Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION
Human experience has chiefly been a masculine, or what may be called, a ‘malist’ experience. Hence the cumulative image humanity offers is a tilted, distorted one with the female voice denied an equal force, with the woman remaining behind the arras. Ibsen commenting on the hypocrisy of the man in patriarchal society, says:

There are two kinds of spiritual laws; two kinds of consciences: one in man and another altogether different in woman. They do not understand each other but in practical life the woman is judged by man’s law as though she were not a woman, but a man.¹

This statement shows the plight of women in male oriented society. Jane Austen, in *Persuasion*, protests:

Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.

The male writers have treated women’s lives, experiences and values as marginal. They have assumed that literature about public events is more serious than that about private life. Much importance is given to the literature by and about men than to the literature by and about women.

Feminism is a protest launched by women of the west for equal social, political, legal, moral, and cultural rights with men. It is often identified as a movement which began late in the 1960s. Behind it, however, lie two centuries
of struggle for women’s rights, marked by such books as Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of Rights of Woman* (1792), John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869), and Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). Centuries of suppression of women’s rights by men and the reaction against this by women particularly in the early two decades of the 20th century had given rise to feminist writings, that is, writing about women by women with the task of exploring the minds of women and the problems faced by them in traditionally male-dominated society.

Feminist challenges the traditional view of woman as the weaker sex and the belief that her place in the kitchen. It assumes the equality of the sexes and seeks to achieve for women a role in society, which such equality warrants. From Christine de Pisan to Jane Austen and beyond, women have been demanding their rights in a male oriented world.

Feminism in India can be traced to the days of Ram Mohan Roy and the Atmiya Sabha he started in 1914. The emancipation of Indian woman is byproduct of Gandhiji’s non-cooperative movement. The independence struggle paved the way for women out the hearth and chimney nooks into the life of the nation. Social reformers have started educational institutions for women to improve the position of women. Only an educated woman is capable of enlightening her home and the family. Urbanization and industrialization have opened up new vistas of employment. They have lead to new opportunities which are different from the traditional ones, wherein occupational mobility is possible.
With the growth of educational and employment opportunities, the educated upper and middle class women especially in urban and industrial areas, have become aware of their position in the patriarchal society. Their reading habit has made them conscious of many of the existing conditions in India. They have started asserting their rights. Ms. Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, former Minister for Health, Government of India, once stated:

We are aware of the necessity of finding and being judged by our own standards as free human beings, voluntarily accepted, we are determined to face the facts of life, to fight the battle of our sex and take the risk.²

In pre-independence India, the picture of Indian womanhood is stale and perverted. It is either exaggerated or neglected. Women do not occupy any important place in most of the Indo-Anglian novels. The Indo-Anglian novels of this period presented woman as romantic, cultured, graceful, wise ... such stuff as dreams are made of. Woman is either portrayed as a selfless, self-denying, sacrificing, compliant angel, a symbol of purity and beauty, or else she is presented as a monster, villain, victimizer, devourer or predator. Women are rarely presented as women realistically. Woman is often portrayed as one, who like eve instigates man to do things which ultimately ruin him, as one who frustrates man's attempts to make a better life.

The early Indo-Anglian novels are dominated by male point of view. The woman is shown as subordinate creature, and the prominence is given to boys in Indian families.
The women of the early Indian English novels have no identity. They are expected to obey the elders and to follow the tradition. Shirwadkar once remarked:

This sense of obedience to the elders which the girls have to follow pervades the Indo-Anglian novel. The picture of highly westernized girls aping the west and obsessed with the idea of physical love only was ridiculed. In contrast, the traditional ideas of obedience and faithfulness were shown as the very essence of Indian girl or girlhood.  

But, Indian women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Shakuntala Shrinagesh, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shashi Deshpande, have turned towards themselves to the women’s world with its intuition, perception and imagination, cultivating a new feminine form and style, especially in the art of novel writing. They have launched an aesthetic voyage within to explore the private consciousness of the women characters. The women characters created by them show courage enough to fight with social evils and male superiority. The Anglo-Indian women novelists

Have contributed to the Indo-Anglian fictions some intimate pictures of girls in isolated circles like the women in Brahmin or purdah-clad families particularly during the period of adolescence when the vigilance over virgins is usually very strict... The girls are at the centre of most of the novels by
women writers and some are first person narrations by the central woman character. This has given scope to the feminine point of view to enter into the sphere of Indo-Anglian fiction.\textsuperscript{4}

These Indo-Anglian novelists, instead of dealing with the public world, give emphasis to private consciousness of their women characters. Centuries of aloofness and isolation have made women more subjective, introspective and more spiritual than men in their approach to literature.

Elaine Showalter, a literary suffragist, traces the evolution of this feminist movement from the time of Brontes to the present, and the development is outlined by her, very convincingly in three stages:

1. Feminine : The phase of imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition.
2. Feminist : The phase of protest against the standards and values in favour of autonomy.
3. Female : The phase of self-discovery, of a search for identity.

The works of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, and Shashi Deshpande are directly related to the third phase. Their women are not goddesses or automatons. They move from bondage to freedom, from indecision to self-assertion.

Kamala Markandaya has a varied repertoire of women character in her fiction from peasant to princess. Many complex and realist women characters have been created by many other talented novelists but Markandaya's women
characters are undeniably the forerunners of doomed female of modern India. They are portrayed in a unique manner, neither merely imitative, nor exotic nor mythic. However retiring and apparently submissive their public image might have been, they have always been heart of the family life, responsible in their roles as wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and finally mother-in-law, for the solidarity of the family and continuation of its values. Kamala Markandaya's female characters come from different age groups and are widely from different educational and social backgrounds, so much so that they in the process reflect the average Indian woman.

Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is the story of Rukmani. Her husband Nathan is only a subordinate character. Rukmani, the narrator of the story, is also a mother of sorrows. She receives shock after shock, for example, her husband Nathan's infidelity, her daughter's sacrificial going on the streets to save the family from starvation, the death of her child Kuti, the ejection from the house by the landlord. Nathan and Rukmani leave the village to join their son, only to find that he has disappeared abandoning his own wife and children. Rukmani and Nathan become stone breakers, they even save a little money, but before they could return to their village, Nathan dies leaving Rukmani forlorn. She comes back to her village and finds peace at last. She has lost her dear and errant husband no doubt, but she has brought Puli with her, their adopted son. Rukmani with her other children, Ira, Selvan, and Puli, starts to rebuild her future on the ruins of the old.

Kamala Markandaya's second novel *Some Inner Fury* (1955) like *Nectar in a Sieve*, also has a woman narrator, Mira. But Mira is totally different from
Rukmani. She belongs to a highly educated, upper class ultramodern society. Comparing her with Rukmani, Laxmi R. Moktali says,

If her heroine Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* represents the peasant folk, Mirabai of *Some Inner Fury* represents the rebellious young blood of pre-independence India. If one is rural the other is urban. But the situations in which these women are placed are more or less, the same, in that both of them had once their golden days and are now thwarted.5

Premala in *Some Inner Fury* is a representative of Kamala Markandaya’s feminist view of life. Premala brought up in a conventional Hindu tradition, is married to westernized Kit, Mira’s brother. What Premala wants out of life is apparently so different from what Kit wants her to be. She puts up a heroic struggle between her instinctual, individual urge and demands of her husband.

Saroji, in *A Silence of Desire* (1960), is another woman who fights male force or society at large, while maintaining her role as wife and mother. *A Silence of Desire* deals more explicitly with the problem of marriage. Here again we get a world picture of the traditional Indian wife in Sarojini!

Good wife ... good with the children, an excellent cook, an efficient manager of his household, a woman who still gave him pleasure after fifteen years of marriage less from warmth of her response than from her unfailing acquiescence to his demands.6
After fifteen years of happy married life Dandekar is suspicious about the character of his wife Sarojini. He is an ordinary clerk and has some pretensions to intellectualism. He is often irritated with his God-fearing and religious wife. Mutual misunderstanding leads to disturbance in their marital life. Sarojini, suffering from a serious ailment, goes to a Swami for treatment. Dandekar takes help of the magistrate to get the Swami ousted from the city. Sarojini finally consents to get scientific treatment, it is on the instruction from Swamy. However, till the end she is an independent figure confronting male reality.

Two Virgins (1973), a novel which has such obvious element of sensation, is a different story from those of Kamala Markandaya's previous novels. Markandaya breaks away from tradition in treating the theme of sex in Two Virgins. It is the story of two sisters, Lalitha and Saroja, in which the former loses her virginity. The two sisters are physically and temperamentally opposed to each other. Lalitha loves glamour in cities but Saroja is a simple girl. Lalitha adopts western ways, dreams of becoming a film star, falls into the clutches of Mr. Gupta, conceives an illegitimate child, after abortion goes back to the city to which she claims to belong. Unlike her sister Lalitha, Saroja is cast in a different mould. She is not ambitious like her elder sister and loves traditional village life. Devoid of good looks and modern ideas, she has a simple concept of life to marry and have round babies. She chooses her own way of life within the bounds and restrictions of rural society. Using the traditional contrasting figures of two sisters, Kamala Markandaya brings out the conjunction of traditionalism and modernism based on feminist rationale.
As a woman novelist, Anita Desai abandons the traditional descriptive prose style. She has added a new dimension to the achievement of Indian women writers in English fiction. She makes a distinctive departure from the ordinary, masculine social reality, in the treatment of her fictional subject matter by exploring the inner world of her women characters who are highly introspective.

Desai’s women characters live in isolated worlds of existential problems, solitary and introspective, they show a marked tendency towards neurotic behaviour. Obsessed with their life of alienation and depression and loneliness Desai’s women characters suffer from an inner torment of the self. They embody the repercussions of belonging to an upper-class affluent society – rich in terms of material achievement, but absolutely impoverished in terms of emotional and spiritual fulfillment. They are victims of alienation and in most cases, suffer because of hypersensitivity.

_Cry, the Peacock_ (1963) is Maya’s story, the story of her married life with Gautama, and almost the entire story is remembrance of things past by Maya herself. In _Cry, the Peacock_, Desai portrays Maya’s efforts to tell her story to herself, to discover some meaning in her life. Maya develops a father fixation and marries Gautama, a man much older than her, with whom she has nothing in common. Ultimately, she kills him, and then herself.

In _Where Shall we Go This Summer?_ (1975) Sita is alienated from her husband, Raman, because of their total incompatibility. Lack of mutual concern leads to apathy which causes the total breakdown of husband and wife relationship. Even Sita’s withdrawal to the idyllic island of Manori doesn’t give her any peace.
In *Voices in the City* (1965), Monisha is given to morbid inclinations. She can’t communicate with her husband Jiban’s self-centred and complacent family. She is isolated, and lacks religious faith on which she might have depended. She withers slowly, and her suicide is an attempt to seek release from her captivity.

Nanda Kaul, in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), is an elderly lady from the affluent upper middle-class strata of society, a great-grandmother, and the wife of a vice-chancellor. Her husband’s infidelity torments her but she is too proud to protest it. She retreats to Carighano in Kasauli, after allowing her husband to have a life-long affair with another woman, in search of freedom and peace. Even her self-imposed exile from family, society and life doesn’t give her mental peace.

Maya, Sita, Monisha, and Nanda Kaul don’t compromise or accept the reality of life. Death through suicide is not the only solution to our existential problems. Desai doesn’t portray her character in the traditional manner. She is concerned with the solitary self of the individual. R.K. Srivastava points out that Anita Desai’s women,

... Are constantly haunted by hidden fears or inhibitions created by their relationship with others or their circumstances of life ..., their solitary musings add to their morbidity and quicken the process of disintegration.⁷

Anita Desai in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) deals with two sisters from a loveless home – Bimla, the elder, stays on in her parents dusty old house in Delhi.
and looks after their mentally retarded younger brother after the death of her parents. Tara, the younger sister, married a man in the Indian Foreign Service and visits the house every three or four years once when her husband comes to India. Moving back and forth in time, Anita Desai beautifully presents the complex web of childhood love and guilt. The parents appear in an unsympathetic light – the rich father and diabetic mother are always at the club, playing cards. When both parents die, it is Bim, hardly out of her teens, who has to take charge of the house hold. Raja, the elder son, goes to Hyderabad and marries his landlord Hyder Ali’s daughter. He escapes from responsibilities. Bim is completely a new heroine in Anita Desai’s fiction, hard-headed and facing life’s challenges bravely. At the end of the novel Bim realizes that the only way to happiness is to acknowledge and accept all.

Anita Desai moved to America early in the nineties. Unlike her earlier novels, Journey to Ithaca (1995) shows India through an outsider’s eyes. She portrays in that novel, a charismatic old woman as a Guru. Matteo, a sensitive young man, and his young bride Sophie come to India in 1975. Sophie, overcome by the heat and dust, goes back to Italy with their children. She comes again to reclaim Matteo, who is under the spell of the Mother in an ashram. Sophie wants to prove that Mother is a sham, and the fourth part of the book deals with Sophie’s quest for the Mother’s origins. The holy woman brought up in Paris, with an Egyptian mother, closely resembles the Mother of the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry.

In Fasting and Feasting (1999) Desai convincingly presents the Indian obsession with a son. The novel deals with the travails of Uma, a daughter with
neither good looking nor intellectual brilliance. She is treated as a domestic drudge by her parents. She has to leave school to look after her baby brother Arun.

Nayantara Sahgal is conspicuously concerned with the suffering of women in ‘the prison-house of loveless-marriage.’ Any attempt to break away from this meaningless matrimony brings more misery:

For the women in the novel of Sahgal both options are fraught with suffering and anguish. The Sita-pativrata tradition tells her to suffer in silence, her modern educated mind, asks what if her husband is not like Rama? Is she still to remain a faithful wife? Nita, Saroj, Simrit, however, realize that breaking away is also very painful. There can be no clean break and easy solutions.8

This is so because, whether in India or in the west, it is indeed difficult to fancy any real sharing of rights and opportunities – legal, political, social, economic, and last but not least, familiar – among men and women. The tendency of the male to dominate every sphere of life has been inherent in his psyche.

Sahgal’s first novel A Time to be Happy (1957) is concerned with the women of three generations. Some of whom adopt traditional way of life, while the others seeks freedom within the confines of their marital life. In her second novel This Time of Morning (1965), Sahgal portrays the suffering of women within marriage. Her third novel Storm in Chandigarh (1969) deals with complex human relationships in both private and public life. It deals with the
crisis in the lives of three young married couple. In *Rich Like Us* (1985), Sahgal depicts the woman, who is subservient to man. In this novel she portrays the women who are exploited and victimized in marriage, in sexual relationships and even in childbirth. Almost all her novels including *Plans for Departure* (1986) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) are concerned with the problems of women in patriarchal society.

Sahgal doesn't simply produce a social document of Indian women's problems. Her women characters are representatives of all suffering women in the world. The world of Nayantara Sahgal is not confined to the particular society and country:

> There is no question that I belonged to a particular class of society but my own feeling has always been that it is not a crime to be of any particular class. It is a crime to be unaware that there is another whole world around you. My awareness has extended more outwards into other types of characters.⁹

The novelist with most sustained achievement is Shashi Deshpande. Her writing is clearly part of Indian literature and emerges from her rootedness in middle class Indian society. Understatement is hallmark of her works. She is not interested in exotic aspects of India. There are no Maharajahs, tiger hunts and holy men in her works. She generally has woman as the narrator and employs a kind of stream of consciousness technique. In all her works, she deals with the problems of women in male chauvinist society.
Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terror* (1980) is the mother of a son and a daughter, but finds no happiness with her husband and children. Hindu tradition plays a big part in Sarita’s unhappiness. Hindus value a son over a daughter, who is considered a burden, to be married off at great expense. Sarita defies her mother by joining medical college, and flouts caste restrictions by marrying the man she loves.

Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is a young woman who has rebelled against her authoritarian and traditional joint family. Indu leaves as a teenager to study in the big city Bombay, and becomes a journalist. She marries a man of her choice. But she soon realizes that her freedom is illusory.

Deshpande’s third novel *That Long Silence* (1989) marks her emergence as a major novelist. The narrator Jaya, an upper middle-class housewife, in Bombay, with two teenage children, is forced to take stock of her life, when her husband is suspected of fraud, and they move into a small flat in a poor locality. Deshpande shows up the hollowness of much of modern Indian life – the convenient, arranged marriage, with the upwardly mobile husband and the children studying in good schools. The repetitiveness and boredom of a woman’s life come through forcefully. She shows how silence imposed on women is partly of their own making though the society and tradition have a hand.

In *A Matter of Time* (1996), Deshpande attempts to depict the complex web of human relationships in an extended family over three generations. Sumi, the mother of three young daughters goes back to her parental home, ‘old house’, when her husband Gopal walks away from the marriage.
Small Remedies (2000) is the most successful of Shashi Deshpande's novels. The narrator, Madhu is trying to come to terms with the death of her eighteen-year-old son killed in a bus that is burnt down in Bombay in the riots which followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid. But she had really lost him even before that, because of her possessive attitude, the novel can be read as a study of motherhood, and the consequences of a woman centering her life on a child. Madhu goes to a small town to write a biography of a famous musician, Savitribai, who has sacrificed her family in her single minded pursuit of music. The main narrative concerns Madhu's efforts to write a book, but her childhood and adolescence, and her present circumstances as a guest in a small town, come to life vividly. The novel reveals the development of the protagonist, who gains strength from remembering and recreating the lives of Saritabai and her own aunt Leela.

Indo-Anglian women writers of twentieth century have been trying to explore the private life of women. So their literature has largely become confessional and personal and their subjective style has been labeled feminine, even though men too employ it. Feminist in Indian English fiction has been a series of counters and ordeals on the part of the woman to strike roots, to belong and assert her identity in a transitional society. The new woman, the feminine novelists of the twentieth century:

Has abandoned the old realism. She doesn't accept observed revelation. She is seeking with passionate determination for that reality, which is behind the
material, the things that matter, spiritual things, ultimate truth.  

Today the women novelists depict a large number of women characters including hawkers, gypsies, prostitutes, painters, nuns, and women employed in a variety of professions.

In the following chapters an attempt is made to show how Kamala Markandaya in her *Nectar in a Sieve* and *Handful of Rice*, Anita Desai in her *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City*, and *Journey to Ithaca*, and Shashi Deshpande in her *The Dark Holds No Terror, Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence*, and *A Matter of Time*, have powerfully and realistically portrayed with their intuition and clear perception, the modern women.
References


4. Ibid., p.48.


