CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

FEMALE PROMETHEUSES AND FEMINIST RECONFIGURATIONS : A STUDY OF FEMINIST ARTICULATION OF HERMENEUTICAL ALTERNATIVES:

1.1 Invading the sanctuaries of patriarchal ideology

If woman has always functioned ‘within’ man’s discourse, a signifier referring always to the opposing signifier that annihilates its particular energy, puts down or stifles its very different sounds, now it is time for her to displace this ‘within’, explode it, overturn it, grab it, make it hers.....

It is not a question of appropriating their instruments, their concepts, their places for oneself or of wishing oneself in their position of mastery. Our knowing that there is a danger of identification does not mean we should give in : Leave that to the worriers, to masculine anxiety and its obsessional relationship to workings they must control - knowing ‘how it runs’ in order to ‘make it run’. Not taking possession to internalise or manipulate but to shoot through and smash the walls.¹

These prophetic exhortations of Helen Cixous herald the birth of feminist consciousness that re-evaluates the ideology or the fully articulated system of assumptions by which a patriarchy operates, which permeates everything it produces, including of course what is deemed to be ‘literature’. Cixous envisions the naissance of a newly born woman, who reinscribes her subjectivity, by disrupting, transgressing established definitions, values and ethics relating to the representation of women. Cixous describes the transformative powers of a feminist
thaumaturgist, who, armed with her weapon of subversion can destabilise the patriarchal ground on which she stands, the frame work within which she was hitherto subsumed and contained. The feminist writer, thus becomes a rebellious, defiant Promethean figure. She questions, "an oppressor’s language inadequate to describe or express women’s experience, a law of the father, which transforms the daughter to the invisible woman in the asylum corridor or the silent woman without access to authoritative expression and shows that she has it in her power to seize speech and make it say what she means". Feminist myth making is a revisionary process, entailing the transvaluation of the “myths, fears and idols” of patriarchy and remythologizing them. The feminist reconstruction of new mythic configurations is motivated by a desire for vast cultural change. In ‘Sorties’ Cixous and Clement speculate about the exhilarating possibility of the end of logocentrism and dethroning universalist, naturalized patriarchal assumptions by replacing them with a pluralistic feminist vision and cognition.

What would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble?

If it were to come out in a new day that the logocentric project had always been, undeniably to found (fund) phallocentrism, to insure for masculine order a rationale equal to history itself?

Then all the stories would have to be told differently, the future would be incalculable? the historical forces would, will change hands, bodies, another thinking, as yet not thinkable, will transform the functioning of all society. We are living in an age where the conceptual foundation of an ancient culture is in the process of being undermined by millions of species of mole never known before.

When they wake up from, among the dead, from among words, from among laws.
Cixous and Clement allude to the stories of women which can actively transform culture by giving voice to a largely unlistened to dimension of experience, one that has been denied validity and legitimation in a culture dominated by men. The feminist fictional works of contemporary women writers provide knowledge of human experience from the perspective of marginalised people. These novels are also vehicles for readers to transport them, into the uncharted and unexplored realms. The feminist speculative fictions such as utopia and dystopia shock the readers out of their mind forged manacles into envisaging and apprehending alternative realities. They explode mechanized stereotypes of conventional attitudes. They also show how patriarchy exaggerates the observable differences of biological sex in order to maintain its own conditions of possibility. Contemporary feminist fictional writers think that even if patriarchal rule does not operate explicitly as a perceivable material reality, there is a need to invoke the concept at the level of representation by acknowledging that patriarchal ideology is still effective. They expose the male hegemony underlying the complacency prevailing about the immutability of gender differences and corresponding social differences.

As a revolutionary, emancipatory ideology, 'Feminist thought' represents a transformation of consciousness, patriarchal social structure and modes of action. All feminist positions are founded upon the belief that women suffer from systematic social injustices because of their sex and therefore any feminist writer is, at the very minimum, committed to some form of reappraisal of the position of women in society. Adrienne Rich recuperates the concept of 'Re-vision' from
Robert Duncan’s *The Artist’s View* (1953) to signify rewriting of patriarchal culture. Although Duncan uses ‘re-vision’ merely to describe his own past, Rich’s ‘re-vision’ is a method for all women to share. The term used by Adrienne Rich becomes the powerful slogan of contemporary feminist writing. As Rich puts it, "Re-vision - the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction - is for women more than a chapter in cultural history; it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched, we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self knowledge, for women, is more than a search for identity; it is part of our refusal of the self destructiveness of male dominated society". Re-vision undertaken by the feminist Promethean writers creates a ‘new space’ on the boundaries of patriarchy.

This study explores the manifestation of feminist consciousness and the evolution of feminist revisionist perspective in the feminist fictional works of four contemporary women writers: Marion Zimmer Bradley, Suniti Namjoshi, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood. The individual fictional works chosen for study are, *The Firebrand* (1987) and *The Mists of Avalon* (1982) by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Suniti Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* (1981) and *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), Marge Piercy’s *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976) and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986).

I have used the appellation “Female Prometheuses” adopted by Alicia Ostricker as a generic name for these four writers who employ fascinating revisionist strategies to subvert patriarchal truths. They transform the reader’s
perceptions of religion, mythology, sexuality, family, politics, meaning and language. They decode the signifying practices by means of which females are coded and classified as women in order to be assigned their social roles, by reconstructing canonical texts, and deconstructing myths, stereotypes and ways of apprehending reality. "The revisionary task of reminiscence and retrieval involves reinscription, a process in which old narratives, stories, scripts, mythologies become transvalued, represented in different terms."7 The task of 'Re-vision' is often one of violent, Promethean transgression for the feminist writer because it entails making of new subjectivities for women and creating alternative fields of signification within which women may identify themselves. These writers unmask the insidious aspects of patriarchy by subverting meanings that belong to an androcentric framework. As manifestoes of the hopes and desires of marginalised people, revisionist feminist fictions adumbrate the genesis of an authentic female voice and decode the hitherto subliminal, camouflaged messages of female anger, protest and rebellion.

The revisionist recreations of these 'female Prometheuses' expose the complacency of patriarchal hermeneutics that would so dismiss female testimony and also register the cacophonies of male supremacist ideologies. They recuperate what is dismissed or elided in these hermeneutic practices of androcentrism in order to give the women's stories muted in the patriarchal narratives, a future and a hope as well as a past. Like the feminist theoreticians, they set out to show in their fictional works that all social categories are structured by the fact of gender and that
‘femininity’ is a construct rather than a quality of healthy femaleness. These writers challenge essentialist notions of ‘femininity’ as a set of qualities which seem to oppose those rational virtues of human or male nature.

1.2 Revisionist strategies as Feminist Hermeneutical Alternatives.

Women are in a nonhegemonic position because as a group, generally, they are outside the dominant systems of meaning, value, and power...

Hegemony is not to be understood at the level of mere opinion or mere manipulation. It is a whole body of practices and expectations; It is a set of meanings and values which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society.... but... is not, except in the operation of a moment of abstract analysis, in any sense a static system.

A hegemony, as a set of practices, has “continually to be renewed, recreated, defended and modified” as well as “continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged”. 8

In order to contest the hegemony of patriarchal culture, the feminist writer embarks on a re-visionary task of reversing patriarchal myths and seriously calls into question the conventional logic of patriarchal discourses. She strives to bring into articulation words for experiences that may have been suppressed in lonely silence, words for what cannot or dare not be said, words for the grief and anger of thwarted desire. Feminist theory which is anchored in the material realities of women’s lives, also vindicates the creation of repository of female experiences as a critique of contemporary society and as an imagined alternative to it. The
emergence of ‘Feminist theory’ as a hermeneutical alternative to resist the hegemony of patriarchal culture can create a woman - centered perspective.

The centrality of revisionist perspective to the pluralist, transformational core of feminism has remained indisputable. Both in the realms of feminist theory and fiction, the transformational manifesto of feminism is revealed through revisionist perspectives. In this context, the fictional works chosen for this study are evaluated as revisionist, feminist subtexts of originally patriarchal ideologies. The present study of contemporary feminist fictional works is undertaken in a hermeneutic spirit because a feminist study situated within a theoretical framework acquires intellectual legitimacy. The interconnecting threads, themes and preoccupations which link contemporary feminist fictional works chosen for this study are discernible in the revisionist enquiry and the feminist reappropriation of patriarchal ideologies common to all the fictional texts. The fictional works resurrect the subdued, marginalised ‘woman’ and depict her metamorphosis into a visionary, a spokeswoman for the “Repressed” of patriarchal culture.

The revisionist perspective in feminist fiction and theory has originated from revisionist myth making or incipient feminist perspectives on biblical scholarship, such as ‘proof – texting’, a revaluation undertaken by women writers to discover passages supportive of women, in religious texts. Adopting iconoclastic, recalcitrant female biblical figures like Deborah and Lilith, representative of extraordinary courage as their role models, the feminist writers make an attempt to rectify misconceptions about women engendered by an
androcentric framework. Elizabeth Cady Stanton in her commentary, *The Woman's Bible* (1895-1898) insists on the male centered character of the sacred writings and exposes the social injustice of patriarchal politics based on scripture. The feminist writers have also revealed the actual misogyny of biblical prophets. Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza who has reconstructed life of women within early Christianity, argues that to concede “too quickly... that women have no authentic history within biblical religion is to abandon history to those who have deprived women of their heritage”. Such re-visionary measures of feminist resistance have played a vital role in the history of feminist hermeneutics. Thus revisionist myth making evolves into a strategy of deconstructing the reductive and retrograde misrepresentations of women in primary patriarchal texts. The ideological rprise of feminist, revisionist myth making in fiction and poetry is upheld by the European and American feminist theories of interpretation.

1.3 Decoding the hidden connections between patriarchal cultural authority and female identity: The feminist theoretical framework of the study.

The aim of this study is to explore the thematic ramifications of the feminist revisionist perspective and their significance in the selected fictional works of Marion Zimmer Bradley, Suniti Namjoshi, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood. The thematic classifications are not rigidly compartmentalised. They are envisaged as overlapping areas. I have also tried to investigate the links which exist between the feminist theories of interpretation or hermeneutical alternatives
produced by the ‘women’s movement’, and the revisionist themes of contemporary
women’s fictions chosen for this study, although the dialectic between fiction and
feminist theory does not always happen in a conscious way.

This study explores the manifestation and evolution of feminist revisionist
in the fictional works of four contemporary women writers: Marion
Zimmer Bradley, Suniti Namjoshi, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood. The
individual fictional works chosen for study are seen as representative of different
aspects of the feminist revisionist enquiry. The connecting link lies in their
recognition of the injustices and intransigence of patriarchal systems of oppression.
Furthermore, feminist theory exerts a generative influence on these fictional works
written by women. These writers utilise ideas and motifs taken from feminist
theory in a highly inventive manner. The interrelation between feminist theory and
fictional narratives is strongly discernible. The feminist ideas and theories of
femininity, its construction, sexual politics, patriarchal relations, the experience and
institution of motherhood - provide an appropriate context for the analysis of
contemporary feminist fictions chosen for this study. These novels can be fully
understood and appreciated in the light of the theoretical ideas which the writers
appropriate and rework.

The notion of ‘patriarchy’ is the pivot around which the revisionist feminist
fictions of these contemporary ‘female Prometheuses’ revolve. ‘Patriarchy’ is
envisaged as a “system of male authority oppressing women through its social,
political and economic institutions.” 10 In these fictional works, the alienation of
women in patriarchy is revealed through the subversive act of 'Re-vision'. They also successfully delineate the feminist process of 'Consciousness-Raising' whereby the women in the novels become aware of their repression and victimization in the patriarchal society and feel empowered to validate their personal experiences as sources of authority. The process of 'Consciousness - Raising' radically alters women's apprehension of reality. To quote Catherine Mackinnon:

"Male power is real: it is just not what it claims to be namely the only reality. Male power is a myth that makes itself true. What it is to raise consciousness is to confront male power in this duality as total on one side and a delusion on the other. In raising, women learn they have learned that men are everything, women their negation: but that the sexes are equal."11

This knowledge constitutes the basis of an alternative realm of identity wherein the category of feminine is transformed into "the privileged site from which western phallocentric thinking can be deconstructed. The feminine ... is seen as ... the privileged carrier of Utopian visions".12 Thus consciousness - raising activity challenges even deeply felt identifications and pulls apart cherished psychic structures with the view of realigning them with female emancipatory interests. It also emphasizes women's involvement in the socio-economic and political structures of society in order to transform them from exploitative forms to emancipatory forms.

In this study, I have made use of the feminist theories of interpretation to illuminate the revisionist intentions discernible in the selected fictional works of
These contemporary feminist ideas about the nature of female reality are derived from different contemporary feminist streams of thought. They are developed by feminist thinkers such as Simone De Beauvoir, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich and others. The second wave feminist ideological positions constitute the theoretical frame work for this study. ‘Second wave feminism’ was a term coined by Marsha Weinman Lear to refer to the formation of women’s liberation groups in America, Britain and Germany in the late 1960s. According to Humm, the term also implies that ‘first wave’ feminism ended in the 1920s. Humm states that the second wave feminism based on the sophisticated understanding of the oppressiveness of imposed gender divisions radically extends the concept of egalitarianism and becomes a radical project of transformation.

Simone De Beauvoir’s careful distinction between sex and gender in her pioneering critique The Second Sex has had an enormous impact on later writers. Beauvoir argues that society sets up the ‘male’ as a positive norm and ‘woman’ as the negative, second sex or ‘other’; she concludes that being female is not the same thing as being constructed as ‘woman’. Beauvoir shows how all aspects of social life and thinking are dominated by the assumption of woman as ‘other’. She points out that it is further internalised by women themselves. Beauvoir also develops the concepts of ‘immanence’ and ‘transcendence’ which are explained in the course of this study. Betty Friedan’s reworking of The Second Sex in The Feminine
Mystique (1963) is described as a pragmatic version of the same arena: women’s passive acceptance of the cultural stereotypes of femininity as constructed by patriarchy. Beauvoir also claims that society sets up oppositions such as nature / culture, production / reproduction - all of which combine to place woman in an inferior position. Thus it can be seen that Beauvoir anticipates the arguments of the contemporary feminist anthropologist Sherry Ortner.

Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics, (1970) one of the first and most influential texts of second wave feminism, recognises the ubiquity of patriarchal power. Millett argues that ‘sexuality’ is the site where male power is expressed and that literature reveals that sexual mastery of men over women as the central symbol of patterns of dominance and subordination in culture. Millett’s expansive understanding of politics revealed in the theory that the personal, sexual life is political becomes the fundamental premise of second wave feminism. Millett’s explanations of patriarchy and sexual politics are taken up by Shulamith Firestone who traces a causal relationship between reproduction and sexual division of labour and identifies the tyranny of heterosexual reproductive practices as the material base of women’s oppression.

In her work Of Woman Born : Motherhood as Experience and Institution, (1976) Adrienne Rich problematizes the experience and institution of motherhood to establish that ‘mother’ is the repressed subject in patriarchy. The concept of ‘difference’ is central to Adrienne Rich’s theory. But as pointed out by Maureen O’Hara, this stance is more common among American feminists, some of whom
share the view that there is an ‘essential female nature’ determined by and
manifested through female body, with its possible multiple orgasms, it internal sex
organs, its capacity for pregnancy and milk nursing.¹⁴ This line of argument sees
‘female nature’ as violently repressed and compromised by patriarchal and
misogynistic societies that have prevented the woman from fully knowing herself,
other women and womankind. The radical version of this line of thinking is
exemplified by Mary Daly and others.

Feminist critics such as Maureen O’Hara and Maggie Humm identify yet
another important stream of feminist epistemology; the ‘constructivist’ theoretical
position represented by Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray. These
theorists draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis and Marxism to argue that the
fundamental structure of our sense of self is constructed by the conventions of a
misogynistic, patriarchal culture. The psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva flatly refuses
to define ‘femininity’. She prefers to see it as a position. If femininity then can be
said to have a definition at all in Kristeva’s terms, it is simply as that which is
marginalised by the patriarchal symbolic order. In her essay “Feminist, Female,
Feminine” (pp.117-132) in The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the
Politics of Literary Criticism (1989), Toril Moi concludes that Kristeva’s emphasis
on femininity as a patriarchal construct enables feminists to counter all forms of
biologist attacks from the defenders of phallocentrism. As Moi suggests, “To
posit all women as necessarily feminine and all men as necessarily masculine is
precisely the move which enables the patriarchal powers to define, not femininity, but all women as marginal to the symbolic order and society.” (p.127)

Helen Cixous examines the hierarchical binary oppositions instituted by patriarchy. Claiming that women are the ‘sex which is not one’, Irigaray argues that women’s sexuality is not satisfactorily represented and the ‘feminine’ is suppressed. Irigaray also reveals the continuous fluidity and plurality of women’s identity.

The poststructuralist line of thinking represented by theorists like Chris Weedon, draws on the deconstructionist thought of Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Althusser and others. For poststructuralists, as Maureen O’Hara puts it, “If we value our mothering, it is not through biological imperatives but because patriarchal societies require that we voluntarily accept roles such as unpaid child rearing and domestic work. To help solidify these work roles into aspects of identity, ideologies of femininity arise.”¹³ Poststructuralists emphasize the plasticity of ‘man made’ female nature. As Belsey points out, one of the most potentially liberating effects of poststructuralism for feminism is that it enables the feminist reader to uncover the discursive production of all meanings to pin point whose interests they support, and to locate the contradictions which render them fundamentally unstable and open to change. Some meanings may be more familiar than others, but they are no more fixed, natural or true for that.¹⁶ Thus it can be seen that in poststructuralist theory, meanings are cultural and learned, but they are also unfixed, sliding.
A brief account of the different feminist theoretical perspectives shows the ways in which writers articulate ‘gendered’ experience. Feminist theory re-evaluates and redefines the whole terrain of literary theory mapped out and colonised by men to include women’s experiences. Feminist theory is the site where “in the most natural and organic way, (female) subjectivity and politics come together”. It also provides the intellectual framework within which the present study is situated.

1.4 An overview

There have been numerous important contributions to the burgeoning scholarship on contemporary feminist fictions. In this section of the introduction, the overview, I have provided a critical account of some of the noteworthy studies on the following feminist fictional works chosen for this study: The Firebrand (1987) and The Mists of Avalon (1982) by Marion Zimmer Bradley, Feminist Fables (1981) and The Mothers of Maya Diip (1989) by Suniti Namjoshi, Woman on the Edge of Time (1976) by Marge Piercy and The Handmaid’s Tale (1986) by Margaret Atwood.

1.4.1 Reviewing patriarchal reality through the ‘fantastic’ and ‘science fictional’ modes:

Feminist science fictions reexamine the patriarchal reality by revealing it as the ‘other’ and defamiliarise the readers with what they have come to expect. Critical studies on the fictions of Bradley, Piercy and Atwood have explored and
illuminated the ‘fantastic’ and ‘science fictional’ perspectives discernible in their oeuvre.

Among these writers, particularly Bradley is more well known as a feminist ‘science fiction’ writer. She is best known for her science fiction especially for her ongoing ‘Dark over Books’ written at the rate of roughly one a year, from the Planet Savers (1962) to City of Sorcery (1984). The series pits the traditional, almost feudal Darkovers against the bureaucratic, technologically advanced Terran colonizers. Some feature the Free Amazons or Remunciates, a group of Darkover women, who renouncing the protections for women in the society, form a community to replace learned sexists behaviour and assumptions with independence, self defence and self sufficiency. Marge Piercy’s Woman on The Edge of Time and The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood have also been hailed as classic, feminist ‘science fictional’ works. I have discussed some of the seminal critical works that have dealt with the analysis of ‘fantastic’ and ‘science fictional’ perspectives in these fictions. Some of them are Feminist Futures: Contemporary women’s Speculative Fiction (1984) by Natalie Rosinsky, Worlds within Women : Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women, (1986) by Thelma J. Shinn, In the Chinks of the World Machine : Feminism and Science Fiction (1988) by Sarah Lefanu and Feminist Alternatives : Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by Women (1990) by Nancy Walker.

In her much acclaimed critical work, entitled In the Chinks of The World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction, Sarah Lefanu discusses the feminist
fictional works of Bradley, namely The Darkover Series, The Woman on the Edge of Time by Piercy and The Handmaid’s Tale by Atwood as science fictions. Lefanu discusses the ‘Darkover’ science fictional series of Bradley in chapters four and five under the respective titles, “Amazonas : Feminist Heroines or Men in Disguise ?” (pp. 33-36) and “When Women write of Women’s Rule”. (pp. 37-52) Although Lefanu does not include The Firebrand, her analysis of the portrayal of Amazonas and Matriarchies in the science fictional works of Bradley provides us with refreshingly new perspectives and interesting insights into the Amazonian sororities that constitute the essential core of the revisionary tale of The Firebrand.

In chapter six entitled “The Dream of Elsewhere : Feminist Utopias” (pp. 53-70) of her work, Lefanu discusses Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time as an outstanding example of a futuristic feminist science fictional utopia. Lefanu argues that feminist utopias are intimately connected with the modern women’s liberation movement. According to Lefanu, Piercy grapples with the potentialities of technology to create a world free of drudgery, social, political and sexual hierarchies. Lefanu compares Piercy’s work with Sally Miller Gearheart’s The Wanderground : Stories of the Hill Women. (1979) She also suggests that Piercy takes on the wider political implications that Firestone explores in The Dialectic of Sex : A case for Feminist Revolution. (1970).

In chapter seven, “The Reduction of Women: Dystopias.” (pp. 71-75) of her book Feminism And Science Fiction, Lefanu explores The Handmaid’s Tale of Atwood as an example of mythopoeic, dystopian vision that depicts a creation
myth in a future world of darkness and silence. Lefamu argues that in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by presenting haunting images of suppression, subjugation and fear, Atwood explores the terror aroused in men by women’s autonomous sexuality. She also describes the novel as the depiction of a search for the absent mother. According to Lefamu, it is partly through that search that Offred manages to construct a subjecthood for herself.

Thelma J Shinn’s study *Worlds within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women*, examines *The Mists of Avalon* by Bradley as the retelling of a traditional Myth. Shinn makes a comparative study of *The Mists of Avalon* and the earlier versions of Arthurian legends. She contends that Bradley focuses on the women characters in order to minimise the undue recognition given to important actions of battle and quest in the earlier versions and thereby accords a secondary importance to what happens in the realm of male action. Although Shinn identifies that “Center stage in *The Mists of Avalon* is the struggle between the followers of the Goddess, whose priestesses inhabit the misty and mystical Avalon, and the followers of the Christianity represented by Bishop Patricius”, (p.31) She does not develop or explore the symbolic implications of this struggle from the feminist viewpoint.

Carrol L Fry’s essay “What God doth the Wizard Pray To : Neo - Pagan witch craft and fantasy fiction” in *Extrapolation* (1990) discusses the adaptation of Neo-Pagan concepts for fantasy fiction with specific reference to *The Mists of Avalon*. Fry provides a detailed account of Neo Pagan rites such as the marriage
of the Goddess and the Horned god and the incorporation of these elements into The Mists of Avalon to establish the mythic underpinnings of the novel. Fry suggests that there is a potentiality for a feminist appropriation of Neo Pagan myths, but she does not explore this dimension as the scope of her essay is restricted to an analysis of Neo Pagan myths and the joining of the age old tale of the Round Table and the Grail with the Neo Pagan monomyth.

Feminist Futures: Contemporary women's speculative fiction by Natalie Rosinsky is also another significant critical study which explores the fantastic and science fictional elements in feminist creative works. In chapter 3 "The Battle of the Sexes: Things to Come" (pp. 65-103) of her work, Rosinsky examines the ways in which different feminist ideologies affect theme and form in three authors' depictions of a future "battle of the sexes". This chapter focuses upon a comparative analysis of Piercy's Woman on the Edge of Time, Joanna Russ's The Female Man and Gearheart's The Wanderground. Rosinsky alludes to the 'democratization' of heroism in these novels. She distinguishes between 'feminist androgyny' and classical or Western concept of androgyny and remarks that at their most hopeful, Russ and Piercy are advocates of androgyny. Rosinsky explores Woman on the Edge of Time as a futuristic depiction of the political struggle for social equity between the sexes.

The issue of whether Piercy intends "Mattapoissett" to be an actual utopia or the product of Consuelo's hallucinations has sparked a lively controversy among critics. Sheila Delaney's essay "Ambivalence in Utopia: The American Feminist
Utopias of Charlotte P. Gilman and Marge Piercy" (pp. 157-180) in Writing Woman: Women writers and women in Literature, Medieval to Modern (1983) focuses on this ambivalence discernible in Piercy’s delineation of the Utopian ‘Mattapoisett’. Delaney makes a useful distinction between two kinds of Utopias: the programmatic and the ideological. She places Woman on The Edge of Time in the former group which she describes as follows: “[The programmatic utopia] stresses a comprehensive social critique and serious social planning, attempts to demonstrate what should change and what might realistically replace present arrangements: it tends to propose social reforms that give scope to human variability.” (p. 158)

“Gilman, Bradley, Piercy and the Evolving Rhetoric of Feminist Utopias” (pp.116-129) in Feminism, Utopia and Narrative (1990) by Libbie Falk Jones analyses Piercy’s time manipulation in Woman on the Edge of Time. Jones points out how Piercy creates fusion through the web of character relationships radiating from Connie. Jones contends that interacting with the future helps Connie to rescue her present as well as to preserve and even to reinvent her past. She shows that Piercy does not establish past, present and future as a logical continuum, but blends them in Connie’s consciousness. Jones concludes that the movement is not linear but spiraling and the novel rounds through memory (what has been) fantasy (what might be) and dream (blending both past and future) to suggest that wholeness can be achieved only when all times of the self are integrated.
“Contemporary feminist Utopianism: Practising Utopia on Utopia” (pp. 238-255) by Lucy Sargisson in Literature and the Political Imagination (1996) identifies a shift within contemporary feminist Utopianism away from the universalist tendencies traditionally associated with Utopia. Critically examining the standard definitions of Utopia, Sargisson mentions Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time as a text which moves towards a new, open-ended and multiple approach towards the present and the future. Sargisson argues that Woman on the Edge of Time combines realism with Utopianism but does not blueprint the future. Rather, a number of alternatives are sketched to the present, which is in itself a possible future. All of the alternatives according to Sargisson are experienced by Connie, the central character, in the present tense. Sargisson also points out the similarity between Irigaray’s concept of ‘conditional presence’ and Piercy’s conception of equally possible different alternatives, none of which are distanced temporally from the central character’s present.

Critical studies have also explored how feminist science fictions illuminate postmodernist aesthetics. In chapter 5 “contemporary Women Writers: Challenging Postmodernist Aesthetics” (pp. 168-217) of her work Feminine Fictions Revisiting the Postmodern (1989) Patricia Waugh discusses Woman on the Edge of Time as a text which reveals the inauthenticity of a coherent psychological self. Waugh argues that Connie occupies a fictional space which hesitates fantasticaly between the ‘real’ world of the present day psychiatric hospital and the ‘possible’ future world of ‘mattapoissett.’
Feminist Alternatives: Irony and Fantasy in the Contemporary Novel by
Women by Nancy Walker examines the narrative devices of irony and fantasy used in some of the contemporary fictional works by women. Walker also includes Piercy's Woman On the Edge of Time. In the Second chapter of the book entitled "Language, Irony and Fantasy" Walker juxtaposes the story of Connie Ramos with Doris Lessing's The Four Gated City which also challenges the authority of the psychiatric establishment. Walker argues that the realistic as well as the utopian / dystopian parts of Piercy's novel embody serious social commentary. Walker also compares the 'Mattapoissett' of Piercy with Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'Herland' and the 'Whileaway' of Russ's The Female Man (1975) to conclude that although there is more conflict in Piercy's utopian 'Mattapoissett' and Janet Evasion's 'Whileaway', most of the inhabitants' energy is devoted to preventing or solving conflict rather than perpetuating its origins in 'We-they' dichotomies.

Analysing The Handmaid's Tale, Walker suggests that in Atwood's novel, the multiple ironies of a society based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Christian doctrine are demonstrated in the imaginative creation of that society. Walker also posits an argument that Atwood is re-writing a classic text: The Scarlet Letter (1850) by Hawthorne. In addition to all of the superficial correspondences, such as the colour red, the location in Massachusetts and the connection between religion and government, Offred's story is in many ways the ironic inversion of Hester's story. Hester is punished for adultery, whereas Offred is forced into it, both cultures using the same Bible as authority for their laws. Further, Walker
compares the "Historical Notes" section of *The Handmaid's Tale* to the appendix of Lessing's *The Four Gated City* to establish that both books are meant as 'reconstructions' of reality. She adds that Atwood plunges the reader at once into a world of uncertainty in which everything including language will be as Offred says repeatedly, a 'reconstruction', the essential method of irony. For Walker, Atwood's novel serves as a paradigm of the difficult search for identity in the contemporary novel by women. It also provides readers with the sense that alternative realities are possible because the ills it portrays spring from those we can identify in our moments in history: destruction of the environment, dangerous advancements in technology, and repressive governments justifying their actions on the basis of religious zeal.

In her essay, "Feminist Science Fiction: Breaking up the subject" (pp.229-239) in *Extrapolation* (Vol. 31, No.3, 1990), Veronica Hollinger focusing on the issue of subjectivity in feminist science fiction, mentions *The Handmaid's Tale* as an example of a feminist science fictional text within which the tension between humanist and poststructuralist readings of the subject is played out. Hollinger writes that the fictional text carefully produces and then decomposes its own protagonist, as well as its own narrative events. According to Hollinger, *The Handmaid's Tale* can be read as a model for feminist science fiction, demonstrating as it does its allegiance to the principles of humanism, while at the same time questioning that humanism from a position of poststructuralist irony.
1.4.2 A happy blending of Realistic and Speculative Modes:

Supplementing the studies on the ‘fantastic’, science fictional elements of these contemporary feminist fictions chosen for this study, there are important critical studies of these works that have also emphasized the amalgamation of the realistic and the ‘fantastic’ modes in these fictions.

Margaret Atwood has viewed Piercy’s Woman on the Edge of Time as a successful blending of realistic and speculative modes. In her essay, “Marge Piercy: Woman on the Edge of Time, Living in the open”, published in Second Words: Selected Critical Prose (1984) Atwood remarks: “Rendered in excruciating, grotty, Zolaesque detail, pill by deadening pill, meal by card board meal, ordeal by ordeal, and as a rendition of what life in a New York bin is like for those without money or influence, it is totally convincing and depressing”. (p 273) Atwood is particularly annoyed with those reviewers who find what they term the “science fiction” parts of the novel irrelevant to its social criticism: “Piercy is not that stupid”, she writes: “If she had intended a realistic novel she would have written one. Woman on the Edge of Time is a utopia, with all the virtues and shortcomings of the form, and many of the things reviewers found irksome are indigenous to the genre rather than the author”. (p.273) Atwood who defended Piercy’s narrative strategy published her own foray into the future, The Handmaid’s Tale, ten years later in 1986.
Janet Larson’s article “Margaret Atwood and the future of prophecy” (pp.27-56) in Religion and Literature (21 Spring , 1989) explores The Handmaid’s Tale as the work of one of the most provocative writing prophets. Larson describes Atwood as a non-theistic prophet of a ‘post biblical’ generation, a social critic and a speculator in futures. Atwood, according to Larson becomes a critical reconstructor of cultural memory who makes the future possible, like the biblical prophets, by helping us remember the past. But Atwood’s invocations of tradition are anti-messianic, inclusive of many forms of wisdom and are not authorised by any transcendental force. She becomes the contemporary Cassandra carrying the additional burden of establishing the ethos of the female critical voice. As Larson puts it, “in her outrageous caricature of Gilead, Atwood projects what their ‘Decade of Destiny’ would lead to if the Bill Brights and Jerry Falwells of the 1980s were to win their ‘Holy war’ against feminism and achieve their goal of taking over political power in America”. (p.34) Larson also points out that The Handmaid’s Tale is the work of an insider who resists univocal readings of the ‘Logos’ but makes the biblical available to the postmodern consciousness by embedding its treasures in a discontinuous, self consciously constructed secular scripture, a palimpsest of many texts. Larson remarks that “The Handmaid’s Tale is structured as a set of scriptures testifying to the provisional nature of all human testimony by binding in one volume two different versions of the same story whose relationship is
open to interpretation. As (female) testimony plus (male) commentary, *The Handmaid’s Tale* as a whole connects the crises and atrocities of western history with the gender politics of interpretation”. (p.35)

1.4.4 Feminist revaluation of contemporary social experiences in dystopia.

“Nature and Nurture in Dystopia: *The Handmaid’s Tale*”, (pp.101-112) by Roberta Rubenstein in *Margaret Atwood: Visions and Forms* (1990) edited by Vanspanckeren and Castro focuses on the extension, inversion and recasting of two of the most persistent clusters of theme and imagery that originate in Atwood’s earlier concern with survival: nature and nurture. Rubenstein notes that the ‘natural’ world in the Republic of Gilead is utterly denatured. She also shows how in *The Handmaid’s Tale*, female anxieties associated with fertility, procreation and maternity are projected as feminist nightmares and cultural catastrophes. Rubenstein contends that Atwood demonstrates the way in which the profound and irreconcilable split between ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ ideologies of reproduction in contemporary social experience corroborate female ambivalence about child bearing in patriarchy.

*Border Traffic: Strategies of contemporary women writers* (1991) by Maggie Humm identifies the plot of *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the ‘experience’ and the ‘institution’ of motherhood or the personal and political aspects of mothering.

Expanding Humm’s perspective, Paulina Palmer’s study, *Contemporary Women’s Fiction: Narrative practice and Feminist Theory* (1989) points out that
The Handmaid’s Tale succeeds in bringing together the two contrary attitudes to motherhood and sexual reproduction found in women’s fiction. The negative view emphasizes female vulnerability to male manipulation and control on account of women’s reproductive capacities. The positive view affirms motherhood as a source of personal pleasure and fulfillment. Palmer argues that by juxtaposing these contrary perspectives, Atwood manages to balance the two opposing aspects of motherhood.

1.4.5 Feminist Linguistic Perspective and Dystopia:

In Feminist Linguistics in Literary Criticism (1994) Katie Wales remarks that in her futuristic novel, The Handmaid’s Tale, Atwood draws attention to the complex relationship women (and women writers in particular) have with language. According to Wales, Atwood shows not only how women can be manipulated through language but also how they can use it, in their own way to preserve themselves.

1.4.6 Unveiling the power equations in Feminist Dystopia

In “Writing so to speak: the feminist dystopia”, the second chapter (pp.29-39) in Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century (1996), Elisabeth Mahoney identifies two competing gendered narratives (narrative authority coded as masculine, silence as feminine) which clash in a power struggle within the fictional space of The Handmaid’s Tale. Mahoney’s reading of the
dystopia focuses on the  slidings of power within the text and in particular,  the site of this battle. Mahoney offers Roland Barthes' *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973) as a strikingly suggestive theoretical and metaphorical parallel to the power struggle represented in the narrative of Atwood, as it develops gender specific components (plaisir and its supplement jouissance) into an erotics of reading.

1.4.7 Dystopia and the Meta Historical Perspective

“Future tense : Making History in The Handmaid’s Tale” (pp.113-121) by Arnold E. Davidson in *Margaret Atwood : Visions and forms* discusses the two different projected futures in *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Davidson argues that Atwood problematizes the notion of the boundary between novel and history. According to Davidson, Atwood not only writes her own history of patriarchy but also shows how patriarchal imperatives are encoded within the various intellectual methods we bring to bear on history. As Davidson suggests, “*The Handmaid’s Tale* in its present form is not the only possible ordering of the ‘some thirty tapes’ that have been transcribed into text. The editors, we are specifically informed, have intervened to make choices about the structure of the tale... Professor Pieixoto admits that all such arrangements are based on some guesswork and are to be regarded as approximate, pending further research. But that proforma disclaimer does not acknowledge how much the very process of assembling a text (or writing the history of any age from its surviving traces) means creating a fiction”. (p.115) For Davidson, this textual question of the boundary between novel and history becomes
all the more pertinent when juxtaposed against Atwood’s insistence that everything in the book is ‘true’ and has, in some form, in some society already been done. Davidson also adds that the biblical fundamentalism of Gilead poses crucial questions about the interpretive use of literary texts for all of that society’s most appalling practices have their scriptural justification.

1.4.8 The coupling of the epigrammatic fable with contemporary feminism.

Studies on Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* have pointed out its ‘atemporal’ quality. A review of *Feminist Fables* by Sherry Simon (pp.264-267) in *Glimpses of Canadian Literature* (1985) explores the rationale behind the coupling of the pithy, epigrammatic fable with contemporary feminism. Simon argues that in the almost 100 short pieces which make up her collection of *Feminist Fables*, Namjoshi succeeds in subverting the fable form, making her pieces less the expression of pre-conceived dogma than the occasion for provocation and questioning. Simon also refers to the ‘atemporal’ feeling in these fables. She points out that the narrator, like her characters, belongs to no time, no place and assumes a detached stance, viewing the drama of creatures, not with anger, but with the sense of distance conferred by the perspective of the ages.

1.5 Revisioning Texts and contexts: A summary of the four major chapters of the study.

This study consists of four chapters apart from the Introduction and conclusion.

The second chapter has two parts. The first part of the chapter focuses on The Firebrand (1987) which is a feminist revisionist narration of the story of Trojan war in The Iliad of Homer. Here, I have tried to show how Bradley rereads the images of women in the canonical text to reveal the politics of woman's "alterity". Bradley appropriates the male authored myths to contest and reinvent their meanings. In her delineation of the lives of royal women of Troy, Bradley demonstrates how biological essentialism is the bedrock of most traditional thinking about women, used both to denigrate and to idealize them, and justify the existing status quo of patriarchal power structures. She views this stereotype of the 'essential feminine', the conception of woman as "nature itself in its primeval, mindless, unarticulated, seductive engulfing, undifferentiated state" with scepticism. The cause-effect relationship between the public/private dichotomy strictly enforced and legitimised by Trojan and Akhaian patriarchies and the exclusion of women from political and administrative spheres of these patriarchies is explored.

The second part of the chapter deals with The Mists of Avalon (1982), a retelling of Arthurian legends from a feminist perspective. Here I have discussed Bradley's delineation of the gender politics of biblical redactors in Arthurian England, who submerge pagan vestiges and suppress the Goddess cults. I have also focussed on the remythologization of the 'Father God' religion of Christianity
in *The Mists of Avalon*. As a revisionist tale, Bradley’s work can be viewed as an exclusionary project for the revival of ancient matriarchal deities. In my analysis of *The Mists of Avalon*, I have attempted to show how patriarchal myths are redefined in the pre-Christian religious and cultural spheres where alternative streams of symbolic practices such as the Goddess cults exist and defy patriarchal orders. This chapter essentially deals with the feminist reconstruction and reworking of two well-known mythological works and legends: *The Iliad* of Homer which represents the Trojan and Akhaian patriarchies and the legends of King Arthur and his knights that are representative of the old English patriarchal Christendom.

Chapter – 3. Decoding the misogynist Wisdom of patriarchal myths: Feminist revisionist consciousness in Suniti Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* and *The Mothers of Maya Diip*.

This chapter explores the thematic manifestations of revisionist consciousness in Suniti Namjoshi’s *Feminist Fables* and *The Mothers of Maya Diip*. In her fables, Namjoshi dismantles androcentric assumptions and reveals ‘woman’ as a product of ideological construction. What is offensive in representations of women is not so much having them defined in relation to men as the fact that such relationships are often exploitative of women. It is reminiscent of Simone De Beauvoir’s classic exposition of ‘alterity’ as a fundamental category of human thought. Similarly, Namjoshi starts from the insight that societies are organised on the assumption that man is ‘self’ and woman ‘other’ and that the consequences are always deleterious to women. As Namjoshi shows in her *Feminist Fables*, the
reason for this is that the 'self' treats the 'other' as either a supplement or a threat. Namjoashi demonstrates that if woman is conceived of as a supplement to man, she becomes the receptacle either of what he does not want or what he cannot have. Every act of demythologizing involves a corresponding act of remythologisation for Namjoashi. Discrediting patriarchal mythologies, Namjoashi portrays myriad images of women in a patriarchal society and unmasksthe oppressive nature of stereotypical representations, which converted into role models, offer an alarmingly limited view of what a woman can expect from society. By providing opportunities for thinking about women and by comparing how they have been represented with how they ought to be, women's self awareness is heightened by a process of 'consciousness-raising'. In the Feminist Fables of Namjoashi, there is hidden laughter as well as anger, a subversive spirit of feminine mischief able to parody or appropriate or re-shape male stories, 'masculine' modes and forms.

In this chapter, the Feminist Fables of Namjoashi are categorised into three groups: fables that rework mythologies and legends, fables on fairy tales and fables which depict female affiliations. Grimm's fairy tales, Arabian Nights, Arthurian legends, Greek myths, Hindu puranic myths constitute the primary sources or texts for Feminist Fables. Like Firestone, Namjoashi identifies romantic love as the pivot of woman's oppression. She deconstructs the elevated position which the romantic love code superficially assigns to woman and perceives her true status. Namjoashi looks critically at fairy tales as they are foremost among the cultural forms which help consolidate patriarchal ideologies. Feminist Fables re-examines myths, legends and fairy tales as some of the traditionally sanctioned ways of
representing women and reveals their anti-feminist and anti-female attitudes, powered by loathing of women which sees them as sources of all evil.

Chapter - 4. Madness as the desiderium for an alternative reality: Marge Piercy’s *Woman on The Edge of Time*.

A heightened awareness of women’s exclusion and alienation from sources of power is a part of the feminist revisionist consciousness. A reappraisal of the patriarchal power and the institutions through which it operates, also necessitates a revaluation of the notion of female insanity within the framework of patriarchal institutions. A greater part of the feminist movement has considered modern Psychology to be both a product and a defense of the status quo of patriarchal society. Viewed from this context, Marge Piercy’s *Woman On The Edge of Time* is an important feminist text. It crosses the boundaries of patriarchal psychological realities. It challenges the conventional notion of reality and demonstrates it to be the most pervasive delusion of all because of its denial of fantasy, desire and the unreal inherent within it. Piercy exposes the destructive effects of patriarchal institution of Psychiatry. She reveals the complexity of human mental states. The delusory boundaries or frontiers between such dualities as sanity and madness are explored and exploded. Piercy reveals how notions of sanity are ideologically inspired and designed to maintain the status quo of power, prestige, money and sex relations. Charlotte Perkins Gilman expresses a similar view in her short story, *The yellow wall paper*. (1892) The narrator’s husband’s prescriptions for her cure in fact intensify her disorientation, yet the reader guided by her narrative voice, is led to perceive that a culture that denies her autonomy and expression cannot be
considered truly sane. A feminist revisionist approach also emphasises the political implications of female insanity and institutionalisation of mad women.

This chapter also explores female insanity as an alternative construction of rationality. Madness is a form of liminality, a way of being outside the definitions of normalcy, particularly in an age of reason, as Foucault has shown, the most disreputable liminality of all. It is outside the limits that rationality constitutes itself. In a ‘rationalistic patriarchy’ a culture created at the behest of an aggressive and intolerant reason, madness takes on an added and exaggerated meaningfulness for Piercy. It is a space where dreams may flourish and desires be realised. It empowers Connie to visualise a feminist utopia. Utopias are the ‘no places’ of a future where society has transformed into something other than our present realities. In Woman on the Edge of Time, it is envisaged by a woman who is outside the boundaries that reason has constructed. This ‘mad’, unreasonable woman, under privileged, dispossessed and abandoned reveals how reason constitutes its limits and impoverishes the world. As Imelda Whelehan remarks, “In offering such utopias feminists remind us of the ‘no place’ for women in current dominant ideological representations - and as they seek to gesture a future ‘no place’ for women as well as men, they might also be viewed as venturing a heterotopia of their own”.

Chapter 5. The Nightmare land of Dystopia: A Revisionist tool of feminist exploration - The Handmaid’s Tale by Margaret Atwood.

This chapter discusses the feminist appropriation of dystopian fiction for the ‘re-visionary’ act of consciousness raising by Margaret Atwood. Atwood’s
feminist dystopia deconstructs the ‘truths’ of logocentric patriarchy. This chapter also investigates the thematic links between Atwood’s poetry and *The Handmaid’s Tale* with specific references to *True Stories* (1981) and *The Circle Game* (1966). Offred, the protagonist of Atwood’s fiction, reiterates and reinforces the views of female persons of Atwood’s *True Stories*, who problematizes ‘Truth’ by sensitizing us to the ‘elusive’ many sidedness of women’s ‘true’ stories. Atwood’s dystopian feminist vision identifies the cause of woman’s suppression as sexual subjugation and incarceration in a man made vicious circle of ‘immanence’. Similarly Atwood’s poem ‘The Circle Game’ in her collection *The Circle Game and other Poems* also explores the condition of female immanence through a metaphorical representation of this theme. The chapter reveals the text’s feminist theoretical underpinnings by illuminating the similarities and interconnecting threads between the views of Andrea Dworkin, Shulamith Firestone and Margaret Atwood. Accentuating the political dimension by providing us with menacing future possibilities of contemporary patriarchy, *The Handmaid’s Tale* also optimistically delineates a diasporized ‘woman culture’ of sorts within the repressive framework of Gileadian terrorist patriarchate.

The four chapters focusing on the six prominent feminist fictional works of ‘Female Prometheuses’ namely Marion Zimmer Bradley, Suniti Namjoshi, Marge Piercy and Margaret Atwood are “re-visionary” attempts which review traditionally
connoted femininity and its codified representations as the excess of patriarchal history. They problematize essentialistic notions of the ‘feminine’ prevailing in patriarchy and work towards constructing a polyvalent identity for the ‘woman’. They derive intellectual sustenance from feminist hermeneutical alternatives anchored in the lives and experiences of women.
NOTES


11. Humm 36.


