CHAPTER - I

WOMEN’S WRITING – A
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If, then, one should try to sum up the character of women’s fiction at the present moment, one would say that it is courageous; it is sincere, it keeps closely to what women feel . . . It does not insist upon its femininity but at the same time, a woman’s book is not written as a man would write it.

(Virginia Woolf in “Women and Fiction”)

Women’s writing has relevance and validity for more reasons than one. Not only does it project the observations, situations, responses and struggles of half of humanity, it also reflects a sensibility constructed by gender, the being which is defined traditionally by frameworks of kinship, marriage and procreation. It focuses attention on the definition of freedom and creativity. Women’s writing throws up all kinds of queries related to oppression and colonization. It has helped both to build and express the idea of a female “self”, and dismantles the concept of the all-inclusive male “I”. Women’s writing defies conventional moral and social structures to deconstruct the ideal woman subordinated and created by male power structures. A woman’s life is bound from all sides and parental and personal relationships are indissolubly linked together. The process of a new self lies in the process of decolonization.

Women writers have had to grow out of subordinate structures and the ‘male’ habit of thought. They have had to discard their passivity, rebel against their merger into a permanent ‘other’, and to realize the nature of desire. Women are learning to know and discover themselves through radical movements and silent changes, through legal and political battles and psychological barriers. Women’s writing has been giving power to the women-folk. As Ann Snitow said, “Woman is my slave name . . . feminism will give me freedom to seek some other identity altogether” (339).

Women’s writing is engaged in changing the definitions of female conduct fostered by most patriarchal societies. Women’s writing with all its variety, timidity and
marginality it has been moving through self-expression and self-questioning towards self-assertion and redefinitions. It has projected alternative structures and meanings, and transformed disorder and chaos into enabling structures. Women’s writing has attempted to dissolve polarities and move towards pluralistic meanings. As the aesthetic foremother of feminist expository prose, Mary Wollstonecraft established a tradition mined by such literary descendants as Olive Schreiner, Emma Goldman, and Virginia Woolf as well as by other thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Helene Cixous, Riley etc. Among some of the questionings, their works have helped relocations of meaning. The women of present generation are voicing the hurt and anger they felt about patriarchal tyranny and the exploitation of institution like family and religion. In Indian writing the names which find an equal importance are Pundita Ramabai’s *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1888), Tarabai Shinde’s *Istri Purush Tulna* (1882) translated as *A Comparison between Women and Men* (1994) and *Simantri Updesh* (1882).

One of the most striking changes in the Humanities in the 1980s was the rise of gender as a category of analysis. In the wake of feminist criticism, gender has been recognized as “a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse” (Ruthven 09). According to Elaine Showalter:

It was through the women’s liberation movement that we began to draw connections between our own work and our own lives, to note the disparities between the identifications and ambitions that had attracted us, along with thousands of other women, to the study and teaching of literature, and the limited and secondary roles granted to fictional heroines, women writers or female scholars. Feminism spoke to our lives and our literary experience with the fierce urgency of a revelation or a great awakening (*New Feminist Criticism* 5).

The same awakening sped to the reading of literature. Feminist criticism emerged as an offshoot of the women’s liberation movement, sharing its polemical force and activist commitment. Its central hypothesis was and is that gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourse. Literary criticism and literary theory have traditionally been guarded male-dominated areas. It was taken for granted that the representative reader, writer or critic of literature was male. Feminist
criticism protested against this exclusion of women, this misogyny and the movement provided the impetus.

Feminist literary criticism offers new readings of literature, re-evaluating literary expressions by both women and men, documenting the impact of sexist assumptions on writers, challenging literary judgments that deny the female voice and an equal role with the male. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or in his fantasy life. There has existed, all the same a distinctively female literary tradition grown out of the anxieties of a woman’s life, even though systematic subject-derivation of women has been a fact as much in life as in literature. Therefore, the feminist writer seeks to analyse and understand the material conditions through which gender has been constructed within specific languages and bodies of literature.

Gender has always been a significant term in feminist criticism. In practice it referred primarily to women and women’s writing. All women’s writing has been studied from feminist point of view which has been called Gynocriticism. It assumes that all writing by women is marked by gender. Alicia Ostriker notes: “Writers necessarily articulate gendered experience, just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of nationality, an age, a language” (9). Feminist critics maintain that women writers are not free to renounce their gender entirely. As Sandra Gilbert asks, “. . . how can her sexual identity be split off from her literary energy?” (177)

Women’s writings have been fulfilling the critical need of allowing women-readers to relate to each woman-writer even if their individual life situations have been different. As Heilburn reflects:

Writings by women will offer unment friends provided the subjects of the writings have encountered struggles or dilemmas or crises of choice that the women-readers can learn from, as one would from a friend’s. Heilburn further says that
woman would like “to read as woman about woman who have braved the terrors and the hopes women share, at least to some degree . . . The secret of unment friends is that they have called upon the same strengths to escape or endure the same kinds of situations (153).

Women’s writings provide “the power of moral necessity to support the oppressed, lending to uncommon demonstration of courage” (Waldron 2). If women-readers come to understand women-writers’ “real selves” through their own feeling, they could gain insights that could encourage them to develop their own strengths.

It is a pity that a social system inflicted with gender bias accords a superior status to the aggressive male rather than the nurturing female. Simone de Beauvoir gives the following explanation for it: “It is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal, that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth life but that which kills” (quoted in Tong 205). Brave women-writers have been taking risks and demonstrating courage in order to inspire other women to be empowered. Hence their writings are turning out to be the narratives of transgression. Women-writers are freeing their authentic voices and giving form to their unique perceptions as they are soaring above society’s stale values and stifling habits.

C. Muske in her *Women and Poetry: Truth, Autobiography and the Shape of the Self* agrees, describing how women are diverted from knowing and loving themselves because their lives are consumed by attaching to men and raising children. She observes how this division of spirit both enlivens and frustrates them for common speech among women and how having “a literary voice provides opportunities to shatter women’s frequent silences.” Muske explores Adrienne Rich’s powerful resolve “And I start to speak again.” She says women’s writing is “giving speech to women’s silence and her own pain” (quoted in Waldron 7). Through their speech they have tried to reach out to others in relationships and to their own inner beings in situations of oppression. They have learnt to define themselves, hone their languages and relate to society.
Women have been socialized not to question or challenge the decisions made for them and accept them gracefully or forced to accept the decisions. Women were not allowed to think for themselves. However, the situation is changing rapidly. Women are questioning and challenging the age-old practices which is possible through women-writing. The writings of women are a part of their deliberate effort to educate themselves and to carry on the process of educating others. Women’s writing raises the consciousness of women themselves and it also raises the consciousness about women. It attempts to present facets of female sensibility, where with the women characters question and probe the link between cultural conditioning and socio-political economic factors which govern their destinies as well as to explore and discover alternative ways of survival and empowerment. Women’s writing struggling against internalization of role models thrust on women has learnt to express the untold narrative of being a woman. Women’s writing is important today more than ever before. It focuses attention on both the manifestation of a female sensibility, a feminine reality, and on its significance as a means of bringing about an awareness of this reality.

Women’s writing has been slow to come into its own for several reasons. There were not enough women writers and not enough access to education to make their writing possible; history has ignored and submerged their contribution, their work has been dismissed as concerned with a limited world of experience as they were confined to domestic life. Women’s writing has also been dismissed as hardly of any consequence because religious and political thought had assigned women a place of subordination and labeled them as being less rational and intellectual than the male of the species. Other causes that have kept women tied to their chains were the needs of society, child-marriages, child-bearing and child-rearing. Women’s lives had been split into two – the physical and the intellectual – and the later had been left underdeveloped by the artificial constructs of society.

Virginia Woolf says that the ‘freedom of the mind’ (Women and Fiction 61) is the first requirement for women to write, for ‘taboos’ and inhibitions do not allow the pursuit of experience for women. Freedom means to breathe freely, to meet people, to have an
openness of experience. But women have been kept in kitchens and parlors, in purvey and luxury but deprived freedom. Paradoxically, while on the one hand women have been placed outside culture, outside history, outside time on the other they have been treated as the custodians of culture, preserving it and continuing it through procreation, tradition, rituals and conservatism. Surprisingly their own relationships and values are referred to as a subculture even when families are extended, boundaries are crossed and kinship founded through them. Women’s writing has drawn attention to the need for an equal education for women and pointed out that the “incapacity, if there be any, it is acquired not natural” (Jones 98). Women’s writing also questioned other patriarchal constructs like marriage and family. The development of the novel is in itself a testimony to this questioning. As the prose narrative moved from religious and political allegory to middle class bourgeois existence it began to concern itself with issues of marriage and respectability.

Women’s writing at another level is literature of silence. Its meaning lies enclosed and camouflaged. It is also the literature of silence for it seeks to express that which has been submerged and suppressed. The work of women writers reflects an engagement with social and political issues, with theoretical perspectives and moves outside culture and disciplinary boundaries. The act of writing has enabled women to move outside the narrow role of man’s helpmate, out the role of the seductress, the angel or the witch. It helps problematize the areas of conflict and facilitates a search for alternative models. Women writers continue to deconstruct literary forms and politico-socio constructs and also struggle with the ghosts of their fathers and the inheritance of their mothers.

Women’s writing cannot be treated as a monolithic structure and all women’s writing is not necessarily feminist. But feminist interpretations can emerge through absence and negation. Women when they write “think back through their mothers” (Woolf, Women and Fiction 93) and their writing have its own characteristics and qualities. To quote Jasbir Jain:
Many women writers (do not want to be called or known as feminists) are tentative about their feminist affiliations even today for fear of being ghettoized and of being marginalized. For the feminist is not juxtaposed with the masculine, but with the universal and as is such treated as a sub-culture. It is pushed into the language and category of the victim and the oppressed, patriarchal viewpoints are not very generous in conceding it space or equality (Intro XV).

In the Introduction of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of feminist knowledge. Women need to write about their experiences for they can tell the meaning of being a woman in a patriarchal society. A woman should not be merged into the universal terms ‘human’ or ‘mankind’, for she says, “we know the feminine world, more intimately than do the men; because we have our roots in it, we grasp more immediately than do men what it means to a human being to be feminine and we are more concerned with such knowledge” (26).

Men need women, love her, worship her and write about her but they do so in relation to their own selves. The desires and aspects of a woman’s life which do not relate to them ordinarily do not interest them. Critics comment that women write about how they give life, childbirth, menstruation, puberty, chastity and marriage etc and impose boundaries and ignore many areas of women interacting with men. Helen Cixous says:

Woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history by her own movement (245).

Centuries of suppression of women’s rights by men, and the reaction against this by women particularly in the early two decades of the twentieth century had given rise to feminist writing, that is, writing about women by women with an accredited task of exploring the minds of women and the problems faced by them in a traditionally male-dominated society. Virginia Woolf’s “intense awareness of her identity as a woman, her interest in feminine problems” is today women’s writers’ problems, no matter where they live and write. The ‘feminine’ problems are not only varied, they are multiple, following
a long history of suffering, oppression and subjugation of women at the hands of men in a male dominated world where equal opportunities were not given to women. Hence their problems were never highlighted in literature in the past. Fearless expression of women’s problems by women is a tendency of today.

In her essay “Women and Fiction”, Virginia Woolf, as a literary suffragist, says, “Women were beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women, of course, until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men” (82). With the suffragist movement gaining momentum in the second decade of the 20th century, came the development of liberal ideas. Women become members of academic societies and literary circles. They participated in administration, become income earners, and schools, colleges and universities were thrown open to them. One of the area in which women could show their talent was writing, because “writing was,” argues Virginia Woolf, “a reputable and harmless occupation. The family peace was not broken by the scratching of a pen . . . The cheapness of writing paper is, of course, the reason why women have succeeded as writers before they have succeeded in the other professions” (The Death of the North 149).

And once women started writing, they turned towards themselves, to the women’s world with its intuition, perception and imagination, cultivating a new feminine form and style, especially in the art of novel writing. Instead of dealing with the “public world; they gave expression to “private consciousness” and turned upon an aesthetic “voyage within” rather that “voyage without”. This is an area in which women excelled men. Centuries of aloofness and isolation had made women more subjective, introspective and more spiritual than men in their approach to art. Women writers place their emphasis differently from men in their writings and their sense of values differs also. Women writers are interested primarily in exploring the complex psychic depths of female characters who are trapped within close confines of social constraints (eg: marriage). Women under patriarchal tradition have been victims intellectually, emotionally and physically. Elaine Showalter suggests, “the attempts of gynocritics should be to illuminate every aspect of women’s writing in a male-dominated society” (Contemporary Literary Criticism 215).
Feminist writing has introduced to art a mode of expression characteristically feminine. The themes, subjects, characters and situations created by female authors are different from male writers. “Women writing has tended to consist of testimonies rather than works of imagination, chronicles rather than artificially conceived texts, lived experiences rather than poetic experimentation and finally a call for action rather than the conversion of life into art” (Sudha 40).

In recent years a great deal of research has been done on women’s writing. Amongst some of the pioneers are Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber, Patricia Meyer Spacks and Ellen Moers. A great deal of theoretical work has also been done by women. The focus on women’s writing, by feminists, has illuminated a submerged tradition of women’s creativity. A vibrant interest in a “female literary tradition” is part of the second phase of feminist literary criticism, which began in the nineteen seventies and has “gradually shifted its centre from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women.” Elaine Showalter talks about two modes of feminist criticism: the woman as reader, which she calls as “the feminist critique” and the woman as writer, which she calls as “gynocritics.” It is the “study of women as writers and its subjects are the history, style, themes, genres ad 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” (Modern Criticism and Theory 335). In her pathbreaking work A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing (1977), Showalter has not only demonstrated a continuously developing female tradition from Brontes through to Dorris Lessing but also the insights to be gained from reading women’s writing within its own tradition, rather than as isolated special cases.

Feminist research has unearthed a mine of unacknowledged women’s writing from the past and from diverse nations and cultures. Elaine Showalter, in tracing the evolution of female tradition in A Literature of Their Own, has suggested that women’s writing has gone through three different phases, common to the development of any literary subculture. In the case of women’s literary tradition, she calls them the Feminine,
Feminist and Female stages. During the Feminine phase, which has been identified by Showalter from about 1840 to 1880, she has proposed that women tried to imitate the predominant male tradition, after having internalized its values and literary standards. The Feminist phase, which emerged from about 1880, was marked by protest emerging from the new political consciousness among women. The women artist’s role began to be redefined in terms of responsibility to fellow women sufferers. The Female phase, which is ongoing since 1920, is characterized by a turning inward, in the quest of self-discovery, and a search for identity. She suggests that the Female phase has entered a new stage of self-awareness around 1960, with the advent of women’s movement (13). The concept of the phase of self-discovery is rather useful in understanding the general mood of contemporary women’s writing. Through such categorization of women’s literary history, Elaine has cogently illustrated how these historical stages can help to understand the complex interrelationship between women writers and their response to societal changes. Elaine has clarified and illustrated that the three phases are not rigid categories and may overlap each other. There may be feminist elements in feminine writers as well as the other way round and one may even find all three phases, in the total career of a single writer (13).

In the context of understanding women’s literary works, the terms ‘feminine’, ‘feminist’ and ‘female’ needs to be understood. Toril Moi has differentiated between the three terms with clarity. To quote: “Initially, I will suggest that we distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (204). Feminist literary critics like Toril Moi and Rosalind Coward have repeatedly asserted that all women’s fiction is not feminist fiction. Moi has clarified that, “the words ‘feminist’ or ‘feminism’ are political labels indicating support for the aims of the new women’s movement which emerged in the late 1960’s” (204). Therefore, “the very fact of being female does not necessarily guarantee a feminist approach . . . A female tradition in literature or criticism is not necessarily a feminist one” (206-207). Many twentieth century women writers have begun to re-examine the subject - self, resulting in their exploration of the complexity of female experience. Though some women writers do not adopt on overtly feminist standpoint,
feminist literary criticism would serve as an appropriate methodology for a study of their works, since it would release their submerged and possible meanings.

The involvement with women’s writing or the idea of retrieving a lost tradition of women’s literature has actually developed only over the last forty years and has been largely an American one. The interest in Women’s literature in American Feminist Criticism grew out of an earlier polemical movement, best represented perhaps by Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* (1969). Disturbed by the sudden realization that, women have invariably been represented in stereotypical ways by a literary heritage that claimed universality, feminist critics turned to women authors for alternative images of women. Literary texts commonly cast women in sexually defined roles. Women were mothers, good submissive wives or bad dominating ones, seductresses, betrayers, prim single women or the inspiration for male artists. Feminist critics regarded that these were false images of women and that women’s writing would reflect women’s real worlds and their real experiences.

Another equally powerful propelling force for the turn toward women’s writing was the growing realization that critical estimates of women’s literature were invariably prejudiced. Mary Ellmann argued that the tendency in western culture was “to comprehend all phenomena, however shifting, in terms of original and simple sexual differences; and . . . classify almost all experience by means of sexual analogy” (6). Women’s writing has had to face the “phallic criticism,” or the criticism practiced by male academics and reviewers. Mary Ellmann writes:

With a kind of inverted fidelity, the analysis of women’s books by men will arrive punctually at the point of preoccupation, which is the fact of femininity. Books by women are treated as though they themselves were women, and criticism embarks, at its happiest, upon an intellectual measuring of busts and hips (29).

In later decades, it was demonstrated by feminist critics that the critical establishment had been unjustly hostile to women writers. Women writers who were widely read and
critically acclaimed in their own times had, over the years, been so discredited as to be forgotten or even damned.

By the late 1970s, three major book-length studies that set up women’s writing as a new disciplinary field had appeared. Serious work on the tasks of writing feminist literary histories and evolving critical paradigm sensitive to the issues at stake in the study of women’s writing had begun. In the earliest of these books, *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers argued that women’s writing was actually a rapid and powerful under current distinct form, but hardly subordinate to, the mainstream. She demonstrated that women’s writing drew upon women’s experiences and also on a literary subculture of women writers that the mainstream was hardly aware of. In fact, Moers’s book touched on almost every theme that was to be elaborated and refined; the exclusion of women writers, the need to find new strategies to open up canonical texts for feminist readings, the idea that a knowledge of feminist history was crucial for an understanding of women’s writing and that women writers had shared a subculture that they often secretly kept alive. Women’s writing had all the components of a rousing argument: evidence of gross injustice countered with a tradition of secret solidarity and resistance.

Elaine Showalter provided women’s writing with the kind of careful attention it had probably never received in the academy. In two articles published in a widely circulated 1985 collection of feminist criticism, Showalter developed a theory of women’s writing. Feminist criticism, she argued, could be regarded as functioning in two distinct modes: “feminist critique” and “gynocritics.” She maintains her own separate inclinations that, “If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be” (*The New Feminist Criticism* 130). She is herself interested in the newly visible world of “feminist culture”, which she argues will provide a setting and the rationale adequate to recovery of a tradition of women’s writing.
In 1979 with *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar set out to explore a new “distinctively female literary tradition” and develop a theory of “female literary response to male literary assertion and coercion” (xii). Their work has provided feminist criticism and women writers with a “respectable” berth in the academy, not only in the United States, but in any other country in which English (or American) literature is studied.

Over the years it is found that feminist criticism has not merely developed a methodology to study a phenomenon that already exists: women’s writing. It has actually shaped a new discipline and in the process created, as the object of its study, a new field: women’s writing. There is no denying that women have written and that women have created literature in the past. A striking coherence noticed in literature by women could be explained by a common female impulse to struggle free from social and literary confinement through strategic redefinitions of the self, art, and society. Like Showalter, Gilbert and Gubar speak that women writers can engage directly with their experience, as male writers whose full authority was never repressed. Literary texts, the assumption is, express the author’s experience and reveal the truth about the writer’s world, and as they do so, they provide the access to the universal dimensions of human nature.

All women’s writing is not necessarily feminist. It needs to be recognized that feminist interpretations can emerge even through absence and negation, not necessarily through identification and equation alone. A feminist critics approach to such writing, using a completely different set of questions, may lead to a new and different insight. Such a claim has been articulated by Annette Kolodny in her essay, “Dancing through the Minefield: Some Observations on the Theory, Practice and Politics of a Feminist Literary Criticism.”

All that the feminist is asserting then, is her own equivalent right to liberate new (and perhaps different) significance from these same texts; and, at the same time, her right to choose which features of a text she takes as relevant because she is after all, asking new and different questions of it (18).
Before asking “new” and “different questions” of the women writers’ texts, it is necessary to examine the possible criteria of écriture feminine. The French feminist critics have been the first to acknowledge theoretically that language is gendered and that gender influences writing as well as reading. Thus the specificity of woman’s language has become a central issue in feminist criticism. Women’s place in culture and society should help to understand the complex questions of how women use man’s language and how is woman’s language different from man’s language. Women live and take part in culture and society, but they nevertheless belong to the “muted group”, a term used by Edwin Ardener in his essay “The Problem Revisited” in Perceiving Women. Gerda Lerner comments on this duality determining women’s lives in her work, The Majority Finds its Past:

Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of woman’s function, even its “superiority”) and redefine it. Thus women live a duality – as members of the general culture and as partakers of women’s culture (52).

The model of women’s culture outlined by Edwin Ardener also illustrates that women partake in the male sphere, that is dominant, but they also belong to a sphere in which men are not represented (22-23). Edwin Ardener uses two circles that overlap, the larger space is occupied by both men and women. The crescent shaped space is “women’s space” or women’s zone of difference. This is also designated as “wild” because it is considered as “the non-social” and is said to belong to the “silent” women (23). As Elaine Showalter points out, in her essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness”, this model is especially applicable to feminist literary theory since it is based on the concepts of the dominant verses the muted group (29). The French feminist Claudine Hermann in an extract in New French Feminisms refers to this very space, maintaining that woman has always needed some distance between herself and man’s world. She writes, “She must conserve some space for herself, a sort of no man’s land which constitutes precisely what men fail to understand of her and often attribute to stupidity because she cannot express
its substances in her inevitably alienated language” (169). This (female) space in women writers’ texts can thus be filed with everything that is not expressed by the discourse in the dominant language, everything that has been repressed or ignored. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guber in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* have pointed out, there are persistent images in women’s writings, which indicate that women writers try to express their confinement and their restrictions. But they cannot express their images and themes in their own language; therefore their language may be termed as a “double-voice discourse” and may be said to reflect a “double-consciousness.” The woman writer can be said to put her viewpoint in the medium of his language.

When women’s writing is considered it is found that women writers have turned to the novel, more than to any other literary form, like poetry or drama. In this context, Virginia Woolf has suggested that it is the interrupted nature of a woman’s life which led her to turn to the novel which is “the easiest thing for a woman to write,” since it is “the least concentrated form of art” (*Women and Writing* 46). She has further observed that since a woman’s experience centered on the domestic and private spheres, she was more adept at using her mind in observation and analysis of character. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf suggests that since the other forms were quite mature by the time she became a writer, woman turned to the novel, which was young enough to be moulded in her hands (77). Pam Morris has also remarked upon how the novel has been the literary form which women writers first and most successfully made their own. To quote Morris:

... as a relatively new genre, the novel was the least prestigious of literary forms. Without classical origins it was regarded for the most of the eighteen century and even into the nineteenth as mainly suited for the light entertainment of women readers. Thus, there was less resistance to the women taking up this literary form than any other (78).

Both Woolf’s and Morris’ observation are helpful for understanding some of the reason for the women writers’ preference for the novel form, though this cannot be taken as a definitive argument, since it seems to ignore significant poetry written by women.
What involves ‘the woman’s novel’ is observed rightly by Nicole Beauman as “there is a category of fiction written for women – ‘the women’s novel.’” It is “a novel which in some way or another illuminates female attitudes to experience, throws light on the texture of women’s lives” (5). Women have revitalized the realistic novel, by shaping it to explore and share their distinctively female experience and preoccupations. The woman image or women representation in novels has been from male or patriarchal point of view, which has had revealed unreal images of women. In this context, the women’s novel offers the possibility of a focus on woman, through an understanding from within. Rosalind Miles has aptly commented that, “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 all universe” (Preface x). Women’s novel mirrors life and deals with “the drama of the undramatic, the steadfast dailiness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of emotions and, above all the importance of human relationships” (Miles 5). Women novelists write novels in their different ways. More recent women’s fiction has opened up relatively unexplored areas of women’s lives, including aspects which have previously been ignored, demeaned, silenced or even idealized. Using a diversity of voices, styles and forms, women writers are exploring aspects of experience, which are specific to their lives as women. Women’s writing gives an insider’s account of women’s mundane and grueling unacknowledged work, as well as their determination and courage to survive against hardships. Women-writers have been the intellectuals with a very progressive and modern outlook. Their writings have become a forum to debate social issues. They present strong women-protagonists who are not afraid to confront society or hesitate to embrace life whatever may be the crisis they face.

Women’s writing is the most crucial one that has really brought women to the centre-stage of social reality. Women writers have compelled women readers to understand their social reality, their role, their functions and the structures within which they operate and identify the issues, barriers, support system to enable or disable them to be equal partners. Women’s writings is therefore more of a critical theory that questions the traditional ideologies of gender bias in policy actions and decision making. In other words, understanding the roots of inequality that lead to marginalization, invisibility and
exclusion of women will promote intellectual enquiry and social action. Women’s writing has helped develop alternate concepts, approaches and strategies for a more balanced equitable society. Importantly it helps both men and women to be aware about the multi-dimensional roles played by women in society and about the visibility of women. Although women’s writing deals with women’s reflections and observations, thematically, it is also the writing for male readers who wish to understand better the inner self of women.

Women’s writing thus aimed to create alternate realities and recast womanhood in a new mould. The body of women’s writing is not a hegemonic enterprise: rather it was/is formed by alternate realities. It also implies an access to a male-dominated culture along with feelings of repression, alienation, division, and a loss of women’s inheritance. Women’s writing thus proposed a different view and difference of standard. To quote Virginia Woolf:

The burden and the complexity of womanhood were not enough. She must reach beyond the sanctuary and pluck for herself the strange bright fruits of art and knowledge. Clasping them as few women have never clasped them, she would not renounce her own inheritance – the difference of view, the difference of standard (Women and Writing 56).

So to know the difference of view and standard it is necessary to study women’s writings to get to know their sensibility and sensitivity etc. Women writers today do write candidly about female sexuality, the emotional lines of women and the intricate fabric of human relationships. They delineate explicitly about the interior experiences of women and how their ‘burgeoning sexuality’ is seen as a threat to traditional patriarchal societies.

**Indian Women’s Writing**

It is universally known that writing has been a male dominion, but what women feel, experience or think can only be better expressed by women only. A male writer will never be able to present the woman’s voice, her perception or sensibility or her beauty
and sensuality. So here a woman had to take up the pen to express her position and her feelings, her perspective and also to write about women. Living the life of the “Other”, undergoing exploitation, suffering the discrimination did lead the Indian woman to realize her true worth. She did find that she is gifted with a special ability that could help her to express herself, her deep-rooted feelings and thoughts, experiences. This led her to choose writing as a tool for expression.

Creative writing has become a survival tactic for women all over the world. They primarily address questions – How do they assert and maintain their identities in a world that prefers to believe they do not exist? How to express what they really are? And find space for them? If asked, ‘Do women write differently? Do any characteristic patterns of self-perception shape the creative expression of women?’ Feminist critic Patricia Meyer Spacks would respond to such questions with a definite ‘yes’. In her view, women’s writing shapes itself “into patterns dictated by the same few clearly defined issues – patterns, if not universal, at least very widespread in female experience” (19).

Women’s writing is now read not as new monuments to existing institutions or cultures, but as documents that display what is at state in the embattled practices of self and agency, and in the making of a habitable world, at the margins of patriarchies reconstituted by the emerging bourgeoisies of empire and nation. The study of women’s writing concentrates on to examine the women’s struggle, how were their worlds shaped, how they have turned figures, plots, narratives, lyrical and fictional projects set up for different purposes to their use, with what cunning did they press into service objects coded into cultural significations indifferent or hostile to them, how did they tread along oblique paths across competing ideological grids, or obdurately hang on to illegitimate pleasure, what forms did their dreams of integrity or selfhood take, what modes of resistance did they fashion and how did they avoid, question, play off, re-write, transform, or even undermine the projects set out for them (Tharu Vol I, 36).
Indian women writers have the full realization that they themselves are fully equipped to voice their opinions and ideas. They believe that the exact voice of the woman can only be voiced by them and not by men. Writing gives them a space to generate their own definitions of self and their feelings and thoughts. Writing has a ‘sustaining vitality’ for the sake of self-development. They write about themselves, realities of life, their conditions/positions, their relationships with family and friends and men or whoever has been vital to their growth and well being. They write about what they feel, see, believe and experience. They write about the condition of other women. They write not to please any audience or for economic independence but because writing is an act of healing for women. They write about female sexuality, women’s friendship, man-woman relationship, the whole range of woman’s strength, thoughts, emotions and action. Their works highlight and show how women see themselves in different roles as daughters, mothers, wives and lovers etc.

Indian women have always assessed themselves by the parameters marked by men. This accounts for the complacency in women as subalterns. They have been passive and submissive because this was the feminine stereotype that was accorded to them. The women still need to transcend the boundaries that inhibit their growth. Although a lot has been said and written about women, an awareness of issues of empowering women needs to be created. It has to be reiterated that the “hand that rocks the cradle can rule the world.”

Women have been largely latent in most male dominated literature wherein they have served as inspirations or subjects of literary texts. However, there is a need to develop a worldview in which a woman sees and understands not because she is supposed to but because she has empirically tested the truths. Literature provides a neutral ground for women to communicate and share a bond on their own terms. Women were largely brought up and educated with texts that were primarily male dominated and their view of things was subsequently coloured. The feminine sensibility then needed to be traced by females so as to create a collective consciousness and celebrate womanhood, not passively comply with conventional norms.
The small collection of Indian women’s writing from the pre-colonial period tells that (it is either from pre-Aryan or non-Aryan sources) women often found opportunities for involvement in literary creation in the context of powerful historical movements that questioned Aryan or Brahminic dominance and represented the claims of rival political groups or emerging social classes. In the medieval period, the bhakti movement led to a long line of women poets and also saints. The women poets of the bhakti movements did not have to seek the institutionalized spaced religion provided to express themselves, and women’s poetry moved from the court and the temple to the open spaces of the field, the workplace, and the common woman’s hearth. The bhakti poets composed in the regional languages. The impressive body of women’s writing that has come down from the bhakti movements from Mirabai, Akkamahadevi, Bahinibai leads to think of the period as one in which patriarchal control was radically questioned and the lines of ordinary women changed. In the Muslim rule women writing is not clearly evident. For women especially it was seen as one of the most oppressive periods in the history of India. The earliest known anthology of women’s literature – in India, certainly, but possibly anywhere in the world – took shape when the songs composed by the Buddhist theris, or senior nuns, which date back to the sixth century B.C., were collected into the Therigatha (Tharu Vol I, 52-62).

The twentieth century is full of women writers who portray varied hues of Indian women and life. Women writers in India from all regional languages; Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, Urdu, Bengali, Oriya, Gujarati, Punjabi and Hindi; through their writings “captured the soul of woman.” They wrote of the new woman who questioned social restrictions and began to assert herself in a male world. They wrote on women’s issues and on various themes like alienation, loneliness, ennui and existential predicament. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries women writers write on women and their experiences. Women are central in their writings and some writers are regarded as fiercely feminist in their writings. They portray the psychological problems faced by women in the middle-class family, they explore the contradictions of the lives of middle-class women, they show concern for their welfare. Women writers also deal with the struggles in woman’s life, the violence inherent in every day familial relationships. They
write about the exploited, marginalized people and women who gain strength and insight through those very experiences.

The emergence of women writers in India brings a new age of brightness for Indian women. Promilla Kapur, a sociologist, analyzes the change, “with a change in women’s personal status and social status has come, a change in her way of thinking and feelings and the past half-century has witnessed great changes in attitudes towards sex, love and marriage” (268). Surveying the literary scenario of woman, one would get a glimpse of the change or rather upgradation of women’s role as a writer of free will. Though socio-cultural changes are sang about, women writers still face so many threats from society. Freedom of expression most often is denied to women. History has confirmed that if a woman writer should survive, she should wear a mask, unmasking herself would make her difficult to live. Eg: Taslima Nasreen. In the past, it is found that women writers had to use pseudonyms to ensure that their works were taken fatally. Kamala Das pictured her helplessness as a woman craving for love, freedom and sex, by a bold acceptance through her works. She has criticized the traditional-bound, conservative society which was always harsh on her unconventional life-style. She was far ahead of many other Indian women writers in her ideas, unconcerned about what others thought of her.

Indian women writers had to overcome many burdens and make space for themselves. They had to kill the ‘angel in the house’ and express themselves. Kamala Das said that a male writer enjoys much privilege than a female writer. She said, “nights became my dominion . . . I could find freedom only at night when I could ignore my family and become an independent person. I felt like myself only in the quiet hours of the night” (quote). Her autobiography My Story created controversy and shocked people with its candid accounts of her encounters with men. Very few writers have this courage to be bold and confessing. The brave writers are condemned as mad. The dismal, subjugated plight of women writers in the twenty-first century portrays the scene that they are still denied the freedom of expression.
For Indian women, writing became a great medium for the expression of their abject condition, their feelings, emotions, thoughts, difficulties, their lack of individuality and identity, their ambitions, hopes and goals, etc. Writing and expressing from their own vantage point of view they cut down all the prejudices levelled against them by showing that being a woman and experiencing all they do is not always a burden but also a boon. Women in any cultural map all over the world have a peripheral existence which according to the theory of centrally located self, advanced by critics, renders them unfit for writing anything. It is heartening to find that despite their marginalized existence and almost a complete obscurity; women in India have written their heart and psyche in their writings.

Indian women writers project themselves as women who are capable to feel, to think as conscious human beings. Today, women are not mere stereotype, are not push button automatons who scream when given this cue, cuddle up when given that smile. Stereotype, a byproduct of patriarchal society/culture, is one of the vehicles through which patriarchy tries to reduce the woman human being to a non-human level. As creative writers, Indian women in their poetry and fiction write about women’s condition, their struggles, suffering, servility, exaltation, strife and resilience. Today, women emerge with beauty and strength, talent and genius on the ‘canvas of life’ undaunted and voice their feelings and ideas with pride. As women have been denied identity, there is definitely a note of defiance in their voice which seeks out their own personality. Today education and awareness has given courage and strength to realize their own worth and rights. The modern, educated, women like to live a life of dignity and equality with an identity of their own, always ready to fight against powerful agencies of patriarchal society. The image of Indian woman presented in the protagonists in fiction stresses the importance of education for girls/women and an even greater need for a career for women. The present status of women in India shows that:

Woman has proved her mettle in all walks of life. The efforts of many stalwarts have spudded a beautiful world to live in. The world today is full of women bringing laurels in every area. Women’s rights and the birth of feminism changed the way society looked at women in the middle class and changed the middle class
values. Women have started to have a more individualistic view on life; they realized that they do not have to depend on a man to survive (Meikandadevan 149-153).

Prior to the rise of the novel, many Indian women composed poetry and short stories in regional languages. Women were the upholders of a rich oral tradition of storytelling, through myths legends, songs and fables. Once literacy began to filter through society, those stories were transformed into poetry and drama. The novel was not at first a common form, perhaps because the majority of women had less access to education than men. It was not until prose began to be used in the late nineteenth century by Bengali writers who had been exposed to European culture that the novel as a form was established in India. Indian English writing started with writers like Sarojini Naidu. She charmed and ignited fire in the readers with her writings. Her works continue to revisit the archetype of the woman and seek to empower them in their milieu. Women in modern India have not only shared the exiting and dangerous roles in the struggle for independence but have had also articulated the national aspirations and consciousness of cultural changes in the realm of literature. In the personality of an individual like Sarojini Naidu, the temper of Indian womanhood achieved its comprehensive synthesis; she was at once the last of Indian political awakening and the nightingale of Indian imagination.

The nineteenth century was the beginning of a new era of feminism that women have not forgotten about or stopped fighting for until this day. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Indian women writers were largely confined to the genres of children’s literature and poetry. Later they shifted to the genre of fiction to portray their struggling state and inner mind very effectively. Towards the mid-nineteenth century more and more began to write in English. Towards the end of the century, the nineteenth century women writers expanded their subject matter, moving beyond highlighting the lives and hardships suffered by women locked in domestic prisons.

When pondered upon why women writers find fiction more suitable it appears that fiction happens to be the most successful genre for women writers, as has been often
suggested, because the novel makes use of domestic scene, or all things supposedly close to women’s experience. Its scene is that world of social relations, of inter-subjectivity, in which the author can reconcile to some extent the speech and her silence and be the first to explore and expose her bisexuality without the threat of losing her feminine identity. Feminist fiction offers insight into the life enhancing and community strengthening aspects and into the aspects of female hysterias, anger, protest and critique underscores that order to be fully human.

Literature has been one sided. Understanding of humanity also has been one sided. So study of the women’s writings helps to know the greater variety that exists in the world. Women need to celebrate their difference and come to an understanding and compassion. The novel has offered women abundant opportunities for creating voices on the margins of fiction and history. Woman’s sexuality is very varied and delicate and that the healing touch can come mainly from literature. Fiction shows that it is the woman, endowed with greater sensitiveness than man, who is more intensely aware of the malaise in all human relationships. The writings by women are significantly rich in feeling and craftsmanship and exhibit a refinement and sensibility which are essentially feminine. Women writers are more concerned with the exploration of the psyche of the protagonists – that of “thought, emotion and sensation” experienced by the characters who strive towards arriving at a more authentic way of life than the one available to them (Dhawan 96). Literature written by women aimed to awaken fellow women and help them to come to terms with their predicament. Such literature was written with the intention to present an image of the woman, carved by women rather than the male counterpart. Simone de Beauvoir’s radical statement, ‘a woman is not born rather becomes a woman’ is very relevant (here) at this juncture. The female is made to be what she is today and gradually the feminine attributes were internalized in them and they became the parameters to access women per se.

The Indian woman writer imprisoned within her social dogmas and stigmas had to choose her literary canvas from a selected area of experience with certain vistas remaining beyond her reach. The vistas hitherto forbidden to her are being creatively
explored and candidly delineated. Indian women writers have turned inward to explore the private rather than the public life of the individual. So their literature has largely become confessional and personal and their subjective style has been labeled ‘feminine,’ even though men, too, employ it. Women’s writing is determined by complex and changing conventions that are themselves produced in and by the relations of power that implicate writer, reader and text.

Contemporary Indian women writers (fiction) share the similarity of their sensibility and the missionary zeal with which they expose the disgrace heaped on women. These women writers write about women and question the assumption (many assumptions) that marriage is the ultimate goal of a woman and reveal how it leaves them badly mauled and terribly frustrated. They possess a special sensibility to record the undulations of the female psyche, in critical familial situations (especially in husband-wife relationships) and many other situations.

Indian women’s voices present in post-colonial literature are certainly more audible than ever. They have tried to claim their right to exist and have tried to clear a psychic space for themselves. Women have suffered oppressions of class, of imperialism, of race, patriarchy, gender. Bedjaoui observes:

Indian woman’s writing involves both a feminized awareness of gender identity and the social context which historically and traditionally had enclosed the life of the female subject. In the works of these women writers, woman’s experience in the Indian family and receiving society has been rather one of friction and disjunction. On the level of fictional representation, Indian women writers have reshaped their ethnicity to adjust to the changing needs of women (42).

In India, there is a greater awareness of the disproportionate burden placed on women in domestic and economic chores, upbringing and care of children. The everlasting discrimination and oppression suffered by Indian women because of their
belonging to a specific caste and gender are described by some women writers though scorned by some radicals and represent a deep challenge to established socio-religious and political creeds. Feminism has tried to eradicate the burden of inhibitions women have supported for ages and to urge them to think and live for themselves. Indian women write from a culturally shaped situation that is gendered. Women’s writing is probably to embrace insight into the particular shared experience of women in a specific culture that has rendered them to an interior status. The images of post-colonial women, notably Indian, in the last four decades have changed and moved from traditional self-sacrificing towards confused minds searching for freedom and proper identity, transgressing thus male-centered powers.

A new feminine literary tradition has spawned out of the curiosities and anxieties of an Indian woman’s life. The woman’s voice is an insurgent, subaltern voice. In the development of Indian English Fiction, observes A. V. Krishna Rao, “the feminine sensibility has achieved an imaginative self-sufficiency which merits recognition in spite of its relatively late manifestation” (140). Contemporary Indian women writers do incorporate feminist concerns in their fictional writings. They examine with subtlety, the tensions that many well educated twenty-first century women experience, as they struggle to define themselves within a patriarchal frame of reference. They expose social inequities and the necessity for justice in the lives of women. They portray women who grapple with sexual, maternal and social conflicts, in their quest for identity and an attempt at doing something in the world. They reveal the exploitative role of men, within the institution of marriage, the ways in which women are responsible for their own situations and also the inventiveness patience, endurance, toughness of women. Women’s writings deal with charting the experience of women’s oppression. Indian women writers being women penetrate deep into the inner mind of the depressed women by virtue of their feminine sensibility and psychological insight and bring to light their issues, which are the outcome of Indian women’s psychological and emotional imbalances in a male dominated society. The Indian women novelists started transforming their own experiences as women as well as their femininity into literary expression.
Indian women writers writing in English reject the existing traditions and social-set-ups and fight for freedom and equality. Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande introduced precursors of this modern woman. These women writers question the need to accept the man-made image of the woman. These writers are strongly informed by a feminist consciousness and not by a polemical feminist ideology. Shashi Deshpande has said that she does not believe in having a propagandist or sexist purpose to her writing and that if it presents such a perspective, it is only a coincidence. Anita Desai has also voiced the same reservations and said that she found it impossible to whip up any interest in a mass of women marching forward under the banner of feminism. But they believe that no writer can isolate herself or himself from society and the violence and injustice that are around them. Women writers such as Mahashweta Devi combined women’s causes with political movements. Others writers such as Nayanatara Sahgel, Ruth Jabawala, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De and many more built a platform of universal female experiences.

Today Indian women’s writing raises questions about issues that have never been discussed so far in any discourse. Women’s writing today are drafted along what Elaine Showalter terms as the “Female Phase,” where women reject both imitation and protest – two forms of dependency and turn instead of female experience as the source of autonomous art. Women writers write with heightened awareness of themselves, their bodies and mind. The themes of alienation, loss of identity and search for a “home” remain at the heart of their writings. Quest for self-identity is a recurring theme in fiction of women. Another important theme is focus on psychological exploration of the inner mind of Indian women in the novels. Other themes that find voice are Indian middle class women’s suffering, frustrations, social agitations, and their stillness as a means of communication, difficulties of fulfillment and self-definition in a man’s world, the conflicting claims of self-hood, wife-hood and motherhood.

Experience forms a vital ingredient in all women’s writings and this in turn serves to connect to the feminine world. These experiences are not only unique but also echo the common concerns and help to strike a communion with women irrespective of color,
class or status. Women’s writings endeavoured to bring establish such a bond which would unify them and serve to develop a collective consciousness. Many women writers’ works, like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Despande, Ruth Jabavala, Arundhati Roy, Jai Nimbkar, Shobha De, Anita Nair, etc., reflect the awakened female sensibility in modern India as they attempt to project the image of the changing traditional society.

Thus women writers make women aware of the myriad possibilities that are available to them. The works of women novelists are a contribution to the emancipation and empowerment of women. Women’s movement in India and the west provided tools for assessing the identities of women that primarily emerged through a consciousness of the patriarchal dominance that had shaped their existence. Women writers seek to create new spaces for the woman so that they operate in a new frame-work itself. It is undeniable that the emergence of the Indian women novelists, on the Indian fictional scene has added a new dimension to Indian fiction, feminist concern with emancipated women.
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