronger and eventually brings her peace and a career which she always cherishes. Suresh had never helped to create a life for her, a career which she wanted for all along. Her quest for identity, freedom, personal happiness, career and marital bliss was not allowed to get materialised in the house of Maraars. Through love with Arjun, she could fulfill all her ambitions. “When you get married you only get a half man, the other half you have to make” (AP-236). These words of Janu’s mother become true as Janu made herself complete not in the company of the half-man of her husband but in the full-man of her lover Arjun who demanded no conditions.

Feminism is by no means a monolithic term. If we seek a common strand in a number of its varieties, it is the critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking which aims at the domination of the male and the subordination of the female. This patriarchal ideology teaches women to internalize this concept in the process of their socialization. It brings to fore the concept of gender which is man-made.
Secondly, Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* (1999)\(^{27}\) is discussed. The woman-protagonist, Uma experiences the patriarchal societal conditioning and gender discrimination. According to Gerald Kaufman, Chairman of the Booker Prize 1999, *Fasting, Feasting* is “a most beautiful novel, very moving, very funny, terribly illustrative of what happens to women in different parts of the world.”\(^{28}\) Down the ages, in the Indian social system, woman is shown as the discriminated sex and has been relegated to an inferior status. Indian culture and people may praise the woman as an incarnation of power (Shakti) and knowledge (Gyan) or Saraswati, but in reality she has been oppressed by the male domination. Woman came to be held as a silent and submissive child-bearing machine. It is not only male chauvinism that has caused havoc but also female reluctance to face the challenges. Besides female apathy is responsible for this disparity. While Janu in *Ancient Promises* revolts against patriarchy and asserts herself, Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* remains meek and obedient.

Showalter views that Anita Desai’s view of life borders on gynocriticism. In a general reading, the novel *Fasting, Feasting* seems to be the story of a lawyer’s family but when read in particular, it is the story that moves around the eldest daughter, Uma, unattractive, dull and epileptic. The lawyer’s family consists of husband (Papa), wife (Mama), two daughters named Uma and Aruna and a son named Arun. The unnamed father, Mama, is a typical middle-class Indian patriarch who rules over the family. No one is supposed to question him or his decisions. His wife, who is not named but simply called Mama, is like a loyal Indian woman, meekly following her husband. Mama and Papa lose their respective identities becoming one merged character. They together represent the inherited power of both patriarchal and hierarchal societal conditioning. In Althusser’s terminology, “the ‘Institutional state Apparatus’ is most apparent in the smallest unit of
society, the family. Mama should fully integrate into the systems of Papa. Sisters should submit to the unexpressed needs of their brothers. Here Mama is totally buried and moulded into the role model of patriarchal wife. Matriarchy submits to patriarchy. Mama becomes Papa and vice-versa representing female apathy and male dominance respectively. The desire for a son keeps troubling the patriarch. Mama’s thought of aborting her third pregnancy is negated outrightly by the patriarchal Papa who wishes to have a son. The very thought that women have a right over their bodies is considered preposterous in a male-dominated society. This is what Kate Millet calls sexual politics “whereby one group of persons is controlled by another.” In a male-dominated society women must always be prepared to allow their husbands to use their bodies for whatever purpose they desire. The perfect oneness of MamaPapa is disturbed when Mama refuses to oblige for abortion. But the tyrant Papa wins again:

“Mama was frantic to have it terminated. She had never been more ill, and would go through hell fire, she wept, just to stop the nausea that tormented her. But Papa set his jaws. They had two daughters, yes, quite grown-up as anyone could see, but there was no son. Would any man give up the chance of a son?”(FF-16)

The irony of the fact is that woman forgets all her humiliation she was subjected to. After the birth of a son, Arun, Mama again becomes one with Papa. Forgiving the patriarch she joins him in his elation. Anita Desai mocks the favourite Indian traditional belief that a family must have a son. The scriptural belief that only the son can give deliverance to the parents is the reason for obsession with a male baby. It is to some extent true that even abroad, the son is much sought after, for he will continue the family.
After the birth of Arun, Uma's position becomes worse. Her mother feels that Uma's going to school is waste of time and money. Poor Uma, in her childlike innocence and ignorance of the patriarchal power politics, fails to understand why she has been deprived of school despite her appeals. Mama's attitude is narrow and parochial. She unequivocally supports male superiority and female inferiority. Woman is woman's biggest enemy. Uma is strictly confined to the domestic cell only. She was almost treated a disgrace to the family. She remained like a catalyst whose presence is never noticed, never appreciated and yet whose absence may make all the difference for she is the only one who always pays attention to the calls of MamaPapa. She is expected to be an obedient daughter, an affectionate and motherly sister and everything but not an individual. As a young girl, she has her dreams, her desires of education, but when her dreams come in conflict with the comforts of her parents, she has sacrificed her life. Anita Desai, at the beginning itself, presents the contrast between the colourful, happy life of Uma's parents and her own dull and dreary existence.

The Atharva Veda says: The birth of a girl, grant it elsewhere, here grant a boy.”\(^{31}\) If this could be the prayer of an age when the condition of women was relatively better and were granted an almost equal status in the society, we may well imagine the poor lot of women in other ages. Even educated parents show gender discrimination when it comes to choosing between daughter and son. Girls are not only less preferred but also they are more burdened with responsibilities. Much like Virmati in Manin Kapoor’s Difficult Daughters, Uma is forced to nurse her kid brother, Arun, even as a school student of 8\(^{th}\) standard. Anita Desai shows how parental apathy scars the daughters permanently. It is natural that parental craving and caring for sons hurt daughters as it makes obvious the truth of their accidental birth. Had the parents been given the chance they would never have liked to face
the ignominy of giving birth to a female child. It is their joy over the birth of a son that inflicts incurable deeper wounds in daughters. PapaMama’s elation and pride of having a son is illustrative of this fact.

It is maintained by feminists that women are not mentally different since birth. The female child is biologically different but the parochial and patriarchal society conditions it into being a woman. Simon de Beauvoir says, “One is not born but rather becomes a woman ........No biological, psychological, economic determines the figure that human female presents in the society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.” Uma becomes a victim of a girl-child who submits herself to the norms of the male-dominated setup. The male superiority complex and the female tyranny which oppress her own kind are to be blamed. Uma is reduced to the status of domestic help. All this because Mama has to fulfill her role of ‘Papa’s helpmeet’, his consort as “After all Uma and Aruna and the Aya were here to stand in for arun’s cot”(FF-31). No efforts are spared to cow down the already docile spirit of Uma.

In India, woman is considered to be an: “embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humility, faith and knowledge.” MamaPapa are deaf and blind to the needs of Uma who is forgotten both as a soul and a body. Their nagging always keep her occupied with one or the other work and prevent her from thinking/cherishing of her own dreams and aspirations.

“Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” Twice MamaPapa tried to get Uma married, first with the Goyal family with whom the marriage engagement got broken off as they had expected more dowry. Meanwhile there came many marriage proposals for the younger beautiful sister, Aruna. But Uma’s unmarried state was not only an
embarassment but also an obstruction to Aruna's prospect of marriage. Sense of fear and insecurity prevails on the mind of Uma. Even her family could not show any sympathy rather it appeared stifling and caused her feel sense of emptiness.

"The tightly knit fabric of family that had seemed so stifling and confining now revealed holes and gaps that were frightening—perhaps the fabric would not hold, perhaps it would not protect after all." (FF-386)

However, after a lot of trials, Uma was disposed in marriage with a considerable dowry to an already-married but widowed man without any issue, a Meerut-based salesman in a Pharmaceutical industry. He looked at Uma glumly and without much interest. One day, the devastating bad news duped Uma. She had learnt that her husband Harish was married already, had a wife and four children in Meerut and he needed another dowry which had led him to marry again. Thank God, he had not touched Uma. Her marriage has come to be dismal and now she is treated like a servant. "Having cost her parents two dowries, without a marriage to show in return, Uma was considered ill-fated by all and no more attempts were made to marry her off" (FF-96). MamaPapa accepts her as the last burden and so does Uma. Though she never rebels and complains she is certainly not an unfeeling brute. Having had no solace from her family members, she silently suffers. Mama looks upon her as a butt of laughter. Aruna being married off into a respectable family and Arun having gone to America for higher education, Uma lives a life of desolation and serves her MamaPapa untiringly and becomes the object of their barbs. Recollections of childhood memories lead her into the world of ecstasy leaving behind the present dreary, aimless existence.
The dreams of a free existence are not unimagined for Uma. Moyna Joshi, the youngest daughter of Mrs. Joshi, was pursuing a career in New Delhi. This fact inspires and incites in Uma an aspiration to make a career, to leave home and to soar high.

“A career. Leaving home. Living alone. These troubling, secret possibilities now entered Uma’s mind.... whenever Uma was idle. They were like seeds dropped on the stony, arid land that Uma inhabited. Sometimes miraculously, they sprouted forth the idea---run away, escape.” (FF-131)

The romantic poems of pleasure by Ella Wheeler Wilcox open up magic casements before Uma. She reads:

You are wasting your life in that dull, dark room......................you are far too bright to be hidden from sight, come fly with me, darling----fly.”(FF-135)

Though she feels courageous to rebel, her timid soul does not support her rebellion. At the most she registers her anger in silence through an angry look when Mama orders. However, there lingers in the deep recesses of Uma the seeds of craving for freedom, happiness and career. Dr. Dutt, the family doctor, offers Uma the job of supervising the nurses’ dormitory which she runs. Papa, a typical middle-class Indian patriarch, believes it is below dignity for a daughter to work, howsoever decent the job may be. He looks upon working of women as if it was a stigma. Career/job is an undesirable intrusion in the male world. In the patriarchal system, the woman’s wish does not exist. She is treated as a non-entity. Her existence has been reduced to an unfed servant who has so many duties but no rights. It is
supposed that all family members must ally their joys with the happiness of the patriarch. Since the totalitarian expertise is destroying the identity, the very soul of human being is now a recognized phenomenon, it should not shock us to see that women steam-rolled and flattened into the family roles, tend to be dehumanized insofar as they are invariably stripped of all the individualizing traits of a sentient being. Shouri Daniels describes the "female incarnate" thus: "She has no shape or form. She is everything or nothing. She is fluid. Pour her into any mould and she takes it.... ideals and principles lie outside her nature." As she is the void, she becomes a being only in so far as she can be regarded as an object in relation to man who is of course the subject.

Another glaring example of gender suffering is that of Anamika, the lovely, intelligent and modest cousin of Uma, who presents an example of sheer sacrifice at the altar of male-domination and female apathy. She wins a scholarship to Oxford, which her parents use it as a trump card for securing a highly-educated and well-placed husband. But the Oxford card brings about her nemesis. The husband does not care a straw for Anamika. He has a mother-fixation and has no time or attention to waste on his wife. Anamika is often beaten by her mother-in-law even in the presence of the dumb observer-husband. With reference to the predicament of Anamika, Kate Millett's words are to be taken into account. According to Kate Millett "marriage is a game of power politics." Marriage gives men licence to show power. That is the reason they marry. Anamika, Oxford admission card-holder, has become just an instrument for her husband "to enhance his superiority to other men"(FF-70). There there is no love for her as he does not waste before impregnating her as a means to crush her even more. When the pregnancy ends in abortion she is beaten by mother-in-law.
Anamika’s sad saga is a strong statement against the customs and rules of an apathetic society.

Uma, in her innocence, hopes that Anamika would be sent back to her mother and all will be well. But Mama reproaches Uma: “You are so silly, Uma. How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?” (FF-71). It is the fear of society that ends the lives of many unfortunate women in India. The great tragedy comes to women. It results out of woman’s unwillingness to act, to dare, to rebel and to fight it out till the end. Uma’s family is informed that Anamika has died of burning. It may be a cold murder at the hands of her husband and mother-in-law. Her in-laws project Anamika’s tragedy as a suicide. The irony is that the unfeeling society kills the feeling beings and there is silence everywhere without any uproar of protest. Anita Desai turns rather satirical in her tone:

What the husband said was that he has been away on a business trip and returned only that afternoon on hearing the news. What the mother-in-law said was that she always had Anamika sleep beside her, in her room, as if she were a daughter, her own child. Only that night Anamika had insisted on sleeping in her own room. She must have planned it, plotted it all. What Anamika’s family said was that it was fate, God had willed it and it was ‘Anamika’s destiny’. What Uma said was nothing.” (FF-151)

A promising life, Anamika, is reduced to ashes. Woman’s inertia makes nothing. Female gender is oppressed and discriminated. The blame goes to the false sense of male ego and perverted socio-ethical values and practices. The novel *Fasting, Feasting* is an indictment against men who
trade in marriages as a means of increasing money and power. Woman's voice for freedom and emancipation constitute the stuff of the novel.

Mira-masi, a distant relative of Mama, is the prototype of an Indian widow. In her widowhood she had developed "an unsettling habit of travelling all over the country, quite alone, safe in her widow's white garments, visiting one place of pilgrimage after another like an obsessed tourist of the spirit" (FF-38). Social gossip and religion are the vocation of Mira-masi. Despite her lonely widowhood, she does not lose her individuality all the same. She is a devout Hindu for whom life means simply fasting and observing rituals. She tells Uma about mythical legendaries such as Mira Bai, Satya Harischandra and Lord Srikrishna. She lends mysterious aura to the novel. Her religious hysterics have Uma overawed. Uma seeks respite from the tense atmosphere of home in the sweet company of Mira-masi. Mira-masi, through her story telling of ancient myths of Hinduism, opens the eyes of Uma towards the domain of thoughts of contentment and inner peace. Uma "felt that here was some one who would pierce through her dreary outer world into an inner world, tantalising in its colour and romance. If only it could replace this, Uma thought hungrily" (FF-40). An Indian belief goes thus: "When in trouble turn to religion. A little bit of ritual practice will see you through an ordinary day in an average family. But if you are a modestly endowed widow or a young woman without matrimonial prospects, you better find your favourite deity and a congenial ashram. As women develop your culinary skills so you are useful to your hosts."

Uma and Mira-masi fit in the above said belief. Uma helps MamaPapa and his/her hosts with her culinary skills and Mira-masi, a widow, fits into religious and ritualistic life. Mira-Masi wishes to channelise
Uma's pointless predicament into nurturing divine sense. She infuses into Uma godliness by her spiritual words: "You are the Lord's child. The Lord has chosen you. You bear his mark" (FF-59). Thus Uma in Fasting, Feasting becomes a victim of the benevolent tyranny of an authoritative father (in the name of Mama Papa) who destroys his daughter's potentiality of growth to feed his own sense of power. It is as if Uma were a piece of clay to be moulded by the master sculptor of MamaPapa.

Aruna, the younger sister of Uma, is quite opposite and is truly feminine. Her ambition is winning a suitable coveted groom by dint of her beauty and coquetry. Anita Desai is concerned more with the exploration of the inner sensibility rather than the outer world of action and as such all her characters merit interpretation from the psychosomatic perspective. As a child, Aruna has mutely witnessed MamaPapa's pride and hilarity towards the son, Arun. This has consequently had a great impact on her psyche. Her show of beauty and her coquetry are simply a result of that impact. Her show of superiority is reflexive of her self-assertion. This sense becomes strong and takes root as she enters into marriage with Arvind and moves on to a better, richer and more fashionable world of Bombay. The hurt left on her heart since childhood pushes her towards the quest for a flawless world. Anita Desai makes it very clear and writes:

‘Clearly Aruna had a vision of a perfect world in which all of them---her own family as well as Arvind’s – were flaws she was constantly uncovering and correcting in her quest for perfection.’ (FF-109)

It is not only male-possessiveness and chauvinism but also female indifference, easy acquiescence and lethargy that make women live a bleak
existence. It is women’s collaboration with the unchallengeable patriarchal legislators that makes matters worse. Mama leaves all thinking and decision making to Papa. She takes pride in her servility. In *Fasting, Feasting*, Anita Desai presents the same meekness in two apparently different cultures. In India Mama follows Papa’s whims and caprices meekly and in Massachusetts Mrs. Patton shows the same servile attitude. Though Mrs. Patton is an ardent vegetarian, she pretends enjoying non-vegetarian food in conformity with the taste of her husband Mr. Patton and thus maintains equilibrium in the strained atmosphere of the house. When she finds Arun, her vegetarian food companion, she is rejoiced no end. The seemingly independent woman was so much in awe of her husband that she was apologetic and deceitful when gingerly she announced her decision to “give vegetarian food a try” (FF-185). Though the socio-familial cultures are different, the reaction of the patriarch is everywhere the same. Mr. Patton’s indifference to his wife’s vegetarianism borders on Papa’s sense of male superiority. Arun notices this one-ness: “his father’s expression, denying any opposition, despair, all seem to him a mirror reflection of it” (FF-185). Subversive forces equally work against women both in the parochial Indian society as well as in the comparatively free western society.

Just like Uma, Melanie Patton, daughter of the Pattons, too becomes the victim of parental indifference. Due to lack of love and affection healthy Uma becomes a patient of hysteria whereas Melanie becomes a victim of anorexia and bulimia. Arun sees in Massachusetts a resemblance to some thing he had already known at home in India—“a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister, who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths of ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is
given, where there is both licence and plenty" (FF-214). The essential hollowness of the so-called developed America is pointed out by the very fact of Melanie's alienation from her family. Melanie ever remains hungry biologically and emotionally inspite of best efforts made by her mother. She herself does not know what she wants and keeps venting her anger on her mother Mrs. Patton.

Another feminist novel is Small Remedies (2000) \(^\text{37}\) penned by Shashi Deshpande. Ritu Menon views that the novel is a striking illustration of the Kierkegaardian axiom: "Life must be lived forwards, but it can only be understood backwards." \(^\text{38}\) This juxtaposition, these backward glances, this excavation of the past, the key to Shashi Deshpande's narrative technique and to the realization of self by the narrator, Madhu. Three women lie at the heart of this story-Madhu, the narrator; her aunt Leela; and Savitribai, a childhood neighbour dimly remembered.

In the foreground is the story of Madhu whose life got transformed in a traumatic moment of revelation of pre-marital sex to her husband, Som that took away her every thing she believed she had achieved--- her marriage, her son and her sanity. Madhu, the only daughter of Eknath, a doctor of Neemgaon, grew up as a motherless child. After her father's death she feels dispaered. She goes to her aunt Leela. She suffers anger, hatred and humiliation in the hands of her step-cousin, Paula, the daughter of Joe and Leela. Orphaned life compels Madhu to go for a career. Putting a full stop to her further higher education, she joined the job in Hamid Merchant-run magazine "City News". Career women are always looked upon as objects of sexual exploitation. She suffers the same exploitation in the hands of Dalvi, who handles her breasts. As a job holder, she feels an absolute sense of freedom living in her cell-like room with bohemian life-style
cooking, eating and serving her male friends Chandru, Som and Tony. Woman has always proved herself an enemy to her own gender. Our society is so conditioned as to categorize women as immoral if they befriend men. This is real because her friend Ketaki misunderstood her movement with boy friends not as a friendship but as a romance. “Men and women can never be friends. Men can be brothers, fathers, lovers, husbands, but never friends—is that how it is?” (SR-254). This was how Madhu reflected when looked down by her friends. Madhu’s friendship with Som soon turns into love and then into marriage. She takes to the role of meek and submissive daughter-in-law in the traditional model family of Som’s dignified father, nurturing mother and other in-laws. Soon she learnt that there emerged strained relations of love and marriage between Som and herself. The reason was that Som, without showing emotional frenzy and without breaking his former links with a girl called Neelam, enters Madhu’s life. Here it is to be understood that their love is rather dry, non-sentimental and non-emotional. However, things for sometime turn good as she becomes a mother of a son. Motherhood, in Indian society, attributes a respectable position. Madhu, with her son Adit, becomes a part and parcel of Som’s family. Love for Adit is the source of happiness in the family. But beneath the current of familial relations lurks the element of male hegemony and hypocrisy. Som is a doubting Thomas, inspite of being a fond and indulgent father, working as busy as a bee and making money for his son Adit. Despite the best compatibility in respect of mutual understanding and emotional balance, Madhu, still in the inner recesses of her mind thinks that this happiness may but be a bubble and there lurks a restless fear of hazy and unreal future.

Madhu’s estrangement with her husband Som begins when she, waking up after nightmare one night, revealed a secret which she had locked up in the deeper regions of her mind. She confessed her pre-marital sex. She had become a victim of rape in the hands of Leela’s step-brother, who had
committed suicide by hanging himself. But Som could not digest this idea of Madhu’s pre-marital sexual molestation. As one who had been a good husband by all standards and shared a wonderful relationship with his wife, he is unable to come to terms with this revelation. He is totally devastated, but Madhu is unable to comprehend this:

“But it’s the single act of sex that Som holds on to, it’s this fact that he can’t let go off, as if it’s has been welded into this palm. Purity, chastity, an intact hymen—these are the things Som is thinking of, these are the truths that matter.” (SR-262)

It does not matter that Som himself had a full-fledged relationship with Neelam before his marriage with Madhu. It is a typical gender-based situation of power politics that a husband may have any number of affairs but expects his wife to be a virgin. It’s all the more indigestible to Som that his wife had been a willing partner. In fact Madhu was just a victim and not a willing partner. Som’s doubting and disbelief grow further. He begins drifting away from Madhu not even touching her physically. Madhu experiences a great grief under Som’s suspicion and anger. Their married life is just like a silent, fearful struggle and they are like two travellers embarked on a journey at a dangerous speed going out of control unable to stop themselves. Their incessant and nocturnal mutual loafing and loathing subject their son, Adit, to a lot of ununderstandable despair, confusion and anger that he goes away out of the house. At this juncture of personal unhappiness of the private lives of Som and Madhu, communal frenzy and bomb blasts occur as a consequence of the demolition of Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, which take away the life of Adit, their only dearest son. With the death of Adit the gap widens farther between Som and Madhu.
Madhu, a doting mother, is all the more tragic when her son, Aditya died in a bomb blast. ‘Small Remedies’ of dhristi ritual with rock salt and mustard seeds to which Madhu stuck to had on no account saved her dear son. She feels that life is always a losing battle and worshipping god does not help any way. But the rituals, festivals, worshippings and chantings are just like small remedies to counter the terrible disease of being human-being, mortal and vulnerable. The only remedy is to believe that tragedies, disasters and sorrows are part of the scheme of life—a package deal. We have to accept both sorrow and pain in equal measure.

Shashi Deshpande’s women never stoop to surrender before anxieties, indoctrination, social conditioning and resultant oppression. Through the continuos analysis of their self they understand and solve the riddles of life. Small Remedies also represents the analytical aspect of the Buddhistic tenets, coupled with a search of permanent values amidst chaos which life has been reduced to. The eternal harmony, the nirvana, can be attained only when they are transcended through rational self-analysis and compassion (maitri) towards all. Buddhism is not a negation of life. It advocates a life by actively participating in it and not by running away from it. In the Buddhistic view, liberation consists in realizing the unreality of the self and eradicating every trace of individuality. This concept of Buddhism is clearly evident in the portrayal of Madhu. Madhu showed compassion towards Paula, when the latter subjected her to mental torture. The death of Aditya tears apart her mooring to sanity, “Death is not an event, it’s an end. It’s like a nuclear devastation; there’s nothing left. Som and I are moving through the rubble of devastated lives, searching for something, for any bits and pieces of our past. But there’s nothing” (SR-211). For Madhu, the pre-marital sexual assault is immaterial. She has outgrown that moment and
wants to adapt herself to the challenges life has posited before her at a later date. Change is the fundamental Buddhist doctrine. The classical doctrine of flux is stated in ‘Dighanikaya’, as follows, “yam Kinci samudaya dhammam, Sabbam tam nirodha dhamman.” It is translated as “Whatever is a rising thing, even life in itself echo the doctrine of impermanence (aniyata).” The continuity of changing stream of consciousness brings about a change in perception too. The spontaneity of life arrives only with a cessation of planning and openness to change. Madhu realizes it during her stay with Hari and Lata. She understands that the more one desires to manage life according to some preconceived pattern, the more irritated, frustrated and fearful one becomes. One should be open and receptive to life. Her constant anxiety is replaced by appreciative confidence and a desire to reassess her life in the context of its different relationships. Madhu’s attempt to write the biography of the vocalist Savithribai proves to be an internal voyage resulting in glorious surrender before the force of truth. Unhappiness results from “wanting to change that which cannot be changed, or from wanting to keep the same that which cannot be kept the same.” Madhu realizes that in order to change her life, first she will have to accept it as it has been. Deshpande’s emphasis on analysis of one’s predicament and overcoming it with rational resolutions is characteristically Buddhistic. Wisdom or emptiness consists in the eradication of all preset views and biased beliefs. Madhu also realizes that all her miseries are caused by misconceptions and distorted egotistic perspectives of the individual and the ultimate solution to them must emerge from within her own self. Buddha said, “Accomplish your liberation through careful perservance.” The philosophy of Karuna and matri lead to the merging of individual identity with those of others in overcoming conflict, hatred and injustice. Madhu, Leela and Haseena too are able to find happiness and fulfilment only when they understand and respond to the
suffering of others. Savithribai, on the contrary, lives a lonely, discontented life and drifts suddenly to death as she can’t renounce attachment to pleasures and passions of life. Buddhism advocates four asravas, which should be abandoned to attain Nirvana. They are recognised as lustful desire, longing for rebirth, speculative views and spiritual blindness. Individuals can attain happiness after transcending these asravas. Madhu also reaches this conclusion after many painful moments. Ultimately she gets rid of her anger, feeling of guilt and loneliness and reaches out to her husband facing the fact of Adit’s death and her continuity of her life with Som.

“.....Som and I, we can wash away, the darkness and ugliness” (SR-322). She realizes that life cannot be lived by indulging in selective amnesia-life carries its own truth with it, even though “Some mysteries have to remain unsolved, some answers will never come” (SR-322).

Madhu begins writing the biography of Savithribai, a great musician. Her own biography is involved in that of Savithribai. She makes perceptive observations about the art of biography.

“Biography is not the arranging of events in a temporal sequence......We don’t live our lives in this way. We see our lives through memories and memories are fractured, fragmented like fiction writer’s (the biographer) needs to construct a plausible narrative.” (SR-165)

In spite of Deshpande’s repeated denials of being a feminist writer, she creates characters which often contradict such statements. The character of Savitribai is brought to life. Madhu remembers her as a frail woman, a
small-sized woman who had shrunk because of age and illness and the real Bai is

"The pampered child? The young girl who discovered what her life was going to be? The young woman who gave up her secure and respectable married life, abandoned her child and eloped with her lover? The woman who is in search of her genius, of her destiny? The great musician, the successful Savithribai Indorker?"

(SR-283)

Here Madhu, the narrator, also recollects her aunt Leela and her husband Joe who had pulled her from the emptiness of life. Madhu, trying to establish the identities of the real Leela and Savithribai, sees parallels between the lives of these two women. She thinks:

"............that in writing about Bai, I’m writing about Leela as well. And my mother and all those women who reached beyond their grasp. Bai moving out of her class in search of her destiny as a singer, Leela breaking out of the conventions of widowhood looking for justice for the weak, my mother running in her bare feet, using her body as an instrument for speed—Yes, they’re in it together. But they paid the price for their attempts to break-out.”(SR-284)

Bai’s attitude to her servants, students and even Madhu is rather imperious. It needed a great grit and determination to be born in a traditional orthodox Brahmin family and make a name for oneself in the field of classical music. Madhu observes the unspoken resentment in Bai’s voice when she recalls how she was abruptly asked by her grandmother to stop
singing when, as a child, she was performing in a family gathering. Madhu recollects how “In Neemgaon she was ‘the singer woman’ and there was something derogatory about the words......about the way they said them” (SR-29). Woman should live her life as per the whims and fancies of her husband. Bai’s husband allowed music to be a hobby only. As he was tradition-bound he did not like his wife, Bai, to step out of the traditional role of wife and go for music. It became a curse for Bai to be a Brahmin of a respectable family. Pursuing the career of a singer and carving for herself name and fame and craving for freedom, she eloped with Ghulaam Sab, a tabla player, a Muslim who supported her, lived with her as long as she needed him and understood her dedication to music. The metaphor of music is used throughout in Savithribai’s story. “The closeness of relationship between melody and rhythm, song and taal, the moment of ‘sam’ between singer and tabla-player imaging the finest concordance between human beings. In contrast, loneliness is like the song without a tabla, music without taal”. It is only through life, experience, joys and sorrows that one can get Thodiraga near to perfection. With a view to master it she burns the boat of her domestic life and goes to Bombay to take up the career of music under the mastership of Kailasnath Buwa. Besides Savithribai feels a sense of ego “I-ME-MYSELF” and clings no part of her life to her daughter Munni (born to her with Ghulaam Sab) and relegates her to insignificance not minding the truth that “A child is a beginning, a renewal, a continuation and an assertion of immortality”, a traditional thought generally nurtured by Madhu, the narrator. For a woman, with a decent and respectable background, to elope with a Muslim tabla player and live in a strange town among total strangers must have required immense courage. That there are different yardsticks for men and women in our society is obvious to Madhu, who in her childhood, was a witness to the rejection of Savithribai by conventional society. She remembers how in Neemgoan “each family had
its place marked out for it according to religion, caste, money, family background........"(SR-138)

Madhu reflects about gender discrimination. She realizes that while people were willing to look over her father’s eccentricities and his foibles, they were not so generous when it came to accepting Savithribai. "Being a man he could get away with much. He could live the way he wanted without open censure or disapproval"(SR-139). It is only when a woman dares to defy convention that people are shocked. As Madhu observes, "In a sense, neither of us belonged, Munni’s family, with her singer mother absent father and another man – a muslim – sharing the home, was of course, radically, shockingly different"(SR-138). The patriarchal extramarital love laws are quite prejudiced against women. Savithribai’s father-in-law had regularly visited his mistress, a famous Thumri singer. The other women looked on this in amusement and gossiped about it. They wondered at his choice of a mistress but there was never any outrage over the fact. "That he had a mistress was accepted, a wife from one’s own class, a mistress from another—this was normal"(SR-220). For a man to indulge in his love of music and even to have a singer for a mistress was alright. But, for a daughter-in-law to be learning music seriously, as if she was going to be a professional, was scandalous and unthinkable. Though Bai had the support and encouragement of her father-in-law, Madhu could imagine the anger, contempt and ridicule Bai had to face from other women. She could imagine the jibes and hostility as an untouchable out-caste. She says:

"To be set apart from your own kind, not to be able to conform, to flout the rules laid down, is to lay yourself to cruelty. Animals know this, they do it more openly, their cruelty towards the deviant is never concealed. But the
subtle cruelty of persistent hostility leaves deeper wounds. There’s always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist the temptation speaks of great courage.” (SR-221)

Savithribai is a malist woman and with a view to coming up in her career she even resorts to sexual promiscuity. Madhu remembers the gossip surrounding Bai in Neemgaon. There was a Station Director who frequented Bai’s house and got her many contracts with the radio, was generally believed to be her lover. Madhu remembers the children teasing Munni and calling him her mama, a kind of euphemism for a mother’s lover. Bai is guileful and hypocritical that she denies the existence of any lover while recounting her story to Madhu. But the world of women was just like a crowing that they crowed, “A woman who’d left her husband’s home what morals would she have, anyway!” (SR-222). By this it is clear that woman is inhuman towards woman.

Madhu is left quite confused at times about Bai’s courage or lack of it. Bai had, no doubt, led the most unconventional life but behind her life of bravado she was a woman who wanted to conform to be accepted by society. She was not the stereotypical feminist with a devil-may-care attitude. This is clear in her blanking out Ghulaam Saab’s name while relating her life to the biographer, Madhu. This reveals her anxiety to cover up her youthful indiscretions in order to present a picture of respectability. She even goes to the extent of hiding the details of her daugther, Munni, who was born through her association with Ghulaam Saab. Madhu could not digest Bai’s indifference to Munni because she herself was a doting mother grieving over the death of her son. Madhu feels that she can give Bai the immotality she desires only if she is willing to pay the price of revealing her
daughter to the world—a daughter whose existence she had successfully obliterated until then. She cannot understand why, when she had the courage to walk out on her marriage and family, was so frightened to reveal the existence of her child. She wonders how “she gave the child the name ‘Indorker’—the name she adopted as a singer—not comprising either her maiden name or her married one, Meenakshi Indorker. Marking her out as her child alone, not the child of her marriage, not the child of her lover. This surely is a statement I cannot ignore?”(SR-169)

Apart from the story of Savithri Bai, Madhu’s narrative also includes the remarkable saga of another equally, or perhaps more, a different woman, her aunt Leela who was “ahead not only of her generation, but the next one as well”(SR-94). Leela is a rebel in a wholly conventional tradition-bound family. She was rather bossy and dominating. Leela and Madhu’s mother are disowned by the family for their defiant and different behaviour. Madhu looks upon Leela as a heroine and the champion of the labourers. Leela is so a courageous career-woman that she takes up a job after the death of her first husband, Vasanth, and educates her brothers-in-law. Even after her second marriage with Joe, a doctor, she continued to live on her own money. Leela was considered a blacks sheep and was given a pariah status by her traditional mother. A widowed Leela marrying a second time and that too with a Christian Joe is unimaginable and unbearable. So Leela was not even allowed to enter the Puja Mandir. She was still considered a widow though she married Joe. Leela’s mother shows apathy towards Leela’s sufferings. The patriarchal-moulded-matriarchal system itself is so oppressive that Leela feels herself frightened about her widowhood. To be some one’s wife would make her feel a sense of security. So, though middle aged, she marries Joe, a father of two children. The marriage between Leela and Joe is well founded on the basis of mutual love. They wait for 15 years
to get married. Their love is great and not found in books or movies as was perceived by Munni and Ketaki. Howsoever their love, their happiness in marriage is totally spoilt by a spoilt brat Paula, Joe's daughter. Here again, it is woman who tries to ruin another woman. Leela is anti-casteist. She moved away and disowned it by marrying Joe. It was Leela alone who supported the inter-caste marriage of Madhu’s parents and even invited them to stay with her when they had no place of their own. She, being an orphan herself in the childhood, developed a fellow feeling and looked after the orphaned Madhu.

Leela was a passionate believer in the Communist ideology but did not hesitate to speak up against the party when the need arose. After putting in years of hard work, she was sidelined by the party bosses and was never allowed to reach the top of the hierarchy, while men who worked under her reached there easily enough. Once, a widow of a sitting Member, who was killed, was given a ticket to stand for elections. This provoked Leela, who had never earlier complained to comment, “It seems you’ve got to become a widow for them to remember that you exist” (SR-224). This is, indeed, a telling statement on the male chauvinism that rules all political parties. Savithribai too understood how much more difficult it was for woman to rise to the top when compared to men. Madhu wondered if she had ever heard the phrase ‘gender discrimination’, but she had certainly experienced and accepted it as the normal course of things. Madhu remembers how Bai had once commented caustically speaking of a young instrumentalist who had reached the pinnacle in no time: “Now a days they become ustads and pundits even before they have proper moustaches” (SR-224). Everywhere it is men who happen to come in the way of women. Savithribai’s identity is connected more to Ghulaam Sab than to Munni because Ghulaam Saab had become a part of her career, her possession, her success and her
achievements. But her guileful opportunistic nature is such that she simply blanks out Ghulaam Saab at the end. Bai’s sense of achievement comes to limelight when she showed Madhu her awards and her photos with the VIPs.

Thus, Savithribai, obsessed with music and Leela, a passionate believer in the Communist world-view, broke away from their families to seek fulfilment in public life. They are independent spirits who gave up respectability to gain love and unhappiness in equal measure. Yet they are symbolic of assertion of women’s subterranean impulses for liberty and status in society. They know the price they have to pay for their self-reliant and independent lives. Bai paid her price in Munni’s rejection of her. Madhu can see fear in the paralytic face of Bai who still appears as if clutching at life. Still she seems to believe more in her music and worldly fame than in god. Her bodily death is rather less important than her musical ragas. Her predicament seems to reflects “Art is long and life is short”. The same is said about Leela, who became a wasted frame after the surgery of cancerous growth on one of her breasts. However, Madhu’s two beacon lights are Bai and Leela. By linking herself to them, she seems to drink the draught of strength, the magic potion, the elixir of courage or the muscle-building spinach.

Deshpande, while writing about bold heroines such as Savithribai and Leela who dared to be different, has also created characters like Munni, who desperately seek the approval of society. Munni was the daughter “whose existence Bai had obliterated”(SR-168) for the sake of her career. Munni, however, desperately hankered after the name her mother had left behind and went to great lengths to dissociate herself from her father and, after a while, her mother. Bai had found conventional life stultifying whereas
Munni yearned for it all her life. As a child Madhu recollects how Munni refused to accept Ghulaam Saab as her father. She received beating and starvation in the hands of Ghulaam Saab. Out of dislike and hatred towards him she used to say that she had been kidnapped by Ghulaam Saab and that her lawyer father would come from Pune and kill him. Munni, in her childhood, did not get parental affection as the other girls did. She was always confused over the conflicting and baffling relations between her mother and Ghulaam Saab. In fact she was unaware of the fact that she was the illegitimate child of Ghulaam Saab. The patriarchal authority acts upon Munni as Ghulaam Saab pretends goodness towards Munni in presence of others. Madhu reflects how Munni was humiliated by the other girls over the question of her real father. She could not answer the questions:

What is your name?
What's your father's name?
Where is your father?
Who's the man who lives with your mother? (SR-77)

Years later, when Madhu met Munni in a bus and recognised her, the latter refused to answer to the name of “Munni” or even acknowledge her childhood friend. She declared that her name was ‘Shailaja Joshi’ trying as it were, to desperately wipe out any connection with her past. Munni wanted respectability and therefore she rejected everything associated with her mother Bai—music, genius, ambition and freedom. It was only after her death that she had got her identity as the only daughter of Savithribai Indorker. Munni moved towards herself and an ordinary woman with ordinary family life. Munni hates music as it is the factor responsible for her mother’s walking over her family. Munni is never silent, she would haunt her mother, cry for justice, rage against obliteration of her life. Forgiveness
has no place in Munni’s thinking. It is pathetic as to see her end in a bomb blast along with that of Madhu’s son, Aditya. Malathi Mathur writes a review about Munni as thus:

At the other end of the spectrum is Munni, Savithribai’s daughter, who turns her back on her mother and all that she stands for, in a desperate desire to conform, having encountered early in life the poisoned barbs that society levels against those who dare to be different.”

Shashi Despande has repeatedly expressed her displeasure at being considered the champion of the oppressed women. It is indeed, a tribute to her that some of the reviewers recognise her for what she is. Malathi Mathur writes: “In portraying struggles of these women for identity, Shashi Deshpande waves no feminist banners, launches into no rabid diatribes. She drives her point home with great subtlety and delicacy.”

Lastly, Salman Rushdie’s novel The Ground Beneath Her Feet (1999) is discussed in the feminist point of view. Rushdie presents the protagonist Vina Apsara as a feminist icon. Vina, the legendary of rock music, is the central character that drives the entire action of the novel. Literally selfless, her personality is smashed like a mirror by the fist of her own life. All the things had been pulled out from under her—her name, family, sense of place and home, safety, belonging, being loved, future life and belief. “She was floating in a void, denatured, dehistorical, clawing at shapelessness trying to make some. An oddity” (GBHF-121). Born as Nissa Shetty, she grew up amidst cornfields in Chester of Virginia. Her mother, Helen, a Greek-American, was full-figured. She was of humble origins. Hoping herself a lot, she married an Indian lawyer, who fathered three daughters in three years. Nissa was the middle one. Having been jailed
and later released, he revised his sexual preferences and left his wife Helen and three daughters. Helen Shetty, a victim of loveless peace, took to drinks and ran into debts. The consequence was that her daughters left her. Next Helen was picked by John Poe, a kind-hearted widower. Now she received stability, a kind of love—a solid ground beneath her feet. She attempted to speed her daughter Nissa on to a better road by her sincere advice but Nissy wished to have taken the path of a falling meteor. All her dreams about her Vina as a rising star in music came to an abrupt end when she herself was no more. May be due to the aftermath consequences of the Indo-China war, she was hanged along and her husband John Poe’s throat was cut. Vina, after her mother’s death, lived with one step-motherly Mrs. Marion Egyptus, who was foul-mouthed and was prejudiced against her black complexion. Nissy had to fight her cousins (Maria’s sons) off as they desired her black skin for sexual pleasure. Even as a school-going child, she had to drag on life suffering racial discrimination shown by the American children. Hated and rejected by Mrs. Egyptus and her children, Vina was sent to India to live with the family of affluent Piloo Doodhwala. Her butcher father, John Poe, bid her not to call him again. But he wished her a good life in India. The Doodhwallas in Bombay, on the other hand and much contrary to her expectations, abandoned her to her own fate. On hearing the news of her love for the 19-year old Ormus, Piloo beat her and sent her out of his house. She quickly perceived that the rich Bombay offered her the worst of both her previous worlds—detested goats of John Poe and the heartless cruelty of Egyptus family. It was at this bleakest hour of life that she arrived, in rain, at the door step of Ormus in 1950. It was her just and inherent rage that drove her here and there. She suffered myriad petty cruelties of unjust relations and the absence of fairy god mothers. Rai, here, finds fault with the irony of Indian ethics. In the underdeveloped nation of India, boy-girl relations are strictly controlled. In India, a land of Kamasutra, Khajuraho temples,
Kamatipura, child marriages and sexual unions leading to population explosion, love is negatived and is looked upon as a controlled factor. In the house of Ormus, Ormus's mother Lady Cama came to know of Vina's love for Ormus. This love episode was looked upon as insane and anti-orthodoxical. Out of anger, Ameer (Rai's mother) abused Vina as 'Bad Egg' and 'Rotten Apple'. She called Vina whore, slut and tart. But these words did not damage her. What damaged Vina to the core were the words of Ameer. "Thank God, you are not my child — you are nothing to me, you are less than the dirt on the soles of my shoes" (GBHF-167). Vina's trust in the world horribly eroded with the loss of maternal love in the hands of Ameer. Her dreams of solid ground beneath her love for Ormus and Rai began eroding. However she reaches London. After she had completed her apprenticeship in the coffee bars and clubs of London, she moved to New York and adhered to Sam's Pleasure Island and Amos Voight's Slaughter house "where the worlds of art, film and music met and fucked" (GBHF-225). She became a "notorious unashamed exhibitionist" (GBHF-225).

“She appeared regularly on the covers of underground magazines, those new cracks in the media facade caused by the western youthquake. By pouring out her rage and passion in these journals of narcotic typography, and posing pneumatically for their porno-liberal pix, she became one of the first sacred monsters of the counterculture, an aggressive iconoclast, half genius, half egomaniac, who lost no opportunity to roar and suck and boo and preen and demolish and cheerlead and revolutionise and innovate and flash and boast and scold. The truth is that this noisy-noisome, pestilential-
pest act of hers had set her singing career back.” 
(GBHF-225)

She is a multiple-selvesed personality with the nature of all-in-one. Rushdie describes her as follows:

"Professor Vina and Crystal Vina, Holy Vina and Profane Vina, Junkie Vina and Veggie Vina, Women’s Vina and Vina the Sex Machine, Barren childless-Tragic Vina and Traumatized-Childhood-Tragedy Vina, Leader Vina who blazed a trail for a generation of women and Disciple Vina who came to think of Ormus as the One she had always sought. She was of all these and more, and everything she was, she pitched uncompromisingly high. There was no Self-Effacing Vina to set against Vina of the Screamingly Stretched Extremes."(GBHF-339)

In pursuit of a successful career, she resorts to sexual promiscuity. Casually, she had married and divorced. The list of her lovers was long. Though she liked bisexuality, her promiscuity was extreme even by the standards of the time. Due to her sexual encounters with her lover Ormus and another lover Rai she had got abortioned three times and got barren after the fourth abortion. Like many women of the time, she had used abortion as a supplementary birth control technique. She evolved her own feminist philosophy on birth control.

"Unable to have children, and following her normal practice of drawing universal conclusions from her own idiosyncratic
experience, she had responded by developing a great polemic against western birth-control methods, a jeremiad against the scientific manipulation of women’s bodies for men’s pleasure, which hit a number of bull’s eyes and then turned into a cockeyed eulogy of the wisdom of the more natural habits of the women of the east.” (GBHF-393)

She had all the way come to India to learn natural birth control techniques with a view to spread the same in America.

As for concept of love in general and her love towards Ormus in particular she was rather Platonic. When she was asked by Ormus for marriage she made it very clear in her convictions about fidelity. She says to him, “Don’t ask me for high fidelity. I am a lo-fi kind of a girl” (GBHF-412). She even did not trust her marriage with either Ormus or Rai. So first she preferred lying with Rai to trustless marriage with Ormus.

Rushdie might have thought how love would associate with such ideas as happiness, trust, fidelity and longevity. It is supposed to go a long time. Love necessarily need not lead to lover’s happiness, which could not be enduring and which broke all rules. “There may be no fidelity, very little trust, not much happiness...yet we can call it love.” This depth causes much experience of great suffering. Vina and Ormus are in a sense betrayed by themselves and that creates the ideology of deflection. Vina can’t be faithful and creates a situation where there can’t be a trusting relationship. Even as wife and husband, Vina and Ormus differ over love-laws. “What he thinks of as his commitment to monogamy, she calls his growing absolutism. She accuses him of tyranny, which he calls fidelity.....What he calls infidelity she calls freedom. What looks to him like promiscuity, she provocatively renames democracy.” (GBHF-384)
Her love views were rather patriarchal and unsentimental. In the eyes of Vina love was not considered a bond of human ties. Rai, the narrator, himself admitted of her take-it-easy attitude towards himself and Ormus.

"................in the field of love and desire Vina was just behaving, like most men, of loving wholeheartedly and simultaneously—half-heartedly—betraying that love without guilt, without any sense of contradiction.....We, Ormus and I we were her women: he, the royal wife standing by her philandering husband, setting for him inspite of his roving eye, his wanderlust; and I, the simultaneously wanton and long-suffering mistress, taking what I could get. That way round, it made perfect sense....."(GBHF-432-433)

Vina was like a philandering husband and a wanderlust. With such a bold-type nympho, there could hardly be any building up of a family or experience of any marital bliss. About human happiness and trustless love she says thus:

"Happiness is human, not divine, and the pursuit of happiness is what we might call love. This love,earthly love is a truce between metamorphs, a temporary agreement not to shape-shift while kissing or holding hands....Love is intimate democracy, a compact that insists on renewals.....It’s fragile, precarious,and it’s all we can get without selling our souls to one party or the other......All treaties can be broken, all promises end up as lies. Sign nothing, make no promises, make a
provisional reconciliation, a fragile peace.” (GBHF-353-54).

Marriage, to her, was just a captivity. She offers Ormus the convention of anti nuptial radicalism: “Monogamy is a manacle, fidelity is a chain. A revolutionary not a wifey will she be.” (GBHF-369)

Especially among the urban socialites, on account of sexual promiscuity and economic self-reliance, and because they do possess, “the restless, exacting, often hysterical spirit......which tends towards discontent, indiscretion and divorce”, it is to be presumed that the bond of marriage, a fragile one as it seems, has fallen on the verge of breaking up. Shoba De’s heroines are educated, attractive, self-confident, defiant, assertive and combative socialite women to whom mutual fidelity in marriage is replaced by sexual freedom. Marriage, to them, is just a convenient contract to lead a comfortable and promiscuous life. Vina’s sexual freedom is ‘the ground beneath her feet’ in the novel The Ground Beneath Her Feet.

Vina was a fiery witty speaker of women’s rights and against the sloppy imperium of men. She is at core, a realistic and a vibrant lecture – tourist and argues on the self-hood of woman and presents her radical views on men’s attitudes.

“.........women no longer see men as individuals but think of them as repositories and products of the ignoble history of their sex........If men are not entirely individuals (and nor are women), then they can’t be held fully responsible for their actions, since responsibility is a concept that can exist only in the context of the modern idea of the auto-determinant self. As products of history,
as merely culturally generated automata, we’re excluded from trusting and being trusted, because trust can exist only where responsibility can be –is-taken.” (GBHF-338)

Ideologically, the Indo-Anglian woman writers are moving from victim feminism to power feminism which Naomi Wolf “starts with the assumption that women can marshal their power and win”.46

Maladjusted marriages dominate the Feminist fictions. Janu’s marriage in Jaishree Mishra’s Ancient Promises, Savithri Bai’s in Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies and Vina’s in Salman Rushdie’s The Ground Beneath Her Feet are not based on mutual trust and hence lead to emotionally incomplete relationships that lead to their alienation and loneliness of spirit which finally result in negation of patriarchy.

Janu in Ancient Promises and Madhu in Small Remedies represent a woman who had a physical relationship with a man before she met her husband, but who was, in every sense, a virtuous woman, a loving wife desiring the truest relationship with her husband, based on honesty, not deceit. Above all, an aspiring human being with an indestructible sense of identity, which, despite her gentleness would not submit into being hammered out of her. A trusting confession of a pre-marital relationship had doomed their marriage. Consequently, they being mothers of children are denied comradeship, understanding and trust, they get retreated into loneliness of passions. Female confinement leads to simmering revolt of the new woman against patriarchy. The longing for love and affection, which if unfulfilled, leaves the individual feel sharply the pangs of loneliness, of ostracism, of rejection, of friendlessness and of rootlessness. The ultimate result is the woman-heroines begin open-revolt revealing female self expression through a career. Education and enhanced career opportunities
have instilled the confidence to walk out on failed marriages. Divorce can now be considered a viable strategy by which the repressed New Woman moulds a more meaningful life for herself even at the cost of living a life of sexual promiscuity and extra-marital affairs and by walking out of home with the people who they love and want to live with without restrictions.

Virtue is no longer measured in terms of chastity and fidelity. Nayantara Sahagal’s redefinition of the traditional idea of female virtue and marital morality aptly suits the present temperament of female protagonists such as Savithribai Indorker in Shashi Deshpande’s Small Remedies, Vina Apsara in Salman Rushdie’s The Ground Beneath Her Feet and Janu in Jaishree Misra’s Ancient Promises. They conform to the idea of New Woman. In every novel, the heroine has moved one step further away from the stereotype of the virtuous woman into a new definition of virtue; traditional virtue lies in staying put, suffering. The New Woman does the opposite. No more as sati, she is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences. Thus Feminist fictions refer to pre-marital relations, adultery, rape or incest. They question patriarchal structures like marriage and family, and juxtaposes this questioning with a woman’s control over her body or need to control her body. Sexuality is neither an object nor an end in itself; it is a natural instinct, which needs to be recognised and channelized not by others but by the self. Women writing the self need to write the body even if desiring ultimately to transcend it. In the recent texts man-woman relationship in modern times has undergone a sea change. Formerly, the Indian woman was a typical product of tradition to become a shadow of her husband. With the advancement of woman education and employment and with the socio-economic upliftment of their status, there has set in a radical trend in the attitudinal, behavioural and
sexual rules and roles of women in the society. Man-woman relationship in modern English novels has acquired varied dimensions. The modern Indian man and the modern Indian woman have now become acquisitive and the age of go-getters has set in. The modern woman has become Janus-faced—one face looks back to the ancient traditional image and the other face forward to a whole new world waiting for her to conquer. Marriage in most cases acts as a deterrent—not a loving and equal partnership. It cuts a woman off from the mainstream of life and prevents her from achieving her goals. When stepped out of their confines, they have to struggle against the prejudices and dual standards prevalent in society. Focus is given on the lack of emotional fulfilment in man-woman relationship. In most marriages love takes a back seat and money dominates. One gets the impression that ideal sexual love is only possible through adultery. Adulterous relationships are neither acquisitive nor utilitarian and the man and the woman gain solace and support, and derive pleasure and happiness in the company of each other. Passion can be either virtuous or vicious. In order to maintain a facade of harmony in their married lives, men and women who enter into relationships often recourse to the art of dissembling.

However, in the Indian context, the new emerging theory of "Neo-womanism" of Africa seems to be suitable that reflects a healthy and harmonious idea of feminism. The new emerging theory of Neo-womanism in Africa is:

"Neo-womanism is the culminating point of the search by women for an ideal relationship between men and women in a fast changing world. Neo-womanism is all of feminism without its militancy and overt rebelliousness, complementing the responsibility of traditional
womanism without its subservience, and the quiet dynamism, resourcefulness and subtle revolutionary mechanism of modern womanism. In short, Neo-womanism is a fusion of positive values emanating from different stages of an evolutionary progression in inter-human relationships as responses to the demands of changes in the society. Neo-womanism makes it a point through actions that are achievement-oriented and the positive results of such actions gradually establish a place for the woman in societal affairs without any controversy because the qualities that define a woman are universally acceptable and admirable. Neo-womanism, as a product of the last stage of sexist dichotomies, should usher in a durable, meaningful and rewarding human co-existence which will reflect the highest level of intellectual pragmatism, sharp perception of issues and lucid visions of a harmonious society enhanced by a just appreciation of the developmental needs and efforts of the people. Neo-womanism is capable of creating a semblance of a perfectly harmonious society which has, as its object, rapid growth and development based on the competence of its members and devoid of sexist discrimination. It is this ideal that Neo-womanism is expected to attain. 47

The post-independent India advanced legislations protecting the rights and status of women ---labour acts, the Hindu Code Bill, the Prohibition of Dowry Act, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, laws legalising abortion and divorce and concessions to sex-workers. But the
actuality is that these laws remain, by and large 'paper tigers' when it comes to the reality of the individual woman's existence. The implementation of these laws is hindered by the harsh reality that a woman's subordination remains embedded in the personal relations of the patriarchal set-up. Legal changes have thus become difficult to enforce gender justice.
NOTES


6. Kate Millett, p. 25


11. Ibid. p. 203

12. Ibid. p. 203


15. Linda Gordon qtd. In the “Preface,” Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, p. 8

17. Ibid., vi


20. Vanamala Viswanatha, Interview with Shashi Deshpande in R.S. Pathak. p.235


25. Mishra, Jaishree, Ancient Promises: Penguin Books, New Delhi, 2000. All further quotations of this text are shown by the abbreviation AP.

26. Sudhir Kakar, p.66.

27. Desai, Anita. Fasting, Feasting. Vintage London, 2000. All subsequent quotations of this text will be shown with the abbreviation FF.

28. Quotation on the back cover page of Fasting, Feasting.


31. Quotation in Atharva Veda, vi. 23.


34. Simon de Beauvoir, p.445.


37. Deshpande, Shashi. *Small Remedies* (New Delhi: Viking, Penguin India, 2000). Further quotations of this text are shown by the abbreviation SR.


41. Dighanikhaya, p.119.


43. Ibid.

44. Rushdie, Salman. *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. Jonathan Cape, London, 1999. All subsequent quotations of this text are shown by the abbreviation GBHF.

45. Charles Cooley, *Social Consciousness*, p.368
