Chapter IV
Reading ‘Silences’ : Marginality and Resistances.

Women have long been pushed to the seams of history.¹ The marginalization and oppression of women both in mainstream history and society has been a political act.² Steeped in oblivion, made oblivious of their strength, women have long been silenced. Women writers have therefore sought in their works to rewrite history, revise and rethink their positions and reconstruct their identities in order to break the prolonged silence that has overpowered them for a long time in literary history. Images of women in literature have been male representations, controlled as it is by masculine economy. Representations of women have as such become misrepresentations and therefore, to rescue women from the misprison of male truth, the feminist agenda has been to interrogate male hegemony, to challenge the male constructs and to construct a positive representation of femininity. Feminism attempts to find an alternative language for women that would be a ‘unique woman’s language.’

In its search for a ‘unique language’, feminists had to first confront the question of identity in order to reconstruct a separate identity for woman. Feminist critical theory therefore interrogates the signifying and universalist assumptions of authority. In insisting a tradition of their own, among other issues, feminist theorists mostly focus on women’s literary productions, women as represented in literature and as readers. It questions socio-his-
torical and ideological conditions in which literary production and consumption take place. Underlining the fact that aesthetic value is not universal, and does not reside in the text, but is historically and culturally determined, feminist theory considers patriarchy's essentializing assumption as relative, not absolute or axiomatic. Hence, feminist theory stresses for the deconstructive and the political to go hand in hand. It opposes sexism, where women write as a biologically oppressed group, and endorses feminism as a part of political project, to raise and transform consciousness.

Feminist literary discourse stresses on the autonomy of selfhood. While the Anglo-American feminists and French feminist theorists differ significantly in their approaches, they unanimously emphasize women's subjectivity and autonomy of selfhood. To them all, patriarchy is a monolith that resists interrogation and denies woman her self-expression and 'identity'. While the American approach addresses real readers and situations, the French polarise feminist issues into body and language. Cora Kaplan, the British Marxist feminist critic addresses some of these problems by constantly interrogating her own political ideologies--Marxist and Feminist--illustrating the gaps and contradictions in the way these ideologies are presently constructed. Inspite of the so called 'gaps and contradictions' the objective of feminist theory/theories in setting its agenda, can claim a large measure of validity.
The question of identity has always been central to feminism though feminist accounts of identity are in a state of flux. A confusion over questions of identity pervades contemporary feminist theory. Nevertheless, multiplicity of definitions and formulations become crucial to realize the identity of 'woman'. An introductory women's studies text book offers this definition of identity:

Our identity is a specific marker of how we define ourselves at any particular moment in life. Discovering and claiming our unique identity is a process of growth, change, renewal and regeneration throughout our lifetime. As a specific marker, identity may seem tangible and fixed at any given point. Over the life span, however, identity is more fluid.

Identity is fluid but we can neither defend or dispense with identities. William Connolly in *Identity/Difference* (1999) states "Identity requires difference in order to be, and it conveys difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty." He continues, "My identity is what I am and how I am recognized rather than what I choose, want or consent to. It is the dense self from which choosing, wanting and consenting proceed. Without that density, these acts could not occur; with it, they are recognized to be mine."

The question pertaining to feminism is: What is it that constitutes the self of a woman? How can a woman determine her 'self' or 'identity'
located as she is within the framework of patriarchal power? The nature of womankind is constantly defined in terms of male desire and male imagination. She has always been the object of male subjectivity and is defined in terms of her relation to the male needs in any society. Her social role and position is also assigned by patriarchy. Women have been forced into a position of passivity. A woman's identity is sought to be fixed and understood in terms of her gendered being defined essentially by her sexuality and reproductive value. Patriarchal societies continue to fix gender roles and prescribe behavioral norms that are often discriminating against women. A woman's 'self' is thus not allowed to emerge. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar compare the male act of imprisoning the female in his writing as an act of killing:

He both silences the female, and 'stills' her - in essence, he 'kills' her. Woman has been killed into a 'perfect image' of herself by successive male authors. That perfect image is in effect, a male dream of female perfection. Male ideology justifies the position of woman and legitimates it. It defines a woman's place, how she should think, act, feel as a woman and so maintains her subordination and justifies her exploitation.

Feminists, however, have objected to the male definition of woman and challenged the universalist assumptions of patriarchy. Feminist discourse is a discourse of critique, an op-positional discourse, a discourse of engagement.
ment and activism. Female sexuality is revolutionary, subversive, heterogeneous and ‘open’ in that it refuses to define female sexuality. If there is a female principle, it is simply to remain outside the male definition of the female. There has not been much examination of how women’s identity and nature of their self is constituted within the categories such as woman’s actual experience. Woman’s experience of their bodies, sexuality and their self can be the basis upon which a feminine understanding can be built.

The Anglo-American criticism fronted by the ‘gynocriticism’ of Elaine Showalter, concentrates on the specificity of women’s writing, on recuperating a tradition of women authors, and on examining in detail women’s relation to culture. In dispute with this however is the slightly later and more theoretically driven French feminist criticism, which draws especially on the work of Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous and Luce Irigaray.

These critics emphasise not the gender of the writer (female) but ‘writing effect’ of the text (feminine). Alice Jardine has named it, in contradiction to ‘gynocriticism’ - ‘gynesis’: the textuality of ‘woman’, rather than an emphasis on specific ‘woman’. Helen Cixous argues for a positive representation of femininity in discourse she calls ‘écriture féminine’. Her essay, “The Laugh of the Medusa” is a celebrated manifesto of “women’s writing” which calls for women to put their ‘bodies’ into their writing. Cixous advocates: “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the
immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Since writing is the place where subversive thought can germinate, it is especially shameful that the phallocentric tradition has for the most part succeeded in suppressing women’s voice. At the heart of Cixous theory is her rejection of theory. Women’s writing, according to her, ‘will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system.’ Such transgression of the laws of phallocentric discourse is the woman writer’s special task, and having always operated ‘within’ male dominated discourse, she needs to invent for herself a language to get into the ‘inside’. Cixous’ approach is essentially and strategically visionary imagining a possible language rather than describing an existing one.

In the shifting terrains of feminism, the location of the woman’s ‘self’ has become important. Women writer’s have sought in their works to rewrite history, revise and rethink their positions and reconstruct their identities in their attempts to break the prolonged silence that has overpowered them for a long time in literary history.

At the heart of the Anglo-American approach is a unified ‘self’- either individual or collective - which is commonly called Man. French Feminists Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous argue that this integrated ‘self’ is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of self-contained powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and
ambiguity. In this humanist ideology the 'self' is the sole author of history and literary text. Whatever may be the differences between the first-wave and second-wave feminists, these critics unanimously deplore the patriarchal premises and emphasize on the construction of woman's identity. They refuse to accept woman's identity as 'given' but rather consider it as a 'construct'.

The issue of subjectivity continues to be of vital significance to feminist debate. Denise Riley rightly opines that 'women' is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting out of that instability.¹⁰

This is echoed in the words of Julia Kristeva, "In 'woman' I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies."¹¹ Identities can come into being and dissolve depending on the concrete practices that constitute them. In the case of woman, ideology goes far, since their bodies as well as their minds are the product of patriarchal manipulation. Women have been compelled in their bodies and minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the 'idea' of nature that has been established for them. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement "one is not born, but becomes a woman" shatters the biological interpretation of history produced by the class of men. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society. It is civilization as a
whole that produces this creature and describes it as 'feminine'. Beauvoir is clear that one 'becomes' a woman, under a cultural compulsion to become one.

Materialist feminist approach posits that in order to constitute themselves as individual subjects of history, woman as a class should first have to kill the 'myth of woman', the mark imposed by the oppressor. Women will have to abstract themselves from the definition 'woman' which is imposed upon them. Helen Cixous is of the view that in order to assert her self woman has to write but defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible with an impossibility that will continue, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded - which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist." But it will always exceed the discourse governing the phallocentric system and take place somewhere other than in the territories subordinated to philosophical-theoretical domination. It will not let itself think except through subjects that break automatic functions, border runners never subjected by any authority. But one can begin to speak, begin to point out some effects, some elements of unconscious drives, some relations of the feminine Imaginary to the Real, to writing.

Drawing on theories like psychoanalysis and deconstruction, the feminist critics have emphasized on the body, language and writings of women, which become indispensable in the constitution of 'self'. The feminists endeav-
our to define a new paradigm that eschews modernist dichotomies and articulate a new conception of knowledge of the self. A new paradigm would have to take into account the experiential dimension of woman's identity and an understanding of the necessary distinction between the epistemological analysis of identity in everyday life. The social construction of identity must be a central element of the new paradigm that feminism is constructing. But the parameters of that social construction must be carefully delineated. Feminists must adopt theories of identity to their specifically feminist concerns.

The first task for feminism then, in order to reclaim the 'voice' of women is to dismantle patriarchy. Patriarchal discourse situates woman outside representation: she is an absence, negativity, the dark continent, or at best a lesser man. 15 Creativity is defined as male and it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too. Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, instead made to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them.

Since both patriarchy and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before woman can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as 'Cyphers', deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.16

Gilbert and Gubar clearly demonstrate how in the nineteenth century the
'eternal feminine' was assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness. The ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all selfless creature; obversely they provide the figure of the monster lurking behind the angel, a contrast to the male idealization of woman. The monster woman refuses to be selfless, acts on her own initiative, who has a story to tell. In short, she is a woman who rejects the submissive role patriarchy has reserved for her. Gilbert and Gubar call this woman 'duplicitious'- one whose mind will not let itself be penetrated by the phallic probings of masculine thought. In this context they cite works from Jane Austen to Dickinson, authors who managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. The female textual strategy, as they see it, consists in "assaulting and revising, deconstructing and reconstructing those images of women inherited from male literature especially... the paradigmatic polarities of angel and monster." The anti-patriarchal strategy is to revise the self-definitions patriarchal culture has imposed on woman writers and to develop a 'self-image' like that of the 'monster or the raging mad woman'. Feminist critical approach thus postulates a 'real' woman hidden behind the patriarchal textual facade and the feminist critic's task is to uncover her truth.
If patriarchy oppresses woman as woman, defining all women as 'feminine' regardless of individual differences, the feminist struggle must be to try to undo the patriarchal strategy that makes 'femininity' intrinsic to biological femaleness. One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male oriented. 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. There is therefore an urgent need to study women's writings, precisely in order to learn 'what woman have felt experienced'. This is what Showalter calls 'gynocriticism'. Showalter rejects theory as a male invention that can, only be used in men's texts. 'Gynocriticism' frees itself from pandering to male values and seeks to focus on the newly visible world of 'female culture'. This search for the 'muted' female culture can best be carried out by considering the socio-cultural theories to the consideration of the female author and her work. No woman, we know, is ever cut off from the real male world, but in the world of ideas we can draw boundaries that opens up new vistas of thought, that allow us to see a problem in a new way. Study of female tradition in literature is an urgent political necessity. Myra Jehlen wants women's studies to become the 'investigation, from women's viewpoint, of everything.'19 She recommends comparison in order to locate "the difference between women's writing and men's that no study of only women's writing can depict."20 This view by Jehlen is in tune with Simone de Beauvoir when she refuses to consider all writings by women
as feminine texts: "In my definition feminists are women - or even men too - who are fighting to change women's condition, in association with the class struggle, but independently of it as well."

In "Laugh of the Medusa," Cixous urges women to dismantle patriarchy through the explorations of a unique women's language, created by women and manifesting women's sexual difference. Women must come to writing in order to explode the dominant masculine text and replace it with a feminine counterpart. Woman need to write 'herself', which will allow her to carry out the transformations in her history. In order to become taker and initiator, "woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement." Cixous describes feminine text as being close to the voice, "very close to the flesh of the language, much more so than masculine texts,... there's tactility in the feminine text, there's touch..." What Cixous tries to do is to subvert the discourse of patriarchy and reveal its contradictions. Her project involves challenging the masculine monopoly on the construction of femininity, female body and woman. Ecriture Feminism claims to offer ways in which institutions and signifying practices (speech, writing, images, myths) belonging to masculine culture can be resisted.
A woman's identity is perceived in terms of the body and women too begin to see themselves in the same way. Female body often appears no more than as a 'body for-others', socially constructed, and therefore under the constant gaze of the other. Women are merely seen as sites or symbols. Though women's bodies and their sexuality are central to the male discourse, they are never subjects of it. Women are used as extensions of man, mirrors of man, as devices for showing man off, devices for helping man get what they want. They are never there in their own right. They are allowed little or no space for an independent, self-perceived articulation. A woman's body becomes an instrument and a symbol. Woman is rivetted into a lop-sided relationship with man; he is the 'one'- she is the 'other'. Women have been made inferiors and the oppression has been compounded by man's belief that women are inferior by nature. Women themselves therefore are in the best position to assess the true existential possibilities of womanhood. However, for centuries women's voice have been suppressed by man's language. If women continue to be defined by male parameters they will always remain as objects, as other, as lack and the dominant patriarchal ideology would systematically 'mute' their voices. At the crossroads of sexuality and ideology woman thus stands constituted as an object. As a subject, woman must learn to speak 'otherwise', or 'make audible [what]...[she] suffers silently in the holes of discourse.'

In order to retrieve the voice, feminist criticism can't afford to settle
for mimicry of the language of the dominant. However, to retrieve the voice and articulate speech are problematic, for over centuries women have been silenced and are voiceless. In her struggle to repossess the voice snatched away from her, the task becomes formidable as she has to struggle through limitations of her social situatedness. Feminist critical theory endeavours to find a voice for woman, in order to end sexist oppression. There can of course be no homogenizing ‘female voice’ as experiences of women differ. All women do not share the same social status and feminism while defining a new paradigm for women should not only centralize experiences of all women but call to attention the diversity of woman’s social and political reality. As a consequence of the growing influences of the postcolonial agenda, creative expression of voices hitherto silenced by the western master narrative have gained momentum since the 80’s. One of the primary projects of Third World feminism was to reject the homogenizing impulses of Western feminists with regard to woman as subject of analysis. The situation of woman under colonialism and postcolonialism is bound to be different, and so writers writing from Third World and colonised history create their own space, different from the liberal white feminists. Third World feminists aim at creating critical space for non-white women’s voices, and evolve a language and mode of writing which is shaped by what they believe to be their way of experiencing and thinking. These are the voices from the margin, voices which need to be articulated.
The dominant community retains the language of power in the name of 'plurality' and dictates the terms of 'difference'. The very process of inclusion implies the process of exclusion. The privileged English writer writes mainly from a privileged position and to the privileged English-speaking reader and consequently such a writer's concerns would be issues of mainstream feminism. Such a body of writing might not therefore lend itself readily to alternative feminist criticism which attempts to look at feminist writing as writing from the margin. We need a critical paradigm that would look at absences as much as presences and a critical consciousness and a corpus of feminist literary criticism, however tentative, to situate women's fiction in English in perspective. The solution perhaps is to relocate the literary text and give it a contextual meaning. We need to look at literary feminism in configuration with historical processes and the complex formations of beliefs, structures and representations which shape and permeate the literary text and determine its value and limitation.

Contemporary feminist theorists emphasize the need to interrogate the past from various ex-centric positions, identify the historical and cultural contexts in which historically privileged texts have been produced. Women belonging to minority groups, oppressed groups feel that the loss of identity which accompanied cultural imperialism can be combated by refusing to forget their language, rituals and cultural practices. Writers from these groups recognise the fact that 'naming' is necessarily biased and
that there is power inscribed in language. Language is not neutral for "systems of discourse are often synonymous with systems of power." In other words, the dominant group in every society holds the monopoly of naming. It can thus embed its imperialistic designs in the very names it supplies. Western feminist discourse, from a privileged position generalises the representation of women and homogenizes the notion of the oppression of women as a group. Moreover they produce the image of an 'average Third World woman'.

Accordingly, this view posits an average Third World woman leading an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being in the Third World (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized etc.)26. This image of the Third World women as represented by the Western feminists is in stark contrast to the self-presentation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.

Feminists from the Third World like Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty react to these images of Third World women represented by Western Feminists. Distinctions in representations are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm of referent. Mohanty therefore says that "Western feminist writing on woman in the Third World
must be considered in the context of the global hegemony of Western scholarship -- i.e. the production, publication distribution, and consumption of information and ideas."27 There is therefore the urgent need to move beyond Marx who found it possible to say: "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented."28 Spivak addresses the native subaltern-- the nameless woman. According to her, the academic feminist must learn to learn from them, to speak to them, to suspect that their access to the political and sexual scene is not merely to be corrected by the academicians superior theory and enlightened compassion.29 In order to learn enough about Third World women and to develop a different readership, the immense heterogeneity of the field must be appreciated, and the First World Feminist must learn to stop feeling privileged as a woman.30 The focus, according to Spivak should not be merely, who am I? but who is the other woman? How am I naming her? How does she name me? Is this part of the problematic I discuss?31 It is only when feminists address these questions irrespective of their spatial locations that woman's voice could be heard. While First Nations Women writers need to combat misrepresentations of their reality in history, Third World women need to combat silences and erasure.

The system of linguistic and literary conventions that constitute a literary text are said by structuralist and post-structuralist critics to be naturalized in the process of reading. Not only is the text's representation of
the world no more than an effect generated by the process of reading, but the world is itself held to be in its turn a text, that is, simply a structure of signs whose significance is constituted by the cultural conventions, codes and ideology that happen to be shared by members of a cultural community. The term 'intertextuality' is used to signify the multiple ways in which any one literary text is made up of other texts, by means of its open or covert citations and allusions, its repetitions and transformations of the formal and substantive features of earlier texts, or simply its unavoidable participation in the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are always already in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born. In Kristeva's formulation, accordingly, any text is in fact an 'intertext'-the site of an intersection of numberless other texts, and existing only through its relations to other texts.³²

Reading engages a 'text'. It is in the exercise of reading that meaning gets interpreted. However, reading is a dangerous activity because as Harold Bloom opines "We can never know 'the poem -in- itself'. All interpretation is a 'necessary misprision' and all reading is therefore misprison or misreading."³³ Different theories of reading have been propounded, some giving primacy to the reader while others privileging the text. According to Marxist tradition, our reading is based on prejudices which are linked to our position in the power relations of a society, a position that is partially known
to us. If we take the notion of Wolfgang Iser that the relation between a text and its reader(s) is a kind of self-regulatory system, we can define the text itself as an array of sign impulses (signifiers) which are received by the reader.

Reader-response critics turn from the traditional conception of a work as an achieved structure of meanings to the ongoing mental operations and responses of readers as their eyes follow a text on the page before them. In this theory, critics agree at least to some considerable degree, that the meanings of a text are the 'production' or 'creation' of the individual reader; hence there is no one 'correct' meaning for all readers either of the linguistic parts or of the artistic whole of a text.34

It is necessary to read a text again and again, but re-reading is not a simple repetition of an anterior reading. Every reading is a first reading and any meaning we construct for a text on a primary reading is incomplete and inexhaustive, awaiting a subsequent reading for its completion. This subsequent reading will again be a first reading and so on. Postmodernist characterization on the theory of reading grants the reader the possibility of escape from fixed selfhood into an existence as a series of subjectivities that hinge upon personal experience of the environment.

In the midst of different theories of reading, what is necessary in
reading is not one particular theory but an amalgamation of different theories. In the act of reading, a reader can assume different positions including the author determined position. Thus, the reader leaves the passive state of silence and enters into a kind of dialogue with the text. In the entry into discourse, the reader is entering society, for he or she breaks the monologic authorial voice and collaborates with the text to produce meaning. It is here in the 'language', which is central to the civilization and society that men and women exist. The idea is that a personal self is created in the articulation or reading of a text, its phenomenological existence. This self is rather a surface with no depth, it is that which is constituted in language.

However, in the context of a woman, the creation of a 'self' while reading a text is questionable. Much feminist literary criticism has, understandably enough, been concerned with constructing a distinctly feminist discourse of the female reader. Faced with New Criticism's privileging of the text, or with the assumption of a universal (and male) 'reader', feminist critics have sought to reveal the gendered specificity of women's 'reading and writing'. Often this works to reveal the embodied nature of texts; to disturb the neutrality of the text. Absence of women's experiences in the text leaves the woman reader nowhere. Faced with this situation, feminists have tried to develop a female tradition of writers while at the same time trying to understand the male biases that go into the literary production and consumption.
Women's lives are described as a state of being and not the stuff of art. A woman's life script is a non-story, silent space, a gap in patriarchal culture. Patriarchy preempts any self-representation on the part of woman; their 'meaning' is already assigned. A woman can only speak as a woman masquerading as a man (and repressing the mother) or into the silence of a patriarchal script (repressing the female). Thus the only speaking position for women is when phallogocentric discourse has permitted women powerful life scripts. Disturbed by the sudden realization that women had invariably been represented in stereotypical ways by a literary heritage that claimed universality, feminist critics turned to women authors for alternative images of woman. One major emphasis has been to alter the way a woman reads the literature of the past so as to make her not an acquiescent but 'the resisting reader', that is, one who resists the author's intentions and design in order, by a "revisionary re-reading" to bring to light and to counter the covert sexual biases written into a literary work. Another prominent task has been to identify recurrent and distorting 'images of women', especially in novels written by men.

Soshana Felman articulates her concern when she wonders whether even women novelists 'speak as woman or are they speaking the language of man?' Can they be said to be speaking as woman simply because they are born female? or are they 'ventriloquist dummies for the male voice'?
The situation of the woman artist under patriarchy is such that it renders it impossible for her to write in a language that she can call her own. As Gilbert and Gubar opine:

For the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and ‘herself’.

They raise questions to which they do not have the answers:

Since his is the chief voice she hears, does the Queen try to sound like the King, imitating his tone, his inflections, his phrasing, his point of view? Or does she ‘talk back’ to him in her own vocabulary, her own timbre insisting on her own viewpoint?

Gilbert and Gubar further go on to show how women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Bronte and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic. These authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. For Gilbert and Gubar, the female voice is duplicitous but nevertheless true, and truly female voice.

A significant view regarding recuperating a woman’s language has been expressed by Pierre Macherey. For Macherey the silences, gaps and contradictions of the text are more revealing of its ideological determinations than are its explicit statements. Terry Eagleton summarizes Macherey’s
argument thus:

It is in the significant silences of a text, in its gaps and absences that the presence of ideology can be most positively felt. It is these silences which the critic must make 'speak.' ...Because a text contains these gaps and silences, it is always incomplete.  

The gaps and silences display a conflict and contradiction of meanings and therefore the significance of a work lies more in the difference rather than in the unity between / among the meanings. By studying the silences and contradictions within a literary work, a critic can link the text to a specific historical context in which a whole set of different structures—ideological, economic, social, political—intersect to produce precisely those textual structures. This renders the author's personal situation and intention as one of the many conflicting strands that make up the contradictory construct we call the text.

When Barthes advocates 'death of the author' he does not necessarily deny the authors. What he claims is that a proper theory of the text does not make its reading depend on authors as unified subjectivities or the readers' given individual characteristics. Readers make unities out of texts but a text itself is 'made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation. In terms of a theory of a text, its unity emerges in readings, and can always be reinterpreted. Writing is not the destruction of every voice but the proliferation of
possibilities of hearing. Postmodernism has certainly made us aware that we cannot locate full presence anywhere, whether in the psyche, in history, in culture, or in the text. However, presence must be distinguished from what has replaced it. Though there is no one presence behind a text, there is an infinite number of presences, or there is an infinite number of presences, or traces, in a given text. One of these presences is the author, about whom we cannot know everything. But the text is not present to us outside interpretation either. There are always questions remaining about any complex text and many ‘texts’ to consider.

Uncertainty in interpreting a text brings great hope of women’s escape from male power. For a woman, her absence is the possibility that she can yet be present in her own terms, rather than on those set by males, whose domination of women is abetted by their co-option and control of the talk, of all the cultural practice that defines what is female. This is what Cixous calls being out of the phallogocentric discourse but does not mean that such a language ever exists. If we accept Foucault’s argument what is ‘true’ depends on who controls discourse, then it is apparent that man’s domination of discourse has trapped woman inside a male ‘truth’. Women in patriarchy must therefore consciously resist aping their oppressors and seek to read resistance in literature by looking for “gestures of defiance or subversion implicit in them.”

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Western Feminist criticism has not merely developed a methodology to study women's writing and women as represented in literature but has actually shaped a new discipline and in the process created, as the object of its study, a new field: women's writing. As feminism enumerates the themes and sets up the agenda for women's writing the world over, the present day concerns of Western feminists are writ large to encompass the world, and the world collapses into the West. The paraphernalia of European middle class woman's place is regarded as an adequate metaphor for all women's worlds. Other times and other places are only a feature of dispersal, not transformation or change. In their work *Women Writing in India* Vol I, Tharu and Lalita point out that Western feminism no doubt articulates its own solutions to women's problems but it did, in a way, that only address the contradictions principally as women from such social formations experienced. Other contradictions, which had their source in patriarchy as it was historically constituted by class, colonialism, or by caste, which would have shaped the subordination of women in India and determined her self-hood or subjectivity were simply not addressed. 

For an alternative feminist reading, especially here in India, we need a critical paradigm that would look at absences as much as presences, silences as much as voices. Women and the marginalized have been a concern with the Indian writers from the first part of the twentieth century. Tagore, Sarat Chandra, Chalam and several women writers themselves, reformulated the issues in different ways and women became the
most problematic and engaging theme of the century. When they wrote, the writers however were not familiar with the theories and concerns of feminism. The portrayal of women and the foregrounding of the gender questions in the first half of the twentieth century was a part of a large discourse involving one’s own experience. The preoccupation with these themes was more an exploration into the Indian social reality; its main concern being problematization of poverty, justice and exploitation. The works of U.R. Ananth Murthy, Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi too reflect these concerns. As women rarely form an integral part of the narratives, a re-reading of texts will enable us to interrogate women’s space in literature and society.

Sāmskara, Paraja and Rudali are texts written in vernacular languages and speak of women who are otherwise marginalised, women who are either low caste, tribal, dalit or prostitutes. Women in these texts represent the majority of silent women of our country whose voices have been silenced under the burden of caste, class and custom. They are silent unable to articulate the oppression that has overpowered them for centuries. Or can we subsume that ‘silence’ is an alternative language for woman—a language that betrays the man-made language? An attempt is therefore made in this chapter to locate the silences in narrative and to see what these silences implicate regarding the situation
of women in India. Can we read the ‘silences’ as a symbol of women’s domi-
nation? Or is ‘silence’ also an articulation -- an articulation of resistance?
Either through speech or silence, the women characters do register some
form of communication.

What Tillie Olsen has said in her pathbreaking first work *Silences*
(1965) is of primary importance in the context of this chapter for in the words
of Maxine Hong Kingston, “Tillie Olsen helps those of us condemned to silence-
the poor, racial minorities, women -- find our voices.”

44 Literature has unwittingly aided the conspiracy of silence, in neglecting the nature of women’s lives and services. There is wide discrepancy between the life of women as conceived by men and the life of women as lived by women. The power and the need to create, over and beyond reproduction, is native in both women and men where the gifted among women have remained mute, or have never attained full capacity. It is because of circumstances, inner or outer, which oppose the need of creation. Circumstances of woman condemn her to an inferiority. Women are traditionally trained to place other’s needs first, to feel those needs as their own; their sphere and their satisfac-
tion lies in making it possible for others to use their abilities. Few women writers have become famous “not because the capacities to create no longer exist, or the need, but because the circumstances for sustained cre-
ation have been almost impossible.”

45 As Olsen says “Unused capacities
atrophy, cease to be..." 46 She observes that almost no mothers -- as almost no part-time, part-self persons -- have created enduring literature so far. Men on the otherhand have had this inestimable advantage towards productivity. She writes:

I cannot help but notice how curiously absent both of these angels, these watchers and warders at the frontiers of the invisible, are from the actual contents of most men's books, except perhaps on the dedication page. 47

In a significant move Olsen warns that as women 'we must not speak of writers in our century...without speaking also of the invisible, the as- innately-capable: the born to the wrong circumstances -- diminished, excluded, foundred, silenced." 48 The silences that she speaks of are 'unnatural': the unnatural thwarting of what struggles to come into being, but cannot -- the silences where the lives never came to writing. " Among those, the mute inglorious Miltons: those whose working hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated, the illiterate, women. Their silence, the silence of centuries as to how 'life was, is for most of humanity." 50 In a chapter "Silences - Its Varieties", Olsen discusses at length the different types of silencers of literature - the censorship silences; political silences; silences of the marginal; absences that are a kind of silence; virulent destroyers; premature silences; foreground silences and silences where the lives never came to writing.
Tillie Olsen's observations in her work can be safely transferred in analysing the texts under discussion because it provides a framework to study the various kinds of silences. In the context of Indian social reality, a re-reading of Samskara, Paraja and Rudali from this perspective enables us to see how the patriarchal structures across caste and community operate to subordinate women in the spaces they occupy and how possibilities of resistance could be read in their silences. Silence is thus seen as creating a discourse -- a discourse of marginalization and resistance.

Positioned within patriarchal structures women internalise the belief that they are no better than extensions of men. This is the oppressive reality of woman. In other words, patriarchy wants women to believe that there is such a thing as an essence of femaleness, called femininity. So women are to conform to the patriarchal standards of femininity. A woman has to be a good mother, a good wife, a good daughter, a good sister, etc. She cannot be just 'herself'. She cannot exist independent of all those other relations. She is always defined as the 'other'. Subjectivity is deemed to her and she is looked only as an 'object'. This objectification of woman have rendered her 'voiceless'. Until and unless women abstract themselves from the definition 'woman' which is imposed upon them, women's voices will remain muted. Silence and subjectivity are relational. We speak, therefore we are.
What binds *Samskara*, *Paraja* and *Rudali* together although written in diverse times is their positioning within Indian discursive reality. Besides, these texts also deal with women who live in the margins. It is therefore interesting to see Anantha Murthy, Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi's approach in the treatment of woman as revealed in their texts, as well as independent of the authors, what do silence do to these women in general and Indian woman's reality.

In India great respect is generally given to a woman. But we need to rethink what forms the basis of this respect. Ashis Nandi in his work *Essays in Politics and culture: At the Edge of Psychology* (1980) opines that the ultimate authority in the Indian mind has always been feminine. Dwelling into past history he writes that 'though the Brahmanic tradition attempted to limit the dominance of woman in society, the pre-Aryan dominance of woman was retained in many areas of life, particularly in the symbolic system.' The Indian culture is therefore undeniably a 'matrifocal culture in which femininity is inextricably linked with prakriti or nature.' This speaks for the respect enjoyed by women. But it would again be wrong to subsume all 'women' as winning this so called respect. It is a woman's 'motherhood' that the traditional family values and respects; her role as wife and to a lesser extent as daughter are devalued and debased. Thus motherhood is manipulated by society to control a woman by forcing her to take on a maternal identity and to shape the critical public relations within the society.
This desire for progeny is a recurrent theme in many Indian texts and women across caste and class explain their existence in terms of this paradigm. Chandri in Samskara is a low caste woman, who is the mistress of the Brahmin Naranappa. Although, through her actions, she exposes the Brahmins, yet Chandri feels incomplete without being a mother:

Suddenly she regretted that she was past thirty. Ten years she’d lived with Naranappa, she still hadn’t had a child....She had got everything yet she had nothing. (Samskara,p.54)

Chandri only echoes what culture has "introjected through a long historical process of social learning, and the learning has been thorough."54 Initiating Praneshacharya into sexual pleasure Chandri savours yet hopes of being a mother:

There was also a hope in her that his touch might bear fruit in her body. And a gratefulness that she too might have earned merit. (Samskara,p.62)

The highest 'merit' for a woman in this life is believed to be attaining mother-hood and thus an Indian woman's identity centres round the figure of a mother. But even, it is not the mother of a daughter but the mother of a son who is the recipient of prestige and respect. As Ashis Nandi writes:

"For the Indian mother, the son is the major medium of self expression... The woman's self respect in the traditional system is protected not through her father or husband but through her son."55 She would go to any extent for the sake of her son. Garuda's wife Sitadevi kept fasts to reform her son:

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She'd fasted Friday nights so that her son's heart might turn good and clear... Sitadevi had offered vows to the goddess: "Give my husband peace, may his love be constant for his son. (Samskara, p.27)

A woman who cannot conceive is made to feel worthless. Bhagirathi, the invalid wife of Praneshacharya, is made to feel worthless in existence in the absence of motherhood, when she tells her husband:

Being married to me is no joy. A house needs a child. Why don't you just get married again.
(Samskara, p.1)

The fate of a woman who gives birth to a daughter is no better. The society does not respect her and her place in the family becomes insignificant. Nathuni Singh's middle wife in Rudali shares with Sanichari how inspite of her wealth, she does not claim any respect in the household just because she is the mother of a girl:

The others are given respect because they have sons. I'm the mother of a mere girl. (Rudali, p. 78)

By idealizing motherhood, women are systematically discriminated against. Motherhood thus becomes a site of domination which subordinates women and renders her incapable of expressing herself out of this patriarchal construct. As Maithrey Krishnaraj says in her essay "Motherhood : Power and Powerlessness," "Maternal responsibility is used as an alibi to exclude woman from power, authority, decision, and a participatory
role in public life.” Exalting motherhood as the sole purpose of women’s existence, women are confined to domestic tasks of mothering, feeding, nurturing and caring. Women are thus silenced under the burden of motherhood.

A very familiar stereotype that appears in the texts besides that of a mother, is the stereotype of a whore or mistress. Generally, it is the upper-caste women who are portrayed in the role of mothers and wives and the lower caste women and tribal women are invariably portrayed as prostitutes and mistresses. In *Samskara* the Brahmin women are either wives or mothers but almost all the low-caste women are prostitutes. Chandri is Naranappa’s mistress. She is never thought fit to be married although she is beautiful. Belli and Padmavati are also low-caste prostitutes within the text who have no other function but to satisfy male desire. It did not matter to Brahmins that these women were out-castes as long as their lustful appetites were fulfilled. As Shripati tells of Belli: “Belli was alright for sleeping with.” (*Samskara*, p. 41) In *Paraja* too the women who figure are objects of male gaze and desire. The Forest guard had “eyes only for the parade of bathing beauties under the waterfall.” (*Paraja*, p. 24) Jili and Bili are tribal girls who get caught in the web of economic exploitation. Jili becomes the victim of first the Forest guard, then the Supervisor and her exploitation is complete in the hands of the Sahukar, who keeps her in his house without marrying her. Jili
and Bili's story is a tale of how circumstances compel women to compromise with their bodies. In *Rudali* Mahesweta Devi mentions a whole randi-basti. Sanichari's daughter-in-law too becomes a whore. Dulan articulates the bare truth when he tells Sanichari "Do you think we always had so many whores? It's these Rajput malik-mahajans who have created so many randis." (*Rudali*, p.72)

Thus it is seen that women are more or less portrayed only in terms of their relationships to men, men in a variety of situations. Constrained and constricted by customs, traditions, rituals and social institutions, women remain silent bearing centuries of oppression.

*Literature has unwittingly aided this conspiracy of silence, neglect, as to the nature of women's lives and services. Throughout much of our literature fanciful constructs of the female, her character and psychology, have obscured the limitations suffered by actual women. Worse they have encouraged expectations and behaviour that only strengthen the real oppression. Anantha Murthy, in *Samskara*, has traversed upon a revolutionary subject. By making Chandri a pivotal character in the novel, he no doubt challenges the traditional role ascribed to woman. Through her actions Chandri poses a threat to Brahminism. As the Brahmins are locked in mire over Naranappa's rites of burial, "suddenly Chandri did something that*
stunned the Brahmins. She moved forward to stand in the front courtyard. They could not believe their eyes. Chandri loosened her four-strand gold chain, her thick bracelet, her bangles and placed them all in a heap before Praneshacharya” (Samskara, pp. 9-10) saying that all those jewellery were there to meet the expenses of the rite. Chandri's act renders the Brahmins speechless. Chandri's part in burying Naranappa with the help of a Muslim is also an act of defiance of the Brahminical norms.

Anantha Murthy's portrayal of Chandri as a revolutionary woman cannot be denied, but at the same time one has to admit that he is silent about many things within the text. He is silent about the marriage of these low-caste women. All the low-caste women remain unmarried. They are fit enough to be objects of pleasure but not fit to be wives. Besides Chandri, the others occupy the peripheral spaces. Perhaps Anantha Murthy tries to expose the situation of women like Chandri, Belli and Padmavati by showing how they only exist as prostitutes. But prostitutes and whores have always been a part of Indian myth as well as reality. In Chandri he makes an attempt to break from the fetters of tradition but at a certain stage he backs away as Chandri fades away to Kundapara.

It is not only the low-caste women who remain in the periphery but the situation of the Brahmin women is also identical. Whereas the Brahmins
engage in conversation, the wives are spatially on the periphery: their sterility is reinforced spatially. They occupy the outer fringes of the discussion. While the Brahmins sit in the inner courtyard, their wives are hidden from view. While the responsibility of women for the 'identity' of the agrahara is stressed, it is clear that the old rules no longer apply where men are concerned. Through the binary opposition between sexual 'good' wives and transgressing 'sexual' women, upper caste women's subjectivity is represented reductively. Conjugally, as Brahmin wives, they are redundant, dispensable lacking in sexual appeal. Their sterility is exemplified in Pranesh's wife, the invalid. While she is referred to as a 'good wife', in the same sentence she is also said to be a 'dry log'. The particular connection of upper-caste woman to ritual complicates the nature of her marginalization and erasure. She is in a sense the embodiment of ritual, which means that the strangle hold of ritual on the modern individual is gendered. Rituals, hence, only extenuate women's oppression by this reductive principle. Either ways, women are oppressed and shown to be subjects of their fate.

Gopinath Mohanty presents a tribal world in Paraja. The setting of the novel is at a period of transition when the new order is taking place but Mohanty shows how establishment of a new order do not necessarily suggest a change in the condition of women, or of the innocent tribals in general, as agents of control unite to double the exploitation. Mohanty exposes
how women become victims of institutions and systems created by men. Jili and Bili are sexually and economically exploited. Mohanty, a non-tribal, even when he tries to present the novel as a fight for survival, a fight against exploitation, he in no way is able to present a true picture of a tribal world. In a tribal society, a woman enjoys a comparatively better position than her non-tribal counterparts. Her sphere of activity is much more wider as she works not just in the hearth but also in the fields. She is not a domesticated woman who is confined within the four walls of the household. Surprisingly, married women do not feature in Mohanty's scheme of survival. Jili and Bili are just teenaged girls and so become easy prey of their captors. No doubt, he does give us a picture of the dormitory system prevalent among the tribals which tells to some extent the freedom that a tribal girl enjoys compared to the non-tribal girls. Mohanty fails to exploit this freedom in Paraja as he does not think it necessary to explore the complexities in the life of a tribal woman. Moreover, he overlooks the possibilities of resistance in tribal women, instead presenting them in the usual stereotype of exploited women, a site of pleasure. These are the absences that Tillie Olsen writes of: absences which are also a kind of silence.

In Samskara as it has been observed, almost all the women characters are little or not-voiced. When voiced they are only made to speak within the system that reinforce their subordinate position. Whether it is
the upper-caste Brahmin wives -- Bhagirathi, Anasuya, Sitadevi or the Brahmin widow Lakshmidevamma, or the low-caste mistresses -- Chandri, Belli, Padmavati - they remain in the periphery. Jili and Bili's condition in Paraja is also no better. Moved by hunger and poverty, the two girls are forced to prostitution -- a ready market that is always available for women's exploitation. Jili's act of moving in with the Sahukar does not register a release for her, but a sinking deeper into the abyss of silence. Bili's knowledge of her sister's step renders her helpless and quietens her. In Rudali despite many deaths in her family, Sanichari doesn't cry. "Preoccupied with the ways of keeping the stomach fed, Sanichari forgot to cry." (Rudali, p.59) The silence of these women in the midst of enormous exploitation speak of the domination of women which has continued unabated since time immemorial. Her silence shows her failure to break out of the fetters of tradition and stereotyped role. To put it in other words, can we suggest that her 'silence' is not 'her' failure, but it is representative of the cultural conditioning of women which force her to remain within the constricted definition of men and the failure perhaps to find a 'language' which would articulate women's felt experiences.

Silences could stand for absences, could be textual and could also
stand as symbols of domination. Nevertheless, women's silence in these texts could also be read as articulations. Silence of these women while on the one hand expresses their marginalization within Indian social practise, at the same time, their silences can also read as a sign of women's resistance. Chandri's silence speaks more than words in *Samskara*. She articulates resistance to patriarchal limitations not through speech but through her actions in silence. Through her actions she resists the dominant. Chandri's sacrificing her jewels to meet Naranappa's rites of burial exposes not only the hypocrisy of the Brahmins but also the greed of their Brahmin wives. Similarly, her participation in Naranappa's burial is also rejection of Brahminical order. She celebrates her sexuality by initiating the Acharya into sexual pleasures thus using her body to speak the language of celebration. Thus Chandri's silent journey through the novel could be read as a rejection of a dominant and oppressive patriarchal language and the acquisition of an alternative language of her own. Chandri thereby converts her silence into a form of resistance.

Mahasweta Devi's *Rudali* is a powerful text which subverts the stereotypes of women. Her protagonist Sanichari is a woman who betrays the male conception of a traditional Indian woman. The passive, timid, domes-
ticated mother is replaced by an individualistic, assertive, die-hard fighter for a cause. Sanichari and Bikhni are representative of women fighting against various forces of oppression. Sanichari refuses to follow the circumscribed life of domesticity in which patriarchy would have her confined. She finds an alternative source of living – that of a rudali. Sanichari who never cried or shed any tears when her own died thinks “that perhaps her tears had been reserved for the time when she would have to feed herself by selling them” (Rudali, p.72). Being a rudali is the only other alternative open to Sanichari other than slaving it out at the fields of the malik-mahajan and being a prostitute. Women like Sanichari have few choices to choose from. “Through motherhood and widowhood they’re tied to the moneylender,” (Rudali, p.74) Nothing had come easy for Sanichari and Bikhni. ‘The daily struggle for a little maize gruel’ was ‘exhausting’ and so Sanichari and Bikhni turn their energies towards crying for a living. Professional mourning for the unmourned dead was a regular business in big cities. “The world belongs to the professional, not to the amateur” (Rudali, p.74.) and so Sanichari and Bikhni also decide to become professionals as the occasion demands.

In the beginning Sanichari is hesitant, anxious and doubts her abil-
ity but once the decision is taken she eventually emerges as a confident woman who organizes the other marginalized women -- the prostitutes, into a body of rudalis and cries away the money of the mailk-mahajans. As Gambhir Singh dies, Sanichari initiates the young prostitutes into this profession saying: "All of you come. When you grow old you'll have to do this anyway, so while I'm around let me initiate you." (Rudali, p.91) By wailing for Gambhir Singh and taking their money, Sanichari tells the prostitutes that they would only be rubbing salt into the wounds of the mailk-mahajan's because "it's they who've turned them into whores, ruined them, then kicked them out." (Rudali, p.90). As Sanichari and her ilk cry hitting their heads, "the gomastha began to weep tears of sorrow. Nothing will be there! Cunning Sanichari!" (Rudali, p.90)

Sanichari's 'cry' is a metaphor of survival. At the metaphoric level, it is Sanichari's cry against the rigid forms of a society which grants no alternative space to women. Sorrow is so overwhelming that it cannot be expressed in words. The system or the perpetrators of the system have snatched away the voices of women. In the process, women are silenced and even when it is semiotically voiced as in Rudali, the muted voices of women turn out into a 'cry' -- a 'cry' of resistance or may be a discourse of loss

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rather than restoration. Voices are suppressed and silenced and when voiced become fragmented and meaningless. Silence, thus creates a discourse of marginalisation that registers resistance and interrogate the dominant.
Endnotes


2 Ibid.


5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.


11 Julia Kristeva, quoted in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. op. cit., p. 216.

12 Helene Cixous, op. cit., p. 278.

Ibid.

Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine" in Feminisms, op. cit., p. 248.

Gilbert and Gubar, quoted in Toril Moi, Sexual / Textual Politics, op. cit., p. 57.

Ibid., p. 58.

Ibid., p. 61.

Myra Jehlen, quoted in Toril Moi, op. cit., p. 80.

Ibid., pp. 80-81.

Simone de Beauvoir, quoted in Toril Moi, op. cit., pp. 91-92.

Helene Cixous, quoted in Vidhu Verma, op. cit., p. 278.

Ibid., p. 279.

Quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "French Feminism in an International Frame" in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. op. cit., p. 54.


Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. op. cit., p. 95.

Ibid., p. 94.

Ibid., p. 96.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, op. cit., pp. 52-53.
30 Ibid., p.53.
31 Ibid., p.54.
33 Ibid., p. 125.
34 Ibid., pp. 256-257.
35 Elspeth Probyn, "Materializing Locations: Images and Selves" in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, eds. op. cit., p.127.
36 Ibid., p. 129.
37 Sidonie Smith, quoted in Elspeth Probyn, op. cit. p.128.
38 Ibid., p.129.
46 Ibid., p.19.
47 Ibid., pp.34-35.
48 Ibid., p.39.
49  Ibid., p. 6.

50  Ibid., p. 10.


52  Ibid.

53  Ibid., p. 36.

54  Ibid., p. 34.

55  Ibid., pp. 36-37.