Chapter V
Conclusion

Ideas of 'selfhood' have been highly problematic and have been contested by philosophers in almost every age. The same questions that have had set their quest confront individuals as writers or readers even today. There can be no homogenizing notion of the 'self' especially in the world that we live in. Raymond Williams has rightly said that different cultures construct different selves. We can extend this argument and say that even within one culture different selves can be produced. The question is do cultures allow a woman's 'self' to emerge or is woman subsumed under the man's 'self'? Feminist theorists argue that women are denied the right to assert their self and autonomy. Delving into representative works of literature feminist theorists have observed that for centuries the male principle has governed the production of literature. According to Gilbert and Gubar women are denied the right to create their own images of the feminine and are made to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them. Elaine Showalter articulates the women's situation under patriarchy thus:

Women are estranged from their own experience and unable to perceive its shape and authenticity, in part because they do not see it mirrored and given resonance in literature...They are expected to identify with masculine experience, which is presented as the human one, and have no faith in the validity of their own perceptions and experiences, rarely seeing them confirmed in literature, or accepted in criticism. ¹

Feminism has therefore attempted to retrieve women's voice and
reconstruct a woman's 'identity' by dismantling tradition, authority and patriarchy that have consistently marginalised women and disenfranchised them. Under the burden of male parameters women suffer silently and are silenced. Feminism has attempted to deconstruct this 'silence' to reinvent women's 'self' - a 'self' freed from male definitions. The feminist strategy in this search has been to expose the patriarchal premises and prejudices in order to draw the space available for women in literature. Though the three texts taken for study have been written in different places, in different times, yet they do open up possibilities of re-reading them in the present context especially from a feminist perspective.

Although the image of the Indian woman has dominated literary imagination women have been depicted as stereotypes in traditional mainstream classical literature. During the post-classical period Indian woman was idealised as a devoted wife, paragon of virtue on the lines of Sita and Savitri. Modernism in Indian novel to some extent presented autonomous self-sufficient woman but this was limited in the portrayal of a selected few. The traditional prototypes still existed as Meenakshi Mukherjee expressed:

One might argue the classical ideals no longer obtain in the Indian context. But in the actual literary practice, numerous characters are found to adhere to classic prototypes - especially the women of fiction who persistently re-enact the suffering, the sacrificing role of Sita and Savitri.²
The novels discussed in the preceding chapters are a testimony to this fact. Women continue to be represented in their stereotypical roles as mothers, wives, mistresses and prostitutes. Both tradition and modernity have been embedded in India to patriarchal ideology. This patriarchal ideology has almost reduced women to a practical non-entity, in life as well as in literature.

The concern in this thesis has been to identify the 'self' of woman by tracing their voices in the three texts -- *Samskara*, *Paraja* and *Rudali*. These three texts in a way share a similarity of subject in that the women represented in these texts belong to the marginalised group— the low-castes, the tribals and the untouchables. However, women form only a subtext in the work of the two male writers Anantha Murthy and Gopinath Mohanty. *Samskara* is the quest of a Brahmin's self-discovery and women have only been considered incidental not central to the formation of that quest. Similarly, *Paraja* too is the story of exploitation of the tribals and women's representation has been very liminal. Only in *Rudali* we can say that women form the central part of the narrative. Women who figure in these texts are representatives of the age-old stereotypes steeped in myth, popular culture and tradition. The imposed identity on a woman silences her and she is deprived of gaining any agency. In *Samskara* and *Paraja* the stories do not revolve around the women and little space is assigned to them. In *Rudali* the
protagonist is a female and it is a story of women's empowerment. However, in this text as the other two, women do not transcend the roles that have been assigned to them. An attempt is made in Rudali to come out of the limitations and assert woman's autonomy but women are shown to lack agency.

Samskara presents the issue of women only marginally, its main theme being Brahminical orthodoxy and the Brahminical anxiety to maintain its pretended superiority. The hypocrisy within Brahminism is exposed. Brahminism operates as a patriarchal structure to subordinate women -- both brahmin and low-caste in the spaces they occupy. Whether it is the Brahmin wives or the mistresses of the Brahmins, they become victims of an oppressive structure that crushes their individuality. Chandri, who comes out as the woman protagonist within the narrative, no doubt poses a threat to Brahminism but even here the mode of resistance is her body. It is through her sexuality that she tames both Naranappa and Praneshacharya. But her place is not legitimated in the patriarchal structure. She remains a mistress and fades away. Praneshacharya kept secret his relationship with Chandri while Naranappa, the liberated Brahmin, though makes public his liaison with Chandri, does not legitimize this relationship and give Chandri the status of a wife. The Brahminic patriarchal discourse keeps women and other marginalised groups on the margins. The author is unable to break the hold of tradition to give Chandri voice and an independent identity in the novel.
No bonding is shown between the women across caste and class. Each group of women remain in the places assigned to them by tradition, having internalised the values that oppress them.

_Paraja_ is the story of exploitation of tribals but here too the main protagonist is the tribal patriarch Sukru Jani. Women are very liminally represented. Jili and Bili are representative of tribal girls who in their fight for survival have to compromise with their bodies. Like _Samskara_, here too body becomes the mode of exchange. For low-caste and tribal women, any negotiation with the upper-caste is the body. Body invariably becomes the site of exploitation. Women are looked upon as objects of pleasure equating them with commodities. Women bonding is shown in the relationship of Jili and Bili as they suffer silently unable to articulate their victimisation. The silences of Jili and Bili are total both under the tribal and non-tribal situation as they lack agency. _Paraja_ however is conspicuous by the absence of non-tribal women characters. We do not know what happens to women in Sahukar's caste/class.

_Samskara_ and _Paraja_ as well as _Rudali_ represent the reality of women in India. However, there is bound to be a difference in descriptions, the images and comparisons, the perspectives and perceptions, when men and women narrate the same reality. It is not merely a question of two different kinds of articulations or voices but more often it is the male gaze which
frames the writer. For that matter even a woman can write about women from a male gaze. *Rudali*, however, is a story with a difference as compared to the other two texts. In Sanichari, Mahasweta Devi has attempted to create a woman, breaking the stereotypes of myth and tradition. Alone and independent Sanichari, a low-caste woman asserts herself within the limited space ascribed to her. What comes out strongly in the text is also the bonding between Sanichari and Bikhni, a bonding based on their humaneness. However, we do not see the same bonding between Sanichari and her daughter-in-law Parbatia. Bonding between them is disrupted as Parbatia takes to prostitution. Sanichari considers the prostitutes outcastes initially and it takes her a while before she realises that prostitutes are also women like them exploited by the malik-mahajans. Thereafter Sanichari is able to rope in the prostitutes in the profession of rudali - beckoning them to join as it would be a good way to take revenge against their exploiters. ‘Cry’ is used as a subaltern tool of revenge. Sanichari is empowered but at the same time she empowers others as well. The women in *Rudali* give voice to their anguish through their cry - a cry of resistance.

In all the three novels, women are victims of institutions which control and subordinate them. The difference is in the approach of each writer. Each writer has dealt with in the narrative of prostitution, and how low-caste and tribal women are portrayed as prostitutes. This system exposes the hypocrisy inherent in the patriarchal Brahminic attitude to marriage
and women. While female purity and monogamy are regarded as essential features of a patriarchal family, male infidelity is excusable.

Chandri in Samskara no doubt has a story to tell, but she is not given any voice. She speaks through her body. The sexual encounter between Praneshacharya and Chandri takes place outside the agrahara in the silence of the forest, showing that a union between a low-caste and Brahmin can take place only in silence. Thus Chandri remains muted inspite of the fact that she is seen as a threat to Brahminism. In Rudali though Sanichari is depicted as an independent and autonomous woman, yet her autonomy is dependent on the patriarchal structure, because rudalis like the prostitutes are also the creations of the malik-mahajans.

In Samskara and Paraja, women negotiate with another culture—the dominant culture represented by Brahminism. The women, tribals and low-caste are representative of subordinate cultures. Within the narrative they provide an alternative discourse but under the burden of caste and class their voices remain fractured and muted. Voices are heard only at a rudimentary level. The speeches ascribed to Chandri, Jili and Bili are functional and amount to mutation. In Sanchari semiotically an attempt is made to express women's voice. She is a self-made woman and in the course of the story discovers her autonomy. Her 'cry' over death is a symbolically inarticulated expression of womanhood in India cutting across caste/class.
At one level 'cry' is just a hired crying. It gives a kind of satisfaction to those who have hired the criers to socially exhibit the sense of loss. It acts as a source of prestige for those who hire. The criers need not necessarily feel emotionally disturbed as they are undertaking social cry as a skill to dramatise a mourning they are not part of. There is also no sentimental attachment to this cry as 'cry' is here just a commodity or a source of earning one's livelihood.

At the metaphoric level however, the 'cry' symbolizes untold pain and suffering. Written in the 'cry', it is women's anguish at her lot. Whereas she cannot cry at the death of her loved ones, ironically, she has to draw those tears for her livelihood. The 'cry' also interrogates the brahminical and higher caste practices that commodify a woman's emotions. Under patriarchy voices are suppressed and silenced and in order for the voice to be articulated it has to be hired and therefore ends in a 'cry' – a fragmented and meaningless babble but nevertheless a woman's voice.
Endnotes
