Chapter Three

Women at Cross-Roads: Gender Identity in a Cross-Cultural Context

“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will.”

– Charlotte Bronte, Jane Eyre.

From a contemporary constructionist perspective, gender identity is not a stable, fixed trait. Sex characteristics define female and male humans. Gender characteristics, on the other hand, are subjective behaviours, resulting from social acculturation. While there are biological differences between men and women, each culture makes its own definitions for what it means to be a man or a woman. As West and Zimmerman point out, gender is “an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements, and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society” (126). The sense of one’s gender identity is acquired through the internalization of external knowledge. “Gender is part of an identity woven from a complex and specific social whole, and requiring very specific and local readings” (Alsop et al. 86).

In the general postcolonial situation, the decolonisation of culture, outlook and modes of reflection have been hampered by the neo-colonial onslaught.
Decolonisation does not mean retrieval of a “romanticised” golden past; it means an objective realisation of the complexity of gender construction in India which is determined by other factors like class, caste, religion, regional cultures and languages, specific traditions, taboos, laws of marriage, sexual kinship and inheritance, feudal moral codes and the new role popularised by western media. In literary theory it means challenging the patriarchal canons, deconstructing the phallocentric creative and critical discourses and defining the feminine in literary texts in the Indian context. Though feminist critics were less in Indian context, many Indian women writers had feminist leanings which they propagated in their novels, and creative writings. These feminist writers were fighting a pitched battle against their “intimate” enemy “man” to win their due honour, status and identity. This was done by their due participation in all affairs of the society and by nurturing and strengthening their freedom of expression. They wished to present the agonies and exploitations they experienced in the male-centric world, craving to bring about a change in the stereotyped attitude of men.

According to Meena Shirwadkar in *Image of Women in Indo-Anglian Novel*, women in India have been passing through the stages of tradition, transition and modernity. Following the changes in the Indian society, many women writers in India were receptive to the new ideas of feminist ideology. Some of the women writers who championed the cause of women were Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, and Bharati Mukherjee. They were followed by Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, and Chitra Divakaruni who show a new awakening of feminine
sensibility. A.V. Krishna Rao quotes E.M. Foster’s remark in *A Passage to India* to describe its growth and direction:

An interesting aspect of the modern Indian enlightenment has been the creative release of the feminine sensibility. Women in modern India have not only shared the exciting but dangerous responsibilities of the struggle for independence but also articulated the national impulse and the consciousness of cultural change in the realm of letters. The feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively late manifestations. (1)

It is true that Indian women entered into the realm of public affairs mostly during the freedom struggle and like their male counterparts their writings remained under the influence of nationalism which motivated them to appreciate tradition despite its burns in their daily life.

The Indian women writers’ suppressed longing to test the rationality of tradition and modernity, in particular space and time, is clear in their writings. Tradition and modernity are equally welcomed by them, provided women are given a space for peaceful existence, a dignified identity, as well as an opportunity to ensure peace, freedom and justice. The female protagonists of the Indian women novelists try to achieve self identity and independence within the framework of marriage and home. They don’t wish to demolish these traditional institutions of marriage and family, as a safer and better alternative is not yet found by them. During the phase of social transition, when new social structures
and values are to be delineated and accepted, the women novelists’ role as trend setters becomes very important, as pointed out by Gramsci:

When things are going badly in the social structure of a nation because of the decadence of the fundamental capacities of its men, Ludovici claims, two distinct tendencies seem always to assert themselves: on the one hand to interpret as symptoms of progress changes which are purely and simply signs of decadence and ruin of old and healthy (!) institutions; and the second, which is due to a justified loss of confidence in the governing class, is to give to everyone, whether or not they have the qualities required, the certainty of being chosen to make the effort in the direction of putting things right. (297)

Women were given the responsibility of putting things right, of revealing to the world the double standard and hypocrisy of men on certain issues relating to women:

Whatever may be their prescription, compromise or revolt, women are more for the integration of families and minds. Women’s story proclaims loudly, ‘We are different: notice us. We have a secret of life and longing we must speak about’. Their narratives, their characters and their language are part of patterns that emerge whenever a social order changes, when suppressed voices find utterance and a new world opens. (N.K. Jain 26)

The new world of women resists the androcentric system of thoughts and representations which had created a damaging effect in the female psyche. In
Women’s Consciousness, Man’s World, Sheila Rowbotham examines the role of cultural representation and social conditions in the formation of “woman’s consciousness”. Basing her research on Simone de Beauvoir’s premises, she argues that a woman can never forget her gender as she is constantly aware of how she is being defined as a woman as a member of a “sub culture” and that her identity is constructed in the shadow of the dominant male culture. As a result, women develop a dual consciousness, a dual self – a self adhering to the cultural prescription of womanhood and an inner self which may be quite different. Rowbotham writes:

But always we are split into two, straddling silence, not sure where we would begin to find ourselves or one another. From this division, our material dislocation, came the experience of one part of ourselves as strange, foreign and cut off from the other which we encountered as tongue-tied paralysis about our own identity. We were never all together in one place, we were always in transit, immigrants into alien territory. We felt uncomfortable, watched, ill at ease. The manner in which we knew ourselves was at variance with ourselves as an historical being-woman. (31)

The secondary status of women confined them to procreation and upbringing of progeny. The patriarchal order subjected them to unfair treatment and they were denied basic human rights. As Bill Ashcroft et al point out in the Introduction to Feminism:

In many different societies, women like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of ‘other’, colonized by various
forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonial
races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of
oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the
history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled
developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial
discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the
dominant and early theory, like early nationalist post-colonial
criticism was concerned with inverting the structures of
domination, substituting for instance, a female tradition or
traditions for a male dominated canon. (233)

Over the centuries and in many different countries, women have spoken out for
their sex and articulated, in different ways, their complaints, their needs and their
hopes. “Women Liberation Movement has its origin in the eighteenth century and
there has been a continuous agitation for women’s rights – social, economical and
cultural – and the freedom and equalities of sexes in the eighteenth and
nineteenth century [sic]” (Pattanayak 65).

Feminist critics believed that the entire cultural spectrum is dominated by
patriarchal value. Everywhere in the political, literary and philosophical system
there is the play of patriarchy. Oyeronke’ Oyewurmi in her “Colonizing Bodies
and Minds” states: “The histories of both the colonized and the colonizer have
been written from the male point of view – women are peripheral if they appear
at all” (256). Woman is subjugated by male in colonial and post-colonial nations.
Among the feminists, the French philosopher and novelist, Simone de Beauvoir’s
Second Sex is considered to be a seminal text on feminism. Her famous sentence
“One is not born but rather becomes a woman” (Second 295) has propelled feminist thinking for the next few decades. According to Ashish Nandy, colonial custom and practice stemmed from “a world view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over non-human and the sub-human, the masculine over the feminine . . . and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage” (X).

In such a baffling postcolonial context, the Indian gender identity, particularly that of women, confronts the confluence of two cultures – the European and the traditional Indian. So it is pertinent here to make a brief survey of the history and development of both the Western and Indian feminisms.

The history of women’s suffering and marginalisation came to the lime light with feminist activities gaining momentum. The history of feminism is divided into two waves, with the first wave dating from 1830 to 1920, best recalled for the suffragette movement and a second wave organised around women’s liberation, dating from 1960s to the present day. From the middle ages to the period of French Revolution there were many women voices who had the courage to argue for the rights of women. Women who chose literary profession were scorned by men. However a few women continued to write and one such woman was Mary Wollstonecraft whose *Vindication of the Rights of Women* was published in 1792. This work created a furore in the literary world. It remains one of the foundation stones of contemporary feminism. In 1843 Marion Reid published *A Plea for Women* that covered most of the areas that needed reform. Feminists of those days affirmed that women were made for men, at the same time a woman was made for herself too. Many of the feminists affirmed the need
for education and economic independence. The two best known arguments for women’s rights were written by men in the nineteenth century. In both the cases the authors William Thompson and John Stuart Mill acknowledge the influence and inspiration of their wives in writing these books. They stressed that women’s suppression proved a hindrance to human development.

True women’s movement began to emerge in England under the leadership of Barbara Leigh Smith and her group of friends known as Ladies of Langham Place. They campaigned for the need of women’s education and employment. Her book *The Higher Education of Women* appeared in 1866 which stated that women should have the same education as men in school and university level. Elizabeth Garret was the first woman doctor to win the approval of the British Medical Journal for her indomitable perseverance to become a doctor. In the course of nineteenth century, the right to vote in the election became central to feminist demands. The suffragette movement, fighting for women’s right to vote had to suffer a long battle. In 1918, women above the age of thirty were allowed to vote and in 1928, women finally won it on equal terms with men. From 1919, women were elected as members of Parliament and the Sex Discrimination Act opened all professions, including civil service to women. After the Second World War, the United Nations issued a Declaration of Human Rights which acknowledged that men and women had equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. The battle for legal, civil and educational equality has been to some extent the central element in feminism. The feminist writings of Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir created ripples in the realm of feminism. Woolf chided women who have served as looking glasses for all
these years reflecting the figure of men at twice its natural size. Simone de Beauvoir insisted on woman to change her condition and come out of the imposed passivity. In her later years, she understood women’s submission was more in the Third World nations as the women of the Third World nations didn’t enjoy the privileges and comforts of the European women.

Feminism as a theory has very recently given rise to a new area in criticism, known as “Feminist Literary Criticism”. The motto of this study is to identify the dormant powerful female tradition in literature. It attempts to give a new interpretation to women’s work and to bring to the limelight the long forgotten works of women in the past. Feminist criticism also aims to interpret the works of male writers from a feminist point of view and to differentiate between the language politics and style of both the sexes. An elementary goal of feminist theory is to comprehend women’s oppression in terms of race, sex, class and sexual preference and how to revolutionize it. Feminist theory reveals the magnitude of women’s individual and collective experiences and their struggles.

The feminist critics also fight against the one-sided evaluation of literary output. The conspiracy with which literary critics subordinated women in literature is perpetuated from the patriarchal ideology and concept of gender. Against the concept of patriarchy, gender and partiality in evaluation of women’s literary output, the feminist critics formed basic themes. They are the female aesthetics which assumed that there is a different literary consciousness of female which differed from the male. It also refers to “female literary consciousness” as expected in literature. The French feminists argued that women have a particular style of writing, not merely a female literary consciousness.
“Ecriture Feminine” described a uniquely feminine style of writing, characterized by disruptions in the text: gaps, silences, runs, rhythms and new image. Such writing proves difficult to read because the feminine voice had been repressed for so long and can only speak in borrowed language. Masculine language is linear, logical, authoritative and realistic whereas women’s language with its gaps, pauses and breaks disrupts the expected flow of language. Women deconstruct masculine language providing to be more radical. French feminists gave a new wave of thought to the existing feminism. Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigary and Helen Cixous “participated in advancing a notion of l’écriture féminine, a feminine writing that would issue from the unconscious the body, from a radically reconceived subjectivity in an endeavor to circumvent what they held to be phallocentric discourses” (Habib 669). All these writers revaluate the significance of the maternal, viewing this as empowering rather than the oppressed.

Around 1980, Elaine Marks and Isabella de Courtivron’s anthology of translations was widely available in Britain and America. The book *New French Feminism*, offered an alternative perspective on many existing problems of woman. However, the three major figures who have come to represent French feminism in Britain and North America are the psychoanalysts Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigary and the philosopher Helen Cixous. These great thinkers stressed that western ideology was actually the expression of male thought, a masculine worldview. Men used language as a means of encoding and maintaining the dominant patriarchal order. A small number of feminists supported the psychoanalytical theory for “the emphasis on the role of culture and society in creating the self
supported view that women had been culturally conditioned to accept an artificially constructed inferiority” (Tolan 333).

Feminist criticism is a vital area in contemporary intellectual activity of literary discourses meant to revive political and social issues associated with women’s actual participation in the mainstream culture. Feminist theory can be compared with some major conceptual developments like Marxism and psychoanalysis. This theory helps one analyse and understand the major factors through which the two genders – male and female – have been constructed with specific language, and ideas in literature. Feminism incorporates both a principle for equal rights and elimination of social injustice, aiming to create a world for women with equal opportunities and rights.

Helen Cixous, one of the pioneering feminists who challenged the male hegemony wrote,

> When I started writing, I instinctively felt an ethical obligation towards women and decided to take up cudgels on behalf of them. When I say ‘women’ I’m speaking of women in their inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history . . . we don’t need to be a part of men, we stand as entities by ourselves. (qtd.in Sahu 3)

According to Helen Cixous, the sex of the writer shouldn’t restrict the freedom of their literary production.

It was Virginia Woolf’s celebrated essay *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) which gave a powerful account of the social and economic restriction faced by
women writers. The most obvious meaning of this claim is that women need financial and psychological independence in order to exercise their creative potential. With centuries of male values and strategies followed in literary theory, feminist theorizing was seen with distrust. Virginia Woolf notes that most of the books on women have been written by men, defining women so as to protect men’s image of their own superiority. She observes a deep ambivalence and irony in male attitude towards women. Women in literature are treated with respect and love but in reality they are ill treated, suppressed and disregarded, in fact, they are absent from history.

According to Woolf, women writers were less in number than men writers because of the neglect and brickbats they faced from the society. There were psychological impediments and traditional biases against which they had to fight. Woolf holds that women should create their own tradition of writing, distinct from men writers’ content and style. Many women writers have vainly tried to write like men. Some writers like Emily Bronte and Jane Austen had ignored the dominant male voice and followed their own consciousness. But many other women writers succumbed to anger and irritation for they didn’t have the clarity of vision and they were forced to see things from the male perspective.

Woolf’s other major feminist text is *Three Guineas* (1938) written as an appeal for contribution to three causes: the rebuilding of a woman’s college, the promotion of women’s entry into the professions and the prevention of war together with the protection of culture and intellectual liberty. Woolf opines that the entire ethos of war is exclusively male. Woolf points out to her fellow patriotic country men, that Nazis and Facists alone were not dictators, as far as
women were concerned, men’s dictatorship is universal. She is not ready to accept the ideals of freedom and justice of the Englishmen when these ideals were not realized in their own home. She strongly condemns the way a woman is treated in her country:

Our country . . . throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions . . . . Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or “our” country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share . . . in fact, as a woman, I have no country.

As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world. (Guineas 108-09)

As a woman her advice to her fellow countrymen is not to encourage the desire to impose ‘their’ civilization upon other peoples. Woolf calls upon women to reject “unreal” loyalties like wealth, profit, money, rank and status.

Simone de Beauvoir remains the most influential of all the twentieth century western feminists for her ground breaking critical work The Second Sex (1949) which remains a seminal work in feminism till this day. Her writings including four volumes of autobiography and several novels add up to a remarkable exploration of her own experience. The Second Sex was well received by women throughout the world. Simone de Beauvoir was influenced by Satre, Marxism, Psychoanalysis and Hegel. Hegel’s philosophy underlies de Beauvoir’s analysis of male-female relation as master-slave relationship. Male consciousness
takes the risk of becoming the master, reducing its opponent to the status of a slave. Because of the nature of duties, the slave is more attuned to the world and ultimately the master is forced to recognize his own dependence on the slave.

De Beauvoir argues that all through history, women have been denied full humanity, denied the human rights to create, to invent and find meaning for life. Man remolds the face of earth, he creates new instruments, he invents and shapes the future; woman on the other hand, is always and archetypally the "other". She is seen by and for men, always the object and never the subject. Woman stands for Nature, mystery and non-human and what she represents is more important than what she is.

Women’s economic, social, political and personal freedom is inhibited by various ideologies which are aimed to detain her in her traditional roles. The perpetuation of certain obstinate myths inhibits her social-economic freedom. “Of all the myths, none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine ‘mystery’ ” (Second 285). This myth allows man the luxury of legitimately not understanding women. “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. She is not regarded as an autonomous being. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute. She is the other” (Second 16).

According to Beauvoir, woman’s otherness seems to be absolute because,

There are, to be sure, other cases in which a certain category has been able to dominate another completely for a time. Very often this privilege depends upon inequality of numbers – the majority imposes its rule upon the minority or persecutes it. But women are not a
minority, like the American Negroes or the Jews; there are as many women as men on earth. (Second 18)

Moreover women have never achieved cohesion as a group. Another contributing factor to women’s subordination is their own reluctance to forgo the traditional advantages conferred on them by their protective male superiors; if man supports woman financially she could evade the economic freedom in which she must work for a living. Simone de Beauvoir opines:

“Woman has always been man’s dependant, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. Almost nowhere is her legal status the same as man’s and frequently it is much to her disadvantage. Even when her rights are legally recognized in the abstract, long-standing custom prevents their full expression in the mores.” (20)

De Beauvoir is confident that women will arrive at “complete economic and social equality which will bring about an inner metamorphosis” (686), and that men and both women will exist both for self and for the other; “mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an other”. In this recognition, in this reciprocity, will “the slavery of half of humanity” be abolished (Beauvoir 688).

Betty Friedan’s book The Feminine Mystique (1963) exploded the myth of the happy housewives in the affluent white American suburbs. The well-researched, sharply written book, revealed that even affluent middle class women lead restricted lives accepting the restriction with a depression. She also founded
the National Organisation for Women (NOW) in 1966 to campaign for the legal rights of women. However, she too faced oppositions from detractors who insisted that legal rights alone could not redress the imbalance in the society, for, women themselves were not confident of their capabilities. They were ill-equipped to grasp opportunities for their advancement. Moreover, many felt Friedan was encouraging women to enter into a male-oriented social system which was corrupt and could be destructive to women. Despite the complaints and criticism, Friedan’s equality feminism was incredibly popular in liberal America. A number of other important feminist voices were heard around this time. They are Mary Ellman’s *Thinking About Women* (1968) Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone’s *The Diabetic of Sex* (1970).

Kate Millet is one of the notable feminists, whose critique *Sexual Politics* (1969) delineates the power structure in man, woman relationship. Patriarchal society subordinates women establishing male supremacy. Politically women face negligible representation, and the biological sciences prove women as a weaker sex to be preserved at home for producing children. Women are encouraged to internalise their own inferiority and are subjected to an artificially constructed idea and cultural pressure. Kate Millet used phallocentric criticism to analyse Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Gustav Flaubert’s *Madam Bovary*. Millet concluded that both the writers had penalized the transgressive female characters in a conservative mode in their otherwise progressive novels. By her method, Millet demonstrated that it is possible to reveal the repressed meanings in the feminist reading of male authors’ works.
One of the gynocritics who coined the term ‘gynocriticism’ is Elaine Showalter. The stand of gynocriticism is that women are different in terms of nature, race, culture and nation and hence they cannot be universally studied. It also states that writing by women is always dominated by a gender consciousness. In fact, there is no distinction between the experience of man and woman and hence gender is a cultural construct. The objective of gynocriticism is to discover the specificity in a woman’s text, which makes it not a man’s text but a woman’s text. In her monumental work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) which is a veritable goldmine of information about the lesser-known literary women of the period, she discusses the women novelists from Brontes to the present day. The male literary tradition had suppressed and ignored the female literary productions which remained hidden, waiting to be discovered. Elaine Showalter has enlisted both American and European novels from the mid nineteenth century to the twentieth century. In her epoch making book *A Literature of Their Own* Showalter has made a gynocentric re-reading of canonical female authors, in an attempt to revolutionize the accepted canon.

Elaine Showalter discusses in her work how the feminists challenged the restrictions of women’s language, denounced the ethic of self-sacrifice and used their fictional dramatization of oppression to urge changes in the social and political system. They embodied a declaration of independence in the female tradition. Women “writers such as Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing and Margaret Drabble, undertook and authentic expression of female experience using a new range of language, accepting sexuality as a source of creative power and reasserting their continuity with women of the past” (Habib 693). Elaine
Showalter came under heavy criticism as her gynocriticism perpetuated the marginalization of woman instead of including them into the dominant cultural discourse. The marginality of women had to be changed and was challenged. The development of female aesthetics and gynocriticism led to elaboration of a separate canon of female writing – literature by women. The feminist critics who study literature written by women and a woman’s critical efforts (female aesthetics) both worked together to establish a canon of writing.

Gender theory developed in the later part of 1980s, as some of the male critics without the patriarchal bias started talking about the feminist point of view. One such critic is K.K. Ruthvin who took the feminist point of view which led to some controversy. Literature came to be studied both as an expression of femininity and masculinity. The use of gender can be considered as a critical tool. Gender study has brought a temporary truce between the sexes.

Feminism requires an agenda within which it can face diverse problems. Liberal ideals of political, economical and educational equality remained influential, but by the end of the nineteenth century, a new trend of celebrating the maternal, domestic or social roles, came into existence. Adrienne Rich, an American poet and critic’s works *Of Woman Born* (1976) and *On Lies, Secrets and Silence* (1980) propagate “a feminist theory which she calls as Re-vision or rewriting of patriarchal customs. The term refers to a new feminist perspective which could link women’s culture to the realities of our past and existing history” (Sahu 9). Rich redefines the concept of joy of motherhood and the concept of ‘lesbian experience’ from a feminist view.
Western feminism reflects the ways how women claimed the full status of an individual without losing their identities as women. There were different titles given to feminism as “Anarchist Feminism”, “Abolitionist Feminism”, “Essentialism”, “Sisterhood”, “Lesbian Feminism” etc. Though called by different names, the notion of alienation is vital to feminist theory. Women’s intimidation in the home, in culture and in sexuality, the sexualisation of women’s work and the sexual persecution of women generate a gender specific form of women’s isolation. Moreover women’s participation in male dominated activity intensifies the alienation. Feminist ideology stresses that under patriarchy, women are defined as sexual objects and women have to raise their voice collectively against this dominant male culture that suppresses women legally, mythically, culturally, politically and economically.

There was a growing voice of dissent in Europe from the black, lesbian and working class women who felt feminism didn’t represent their views. In trying to present a universal voice of feminism, some of the feminists ignored the differences that existed between women. For black women, the term ‘black’ itself was a site of contention which had to be fought along with gender discrimination. Bell Hooks in her Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre (1984) was sharply critical of the feminist movement arguing on behalf of the black women. Black women are the most victimized by sexist oppression, as they are powerless to change their condition in life and have never been allowed to speak out for themselves. The current feminism, she insists, is racist and has left many women bitterly disillusioned, for the white women were not aware of the problem of
black women. Thus the concept of gender is inseparable from the culture in which it is embedded.

The Indian post-colonial critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty argued that just as men reduced women to the “other”, so the white woman had constructed the Third World woman as the “other” to herself.

The average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etc). This I suggest is in contrast to the (implicit) self representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions. (Mohanty 243)

Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar are of the view that

Many white feminists’ failure to acknowledge the differences between themselves and Black and Third world women have contributed to the predominantly eurocentric and ethnocentric theories of women’s oppression. Feminist practices which examine our cultural practices as ‘feudal residues’, or label us ‘traditional’ also portray us as politically immature women who need to be versed and schooled in the ethos of western feminism. (qtd. in Havely 236)

A recent development has been the attempt to think through feminism from black and third world women perspectives as in Alice Walker’s *In Search of our
Mother’s Gardens (1983) and Barbara Smith’s Towards A Black Feminist Criticism (1977). Contributions of lesbian critics include Mary Daly’s Gyn/Ecology (1978), and Judith Butler’s ground breaking work Gender Trouble (1990) was a powerful critique of heterosexual assumptions in feminist theory.

The Women’s Liberation Movement in the West has been fairly successful in deflating male superiority but it did not permeate easily in the east, as the position of women in the east was tradition bound. Feminism as an ideology was alien to the Indian culture which couldn’t be transplanted into the Indian socio-cultural milieu without some danger to the traditional institutions like family, marriage etc. Feminism in India is not a single unified movement and its needs are plural. The Indian subcontinent with its diverse languages, culture and family structure shaped feminine perspective differently from the developments in western cultures. Sahgal says in an interview,

I believe that there are fundamental differences between Indian feminism and western feminism, and the issues are very different. Feminism in India is making a tremendous impact with less noise and drama than in the west. As far as my fiction is concerned, I feel Indian women are conditioned to stay put in the home, no matter what difficulties they face. They find it extremely difficult to break family ties. (qtd. in Sinha 136)

The women of India and the third world nations had to educate the women of west in particular about their needs and the gulf that existed between them. Audre Lorde in her “The Master’s Tools will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” says,
Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of black and third world women to educate white women, in the face of tremendous resistance, as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. (100)

Feminist movement didn’t gain proper attention till independence in India as women too took part in the freedom struggle. Women of India had to fight against colonialism and patriarchy too. The emergence of women as an identifiable category defined by their anatomy and subordination to men in all situations, resulted, in part, from the imposition of a patriarchal colonial state. For females, colonization was a two fold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. So women are doubly colonized, one by the British colonialism and the other by indigeneous tradition imposed by Indian men. However, the western education abroad moulded and changed the outlook of the inteligentia and the men of India started opposing some of the discriminatory practices against women. In the pre-independent age, the question of women’s education became debatable. The colonialists claimed to improve the status of women by offering them education but the nationalists countered it by saying that Indian women would become decultured in the process of western education. An over-educated woman was represented as becoming a “memsahib” who neglects her home and husband. They felt that too much of education would result in bad domestic practices. It was a cultural construct which continued for a few years
and women remained a victim to patriarchal oppressions. Writing about what it means to be a woman in modern India, Clara Nubile comments:

Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of ‘being a woman-wife-mother . . . . A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional Indian views . . . . Indian women do not appear to have their independent role in society. Moreover, they must become a male-appendix in order to have a role. Indian women are thus linked by male-definitions of sex-segregation patterns. Only if a woman is a wife and a mother – both examples of male appendixes – she gains a status in the outer world, although a very subordinate one . . . . The main difference between India and western societies is that in India women live as a part of a community, a group, a family, first the father’s family, then the husband’s one and finally the joint family . . . . Individualism is considered a western perversion and female individual space is unacceptable and inconceivable. (22-23)

However, the prevalent notion that feminism permeated into the east from the west is not accepted by the critics-writers of third world nations. They quote instances from Indian literature as early as eighteenth century which exhibit a rare expression of feminine sexuality and their freedom of expression.

In *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, a comprehensive account of women’s involvement in nationalist struggles in Egypt, Iran, India, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Korea, Kumari
Jayawardena makes the interesting observation that feminist ideas in these regions were not originally imported from the West, but inscribed in their own inheritance. Ketu H. Katrak also subscribes to a similar point of view:

Women writers’ stances, particularly with regard to glorifying/denigrating traditions, vary as dictated by their own class backgrounds, levels of education, political awareness and commitment, and their search for alternatives to existing levels of oppression often inscribed within the most revered traditions. Their texts deal with, and often challenge, their dual oppression – patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism. (254)

A striking example for such a dual oppression is the case of the Telugu poet Muddupalani, a courtesan in the court of Pratapa Simha of the eighteenth century, as described by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita in their introduction to *Women Writing in India*. Muddupalani’s *Radhika Santwanam* was a ‘Sringaraprabandham’, in which the principal ‘rasa’ evoked was ‘sringara’ or erotic pleasure. Traditionally, in such literature, it is the man who woos his lover. But in *Radhika Santwanam*, the woman’s sensuality is presented as the central issue, as she takes the initiative, and it is her satisfaction or pleasure that provides the poetic resolution. It is an unusual work, but it was relatively uncontroversial in its time. In 1911, however, it was banned by the British Government, on the ground that it could endanger the moral health of the Indian subjects. Though the ban orders were withdrawn after Independence, it was difficult to find a copy, even as late as the late 1980s, perhaps due to the influence of the many reform movements. Tharu and Lalita write:
The story of Muddupalani’s life, her writing, and the misadventures of ‘Radhika Santwanam’, could well be read as an allegory of the enterprise of women’s writing and the scope of feminist criticism in India, for it raises, in an uncanny way, many of the critical questions that frame women’s writing. These include questions about the contexts, structured and restructured by changing ideologies of class, gender, empire, in which the women wrote, and the conditions in which they were read: questions about the politics, sexual and critical, that determined the reception and impact of their work; questions about the resistances, the subversions, the strategic appropriations that characterised the subtlest and most radical women’s writing . . . . Patriarchies reconstructed in the interests of Orientalism, Imperialism, the Enlightenment, nationalism, among other forces, provide the horizon within which the text articulates its feminist challenge. (15)

The changes that resulted after independence made women get educated, join the work force and become economically independent. The feminist movement in India gained momentum only in the late sixties when educated women began questioning the unjust treatment of patriarchy in a more realistic level. The two different images of Indian womanhood which equals her to “Shakti” and the other treating her as a piece of property to be passed from one man to another, combine to keep women out of the mainstream and deny her personhood, to confine her within “lakshman rekha”, defiance of which brought her only disaster. The cultural institutions which propagated patriarchy are questioned by liberal minded feminists in their literary works.
The cultural representation and social conditioning that formed the women’s consciousness in India considered woman to be an embodiment of sacrifice, silent suffering, humanity, faith and knowledge. She should be virtuous, chaste, submissive, homely, graceful and devoted to her husband and his family. But the young women of today are becoming aware of the biased attitude of the society. They question the cultural representation of women and the inhibitions imposed by the society on women alone. There are two crucial issues that people are concerned about in the liberation of women and men from the rigid and limiting sex rules. One is whether there is any basis to the claim that there are biologically derived, psychological characteristics which universally differentiate man and woman. The other is to understand why it is that in almost every society women are physically, politically and economically dominated by men and are thought to be inferior to man. These persistent questioning by women, and specifically women writers brought in a flux in the society.

Fiction by Indian women novelists occupies a prominent place in Indian writing in English. They have made a substantial contribution to the growth and the enrichment of Indian novels in English. Their novels lay bare the physical and psychological abuse and ill-treatment of women in the male dominated Indian society. They raise their voice against gender discrimination, the social, cultural and religious practices that oppress women. They also illustrate how legends, myths and orthodox attitudes and traditional beliefs strengthen the patriarchal practices which have made women inferior creatures and mere objects of pleasure. Through their writings the women novelists try not only to re-define the position of women in society but also to bring out their identity and assert their
independence as women. Prominent among these women novelists are Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy etc.

With the rise of feminist movement in India, many women novelists in India have come up against the suppression and ill treatment of women. They try to portray the psychological, social and cultural impediments the women characters face in their novels. They in their own way try to re-define the traditional Indian women through their novels. Kamala Markandaya’s women characters are strongly rooted in traditions and they are to a great extent conformists. Though they strongly believe in the established customs and cultural practices they never give up their individuality. As Jameela Begum observes “Her women characters are memorable in that they portray . . . an indepth study of the human psyche caught in the net of social, traditional and spiritual values” (22-23).

Anita Desai is noted for her sensitive portrayal of the inner life of her female characters. She explores the tensions between family members and the alienation of middle-class woman. According to Molly Yancovitz “. . . . Desai writes women as a simplification, producing an identity (perhaps only strategically essentialist), that silently screams out against the oppressed positioning of women in India” (qtd. in Singh 102) but no woman character of Anita Desai has been fortunate enough to free herself from the shackles of femininity.

Shashi Deshpande a leading Indian woman writer has depicted the dilemmas, dualities and sufferings of the Indian women in her novels. She has
shown woman as a silent sufferer who has to bear the brunt of the patriarchy. Her women characters struggle against the age old slavery and suppression and reclaim their identity. Shashi Deshpande feels that men and women should live together in a more friendly way to solve the problem of gender discrimination. According to Shashi Deshpande “A woman is also an individual like a man, she is one half of human society. She is also born like a man with lot of capabilities and potentials. She has every right to develop all that” (qtd. in Prasannasree 149).

Born and educated in Europe but married to an Indian and settled in India, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, in her writings differs from other writers native to the Indian soil. Jhabvala is gifted with the Western sensibility which endows her with an uncommon insight into the typical traits of Indians, particularly the urban upper class oscillating between tradition and modernity. Jhabvala’s world is upper class North India. Like Sahgal, she portrays the anglicised Indians and the East-West conflicts, but her protagonists are simple minded, sensuous and emotional, and her novels deal with routine daily life, not with the corridors of parliament and power politics as that of Sahgal. In the technical sense Jhabvala is considered to be one of the best writers. Sahgal shares common ground with these women novelists in interrogating the structure of domination in the network of power, knowledge and canon formation.

Nayantara Sahgal with her liberal outlook and Western education fictionally politicizes women’s issues as power struggle. Sahgal’s women belong to the opulent class and they have no experience of much discrimination in educational or political fields and financial dependence. They are deeply and sensitively alive to women’s predicament in a patriarchal society. In Sahgal, the
struggle is for abolishing gender discrimination seeking respect, mutuality and peace in life. She asserts women’s strength and values and does not propagate a separate female world.

Sahgal investigates in her fictional world, the existing social order and discovers the cultural conditionings blocking the awakening in the Indian women. However Sahgal encompasses the women in relation to the Indian socio-cultural ethos, thus exploring the various concepts of Indian tradition at large, such as arranged marriage, the supreme importance of chastity, the denial of personal rights to women and the image of Indian woman as a self-denying and self-effacing being. The adherence to chastity is considered primitive by Sahgal.

It is Sahgal’s bitter experience of her first marriage and divorce which heightened her awareness of the discrimination faced by women in the Indian context. This sharpened sensibility has given birth to an awakening of feminist ideas in her. She confesses to Neena Arora “I have come to this awakening rather late, although I have personally always been independent minded. That is not enough. I think, if one cares, one must project and ally oneself with one’s beliefs. I think I do this more now as regards feminism” (115). Sahgal is against the social norms that restrict the freedom of women.

In this patriarchal society a female child is brought up under the strict control of her parents. Marriage, home, children, the claims of the family are the traditional goals set for a female child since her birth. A daughter who conforms to this traditional goal is accepted as a virtuous good woman. In the Hindu traditional society, a girl is brought up with the notion of being “Parayadhan” i.e. another person’s possession at her parent’s home. Conforming to this tradition
the parents try to find a suitable match of their choice for their daughters. “A marriage joined from the top to bottom by caste, community and background” (Rich 57) is the choice of the parents. She is given to a new master, her husband who will determine and shape her for the rest of her life. She hardly gets any encouragement to develop her independent personality. The decision of her career and her marriage is taken by her father and mother. Throughout her whole life, she remains as someone’s daughter, someone’s wife or someone’s mother. Her own identity does not have any existence. This kind of practice reduced woman to a non-entity and Sahgal opposes the social norms that treat women as possessions in her article “Women: Persons or Possessions”. She says, “When I heard someone remark, we never allow our daughter to go out or I can’t do that, my husband would not like it, it sounded very peculiar alien jargon. As if, I thought, women were property not persons” (68). In The Day in Shadow Som draws immense pleasure in showing off his wife as his personal possession, as he says to his friend, “Look what I’ve got. Good enough to keep, under lock and key” (Shadow 27). As a husband, he treats his wife as a priceless object adorning her with jewellery and fine expensive things. To Simrit all the beautiful things of materialistic world appear meaningless. She craves for some goal; some meaning, beyond the world of self advancement. Inder in Storm in Chandigarh also considers Saroj as his possession; Like his shoes, she belongs to him.

Sahgal does not consider marriage as an impregnable institution. It had to be more flexible in the age of transition. It had to rest on equal companionship. She says in her second autobiography From Fear Set Free:
For my elders marriage both by law and tradition had been indissoluble, a choice once made irrevocable. For my grandchildren who would grow up in a greatly changed India, it would, in all probability, be a more flexible and less stable institution, yielding more and more to the pressures of personality and society. For me, it would fall midway between the two, the law eventually facilitating divorce, while tradition and sentiment were still ranged against it. (32)

Sahgal’s personal experience shattered her dreams of love and marriage. She artistically transforms her own experience of the traumatic marriage and the consequent divorce together with what she observed, understood and sympathized in the contemporary world into fiction in *Storm in Chandigarh* and *The Day in Shadow*.

Sahgal’s women characters are heterogeneous. From the traditional mother characters who mould their daughters to their assigned roles by the dominant male culture, to the rebellious women who refuse to stick on to their gender roles, women are effectively portrayed by the novelist. Sahgal’s ambivalence is reflected here, for though she struggles to abolish gender discrimination, she does not propagate a separate “female world” like the radical feminists, but envisions an organised whole world blending female rights with the male culture so that women could stand on equal footing with men. In fact Sahgal’s women characters are like “damsels in distress” who need men to save them from their oppression. Neena Arora remarks:
Sahgal’s women depend on some help to escape oppression and exploitation which in their cases is usually provided by a man a friend or a father who often helps them to come out of the miserable relationship or give them moral strength to smash the taboos and assert their identity to live a meaningful life. (102)

Bringing up a girl child and arranging a traditional marriage becomes a very heavy investment with no returns and therefore women’s education was not supported in Indian society earlier. Girls were married off in a young age and Sahgal portrays such docile, submissive characters in all her novels. Pinky’s marriage in A Situation in New Delhi is a typical traditional marriage where money is spent luxuriously as a status symbol. Pinky has agreed to marry a man who is a total stranger to her. She doesn’t know anything about marriage or sex, except that she has to live with her husband in another house. Pinky happily leaves the choice of selecting her trousseau, jewellery and her life partner to her parents. Even when Devi asks her what she would like to have as a wedding gift, she meekly answers “You decide Aunty. You’ll know best” (Situation 41).

Everything in Pinky’s life is decided by others. Pinky is very much conscious of her looks and figure and visits the beauty parlour “to get her arms and legs done, leaving skin with a polished look, not a hair in sight” (Situation 168), Pinky’s desire to look beautiful represents her submission to the patriarchal values. “Girls like Pinky lived as their mothers and grandmothers had” (Situation 44) easily moulding themselves to the gender roles. Girls like Pinky with their doll-like beauty and docile submission to patriarchy are considered as ‘best wife’ material by men. Bimmie’s wedding described by Sonali in Rich Like Us is also one such
traditional marriage where Bimmie accepts the stereotyped bride role with little fuss unable to see the heavy responsibility and underlying suffering behind it. Girls like Pinky and Bimmie who easily lend themselves to the stereotyped roles do not face any alienation or identity crisis which Sahgal’s intelligent and sensitive women face in their lives. Rashmi in This Time of Morning, Saroj in Storm in Chandigarh, Simrit in The Day is Shadow, and Sonali in Rich Like Us do not submit to patriarchy, losing their identity. Betty Friedan accuses society of considering identity crisis as man’s problem only. “The crisis of growing up, of choosing his identity, the decision as to what one is and is going to be are considered only men’s prerogatives and women are told that feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights, the independence and the opportunities” (68).

In This Time of Morning, Nita’s desire to be her own self and to choose a career leads her to commit a faux-pa when she gets involved with an elderly man Kalyan, a minister without portfolio. Her father Dr. Narang is a queer mixture of eastern and western cultures. In his life style, like taking drinks, playing bridge and attending dance, he enjoys western culture. But when it comes to his daughter, he is traditional and his wife informs Rakesh, a family friend “But don’t keep Nita out too late. Her father hardly ever allows her to go out to these club dances. He’s ever so strict” (Morning 38).

Nita at the age of twenty-three, doesn’t wish to get married. She feels she could choose a career and enjoy her life. She tells Rakesh “I do not want to marry at all just yet. Now you are back, Rakesh, do persuade Mummy and Daddy I should have a job” (Morning 41). Nita is happy to get a job on the minister’s
recommendation. Due to her western liberated lifestyle and the severe restrictions imposed by her parents, Nita is unable to balance between the two and she ends up in a sexual relation with the minister out of her love and admiration for the minister. Nita also fails to assert herself in refusing to marry a man of her parent’s choice. Nita is not assertive to rebel and so she bows down to social conventions and traditions despite her unwillingness. This helplessness was and is the state of women in the Indian context, which Sahgal portrays in her novels.

Sahgal believed that marriages of modern age rested on equal companionship, love and trust. But her personal experience shattered her dreams of love and marriage. She writes about her disastrous marriage in “Turning Point”:

Marriage unsettled me disastrously. For the first time, I came across the shocking assumption of inequality. A man’s ego and ambition, I learned, must be served first. In case of conflict, the man’s will and desire must prevail . . . . By traditional standards, I should have been happy . . . what was missing was something vital and essential to me as oxygen-an atmosphere of aspiration . . . . For its clamoring core was the inescapable truth that once you have lived in freedom, been truly yourself, you can never settle for less . . . . (29)

Sahgal views traditional marriage as an institution which rests on patriarchy and its dominant norms. In her first novel A Time to Be Happy Sahgal presents three generations of couples whose marriages are arranged ones. The narrator’s parents
and his friend Govind Narayan’s parents belong to the first generation. The narrator’s unorthodox father and his traditional mother were wonderfully suited. His mother, “like any good Hindu wife believed that his concern was with God and hers with God in him” (Happy 5). Milton too develops the same idea when he describes Adam communicating to God and Eve responding to God through Adam. But Govind Naryan’s mother Ammaji and her husband belong to two different worlds. Her husband was a pleasure loving man and her “nun like disdain for luxury” (Happy 25) irritated him. Ammaji refused to submit to the mould in which he tried to cast her. She was bold enough to criticize all that she disapproved of her husband and his home, but they knew that marriage is for life and “those who do not adjust to its ups and downs must forever remain unhappy” (Happy 6).

Lakshmi, the wife of Govind Narayan and his brother Harish’s wife Maya belong to the second generation. Lakshmi’s marriage to Govind Narayan is considered to rest on a solid stable structure, true and tried, built on the theory that affection and mutual regard could reasonably be expected to flourish between partners of same socio-religious and provincial background.

Lakshmi, content to be a woman, lives a happy life with Govind Narayan with no conflicts coming their way. But Maya, the wife of Harish is a victim of matrimonial incompatibility, unable to submerge her individuality in the rich family of the Shivpals. She becomes a volunteer in the Congress to serve the nation, while Harish the deputy collector of Lucknow is interested in aping the British ways and throwing parties to entertain the elite group. As their
temperament, out-look and attitudes are entirely different, their marriage becomes a marriage of “emotional isolation”, her childlessness adding to her loneliness.

Girish, Devika, and Sanad, Kusum belong to the third generation of couples. For Girish, his uncle Harish is his role model and as Devika is submissive, eager to please her husband, there is no conflict in their married life. Sanad, an anglicized young man, falls in love with Kusum who comes from a nationalist background. They find it difficult to get along as they belong to different kinds of traditions. Kusum confesses: “Sometimes I feel Sanad and I are so far apart . . . . I am so awkward in his world” (Happy 240). But there is no serious incompatibility in their marriage as they are determined to make their marriage work out of their love for each other.

Rashmi of This Time of Morning is a representative of modern women for whom marriage means an emotional involvement based on truth and equality but not on domination and self-effacement. But her marriage makes her “a moth trapped in cement” (Morning 44), as she feels that they are a mismatched couple. She walks out of marriage with an intention of divorce, as her wrong marriage had robbed lustre, defeated her courage and will, making her silent and withdrawn. She finds comfort in the company of Neil Barenson, a Danish architect.

Mira, the mother of Rashmi, believes that marriage means a complete identification with the husband. Though Kailas, her husband warns her even before marriage that he has only little time left “for the sort of marriage any women wanted” (Morning 61), she is successful in achieving a balance with him because of her traditional attitude and they successfully continue as a team. She is
shocked to know her daughter seeking a divorce. She laments “what reason could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands to lunatics and lepers. And Dalip, God forbid, was none of these things” (Morning 203).

But Kailas rightly understands that Mira belongs “to a fast disappearing race of women for whom endurance was a test of character” (Morning 204) whereas Rashmi longs for a release from ancient bonds, pain and suppression. Uma the wife of Arjun Mitra creates a hell for both herself and her husband. The fourteen years difference between them create a mismatch as Arjun fails to understand the need for her exuberance and vivacity. As a kind of revenge on her husband she transforms sex into a kind of escape from her limited pattern of life. Arjun Mitra swallows his wife’s infidelity and the scandal of the society.

Sahgal has portrayed Uma, the wife of Arjun Mitra, as a woman who doesn’t conform to the virtuous stereotype. Arjun Mitra, the grandson of the renowned Sarat Mitra, had to suffer the pinch of the mismatch. “Arjun had often thought since that fateful day that marriage was the only venture into the unknown on which human beings embarked without the least hesitation or preparations” (Morning 31). He had been an obedient and pleasing son but his marriage arranged by his loving parents had brought him a disgrace. Uma’s “bewitching face, the lovely body, had been a mask for her treachery” (Morning 33). For Arjun and Uma “there was no escape from marriage. They had been married according to the Hindu law and there was no provision for divorce” (Morning 51). Both man and woman had to suffer in an incompatible marriage.
Neil Berenson is also victim of the “fractured families”. Despite having failed in her marriage, Rashmi feels “since marriage can be so unhappy I suppose it can be happy too with the right ingredients” (Morning 197). But Neil says “Marriage does not really make for happiness. I think there is something wrong with people who stay happily married” (Morning 195). Rashmi and Neil represent the eastern and western notion of marriage and its position in respective societies.

The marital incompatibility in man-woman relationship becomes the main theme of Nayantara Sahgal’s autobiographical novels Storm in Chandigarh (1969) and The Day in Shadow. Saroj in Storm in Chandigarh has been brought up in a liberal atmosphere by her parents and expects equality and respect within marriage. But Inder, her husband belongs to the “he-man school” for whom “A wife was one half of an enterprise, the compliant partner who presided over home and children and furthered husband’s career” (Storm 46). Before their marriage, Saroj confides about her premarital affair to Inder, hoping for a clean break from the past. Unfortunately Inder begins to harbour a nagging suspicion with regard to Saroj’s loyalty, and begins to torment her. Saroj for the sake of her two children and the third on the way, accepts and lives a life entirely on his terms. Shyam Asnani is right on stressing on the emptiness in their relationship. “They have lived, loved, even produced and raised children but there hasn been no real happiness between them” (127).

Saroj quietly endures the taunts of Inder till she comes under the influence of Vishal Dubey, a liaison officer who has come to settle the political problem between the chief ministers of Chandigarh and Haryana. Saroj begins to protest
against Inder’s authoritarian ways and is abused and assaulted by Inder. Soon the situation worsens and Saroj decides to leave her husband and Inder’s home once for all, taking her children with her for confinement to New Delhi, under Dubey’s advice and support. Lakshmi Sinha welcomes Saroj’s decision to leave Inder, “Saroj leaves domesticity and timidness far behind and emerges out of her chrysalis with new found confidence. Dubey has resurrected her personality” (109).

Inder, a representative of the patriarchal norms with “ancient tribal male roots” (Storm 86) is unable to forgive the moral lapse of Saroj or tolerate the individuality of women. According to Inder man will always be the master, “A thousand years from now a woman will still want and need a master, the man who will own and command her and that’s the man she’ll respect” (Storm 92). In fact in Inder’s view a wife is a slave: “No slave is a slave to the same lengths and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is” (Mill 57). According to Sahgal, marriage becomes a life long damage in a mismatched couple’s life. Though Saroj and Inder are married long back and have children, the “Oxygen of Understanding” and caress of affection for which she craves is missing in her married life.

M.L. Malhotra in his Bridges of Literature traces the reason for the failure of marriage of Inder and Saroj:

Their marriage, though out-wardly successful is unhappy, reeling on the rock of temperamental incompatibilities and a radical change divergence of marital ideals. Saroj is a highly sensitive, child-oriented marital creature raised in a free atmosphere but
yoked to an insensitive, self-centered, a western gloss. They belong to two different culture milieus. (229)

As Vishal remarks, “Get two people so unlike together in marriage and every effort at growth on the part of one can look like an act of betrayal to the other” (Storm 145). Saroj’s effort to build a home of love ends in a failure and she leaves Inder once for all. Altekar A.S. in his The Position of Women in the Hindu Civilization remarks: “Generally speaking in all climes and times, men have laid down a much higher standard of sexual morality for women than what they were themselves prepared for to accept. Hindu society has been no exception to this rule” (305). Sahgal clearly questions the double standard in sexual morality propagated by patriarchy.

Sahgal in Storm in Chandigarh is deeply concerned with the failure of marital relationship. Even Vishal Dubey who is deeply concerned with human relationship in happy marriages, finds that his own marriage with Leela has turned out to be “a vanishing search for communication” (Storm 17). After Leela’s death, Vishal’s sexual relationship with Gauri is begun mindlessly. Gauri, the wife of a successful industrialist, calls herself a “social butterfly” fluttering with “freedom of sex” finding no harm in extramarital relationship. In fact Mara too, who has been brought up in a foreign country, doesn’t consider it wrong to have an affair with Inder. There are frequent misgivings and estrangement between Mara and her husband Jit which are solved in the end, when Jit “reached out” to Mara breaking the barriers between them. Sahgal’s women reject the gender roles assigned to them by Indian culture.
Sahgal’s women strive to establish a new order with changed standards, where women can be their true selves and where there is no need for hypocrisy. They believe that character is to be judged not by chastity of body but by purity of heart. These women wish to herald a new morality which demands accommodation of individual longing for self-fulfilment . . . .

(Meera Bai 136)

Sahgal’s women characters transform sex into a multidimensional relationship. Pre-marital and extra marital relationships are not good or bad in themselves, but there is much more to it then the plain moral view. But when women like Mara talk about extra marital affair frankly, men like Inder wouldn’t digest it, as seen in the following dialogue: ‘He tells Mara, ‘There is no shame nowadays, no barriers. Everything is taken lightly. And women talk and behave like men’. ‘Perhaps they just behave more like human beings and less like possessions’ said Mara mildly” (Storm 92).

In Mara’s world, extra marital affair finds an easy acceptance whereas Inder, though he has an affair with Mara, couldn’t tolerate his wife’s pre-marital affair. Leela’s attitude to an extra-marital relationship is one of self-deception, deceiving herself and her husband Vishal Dubey, while for Gauri, it is a mere habit helping to keep her marriage on an even keel, and to Uma Mitra in This Time of Morning, entering into adulterous relationship was to take revenge on her husband who she felt, was neglecting her. Contrasted to these is Rashmi’s relationship with Neil symbolising a reawakening of desire and the behaviour of Saroj and Simrit for whom emotional involvement is a prelude to sex. According
to Sahgal each case should be judged on its own aesthetics, whether it is guided by love and aspiration or greed and gluttony. Is there truth and beauty in it or only desire for gain? This is the yardstick Sahgal applies to the sexual acts of her characters. Sexual relationships in her novels have become acts of non-conformity without moral over-tones.

Sex outside marriage is treated as a sign of promiscuity and in her treatment of sexual relationship, Nayantara Sahgal is different from most of her contemporaries on the Indo-English literary scene. Unconventional relationship in sex is not considered respectable but Sahgal treats sexual relationship honestly and points out that adulterous relationships need not always be immoral. Chastity for her is not a concept of the flesh, it is one of the spirit. About her women characters she writes:

I try to create the virtuous woman-the modern Sita, if you like. My women are strivers and aspirers, toward freedom, toward goodness, towards a compassionate world. Their virtue is a quality of heart and mind and spirit, a kind of untouched innocence and integrity. I think there is this quality in the Indian woman. (qtd. in Jain 145)

The dominant male culture demanded women to remain virtuous in accordance with the patriarchal norms. Sahgal’s cross-cultural vision lends her a modern outlook. She opposes the “virtuous stereotypes” prescribed by patriarchy and says:

I have a very different idea of virtue and a virtuous woman, different from the stereotype virtuous woman in India-self-
effacing self-sacrificing to the extent of becoming a ‘sati’ by immolating herself – culmination of the wish to have no identity after the death of her husband. But women in my novels represent a different kind of virtue . . . . The new ideal of virtue is courage. (qtd. in Sharma 13)

Sahgal was rather daring to voice such a view in an age which was governed by moral conventions of the patriarchal society. Indian culture with its past traditions, the present issues and the future trends – nothing escapes her all pervading vision.

Sahgal is against the ferocious cult of associating women’s virtue with the chastity of the body. Nayantara lashes out vehemently and sarcastically that if chastity is so important and so well preserving, it would be easier to “safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion, not women” for, she holds “the biological urge is supposed to be much more stronger in men, so it is men who should be kept under restraint and not allowed to roam free to indulge their appetites” (Storm 173). When a woman is brought up with an attitude that chastity of the body is more important than her own life, she braves to lose her life than to continue it without “the crown and glory” of womanhood. When a girl loses her ‘chastity’ due to a rape, she feels herself soiled due to the social conditioning and readily commits suicide to escape the criticism of the society and the humiliation caused to her family. Madhu in A Situation in New Delhi, a student of Delhi University, is raped by three students. The students are dismissed by the vice chancellor which leads to violence in the University campus. The girl’s parents are not ready to talk to anyone or report the case for publicity would only add to their
intolerable disgrace. The family doesn’t show any concern to the girl but try to get her off in marriage. Neither the Education Minister Devi’s formal visit to Madhu’s home nor Usman’s dismissal of the students reduces Madhu’s shock. She is hurt by the accusing stares of women in the family, in the society and in the university. She feels herself soiled and commits suicide. Madhu’s cultural and social conditioning had compelled her to take such a disastrous decision.

Feminist theory defines rape as an act of sadism based on patriarchal domination. It is an alarming form of physical violence which is a sad reminder to all women of their susceptible and vulnerable condition. Under patriarchy women are defined as sexual objects who are sexually passive, receptive and men reinforce their drives towards heterosexual intercourse through rape. It is act of power vs. powerlessness, an act of terror against the exploited group – women. Sahgal has depicted Madhu as a victim of male chauvinism and physical arrogance.

Men’s power rests in the cultural hegemony they enjoy in the Indian society. Women are marginalised through cultural institutions and religious rituals. Sahgal is very much concerned about the limitless power enjoyed by men within marriage whereas a woman had to serve her lord. Madhu Kishwar states in her article “Battered”:

Men’s power is fuelled by the assumption on which marriage in all society is based. The primary assumption, shared by all concerned, including woman and her parents, is that she, as a wife, exists to serve the purpose of her
husband. All aspects of her life are to be determined by this service role of hers. (12)

Women like Saroj and Simrit struggle to re-interpret the traditional old myth of gender and adopt a new role suiting the modern time. The failure of their first marriage doesn’t make them hesitate to choose a better partner like Vishal and Raj and continue their life. Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow* derives directly from the author’s personal experience: the study of the deathly struggle that accompanies the attempts of an Indian woman to liberate herself from the moral and social pressures that combine with economic dependence, to exercise a crippling power over middle-class women and is marked with intense indignation as well as sensitivity and compassion. (Asnani 131)

Sahgal speaks about the subtle and inhuman form of exploitation, a sort of beating where signs of bruises not external. In Sahgal’s fictional world marriage is often presented as an experience of conflict, frustration and a long drawn period of stress, through which characters mature and find a stable identity of their own. Sahgal opines in her “Women: Persons or Possessions” that women are no longer “a sex object and glamour girl, fed on fake dreams of perpetual youth lulled into a passive role that requires no individuality” (qtd. in Asnani 122). Sahgal’s women are not outright rebels against marriage but women who simply seek a better quality in marriage. Rashmi of *This Time of Morning*, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* and Smrit in *The Day in Shadow*, all certainly have a mind and will of their own and are brave enough to question the established norms of conventional marriage. Chaman Nahal remarks “In each case the attack
is not against the institution of marriage but against the inequality and injustice that is forced upon women by men using the institution of marriage” (102).

Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow* is the result of the linear development seen in the life of the novelist. Sahgal confesses about *The Day in Shadow* in her article “Of Divorce and Hindu Woman”: “In this book I tried to figure out something that has happened to me – the shattering experience of divorce. I wanted to show how even in a free country like ours, where women are equal citizens, a woman can be criminally exploited without creating a ripple” (qtd. in Asnani 131).

Nayantara Sahgal reveals herself as a perceptive and conscientious social critic in constant proximity to the social and political evils of the milieu. The political world of Sumer Singh, the highly ambitious social world of Som and Raj’s world of personal values are presented in total conflict and Simrit who finds herself at a loss in these conflicting worlds, finally chooses the world of Raj which appeals to her. *The Day in Shadow* deals with the issue of male domination and exploitation in the age of transition. Sahgal in this novel depicts the fast-deteriorating relationship between Som and Simrit, who have been married for seventeen years and have three children. As a businessman, Som’s sole ambition in life is to move up fast; to fulfill his life’s goal, he makes and unmakes friendship and alliances with people without any compunction. In a second, he is able to disregard his close friendship with Lalli to begin a new business deal with Vetter. Som is ready to shower Simrit with costly gifts, take her to foreign countries to buy anything she wishes. But Simrit is unhappy “with all her toys” (*Shadow* 81); she feels suffocated and alienated in his world, for she needs “a
world whose texture is kindly” (Shadow 89). In her married life, most of the time, she had been like “an animal, only a nice obedient, domestic one, sitting on a cushion, doing as she was told” (Shadow 57). Som had not considered her equal or worthy to discuss about his business, “her usefulness to him had never extended to the areas of her mind” (Shadow 77). In her relationship with Som “Talk was the missing link between her and Som, between her and his world. She had a famishing need for talk . . . . Good talk, about books, events, ideas, people” (Shadow 93). But Som could never understand her feelings. Simrit is unable to have any emotional involvement with him. She refuses to show any response in their sexual life which hurts Som’s ego and quickens their separation.

Simrit’s divorce not only brings a lot of problems with her own irrational fears and tensions but also with society which does not recognize a woman’s identity apart from her husband’s. A divorced woman is stigmatized for ever and she is curiously watched by others as if divorce were “a disease that left pock marks” (Shadow 4). Simrit’s divorce cripples her, draining the little resource she had. Struggling to build a new life for herself and her children she encounters Raj, a brilliant rising member of parliament who prizes her learning. “The Consent Terms” of the divorce settlement was deliberately aimed at leaving Som’s funds intact for his son, at the cost of making Simrit a financial wreck. She had to pay the heavy tax but couldn’t enjoy the benefit from the shares which her son Brij alone would inherit later. Som had taken a sweet revenge on her even after she had left him. It is her friend Raj, who helps her to come out of the stupor and establish a life of her own. He shows her how Som had drafted the settlement to exploit her and she like any other woman, had signed it without understanding
the legal terms. Raj is angry when he sees Simrit accepting her tax burden like a beast of burden. “To him it looked more and more, the mirror of a whole culture, people – especially women – forever taking things lying down” (Shadow 140).

Since Simrit had all along followed the beaten track, she hesitates to act, even after realising Som’s treachery. Raj with his persuasive power brings an attitudinal change and helps her to overcome her hesitations and guilty thoughts. According to Sushila Singh, the central paradox is “Simrit’s over dependence on Raj; In a novel that seemed to begin with a woman’s decision to seek freedom, ironically it is man [sic] who constantly provides the norms” (140). Similarly Vishal in Storm in Chandigarh becomes the purveyor of Sahgal’s most deeply-felt sentiments regarding human values and sentiments. “He is besides the filtering consciousness for the omniscient author’s narration as well as reflection” (Kothandaraman 27). There is an intriguing ambivalence between her emphasis on liberating women from the shackles of traditional subservience and her refusal to make a woman protagonist the focussing consciousness of the narrative. Her use of a central male consciousness to direct her attack against male patriarchal ideology and attitudes, asserts her belief that, this is not a battle of a man against woman. It is a battle between those who believe in an equal society and those who don’t.

A Situation in New Delhi describes a different fact of incompatibility that exists in marriage between Usman Ali, the Vice-chancellor of Delhi University and his wife Nadira. Usman needs a friendship within marriage but unfortunately Nadira is not ready to share her “stubborn, uncompromising heart and mind” (Situation 156) with Usman. Nadira is “a durable mistress material” but
“problematic as a wife” (Situation 35) as Nadira is a voluptuous woman who longs for the physical side of the marriage. She becomes a mere body without a mind. In Devi, Usman is able to find what he needs in a woman, intelligence and receptivity to ideas, but Devi uses the men in her life for personal survival without any commitment to long term relationship as she is duty bound to her brother Shivraj. So Usman reconciles and establishes a right kind of relationship with his wife Nadira. Devi, a widow, on the other hand, being a popular figure in the country, defies the traditional mould by having extra-marital affairs with Usman and Michael.

In *Rich Like Us* Sahgal exposes the biases in the Hindu marriage system which support male supremacy. Though Ram knows Hindu marriage as a sacrament and not a contract, he himself has no belief in it. He is not satisfied with one wife for a life time. His life with his traditional wife Mona is not satisfactory and so he marries Rose, an English woman. Rose is kept in the dark about Ram’s first marriage in the beginning of their love affair and when Ram finds that Rose is serious about marrying him, he confesses the truth that he was already married to Mona and they had a toddler in India. Rose who is emotionally stable, marries Ram. The second marriage of Ram causes a lot of pain to both the women initially as they find it difficult to adjust with the “other”. Ram without any guilt, proceeds with his business, whereas Rose and Mona, though they belong to two different cultures, suffer alike by the exercise of “male prerogative”. They are forced to live together and in the later years a “sisterhood” or female bonding that occurs between them brings them close to each other,
understanding and sympathising with each other’s problems. A marriage which would have disintegrated, continues because of Rose and Mona.

It is for the first time, the protagonist of Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* remains unmarried till the end. Sonali, an intelligent IAS officer is against the “show” in the arranged marriages. She never forgot Bimmie’s wedding which she attended as a child. Sonali says she couldn’t recognize Bimmie who was “looking like a tent . . . . But I was hypnotized by Bimmie’s nose ring, the sandal paste dots on her face, eyes down caste and those manacled hands resting submissively in her red silk lap. This was never Bimmie” (*Rich* 54-55). Sonali wailed her protest as a child for she didn’t like the adults who “had captured and tented her by mistake” (*Rich* 55). Sonali felt sad for Bimmie and the talk of her own marriage “A boy for Sonali” (*Rich* 56) used to send her into tantrums in her early teens and she decides to opt out of marriage by pursuing her higher education in England which could make her a career woman. Sonali is a different creation, and Sahgal defines her “New woman” thus:

. . . there is no such thing as a modern Indian . . . we have invented that person every time, we are so much a mixture of past and present, we are so swept by different tides. The modern Indian has yet to arrive yet to emerge as a fully developed human being . . . . Sonali . . . she is a complete invention. She is my dream of what somebody should have done at that time. (Varalakshmi 13)

But in the Indian cultural set up, women would not have the choice to opt out of marriage as Sonali did, but what Sahgal stresses in ‘modern woman’ is the
courage of Sonali to question the any kind of oppression, be it emergency or patriarchy.

Sahgal was fed with the value of freedom into her very bones quite early in her life. She has inherited and cherished certain set of values due to her family background. She herself declares in her article “The Testament of an Indo-Anglian Writer”, “I am Indian – by blood, nationality, upbringing and conviction – and western by virtue of my English medium education” (23). Brought up with liberal ideas, Sahgal endeavours to live up to the values of freedom and a broad humanistic approach to life. In the same article she affirms:

The need for freedom, I knew once and for all, went far beyond political or economic definition . . . . It became a solid value. I knew that never in any circumstances, personal or national, whether in my capacity as student, or later as wife, mother or citizen, would I let it go. The freedom to think, to write, to be, was what life was all about. (25)

Freedom for Sahgal is not political freedom or economic independence. Freedom means a way of life, of doing things one believed to be right, even if they were against the accepted social norms. It is because of such observations, Sahgal is called as non-conformist. She wants her women to regain their identity as individuals and enjoy freedom. The family in India during the last few decades, has been under a process of social change, thus affecting man-woman relationship. There is a conspicuous change in the sphere of gender roles and values. The role of husband-wife is the principal component in a family that has undergone a vital change due to the growing enlightenment and emancipation of
women. In this regard, literature plays a sterling role in raising the readers’ consciousness and providing a glimpse into female psyche and their marginalised position in the society. Rukmini Bhaya Nair says “women, conventionalized into their roles of wives, sisters and mothers have, as a result remained trapped within a powerful cross cultural metaphor that violently divides the gender making us all, in one way or another, victims of Lawrence’s Pansay-Syndrome” (9).

Changes in socio-economic conditions have changed our patriarchal attitudes to gender roles and this change is reflected in literature too. But this change didn’t happen overnight:

Feminism as an ideology developed in interaction with the development of individualism and cannot be understood apart from it. Feminist scholars have exposed the deceptions of individualism for women and have charted the ways in which women writers have wrestled with its demons. Today the principal debates within feminism directly reflect the ways in which women, beginning in the eighteenth century, have attempted to claim the full status of individual without losing their identities as women. (Fox 138)

The image of woman in contemporary literature is totally different from the traditional images of women in the past. Sahgal reveals in *This Time of Morning*, the changing social conditions of Indian society in the way young Nita and Rashmi behave. Nita is shown grumbling when she is not allowed to smoke. Although she is twenty-three, she doesn’t want to marry, as marriage would hedge her new-found liberty. Rashmi’s inclination to divorce Dalip and her extra-marital relationship with Neil reveals her pang for emancipation. Uma, the wife
of Arjun Mitra, is keen on breaking the shackles of social conventions. She doesn’t want to be a “good wife” of Arjun. Instead, by her sexual alliances and her infidelity she makes Arjun’s married life a hell. She questions patriarchy and its norms when she says “And it always amazes me that what is taken for granted in a man is horrifying in a woman. Even in this day and age. Imagine. It’s a man’s privilege to get drunk, for instance and no one thinks him any worse for it” (Morning, 226). Though Uma lashes at the conventions, she herself has a fear of being “gossiped” as a “bad woman”.

Varalakshmi points out that this fear in women is caused not only by the patriarchal system, but also by the internalised cultural ideals in women: “I would be accurate to say that women all over the world are generally apprehensive about doing anything outside the ordinary because they fear the speculation and gossip of not only the men around them but even more so the women who are influenced by social conditioning” (109).

However, Mara, Gauri, Uma Mitra, Rashmi, Nita, Saroj, Simrit and Sonali do not fall into gender roles assigned to them by the society. According to M.L. Malhotra, “If Nayantara’s women characters have any passion it is the longing to be free, freedom from all restraints in word and deed, being their monomania . . . they want to be fully alive and be themselves . . . . No taboos or inhibitions” (224).

Women are no longer ready to tolerate the thorny barbs from their husbands or society and sacrifice their individual freedom on the altar of marriage. When man and woman fail to build a relationship based on mutual love, trust, equality and understanding, modern woman never hesitates to break
the confining experience of marriage. In Sahgal’s novels, almost every woman character suffers from isolation resulting from unrequited love and hankers after love and affection outside marriage. They belong to the educated elite class and they respond fearlessly to the challenges posed by the society to women as they are aware of their rights as individuals. According to Theresa Hubel, “Individualism is based on the ideal that all people are born individuals and therefore entitled to certain fundamental rights as individuals: freedom to speak one’s mind, to choose one’s profession or religion, to conduct one’s private life without fear or state intervention and so on” (82). Sahgal’s characters try to assert this kind of individualism.

In “A Search for Answer”, Sahgal says, “Freedom means creativity, adventure, experimentation and even risk” (85). It is the courage to make deliberate choices and establish self-identity or it is the fearless expression of self. Sometimes, they act against the established social norms as Saroj, who has a pre-marital relation with her lover and is condemned by her husband as “used, soiled and unfit” for marriage. All women characters of Sahgal experience the thrill of emancipation in their flight from virtuous stereotypes. It is a challenge to patriarchy which assumes that the “other” will do his bidding, irrespective of “other’s” likes. Michael Holquist opines: “Utopian dreams of systems give birth to nightmares of experience because there is no correspondence between the desire of the self and the reality of the other” (139). However, in the patriarchal setup, woman had to remain as the subdued “other” for a longer time in the Indian context.
Indian women experience the thrill of freedom when they go abroad. Sonali felt emancipated when she was free to choose her hair style, dress and even “a little disorder around” her (Rich 123). Sonali enjoyed her new found freedom in Oxford but for Ravi, there wasn’t much difference. Sonali felt “He had never fought a battle for freedom, never been patted down firmly when his sap was rising, never had a sari throttling his legs making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus threat to life and limb, never had his mother set up a howl when he went and got a haircut” (Rich 123-24). In fact Ravi Kachru had not experienced any simple subjugations which every Indian girl had experienced. To Sonali, her foreign experience, gave her immense freedom and this was felt by Sahgal herself during her study at the Wesley in America, where her sensibility got sharpened due to an alien encounter. She found that,

Freedom was a cherished possession, belligerently defended. In India, it has been haunting in its lack, a distant star on the horizon, something to work and ache for, often at stupendous personal cost.

In America, it was in one’s lap, or in one’s tongue, where, I suddenly discovered it belonged. It was one’s own . . . . The freedom to think, to write, to be, was what life was all about. ("Testament" 25)

Freedom gives the strength of full expression of one’s personality and discovers the core of one’s true identity.

To sum up, Nayantara Sahgal’s cross-cultural vision endows her women characters with an ambivalence in their relationships with men. Marriage, a patriarchal institution central to almost all her works, becomes a site of
contention and conflict, mainly because of women’s westernised notions of individual freedom. Sahgal offers a heterogeneous range of women characters who, either like Pinky in *A Situation in New Delhi* and Bimmie in *Rich Like Us* submit docilely to stereotypical cultural prescriptions of gender roles, or like Nita in *This Time of Morning* find themselves precariously balanced between a westernised liberated life style and the restrictions imposed on them by a traditional patriarchal culture. *A Time to Be Happy* foregrounds contrastive marriages in three generations – those in which women are submissive and hence the marriage is apparently harmonious and those in which women register their protest. Pre-marital and extra-marital affairs which are condemned as morally taboo in conventional Indian culture, are viewed differently by Sahgal’s cross-cultural outlook. She sees sexual relationships without moral overtones. Divorce and female sensuality are issues which Sahgal treats with the broad humanistic outlook that her western education endowed her with. Sahgal cannot be branded as a radical, iconoclastic feminist who tries to break down all the traditional cultural prescriptions of womanhood, but she may be seen as a constructive feminist who advocates individual freedom for women in and out of marriage, in keeping with their conscience and “chastity” of spirit.

Closely allied with Sahgal’s treatment of women, religio-cultural issues are raised in her novels, which will be discussed in the next chapter, in the context of Sahgal’s cross-cultural vision.