Introduction

A. Contemporary Indian Women’s Fiction in English: At a Glance

Indian women novelists in English, both native and Diasporic, insiders as well as outsiders, are the essential ingredients of the total fabric of the contemporary Indian English fiction. Interestingly, Salman Rushdie is poised between Indian English fiction, then and now, and the eminent scholars assert that the new generation owes much to him than to the early novelists of the post-Independence era. It is believed that the contemporary novelists since the Booker Prize Winner *Midnight’s Children* (1981) have moved away from the guiding spirit of compassion and humanism. A. K. Mehrotra observes:

The 1980s witnessed a second coming for the Indian novel in English. Its messiah seems to have been Salman Rushdie. The appearance of *Midnight’s Children* in 1981 brought about a Renaissance in Indian writing in English which has outdone that of the 1930s. Its influence, acknowledged by critics and novelists alike, has been apparent in a numerous ways: the appearance of a certain post-modern playfulness, the turn to history, a new exuberance of language, the reinvention of allegory, the sexual frankness, even the prominent references to Bollywood, all seem to owe something to Rushdie’s novel. In nineteen eighties, there is an emergence of many new novelists - male and female who are treated as the ‘new wave’ novelists, have technically and thematically widened the scope of Indian novel in English. New novelists with new themes and techniques, and visions
and aspirations are emerging on the Indian literary scenario; therefore, the Indian novel in English has immense future (Mehrotra 318).

Prior to the rise of the novel, the appearance of women novelists on the literary horizon is an important development in the Indian English literature. Besides, these women writers have contributed to other genres such as poetry and short stories in regional languages like Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu, Malayalam and Kannada. Some of them are the chief upholders of a rich tradition of story-telling. But in the last two decades, there has been an outburst of Indian women’s writing in English, published in India and abroad.

The earlier Indian women novelists expressed in their writing their discontent with the plight of upper caste and lower caste traditional Hindu women trapped in repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry system, prohibition on women’s education, arranged marriages, and enforced widowhood. The status of female as a safe, secured, and serene being under the so called caring, responsible, masculine cover is granted in our patriarchal society. But it is unbearable for modern woman who is in search of her own identity. She is a caring daughter, honest wife, loveable mother, and dutiful daughter-in-law, goddess in a society but not an individual ‘self’. She has been denied a right to live for herself in a family and society at large. The contemporary women novelists realize this helpless condition of women and earnestly desire to expose this traumatic reality in their fictional world. In this regard M. K. Naik claims that the post-independence women novelists until the 1980s “form a sizeable and significant school” (Naik 233). He has enlisted veterans like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale, Githa Hariharan, Jai Nimbkar,
Dina Mehta and Gita Mehta who have been publishing for more than two decades and those who have emerged in the last few years such as the Booker Prize winners Arundhati Roy and Kiran Desai and the Pulitzer Prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri. But the first mentioned are the established and canonized Indian women novelists. Besides them, there are more than thirty Indian women novelists and a dozen short story writers in English who are enriching the realm of Indian English fiction. Such women writers are Nina Sibal, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Rani Dharker, Radhika Jha, Sunny Singh, Shobha De, Suma Josson, Anita Rau Badami, Indira Ganesan, Lakshmi Kannan, Kavery Nambisan, Meena Alexander, Raji Narasimhan, Mrinal Pande, Indu K. Mallah, Zai Whitaker, Prema Nandakumar, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Sagarika Ghose, Sunetra Gupta, Kavita Daswani, Preethi Nair, Shama Futehally, Jayashree Chatterjee, Manorama Mathai, Anjana Appachana, Jaishree Misra, Nirmala Moorthy, Kamalini Sengupta, Nirmala Aravind, Deepa Shah, Cauvery Madhavan and Suniti Namjoshi.

All of them have advocated feminism and have created space for their own articulation of the female angst intensified by their femininity. The image of woman in Indian English fiction has been changed during the last three decades. In her “Preface” to *The Woman Question in the Contemporary Indian Women Writings in English* Indu Swami observes:

The question of the relative status of man and woman has often engaged the attention of the writers all over the world. Indian English writers have also begun to come out into light on the contemporary literary scene with their abundant talent of writing, and women writers are in the forefront in this respect. They have directly plunged into the world of the
newly confronting situations from the point of view of women and the complex dilemmas of the modern world with confidence, sincerity, and courage, and with the remarkable felicity of language (Swami vii).

The contemporary women writers have moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring and self-sacrificing women to female characters searching for identity no longer characterized and defined in terms of their victim status. They have written about the problems of their kind and sexual politics which defines gender discrimination. All of them are firmly rooted in the Indian soil though some of them are Diasporic. Yet they differ from the western behavioural patterns. Their feminine flair is determined by the Indian cultural determinants and their literary manifestations are foregrounded by their female experiences. The women novelists depict woman as an individual with throbbing pulses, feelings and aspirations. These new, fully awakened women novelists protest against the patriarchal norms. They have portrayed female characters that are reluctant to play the secondary roles in a male-dominated society. Their writing becomes, by and large, a path of self-realization. Today Indian women writers in English in India or abroad are at the forefront of Indian English literature and this shows that the Indian women writers have come of age. Some of them have successfully appropriated the alien tongue and made it a vehicle for the expression of their own cultural experiences in India and abroad.

Traditionally, the output of Indian women novelists has been undervalued due to perhaps patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of the male experience. One cause contributing to this prejudice is perhaps that most of them write about their enclosed domestic space, and women’s perceptions of their experiences within it. As a result, their
works are automatically ranked below the work of male writers who deal with ‘weightier’ themes. Secondly, the world of English language is available only to the writers of the intellectual, affluent, educated classes, and a frequent judgment is made that the writers and their works belong to a high social strata, and are cut off from the reality of Indian life. The subject matter of their novels is the depiction of the repressed and oppressed lives of women in the lower classes that we find in regional authors’ writings in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Malayalam, Urdu, Tamil, and other Indian languages. Some even believe that the English language can alienate a text from its culture of origin, as Shashi Deshpande says that English is in some ways harmful to Indian culture, not because it is the language of ex-colonizers, but because it has become the language of the privileged elite classes of India.

The contemporary Indian women novelists in English are realistic in their presentation of society. They concentrate on the themes such as restraint, subjugation and subordination, the mediocre status offered to women, their emotional trauma and cultural conflicts. Kamala Markandaya (1924-2004), a pioneer novelist of the Indian Diaspora, believed in poverty to be a social sin in her novels such as *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1957), *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *Two Virgins* (1973) and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). The East-West Encounter forms a major thematic concern in her novels. She has presented a cross section of the Indian society in which women perform the roles traditionally assigned to them in a patriarchy. She also deals with the themes like social protest, social reforms and cultural clashes. She has written only one novel after 1980
and that is *Pleasure City* (1982) which deals with the conflict between tradition and modernity.

Nayantara Sahgal (1927- ) is a leading practitioner of the political novel in India. She has used political events as the background and has presented a picture of Indian political scenario of power politics and sexual politics in her earlier novel *A Situation in New Delhi* (1977). She reveals her angst against oppression of women in the tradition bound Indian society in her novels like *Rich Like Us* (1985), *Plans for Departure* (1985), and *Mistaken Identity* (1988). She depicts the modern woman in search of self-realization and sexual freedom. Sahgal presents the life of the richest sections of Indian society, their hypocrisy and shallow values.

Ruth Prawer Jhabvala (1927- ), the insider-outsider, is primarily interested in the social comedy of human beings in her urban and domestic fiction. She portrays the middle class women trapped in divergent cultural values and traditional ways of life. Her recent work makes use of her European Jewish heritage and American experience, though her preoccupation with India still continues. She regards herself as one of the European writers who have written about India. Her *In Search of Love and Beauty* (1983) focuses on a group of German and Austrian refugees in New York and reveals the overwhelming sexual attraction of the men. *Three Continents* (1987) has the theme of marriage. *Poet and Dancer* (1995) is a mixture of religiosity and sexuality. On the other hand, *Shards of Memory* (1995), set in America, England and Europe, is a story of avarice and love and focuses on lesbian relationship. She deals with urban middle class Indian life of an average joint Hindu family and the confrontation between occidental and oriental attitudes. Shyam M. Asnani observes, “R. P. Jhabvala writes about the furious social suffering
in the present day India. … She describes the head-on collision between the traditional and the modern, the east and the west, and the confusion that follows in the wake of these collisions” (Asnani 80). Dina Mehta’s (b.1928-) novel *And Some Takes a Lover* (1992) describes a young woman’s growing up.


Anita Desai’s (b.1937-) earlier novels deal with the minds and souls of characters and reveal the hidden depths of human psyche. She explores the psychological states of women who are essentially forlorn and most sensitive. The inner voyage of her characters seems to be greatly influenced by Virginia Woolf who remarks, “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; it is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (Woolf 177). In this respect she is very closer to Dostoevsky, Proust, Woolf, James Joyce, and Henry James. She observes, “Literature should deal with more enduring matters, less temporary and less temporal than politics. It should deal with life and with death. It should be too ironical and also too mystical to accept the world at face value and regard it as the whole or the only truth” (Desai 1). Her earlier novels are *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Voices in the City* (1965), *Bye-Bye Blackbird* (1971), *The Peacock Garden* (1974), *Where Shall We Go This Summer* (1975), and *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). She has published six novels in the
last two decades and her fiction stands as a collective metaphor for her ways of celebrating womanhood in the midst of conflicting ideologies, human bondages and phallocentric notions of womanhood. Her fiction is also an entertaining document of superficial and restricted society. She depicts the multitude detrimental variants of society such as hopelessness, disillusionment and existential anxieties of her female protagonists. Her later novels are *Clear Light of Day* (1980), *The Village by the Sea: An Indian Family Story* (1982), *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988), *Journey to Ithaca* (1995), and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). In *Clear Light of Day*, there is a psychological portrayal of the protagonist. Desai represents her feminine sensibilities and feminist vision of the human being. She has carved a niche for her preoccupation with Indian women who are denied of their values and freedom.

discovery, gender discrimination, and conflict between tradition and modernity, bold and submissive women, joint family system, man-woman relationships and other minor problems are the themes in her novels. Deshpande makes a plea for women’s liberation in a male-dominated society. *The Binding Wine* is a feminine novel in which woman is portrayed as a wooden creature subjected to male-domination. Her novels have plenty of homespun details of women’s lives and their silence, cultural moorings and private everyday lives of ordinary people in India. Though she denies herself as a feminist novelist, she writes about gender issues such as the process of ‘womanization’, sexual politics, and the conservative paradigms in the Indian context. Besides human relationships, her novels directly deal with the situation of women in urban and middle-class life in a realistic mode.

Gita Mehta (b.1944–), dividing her life time among three continents such as New York, London and India, writes about trends in general and highlights India’s history and diversity with her rootedness in Indian aesthetics. She paints the emancipation of women and delineates an evocative picture of Indian life. Her *Karma Kola: Marketing the Mystic East* (1979) is a satire on the westerners’ attack on the mysticism, enlightenment and spirituality of India. In *Raj* (1989), she presents a kaleidoscopic picture of historical, political and cultural complexities of India in the British Rule. Her *A River Sutra* (1993) reflects her secular humanist philosophy in Indian life.

Some Indian women novelists in English like Uma Vasudev (b.1931), Mrinal Pande (b.1946), Manju Kapur (b.1948) and Meena Alexander (b.1951) have tried to deal with the biological, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women. There is a frank treatment of sex in Uma Vasudev’s *The Song of Anasuya* (1978). Politics and sex are

Manju Kapur presents the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women in her first two novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and * A Married Woman* (2002). Her canvas articulates the position of a woman in a joint family, her love and longing and her conflict between duty and responsibility and between ideals and ethics. She recreates the circumscribed life of women in her fiction. In *Difficult Daughters*, she presents a woman who considers marriage as the end of her life and presents three generations of women in it. It also depicts the problems such as predicament of love and marriage, bigamy, extra-marital affairs, generation gap and search for identity. * A Married Woman* is a novel of investigative reporting on the most controversial political issue of the demolition of the Babri Masjid and a woman’s obsession with love and lesbianism. It depicts a dilemma of love marriage or an arranged marriage and relationship as self-assertion. This novel shows how women can preserve their feminine status and maintain their own individuality by establishing a relationship with their own community. Her *Home* (2006) gives glimpses of the life in Punjab in the decades before partition. This novel also focuses on the joint family system, tradition, customs and the women bound in them.

(1995), and Second Thoughts (1996). She analyzes various aspects of sex in her novels. For her, sex is not a taboo but a part and parcel of life. However, she has tried to expose the moral and spiritual breakdown in modern society. She is a feminist who fights for equality of women in a patriarchal society.

The novels of Manjula Padmanabhan (b.1953-) and Namita Gokhale (b.1956-) deal with the articulation of women’s lives in the modern situation. Padmanabhan’s Hot Death, Cold Soup (1996) deals with the binary opposition between the male and female. Her recent novel Escape (2008) describes an escape of a girl for life on the earth from the torture of men community and cut off from the rest of the planet. This novel is one of the few works of modern Indian eco-feminist science fiction that throws light on the problem of increasing female feticides and its consequences. Namita Gokhale criticizes the upper class contemporary Indian society of New Delhi in her Paro: Dreams of Passion (1984); on the other hand, she deals with the expansion of the British Rule in India in The Conquerors (1996). Her A Himalayan Love Story (1996) deals with man-woman relationship and her latest novel The Book of Shadows (1999) explores human emotions and superstitious beliefs.

Githa Hariharan (1954-) adopts an epic mode in her The Thousand Faces of Night (1992), The Ghosts of Vasu Master (1994) and When Dreams Travel (1999). She reveals the ill-treatment of barren women in patriarchy. The first novel brings out the predicament of the Indian women and probes into the problems of women at various levels in society and raises a number of feminist issues. It advocates gender equality and exposes the patriarchal callousness in recognizing woman’s need and giving her emotional rapport. She also focuses on the binary opposition of cultural attitudes bordering on tradition and modernity. Her
fictional world represents the modern new woman, independent, competent and confident and tries to send a different signal for the new woman of modern India, that is, to shake off the age-old shackles imposed on them.

Arundhati Roy’s (b.1961-) *The God of Small Things* (2005) is about transgressed community boundaries of the Hindus and the Dalits. It is the story of men and women who have been neglected in the society and have to pay a heavy price for being either a Dalit or a woman. The novel presents her dystopoeic vision which is concerned with anti-utopian views that are negative, disintegrative and fragmented. She projects the cultural scenario of isolation, oppression, depression, frustration and amalgamation in it. Roy explores how the dominant patriarchal culture controls and dictates the power-politics of society in which women are more submissive and voiceless. Gender discrimination is the main reason of numerous problems to the ‘second sex’ such as humiliation, subordination and exploitation. It is also shown that the dominance of patriarchal culture in India is at its hegemony and pushes aside the ‘second sex’ at the periphery. She portrays the world of caste prejudices, discrimination against women, family conflicts in the backdrop of social history. It shows that caste system is prevalent in free India even in the later part of the twentieth century. It also shows that the outcastes are victimized by religion, political parties and even by the Government.

The novel touches upon political and human rights issues. Thus humiliation, male-domination, exploitation, suppression and the ultimate victimization of the marginal women is seen in different contexts in this linguistic masterpiece. Ranga Rao observes, “The story is about an Indian village, authentic India, but the sensibility is urban, westernized, modern” (Rao viii). Furthermore he comments, “Roy’s book is the only one I can
think of among Indian novel in English which can be comprehensively
described as a protest novel. It is all about atrocities against minorities,
small things: children and youth, women and untouchables (Rao 13). Roy
herself says:

I have to say that my book is not about history but biology
and transgression. And, therefore, the fact is that you never
understand the nature of brutality until you see what has
been loved being smashed. And so the book deals with both
things - it deals without reality to be brutal as well as our
ability to be so deeply intimated so deeply loving (Roy 46).

During the last two decades, that is 1980s and 1990s, there has been
astonishing flowering of Indian women’s fiction in English, published
both in India and abroad. Today, Indian women novelists, whether
writing in India or abroad, are at the forefront of Indian writing in
English. The recent writers are mostly western-educated middle class
men and women who express their discontent with the misery and plight
of upper-caste and upper-class traditional Hindu women trapped in
repressive patriarchal institutions. The image of woman in Indian English
fiction has undergone a tremendous change during the last three decades.
From 1980s onwards, the female characters assert themselves and defy
marriage and motherhood. The novels emerging in the twenty-first
century furnish the examples of a whole range of attitudes towards the
imposition of tradition, some offering an analysis of the family structure
and the caste–system as the key elements of the patriarchal social
organization. They also reinterpret mythology by deploying new symbols
and subverting the canonic versions. The work of Indian women novelists
is significant not only in making society aware of women’s demands, and
in providing a medium for self-expression, but also in venturing beyond
familial pressures to greater human issues and thus, in contributing to rewriting the history of India. However, Indian fiction in English today has broadened its vision and illustrates how various women writers show this transcendence through their writings. Their canvas delineates the basic human predicament and the dilemma is of choice, struggle and an existential void.

The 1990s witnessed a sudden growth of Indian English fiction in a feminist wave. A group of Indian women novelists in English in their indebtedness to hybridity of thought and multi-cultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious social dimensions have contextualized the problems of women in general and middle and upper-class women in particular. They have shown how rewriting marginality is central to the transformative process of reconstructing our relations to our self and our world.

It is asserted that Indian women novelists in English have considerably widened the areas of human experience with their sharp feminine perception of life, transmuted into the verbal artifact. Now, it is no exaggeration to say that Indian English writing by women is in an ascending order. The new voices in Indian English Literature are free from the imitation of the West and the insularities of the Indian past. They look straight at reality, both without and within with authenticity and minutely observe experiences.

There emerged a new crop of women novelists who have used the narrative canvas to delineate the adverse female experiences in an air of patriarchal social set-up. Theirs is a unique Indian sensibility solidly rooted in Indian ethos. Their primacy of feminine socio-cultural issues is an indictment of the fact that the Indian female novelists, no longer, relied on the western models for their artifacts. Their depiction of female
experiences, as have been lived, breathe authenticity since their sensibility has been shaped by the Indian cultural determinants. They are more sensitive in depicting women’s lives and concerns than of their counterparts.

One aspect of the novel as a genre is its multi-voicedness that focuses on social patterns and cultural kaleidoscopic experiences. The position of a woman is always considered as an index in shaping the nation’s forum. In fact, it is the womanhood that determines the quality of culture lived by people in a particular nation. The feminine burden of responsibility has been shouldered by the women novelists and they have given a novel the new form of sensibility. Many of the Indian women novelists in English have given vent to their desire for freedom of thought and expression, liberation from oppression and marginalization, and equality as a quest for dignity. They have displayed the feminine psyche in their works. They question the existing paradigms about the women’s subjection to male hegemony and search for self-identity.

Partition and the political ferment of the 1920s in Punjab find place in Nina Sibal’s work.


While talking about new bearings and fresh flowering in Indian English fiction, M. K. Naik refers to these novelists as “new” novelists who “share most of the preoccupations of their male counterparts, and try to make their own room in terms of certain pressing needs and concerns” (Naik 199). A. S. Dasan remarks that in the new brand of Indian English
fiction “homogeneous perspectives and essential views on rootedness in Indianness or on culture, quest for identity, colonialism and postcolonialism are challenged in the context of celebration of hybridity, migration and diaspora” (Dasan 73). The Diasporic women novelists depict Indian social reality and cultural angst in their narratives in order to cope with the ongoing process of multi-ethnic acculturation. In this regard Dasan says, “The current Indian English novel vis-à-vis Diasporic Indian writing has started embracing multiculturalism and pluralism in the midst of cross-fertilization of ideas and new forms of cultural exchanges in the context of humanity’s drift towards transnational cultural and social identity, thanks to globalization” (Dasan 77).

Many of the Diasporic women novelists write, to use Rushdie’s phrase, about their “imaginary homelands” through the lens of nostalgia. These Diasporic novelists are Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Uma Permeswaran, Sunetra Gupta, Anita Rau Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bhargavi Mandava, Ameena Meer, Meera Syal, Preethi Nair, Anjana Appachana, Meena Alexander, Bharati Krichner, Sujata Massey, Kavita Daswani, Shauna Singh Baldwin, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri and Suniti Namjoshi. Some of them moved to the USA, England and Canada as post-graduate students or as young children with their families and later on became the novelists. Their writing has developed its own theoretical position, privileging multiple visions and perspectives, and it is evident in the fictional works of these Indian women novelists of the Diaspora. These Diasporic Indian women novelists have settled in the USA, Canada, Britain, and other parts of the world and have written about their situation in cross cultural contexts. Most of these writers depict the real conditions in the contemporary India with a sense of nostalgia. The clash between tradition and modernity and
East-West cultural conflict are the prominent issues in their writings. They also deal with multi-culturalism, feminine issues gender issues, generational conflicts, familial relationships, marriage and sexuality in their novels. The theme of migration leading to self-discovery with a negation of origin is a recurrent theme among the migrant writers.

Markandaya deals with the themes of East-West Encounter and conflict between tradition and modernity in her novels. Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine* (1989) is about an illegal immigrant Jasmine, a young Indian village girl. It reveals an ordeal of expatriation and immigration on an alien land. *The Holder of the World* (1997) is about the search of a diamond called the ‘Emperor’s Tear’. Her *Leave it to Me* (1997) is a purely American and about men-women sexual politics. Her protagonists are the victims of bigotry, sexism and other forms of social tyranny. Mukherjee confesses herself that she is neither an exile nor an expatriate but the American mainstream writer. She declares, “I am an American writer in the American mainstream, trying to expand it. This is a vitally important statement from me. I am not Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant; my investment is in the American reality, not the Indian” (qtd. in Shyamala A. Narayan 108). Mukherjee represents the Indian women in a cross-cultural context in her *Desirable Daughters* (2002). It is the manifesto of Diaspora which deals with an identity of Asian-American. It also concentrates on the problems of migration, obsession of marriage, lust for wealth, fame, fashion and life style addictions. Her fiction shows how immigrants are transformed by the idea of living in the United States.

Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* reveals all the characteristics of Diaspora fiction: a concern with the fate of immigrants and a growing distance from the Indian reality which is viewed from
outside. She deals with the character of a migrant Austrian Jew in India. Her *Journey to Ithaca* is a completely Eurocentric in its vision of India as a land of heat and dust. It has shown an Egyptian acculturated in India along with an Italian spiritual seeker in the subcontinent. *Fasting, Feasting* takes up a stock theme of post-colonial fiction: the encounter with the West. It is about the contrast between two cultures - the Indian and the American. It shows the predicament of a lonely Indian named Arun in the USA. Gender discrimination, isolation and loneliness, subjugation and domestic violence are some other themes in this novel. Her latest novel is *The Zigzag Way* (1940) which depicts the double perspective of India and its background as well as the expatriates.

Meena Alexander (b.1951- ) is known for her *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhattan Music* (1997). Alexander focuses on the issues of cultural riches, psychological complexity, feminism and social politics in *Nampally Road* while her *Manhattan Music* is infused with the power of myth, poetry and inner life. She also emphasizes the Indian Diaspora, fanaticism, ethnic tolerance, and inter-racial affairs such as marriage. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s (b.1956- ) first novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) deals with trans-culturalism. Her second novel *Sister of My Heart* (1999) depicts the cultural clash between the East and the West. She transcends the transcultural boundaries in her fictional world.

Anjana Appachana (1957- ), settled in the USA, is the recipient of the O’ Henry Festival Prize and a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship. She provides a realistic account of the lives of middle class women and their painful negotiations between personal aspirations and social expectations. Her first novel *Listening Now* (1997) is a woman’s love story with its agonized secrets. The central theme of this novel is the experiences of an ordinary Indian woman, her dreams

Anita Rau Badami’s (b.1961-) debut novel *Tamarind Mem* (1996) is a beautiful and brilliant depiction of two generations of women set in India and Canada. She explores the cultural clash between two cultures. Her second novel *The Hero’s Walk* (2001) is about loss, disappointment and frustration. It is also about the transmutations of a millennia old culture. The novel is set in a town named Toturpuram on the Bay of Bengal, East Karnataka, adjoining Tamil Nadu and Canada. Her next novel *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) is set in Canada and is about three women destroyed by the political turmoil during the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 and then in the year 1985 when the demand for an independent Sikh State called Khalistan came into violent existence. This novel concentrates on the immigrant experiences of three women namely Bibiji or Kaur, Leela Bhat and Nimmo.

Shauna Singh Baldwin’s (1962-) first novel entitled *What the Body Remembers* (1999) deals with the shared suffering, glory and the problems of bigamy, trauma of loneliness and search for self-identity. The young woman’s identity is projected in it as a ‘baby producing machine’ and ‘surrogate mother’. Underestimation of married women, their exploitation and unjust treatment are the focal points in this novel. It is a family saga of polygamy, hatred, jealousy and superstitious immensity of patriarchy. It is a narrative of history of Pakistan which
embodies several harrowing political, ideological, communal and religious issues defining and delineating the colossal waste of life and other resources. Ameena Meer’s (B.1964-) novel *Bombay Talkie* (1994) deals with the Indian sojourn of a young born in the USA.


More recently one of the Indian women writers living abroad is Jhumpa Lahiri (b.1967-) who has acclaimed herself as the chronicler of the immigrant experience. Her debut collection of short stories *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999) won the 2000 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The stories revolve around the South Asian immigrants dealing with Indian encounters with Americans, or two cultures colliding into one another. Lahiri depicts the characteristic experiences of Indians living in an alien land. In her debut novel *The Namesake* (2003), Lahiri explores the cultural dissonance experienced by the immigrants caught between the culture of their birthplace and the unfamiliar ways of their adopted home. It concentrates on the themes of conflict in relationships between couples, families and friends. She explores the ideas of isolation and the
identity crisis and throws light on the borrowed existence of immigrants in a foreign land. Her recent work is *Unaccustomed Earth* (2007), a superbly crafted new work of fiction with eight stories that offer a perspective on the clash between family and cultural traditions and the search for ‘individual identity’. Lahiri’s fiction is autobiographical and frequently draws upon her own experiences as well as those of her parents, friends, acquaintances, and others in the Bengali communities with which she is familiar. She examines her characters’ struggles, anxieties, and biases to chronicle the nuances and details of immigrant psychology and behavioural patterns. She deals with the search for identity, the sense of alienation and exile in her fiction.

shuns the match. Then Tanaya turns into a supermodel and soon this traditional girl is disowned by her family.

Kiran Desai (b.1971-), a Diasporic novelist differs from her mother Anita Desai, in her artistic sensibility. Desai’s first novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard* (1998) is set in a small dusty town of Shahkot in North India and revolves around the family of Sampath Chawla. The novel presents the problematic issue of survival in an adopted language through eccentric characters. It is a magical tale of a world gone slightly mad and India is presented through her crazy imaginary characters to delight the western readers. Her masterpiece and the Booker Prize winner, *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) deftly moves between the first and the third worlds and captures the terror of an immigrant experience. Its setting is from the peaks of Himalayas to New York. In this novel Desai writes about the nations – imagined and the real, depicting history – personal and political, and the consequences of colonialism and global conflicts of religion, race, and nationalism.

This comprehensive survey of Indian women novelists in English makes us aware of the fact that they have retained their permanent stamp in the arena of English fiction. The contribution of contemporary Indian women novelists reveals an incredible array of their talent. It evinces that Indian women novelists in English have successfully appropriated the language and made it a vehicle of their own cultural experience and expression. Their fiction has been significant because it has tried to question the commodification of women as bodies. Women writers from various regions of India are trying to write evocatively about men and women. Many of them try to articulate, to use M.K. Naik’s perceptive phrase ‘that long silence’ (Naik 211), which Indian society imposes upon its womenfolk. As a result, many Indian women novelists in English have
won prestigious national and international literary awards. Women writers in India can no longer be claimed as the exclusively property of India, but they and their work belong to the world. M. F. Patel observes, “Our women writers have grappled with complex issues such as sensuality, servility, subjugation and society. They have handled them with a sense of balance, never disregarding our Indian traditions, yet discovering that there is more in the offing” (Patel 102).

B. Suniti Namjoshi: Life and Works

Suniti Namjoshi is one of the ‘new’ Indian women novelists in English from Maharashtra. Like Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai, she is a very significant Diasporic writer in Indian English literature. She was born in 1941 in a Chitpavan Brahmin family of Pune. She is the daughter of Sarojini Naik Nimbalkar from Phaltan in Maharashtra and Manohar Namjoshi. She was educated at an American boarding school—Rishi Valley and University of Pune, Pune. After her education, she taught there for a year before joining the Indian Administrative Service. Then she joined the most highly acclaimed government position as an I.A. S. Officer in 1964 and was posted in Pune. She met the lawyers, farmers, landowners, tenants, civil servants and politicians and learnt about their ways of working.

She worked as an Assistant Collector and a Sub-divisional Magistrate for two years that forced her to read Marathi as it was her mother tongue. But very soon, she lost her interest in that profession and determined ‘to stay out of trouble’. Then she took the study leave to pursue her Master’s Degree in Public Administration at the University of Missouri, Columbia, in the United States where she was also encountered with ‘a severe case of culture shock’ and ‘racism’ (Namjoshi 14). At that
time she was influenced by the American racism. She was also influenced by the radical students for a Democratic Society who weren’t feminist. As a result, she resigned from the Indian Administrative Service in 1969 and moved to Montreal, Canada to do her Ph. D. in English Literature at McGill University. She acquired a social conscience through her teaching experience. Louis Dudek, a poet and an academician, was her supervisor. She worked on modern poetry and submitted her Doctoral thesis entitled “Ezra Pound and Reality: The Metaphysics of the Cantos”. Though she began to articulate “an Asian perspective, an alien perspective, later a lesbian perspective”, but she ignored both the “male-centred consciousness” of literature and Pound’s “anti-Semitism” (Namjoshi 22).

Suniti Namjoshi became a teacher at Scarborough College, University of Toronto in 1972 and worked there for the next fifteen years. She spent her first sabbatical in London and Cambridge in the year 1978-79. And it is a major shift in her career as well as her creative life where she was influenced by the Feminist and Gay Liberation Movements. This was a period of intense introspection for her, a period of political development and political transformation. Suniti matured as a feminist, lesbian, and an activist under the influence of Feminist and Gay Liberation Movements and Christine Donald. Suniti met Gillian Hanscombe, an Australian author, in London in 1984. A few years later in May of 1987, Suniti moved to Devon, England, and in October 1988, she resigned from the University of Toronto. Presently Suniti Namjoshi lives in Devon, England with her friend, a lesbian partner Gillian Hanscombe, writing and serving as a research fellow at Exter University.

A poet, fabulist, mythmaker, fiction writer, feminist and a lesbian, Suniti Namjoshi began her literary career with a book of poetry *Poems* (1967) published by P. Lal of the Kolkata Writer’s Workshop. She also
published *Poems of Govindagraj* in the same year. These poems are translated from Marathi into English with the help of her mother Sarojini Namjoshi. She also translated some of the Marathi *Bhakti Poems* of Eknath, Namdeo and Tukaram with the help of her mother and grandmother, Laxmi Devi Naik Nimbalkar. Namjoshi’s first book *Poems* is an anthology which has no single unifying theme. It is full of various related and unrelated issues to herself such as a memory of the dead friend, the cultural dilemma, her feeling towards nature and a quest for life.

The early formative influences on Suniti were two “the fact of growing up in India, and the fact of thinking in English” (Vijayasree 177). She was educated in English, and could think in English, but was not well versed in the Sanskrit and Marathi literary traditions. The first volume contains twenty-four poems in which most of the poems are intensely personal and express a young woman’s deep dissatisfaction with the existing order of things in the world, and her strong awareness of the need for a transformational change. Most of the poems are against the traditional life. Namjoshi’s intention is to explore the enigma of life.

Her early poetry also includes the collection *More Poems* which appeared in the year 1971. At that time she suffered from a severe culture shock and wrote about the logic of lesbianism, racism and the American snobbery. She remarks,

One aspect of culture shock is that one is not recognized – in both senses of the word. In India I was inescapably my grandfather’s granddaughter, one member of a particular family located for hundreds of years in a particular region, with a particular place in a particular system. I was free of all
that. But now I was literally Nobody from Nowhere – and I didn’t like it. This was the tail end of the sixties (Namjoshi 14).

In *More Poems* she depicts animal characters like the Blue Donkey and One-Eyed Monkey as central characters. She is preoccupied with the mythical and fabular world in the stories of the past. Some poems reveal her immediate concerns as an Indian woman living in Canada. The main themes of the poems are dislocation, diasporic living and the expatriate poet’s fears of living in an alien land amidst strangers. Distance, separation, loss and longing are more affectively expressed in the poem ‘The Elsewhere Fish’. Jasbir Jain rightly observes: “The two countries become the two countries of the mind, of belonging or not belonging, of being left out and being involved” (Jain 116). In this anthology Namjoshi reveals her perception of the West, especially America. In the poem, ‘The New York Bird’ Suniti comments on materialism in America. Sometimes she raises the politics of colonization and racism in her poems like ‘Those Astonishing Anglo-Saxons’, and ‘A Problem’.

Namjoshi’s *Cyclone in Pakistan* (1971) deals with her preoccupation with social issues such as poverty, deprivation, war, violence and loss of life. Recalling the background of writing these poems Namjoshi says, “I was acquiring the beginnings of a social conscience, or perhaps it was only a social consciousness. The real teaching experience had to do with feeling in my lived life what it was like to be poor to the point of wondering what one was going to eat. There was also the matter of experiencing the social hierarchy at the bottom end of the system” (Namjoshi 21). While writing these poems Namjoshi was working on her doctoral dissertation on Ezra Pound. Naturally she was influenced by Pound’s economical and political
ideologies. A large number of poems reveal her consciousness of the day-
today happenings in the world around her. The title poem ‘Cyclone in
Pakistan’ is about the 1970 cyclone in Pakistan. In this poem she depicts
the whole disastrous picture of that cyclone. Namjoshi’s poetry reflects a
fragmented mind at war with itself and the world around. Poetry is a
means through which Namjoshi tries to come to terms with her own
dividedness and schizophrenic condition. It is her consistent pre-
occupation with the conflicting aspects of life and living which need to
highlight serious critical consideration.

*The Jackass and the Lady* (1980) reflects Namjoshi’s ideological
position as a lesbian-feminist writer. There was a great transformation in
her life. In this period she came under the impact of the Western Feminist
thought and Gay Liberation Movement. She gives a detailed account of
the background of this volume in her *Because of India*, “By 1980 I was a
feminist, and revised some of the poems accordingly. In some instances it
was simply a matter of restoring the poems to their original form”
(Namjoshi 27). Suniti in her works exhibits little of the cultural
dissociation one expects in the writings of immigrant. She rarely writes of
immigrant experience, though she has, in succession, immigrated to the
United States, Canada and Britain. The main themes in her work are
gender, sexual orientation and politics. Her marginality, her sense of
“Otherness” springs from her life, in a male-centred society as a woman,
a feminist, and a lesbian.

Some of her innermost feelings either as feminist or a lesbian are
articulated in these poems. She writes about consciousness and voice,
particularly the identification with the wholeness of creation, including
the world of animals, and relates these poems to the culture and traditions
of Hinduism, not to the patriarchal thinking of Western Christianity.
Suniti explains her reasons for choosing birds and beasts for her poetic world in *Because of India*. She convincingly argues that women cannot be separated from the birds and the beasts. There is also the influence of Hindu philosophy on Suniti Namjoshi’s thinking of choosing beast.

**The Authentic Lie** is Suniti’s first book published outside India in 1982. It is very different from other anthologies as it deals with the themes of death and the impact of death on a child. Namjoshi’s father was killed in a plane crash on 11th December 1953 when she was eleven and **The Authentic Lie** is a mature reconsideration of childhood grief though it includes poems about other aspects of death and the dead. The violence of personal relationships is more readily expressed in the section “The Assassins”. This collection is autobiographical and deals with her own childhood grief on losing her father. All the poems are about the theme of death and its fascination. The child continues the quest of her lost father. The child misses her father. She is well aware that the return of her dead father is a sinister affair, but there lies hidden possibility of seeking father in her heart. There is a metaphysical speculation on death and the possibility of seeking dead father. **The Authentic Lie** offers her a professed ideological position as a feminist under interrogation. She confesses, “At the time I wasn’t a feminist, in the sense that I had no understanding of patriarchy as an institution” (Namjoshi 41).

**From the Bedside Book of Nightmares** is her next collection published in 1984 in which she tries to explore the bloodier aspects of gay liberation and women’s liberation. Certainly, she wanted to do something more than preventing one set of egos from dominating another set of egos. Thus she wrote poems about egotism and the problem of identity. Suniti Namjoshi and Gillian Hanscombe wrote the poems in **Flesh and Paper** between 1984-1986. This volume is divided into five
sections and these poems echo their lesbian identities, political awareness and their literary backgrounds. She herself comments, “Flesh and Paper is of course a dialogue in its very structure. The two lesbians are trying to understand what kind of sense the world makes to a lesbian consciousness, and in the very process of writing are trying to deal with the fact that language creates worlds” (Namjoshi 113). She seems to be influenced by J. Krishnamurthi’s philosophy of Hinduism and humanism.

The shaping influences in the making of Suniti Namjoshi as a creative writer are her parents, grandparents, her cultural and family backgrounds, her everyday Indian experiences and “not entirely happy confluence of Western and Hindu influences” (Namjoshi 28). Furthermore, she argues that in Hinduism there is no clear cut division between human beings and animals. She also deals with her own alienation from the male-centred western humanist tradition. Later on she made a “happier” choice of claiming the centre-stage for the dispossessed and to challenge the traditional assumptions.

She is also greatly influenced by her friends such as Christine Donald, a lesbian feminist and Gillian Hanscombe from Australia. Besides, her writing is influenced by the old and new writers such as Ezra Pound’s socio-political and economical ideology and anti-Semitism, the literary universe of Northrop Frye and the poetry of Jay Macpherson, Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics, Adrienne Rich’s work, Virginia Woolf, the philosopher J. Krishnamurthi, Jonathan Swift, and Lewis Carroll, the mathematician. She also draws on Greek and Christian myths, legends, fables and fairy tales. In the words of Vijayasree, “She transgresses norms of societal and literary conventions; stresses the need for looking at life from alternative perspectives so that the conventional hierarchies of class, race and gender get demolished and more acceptable and
egalitarian perspectives may emerge” (Vijayasree 15). From 1987 onwards, Suniti Namjoshi devoted herself to writing as a full time vocation. Now she is one of the important writers in contemporary Indian English Literature with several volumes of verse, fables, short stories and works of fiction. Though she lives and works in Devon, England, her work is deeply steeped in the tradition of Indian story-telling and fables drawn from several cultures.

The emergence of ‘new’ women writers in Indian English fiction has enabled a more varied expression, of which Suniti Namjoshi is a good representative. A woman writer has to encounter with the problematic issues such as to represent the self and the other, quest for identity and cultural obstacles. Her work is filled in with the autobiographical elements, political and Hindu heritage as well as Christian faith. Her fairy tales, fables and stories unveil the complex terrain between the colonial, postcolonial and the neo-colonial eras. Her fiction enables the subaltern female subjectivity to voice women’s own concerns in the times of crisis. Basically, she is a feminist. She is an experimental writer who dares to tackle a variety of subjects and employs a wide range of techniques in her writings. She also deals with the issues of tradition and modernity and rewrites ancient myths and legends both Indian and Western with modern touch. In all her creative works, written and published in four countries, Namjoshi’s sexual, political and artistic intellectual selves converge to offer a rare glimpse of her differing subjectivities, which fracture a binary worldview and unsettle both Eastern and Western orthodoxies. She has also written the play *Kaliyug: Circles of Paradise* in collaboration with Gillian Hanscombe. All her works deal with the very sensitive current issues of race, gender, and ethnicity that are relevant in the ultramodern world. In this regard she says, “Today the main components seem to be
based on gender, skin colour, and sexual choice, as well as other factors such as nationality and religion, which are more or less important in different places” (Namjoshi 84). Few of her works have been translated into Italian, Korean, Dutch, and Spanish. Now a days, her books are being used as texts in few schools in Delhi, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu in India and in London and this evinces that her books are not only popular among intelligentsia but also among general readers and the lovers of Indian English literature.

Namjoshi has lived her life in a different way right from the beginning of her career. She looks at life from different view points and her own views of life have been reflected in her work. She always remained aloof from name, fame, the prestigious position or publicity. Yet, she writes about the nature of all modes of dominance - of class, race, gender, and nationality and transgresses it. This transgression becomes her key concern in her works. She believes that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural constrains of gender differences. She tries to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and create gender inequality in her literary works. According to her, women should claim for more space within the existing social structures. Therefore, all of her works are related with womanhood.

Namjoshi confesses about her status, “I am not a novelist. I am a fabulist” (Kanaganayakam 50). Her work weaves an intricate network of intertexts into her fiction. An attempt to analyze Namjoshi’s fiction requires grasping this interconnectedness and this can sometimes send one on an endless search for the missing links. Basically, when she narrates her tale she does not serve the meaning on a platter to her readers. In fact, she does not even believe that there is a single authorial
meaning that a writer can dictate. Instead, she leaves it to her readers to
draw their own inferences and arrive at their own decoding of the texts.

Though Namjoshi has written eight volumes of poems marked by
sparkling wit, word play and inventive power, she is more popular as a
fiction writer than a poet. She has published numerous poems, fables,
articles and reviews in anthologies and journals in India, Canada, the
U.S., Australia and Britain. However, the researcher has restricted her
study to Namjoshi’s following collections of fables and novels:

1. **Feminist Fables** (1981)
2. **The Conversations of Cow** (1985)
3. **The Blue Donkey Fables** (1988)
4. **The Mothers of Maya Diip** (1989)
5. **Saint Suniti and the Dragon** (1994)

Suniti Namjoshi emerged as a blooming star on the horizon of
Indian English fiction and has been active on the literary scene for more
than half a century. She is more inclined to fictionalize women’s private
as well as public experiences, fears, anxieties, hopes and frustrations. She
has written both singly and in collaboration, in verse and prose; fables
and dystopias, novels and short stories, fantasies, satire, children’s
literature with a feminist touch, and almost in each genre except drama
and epic. She has travelled all over the world to probe into the cultural
foregrounding of several nations and produced both the feminist and
Diasporic narratives of culture. The universal discrimination of gender
and class become her major thematic concerns. She also posits the animal world against the human world in her writings. For this purpose, she uses different cultural myths, fairy tales and narratives of an ‘alien’ culture. One finds, as Jasbir Jain has pointed out “the multi-dimensional explorations” (Jain10) in her fictional world.

An objective review of the relevant literature published and research already carried out on Suniti Namjoshi is quite essential in order to determine the focal point of the proposed research. Several articles and reviews have featured in various anthologies and journals in India, Canada, the United States of America and England on her poetry, fables and short fiction. M.K. Naik has taken a note of Suniti Namjoshi as one of the ‘new’ women writers and offers a precise comment on her fiction in his *Indian English Fiction 1980-2000: A Critical Survey* (2007). Similarly, C. Vijayasree refers to Namjoshi’s five anthologies of poems, several works of fiction and identifies ‘transgression’ and ‘transformation’ as the cardinal features of her creative writing in her *Suniti Namjoshi: The Artful Transgressor* (2001). Scholars and reviewers like Vevaina Coomi, Binda Thaper, Uma Maheshwari, Shafalee Jain, Christine Croyden, Jack Nichols, Arundhati Subramaniam, Shabnam Arora Afsah and many more have published their articles, reviews and interviews. The researcher has tried to acquaint herself with the doctoral dissertations submitted in various universities in India such as Mary Fatima Cross’s Ph. D. thesis entitled “Narrative Strategies in Recent Indian Fiction by Women: A Study of Bharati Mukherjee, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande and Suniti Namjoshi”, and Anne Susan Koshy’s an M. Phil dissertation “Feminism and Fairy Tales: A Comparative Study of the Short Stories of Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood and Suniti Namjoshi”. However, no extensive research work has
been carried out exclusively on Suniti Namjoshi’s fiction. No one has studied her as a feminist novelist and a short story writer. The researcher feels that there is a need for a detailed study of her fictional world wherein her fictional characters assume real flesh and blood and come alive close to us. The cultural encounters are vividly shown in her works. The thematic study of Suniti Namjoshi’s fiction will add to the knowledge and perception of people in the days of globalization.

The researcher has concentrated on the thematic pre-occupations of Suniti Namjoshi’s fables and novels. The proposed research work has taken into consideration Suniti Namjoshi’s fables, short stories and novels published up to 2006. But her non-fiction and poetic collections are not included in this study. An attempt has been made to explore her deep engagement with themes such as feminist consciousness, radical feminism, lesbianism, queer theory, sexual orientation, and questions of cultural identity.

Namjoshi’s fiction infuses multiple viewpoints and perspectives; therefore, the researcher proposes to undertake the exploration of the diverse cultural influences which affect her fiction with its complex blend of Eastern and Western ideas. It is also intended to probe into the inner tracts of the minds of characters and the social milieu in which they dwell and offer comprehensive statements on the themes related to culture, politics, and society. The researcher has concentrated on the theoretical framework of feminism, feminist consciousness, gay and lesbianism and queer theory in the select works of Suniti Namjoshi. It is also intended to concentrate on women’s gender discrimination, victimization, marginalization, oppression and suppression, liberation and emancipation, lesbian identity, feminist consciousness, and the quest for identity in the modern society. All these themes emphasize the secondary
positions assigned to women in the modern India. The researcher has made a comprehensive study of all these themes in the select works of Suniti Namjoshi to highlight the plight of the women in contemporary Indian scenario. This thematic assessment has been made by using analytical and interpretative methods. The aim of the present study is to attempt a modest and coherent study of Suniti Namjoshi’s fiction which will enhance the readers’ understanding of her as a major contemporary female Indian writer. Her reputation as a female writer at the intersection of the national and global also deserves a greater critical attention.