CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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One of the most remarkable features of the contemporary Indian literature has been an upsurge in women’s writing in English and other regional languages. The corpus of women’s writing in India in recent times manifests new changes, trends and dimensions in the wake of new literary movements and theories – post-colonial, post-modern and feminist- to name only a few of them.

In the contemporary times the position of Indian woman in society has verily undergone a sea change. Women from all sections and sub-sections of society – such as the tribal, Dalit, minority, rural and urban – are registering their voices in contemporary literature. This posits the need to envisage and thereby re-orient as well as reconstruct the image of the Indian rural woman in literature so as to incorporate her in the contemporary mainstream literary discourse.

In an age when “grand narratives of legitimation” are no longer credible “and literary critics no longer believe in the availability of a privileged meta-discourse capable of capturing once for all the truth of every first order discourse, legitimation becomes plural, local and immanent”.¹

Until recently, Indian English with its sub-genre of ‘Women Writers’ was the only documented category accessible to academia. Now the situation has changed. There are indications of a rapid enlargement and increase in material and critical perception on Indian literature published in regional languages. In this changing scenario, the Indian English woman
writer has to relocate her place anew vis-à-vis her counterparts writing in other regional languages. In the changing context Indian English works are, of course, a part of a larger scene. Writers, in order to represent Indian reality, are required to be a part of the pluralistic literary tradition which includes all the regions and all the respective languages spoken there. Even to those who read no Indian language other than English, "it is becoming clear that women's literature in regional languages is plentiful, rich and complex." Within literature, Indian English comprises a few building blocks of an expansive structure. C.D. Narasimhaiah stresses upon this pluralism and multiplicity of Indian literature: "Indian writing in English is to me primarily part of the literature of India, in the same way as literatures written in various regional languages are and aught to be."3

By selecting texts from more than one Indian language, this study intends to cover a wider variety of Indian women spreading over a larger geographical area offering thereby multiple cultural shades of their personality. However, there has been an obvious constraint to select only those texts which have already been translated into English. The only exception being Maitreyi Pushpa's novels which are not available in their English translation as yet. The choice of this particular Hindi author and her texts could not be compromised since in the context of this study, these texts are most pertinent.

This selected group of authors consists of most celebrated and eminent women writers in their respective languages. Kamala Markandaya, a pioneer, is the most widely acclaimed Indo English author who represents
the first generation of women writers. Dalip Kaur Tiwana, a Sahitya Akademi Award winner, is the most representative Punjabi writer. Indira Goswami, a winner of Jnanpith Award, is a uniquely gifted representative writer of Assam. Maitreyi Pushpa, the winner of the SAARC Literary Award and the youngest among the four, has emerged as a trend-setting woman writer from the Hindi belt.

This study delimits the focus only on those selective texts which are centred on women characters, placed in a rural background. What is common to all these novels is the rural milieu and the predominant position of the female protagonist in this milieu.

In an age of globalization when English language is firmly established as an international language, it posits the polemics of valorization of the English texts not only marginalizing in the process the vernacular, regional literature but simultaneously promoting a literary tradition not truly representative of the mainstream literary tradition. The native Indian writers confront a complex situation. On one hand, the regional literature is striding towards progress and maturity but at the same time the regional literature is facing an unprecedented tough competition with literature written in English. No writer of repute can aspire for visibility without being projected before a large readership out of his narrow region. For this they depend on English renditions of their works. Therefore, the texts translated in English gain importance for any holistic study of Indian Literature.

With the advent of information technology, L.P.G., i.e. liberalization, privatization, globalization and various other technologies, the entire corpus
of Indian society both urban as well as rural has undergone remarkable changes in recent times affecting in the process the position of a woman. This pervasive change posits the need to critique the position of a woman and her subsequent representation in literature in the modern contexts. To be specific, it is all the more fascinating and rewarding to explore and study the changing position of rural women because the majority of Indian women have a rural base and therefore, they provide a more appropriate site for the study of the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. Women in the cities exhibit cosmopolitan traits and under the influence of education they are more amenable to change. Rural women, on the contrary, resist change due to lack of education and exposure. The process of change in villages is comparatively slow and therefore, they have still retained their native identity and an old-world aura. These rural women are in the grip of those customs and traditions which are fast receding in the cities. Therefore, it is the rural woman who is more representative of Indian womanhood but surprisingly the rural Indian woman has not been adequately represented in Indo English literary canon.

M.K. Naik takes into account the bias against grassroot culture found in Indian English writing which has fallen into disrepute caused by opposition to its so-called elitism and separateness from mass culture. The hypothesis that rural India finds a scant representation in the novels of Indian English women writers is vindicated by this study. Barring the exception of Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a sieve* and *Two Virgins* no other text portraying a typical rural milieu was available.
Initially, images of rural women in fiction are available in male-authored texts. But it is imperative to study the images of rural women in women-authored texts for the formulation or conceptualization of women in a holistic perspective. The women writers can better relate to the empirical realities of a woman's life.

The corpus of women's writing in recent times manifests remarkable changes in the wake of new literary theories and movements. The stereotypes of a rural woman conforming to a woman's oppression, suppression, conditioning and indoctrination in a patriarchal society are still existent in the fictional world of the writers. But in the post-colonial, post-Independence India the position of woman and her subsequent role in society has metamorphosed in a social as well as political context. The novels of contemporary women writers in Hindi and other regional languages have vividly portrayed novel images of the 'new' rural woman in their fiction. This study, therefore, proposes to concentrate on the representative texts of these women writers.

*Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is Kamala Markandaya’s much acclaimed first novel which was hailed as a realistic epic of rural India. In its theme of hunger and concomitant theme of human degradation, what is of more significance to this study is that through, Rukmani, the protagonist narrator, the author has underlined a woman’s responses and susceptibilities to a typical reality of poor rural Indian masses. *Two Virgins* (1975), her eighth novel is also located in a South Indian anonymous village and like *Nectar in a Sieve*, this novel also shows village life as disturbed by the advent of
modernity. Both these novels record change. In Two Virgins the change is perceived through the sensitive mind of Saroja, the adolescent narrator of the story.

_A Saga of South Kamrup_ (1993), the magnum opus of Indira Goswami, centres round a *Sattra* (religious Vaisnavite monastery) in a remote corner of North East India in the district of Kamrup in Assam. At the centre of the novel are the lives of three Brahmin widows and the harrowing details of their tortured existence in the extremely orthodox patriarchal social set-up.

_And Such is Her Fate_ (1980), which is an English translation of Dalip Kaur Tiwana’s Punjabi novel _Eho Hamarajiwana_ can be taken as a creative exercise in women’s lib, or an anthropomorphic statement on feminine condition in the lower peasantry of Punjab.

In _Idannamani_ (1994) Maitreyi Pushpa captures the lives of women from three generations in a village caught up in transition. While the mother-in-law and grandmother lament the annihilation of tradition by their daughter-in-law, Manda, the grand daughter, caught between her grand mother and mother, is full of questioning as well as understanding in favour of change and renewal. _Chaak_ (1997), another landmark novel, strongly raises issues of women’s rights, and accepts the inevitability of change and modernization. Sarang, the female protagonist presents the author’s vision of the fast emerging ‘New Woman’ of Indian villages.

The word image is used in many different ways and contexts. The words _rupa, bimba, pratima, murti_ are synonymously used in diverse contexts. Generally, when we speak of image a society projects of its women, we have
in mind its ideals of womanhood, or its popular stereotypes or the vision implicit in its institutionalization of the role or position of women, or the vision of poets, writers, artists and prophets relating to women. In studying such images it is generally believed that they are the products of opinion and fancy and need to be evaluated in view of actual historical conditions. The relevance of such images would be as historical indices of social conditions. They represent a felt idea or the vision of value and express a truth which is scarcely accessible otherwise. According to G.C. Pande:

Image as vision or idea, in fact, is to be regarded not so much as the reflection of social form as its profound matrix. Such images may be seen in myths and legends and art and prophecy and implicitly in socio-religious ethos. They are not historical scraps but perennial pointers of ideal possibilities.¹²

Cultural ideas, symbols, values and mores play crucial role in the creation of women images and reinforcement of gender dichotomies. These images in turn, in the form of ideas, symbols, traditions, values models etc., do impinge upon and sometimes exert powerful influence on the lives of women and on the social order. This study undertakes to investigate the images of rural women as they are represented in contemporary Indian literature and the factors responsible for the formation of those images. An effort has also been made to find out the manner in which women and women’s potential- both constructive and destructive- have been perceived in India’s social ethos and cultural heritage. This study provides a glimpse of Indian villages in transition as reflected in the response of the female
fictional characters to change in their lives and in the lives of those around them. The study would also throw into bold relief the questions of the rural woman’s identity, status, selfhood, self-fulfilment and sexuality. It also examines how women in rural India are trying to cope with change in their lives and with the opposite pulls of tradition and modernity.

Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages, through which a woman has been depicted in literature. The change in social reality demands a corresponding change in literature, since all great literature ‘holds mirror unto life.’ The movement of neo-feminism in the West has apparently influenced the Indian women writers who have expressed their exasperation at the continuance of the traditional woman images. Firmly grounded literary stereotypes do not portray the changing reality. Therefore, a search is on for new images.

The prevalent woman images influence attitudes towards women in at least three fundamental ways. First, at the societal plane, the perception of different categories of women is distinctly shaped by the popularly accepted female images or stereotypes. This can be observed in the manner in which people treat widows in society. Second, at the interpersonal level within the family these images frequently impinge in a variety of ways. Treatment given to sons and daughters in a family is an index of gender discrimination. These gender dichotomies, flowing almost directly from the popular images fostered about girls and women are reflected quite sharply in the manner in which work distribution is affected in most Indian families. Thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, these images leave a deep imprint upon women’s
self-perception. Although the shaping of one’s self-image is a subtle and largely intangible process, the fact that identity formation involves the internalization of received values and wisdom implies that the popularly accepted female images play a critical if not central role in the crystallization of women’s self-perception.”

Given the plurality and complexity of India, it is perhaps a futile exercise to search for and locate one dominant image of a typical Indian woman. None the less, consistency and continuity have characterized the evaluation of Indian culture, especially in the sphere of social institutions such as varna, jati and family which manifest a significant bearing on the construction and determination of gender in Indian society. Consequently the normative image of Indian woman has shown a remarkable consistency. However, intervening historical processes involving socio-religious and politico-economic changes have significantly influenced and shaped the construction of femininity in different periods. Even various social reform movements in India were constructed in such a manner that they eventually reinforced the dominant cultural images of the benevolent mother and virtuous wife. The traditional virtues were not substituted but rather supplemented with more contemporaneous values.

While there is no universally applicable image of an archetypal Indian woman and that images of women have undergone numerous changes, certain basic motifs and models have enjoyed a sustained existence and have won wide social acceptance and even approval. Among the most dominant motif is the notion of the pativrata, the devoted, virtuous wife. The
predominance of *pativrata* image has led to the veneration and idealization of wifehood committed to and constrained by virtues like chastity, fidelity, patience, tolerance, unswerving devotion and uncomplaining self-sacrifice etc. This ideological construct has not only led to the strict management of female sexuality and restricted woman's social interaction and mobility but has also ensured that women remain in an inferior, subordinate and distinctly dependent position in the marital equation.

There is no denying the fact that the Indian subcontinent has invariably witnessed the simultaneous presence and prevalence of the "Great Tradition" of the classical elite and the literati and the "Little Traditions" of the common folk which have been more liberal to women. It is true that the traditional values, ideals and norms have undergone a distinct dilution in recent years for the urban upper and middle classes, it is difficult to deny that large sections of Indian women still identify with the *pativrata* image which therefore, continues to affect and shape their lives in a subtle but significant way.

Closely associated with the notion of *pativrata* is the image of glorified motherhood. The positive estimation of the mother's role in Indian mythology, folklore, contemporary cinema, political ideology and every day family life is so well established that it requires little elucidation. Throughout India, the very idea of motherhood is accorded profound reverence and it is usually believed to be a role of great spiritual power and potency.

In sharp contrast to the positive woman images of the *pativrata* and the glorified benign mother, Indian tradition also manifests a variety of
converse, overtly negative images. Chief among these sinister and destructive images are those of the widow and the barren woman.

In India, a country of multi-culturalism, there cannot be a uniform tradition. Besides the Hindu tradition, which is its major constituent, Indian tradition comprises of several other traditions which aught to be taken into account. Uma Chakravarti seems genuinely concerned about the predominance of Aryan tradition which eclipses other subaltern traditions:

"--- knowledge about the past ultimately ended in the creation of a persuasive rhetoric, shared by Hindu liberals and conservatives alike, especially in relation to the myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood as located in the Vedic period. This image foregrounded the Aryan woman (the progenitor of the upper-caste woman) as the only object of historical concern. It is no wonder then that the Vedic dasi (woman in servitude), captured, subjugated and enslaved by the conquering Aryans, but who also represents one aspect of Indian womanhood, disappeared without leaving any trace of herself in nineteen century history. Since no one had noticed her existence, it is natural that there was no one to mourn her disappearance."

One reason behind selecting only rural women for this proposed study is to mainly focus on the marginalized section of women that has escaped the notice of historians and also of writers who remain by and large preoccupied with the urban, educated and the genteel section of women. The rural woman for most part has remained peripheral in the fictional texts of women writers in English. No woman writer except Kamala Markandaya
has chosen to depict village in her fiction. They have generally limited themselves to sophisticated urban surroundings and have dealt purely with problems of urban, educated and middle class women.

The experiences of rural and underprivileged women still remain largely blocked off from the Indian novel written in English. The village life, where the gross of the population lives, has largely been ignored. Anita Desai, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabwala and Shashi Deshpande- all these major women writers confine themselves to a particular section of women. Rural woman is yet to find her place in the works of Indo English women writers. The reason may be attributed to the parentage, family and social background of these writers. Most of these significant women writers belong to the urban middle class which is generally credited with conservative tendencies and an inclination to maintain the status-quo.

Commenting on this situation Meenakshi Mukherjee points out that historically English has been the language of privilege and has had an aura of exclusiveness and is not a value neutral medium of communication. The women writers in English still belong to the urban elite for “proficiency in the language is determined by the cultural class and incidentally, the levels of economic affluence.” The general impression is that these writers and their works belong to an esoteric social strata. They are thus, cut off from the reality of the mass existence in India.

But then, fortunately where the writers writing in English have hesitated to enter, their counterparts writing in Hindi and other regional languages have made a remarkable place for themselves. The regional
languages capture the Indian village and the grassroot reality of Indian life with more felicity and ease than English. The qualitative difference in the depiction of Indira Goswami’s village in South Kamrup, Tiwana’s village in Malawa region of Punjab, Maitreyi Pushpa’s village in Bundelkhand in U.P. and the anonymous village of Kamala Markandaya substantiates this point.

The images of rural Indian women in fiction are at the initial stage foregrounded in male authored texts. The famous trio of Indo Anglian fiction – Raja Rao, R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand – portrayed women in their novels with much sensitivity. Raja Rao has recreated the fundamental and archetypal images of women, R.K. Narayan prefers to adhere to the stereotypes already available and it is only Muk Raj Anand who creates a new image of the ‘real’ woman.

Raja Rao’s approach is that of a Vedantin and he observes, “to be mothers were women created”. ¹⁹ His concept of womanhood precludes individualism. Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) is a significant novel about an Indian village caught in the turmoil of Freedom Movement, which portrays women as taking major roles. Women are in the forefront but the author emphasizes that it is not in defiance of their men--- says the pariah woman, “If my husband says spin, I shall spin learned one.”³⁰ Women are shown as upholders of stability. *Kanthapura* unveiled the immense potential of Indian women and influenced a shift in the sensibility of society towards them.

R.K. Narayan portrayed a wide range of feminine characters- from the conventional to the rebellious. However, the conventional women dominate in his novels and are presented as supporters of the institution of
family. By and large, he projects that the rebellion ends in defeat of one type or the other. In his two novels *The Guide* and *The Painter of Signs*, R.K. Narayan portrays the characters of Rosie and Daisy respectively who achieve fulfilment through their professions. But in both the portrayals Narayan anticipates the emergence of the "New Woman" and her attempts at fulfilment from the social perspective. Narayan has not made any deliberate effort to focus on village and women from rural background. His ‘Malgudi’ presents a typical small town ethos.

Mulk Raj Anand, the third novelist of the first generation emerged as the spokesman of the downtrodden in his novels like *Coolie* and *Untouchable*. Although there is no dearth of conventional women in his novels, it is his novel *Gauri* which provides the portrayal of a defiant rural woman. Of all the Indo- Anglian novels about rural India, it is only in *Gauri* that the emergence of independent womanhood is perceived to have attained a level of reckoning. In order to study emerging innovative feminine consciousness personifying individuation in post-Independence India, Anand chooses a remote, innocuous village reeling under superstition, irrationalism, ignorance and male chauvinism graphically indicating the helplessness of illiterate or semi-literate women. He depicts Indian woman involved in a fundamental quest for identity, notwithstanding the myth of emancipation.

Long before the above mentioned trio, writers like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya and Prem Chand had written woman-centered novels. They handled the woman issue with sensitivity and understanding. Their novels, translated into many
Indian languages influenced a whole generation of younger writers in India. The liberal humanism of Prem Chand and Saratchandra inspired men and women alike cutting regional and linguistic lines. Paradoxically, even while depicting the lives of the downtrodden, the deprived and women, they represent the values of educated middle class Indians who were undoubtedly eager to change the old, traditional attitudes but reluctant to discard them altogether. This ambivalence reflects the contradictions in the psyche of the readers and the writers alike. Rajinder Singh Bedi is another noteworthy writer who writes about peasants and working class people in his Punjabi novel *Ek Chaddar Maili Si* without introducing any character with a middle class perspective.

The reasons for the predominance of middle class attitude are not hard to find. The unity of Indian literature comes mainly from the shared values of middle class readers and writers, notwithstanding their various sub-groupings and commitments pertaining to their religion, language, caste, political ideology and gender. The production and consumption of literature in India has mainly been a middle-class enterprise. Only in recent years has it acquired a wider base, with the growth of the regional, tribal, Dalit and other subaltern groups. A focus in the present study on the images of rural women certainly unfolds new images of women beyond the encrusted, closed world of the middle-class that has been over-exposed.

When male writers write about "woman", she becomes the creation of an "outsider" who has seen the suffering of the stereotyped woman standing outside the threshold of her experience. On the other hand,
"woman" in the works of women writers is the creation of an "insider" who has absorbed both consciously and unconsciously the unique experiences of woman’s life as a part of the experience itself. In this context, the women’s novels offer the possibility of a focus on women through an understanding from within. Rosalind Miles has aptly commented:

The task of interpretation of women’s experience cannot be left to male writers alone, however, sympathetic they may be. The female perspective, expressed through women’s writing of all kinds, is more than a valuable corrective to an all male view of the universe.21

Since "woman" has invariably been interpreted by man, she has not been allowed space beyond archetypes and stereotypes. According to Mary Ann Ferguson: “One peculiarity of the images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes. Another way of putting this would be to say that in every age woman has been seen primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object--- their roles in relationship to men.”22 Roles outside this, i.e. woman as an achiever, as leader or as a strong individual are, by and large, either non-existent or rare.

At the time of the inauguration of Sahitya Akademi, Dr. Radhakrishnan uttered a truth, “There are many languages in India but one literature.” Since ancient times there has been a continuous interaction between various Indian languages. Important literary movements like the Bhakti movement have stretched beyond the regions in which they originally appeared. Texts in one language have influenced those in other Indian languages. There is a remarkable similarity in the response to socio-
political changes and literary innovations all over the country. A common core of metaphors and symbols, myths and legends, conventions and norms has evolved over the last one thousand years despite linguistic and non-linguistic diversities, and the literatures produced in different Indian languages tend to converge at several points. Therefore, in India which is a vast multilingual and multicultural subcontinent, literary exchanges have taken place perpetually down the ages and literary and cultural movements have never been confined to a single geographical region or a single linguistic group. This premise has been taken to justify the selection of texts in this study.

Considering literature of various Indian languages as one "Pan Indian Literature," novels written in four different languages about four different regions have been taken up to find out the common features which point out to the unity of our literary tradition and also to those which are specific to the society and culture of a particular region. Though there may be greater affinity among writers in a single language, there are also similarities among the works of authors who might not be aware of each other or literatures which have not been in contact. The study concentrates on the common problems which agitate the writers while searching images of women in rural India, the similarities as well as differences in their treatment of the theme, and the change in attitude over a period of time. This type of study also foregrounds the advantageous position of writers of regional languages in the depiction of native, rural reality.
In order to have a sound understanding of the present social structure and position of women therein, it is imperative to know the operation of various historical, political, cultural and economic factors moulding the society. Such historical perspective is all the more necessary in the case of a society with a continuous history of more than three thousand years. It is also crucial to understand the past social structure because some of the norms and values affecting women today have their roots in the past. It is however, a problematic issue to ascertain and understand the general attitude of Hindu society towards the fair sex. The position and status of women have been changing from age to age and consequently the attitude of society towards them could not remain the same in different periods. Therefore, the vicissitudes in the attitude of society towards women have to be taken into account.

Another serious difficulty arises from the nature of the data which has to be relied upon. In the same century and in the same province diametrically opposite views about the worth, nature and importance of women are found to exist. One school declares woman as the highest gift of God to man, while the other asserts that the best way to reach God is to avoid woman. It is difficult to determine which of these contending views represented mainstream view of the community. It could also be inferred that the views of the average man never find an adequate expression in the din of this warfare of words between the extremists of the opposite camps. The remarks of Prof. Srinivas are noteworthy in this context:
It (the changing position of Indian women) has many facets and
generalization is well nigh impossible because of the existence of
considerable variation among regions, between rural and urban
areas, among classes, and finally among different religions, ethnic
and caste groups. While in certain context Indian subcontinent is a
single cultural region, in many others it is heuristically more
rewarding to look upon it as a congeries of micro-regions, differences
between which are crucial.\textsuperscript{24}

Romila Thapar also refers to the similar kind of a problem relating to
the variations on the status of women: “Within the Indian subcontinent
there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging
according to cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights
and morals.”\textsuperscript{25} Apart from finding a monolithic picture of woman in various
phases, there is grave difficulty of locating authentic sources to construct a
profile of Indian women. This problem acquires more significance when
history is being looked at through subaltern sources and with a feminist
perspective. Whereas historical documents used by mainstream scholars are
found to be elitist, even historians have not paid enough attention to the
woman question.

A. S. Altekar has made a painstaking attempt to make a period-wise
survey of woman’s position in different epochs of history.\textsuperscript{26} He makes a
tentative division in the following manner:

1. The Age of the Rigveda from 2500 to 1500 B.C.
2. The Age of the Late Samhitas, Brahmanas and Upanishads from 1500 to 500 B.C.

3. The Age of the Sutras, Epics and early Smritis from 500 to 500 A.D.

4. The Age of later Smritis, commentators and Digest Writers from 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D.

The fifth period would cover the period from 1800 A.D. to the recent times.

In the Vedic age the position of women on the whole was fairly satisfactory. Altekar avers that in the Vedic literature there are no doubt a few derogatory observations like ‘women have a fickle mind’, ‘women can be easily won over by one who is handsome and can sing and dance well’. They, however, reflect the light hearted cynicism of some poets, and do not embody the views of the leaders of society. The community as a whole was showing proper concern and respect for women, allowing them considerable freedom in different activities of the social and political life. The main disabilities from which women suffered in this age, as well as in the next one, were proprietary ones. They could hold or inherit no property.

During the period of Late Samhitas, the position of women was relatively more satisfactory due to political and religious reasons. The practice of Sati and Child marriage did not exist. Sacred initiation (upanayana) of girls was common and they subsequently used to go through a course of education. Some of them attained distinction in the field of theology and philosophy and a considerable number of women used to follow teaching career. She had religious privileges like man and could have
a voice in the settlement of her marriage. Purda system was altogether unknown and she could move freely in family and society.

In the next one thousand years from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D., the position of woman considerably deteriorated. The discontinuance of upanayana, the neglect of education and the lowering of the marriage age caused disastrous consequences upon the position and status of women. Besides being too young and inexperienced, they ceased to have any effective voice in the settlement of their marriages. Svayamvara, though still in vogue among the Kshatriyas, came to be condemned by Brahmanical writers. Parents had to marry their daughters in a hurry, lest the girls should attain puberty before their marriage. During the first half of this period widow remarriages and Niyoga continued to be permitted but the increasing public opinion against these customs discredited them altogether about 500 A.D. Marriage became an irrevocable union so far as the wife was concerned. The husband, on the contrary, could discard his wife for the grave offence of not being sufficiently submissive. The Smriti writers came forward to preach that a wife should always serve her husband as God, even if he were a moral wreck. This discrimination prevailed due to the simple fact that women were not able to effectively oppose these absurd theories and claims because most of them were uneducated and ignorant about their former privileges and status.

The period of five hundred years between 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. was a very dark and dismal period for Northern India. The fertile Indian plains were subjected to one after another foreign invasion. Just as the renunciation
philosophy of the Bhakti school appealed to Hindu society in the medieval times owing to the political set back which it received at that time on account of the rise of Islam, so also the ascetic ideal of Upanishads, Jainism and Buddhism began to gain a real hold on the society only at about the beginning of the Christian era due to the prevailing wave of political and economic despondency.

The new developments affected women adversely in various ways. The ascetic school of thought is hostile to women. Women are treated as evil and delusion. This ideology of renunciation condemns woman as a snare and an impediment in the path of spirituality. Widow remarriage and Niyoga which acknowledged a widow's sexuality came under hostile attacks. She was enjoined to aim at the higher ideal of salvation (mukti) and not at the lower one of heaven (svarga). Salvation can be best attained by leading a pure and chaste life like hundreds of monks and nuns. This injunction was imposed only on the widow and not on the widower. The Smritis permit a widower to remarry immediately after the death of his first wife, 'lest the sacred fires should remain unlit'. A greater calamity that overtook the widow in this period was the revival of the practice of Sati. Earlier it was confined to the warrior class but now it started spreading over to other sections of the society as well and the practice of Sati came to be regarded as a great religious sacrifice that deserved to be followed. The doctrine of the perpetual tutelage of women also became popular during this time. The tendency to regard women as fragile and of a weak moral fibre grew stronger during this period.
During the period of later Smritis (500 A.D. to 1800 A.D.) woman continued to be a loser. In the absence of upanayana, from the theological point of view, she naturally came to be regarded as of the same status as the Sudra. This inflicted an incalculable harm on her general status and prestige. With the influence of Islam, Purda entered the society. Prohibition of widow remarriage, the revival of the custom of Sati, the spread of Purda, the greater prevalence of polygamy and supersession, indicate a deeply entrenched gender discrimination. Each and every custom and norm was biased against woman.

Since women were debarred from the study of higher theology and philosophy, keeping in view the fact that they are by nature more religious than men, a new type of religious literature was evolved to fulfil their mental needs and aspirations. This was the remodelled Puranic literature which enunciated the principles of Hinduism in a homely, easy and attractive manner illustrating them with edifying stories. Women became very well-grounded in the culture of the race through listening to this literature which extolled faith, almost blind faith to the detriment of rationalism.

Indian women in general and uneducated rural women in particular are nurtured on this Puranic lore and seek their role models in the great repertoire of female charcters which this most popular literature offers to the gullible masses. The two primordial great epics, The Ramayana by Valmiki and The Mahabharata by Vyasdev have been written around two pivotal characters, Sita and Draupadi. These two feminine archetypes define the limits of feminine experience in reality, especially the Indian reality. The
primordial myth gave woman her identity. All subsequent social stereotypes have been reinforced by these archetypes for ages. Sita and Draupadi represent the polarities of feminine experience. Sita absorbs all inflicted misery and humiliation of the male ego whereas Draupadi challenges the male ego to the epitomic limits of human excellence. Sita accepts, accommodates and withdraws. Draupadi resents, rejects, and involves herself in the process of life as a protagonist. The gender divide in modern Indian literature moves between new iconizations of these two bold and primordial figures.  

Vedic literature which depicts the golden age of Indian womanhood, offers two images of women--- Brahmadini and Sadyobadhu. The first was the ascetic type in quest of truth, knowledge and spiritual pursuits who sacrifices life for the society. The second, Sadyobadhu was the domestic woman- the daughter, wife and mother who dedicates herself to the welfare of the family. The images of woman available in society and in literature in the past and present mostly belong to the second category.

The image of the independent worldly woman was not esteemed in orthodox, elite society. Women were occasionally known as scholars, rulers, poets, artists, religious leaders and teachers. But such cases were exceptions rather than a norm.

Manusmriti and Dharmsastras are the two most important texts which codify rules and norms for woman’s behaviour. Over the centuries an effective ideology supporting Brahmncal patriarchy was worked out, which provided the rationale for subjugation of women and the lower castes. A
woman’s inferior social status was justified on the basis of what was supposed to be her inherent moral weakness and she could hope to improve her prospects in the next birth only by faithfully following the duties prescribed for her by the law-givers. As a girl she was under the tutelage of her father, as an adult, of her husband, and as a widow, of her sons.  

Marriage was made obligatory for a woman. Contrary to the general law of karma, a wife was supposed to partake in the lot of her husband and bound to him till eternity, through all the cycles of birth and death. She was required to be faithful to him in thought and deed, irrespective of whether he was virtuous or unworthy, dead or alive, and whether the marriage was consummated or not. “Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good qualities, yet a husband must be worshipped as a God by a faithful wife.” To ensure caste purity, women were jealously guarded and their freedom severely restricted. The ideology of Pativrata or satitva was designed to make them control their sexuality and avoid transgressing patriarchal norms. The ideal women never strive to break these bonds of control.

Norms for women in Hinduism derive from two separate, though interrelated sources. First the male-dominated classical literature which prescribes control and subordination of woman. Second, folk and oral traditions often created and propagated by women, yield norms that are concerned with women’s welfare and emphasize the behaviour of crucial male kin (the husband as lover, the brother as protector, the son as security); as well as the female kin (the mother-in-law, the husband’s sister etc.). In
both these sources the mother is given extreme importance. She is not only the bearer of children but also a goddess to her devotees. The wife is the woman under male control, the mother is the woman in control of herself and her children. These two figures dominate Hindu thought about women. Whereas the Western civilization stresses the sexual role of woman as wife, Indian civilization stresses her role as a mother and motherhood implies the spiritual transformation of the social role of wifehood.

The *Puranas*, on which popular Hinduism is largely based, have many stories about virtuous women, who with the power of their *satitva* protect their husbands from disaster or death and make great sacrifices for their sake. The stories, many of which also occur in the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata* illustrate the devotion of wives and emphasize the superhuman powers of a *pativrata* or a steadfast wife. Susan Wadley aptly comments:

The dominant norms for Hindu woman concern her role as a wife. Classical Hindu laws focus almost exclusively on this aspect of the woman. Role models and norms for mothers, daughters, sisters etc. are less prominent and are more apt to appear in folklore and vernacular traditions.

The Valmiki *Ramayana* upholds the *pativrata* tradition which requires a wife to merge her individuality completely into that of her husband. She is required to turn herself into his shadow not even complaining against injustice or maltreatment at his hands. Sita is such an
archetypal pativrata, a paragon of wifely devotion. The *Ramayana* also narrates the legend of Ahalya who was turned into a rock by her husband for unwittingly transgressing her *pativrata dharma*. Both Sita and Ahalya exemplify the high value placed on female chastity in Indian culture and bring into sharp focus the harsh verdict that follows the slightest breach of propriety by a woman, even if she happens to be a victim of others’ malintentions.

*The Mahabharata* (400 B.C. to A.D. 400) which has been described by critics as *Itihasa* or history rather than poetry shows life in its rich complexity depicting more complex images of woman than the *Ramayana*. Instead of presenting the ideal type of human conduct, it describes the thoughts and feelings, the sorrows and sufferings of human beings who are made of flesh and blood. Another remarkable fact is that the views expressed in *Mahabharata* relating to women bear a close resemblance to the views expressed in *Manusmriti*. These views are reproduced especially in *Shantiparva* and *Anushasanparva* of the *Mahabharata*. Certain norms of behaviour are laid down with ample illustrations drawn from various sources, e.g., Parvati, Savitri, and Draupadi symbolize the ideal of total devotion to a husband, a virtue necessary for an ideal wife.

It also goes on to explain how a woman becomes an object of ridicule if she violates the rules or refuses to observe the code of conduct prescribed for her. Lastly, it refers to how a woman achieves the high honour by strict observance of all the imperatives. There is no dearth of eulogies to such women in the *Mahabharata*. Much of the discussion, however, centres round
the woman's role as wife and mother. Even this vast epic does not speak of sister-brother, father-daughter relationship at all. Commenting on the depiction of women in this great epic, Rekha Jhanji writes:

The complex attitudes of love, hate and reverence that we find woven in the text of the *Mahabharata* seem to embody the perennial paradoxes of human existence in the male-centric *Weltanschuung*. Women are both revered and hated, they wield power over men by their seductive charm and are vulnerable because of their physical fragility. Perhaps it is because of these twin characteristics that the *Dharmsastras* enjoin them to be kept under male tutelage.

Buddhism and Jainism which evolved as a protest against oppressive caste system and hegemony of Brahminism laid more stress on renunciation and considered it a higher ideal than *pativrata* or devotion to husband. They promoted a new image of woman in literature--- that of an ascetic detached from the affairs of ordinary people who could move about with confidence, unprotected and alone. Buddhism also did not oppose patriarchy. The rules of the *sangha* also discriminated between men and women, and a nun however advanced in faith, was subordinated to the youngest novice among the brethren.

There are two basic attitudes — the erotic and the ascetic which govern predominantly the classical Sanskrit literature. The Kavya or poetic literature of Sanskrit was written in the courtly tradition and its subject matter was the heroic and amorous exploits of gods and kings. The great Sanskrit poets celebrated the beauty and moods of young women or *nayikas*
in their roles as wives or mistresses of noblemen and classified them into
different types according to their relationship with men. For instance,
Vishwanath (18th Century) in his treatise on Sanskrit poetics, *Sahitya Darpan*
classifies nayikas (heroines) into *swakiya* (a married woman devoted to her
husband), *parkiya*, (a women in love with a man who is not her husband)
and *samanya* (courtesan). Then he goes further to specify their sub-groups
such as *mudha* (the innocent woman), *khandita* (the jealous and angry
woman), *abhisarika* (the woman going for a tryst), making a total of 384
*nayikas.* However, in the classical Sanskrit poetry, immortalized by poets
like Kalidasa, the stress is on the emotions of the male hero. Women are
portrayed only as the object of his varied emotions.

Besides the sacred and kavya literature, one of the most popular
treatises in Sanskrit is *Kamasutra* of vatsyayan (C. third century A.D.) which
is considered the ancient authority on erotica and which takes up a worldly,
matter of fact attitude about woman and her sexuality.

The emergence of the Bhakti movement, the cult of devotion to God,
opened up another channel for women in medieval India wherein they
could transcend their social and familiar roles and direct their sexual and
emotional energy. Women saints subverted or even inverted the traditional
ideals of womanhood by rejecting marriage and family and rebelling against
patriarchal social conventions. Mira Bai (1499-1547) refused to acknowledge
her marriage or her widowhood and ignoring the restriction imposed by the
powerful, royal family of her husband, joined the bands of wandering
devotees singing of her love for Krishna. Vaishnavism, an off shoot of this
movement, developed the concept of Radha as the archetypal beloved of God, who as a married woman, disregarded social restrictions in order to seek union with him. Radha was treated as an independent goddess, as a model for ideal human love which existed outside marriage and which was cultivated for its own sake. After Sita and Draupadi, Mira and Radha are the most significant women images to have found place in the consciousness of India.

The *Ramcharitmanas* – the medieval epic of Tulasidas written during the Bhakti period has been so much popular amongst the Indians in general and the Hindus of North India in particular that it could fairly be described as a major sourcebook of ideals and values that have influenced and moulded the Hindu psyche so extensively and deeply. While locating images of women, writers as well as the masses of India repeatedly refer to this perennial source book which epitomizes the aspirations of the Hindu race. For understanding the image of woman in the *Ramcharitmanas*, the following couplet tells a lot about Tulasidas’ perception of woman:

नाया भगति चूनाव तुम दोउ, नारी वर्ग जानहि सब कोउ।
पुनि रघुवीर हि भगति पियारी, माया खत नर्तकी पियारी।।

*Ramcharitmanas, Uttarkand - 155.*

The poet symbolically distinguishes between two types of women, one is represented by *maya* (the power of deception) – the nautch girl, a villain whose sole object is to seduce man and drive him to peril. The other type is symbolized as *bhakti* (devotion) to Lord (Rama) – who is always close and dear to him. To Tulasidas only such women deserve veneration who
follow the path of bhakti. Such a notion of bhakti implies virtues like self-discipline, self-sacrifice, devotion to one's husband and family, love for satsang (company of the wise) and wisdom, pridelessness and above all devotion to Rama. Women possessing negative attributes are construed as the human manifestation of the deceptive power of maya. Almost all women characters in the Ramcharitmanas belong to either of these categories, i.e. virtuous and non-virtuous women.

Anand Kashyap has analysed the major women characters of the Ramcharitmanas as: (a) Sati Ansuya and Shabri who represent the extreme ideals of the two basic dharmas or values of pativrata and bhaki respectively; (b) Sita, Kaushalya and Sumitra who appear to be closest to the poet's heart since they have deftly fused the two values together and have lived a normal social life despite the vicissitudes of fortune in the mundane world, and (c) Kaikeyi, the vampish queen whose character is illustrative of the havoc that selfish individualism can cause to harmonious family life whereby the hopeless Kaikeyi has become one of the most negative female archetypes for all posterity.

The role of the Ramcharitmanas is most pertinent in the formation of images of rural women in India because the paradigms of female personality which this epic offers appear most familiar to the poor, unlettered women living in remote villages whose acquaintance with religion and culture is nurtured by orally transmitted knowledge. The Ramcharitmanas enjoys a unique place in the life of rural India. Men and women draw parallels to their mundane situations from this epic and relate themselves with the
characters in it every now and then. They have become the touchstone of human behaviour.

The *pathivrata* (Sita, Savitri), the rebel (Mirabai), the transgressor (Ahalya), the love-lorn maiden (Radha), the seductive courtesan (the celestial *apsaras*) and the powerful mother (Kali and Durga) are some of the archetypal images of Indian womanhood which are absorbed in our literary tradition and are retreated and redefined in new forms in different ages by different writers. 39

G.C. Pande, an eminent historian, thinks that women were imaged in three major ways in Indian tradition as (i) the complementary other of man; (ii) as the most potent threat and chief snare for man; (iii) as the embodiment of spiritual power and pure bliss. Images of independent worldly women did not find favour with the orthodox, elite society and were regarded as exceptional rather than as abnormal. 40

However, since literature has been predominantly the creation of men, the archetypes of woman are also the reflection of male perception. As Vijaya Ramaswamy writes.

The prerogative of imaging women, whether through writings or the arts, has, by and large, been a male enterprise. Literary or social language typified the 'Law of the Father' meaning the patriarchal voice.” 41

The emergence of socio-religious reform movements in the nineteenth century was a Pan-Indian phenomenon. The educated urban, middle classes sought to rediscover the 'pure and proper' past so that the
degenerate socio-religious practices in the present could be reformed. Most of such practices were sanctified by tradition and some scriptural authority. The pioneers of these reform movements accepted the construct of ‘Hinduism’ as a monolithic entity and subscribed to the idea of its pristine glory seeking to revive it by returning to its fundamental principals as they conceived them.\(^4\)

As women occupied a crucial position in society as mothers and wives, their social status became the indicator of a civilized society. Most of the criticism of the British administrators, historians and especially Christian missionaries in the pre-independence era was targeted at the women’s deplorable condition and the related social evils. A change in the social position of women and a redefinition of their role became the focal point in all socio-religious reforms and programmes. Taking a lead from Bengal, this movement of Indian renaissance, spread in the other parts of the country as well. Men of letters invoked the authority of scriptures to advocate against such woman-related customs as Sati, polygamy, child-marriage, purda, female infanticide, dowry and several other practices that came to be regarded as unbecoming of a civilized society. Their concern for the growing incidences of sati and prostitution was combined with the concern for widows, especially the child widows and their remarriage. Education for women was seen as a means to ameliorate their situation, though it came to be emphasized more as a means of equipping women to be better wives and mothers. As a whole, their attempts have generally been seen as representing a century of progress for Indian women.
Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G. Ranade, Mahatma Phule and others raised their voice against unjust social practices and injustice perpetrated on women. Revivalists like Dayanand Sarswati and Vivekananda believed in reviving the old Vedic society presumed to be the ideal society for women.

At the outset of the twentieth century the experience of the nineteenth century, in terms of the formation of women's identity is reflected in Vivekananda's image of Hindu womanhood. In fact there is a constant interplay between the West and East in his characterization of Hindu womanhood. The materialism of the West and spiritualism of the East with its bearing on women finds expression in his speeches. Many of his statements were addressed to a Western audience which explains the context in which his picture of Hindu women, a symbol of spirituality is contrasted with her materialistic Western counterpart.

Vivekananda also extols the 'mother' and associates true motherhood with chastity. According to him what fulfils a woman is motherhood. There is no women's question for Vivekananda as to him women have always been respected and given their due. Vivekananda confidently asserted that "a race that produced Sita, even if dreamt of her, has a reverence for woman that is unmatched on earth—".

Uma Chakravarti comments on this phenomenon of projecting the image which instead of representing reality, created a deceptive illusion of it:
The nation's identity lay in the culture and more specifically in its womanhood. In the changed political and social environment the image of womanhood was more important than the reality. Historians and laymen would complete the process by ensuring, through continued writings in the twentieth century, that the image also came to be perceived as reality”.

Uma Chakravarti documents the ‘invention’ of the tradition of the Hindu-- Aryan ‘identity’ during the nineteenth century which rested on the construction of a glorious past and an idealized image of womanhood. In their anxiety to change the low status of women in the present and to equip them for the regeneration of the country, the reformers invoked the image of the learned Gargis and Maitreyis of the Vedic ‘golden age’ and occasionally of the virtuous and valorous Rajput women of the otherwise ‘dark’ period of Muslim rule. By the beginning of the twentieth century, these images had become a part of the intellectual baggage of the educated men and women and inseparable part of the rhetoric of reform. She rightly points out, the bulk of womanhood- the low caste, peasant and working women, or metaphorically the Vedic Dasi had no place in this conceptualization”.

In order to assess any qualitative change in the social status of women in the pre-Independence India, it is imperative to take into account the contribution of two stalwarts who worked for the upliftment of Indian womanhood--- Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1884) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Being concerned for the improvement of the lot of
Hindu women by way of eradicating social evils, Dayanand, the founder of Arya Samaj, was the first reformer to have given a broadly consistent ideology of social reconstruction with a well defined place for women in it. Firmly believing in Vedic infallibility, he conjured up the vision of a return to this ‘golden age’. He saw reform and education as well as the procreation of superior offsprings as the means for social reconstruction. Since women occupied a crucial place in this conception, he dwelt at length on their desired position and role in society. From the details of domestic life laid out by Dayanand in *Satyartha Prakash* it appears that he had primarily the upper and middle class families in mind. The round of a woman’s life in such a situation was to consist of good upbringing as a child, education in the home from the age of five to eight, schooling of special kind up to the age of sixteen, marriage by consent to a young man seen personally and of a known occupation and similar status, producing and bringing up children, especially male children, caring for the conjugal family, managing the household and supervising the servants, becoming dependent on the sons after the husband’s *vanprastha* and demise, and finally dying without aspiring for salvation. Her role, thus, was confined to home as wife and mother.

There is no place for the working or rural or lower caste women in this prescribed set up. This entire edifice of ideas regarding the position of women is more or less based on *Manusmriti* which propounds the need and concern for the preservation of the wife as the field (*Ksetra*) for procreation in the interest of the husband who provides the seed and hence is the ‘owner
of the field' (*Ksetra-Swamit*). In his exposition of 'niyoga' he virtually reiterates this position.

The underlying assumptions in the *Manusmriti* and *Satyarth Prakash* are that motherhood is the prime function of woman, devotion to husband her prime duty, the management of household her prime responsibility and the nature ordained these roles for her. The regulation of her sexuality thus became the prime social necessity. These ideas continue to influence the social psyche down to the early twentieth century. The enlightened Arya Smajists like Lala Lajpat Rai also subscribe to the *Manusmriti* as 'the best known code of Hindu Law' which in spite of its corruptions 'assigns a very high position to women and exhibits an extraordinary solicitude for their welfare, for their purity and for their honour. All the revivalist reformists wanted to see woman enlightened but dependent, they wanted to give her dignity but not freedom.

Mahatama Gandhi’s ideas on the women’s question in India are scattered in his speeches and writings which were later compiled into various anthologies. Their range and scope is much wider which can be attributed to his position as a householder, his English education, legal training, wider exposure to other societies, his political purposes and over and above, his visionary power.

Apart from being a political leader, Gandhiji was also a critic of some of the outmoded social institutions. His own concept of woman imbibed a peculiar blend of religious and rational elements. Having immense faith in woman’s inner moral strength, his model of ideal women were Parvati,
Draupadi, Sita, Savitri and Damyanti— the women who knew how to conserve what is best "in our culture" and to reject what is base and degrading. He reinterpreted the mythical women like Sita and Mira and presented them as models of Indian womanhood to propound his philosophy of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. He wanted to harness the Hindu women's capacity for "silent and dignified suffering" for constructive social and political work. Women could take up the spinning wheel for the "economic and moral" salvation of India, and they could participate in public life marked by non-violent passive resistance.⁴¹

The plight of Hindu women in contemporary India, according to Mahatma Gandhi, was the result of "Hindu culture" informed by some Sanskrit texts of "doubtful authority". He advocated the expurgation of scriptures which did not stand the test of reason and science and went against the basic principles of religion and morality.⁴² Apart from women's education or their freedom to choose a life partner, he advocated equal privileges for men and women in terms of legal provision and right to property.⁴³ The nationalist movement led by Gandhi not only drew a large number of women to political activity but it also generated strength and confidence among women which helped them to organize and fight for their own cause rather than depend upon the benevolent men in society to promote their cause. The formation of the All India Women's Conference in 1927 was a crucial event in women's march towards equality.

There are obvious differences of opinion between Dayanand Sarswati and Mahatma Gandhi, the two most significant champions of women's
cause. But because of their inherent rootedness in the basic values of patriarchy both of them share basic significant similarities. Both conceived the women's world to be different from men wherein there was no scope for self-reliance, equality of opportunity and autonomy as persons. Further, their conception of the women's position was coloured by an idealized view of the upper-caste and upper-class women in the ancient past. However, they also operate within the framework of revivalism and invoke the myth of high status of women in ancient past and evade radical change in the present. Critics view their concept of complementary sex roles to be based on what was regarded as the biological inferiority of women. Women like Sita, Savitri, and Damyanti, with their spirit of self-sacrifice and self-abnegation, symbolized complete devotion to, and dependence on men. The idea of women competing with men in the economic sphere or men cooperating with them in the domestic sphere had no scope in this conception of women's place in society. In short, contextual variations and inconsistencies notwithstanding, the normative in both Swami Dayanand and Mahatma Gandhi essentially extended male authority over the lives of women, they succeeded in 'reformulating' patriarchy and in creating additional space for women at home and in the public sphere, but they did not transgress it."

According to Partha Chattrjee, "the nationalist resolution of the women's question was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres- the material and the spiritual." Consequently, despite their concern for women's condition, the logic of 'false essentialisms of
material/spiritual, inner/outer and ghar/bahir, led the nationalists to ultimately adhere to the theory of complementary roles for sexes which has been a critical factor not only for propagating conventional masculine/feminine stereotypes but also an ideological construct for denying equality of status and rights to women.\(^5^5\)

In the nationalist phase, women were invested with a highly symbolic role, that is of preserving at the personal or domestic level the ideology of a community which had lost out to the colonial ruler in the economic sphere and so was clinging to cultural matters. Women had to preserve and retain feudal forms. However, this enclosed social space ossified their lives, making them captives of male fantasy, of their over-protectiveness and over-possessiveness which comprised their status as full human beings by an insistence on their pristine and pure qualities.\(^5^6\)

The hold of patriarchal value system imbibed unconsciously by the Indian social reformers and political leaders from the twice-born background has been so empowering that the Indian society by and large continues to remain ambivalent with regard to the position of women. Ironically, even women themselves have internalized the role expectations embedded in patriarchy and reinforced by the powerful legacy of the movements of socio-religious reform. They agree to be treated as semi-divine when exalted as mothers, and as subhuman when controlled and dominated as wives and daughters. They accept by and large to remain devalued as persons, both in home and outside."\(^5^7\)
Infact, the women’s question appears to have embodied a twofold significance for the nationalists: at one level, it was vital for a vindication of tradition in Indian and Western eyes; at another, it was crucial to the validation of their claim regarding India’s fitness for ‘swaraj’.

For Jawahar Lal Nehru, the crusade for effecting gender equity was a life-long commitment. In pre-Independence era, Nehru, as the President of Indian National Congress in 1931, played a vital role in pledging the nationalists to a policy of gender equality in political, economic, and legal spheres of national life after the attainment of freedom. As a prominent member of the Constituent Assembly, he honoured this commitment by enshrining particular provisions in the Indian Constitution which vindicated this long-standing assurance of the Congress. Finally, in independent India, Prime Minister Nehru, despite severe opposition from even his own party ranks, steered and enacted a number of laws improving the rights of women in such sensitive but significant areas as marriage, inheritance, adoption and guardianship.

Nehru’s seminal contribution to the women’s cause lies in his integrated, holistic approach. He was emphatic about the need for constant revitalization of tradition in order to attune it to changing conditions. More than anyone else, it was Nehru who envisaged women playing active, multiple roles outside the domestic sphere, fully knowing the fact that economic freedom was the crux of women’s emancipation. Nehru consistently nourished and encouraged various subsidiary movements, such as those of peasant women, within the main stream of nationalist activity.
He highlighted the fact that participation in the freedom struggle would not automatically lead to women's liberation and for achieving the same women would have to fight a separate battle. He did not concentrate only on the necessity of the removal of the social evils which obstructed women's progress. Instead, through their participation in the political quest, the process of education and economic independence, he was hopeful of drawing them out of their traditional seclusion in the household and going beyond their stereotypical images and roles and thus effecting their overall emancipation. Nehru strikes a totally progressive note unlike other nationalist reformers when he questions the validity and relevance of the ideal women images such as Sita and Savitri for contemporary India. He believed that the repeated reference to these ideal images concealed an attempt to cover up the present sordid plight of women:

We hear a good deal about Sita and Savitri. But I have a feeling that these echoes from the past are raised chiefly to hide our present deficiencies and to prevent us from attacking the root—cause of women's degradation in India today.  

The efforts of stalwarts of various hues in the nationalist movements, generated a new self-confidence in women and altered the self-perception of women “as distinctly new qualities like courage, confidence simplicity and self-reliance were highlighted in lieu of the conventional ones such as decoration, delicacy and dependence. Inevitably all this led to the creation of a new self-image of Indian womanhood.”
In the post-Independence era, India can take credit for introducing some of the most advanced legislation protecting the rights and status of women. The constitution granted Indian women an equal status with men in all spheres of life. There have been labour legislation, the Hindu Code Bill, the Prohibition of Dowry Act, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, bills legalizing abortion etc. But in actuality all these laws remain confined to the pages of the constitution when it comes to the ground reality, the individual woman’s existence. The implementation is impeded by the fact that a woman’s subordination remains embedded in the personal relationships of the patriarchal family. Legal changes become difficult to enforce.

III

Throughout the span of twentieth century, concerted efforts have been made to understand and analyze the multiple forces which inter-relate to create the position and image of women in any given society. Anglo-American liberal feminists focused on the denial of equality in political and legal rights. Marxist and socialist feminists in the West, as in the Third World, have explored the problem from the perspective of class oppression and male hegemony over the systems of production. Underlying these two major angles of analysis as well as many more subsidiary newly emerging strands of feminism, there is the commonality of an ubiquitous male control over every aspect of a woman’s existence – her productive and reproductive powers, her sexuality and morality, her mobility and her political, legal, social and economic rights. The term “patriarchy”, which was popularized
by American radical feminists of the sixties, has become widely accepted as
the concept explaining women’s subjugation on the broadest, most
universally applicable terms.

The concept of patriarchy, however fetishized it may have become,
maintains a necessary focus on the idea that a woman’s oppression is not an
isolated misfortune under one man’s tyrannical authority. What is more
threatening is that a woman is at the receiving end of an entire system of
social structures and practices based on the fascist ideology that men are and
should be, superior to women. In her landmark work Sexual Politics, Kate
Millett argued that this system of domination of one collective group,
defined by birth, over another collective group, also defined by birth, is a
power game, a political manoeuvring more universal than any other form of
oppression. This system she posits:

----- tends moreover to be sturdier than any form of segregation, and
more rigorous than class stratification, more uniform, certainly more
enduring. However, mulled its present appearance may be, sexual
dominion obtains nevertheless as perhaps the most pervasive
ideology of our culture and provides its most fundamental concept of
power.62

Slogans like “the personal is political” and terms like “sexual politics”
found popularity in the jargon and vocabulary of radical feminists after such
revolutionary re-defining of the entire concept of power.

However, with the emergence of many other strands of feminism,
Indian feminist theorists and activists, as well as their compatriots in the
Third World countries and various other marginalized groups, do not comply with the dangerous over-simplification in the Western theories of patriarchy. They reject the idea of a constant, monolithic, universal patriarchal system and assert that in India patriarchy is constituted along a complex ideological grid in which gender, race, caste, class, religion, community, colonialism, nationalism- all play a determinant role. In the introduction to *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid argue that patriarchies are constantly being reconstituted as political, social, cultural and ideological factors undergo modifications.⁵³

A general consensus is emerging among Indian feminist scholars that patriarchal forces which shape the position and images of women in India and their subsequent depiction in literature, must unarguably be studied in specific contexts. A slavish application of Western theories is not required however, they can be discretely used to underline the broad principles of patriarchy. Maitreyi Krishnaraj expresses this general opinion that, regardless of differing socio-cultural contexts, “patriarchy has emerged as a dominant analytical concept for preplanning structures of male domination and female subordination. Patriarchy as an analytic framework encompasses all the others.”⁶⁴

The male supremacist ideology is experienced in its most acute form within the domain of family subtly by subverting the most personal relationships. Millett asserted, “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole.”⁶⁵
Within the family the male forces surrounding her appear to be nurturing, life-giving, supporting – the father protecting the daughter, or the husband tender and caring. But the seemingly benevolent institutions like marriage and family work invidiously against her and she is destroyed by the apparently benevolent male forces. Under the working of this system, women also become a part of the system. They internalize its values, they are not free of patriarchal ideology and patriarchies thrive on their co-operation. They obviously derive some benefits from it. A very complex set of relationships keeps their co-operation or complicity active. Gerda Lerner remarks in this context:

This co-operation is secured by a variety of means: gender indoctrination, educational deprivation, the denial to women of their history; the dividing of women one from the other, by defining "respectability" and "deviance" according to women's sexual activities; by restraints and outright coercion; by discrimination in access to economic resources and political power; and by awarding class privileges to conforming women .... a form of patriarchy best described as paternalistic dominance. Women have always shared the class privileges of men of their class as long as they were under the protection of a man. For women, other than those of the lower classes, the reciprocal agreement went in this manner: “in exchange for your sexual, economic, political and intellectual subordination to men you may share the power of men of your class to exploit men and women of the lower class.”
Women in order to retain privilege, continually negotiate their bargaining power, sometimes at the cost of other women. They treat their sons better, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom, ill-treat their daughters-in-law and so on. The family becomes a veritable site of power politics. A rural woman has explained the situation in the following manner: “Men in our families are like the sun, they have light of their own. Women are like satellites without any light of their own. They shine only if and when the sun’s light touches them. This is why women have to constantly compete with each other to have a bigger share of sunlight, because without this light there is no life.”

Another, even more cunning deployment of repressive forces of patriarchy is found in the making of sexual stereotypes. Feminist theories highlight the immense psychological pressure created by sex-role stereotyping. These theories can be used to analyze the fictional depiction of sexual stereotyping in the formulation of various images of women in the novels selected for this study.

Kate Milleltt refers to it as the “most ingenious form of interior colonization”. Ann Scott describes it as “a cultural iceberg: for every one-tenth of which is overt, or showing, the other nine-tenths are covert – submerged in a largely unquestioned tradition of women as inferiors”. “Interior colonization” and “cultural iceberg” constitute the ideology of sexism.

Sexual stereotyping is a phenomenon more subtle and pervasive than physical brutalization or economic deprivation. It is a form of psychological
conditioning in which not the individual male but the norms worked out by a particular culture through the ages work as the defining repressive force. It creates clearly defined gender identities marginalizing one group and favouring another. It is all the more dangerous because the victims are participators in their own oppression, in consciously internalizing the very code which keeps them subjugated, trapped in an image of the 'ideal perpetrated' through the centuries.

Gender socialization is another useful concept which can be specifically used for an understanding of the impact of sexual stereotyping in the Indian context. Socialization is a process of slow conditioning through which women and men, gradually come to accept constructed code of gender identity as definitive, biologically determined and thus inevitable. Psychological programming through stereotypes and gender socialization are congruent effects of patriarchy.  

The principal component of this form of indoctrination is the construction of a model of femininity. Notwithstanding culture-specific variations, this construct has an overall common applicability. Simone de Beauvoir professed:

One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.

The social construct of femininity exerts tremendous psychological pressure on women through what Betty Friedan has termed “the feminine
mystique”, “... the notion that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of her own femininity.” The ideal of femininity, in all cultures, works mainly on two myths – that of the subservience and passivity of a woman's temperament and the compulsive limitation of her role to the domestic arena, her purpose being marriage, procreation and domestic labour.

This universal feminine mystique has been raised to the status of a religious credo in India. In his analysis of the psycho-social matrix which creates the Indian identity, Sudhir Kakar states that the role of myths, especially those of religious derivation, in defining and integrating the traditional elements and the common features of identity and society in Hindu India cannot be over estimated and there is a formidable consensus on the ideal of womanhood which, in spite of many changes in individual circumstance in the course of modernization, urbanization and education still governs the inner imagery of individual men and women as well as the social relations between them in both the traditional and modern sectors of the Indian community.”

Female sexuality is another very important area of women's subordination. Women are obliged to provide sexual services to their men according to their needs and desires. It is in the sphere of female sexuality that there have been the most restrictive taboos and most stifling codes of behaviour which have been raised to the status of sacrosanct, religious truths. Paradoxically her urges and desires as a flesh and blood human
individual are ignored and crushed and she is elevated to the position of a goddess and worshipped for being spiritual. Jasbir Jain avers:

One also needs to contest the oft-quoted view that in India, women have always enjoyed a place of respect and dignity, that they have been privileged as ‘devis’. It needs to be seen that the respect and privileges that accompany the position of a ‘devi’ are not only anti-individualistic and, what is far more serious, they are also anti-humanistic and deny women a personhood. Infact, a major part of the battle in Indian feminism has been directed towards freeing womanhood from the confining, distancing mould of ‘devi’.  

A complex web of gender-specific familial, cultural, social and religious codes of behaviour impose control over women’s sexuality through prescribing their dress, behaviour and mobility. An important view point links the suspicions regarding female sexuality in the specific Indian context with the consolidation of the caste system:

Women were literally seen as points of entrance, as "gateways" to the caste system. If men of ritually low status were to get sexual access to women of higher status, then not only the purity of the woman but that of the entire group would be endangered.  

In Indian society, centuries of indoctrination regarding the expression of female sexuality continue to hold ground. A natural expression of woman’s sexuality – within and out of the haloed precincts of marriage – is summarily branded immoral, for, female sexuality is traditionally centered round the act of procreation only. A whole moral and
legal regime exists to restrict the expression of woman's sexuality outside marriage in every society, whereas customarily, a blind eye is turned towards male promiscuity. At the other end of the spectrum men may force their wives and daughters and other women under their control into prostitution, i.e. trading their sexuality. Rape and the threat of rape is another way in which women's sexuality is dominated through an invocation of "shame" and "honour."

A radical feminist analysis says that women under patriarchy are not only mothers, they are also sexual slaves, and patriarchal ideology typically opposes women as sexual beings to women as mothers. A typical Hindu male "eulogizes the 'constant' mother, while he relegates the irresistible ever changing woman to the lowliest status."

With the partial exception of mothers the male culture defines women as sexual objects for male consumption. According to it rape may not have existed in every society but it is a defining feature of patriarchy. It sees rape as an effective political device, a political act or oppression exercised by members of a powerful class on members of a powerless class.

Apart from feminist theories analyzing patriarchy, many feminists have been attracted to the psychoanalytic approach. Contemporary women writers in India have imbibed the outcome of these studies and its impact is obvious in their writing. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar examine female images in the works of Jane Austen, Mary Shelley, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Bronte and George Eliot. They address such topics as mothering, living with enclosures, doubling of charters and of the self, women's diseases and
feminized landscapes. They make the interesting argument that female writers often identify themselves with the literary characters they detest. Gilbert and Gubar point out how the monster/madwoman figure represents aspects of the author's self image – like the angel/heroine figure – as well as the author's anti-patriarchal strategies. They argue that the nineteenth century women writers contain a hidden subversive element. According to Gilbert and Gubar, nineteenth century women writers do not project any rebellious impulses on to the heroines but they express them through creating mad monstrous women. Although these characters are “suitably punished in the course of the novel,” they also convey the author's “own self-division”, resulting from “a desire both to accept and to reject them”.

Julia Kristeva furnishes the most psycho analytically based version of French feminism in *Desire in Language* and other works. She describes a Mother-centered realm of expression as the *semiotic* as opposed to the *symbolic* Law of the Father. Like Cixous and Luce Irigaray, Kristeva opposes phallocentrism with images derived from women's corporeal experiences and thus connects the personal with the social.

Another psychological approach, myth criticism has also found place in feminist scholarship and several writers have adopted its perspectives and transformed them for the purposes of feminist criticism. Feminist myth critics tend to center their discussion on the Great Mother and other early images and goddesses.

Foregrounding the necessity of women writing their own reality, Pam Morris elaborates that “male-authored texts tend to construct female
characters as passive objectives of a masculine gaze which is frequently voyeuristic and almost invariably judgmental. Mary Anne Ferguson’s widely circulated anthology demonstrated that, “literary texts commonly cast women in sexually defined roles.” In Ferguson’s scheme of things, these were clearly regarded as false images of women. She assumed that women’s writing would reflect women’s real worlds and their real experiences. Much of the most persuasive feminist criticism of the early 1970s worked from the same principle. Feminists believed that literary criticism, with its universalist assumptions, systematically obscured questions relating to women as writers, women as readers and the representation of women in literary texts.

Elaine Showalter, more than any other individual critic, has been responsible for encouraging the focus on women’s writing. This is the positive critical project which she calls “gynocriticism” in opposition to the negative "feminist critique" of male texts. She posited three major phases that she claimed were common to all literary subcultures. First, a phase of initiation, second, a phase of protest, and third “a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity.” In the context of the present study which concentrates on the images of women in women writers, what is of interest is this mode of self-discovery which Showalter calls “Gynocritics”. It is:

The study of women as writers and its subjects are the history, style, themes, genres and structures of writing by women, the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual
or collective female career and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition.  

Women as represented in novels written by men, are quite naturally a representation of observation from an exterior point of view. In her oft quoted words, Simone de Beauvoir points out that men see woman as the "other". In the words of the author “……she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject he is the Absolute – she is the other”. In the social system of patriarchy, the term man stands for the norm and woman is always defined in relation to what man is not. Having no identity of her own, she often serves as an empty space, upon which he may project his desires and fears. Literature written by men abounds in examples of women depicted as paragons of feminine virtue or as domineering viragoes and shrews. Governed by their own projections on a female otherness, men lose contact with women, as they really are. 

As male point of view provides the norm even women writers tend to internalize the culturally conditioned and received image of man. Therefore, sometimes even women authored texts present images of women, which conform to the male typecasting of women which results from seeing women as ‘flat embodiments of a particular force or theme,’ “and mythically, allegorically, symbolically, but never realistically as fully rounded complex human beings”.

Disturbed by the fact that women had invariably been represented in stereotypical ways in the literary canon that claimed universality, feminist critics have turned to women authors for alternative images of women.
Nicola Beauman defines "the women's novel" as "a novel which in some way or another illuminates female attitudes to experience, throws light on the texture of women's lives." Taking the above premise, all the six novels taken up in this study can be placed in this category. Notwithstanding the difference of attitudes of their authors and the determinants of these attitudes, these texts do illuminate the attitudes of rural women to their rural reality and throw light on the texture of the life of rural women in India. In the process of selection, Elaine Showalter's distinction between books that happen to have been written by women and books which "purposefully and collectively concern with the articulation of women’s experience" has been used as a criterion.

Ironically, out of the three living authors – Dalip Kaur Tiwana and Indira Goswami refused to be labelled as feminists during the course of their interviews. However, Maitreyi Pushpa was an exception who took pride in her professed commitment with feminism. Not only these regional writers, even most of the Indo-Anglian women writers in India feel reluctant to be called feminists. They consider even the term 'women writer' as derogatory, taking away their artistic autonomy and identity and categorizing them by gender. For Krishna Sobti her concerns were more comprehensive and broad-based than to be bracketed with the feminists. At about the same time in another interview she categorically stated that tired of ghettoized as a feminist writer she may as well give up writing. Other writers before her, Anita Desai for instance, had resisted being labelled as feminist and had
rejected all comparisons between the metaphor of birthing and creative writing.  

The list is endless, both at home and abroad. Dorris Lessing was disappointed that the *Golden Notebook* (1962) was read as “a feminist tract” which pushed her literary experimentation into the wilderness. Lessing is of the view that the women’s movement is “obsolete and parochial” in the face of impending global disaster. And Madhu Kishwar, the editor of *Manushi* wrote in 1989 (No. 61) in an editorial titled “Why I do not call myself a Feminist” in which she gave several reasons for not preferring the term. Dalip Kaur Tiwana, in her literary autobiography, *Puchhde Ho To Suno* (1995) has discussed the issue of being a woman writer at some length. Tiwana also showed unwillingness to be limited by the term feminist.

Most women writers who resist being labelled as feminist do so for a variety of reasons, some of which can be stated as follows: the reader-critic reads them selectively and glosses over their subtexts, the media and market view them as woman to woman writers, i.e. women who write about women and address a female readership, a lot of research and reviewing is confined to this slot and stereotypes them; they are identified with victim-literatures and this limits the perception of their experimentation or aesthetics; feminism is still not viewed as an individual’s right to grow, but as militant rebellion bent upon indiscriminately destroying all social or moral codes or the new woman is seen as a promiscuous one: moreover binary oppositions continue to exist.

What writers are wary about are the political and ideological
implications. If the term can be divested of its polemical implications, it can perhaps carry a broader, much acceptable meaning. Even these women writers who are indifferent to feminism, or critical of it, are living and writing in a world in which feminism has been a force to reckon with. In Flora Alexander's words:

the fact of their gender has had some effect on their experience and their perceptions of the world, and this is in some measure selected in the nature of the fiction they write.  

Novelists need not be conscious subscribers to the feminist ideology, those who unobtrusively pose questions about the marginality and oppression of woman, who challenge tradition which stereotypes woman in stifling roles and suggest new patterns of existence can legitimately be called feminists. Kamala Markandaya, Indira Goswami and Dalip Kaur Tiwana are feminist in this broader sense of the term. Without entering the polemics of feminism, they are champions of "woman's cause."

The application of a feminist critical approach and the use of feminist theories and jargon to explicate the works of Indian women writers is confronted with another danger. Since these modern feminist theories have been formulated in the West, on the basis of European–American social reality, there is a fear that if Western models of feminism are indiscriminately imposed on Indian social reality, they might prove counter-productive. Indian social activists and academics assert that unlike in the West colonial and nationalist experiences have moulded the lives of the modern Indian women. They feel strongly that Indian feminism should
chart its own course rather than be burdened with an imported culture-specific brand of feminism. Madhu Kishwar, founder of “Manushi”, a leading women’s organization, laments.

The definitions, the terminology, the assumptions, even the issues, the forms of struggle and institutions are exported from West to East and too often we are expected to be the echo of what are assumed to be more advanced women’s movements in the West.92

Since the proposed study does not require a rigid application of any particular feminist ideology, efforts have been made to create a flexible framework using selectively those aspects of feminist theory which have universal applicability.
Notes and References


4. M.K. Naik draws special attention to this prejudice in *A History of Indian English Literature* (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1982).


20. - - - Kanthapura 2nd ed. (Bombay: Oiform UP, 1974) 104.


23. Ascetic School in the Classical Sanskrit Literature treats women as delusion and evil. They have nothing but condemnation for women who retreated as obstacles in the path of spirituality. It is later on reflected in Buddhist and Jain epics (Mahakavyas) or other forms of literature and very prominently in numerous poems by Bhartrihari.


28. The doctrine of perpetual tutelage was ordained by Manu. The father ought to protect a woman while she is a maiden, the husband when she is married, and the sons when the husband is no more; a woman ought not to remain independent:

वित्ता रक्षन्ति कौमारे भरता रक्षन्ति यीवने

रक्षन्ति स्मारिते पुत्रा न यवेत्सः स्वतन्त्रताम्। Manusmriti, IX-3.


30. बाल्ये विदुर्वेशसिद्धेन्द्र पाणिप्रहस्य यीवने

पुज्याणां मातिप्रेते न भजेत्स्त्रीस्वतन्त्रताम्। Manusmriti, V - 148
31. विशील: कामवृताभि: वा कुमावतपरिवर्तितं ।
उपाध्य: स्त्रीणाम साध्या सततं देववति।। Manusmriti, V - 154


33. Jacobson and Wadley, *Women in India* 120.


44. Chakravarti, *Recasting Women* 78.

45. Chakravarti quoted by Indu Banga, Women in Indian History 246.


This, in fact, is the thrust of Uma Chakravarty's discussion of Swami Dayanand's ideology; "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? 54-60.

'The Position of Indian Women' (The Tribune, 18 March 1915), quoted in Madhu Kishwar, 'The Daughters of Aryavarata', The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 23.2 (1986, 177). gathered from his speeches and writings largely in the Young India and the Harijan and

Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on women have been put together in several anthologies, particularly, Women and Social Injustice (Ahmdabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1942).

Gandhi, Women 217-288-235


Gandhi, Women 15


Jain and Mahan, Women Images 214-221.

Jain and Mahan, Women Images 227.

Jain and Mahan, Women Images 214.


Maitreyi Krishanraj, ed. Feminist Concepts (Bombay: SNDT University, 1993) iii.


82. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.


85. Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own*.

86. Maitreyi Pushpa Excerpts from the interview with Maitreyi Pushpa are given in the last chapter, *Being Women: Seeing Women*, which substantiate this statement.


90. Dalip Kaur Tiwana. *Puchde Ho To Sum* (Listen, if You Ask) 110. Also see 90-93, She Writes: "In my novels neither have I talked about woman nor about man. I have always talked about their relationships" (91) Before being a woman, a woman is a human being (see p. 28).
