Chapter IV

THE IMAGE OF SHAKTHI - NAHAL'S FEMALE CHARACTERS

Mythology has been a perennial source of inspiration to writers of all languages. The average Indian mind is steeped in mythology that has seeped down to him through the preceding generations. The influence that myths exercise on the collective consciousness of a people has been acknowledged by sociologists the world over. Myths have an imperceptible, but ever dominant role in shaping the moral codes, ethical precepts and way of life of a people. The Indian ethos is nurtured in myths of the Hindu deities to such an extent that, "an Indian Writer" says Nahal, "cannot escape the myths."\footnote{1} Many are the writers who while creating their fictional characters have, drawn on mythological persons like Rama, the ideal king or Sita and Savitri, the adorable paragons of admirable virtue and chastity. The tendency to idealise women and eulogise them is a hallmark of traditional Sanskrit literature.

Meenakshi Mukerjee observes that even though these classical ideals are no longer available in the contemporary Indian
literary practice, numerous characters are found to adhere closely to classical prototypes-especially the women of fiction "who persistently reenact the suffering, sacrificing role of Sita or Savitri". The patriarchal joint family system had enjoined on the Indian woman, a host of religious, moral and social obligations. Once married into such a family, she was expected to "eschew all personal ambitions and goals and find fulfilment in the family, not outside it." But by the turn of the century, due to the persistent work carried out by social and political reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi, Indian Women began to shake off their passivity and gain an identity of their own.

The Indian English novelists of the first generation tried either to idealise woman or to present her realistically, but very often superficially. In the traditional concept a woman is expected to view suffering and sacrifice more as her inalienable fate than as a miserable plight. These writers seldom explored the possibility of a psychological probe into her inner depths. This sort of idealisation tends to, or is intended to, deny woman her right to live as a normal human being. This infact is a subtle device to keep her shackled by glorifying her suffering and poetising her sorrow. She is assigned a role as the custodian of extraordinary moral virtues which enable her to take up inexorable suffering to lighten the burden of the male world. This idealisation syndrome is most conspicuous in the novels of Raja Rao. In
Serpent and the Rope (1960) a veritable spectrum of womanhood is presented through the portrayal of Saroja, Savitri, Madeleine, Catherine and Laxmi. The novelist assumes the conventional attitude of the woman's subsidiary position in the social milieu, under cover of philosophical idealism. Rama, the Vedantin of the Serpent and the Rope, in while idealising the woman on the spiritual and philosophical planes, is, in fact, trying to subjugate her through his oppressive actions. He accepts without any compunction, his spiritual marriage with Savitri and his practical marriage with Madeleine, while indulging at the same time in physical union with Laxmi. Again in The Cat and Shakespeare, (1965) Ramakrishna pronounces that "to be wife is to worship man". The different roles of woman as sister and as wife are subordinated to her status as an apprentice for motherhood, which seems to be her final goal and fated role in life.

Another variant of this subservient role is seen in the portrayal of the woman as a meek sufferer, very often voluntarily sacrificing her personal comforts to satisfy the male ego. It becomes the lot of woman to compromise, to adjust, to forgive, so that life goes on uninterrupted. Kamala Markandeya's female characters like Mira (Some Inner Fury), Rukmani (Nectar in a Sieve), Nalini (A Handful or Rice) and Sarojini (A Silence of Desire) show a stoic acceptance of their subservient roles in a male-dominated society. Bhabani Bhattacharya presents Mohini (Music for Mohini) as finally
accepting her loss of identity without any grumbling. Geetha in Rama Mehta's Inside the Haveli is a Bombay-educated modern girl who is brought into a purdah-clad Marvadi family. She finds it quite suffocating to adjust herself to the Haveli life, where "Men were regarded with awe as if they were gods." Finally she is made to lose all her identity to merge with the maelstrom of the haveli life.

Writers like R.K. Narayan and Mulkraj Anand, who are more concerned with the realistic portrayal of society also tend to ignore the role of the emerging new woman and assign to her a secondary position in their fictional world. In the novels of R.K. Narayan, with the possible exception of Daisy (The Painter of Signs) and Rosie (The Guide), women never occupy a central position. In The Dark Room, Narayan makes Savitri revolt against her despotic husband and leave the house. But in the end, the novelist sends her back limping to accept a life of torture and humiliation. Mulkraj Anand too, relegates his fictional women to the background in all his novels except Gowri. Meena Shirwadkar observes that it is quite unfortunate that Narayan and Anand do not have "a vision of woman that would alter her present plight and open new possibilities of life." Chaman Nahal, who belongs to the second generation of Indian-English novelists has made a significant deviation from this conventional path. He rightly feels that meek and submissive characters like Sita or Savitri do not serve the purpose in a fast
changing social milieu where the Indian woman is fighting a relentless battle to assert her identity and to free herself from servitude. "When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome" says Nahal, "my idea of femininism materialises." His women characters epitomise his idea of the new women shorn of all conventional embellishments. He would like to substitute the existing mythological symbols by constructing "a replacement model in the context of the myths we already have." He thus introduces the image of Shakthi, the primordial creative force as represented in the Hindu mythology.

In the traditional Hindu systems of philosophy, the feminine principle has always been assigned a place of vital importance as the dynamic, active, creative and energizing aspect of the absolute. The worship and celebration of woman as a deity goes back to the vedic times. The Vedas contain hymns to Aditi, the mother of gods and men. Aditi, it may be seen, is personified freedom, the eternal mother of all beings, who will set free the creations from their bondage. In the Kena Upanishad, Shakti is referred to as a "superbly charming woman, Uma Haimavati, ever in association with the Omniscient Brahma." The Samkhya philosophy extols woman as prakriti, the primary form of being from which different forms of existence issue. It is the symbol of the "never resting active world stress." Shankaracharya, calling this feminine principle at work as Maya, says "In her static and transcendent aspect, she is Shiva and
in the kinetic, immanent aspect, she becomes Shakthi." It is through Shakthi that the divine activity in the world is manifested, while purusa, the male principle remains transcendent, though omnipotent, as mere witness. Though benevolent in the dormant state, she may get transformed into Durga, the relentless destroyer of evil in all its manifestations. Sir John Woodroffe, the eminent Vedantic Scholar considers Shakti as the symbol of an evolutionary process. It is displayed in the forms evolved as "an increasing exhibition of consciousness from apparently, not truly unconscious matter." He further maintains that on a more pragmatic level it simply means that man, by his striving, must seek to become fully humane, and pass yet further into the divine fullness." As such Shakti is the life force at work which helps us to transform ourselves from "being" into "becoming".

The perpetual thirst of the female psyche to rediscover her lost identity and to assert herself can be seen as early as in the first novel written by Chaman Nahal, My True Faces.(1973) The novel, noted for its philosophical density, depicts its hero Kamal, as a sensitive young man with an orthodox Hindu background. He is married to Malti, an anglicised Hindu girl, and predictably, the contradictions in their outlooks and value systems do not make for harmonious living. Malti can hardly tolerate the possessive and domineering attitude of her husband, and ultimately she walks out on
him. The novelist hints that a "a sophisticated girl can never submit herself like a slave, in a family where the husband is regarded as the equivalent of a Parameswar, a God."12 Malti laments that she, who had the freedom of a bird, is now with "clipped wings"(71) Kamal tries to give his wife a fair treatment, not out of any genuine love or fondness for her, but because he considers it his duty-his dharma. Even his love making is part of his attempt to carry out his dharma towards his wife. The magnificence of the relationship for him "lay in the awareness that what was passing between him and Malti had the full sanction of the dharma"70. Malti, once employed as a trained nurse, had to resign her job in order to play the role of a conventional housewife to please her husband. Kamal cannot even think of letting her go back to work until she had reared a few children for him. There comes a stage in Malti's life when she has to make a choice between dignity and slavery, between preservation of her identity and submission to a robot-like husband. She promptly opts for the former and walks out with her only son. She is soon brought back to the presence of her own and her husband's in-laws, who in a mock heroic style drench her in a shower of sermons. They try to enlighten her by quoting scriptures that spell out the duties of an ideal wife.

It has often been said that the Indian marriage has an edge over its western counterpart due to the wider social connotation it carries. A woman is married into a family, into a community, which
bestows the family and community concerned with the additional responsibility of keeping the marriage intact. It is believed that when difference of opinions crop up between the husband and wife, the elders are only too willing to sort them out. But in actual practice, such unwarranted interference can hardly save a marriage, especially when the rift has got a solid foundation. Nahal wants to demonstrate this truth through the ending he gives his novel. In spite of the best efforts of the in-laws to fabricate a compromise, Kamal and Malti decide to go their separate ways rather than keep up a facade of happy married life.

Nahal is fully conscious of the fact that this sub-servient role is not quite alien to the Indian woman. In his second novel, Into Another Dawn, his heroine is an affluent American lady married to a millionaire. Irene is "an upright girl with a very clear head'. Who would like to believe that a "woman's real place is inside of a man's heart". (12) All her attempts to love and be loved by the man of her choice are foiled when she understands that her husband, busy making millions has got little concern for her happiness. She is reduced to the level of a show piece or a mere errand boy to do the chores for him. Destined to spend the long and lonely nights in a huge mansion, she accidentally crosses the path of an Indian migrant, Ravi. What follows is a passionate and intense release of her pent-up emotions and she loses herself in her new found freedom. She puts up a relentless
struggle to get herself released from the clutches of a "psychopath, who takes delight in torturing her". (123) He sets spies on her to watch her movements and would not agree to a decent marriage settlement. Irene lives through all these trials and never does she falter in her love towards Ravi. Irene becomes the representative of those millions of suffering females who are constantly persuaded to forfeit their identity and self respect so that the male ego can flourish unscathed.

In their frantic efforts to free themselves from prying eyes, Ravi and Irene visit the Woodstock Music and Art Fair, where they spend a few days in total abandon. The key word of the festival was freedom - freedom from all bondages that restrict and stifle the full blossoming of the human spirit.

Mere enfranchisement was nothing; freedom was not conferred by declarations of independence. Freedom meant the right to protest, the right to question, to vary and to change, whosoever the authority or noble the concept. (115)

The novel becomes a vehement plea for the individual's unhampered freedom to live a life of his or her choice. On the ski-ing ground, the women far excelled the men and soon it become "a point of honour with them, to come down on everything with that defiance"
Nahal believes that, given the right kind of opportunity and assurance, women can work wonders and contribute a lot in making this world an honourable habitat for humanity.

In Sunrise in Fiji, Nahal introduces a middleaged woman of Indian descent who had to meekly bear the brunt of a mass rape she was subjected to, in her adolescent stage. Rukmani flees to a remote part of the island to escape inquisitive neighbours. There she gives birth to a son, after legalising her marriage with the chieftain of the village. She then opts to lead a new life with another man. Her son grows up in the village, unaware of his real identity. After a long span of 35 years, she gets the news of the death of her son by drowning. Rukmani had, "sealed off a part of her existence and had braved the cruel world as best as the she could (123) The rude shock administered by the tragic death of her first born proves to be an eye opener for her and she realises the futility of a life spent in innumerable adjustments that the societal norms called for. She had always maintained her self dignity and sense of freedom, however hard her physical tribulations were. Even virginity was to this woman, a thing of the mind;

She had emerged firm and purer, chaster after each touch. Virginity, for this woman, was only a state of the mind. It could be lost and regained, over and over again. She was an eternal virgin (125)
Her own bitter experiences in life do not deter her from reassuring Harivansh, who accompanies her to the village. She advises him to begin a new life that will usher in hope and joy. "There is always the time. The last day, the last hour, the last moment will do". (125) Pratibha, Harivansh's fiance exhibits great buoyancy of spirit and self esteem on the face of setbacks. Her hope for a life with the man after her heart soon comes to an end when Harivansh turns a cold foot. Humiliated and run down, she raves at him for shattering her dreams of a re-generation.

Nahal's enthusiasm in portraying women as putting up a brave fight against adverse circumstances becomes more pronounced in his later novels. All the four novels on the Gandhian theme are replete with women characters who could scale supreme heights of human endurance through their selfless devotion to the work at hand and by immense fortitude. Nahal is dismayed at the fact that most Indian novelists writing in English could overlook the great potential the freedom struggle provided. The significant role played by some of our women leaders in the forefront of the struggle could have been highlighted in novels:

In the freedom movement from 1915 to 1947 we had the most riot period in the Indian history, when Indian women played such a glorious role: Vijayalekshmi Pandit,
Sarojini Naidu...... The heroic role played by Indian women in their own capacity definitely provides an alternative replacement model. This rich resource has been completely left out.13

With the Gandhian movement in full swing, all discriminations based on sex began to fade away and women from all walks of life, women from secluded cloisters, women who had never looked upon a crowded street, flung themselves into the blinding glare of the day, unabashed and unprotected. With a much revered political colossus like Gandhi to back them up, they soon gained social respect, which in turn prompted others to come to the limelight. Gandhi, through his speeches and writings in the Harijan and Young India vehemently criticised the dowry system and the practice of enforced widowhood. He also encouraged women's education and pleaded for equal status for women. The entire period of nearly three decades of the Gandhian movement was also a period of emancipation for the Indian women on a scale unprecedented in history.

This new renaissance of the Indian women, naturally got reflected in the literature produced during this period. The new political awakening blazed the way for a set of creative writers in a number of regional languages, as well as in Indian-writing in English, who tried to redefine the role of the new women in a fast changing
social and political milieu. As women are the worst affected by social outrages like the caste system, untouchability, the dowry system and poverty, these writers tried to picture this slow, but steady revolution affecting the intellect and emotions of the Indian woman. Thus, R.K.Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, K.S.Venkita Ramani's *Kandan the patriot*, Bhabani Bhattacharyya's *So many Hungers*, and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in Sieve*, bring into focus, the problems faced by women in a transitional stage in Indian history. Again, the unprecedentedly violent and traumatic incidents that ensued the partition of the Indian subcontinent became instrumental in the creation of a number of novels like *A Train to Pakistan* by Kushwant Singh, *The Dark Dancer* by Balachandra Rajan, *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Husain, *The Rape* by Raj Gill and *Ashes and Petals* by H.S.Gill. These novels invariably portray how the Indian women braced themselves up in the face of a calamity and put up a brave fight to tide over adverse circumstances.

Nahal enjoys the unique distinction of having produced a series of four novels on the theme of the struggle for independence spanning a period of thirty three years - from Gandhi's return from South Africa in 1915 to his assassination in 1948. It is also for the first time in the history of Indian English fiction that one comes across a full length and brilliant delineation of a number of remarkable women
characters who lived in close proximity to Gandhi himself. The most important among these characters is Kusum, whose destiny gets, entangled in a mysterious way with the destiny of the nation at different levels of her life. Mary lago rightly observes that Kusum "represents the new women of India".14

Kusum's story is woven as a parallel strand to the Gandhi saga throughout the first three novels of the Gandhi Quartet viz, The Crown And The Loincloth, The Salt of Life, and The Triumph of the Tricolour. Gandhi is shown as exerting an imperceptible, yet powerful influence in shaping her vision of life. Married into the populous patriarchal household of Thakur Shantinath, She never had the occasion to experience the constraints that a joint family normally exercised. On the other hand, the communal living brought her a feeling of relief and freedom, as there were "so many people around to take care of details". (The Crown-311) This unusual opportunity provided her with ample leisure to think for herself and shape her life after her heart's desire, to a certain degree. Her husband Sunil an avowed Gandhian and freedom fighter, inspired her to think freely and act boldly. Soon she is dragged into the maelstrom of the freedom struggle, first as her husband's confederate, and after his martyrdom, as a full fledged worker. It is quite significant that after Sunil's death, she doesn't (like the Hindu widows of the day) opt to lead a life of austerity clad in white, shunning society and eschewing all pleasures
of life. She joins the Sabarmathi Ashram with her son Vikram and becomes a teacher in the School attached to the Ashram. The knowledge that her trusted husband Sunil had been having a clandestine affair with her best friend, Rehana, comes as a rude shock to her. But she does not like to submit herself to dejection or grief, on account of that. She derives strength by repeating to herself, "Yes, my affirmation has begun, my new life has sprouted. (Crown-466). Her reverence for Gandhi does not prevent her from having frank and even vociferous open arguments with that great soul. On these occasions she never conceals her doubts or glosses over the differences in their respective views. This openness all the more endears her to Gandhi.

Kusum gets a new lease of life when Raja Vishal Chand, the ruling price of Lambini and an admirer of Gandhi marries her. She boldly takes the decision to get married a second time, even though her father-in-law and her own father resent the very idea of a widow's remarriage. As fate would have it, her conjugal bliss is short lived as Raja Vishalchand passes away after giving her a son to inherit the throne of Lambini. Kusum once again returns to the solace of the Gandhi Ashram. She gets completely immersed in the freedom movement, contributing her mite to the realisation of the Gandhian dream. When Gandhi and other senior leader are incarcerated in the Quit-India movement, and the movement is temporarily suspended, she goes to Benares to start a home for destitute women. She is
convinced that it is high time that the Indian woman took up a mood of defiance and dared to break the shackles of subservience that had kept her bound for centuries. She feels that "the flag of womanhood has unsullied power, has to be raised high, and if this could be done only through defiance, so be it (The Triumph-168). Kusum is so intent on bringing about the uplift of women that she goes to the extent of adopting an abandoned girl child. She hopes to rear this deaf and dump child in such a manner that she would defy the accepted norms of womanhood and emerge as the new woman in a free India:

We will turn Gulbachan into a symbol of defiance, of daring, The way she grown up, the way we treat her, the way we open up new avenues for her, will represent the new woman we fashion for ourselves here. Woman in India will no longer be chained or gagged or silenced .... There will be a rainbow spanning the sky. There will be hope, there will be a future for them all. (The Triumph-459)

When communal riots break out, Gandhi takes a long march through the villages on a peace mission in which Kusum also joins him. The appalling sight of mutilated human bodies lying in heaps, shocks her. Huge vultures are everywhere tearing at the entrails of men, women and children. Separated from the group, she falls a prey to a pack of vultures. At first she tries to seek a shelter.
She finds none, and nobody nearby to aid her. The vultures attack her with renewed vigour. She is bruised, frightened and weak. Suddenly it dawns on her that she should retaliate with all her might, instead of fleeing from the birds of prey:

A firmness of purpose came on her, which had been the unique feature of her entire life. Would a couple of birds have the better of Shakthi—a female who was a personification of power, the mother and giver of life to them? No, she would not let that happen. (The Triumph-472).

She soon understands that fighting back with all her might has reduced the fierceness of the attack of the vultures and this further encourages her to continue the fighting with unabated spirit, till she is free of danger. Through this episode towards the end of The Triumph of the Tricolour, the message Nahal tries to convey to the Indian woman is explicit enough: If the Indian Woman has to survive and lead a normal life upholding her dignity and self esteem, she has to fight the injustices heaped upon her, rather than succumb to the male tyranny.

The spirit of defiance and the will to steer one's life clear through adverse circumstance is again exhibited in the characters of
Shyama and her daughter Abha. Shyama, Kusum's sister-in-law falls in love with Rakesh, a member of a revolutionary organisation working for freedom. She elopes with him, knowing fully well that a life of turmoil and hardships is in store for her. Her very act of walking out of her father's Haveli, where everything is done according to set rules and conventions is quite symbolic. She has to defy the old world order and embrace the new to fix up her own identity. In spite of her best efforts to become an ideal wife, Rakesh feels no qualms in disowning her. Though wounded to the core of her being, Shyma does not succumb to a cruel fate. She takes the bold decision to become the wife of Zahir, a Muslim friend of Rakesh. The zest for life and the unwillingness to surrender, impel her to tread a path strewn with hostile impediments.

Abha, Shyama's daughter grows up to become a doctor. She dedicates her life to the upliftment of the poor and downtrodden. When cholera breaks out in the thickly populated slums of Delhi, she volunteers to set up a clinic in the worst affected area. She also leads the Muslims of Bellimaran in the agitation against forced donations to the war fund. She opts to remain single because she cannot subscribe to the idea of an arranged marriage, but she is bold enough to adopt an abandoned girl child. She is convinced that the Indian myths as well as the religious and social conventions are weighted against the woman. Kusum remains the perennial source of her moral courage from where
she draws liberally and fashions her idea of the emerging womanhood. She fully agrees with Kusum when she says:

Why can't a single woman adopt a child?
I would even sanction a single woman having a child of her own...the husband is a cumbersome necessity. A woman may marry a man if she loves him. But why should she marry him just for the sake of the child? (The Triumph-454)

Abha becomes a symbol of the Gandhian presumption of fearlessness, self dignity, devotion to work and self esteem. No wonder, the Mahatma himself pays homage to her when he says "we could do with a few more Abhas" (The Triumph-432). While Abha is free from the dependence syndrome, and yet manages to lead a normal life, Nahal presents two other characters who, though free from the dependence syndrome, are not able to lead a normal life, due to the constraints of a convention-bound society that would sneer at an affair outside wedlock. Rehanna, Imtias Hasan's wife cannot help loving Sunil, Kusum's husband, even while cherishing a warm affection for his wife. She insists that they should never give themselves in to the craving of the flesh, lest it should mar the chance of attaining that supreme bliss gained by the merging of two selfless souls in love. She
would like to soar high to reach a higher level of consciousness. She tells Sunil:

Consummation is the death of an experience .... by not consummating our passion, we can love each other limitlessly. And I do want to love you without bounds, without confines, for ever and for ever.... (The Crown.173)

Rahana's attempts to ennoble her love by defying the demands of Nature and the law of probability which holds a powerful sway over human beings, is to be viewed as a brave gesture. The very willingness to accept unconsummated love as the epitome of nobility makes her at once extraordinary and worthy of emulation. Rehana stands in contrast with Priti, the Dogri woman Sunil comes into contact with, during his stay in the Pahari village. Though married to three brothers, she enjoys the freedom and respect that would be the envy of any city wife. She is too willing to exercise her personal charm on Sunil, even though he is almost a stranger to her, once he makes a favourable gesture. She is quite uninhibited in her love making as she is not in the least scared of any social taboos. For her, consummation is the only way to belong to a person fully, though the union can be shortlived. She makes this clear in her parting words to Sunil:
I gave my heart to you and you are leaving me. I won't keep you.....I can't. Only don't make promises you know are false (The Crown-266)

Both Rehana and Priti aim at the fullness of life, even while being fully conscious of the limitations and transience of their forbidden relationships. In a sense, they transcend these limitations to assert their individuality and sense of freedom. What Rehana achieves through her spiritual love becomes almost on a par with what Priti gets through her willing surrender of her body.

It is doubtful whether historians have done full justice to those noble and daring women who underwent great ordeals in the struggle for Indian Independence. Surprisingly enough, hardly any reference has been made in chronicles to the role of women who worked with the revolutionary groups intent on achieving freedom. Nahal is eager to highlight the heroic role played by these women, which contributed to the overall thrust of the freedom movement. Noted psychologist Helene Deutsch considers women's protests as deriving from a neurotic dissatisfaction with their ordained lot.

They (the women) often participate in violent anonymous protests and join revolutionary movements. Most of the time they are unconsciously protesting against their own fate. By identifying themselves with the socially
oppressed or the non-possessing class, they take up a position against their own unsatisfying role.¹⁵

This observation holds good in the case of Salma, mistress of the dreaded revolutionary Darbara Singh. In her adolescence she was enticed by a married man who, having ravished her all the way down to Lahore, had sold her into the flesh trade. Salma spent her youthful years in a brothel-a 'Kotta', as a courtesan until Darbara came and rescued her. She played a major part in the attack on the visiting prince of Wales. Sardar Bhajan Singh, a hosiery merchant of Bombay provides her with a decent job in his factory, but her revolutionary fervour prompts her to be in constant contact with the extremist groups. She travels to Kashmir to get arrested in the agitation launched by a women's organisation against the sale of young girls in that state. She could have revelled in luxury and comfort as an assistant manger of the factory. When the police ruthlessly tried to evict the hapless workers from the slums, her heart goes out to those slum dwellers. She is shot dead while leading the agitation against forcible eviction.

Dulari, the mistress of Joseph Daniel, is a dedicated revolutionary. She excels some of her male companions in planning and executing sabotage activities. Her experience in the telegraph office is of much help to the revolutionaries in sending and receiving coded
messages. She stays faithful to Joseph Deniel and the movement, fully conscious of the dangers in which her own life is. Like a true revolutionary, she courts martyrdom along with her partner in life and activities.

"When one talks of Shakti unleashed" says Shobha De, "one also remembers the two connotations of Shakti--the destructive avatar is as potent as the creative one. The image of 'Durga', the relentless wielder of revenge on all evil doers is epitomised in the character of Charulatha, a revolutionary from Bengal. A fuming volcano of a girl, she prevails upon the revolutionary leaders to let her be a member of the chosen group that is after assassinating the Prince of Wales. She is convinced and proves it to her credit that women need not in any way be inferior to men. "why can't the woman match the dexterity of men, even surpass it", she asks (The Crown 395). She has the clear vision of the rightful role of the woman, who is not only equal to man, but in some respects, surpasses him:

A woman is not born to feed a man, or to lie under him, or to bear children for him. Men would have us believe so, and women have gone along with them. A woman is the personification of Shakthi, of power. It is woman who lends true strength to a man, who can reshape and remake even a broken man. (The Crown-399)
Charulatha is quite unwilling to compromise her dignity and sense of freedom even before Sen, the person she so dearly loves. About Sen she says, "He is the breath of my being, but I will walk out on him the instant he starts treating me like a plaything" (The Crow 399). A sharp-shooter and an adept at throwing a knife point blank at the target, she takes meticulous care to train herself as a tonga driver. Her firmness of purpose is inherent in her very stature. Nahal thus describes her:

Pull her a little and she would shoot back, at you. Though her gently and she might resent even that. Any response from her was possible only on her own terms. (The Crown 385)

Her unbreakable will power and sharp intelligence earn her the respect of every hardened revolutionary of the group. True to her words, on the appointed day, she rushes at break neck speed in a tonga and crashes right on the dais on which the Prince of Wales is seated. Though she fails in her mission, the impact of the very attempt is tremendous on the sagging morale of the revolutionary groups. The incident also helps to administer a shock to the complacent attitude of the British administrators.
Sunanda of Azadi represents the transitional stage of Indian womanhood—the period of disillusionment caused by changing value systems consequent on social and political upheavals. As daughter-in-law of the tradition-bound household of Bibi Amarvati, she leads a contented life, in spite of her husband being a good for nothing fellow. She is impeccable in her roles as wife, mother and as daughter-in-law. Partition comes as a nightmare in her life and she flees with the whole lot of the village to the Indian border. During this journey, she is abducted, raped and humiliated by a Pakistani military officer. Instead of submitting herself to her ill luck or committing suicide like some of the conservative Hindu wives did to save their honour, she emerges unscathed to surmount the tribulations with renewed fortitude. Like Rukmini in Sunrise in Fiji, she believes that chastity is a thing of the soul rather than a physical attribute. Sunanda, though defiled, has still her honour intact and becomes the very epitome of nobility. She has endured all hardships with a dignity quite in keeping with the Indian womanhood, bringing to our mind the very image of Mother India, emerging jubilant, breaking the shackles that had bound her for generations.

Prabha Rani, Dhanavanti Preetam Devi and Viranvathi of The Gandhi Quartet represent the old order in which women are confined to the four walls of a Haveli or kitchen. By presenting their real life situations and visions of life, Nahal perhaps intends his "new"
women to shine by contrast. Prabha Rani is illiterate and whatever knowledge she has of the world outside has been provided by her husband. As such her opinions about men and matters are not in the least different from what her husband holds as true. Her only aim in life seems to be looking after the comforts of her lord and master, Kanshi Ram. Though he never illtreats her, he cannot consider her equal to him in any way. Curiously enough, Prabha Rani is quite content with her subservient role and never aspires for anything better.

Dhanvanti, Sunil's mother, is almost a replica of Prabha Rani in so far as she gives the same devotion and high esteem to her husband, Thakur Shantinath. When her daughter Shyama elopes with a revolutionary, she is much concerned about the shock the event brings upon her husband. (The crown.118) "You are the centre on which our wheel turns", she tells her husband. She has no personal needs or aspirations and her only aim in life seems to be the welfare of the whole family. Likewise, Pritam Devi, Rakesh's Mother is a too submissive wife, "Watching credulously the wonder that her husband is" (The salt-385) and deriving pleasure out of total surrender and sacrifice. For these women, life is only an interregnum, a link in the chain, a suspension even, of the true life that awaited elsewhere. This sort of philosophical consolation enables them to undergo innumerable sufferings with equanimity.
The Hindu mythology holds Sita as the ideal wife of Lord Rama: She is the daughter of Mother Earth. She exhibits great patience and tolerance even while passing through great tribulations as a result of the inequities and injustices she is subjected to. But in her life there comes a time when she feels that her self-esteem is put to the test when Rama, in deference to the vox populi decides to disown her. She lashes out at him in unflinching terms on his inability to protect her and on his failure to keep his 'dharma' as a husband. Viranvati, Kusum's mother, reminds us of this incident when she lashes out at her husband who is too overbearing and domineering. She had always felt safe and content in the seclusion the kitchen afforded her. When her husband plans to build a new house, her only interest is in the lay-out of the kitchen. She thus tells Kusum.

'This is the only room in the house which belongs to me. The house belongs to your father, only the kitchen is mine. That's where I live most of the time. (The salt-227)

Lala Dharam Das, her husband takes her for granted and he is intent solely on building up his business empire to the total negligence of his conjugal obligations. He keeps concubines to gratify his sexual tastes and is deliberately oblivious of the love and reverence his wife bestows upon him. there comes a stage in Viranvanti's life
when she can no longer contain her resentment towards her husband, and she fights back with all her might, only to be locked up for ever in a lunatic asylum.

A careful scrutiny of Nahal's women characters will reveal a persistent pattern running through them. To begin with, the novelist does not bother himself to hand pick and present an array of characters representing different walks of life or different strata of society. Malti, Irence, Pratibha, Kusum, Shyama, Abha—all come from affluent families and move and work with persons belonging to the highest strata of society. The women characters in the Gandhi Quartet, Kusum, Rehana, Shyama, Abha are held in high esteem by their male acquaintances including Gandhi. In a sense, the women revolutionaries too come to occupy this high prestige in their organization by their courage and dedication to the cause at hand. Moreover these characters are fortunate in the sense that they are seldom bothered by mundane considerations of life like poverty or need. Unlike Rukmani in Kamala Markandeya's Nectar in a Sieve, or Kajoli in Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers, they never go through a stage when they are deprived of the bare necessities of existence. This unusual situation, which is denied to the majority of Indian women, afforded them with the opportunity of shaping their own private lives, to a certain extent at least in accordance with the lofty ideals of human dignity they come to cherish.
Secondly, all these characters exhibit great sense of freedom and free will even when crushed down by adverse circumstances. Irene in Into Another Dawn resists till the last her husband's attempts to confine her to the seclusion of a fortress-like mansion, and to efface her individuality. Malti becomes intolerant of a life of innumerable adjustments and walks out boldly on her husband. Kusum gets married a second time, incurring thereby the displeasure of her father in law and her own father Shyama exhibits great courage, first in her decision to marry a revolutionary and then in her bold determination to continue life with dignity when betrayed by the man of her choice. Abha opts to remain unmarried and yet adopts an orphan girl, ignoring the norms laid down by Islam in such cases. The women revolutionaries in general are a shade better as partners than conventional wives with the total freedom and sense of equality they come to enjoy with their male counterparts. They strive for sufficient courage and power to stand their ground. They have enough spirit to shape up their unfair lives and inform the world they live in of the larger concept of love. Their awakening hopefully leads to a reappraisal of the world of which they are an inseparable part.

As a corollary to this sense of freedom and eagerness to lead a life of their choice, we see in these characters an indomitable urge to shake off the injustices heaped upon them by an essentially male dominated society. Kusum takes the initiative to free the
unfortunate women from the clutches of the inhuman priests of Varanasi. She is eager to give them a new lease of life. She wants to bring up the deaf and dumb girl, Gulbachan as a symbol of defiance. Irene fights a relentless legal battle with her millionaire husband. Malti cannot think of sacrificing her self esteem to become a traditional Hindu wife. Nahal wants to project these new women, who try to 'hit back' as a replacement model for the meek and submissive women who are constrained to lead a life circumscribed by conventional norms. While admitting that such defiance is not so easy to achieve, as the constraints are so may in Indian living, Nahal is full of praise for Nayantara Sahgal, for she presents in her novels, "a number of women who are driven to a situation when there is no way, but to hit back." Nahal's heroines also refuse to conform to the accepted patterns of male-oriented social behaviour. They are rebels, one and all, who, faced with a choice between their conviction and conformity, unhesitatingly choose the former.

Uninterrupted marital, bliss seems to be too evasive a phenomenon for most of Nahal's women characters. Kusum suffers the death of her first husband Sunil, and then that of Raja Vishalchand, who marries her after Sunil's death. Shyama is deserted by her first husband and Irene's hopes of a settled life is shattered when Ravi, already in the grip of a fatal disease, leaves for India. Likewise Malti is bent on breaking up a relationship that can no longer give her any
happiness. In all these cases, the women happen to be at the receiving end of unearned suffering. Furthermore, the novelist places them in such a situation that they have to overcome adverse situations by means of sheer will power and an affirmation of life that refuse to buckle under personal calamities.

The Indian English writers in general have somehow overlooked the possibilities of prying deep into the intricacies of sexual behaviour of the characters they present. Nahal laments that "marriage or love or sexual relationships can give joy and happiness as well is ignored by most of our novelists."18 Nahal considers the novel, The Song of Anasuya, by Uma Vasudev, a novel that has been relegated by most Indian critics to erotica as a laudable achievement and a trend setter in this direction. True to this belief, Nahal takes particular care in tracing out the possibilities and marvels of the psychic and physical pleasures generated by man-woman relationship. His women characters are shown as relishing great freedom in their enjoyment of sex, whether they are with their respective spouses or with someone outside the wedlock. Kusum's intimate moments with her first husband Sunil and then with her second husband Raja Vishalchand are elaborately sketched. Sunil, in his quest for love runs the whole gamut of experience, from the dutiful and wifely love of Kusum to the spiritually stirring and maddening love of Rehana to the intensely physical and passionate relationship with priti. Sunil's
forbidden love with Rehana, which she claims to be of a spiritual nature, has more than the spirit involved in it. She is not bothered by inhibitions of any kind when she bares her body before Sunil:

There was nothing immodest about her, neither through word nor through gesture did she seem to suggest anything lewd. There was only the absence of humbug. Yes, she let her clothiers slip down her body, until they lay in a halp under her. And, lightly, she stepped over them and stood aside for him to have a clearer view. (The Crown-165)

Later when Sunil is enticed by the hill woman, Priti, it is she who takes the initiative in their love making. Likewise, Irene in Into Another Drawn enjoys absolute abandon in her union with Ravi. He recollects that "there are no serfs here none yielded to the other. Irene in the act of love becomes my absolute equal -- my (21) co-sharer. This image brings into our mind the mythical Parvati, who occupies one half of God Siva. Anand Kumaraswamy in this connection observes that the "status of women on earth is reflected in the status of Goddesses."19 Rabindranath Tagore pays tribute to this concept of man and woman as the two inseparable parts of a single entity in his poem 'Man and Woman'

In the heart of creation
Flow these two streams of Man and Woman.20
This picture of the Indian woman enjoying the pleasures her body affords her, without the least bit of inhibition, is in sharp contrast with the conventional attitude towards happiness which Kusum recollects:

Happiness was so ephemeral, so flimsy, it slipped from your grip more easily than any other worldly possession. Happiness was even equated with guilt: to laugh or to be merry at least openly was vulgar. Nobility, on the other hand, bestowed glory upon you, bestowed true happiness. It was in search of that fragile solace that the Hindu women observed their fasts, went on pilgrimages, or burned themselves at the pyres of their dead husbands.

(The salt-102)

Nahal's novels, especially those belonging to the Gandhi Quartet, excel in passages that pay homage to the attributes of the female mind and body. These passages very often border on the lyric by their sheer sonorousness and exquisite cadence:

The human female was God's finest and ultimate act of creation... if a woman's heart was located in ten parts of her body, her modesty was located in a hundred. ... a woman could be killed and ruined, but she could not be trifled with, her right to her privacy do not snatched from
her, her right to walk alone through the secret chambers of her fancy.... modesty was a woman's true honour, her trident, her sword, her beacon of new hopes, her nectar of renewal. (The crown 103)

The novels of Mulkraj Anand, Bhanani Bhattacharya and Kamala Markandeya present situations in which the rural women are exploited at different levels by a scheming male world. Such exploitation can be on the economic plane as in the case of Kajoli in So Many Hungers. Extreme poverty drives her to take up a bold decision that she would "sell the least thing she owned herself."21 Sohani in Anand's The Untouchable finds it difficult to resist the Brahmin priest who tries to molest her because of her inferior social position. Rukmani in Nectar in a Sieve exemplifies the large mass of underprivileged women in rural India who are constantly subjected to exploitation due to an unjust social order. Nahal's characters largely belong to the upper middle class and upper class society, but they too are subjected to exploitation at different levels. Kusum's elder brother-in-law is too eager to disinherit her and her son by advancing legal points. He does the same to Gunjan and Mala, his close relatives. Gurinder gets seduced by Nirmal Singh, her father's partner in business. When she joins a monastic order, an elderly priest, who initiates her into the order tries to molest her. She just escapes unhurt, when she flourishes the little sword she always carries before the old man.
She learns the great truth of life, that only by resisting the evil, can a woman save her honour. This in fact is the unmistakable message that Bhabani Battacharys also gives through his novels. As Santha Kishnaswamy observes, Bhattacharys "affirms again and again that the woman need not be a victim; she can play a positive role in the development of society." Nahal while upholding this vision of the Indian women, is fully aware of the hardships such a course demands. 

Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book, The Second Sex, takes stock of the gravity of this problem:

The woman of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of feminity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concerte ways; but they do not easily succeed in living completely the life of a human being ..... masculine prestige is far from extinction, resting still upon solid, economic and social foundations.

The socio-political and economic changes during the past three or four decades have altered the position of women in life and literature alike. But the women have yet to traverse a long way towards their goal of taking up their position alongside men on terms of perfect equality. It is a fact that the number of women with an irrepressible yearning to break lose from the time-honoured crippling and iniquitous social laws, condemning women to a role far inferior to
that of men is increasing day by day. But it is quite disappointing to note that they too, often, lose their moorings and find themselves in perilously embarrassing situations. Under the circumstances, one expects the writers to present the picture of woman who would alter her present plight and open up new possibilities in life. But as Meena Shirwadkar laments, the writers still seem to be interested in showing the actuality of life, when we expect from them "the persuasive possibility". Shoba De also subscribes to this idea when she says "Shakti needs to be harnessed, directed and exploited for the furtherance of overall human development". It is quite exhilarating to note that Nahal's recurring image of the new woman as Shakti, in his novels, is a welcome change in this direction. The European women Nahal portrays in the Gandhi Quartet do not, as a rule, exhibit much depth of character. Mrs. Jhabvala in An Experience of India says that "to live in India and adopt Indian attitudes, habits, beliefs, assume, if possible, an Indian personality". Unfortunately, none of these women characters in the Gandhi Quartet shows any inclination to belong to India in the above sense. What little interest they take about India is quite ephemeral and of a superfluous nature. By and large, they cherish the idea that the white world alone is equipped with the unique capacity to enjoy the fruits of culture and sophistication. Their opinions on men and matters are biased and to a great extent, mere echoes of what their male acquaintances hold as
true. As a result, these women characters remain static and very often serve as a foil to their dynamic Indian counterparts.

Chaman Nahal's novel, *The English Queens* published in 1979 is more of a burlesque in which the characters are coloured caricatures. The narrative technique employed is satirical, treating frivolous incidents with unmerited seriousness. As such, the women characters in this novel are in a group by themselves and hence not included in this study.

It is a bit disheartening to observe that Nahal could overlook the possibility of projecting Kasturba in the *Gandhi Quartet* as a potential force that helped to unleash the vast resources of women power during the freedom struggle. Even though it was Gandhi who formulated and propagated equality and fair deal for the Indian women, it remains a historical fact that Ba had worked earnestly to materialise his vision of Indian woman. Keeping in tune with Gandhi's autobiography, Nahal presents Gandhi as a domineering husband, demanding too much of servitude from his wife, only to repent his actions in the end. Even as a child bride Kasturba had resisted all her husband's attempts to subdue her and force her to obey unjust laws. Later in her life in the various Ashrams, she became pivotal in establishing a number of welfare organisations meant for women. She was also instrumental in encouraging widow marriages and promoting
women's education. With all these positive traits to her credit, one feels that Nahal has not done full justice to Kasturba as a historical character in the *Gandhi Quartet*.

Nahal has a clear vision of the role of women in the present day India and he affirms the possibility of something positive beyond the darkness around, through his woman protagonists. In his chronicling of human experience he make use of the Indian woman as the prop or the pillar to help us endure and prevail. As Shantha Krishnaswamy observes, this picture of the new woman "uplifts tired humanity and points the way to a better future". Their tenacity of spirit lifts up the reader's heart. Their vision of life consoles and reminds the new generation that they too can make it, if they have sufficient courage.
Notes

1. Sushila Singh, ed. Feminism and Recent Fiction in English (New Delhi: Prestige Book, 1991) 18


4. Raja Rao, The cat and Shakespeare (New Delhi: Orient Paperback,) 32

5. Rama Mehta, Inside the Haveli (New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1977) 3


7. Chaman Nahal, Feminism in Indian Fiction: Forms and Variations

8. Sushila Singh ed. Feminism and recent Fiction in English (New Delhi Prestige Books, 1991) 17


10. S. Radhakrishnan, Indian Philosophy, Vol. II (Delhi: Oxford University Press) 262


13. Chaman Nahal, Feminism and Recent Fiction in English 17


17. Chaman Nahal, *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English* 19


25. Shobha De, *Shooting from the Hip*-112
