CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION
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This study was taken up with certain assumptions and premises. To begin with, it upheld the view that the women writers in English have by and large promoted the "elitist" tradition focusing mainly on the lives and experiences of the urbanite, educated middle class women and the images of women presented in their fiction could not by any standard be treated as the representative images of women. Since the majority of Indian women resides in villages, it becomes imperative to incorporate the construct of rural woman for any imaging of Indian women.

In the English literary canon, especially in the fiction of women writers the experiences of rural and under-privileged women remain peripheral. The regional women writers, on the contrary, have captured the Indian village with all its flavours intact and their works exhibit the grass-root reality of rural women. Therefore, it 'becomes imperative' to incorporate the fictional writings of regional women writers for the purpose of critiquing the images of rural women. The inclusion of the works of Indira Goswami, Dalip Kaur Tiwana and Maitreyi Pushpa in this study validates this claim.

In this study the word 'image' has been used in its various contexts and connotations. Images of women in a particular society imbibe ideals of womanhood, popular and prevalent stereotypes, the vision of that society which institutionalizes the role or position of women or the vision of writers, artists, and thinkers relating to women. Since the images are ideological
constructs, they have to be evaluated vis-à-vis actual historical conditions. Social and cultural ethos, symbols, values, and mores are responsible for the creation of these images and the images in turn in the form of ideas, values, traditions and symbols exert a powerful influence on the lives of women and subsequently on the existing social order.

Caste, class, region, religion and language play a significant role in the formulation of these images. Another major factor affecting the image is the rural/urban divide which calls for more attention. Essentially though, a woman is primarily a woman irrespective of her rural or urban base and this dichotomy sounds hypothetical.

In the fictional texts selected for this study, the predominant Hindu, Aryan tradition overshadows other subaltern traditions. With the exception of Dalip Kaur Tiwana’s And Such is her Fate, all other texts are foregrounded in the Hindu tradition. No doubt Tiwana replaces a Hindu family with a Sikh family, but the cultural ethos remains the same. Since the role of religion is non-committal, the religious identity of the female protagonist is an insignificant issue in the determination/evaluation of her image.

Prior to women’s writing in the pre-Independence era male writers, for instance, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya and Prem Chand have offered images of women in their fiction but over and above, their fictional discourse becomes mainly a site for questioning, examining or defending social values and relationships. Similarly the pioneering trio of Indo-Anglian writers, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan too have more or less created stereotypes of women in
various relationships with men. Women’s image in their fiction is that of an ‘object’ of male concern presented from an outsider’s stand point.

In retrospect, the role and position of woman in Indian society has witnessed many vicissitudes oscillating between a position of considerable esteem, authority and independence to one of subordination and subservience. Thus in the Vedic age as well as the age of Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanishads (2500 B.C. to 500 B.C.) the position of women in society should be rated as fairly satisfactory. But in the following period of one thousand years (500 B.C to 500 A.D.) her position and status in society witnessed a constant degradation when she not only lost her earlier privileged position and rights but the laws governing her life were made more and more stringent. From the elevated status of Sahadharmini she descended down to the level of a Sudra to touch the nadir.

In the epic age of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the two pivotal characters of Sita and Draupadi come to define the extent and thereby represent the polarities of feminine experience in the Indian context. The gender divide in the later Indian literature moves between these two primordial figures – Sita, who accepts and accommodates, Draupadi who resents and revolts.

Vedic literature, said to be the golden period of Indian womanhood, offers two images of women, Brahavadini and Sadyohadhu – the ascetic and the domestic respectively. Manusmriti and Dharmshastras codified rules and norms for women’s behaviour supporting Brahmnical ideology, providing a strong rationale for the subjugation and subordination of women.
Puranic literature also upholds the image of woman as *pativrata* and emphasizes the superhuman power ascribed to the *satitva-* the virtue of a steadfast wife. Sita, Ahalya, Draupadi and Gandhari— all these archetypal women are models of the *pativrata* which requires a woman to submerge her individuality/identity in that of her husband and they are deified as models of feminine virtue.

The classical Sanskrit literature propounds two basic attitudes towards women— the erotic and the ascetic. The ascetic school was hostile towards woman and regarded her as ‘*mayā*’ or illusion instrumental in the seduction of man. The *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas which has influenced the Indian psyche to the utmost degree, also places women in two categories of the virtuous and the non-virtuous, signifying *Bhakti* and *Maya* respectively.

In a pluralistic, multicultural, complex social set-up of India, it is invariably a stupendous task to search for and locate one dominant meta image of a ‘typical’, normative Indian woman. Hence parallel to the ‘Great Tradition’ of the classical elite, there also exists ‘the Little Tradition’ of the common folk which has equally contributed in the formation of the image of woman. The Hindu tradition is verily the major tradition but there are several other traditions too which need to be taken into account for the purpose of determining the images of women.

Though there is no universally applicable image of an archetypal Indian woman and images of women have invariably undergone numerous changes, certain basic motifs and models have enjoyed social acceptance and are instrumental in the formation of images of women. The use of the
terms like "archetype," "stereotype" and "real" in the context of the images of women denote certain attitudes. The "archetype" represents the source-image, the ideal-original image of woman, the ‘stereotype’ stands for the conventional image of woman created under the normative pressure of the traditional society, and the ‘real’ stands for the image of woman breaking away from the stereotype. It is an articulate and assertive image.

The Hindu tradition has presented certain archetypal images – the *pativrata* (Sita, Savitri, Draupadi), the rebel (Mirabai), the transgressor (Ahalya), the lover-lorn maiden (Radha), the powerful mother or *Shakti* (Kali and Durga). In every age woman has been seen primarily in the stereotyped roles of mother, wife, mistress or a sex-object – in relationship to man. The roles for women outside these hegemonic constructs as an achiever, leader, or a strong individual are either non-existent or rare.

The position and subsequent image of women is subject to various historical, political, cultural and economic factors. The cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals are other factors that largely affect and subsequently determine the position of a woman in a particular society and her literary portrayal.

As women occupy a crucial position in society as mothers and wives, their social status becomes the index of a civilized society. An effort to revive the glorious past of India and subsequently, to restore the pristine image of Indian woman were issues prioritized by all religious and social reform movements of nineteenth and twentieth century. The humanist thinkers and leaders invoked the authority of scriptures to advocate against
certain evil social customs like Sati, polygamy, child marriage, parda, female infanticide, dowry etc. which were anti-women.

Revivalist thinkers like Vivekanand and Dayanand Saraswati have contributed a lot to restore the status and image of Indian women in their own individual way. Whereas, Dayanand sought to revive the old Vedic society presumed to be the best for woman, Vivekananda extolled India women haloed with spirituality by juxtaposing them against Western women steeped in materialism. Mahatama Gandhi succeeded in harnessing the Indian woman’s capacity for silent and dignified suffering for constructive social and political work. For the first time the women came out of the narrow domestic world and found a new identity in the social and political sphere. Women emerged as strong, self-sufficient and self-confident individuals to fight for their cause on their own.

These social and political thinkers, because of their inherent rootedness in the basic patriarchal values, essentially extended male authority over the lives of women. No doubt, they succeeded in ‘reformulating’ patriarchy and providing an additional space for women at home and in the public domain, but they did not allow them to transgress it.

Jawahar Lal Nehru played a seminal role in pre as well as post-independence era in the actual upliftment of women. More than any other visionary, he envisaged for women active and multiple roles outside the domestic sphere through education and economic independence so that the women could shake off the stereotypical images and roles. He paved the
way, through various legislations, for women's emancipation in a holistic way.

After Independence Indian constitution granted women an equal status with men in every sphere of life. But the implementation of her legal rights is obstructed at various levels due to the age old notion of woman's subordinate status deeply embedded in the personal relationships of the patriarchal family system.

With the advent of feminism as a movement in the West and its overall impact on literature and society, concerted efforts have been made to analyze and understand the multiple forces which combine to create the marginalized status and subsequent image of woman. The term patriarchy has been widely accepted as the fundamental concept to analyze and explain the male hegemonic structure which is responsible for the subjugation of women. The term patriarchy has been used more generally to refer to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a whole system whereby women are subordinated in a number of ways.

Indian feminist scholars in recent times have posited the need to cautiously and judiciously apply the principles of patriarchy in the Indian contexts. Patriarchy has been accepted as an analytic framework and it is argued that patriarchies are constantly being reconstituted as political, social, cultural and ideological factors are undergoing modification and change. They have come to reject the idea of a constant, monolithic, static, universal patriarchal system and conform to the view that in India
patriarchy is constituted on the basis of an ideology wherein the factors of gender, race, caste, class, religion, community, colonialism, and nationalism play a definite role.

Patriarchy operates through the unit of family. Patriarchy works as a system of benevolent paternalism in which obedient and conforming women are accorded certain rights, privileges and security. This paternalism renders their subordination invisible and leads to women's complicity in it.

Another subtle device through which the repressive forces of patriarchy work can be seen in sexual stereotyping. This phenomenon, aptly described as a form of "interior colonization" implies a form of psychological conditioning in which not the individual male but the norms prescribed by a particular culture through the ages in the form of traditions, customs, and mores work as the defining repressive force. It creates gender identities by dividing women, one from the other by defining "respectability" and "deviance". Gradually women come to internalize the very code which keeps them subjugated and trapped in an image of the 'ideal perpetuated' through the centuries.

The impact of sexual stereotyping works through another concept of "gender socialization" - a process of slow conditioning where women accept constructed code of gender identity as definitive, biologically determined and thus inevitable.

Gender indoctrination is achieved through the construction of a model of femininity. This social construct of femininity exerts great psychological pressure which has been termed as "feminine mystique" - the
notion that the highest value and commitment for women lies in the fulfilment of her own femininity. This concept works on the myth of an inherent subservience and passivity in a woman’s temperament and a compulsive delimitation of her role to the domestic arena, her only purpose being marriage, procreation and domestic labour. Sometimes this mystique is edified to the status of a religious credo as it happened in India.

Female sexuality is another area of women’s subjugation. It has been described as one of the most sacred duties of women (wives) to provide sexual services to their male counterparts as per their desires and needs. On the other hand female sexuality has been viewed as a danger zone and suppressed through most restrictive taboos and stifling codes of behaviour to the extent of brutally ignoring and overlooking a woman’s physical instincts and desires. A gender specific familial, cultural, social and religious code has been created to control woman’s sexuality through prescribing her dress, space and mobility. A natural expression of female sexuality within and out of the limits of marriage is callously branded as immoral and a punishable transgression. Male sexuality, on the other hand, is attributed to masculinity and male promiscuity is accepted as a norm. Female sexuality is controlled through linking it with notions of ‘shame’ and ‘honour’.

Patriarchal ideology differentiates between women as sexual beings and women as mothers. Brahminical society sanitized and circumscribed female power born out of wifely fidelity and chastity. Wifehood, not motherhood has been the dominant strand of mythology intended to mould
feminine identity in India and it was through such models that the sexuality of women was contained within legitimate boundaries.

Gynocriticism in recent times has shifted the focus on women’s writing especially on such texts which have been written by women authors keeping women in the center. The texts selected for this study substantiate this claim. The present study of images of women also aims at placing the Indian women writers of fiction in a critical perspective and examine the significance of their writing in formulating a new consciousness regarding woman’s role and status corresponding with the changing times.

The writers selected for this study, though do not subscribe to a categorically feminist ideology but they are strongly informed by a feminist consciousness. An indoctrinated ideology does not swamp their texts but a feminist consciousness is embedded in these texts and sub-texts. Their fictional writings substantiate this fact. By portraying the agony and discontent simmering in woman’s heart and creating women who move from victimization to self-assertion, these writers provide a pattern for the consciousness of the contemporary Indian woman. Through their narratives they project a positive image of Indian rural women which reveals their intent not to stereotype women into postures of dependence and subordination. Through this new emerging image of rural woman, they articulate a world-view in keeping with the values of female self-hood.

The rural women presented by Kamala Markandaya in Nectar in a Sieve are not situated in a specific region. The village here, as well as in Two Virgins has a romanticized and imagined locale. As she does not ‘establish a
context', her characters tend to remain vague and shadowy. These women images are generalized and appear to function as vehicles of the author's pre-conceived ideas about some popular themes. Even though presenting women from a woman’s perspective her women images are in conformity with those presented in male-authored texts. Rukmani presents the image of an ideal Indian woman who strictly confirms to the popular paradigm of *pativrata*, a self-effacing and self-sacrificing woman.

Kamala Markandaya’s stereotypical women neither question tradition nor do they revolt. Rebellion of any kind is assigned to the negative images of women like Kunthi. A positive woman image is of Rukmani, one who accepts her predicament and her prescribed gender roles. By subverting the voice of rebellion the author confirms her faith in the legacy of tradition. Markandaya’s rural women should not be viewed as voices of protest and resistance. These women are at the initial stage of awakening. They are awakening to their feminine consciousness. Being pulled by the forces of tradition and modernity, they are trying to find a balance between the ‘ideal’ and the ‘actual’. Rukmani embodies the image of a heroic, empowered and emancipated woman who accepts change in the most positive sense creating for herself a feminine space within the framework of tradition.

*Two Virgins* vis-à-vis *Nectar in a Sieve* marks the author’s own shift in her attitude in relation to women. *Two Virgins* takes girls’ education for granted. The issue raised in this novel is the corrupting influence of Western education on innocent rural girls. Lalitha and Saroja, the two
central characters represent two contrasting images of young women in the village symbolizing tradition and modernity. Lalitha who revolts, ruins her prospects of a happy life. Saroja imbibes the stereotype, finds it secure and clings to it. She validates the author’s stand in favour of tradition. Another important image of aunt Alamelu, the widow presents the extreme, orthodox viewpoint in favour of tradition. Saroja, the authorial voice, is a judicious woman who can make a discreet use of tradition in a changing society. Markandaya has taken up the feminist issue of female sexuality in a significant manner. Amma, unlike a deified, glorious, self-sacrificing mother, representing the image of a down to earth woman of flesh and blood, asserts her sexuality. This novel presents another important image of an economically independent, empowered spinster Miss Mendoza, who is a Christian and a Missionary school teacher. By placing her out of the familiar Hindu tradition, the author once again reflects her faith in the traditional image of a Hindu woman.

Bhano, Dalip Kaur Tiwana’s female protagonist in And Such is Her Fate presents the image of a victimized woman in a male dominated feudalistic rural society. The novel offers a powerful critique of the social and cultural norms of this society which reduces woman to a lifeless salable market commodity. Bhano is neither a rebel nor a revolutionary. Instead of aspiring to change the system, she longs to be a part of the system which marginalizes woman on every score of caste, class and gender. Representing the image of a deprived woman, she submits before the system passively without ever interrogating it. Bhano may not be heroic in
resistance; her heroism lies in endurance and a stoic acceptance of "Her Fate". Her last symbolic act of defiance is suggestive of her rejection of the system which refuses to accept her.

Another important woman image in this novel is presented through the portrayal of Bhagwanti who cunningly manipulates men through a subversion of gender norms. She represents the 'other' of Bhano who instead of being manipulated has learnt to manipulate men as a strategy of survival in a system which survives by subjugating and dehumanizing women. Through the tragic predicament of Bhano, Tiwana accentuates the necessity of a dissenting 'Voice'. Bhano, by her silent gesture of defiance suggests the emergence of a new image of rural woman, who, after centuries old silence can ultimately hope to find her VOICE.

In *A Saga of South Kamrup*, Indira Goswami depicts the life of women in a high caste, high-class Brahmnical rural *Sattrra* which is dominated by relentless feudal patriarchal mores and religious dogma. In the center of the novel are the lives of women, particularly of widows who are relegated to an extremely marginalized existence. The author presents these widows belonging to the privileged class as the images of gruesome human degradation and suffering. These women images are representative of a large number of such women and their lives racked by over-whelming unfulfilled desires, mortified by inhuman ascetic practices, economic deprivation and tormented by nightmares of guilt and fear.

The three major female characters present three different attitudes through three different images. The eldest widow assimilates tradition and
her surrender is total. Her life ends because of excessive mortification caused by notions of obsessive piety. The youngest hates tradition and its hypocritical pretences. She resists, revolts and gets brutally crushed as a punishment for transgression. The third, placed between the two avoids the extremist posture, tries to create some private space for herself and survive in a male hegemonic system. She too, faces shattering setbacks, but since she represents tradition she strives to change it to her own needs. To put it more precisely, they accept the stereotype, reject the stereotype and modify it respectively, thereby indicating an inevitable process of change. It could be inferred that the novelist upholds tradition since every act of transgression is punished. But she, however does not promote tradition. The tragic lives of women validate her belief that meaningless, dead customs suffocate life without any promise of hope and fulfillment.

Apart from these upper-caste widows, the author has presented the images of lower-caste, lower-class working women, who, inspite of their poverty and permissive morality are definitely a happier lot and offer images of contrasting women.

Maitreyi Pushpa, the youngest of the selected four authors, admits her pronounced commitment to the feminist ideology and cause. This outstanding feminist has tried to reconstruct feminist politics for genuine social transformation. She has created a new image of the rural woman of India and her female protagonists are stunningly emancipated women. They refuse to compromise with injustice and emerge as powerful voices of rebellion without being overtly self-conscious of being such. Securely
rooted in the rural milieu, they do not question their gender roles and wage a war against every injustice on their familiar home pitch.

These women, instead of fighting for personal freedom extend their private sphere to the public sphere of their less fortunate, deprived fellow sisters. All of these women who share a deprived past, have been endowed with leadership qualities. Mandakini, Kusuma, and even Prem in *Idannamam* and Sarang in *Chaak*—the major women characters project the image of a conservative revolutionary. Bau, the grandmother in *Idannamam* is the image of a typical matriarch. There are other women images of stereotypical wives and mothers. Maitreyi Pushpa also presents images of so-called ‘fallen woman’ but with a rare compassion and sensitivity. Manda in *Idannamam* and Sarang in *Chaak* offer the image of a woman who as a potent rival of man in a patriarchal set-up, proves her worth, competence, and superiority even in the political arena, hitherto a tabooed space for women. *Chaak* also reveals the author’s progressive attitude towards female sexuality through the portrayal of unconventional, new images which have baffled her critics. For instance, there is Resham, a widow who asserts her right to sexuality and her right on her unborn child conceived out of an extra-marital relationship. Sarang is an uncommon image of a rural woman who musters up courage to assert her rights as a woman as well as a mother.

Maitreyi Pushpa’s novels present several images of such unconventional women. Initially, she projects them as ‘victims’ but soon they are on a warring path to finally emerge as survivors and sometimes even as ‘victors’.
The present study focusing on images of rural women in the selected works of Indian women writers reveals a very wide variety of images ranging from the extremely conventional to the stunningly progressive ones. This Protean image of woman also indicates that these writers are finding new ways of asserting female self-hood, showing increasing courage in breaking age-old strictures regarding a woman's existence. With the portrayal of women who have courage to constructively modify, change, or transform their lives, Indian women writers are in the process of rejecting the stereotypes of eternally suffering Indian womanhood and, on the contrary, restoring to woman to her rightful status. Ideologically, they are moving from victim feminism to power feminism. In this changing socio-political scenario there is a need to create a place for the rural women of India and their subsequent representation in the literary cannon, for they constitute the most representative image of women in India.