CHAPTER 3

IN SEARCH OF ANSWERS

Indian Women's Voices
A. **The Inner Voice:** – Indian Women Poets and Raconteurs 
down the ages.

Women have traditionally been story tellers in the Indian sub-
continent, the chief upholders of and contributors to a powerful oral 
tradition which embraces myths, legends, fables, folklore and songs both 
devotional and moral, stretching back millennia into the hoary past. The 
region’s ancient literature began by gathering and transcribing much of 
the accumulated, though anonymous, wisdom of oral literature.

While the earliest Sanskrit literature dates back to the Vedas, or 
sacred hymns, of 1500 BC, the most influential ancient texts are the 
Hindu epic poems - the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Compendia of 
myths, beliefs and folklore, they demonstrate Hindu concepts such as 
worship, religious duty, and the hierarchical system of caste, while 
creating alongside their respective mythical heroes - Krishna, Rama - 
archetypal stereotypes of heroines who embodied putative ideas of 
motherhood, or wife-hood - Sita, Savitri. These ideas of womanhood 
were reinforced by the Code of Manu (circa A.D. 1-200), which defined 
women, not as individuals with independent destinies, but solely in terms 
of their roles as daughters, sisters, wives and mothers. The epics, spread 
through local versions, and together with the animal fables of the 
Panchatantra, they remain a pervasive and rich source for modern tales, 
not least for feminist writers who challenge and subvert their models.¹
With the eight century Tamil poet Karrai kal Ammaiyar, begins a long line of women poet-saints in the medieval bhakti movements. The word ‘bhakti’ means ‘devotion’, and these powerful religious upheavals, which mocked pedantry, rejected ascetic withdrawal, and emphasized the intense, mystic experience of personal devotion, swept first the south of India, then the north, in the medieval period and gave rise to an oral tradition rich in vernacular idioms. Partly as a reaction against the Sanskritic, lifeless rituals of Vedic Hinduism, ‘bhakti’ aimed to inspire people to worship a personal god without an intermediary. “Sanskrit is the stagnant water of the Lord’s private well, Kabir sang, whereas the spoken language is the rippling water of the running stream.” The devotees set their poetry in familiar contexts and found their imagery in the everyday lives of working people; as a result, they drew their symbolism primarily from non-vedic sources and their verses cultivated a rough hewn directness.

There were many women among the bhakti or saint-poets, who frequently used sexual love and longing as a metaphor for divine love and spiritual yearning, as was the medieval convention; they are now being ‘rediscovered’ as precursors of female rebellion and liberation.

Century after century, the growth of the Bhakti movement lead to the break of the barriers of caste and sex. The women poets did not have to seek the institutionalized space religion provided, to express themselves, and women’s poetry moved from the court to the temple to
the open spaces of the field, the workplace, and the common woman’s hearth.

Scholars continued to speculate about the origin, nature and the importance of the movement. The most commonly proffered theory, and the one the feminist historian Neera Desai also proposes, is that the Bhakti movement was a response from medieval Hindu society to the threat posed by the growing political power as well as the monotheistic and egalitarian ideas of the Muslim invaders. “Hindu society, which had gradually become more and more rigid, was forced to respond, these historians argue, to demands of equality from the lower castes, who might otherwise have converted to Islam.” I.H. Quereshi, on the other hand regards the movement as “a characteristically subtle attempt by Hindu society to lure Muslims into its field.” The more conciliatory historian Tarachand opines that “the movement represents a creative synthesis of the great religious traditions.”

As Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha argue, “the difficulty with these theories is that each of them plucks these varied, complex and energetic movements out their social contexts, and recasts them as an episode in another drama - one that stages the struggle of two monolithically imaged, dominant religions.”

Yet, most commentators agree that the bhakti movements did not have any explicit political focus, barring an increasing devotion to God. Given the impressive body of women’s writing that has come down from
the bhakti movements, it is tempting to think of the period as one in which patriarchal control was radically questioned and the lives of ordinary women changed. But there is little evidence that this might have been so. By the early sixteenth century, the movements had been pushed into cults structured around Vedic Gods, lost their critical edge and were reabsorbed into the very hierarchical and ritual centered system they had initially so successfully opposed.

B. CENTRE CANNOT HOLD - British colonisation, and the rise of nationalism.

Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the new sea route to India was followed by establishment of a number of trading settlements by the Portuguese in India. Within a short period, the Portuguese had a monopoly of trade with the East. They captured Goa in 1510 and acquired territories in other parts of Asia. After about a century however, two other maritime countries of Europe - Holland and England - entered the scene and ousted the Portuguese who were left only their possessions of Goa, Daman and Diu in India. Then followed a fierce rivalry between the East India Company of England formed in 1600 and the United East Indian Company of Holland, formed in 1602. The two companies established their trading posts, called factories, in India and struggled for supremacy there and in other parts of South-East Asia. The struggle ended in the latter half of seventeenth century when the English succeeded in entrenching themselves in India, and the Dutch in Indonesia.
The disintegration of the Mughal empire and the failure of any other Indian state to emerge as an all-India power in its place made it possible for the French and the English companies to interfere in the political affairs of India. The British conquest of India began with the occupation of Bengal. After the Carnatic wars, the English were confident that through political intrigues and with the help of a small trained army, they could not only destroy their French rivals but also establish their supremacy over Indian rulers. In the decisive Battle of Buxar in 1764 the Indian confederacy of Mir Quasim, Shuja-ud-Daulah and Shah Alam II was completely routed and the British were the masters of Bengal, later proceeding with further conquests of India.

Within a decade after the English East India Company had laid the foundations of the British Empire in India, a new development of worldwide significance began. The Industrial Revolution, which led to a tremendous increase in the production of goods also created a new world economic system. The industrialized countries required markets for their products and sources of raw materials. These they found in their colonies, and imperialism arose in the industrialized countries to subordinate the economies of other countries to their needs. By the later years of the nineteenth century the imperialist countries had succeeded, through war, manipulation and deception in establishing their domination over almost all the countries of Asia, Africa, Caribbean and South America.
The administrative system established by the British rulers in India, and the policies pursued by them were designed to expand and consolidate their hold over the country and to economically exploit her. The British rule resulted in the drain of Indian wealth to Britain, the destruction of the old agrarian system, the impoverishment of the peasantry, the ruination of Indian craftsmen and the transformation of India into a market for British goods, and a supplier of raw materials. India was thus reduced to the position of a backward agricultural appendage to the industrial economy of Britain.

The greatest - and the most widespread - armed uprising which shook the foundations of British rule in India, took place in 1857. The accumulating hatred against British rule, which had resulted in numerous, though localized, outbreaks burst forth in mighty rebellion. Faced with the prospect of the extinction of their power in India, the British rulers poured in immense resources in arms and men to suppress the uprising and conquer afresh, large parts of Northern and Central India. Between 1857 and 1900, about thirty million Indians perished in famines as a result of Britain’s repressive policies.

While armed revolts against colonial exploitation continued, some sections of Indians became aware of the backwardness of Indian society and the need for reform. This led to the emergence of a movement of social and cultural awakening. The leaders of the movement like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayananda Saraswati and others, were inspired by the ideas of rationalism and humanism. They
laid great stress on science and education for the regeneration of Indian society. They carried on a campaign against obscurantism and inhuman customs and institutions, like the oppression of women, sati and child marriage.

Movements for women’s emancipation and against caste rigidity and religious orthodoxy began to take roots in the middle of the nineteenth century in Western and Southern India. In 1849, Paramhansa Mandali, an organisation founded in Bombay, promoted widow re-marriage and education among women and ‘lower castes’. Two great champions who worked for the liberation of women were L.G.H. Deshmukh and Jotiba Phule. The question of social reform became increasingly linked with the demand for political reform. Most of the social reformers became active in the emerging all-India political movement, and the movement of cultural and social awakening ultimately became an integral part of the struggle for freedom.

From the early decades of the 19th century, modern political and national consciousness and awareness of India’s degraded condition had been growing in the country. This became evident in the formation of political associations, which though provincial in character and dominated by wealthy merchants and landlords, raised demands for political and civil rights and reduction of taxes, and protested against torture and racial discrimination. They exerted pressure on the authorities through petitions and by mobilizing political opinion in Britain.
Another significant development was the growth of the Indian press. By the end of the 19th century about 500 Indian newspapers and journals in English and Indian languages were being published in different parts of the country. Many of them were started by nationalists and by other radical elements. The press became a major vehicle for expressing India’s national aspirations. By voicing Indian grievances, attacking anti-Indian policies and acts of the government, and asserting Indian political and economic interests, it played a vital role in India’s national and political awakening. It is interesting to note that women played an equally important role in the struggle for freedom and the establishment of underground printing-presses as is evident in a story titled "Grandmother’s Letters" by Meena Alexander. In a series of cameo-like descriptions, the letters talk of imprisonment, resistance to British atrocities, the salt satyagraha and finally, the Quit India movement launched by Mahatma Gandhi. This acclaimed story is a closely researched work on the National movement, which acknowledges the involvement of women in the struggle for independence.
C. **Placid Waters, Deep Currents** – The birth of the women’s movement and the growth of women’s writing.

The women’s movement was from the outset linked to the anti-colonial struggle against British rule. Demands for political reforms embraced calls for women’s education and emancipation. The Freedom Movement which culminated in Indian independence in 1947 and the creation of Pakistan as a separate Muslim State, gathered pace in the 1920s and 1930s under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. His strategy of satyagraha or non-violent resistance explicitly called on both men and women of all social classes. Active participation in the freedom struggle helped bring women out of their traditional seclusion, eroding the distinction between the ‘male’ public and ‘female’ domestic domains. Nationalism also acted as a spur to literature, although even in the late 18th century and early 19th century Indians were already writing in English. Toru Dutt, a precocious and gifted Bengali woman who died at the age of twenty-one wrote in both English and French, rendering Hindu myths and tales into English published in 1882 as *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan*.

The tone of most women’s fiction of the time was didactic and reformist, much of it thinly-veiled autobiography criticizing repressive practices against women. Similarly, the early 20th century stories of Cornelia Sorabji told of individual women’s struggles against repressive orthodoxy at a time when society was changing rapidly, and women’s traditional status was being questioned.
Fiction was also developing in regional languages, notably in Bengali and Urdu, and like their Indo-Anglian counterparts, women writer’s intention was also chiefly didactic and ameliorative.

Sarojini Naidu, one of the most celebrated Gandhian leaders, and a pioneer of the women’s movement, is also known for her romantic verse in English. Her collection *The Sceptred Flute* published in 1928, won acclaim. The 1930s were a period of literary progressivism, marked by moves to enlist literature in the cause of social revolution. The Progressive Writers’ Association was formed by the Urdu and Hindi writer Premchand in 1936, and its leftist manifesto argued against obscurantism in religion and tradition, identifying the repression of women as an obstacle to progress, while its writers tended towards realism and social comment in their work.

As has been seen, the development of women’s writing can be linked with the development of the women’s movement in India and an awareness of this is essential in order to appreciate the scope and genius of women’s writing in this period.

As one reads the output by women of that period, one finds

"...all the grand abstractions of the times, - Empire, Human Nature, Ethical Responsibility, Tradition, Nationalism, Indianness, Masculinity, each with
important stakes in the woman question - imaged in the unfamiliar mirror of these changing subjectivities. For gender, as we shall see, was far from being marginal to the new world. It has a major role to play in the structuring of a whole range of social institutions and practices. Neither the authorial selves, nor the readers they address, can, therefore, be thought of in an a historic mode or as primordially female. Their selfhood or subjectivity cannot be separated from the specific historical and political conjunctures that constituted their worlds."

Clearly, patriarchies are formed through historical processes, and are structured by other dominant ideologies - of colonialism, of class and of caste, which they in turn structure.

Euro-American feminist theory has tended to concentrate its efforts principally on exposing the patriarchal urgencies that underwrite representations of women and shape the conceptual and methodological apparatus of a discipline. Though they admit the need to take race and class and occasionally even imperialism into account, these theories usually treat patriarchy as an isolatable system responsible for the subordination of women, to which, in the interests of a more complete analysis of the workings of power in a particular society, oppressions of race and class might be added. Even as an initial consciousness-raising gesture, such an approach seems inadequate. Reading the texts then as
earlier 'less advanced' realisations of contemporary sensibilities would be to lose out on the rich drama that is staged in these texts, not only in their overt themes but also in the fine detail of their form.

These writers contested the structures that were shaping their worlds: they tactically re-deployed dominant discourses, held onto older strains and recharged them with new meanings and even introduced new issues, new emphases, new orientations. And in doing so, they left their marks on the literature of the sub-continent. What emerges from the writings, then, is a subtle and closely textured sense of the struggles and counter struggles through which women’s subjectives took shape. Among the radical women in the group were the highly accomplished and innovative fiction writers Ismat Chughtai and Attia Hosain. Both were Muslims writing out of a rich Urdu storytelling tradition, their stories depicting the restrictions on women in a male-dominated society - whether at its apex of privilege, as in their own class, or among the servant class and peasantry. They also articulated the bonds between Hindus and Muslims, ruptured by the partition in 1947.

Ismat Chughtai, one of Urdu’s boldest and most outspoken writers, cuts to the core of the female psyche in her novel The Crooked Line, exposing it layer by layer in her searing, candid style as no other writer of the Indian subcontinent, male or female, has done before or since. She leaves out very little. Relationships of women with each other within the sphere of the extended family, the dynamics of a nascent female identity as it reveals itself in relationships between young girls grappling with
sexual urges in an environment dominated by a female presence, relationships between women and men, the connection between women and their social and political milieu, there is hardly any aspect of female experience that Chughtai does not draw upon in the *The Crooked Line*.

The narrative draws heavily on Chughtai’s own experiences; she was the youngest of six brothers and four sisters. Since her sisters got married when she was very young, the better part of her childhood was spent in the company of her brothers, a factor she has admitted contributed greatly to the frankness in her nature and subsequently her writing. As she describes it: “We are all frank, my father, my brothers... my father was very progressive and broad-minded. He believed in education and gave me equal chances with my brothers.... I never had the feeling I should be shy and nervous. Because of that upbringing, I’m this way.”

It is important to note that the subject of women’s lives had often been taken up by Indian writers before Ismat Chughtai appeared on the scene; however it was Chughtai who, fearlessly and without reserve, initiated the practice of looking at women’s lives from a psychological standpoint. The story-line in the *The Crooked Line* revolves around the experiences of Shaman, beginning with her birth as the tenth and youngest child in a middle class Muslim family, where traditional mores and cultural constraints maintain an oppressive hold on the lives and behaviour of all its members. But the narrative functions only as a vehicle whereby Chughtai exposes the social and cultural conflicts and
the psycho-sexual determinants that govern the development of female consciousness.

This brings to mind the interesting parallels that one can see between ‘The First Phase’ in *The Crooked Line* and the section titled ‘The Formative Years: Childhood’, in the *Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir’s pioneering work on female sexuality which appeared in 1949, four years after Chughtai’s novel. As a matter of fact, there are certain portions in Chughtai’s novel that seem to be fictionlised prefigurations of Beauvoir’s description and analysis of childhood playacting and fantasy. In both works, feminine experience is explored from childhood through puberty and adolescence to womanhood, these being the stages in the development of a sense of self that finally results in an acceptance of sexual impulses and subsequently leads to the awareness of a sexual identity.

In the early chapters, the baby Shaman forms a strong attachment to her wet-nurse Unna; she fondles and caresses Unna and later, after Unna is wrenched away from her, she develops a dependence on her older sister Manjhu and feels intense jealousy when she has to share her with another child, in much the same way that Beauvoir sees that the girl “...kisses, handles, and caresses... in an aggressive way ... feels the same jealousy ... in similar behaviour patterns: rage, sulkiness ... and they resort to the same coquettish tricks to gain ... love....”\(^1\) While playing with her doll, Shaman pretends to be the mother and, like Beauvoir’s girl, takes to “... dressing her up as she dreams of being coddled and dressed up

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herself... [and] by means of compliments, and scoldings, through images and words, she learns the meaning of the terms pretty and homely....”¹²

With unselfconscious ease and never losing her grip on the narrative technique, Chughtai actually, reveals, bit by bit, the process that determines a woman’s role in society, thereby bringing credence to Beauvoir’s claim that a woman “is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”¹³

One sees, in the early chapters of *The Crooked Line*, how women un-empowered in a man’s world and unable to govern their own destinies, develop a flawed and second-class mode of empowerment within the confines of their limitations and begin to oppress other women; we see clearly how some women, quite unselfconsciously, often naively, participate in the perpetuation of the tradition of oppression, how they can cruelly cut down another female just as society cruelly cuts them down. This is an under current which runs throughout the novel, pushing to new limits the areas of women’s experiences, that could be publicly expressed.

One example is Shaman’s oldest sister Bari Apa, who, widowed a few years after her marriage and having returned to her parents house with two young children, has relinquished the joys of living even though she is still young, in keeping with the demands of convention.

“Her parents’ honour held safely within her grasp, Bari Apa was continuing to do her family a favour. But the act of stifling her own desires was imbuing her with
greater power to dominate. She had annihilated her own femininity for the sake of her father's honour...." (CL p.35)

Frustrated sexually and emotionally, lacking proper status in society, weakened in her traditional role as wife and mother, she now seeks a scapegoat and finds it in the person of her youngest sister Shaman who, unlike her, seems to have no regard for any kind of convention, and whom Bari Apa hated ever since the day she was born:

"Another addition after nine children, why, it was as if the hands on the clock had moved to ten. Orders were to heat water for the baby sister's bath, and, shedding tears that were steamier than boiling water, and cursing at the same time, Bari Apa put water on the stove to boil. As if to mock her, some of the scalding water spilled over from the pot and seared her hand. 'May god curse this baby sister!' Why won't Amma's womb close up now?" (CL.p.1)

Taking us through some of the most brilliantly written pieces about childhood fixations and fantasies, Chughtai focuses on Shaman's emotional deprivation in a house filled with siblings, nannies, servants and a mother and father. These feelings, induced by her mother's aloofness and later heightened by her traumatic separation, first from her wet-nurse Unna and then her older sister Manjhu, and the rejection she
experiences as the hands of her oldest sister Bari Apa, convinces her that she is fated to remain unloved.

Shaman’s rebellion against all that is considered proper and nice further complicates the situation. As a matter of fact, her birth is ‘ill-timed’, with her early arrival she surprises and disappoints her mother whose ‘long-standing desire to send for the English midwife came to naught.’ And the ‘howl’ with which she makes her appearance puts fear into the hearts of her older sisters and others who happen to be around, and marks the first sign of mutinous behaviour. Bari Apa finds it easy to make Shaman the target of her own discontentment and sense of defeat in the face of unrelenting social standards. She badgers and torments her young sister, attempting at every step to draw comparisons between Shaman’s ineptness and her own daughter Noori’s superiority, continuing with Shaman’s belittlement in mean and nasty ways which Noori promptly and maliciously mimics: “‘She is dirty, a sweepers’s child....’ ‘Nani bought her for two paisas’ she lisped, and Bari Apa tweaked her cheek affectionately.” (CLpp.19-20)

Shaman begins to hate Bari Apa and totally unsympathetic to her ‘stifling of her own desires’, she begins to think of her as a snake, and Noori ‘the offspring of a snake’. Bari Apa had been treated badly by her mother-in-law, who, when her son was living, used every opportunity to make her daughter-in-law as unhappy as she could, and Bari Apa in turn, in a sort of perverse and vicarious pleasure made Shaman the scapegoat
on whom to heap abuses, and so the cycle of oppression fed on itself among all the females in this household.

In her effort to seek and define connections between culture and female experience, especially in the middle-class Muslim societies she often writes about, Chughtai incises and dissects custom and ritual with a keenly discerning eye. As young girls playing wedding games with their dolls, Shaman and Noori happen to be spectators at a wedding in the neighborhood in which they come face to face with rituals and customs in an environment dominated by women. The only male present in this instance is the bridegroom. The shy bride is covered in veils, and the groom, reticent and bashful,

“...happily licks kheer from her palm while the women tittered merrily at every lively ceremony imbued with romantic innuendo. Shaman too found herself in the grip of a strange longing, while Noori insisted that they go to the storage room and play the wedding game right away. And that was not all. After the ceremonies were over, the women began teasing the bridegroom with such gusto, one would think the bridegroom was a sugary delicacy being offered to them for tasting.”

(CL.p.43)

Every ritual and every custom is decoded by Chughtai in a wonderfully clever and seemingly artless manner, to reveal its psycho-
social content. In another powerful scene that dramatically illustrates the rites of passage, Shaman and Noori, quite unselfconsciously and altogether by accident, wander into the realm of gender awareness. The rag doll on which the girls have been practicing wedding rituals is threadbare and worn. At their request Bari Apa cuts out a nose from a cotton swatch to put on its face, makes fingers from a length of cord and attaches them to the doll’s arm stumps and further embellishes the doll by adding a long braid intertwined with a colourful ribbon. But something is missing. In the course of a game later, the two girls secretly stuff the doll’s vest with two tiny cotton balls and they

“...felt such shame, they couldn’t even look at her. Draped in a firmly crepe dupatta, the doll with the cloth nose and the string fingers now looked like a woman alive and real. God forgive them! They were not interested in anything else and all day long they played wedding games with her. But one day ...Bari Apa stumbled upon the dolls and their secret was exposed. Such a beating they received ....”(CL.p.43)

The breasts turn the doll into a real woman, but Bari Apa tears out the breasts and the vest and, in a gesture that graphically sums up the repression endured by young girls, stitches up the doll’s shirt at the waist. But a lesson had been learnt. From that day on, they lost interest in the doll. To them it now looked like a bundle of rags. It is not at all
surprising that these lines come at the end of that phase of Shaman’s life that marks her childhood.

The age had just discovered realism, Freud, and the individual. Thus Shaman duly undertakes fashionable middle-class learning. Chughtai focuses mainly on the personality of this female individual and her world, tracing Shaman’s inner development and social existence in exuberant detail, from childhood to middle age and maturity, drawing on the people the author knew personally as well as on some autobiographical material.

It is relevant to note that women writers in general, and the women writers who contribute to the research substance of this dissertation in particular, irrespective of the country of their origin-Africa, West Indies, India - do draw strongly upon autobiographical elements in their narratives.

Moving along in a narrative pattern somewhat akin to a Jane Eyre format, a novel which Shaman confesses affects her the most, the action shifts from Shaman’s home to the school hostel where, like Jane, Shaman experiences deep friendships and school-girl crushes for the first time. Chughtai’s account of Shaman’s life in school, like Jamaica Kincaid’s account of Annie John, is a thorough, extremely frank and often blunt exploration of the different levels of friendship that exist between the girls; Rasul Fatima’s endless and pitiful fawning and her secretive, nightly physical advances repeal and sicken Shaman, but only a short
time later Shaman herself experiences similar feelings for the beautiful Najma only to be rebuffed because Najma and Saadat, who happens to be Shaman’s roommate, are already bound in a jealously guarded relationship. Although bewildering and unfathomable, the strong desires that govern these relationships cannot be disregarded either by the characters in the novel or by the reader. However, one must remember that Chughtai was not out to shock or titillate; she undertakes an intricate exposition of certain aspects of female sexual experience as an essential part of her narrative.

Shaman in college comes face to face with feelings, both sexual and emotional in nature, that determine her new relationships with males in ways she had never imagined before. Heightened this time by a new sexual awareness, she is swept up by a maelstrom of deep and stirring emotions she cannot fully understand or accept. Unlike Alma, Shaman’s rebellious, daring friend who finds herself embroiled in a relationship she later regrets deeply, Shaman refuses to succumb to her strong, passionate feelings.

In a society where women are not rewarded for craving independence, both Alma and Shaman are tragically doomed, and worse still, Shaman cannot ever feel loved. But, although her emotional machinery is rusty, making it nearly impossible for her to sustain a loving, physical relationship with a man, at college she does succeed in emerging from the shell of self-deprecation as she becomes aware of the
hidden embers of rebellion and self-reliance and is herself ironically dazzled by the radiance of this new Shamshad.

There is much symbolism in Shaman’s actions from early on; as a child, “She would scoop up some sand in her fist and hold it lovingly against her stomach. She wished she could take all of the world’s mud and collect it under her tongue, mix it with spittle and then let the viscous curds glide down her throat.” (CL.p.8) The rest of the paragraph elaborates on desire, frenzy and its subsiding. It is symbolic that Shaman’s relationships and attachments formed with women and men go about the same way. By the time she meets and marries Ronnie Taylor, an Irish army captain who is a friend of Alma’s, the passionate side of her nature has been corroded by years of denial and disappointment. She has begun to feel she is a rock on which nothing will take root. In a moment of supreme self-possession at the end, when she has found herself in the “well-lit... isolation of her quarters,” (CL.p.369) following the break-up of her relationship with her white husband Ronnie, the lonely happiness of her state is quite ambiguous, yet, the arrival at this point of self-realisation is important.

Set against the turbulent times of India’s struggle for independence from the British Raj, the romance between Ronnie and Shaman assumes larger meanings, not only for them but also for the reader: breaking with tradition once more but lacking meaningful direction, Shaman finds herself struggling to stabilise a pitching boat that has been cast on uneven waters. She and Ronnie fight constantly. Their inability to come to terms
with the differences in the colour of their skins eventually shatters whatever hope there might have been for the relationship to develop and mature. As if foreshadowing Nirad C. Chaudhuri and V.S. Naipaul, Alma, Shaman’s friend says, “This darkness exists in our blood.... This blood, this Hindustani blood, has turned black.(CL.p.193)

Like the British and their colonised subjects, who can no longer see eye to eye on anything and must end their relationship, Shaman and Ronnie too struggle to be free of each other. Analogous to the political tussle plaguing India, their struggle also suffers from doubts, confusion and despair and, like India, Shaman must grapple with the pain of rebirth and impending independence. She finally does achieve peace and independence, but, much like her nation in the throes of labour, not without a cost:

“Why was fate so hostile to every aspect of her life? Bitterness arose and then subsided, but every twist and jab left a mark. Actually they were both tired of the strain; love had become a cheap emotion, they became wary of each other’s presence... and these minor skirmishes continued to intensify the hatred that had become rooted in their consciousness....”(CL.p.334)
Stylistically, *The Crooked Line* provides a sampling of the many qualities that characterise Chughtai’s short stories\(^\text{14}\): an energetic and robust diction laced with unique examples of the speech patterns used specifically by the ladies of the house ‘Begumati Zuban’ in Urdu.

Picturesque vibrant imagery, a fast-paced narrative, plausible lifelike characters, sharp piercing wit, an unselfconscious cynicism and an uncommon courage to speak one’s mind regardless of the consequences\(^\text{15}\) are all the hallmarks of Chughtai’s revolutionary style.

In *The Crooked Line*, Shaman’s character is made to unfold in the home - women’s particular precinct, the larger social world, and even the political spaces; living among Muslims, Hindus and Christians, and between Indians and the British, or those midway, Chughtai creates numerous interpersonal scenarios for her protagonist so as to resolve the intellectual and emotional contradictions of her character, who lives in and exposes the hidebound mores of an effete society.

The title of the book is meant to evoke a psycho-biological innuendo:

“Her body drifted into repose, but her mind continued to sob apprehensively. She looked behind her and saw in the distance a road that wound about like an undulating cobra pursuing her. She wanted to return, to
wipe out this frightful mark and in its place draw a new line, a neat and clean line. But these curves had become too firm, like a steel wire. Her eyes closed, she began running on these *crooked lines*. (italics mine)" (CL. p. 292)

Chughtai’s narrative is dramatic and rapid. The dialogues have both a colloquial richness and piquancy. The narrator’s language is not much differentiated from the character’s, because the ‘women’s world’ is not seen as unrelated to the other spheres – the colonial politics of India, race relations, folk fallacies, and social divides made the worse for political folly and civilizational inadequacy.

In the ultimate analysis, however, Ismat Chughtai was her own ‘heroines’, she was Shaman, she was a ‘crooked line’ herself, someone who was, in the words of Beauvoir, ‘taking charge of her own existence’, a rebel who refused to yield to society’s stereotypes about women, but who never wished to be anyone but a woman.

D. **THE REFRACTING PRISM - Deshpande’s quest for the light within**

With such a rich tradition of women’s writing, it was only natural for women in post-colonial India to distill the wisdom and creativity of the past, and, refract like a prism, the brilliant hues of women’s creative writing.
The first wave of women's writing came to an end with Independence, a second wave being clearly seen in the seventies and eighties. Indo-Anglian literature draws on regional literary tradition, as well as regional languages and literatures which cross-fertilize it, and there is now a salutary tendency to view it alongside translations from the regional languages, rather than treating Indo-Anglian writing as an isolated category.

While their subjects are infinitely varied, many Indo-Anglian writers return to a theme inherited from the English writer E.M. Forster's paradigmatic novel, *A Passage to India*: that of a conflict between East and West, or the tensions within English-educated, middle-class Indian families, torn between tradition and Western ideas. History often provides the setting, as in the words of Adil Jussawalla: "Suddenness is history's trapdoor, through which we fall- armchair critics along with our armchairs to certain oblivion- unless there is someone who doesn't flinch from seeing what happened and sets it down."16

Thus, no Indian writer can avoid taking a moral stand on the many social evils in his or her country, especially when, in view of the obvious poverty and distress, it is a social privilege to be able to write. Many of the younger women writers are part of this activist ambience. For example, Viswapriya Iyengar writers, "It requires infinite reservoirs of humanity not to be divided on the battlefront from those who suffer, not to let the poignant and violent moments of history be immobilized through the distinction of the chronicler from the victim."17
This political and social truth is intensified for women, whose efforts to make their own history inevitably appear to be radical acts of rebellion, as in the words of Karl Marx, ‘we make our own history, but not in the circumstances of our own making.’ A woman writer who therefore wants to encapsulate the excesses of this travesty, which is a part of the historical process, has to create a complex interplay between her fiction and the events of the real world. The timeframe of the seventies was a decade that witnessed the birth of a global feminist consciousness. The feminist movement in India was not as strident or vociferous as it had been in the west, because the Indian woman has had to free herself from a more subtle, if not invidious form of subjugation. Here her imagination as a writer, would have to weave a tale that would transcend the mundane and transform the real into the magical. Writers have been fascinated by myths, their artistic expressions often being shaped by them. Thus, literature remains a fertile ground for a writer to subvert a myth and adapt it to her creative fancy.

Myths being timeless and immortal remain inviolable and traverse a wide arena of human activity; their enigmatic nature evokes curiosity and simultaneously nurtures creativity. Indian women writers have also utilised the myth for a creative purpose. They use the male-centered fictions, and create overtly feminist texts which are fundamentally subversive because they install the marginalised woman at the centre of the literary discourse, becoming at once the subject and the creator.
Although the act of writing was deemed to be the exclusive preserve of male writers, the literary landscape was thought to be essentially male in nature, and the male writer was regarded as an Adamic creator, Indian women writers, by their act of writing have subverted the Adamic myth by centralizing the woman in their plots. They have had to encounter the inhospitable terrain of male-created myths, which have always aimed at marginalisation of the woman who lies, or is forcibly placed outside the arena of the myth.

Green and Kahn opine that traditional literary works exhibit a “mythologized and hierarchized” difference between the two sexes, that tilts in favour of the male. Women, in these parochial patriarchal texts feel “silenced, erased, confined and colonized”, on the margins of power, shadowed in traditional representation. An attempt to re-write myths by inscribing a woman at the centre is necessary, as endorsed by Gilbert, who in an introduction to The Newly Born Woman says that “a woman is the dark continent to which a woman must return.” She exists on a continuous periphery of culture’s clearing and hence lends herself to subversive feminine symbols, “the witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers, etc.” These themes are subtly explored by Shashi Deshpande in The Dark Holds No Terrors, where the mother-daughter conflict is evident as a subterranea undercurrent throughout the novel.

Deshpande’s books privilege women, who appear to conform to a male order. At a more intangible level, they rebel against the myths that define them from a male perspective. Though Deshpande’s works lack
an overt feminist slant, her stories are pleasingly gritty, offer realistic uncompromisingly detailed glimpses of urban life and seek to emancipate women from the imprisoning images of myths.

Her novels trace a women’s journey into the depths of her being, a self-discovery, aided by graphic illustrations of the plight of women, urban, middle-class, educated, yet pawns in the game, to be moved and discarded as the patriarchy demanded.

The protagonist and the narrator of The Dark Holds No Terrors is Sarita (Saru), a married, successful doctor and a mother of two children. Yet, all is not well beneath the placid waters of her marriage, and her relationship with Manu, her husband stifles the woman in her. Disillusioned, she seeks a reprieve in her childhood home; through fragmented recollections of her adolescence, emerges a story, a mosaic of experiences within the timeframe of her life. As a child, Saru always felt unwanted and suffered from maternal neglect, her mother doting on her son Dhruva, three years younger than Saru. Here son-preference manifests itself in the most hideous form, creating in the adolescent girl a feeling of inadequacy brought about by maternal rejection.

In a defiant outburst she says to her mother, “...yesterday night I dreamt you died. I saw your body burning....” (DHT p. 143) Stung by her mother’s lack of affection, Saru, too, seeks to negate her mother’s existence. Saru’s aversion for her menstruation goes beyond the mere physical inconvenience, Saru recollects, “A kind of shame engulfed me,
making me want to rage, to scream against the fact that put me in the same class as my mother. 'You’re a woman now,' she said. 'If you’re a woman, I don’t want to be one,' I though resentfully, watching her body.” (DHT p. 62)

Juxtaposing past with present, Deshpande creates a matrix of thoughts, emotions and episodes that make Saru vulnerable. She is blamed for Dhruva’s accidental drowning in a pond. Her mother accusingly turns to her: “You did it. You did this. You killed him....Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive, when he’s dead.” (DHT p.191) This unjust censure widens the already existing gulf between mother and daughter, creating a never-to-be bridged chasm.

Saru enters medical college despite her mother’s protests to the contrary: “she’s a girl.”(DHTp.144) Saru can comprehend the veiled hint that she “...is not Dhruva.” (DHT p.144) that is left unuttered. She remembers that both her parents had been subtly partial to Dhruva.

It may be recalled that in Hindu mythology, the myth of Dhruva’s quest for eternal truth has been retold also as the story of the birth of the North Star. As a young boy Dhruva had been denied a position on his father’s lap by his step-mother. After years of penance, he was immortalised as the brightest star in the galaxy. Dhruva’s redemption was two-fold. He reclaimed his identity and his rightful place in his father’s kingdom, on his own terms.
Deshpande reverses the myth, yet does so in a subtle way. She does not subvert myths in order to pre-figure the woman's identity, but rather the exposed mythic substructures of the book reveal an inherent subversion. Throughout her life Saru had been denied maternal affection. Her father, like the king in the Dhruva myth, was a silent witness to his wife's indifference to Saru, prompting Saru to think: “'Pusillanimous'... I had come across the word in my English text.... Fainthearted’, the dictionary had informed me and I had written that in the margin. And then, on an impulse, I had written below it... Like my father.” (DHT p.143)

Saru re-inscribes her identity as a successful woman, outside her home. The myth of Dhruva is transposed on Saru. Her return to her mother's home, after the latter's death, is on her own terms. Shadowy, marginalised, she regains her substance, in the words of Adrienne Rich, "The drive to self knowledge, is more than a search for identity; it is part of her refusal of the self-destructiveness of the male-dominated society."22

Saru's career and its success cast a shadow on her marriage. Her love marriage to Manu, against her parents wishes is also doomed to fail as Manu's professional success lacks the vigour that characterises Saru's achievements. Her renown serves as a threat to Manu, whose inferiority complex at his professional failure makes him subject Saru to tortuous rape every night. Saru begins to dread the dark, in an ironic reversal of a pattern. As a child her brother Dhruva had been terrified of the dark, and
she Saru was the fearless one, insensitive to it. But as an adult, it is she who awaits the dark night with trepidation.

Deshpande visualises Saru as a woman, who does not allow biology to imprison her. Saru seeks an identity beyond her sex. Though her childhood aversion originates in a hatred for her mother, Saru grows up to revel in her femininity. Her education in the medical college releases her “...from a prison of fears and shame.” (DHT.p.63) Now the mysterious secrets of her body become a source of delight, marriage to a man of her choice seems the ultimate actualization of her adolescent fantasies.

But Saru realises that her idyllic marriage is far from perfect, “And still for long the fear was there, the secret fear that behind each word, behind each kiss, lay the enemy, the snake, the monster of rejection.” (DHT.p.66) Her apprehensions are reminiscent of the Edenic myth, where the monstrous serpent caused Adam and Eve to be reduced to a state of mortal beings, forever in a state of shame.

Marriage for Saru, proves to be an emotional cul-de-sac and her doubt, “...surely we were unique?” (DHT.p.66) recalls the fragility of the myth of happy marriage. The dream of “...finding happiness through a man....” (DHT.p.124) eludes her. The myth of a happy marriage turns to ashes in the scorching heat of Manu’s savage nightly assault on Saru’s person. Deshpande seems to posit a new truism which says, ‘someday the prince will come, but we will not live happily ever after’. Deshpande
thus rewrites the fairy tale ending with a twist, at the same time
demystifying certain stereotypes that encourage a belief that, for a
woman, personal fulfillment comes through marriage and motherhood.
Marriage as an alternative, "...was not only terrible but
damnable."
(DHT.p.140) Saru likens her marriage to a "Bharata Natyam
routine...[carried out on] well defined chalk lines." (DHT.p.111) As
individual variations contravene the traditions of this age-old dance form,
so it is with her marriage, an age-old institution reversed by patriarchy.
Now, it becomes an ossified homage to convention. Saru's non-
conformity, also her strength, is perceived by her to be a great hindrance.
Her failure in marriage is a consequence of this strength, which, in a
woman "...is a wrong which will never be forgiven."(DHT.p.137)

In his brief analysis of The Dark Holds No Terrors, Iyengar views
Saru as an unusual woman, who "defies her mother to become a doctor,
defies her cast to marry outside and defies social conventions by using
Boozie to advance her career" Later, her brief stay in her mother's
house after her death, became an opportunity for Saru to view her life and
her acts. Her "...remembrances melt and form icicles of furrowing
thought."

Iyengar views Saru as a rebellious woman, who is driven to despair
by her husband who resents her independence. Her despair gradually
gives way to self-confidence and towards the end of the narrative, she is
prepared to meet her husband, displaying an acute sense of perspicacity in
this bit of introspection: "I wonder ... who is the victim and who is the predator? .... or are we each of us, both?" (DHT.p.159)

Deshpande locates her women in a transitional phase of the Indian society, unable to break away from the past and uncertain of the future. Yet they attempt to reconcile themselves to situations in day-to-day life which seem to hold little promise. Before they ultimately succumb to compromise, they indulge in notions of independence and non-conformity.

King, in summing up the strengths in Deshpande’s art says that she portrays the “uncertainties and doubts of women who cannot see themselves as heroic, but as those who want to make life possible”²⁵ A perfunctory reading might see the book as simply another emotional journey story, but on closer examination, it defies definition. The quest to find the inner voice is complex and the only definitive discovery here is that, to make the journey at all, one must put distance between self and past.

Sandhu views Deshpande as the only writer who has dealt minutely with the phenomenon of the educated, middle class women “...struggling to adjust rather than get free from the traditional world.”²⁶ Such women are caught in a limbo, their position appearing to be “...a blend of acceptance and rejection, flexibility and rigidity, fantasy and reality, and above all revolt and compromise.”²⁷ Locked in a bitter conflict between the imposed and the willed, they remain “...appendages to men.”²⁸ Yet,
although not very brave, these are "...women struggling to find their own voice." 29

E. LISTENING NOW - Incantations waiting to be heard in Appachana’s fiction.

For women writing in India a sense of nationality can grow out of the quest for and discovery of identity, an aim to acknowledge the established traditions that are both distinctive and rooted, and an unflinching scrutiny of the same in order to attain that identity. Anjanna Appachana is one such writer of the Indian diaspora whose novel and short stories reveal the complexity, self-conscious artistry and excellent of an author who is apt to appear deceptively simple. Her manipulation of narrative technique, authorial distance and the subtlety with which she uses the English Language with a structural relevance of proverbs, symbols and images, demonstrate her expertise at characterization.

Incantations and other Stories, an anthology of stories is a powerful concentrated exploration of the persistence across generations, of familial traditions and patterns of behaviour. In her hallmark pithy style Appachana lays bare social encounters, stripping them of the illusions of convention and middle-class respectability. In spite of their rebellious nature, the daughters in Appachana’s stories inevitably absorb their parents’ experience and perceptions, and unwittingly or otherwise bear the stamp of their mothers, and by extension that of their mothers’ culture. The universality of this theme helps to counteract what might
otherwise be seen as the simplicity of Appachana’s settings, focusing as she does on the families of India’s self-conscious urban middle class. Her social coordinates are sometimes starkly and incongruously evident, like out-cropping of bare stone in the landscape.

The collection’s title story ‘Incantations’, charts the dilemma of a young girl of twelve who carries the burden of her older sister’s terrible shame of having been raped by her brother-in-law a few days before her wedding. Forced into secrecy, the young girl Geeti has nightmares and becomes sullen and withdrawn. Torn between loyalty to her sister Sangeeta and the weight of this secret, Geeti’s questions and doubts torment her daily. Twenty years later these still remain unanswered, an untravelled terrain of ‘perhapses’ and ‘maybes’:

“Now, twenty years later, I try and imagine what would have happened had my sister told my parents about the rape. They would, of course, have called it [the wedding] off. And Sangeeta, with her lost virginity would have continued to live with our parents, a fallen woman, as people would say. Despoiled, she would have faded quietly away into the greyness of eternal spinsterhood, while my parents prayed that some nice man would come along and love her... not questioning the unbroken hymen. Had I been older, I would have told my parents and watched them shrivel away with barely a rustle, accepting this as their karma for sins
committed in their last births, cradling their first-born, bearing forever the burden of an unmarried and deflowered daughter.” (IOS.p.93)

Fear for her sister, coupled with guilt at her own behaviour engulfs Geeti; it is finally Mala Mousi who restores Geeti’s equanimity, Mousi, iconoclastic, unmarried at thirty, poised, confident, wildly extravagant and almost always happy. One who did not hesitate to speak her mind, who was acidic in her ridicule of her elder sister, Geeti’s mother for being so cloistered and cocooned in her own world. Mala Mousi is, for Geeti, the epitome of all that is pure unadulterated freedom. She is unaccountably free, having walked out of the inner women’s rooms of her home and her station in life, leaving her sisters still trapped with their husbands and families: “She was brisk, sharp and cutting ...too direct, too crisp, too outspoken, too independent.” (IOS.p.98)

Sangeeta, for some reason feels in intimidated by Mala Mousi’s outlook; she felt Mala Mousi had

“... too many sharp edges and not enough of the softness and oozing affection of other Aunts.... ‘She thinks too much,’ Sangeeta would tell out mother.... ‘And what’s the point of all her philosophy and reading if she still isn’t married?’ Mala Mousi did love life, but her love of life ...was serious, contemplative, silent ...her constant fighting for her privacy and

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independence, the fact that she lived alone and that her family pitied her unmarried slate and constantly reminded her of it. None of this seemed to affect Mala Mousi, who was quite ruthless with her six sisters and reminded them at regular intervals that she was the only one who wasn’t using her education to cook.” (IOS.p.99)

But for Sangeeta, the marriage she so keenly wanted is a living nightmare with her brother-in-law outraging her modesty everyday, and her husband imposing himself on her every night. Finally, she reaches a stage where she can take no more, and she commits suicide by hanging herself from the ceiling fan; but before this she castrates the sleeping brother-in-law, so that he bleeds to death.

“Mala Mousi showed me some of the women’s magazines that had written about Sangeeta, making the case an issue. One compared her to Draupadi on the battlefield after the war had been won by the Pandavas, washing her hair in the blood of the man who had humiliated her, fulfilling her vow like a woman possessed.” (IOS.p.105)

Here, an insight into the heroic personality of the princess Draupadi of the Mahabharata is essential in order to perceive the use of myths and folklore by Indian women writers to accentuate the
marginalisation of women even today, in 20th century India. Draupadi is celebrated in Indian religious literature (and all ancient Indian literature is religious) as a woman of heroic stature, rivalled only by three other famous female heroine-figures, Sita, Savitri and Sakuntala. Each of these four women possesses mythic status far greater than her beauty; confronted with seemingly unbearable provocation and misfortune, they have the strength to endure. Married though they are to men who prove to be weak, unreliable, forgetful or mistrustful, each treats her husband as a god to be worshipped, and is content to live her life in his shadow. Geeti’s father reaffirms his disgust with the men in Hindu mythology: “...such are the gods we worship.” (IOS. p.100)

These heroic female exempla are of the first importance to any study of the modern Indian novel because they, and the traditions they bring forth, exhibit those qualities of service and self-restraint as well as sound household management, which have remained the hallmark of Hindu, wives down to the present day.

They provide the structure on which Hindu society has long modelled its concepts of female virtue, and on which Indian writers have built their female characters and based their pictures of marriage and family life. This being the case, they also provide the background against which contemporary fictional figures such as Appachana’s women are viewed to the best effect.
The incantations of the collection’s title story are ‘accept’ and ‘endure’, advice given by generations of mothers to their daughters, upon beginning a new life with an unknown husband. Geeti wonders:

“Did our mothers then protest, silently, silently? Or quietly, unprotestingly acquiesce to what some instinct told them had to be endured, hearing during the act, like incantations, the distant refrain of their mothers’ voices, chanting, do what your husband tells you to, accept, endure.... And their stories lay untold, swollen like rivers after the monsoon rains. Years later, untold stories still, and our mothers like the parched, cracked countryside, waiting for rain that will never come.”(IOS.p.92)

Appachana’s drawings from life are finely detailed but not overworked, and female acceptance of fate is the thread of linking the characters together, aware of differences, striving towards a common goal.

But her traditional upbringing does not allow Geeti to follow in the footsteps of Mala Mousi’s way of life, nor can she bring herself to become like her mother;
“I am the in-between; not married, fat, discontented and accepting like my mother, or unmarried, uncompromising and independent like Mala Mousi, but separated for the time being from my uncomprehending, angry husband, having shed my old fantasies for another - that of empathy, tenderness, and companionship.... There are times when I long for Mala Mousi’s conviction of one life and one death and nothing before or after, long too, for her optimism and faith in herself. But if I had her conviction, I would not have her optimism, and could I then continue living, knowing that this is the end, that this is all? I pray, just in case.” (IOS.p.107,109)

It is on this note that the story ends, with Geeti caught between modern rationalism and traditional beliefs, not willing to relinquish either, so intoxicating is one, yet so firm is the grip of the other.

Listening Now, a recent novel by Appachana intimately portrays relationships between and within families and friends, keeping at its core the life of Padma, whose hermetic orderly existence as an adolescent and later as a young woman is irreversibly disturbed by external incursions. Narrated at different states by different voices, Listening Now presents to us a frieze of characters, stressing on the aural capacity of humans. The cadence is pithy, and the characters: Padma, Mallika, Madhu, Anuradha, Shanta and Rukmini are all explicable primarily in terms of features of
their past. Thus, even in works of literature that are not strictly historical, history, in the sense outlined above, is nevertheless a kind of indispensable matrix against which character and event assume meaning. Appachana is adept at listening to a woman’s heartbeat. She covers three generations and seems to get under the skin of her characters with ease.

The novel’s timeframe ranges over fifteen years, fragmented and rhetoric; Appachana weaves with words, a narrative device which serves to accentuate the current feelings of the narrator, where the patina of history creatively modifies meaning and effect.

The theme is fairly Indian; Padma the youngest of three siblings meets, and starts to like her brother Madhav’s friend Karan. A romance carried out amidst tea-shops and book-stores is cruelly shattered by Karan’s mother who refuses to accept the fact that Padma is carrying Karan’s child, “So, you want to give our family’s name to the bastard of your whoring sister?”(LN.p.389) is the insult thrown at Padma’s mother Rukmini and older sister Shanta when they visit Karan’s house in his absence with the marriage proposal. Stunned by the callousness of Karan’s family, first Shanta then Rukmini, curse the family.

“May your son’s wife be forever barren, May your two daughters be forever barren, may your house be forever empty of the laughter of grandchildren. May the marriages of your son and your two daughters be as barren as their wombs.... May all my sister’s sufferings
comeback to your through your children.... Then it was Rukmini turn: I add my curse to hers. To her curse, I add, you will always have hope, from one year to the next you will have hope. I will always come to nought. For year to year the wombs of your children will carry not life but death.”(LN.p.370)

Years later when Karan becomes aware of the fact that Padma is not married, that she has borne his child Mallika, and that she is running her household on a lecturers salary, he is aghast. “After some time he said, ‘How did Padma-’ He stopped, his face was twisted. ‘Padma is a lecturer. Mallika is in a convent school.’ No more. Let him imagine the worst. He said, his voice sounding like another, ‘You help support her.’ ‘Her father has not spoken to her or seen her since the day she left our house to go to Shanta’s, when she found out she was going to have a baby. Her brother has not spoken to her since then. I have not seen her since then.’ It was as though he could not contain his thoughts, his words. She heard him say something. She said ‘She manages, she takes tuitions.’ She watched the horror on his face. ‘But on a lecturer’s salary...’ ‘When Padma lost you she also lost her family....”(LN.p.392,393)

Being educated, Padma is more independent than her friends and neighbours Madhu and Anuradha, who, secure though they are in their protected patriarchal homes, feel stifled by the cloying atmospheres of their affluent homes, envying Padma her freedom wrought by education.
Appachana seems to say that work and money are the twin keys to freedom, but leaves a doubt as to whether these would really further the cause of women's emancipation.

Appachana's portrayal of Madhu and Anu seem to be echoes of Vatsyayana's Kama Sutra, a treatise on male/female relationships in ancient India - known widely in the west as The Hindu Art of Love - a code set down for the woman who wishes to measure up to the standards set by traditional heroines. A woman, says the author, is to devote herself to her husband as though to a deity. She is to minister personally to his comforts at the table, share in his fasts and vows without refusal. She attends festivities, social gatherings, sacrifices and religious processions only with his permission. She does not loiter about her own front door, nor in solitary places. She does not let prosperity make her proud. She honours her husband's friends, and when in the presence of his parents, she does not answer back, speaks a few sweet words and does not laugh aloud. When her husband is away she lives a life of ascetic restraint; when he returns home, she goes immediately to greet him and then she worships the gods. She keeps the house absolutely clean, looks after the worship of the gods at the household shrine, and offers oblations three times a day. She lays by a store of provisions for the house, frames an annual budget and makes up her expenses accordingly.

First-hand accounts of the lives of Indian women today indicate that little has changed. The South Asian Digest of Region Writing (Vol. 9), devotes a third of its space to literature by and about women of the
region. Research indicates that the circumstances of women's lives in rural and provincial India today appear to be much as they were in the time of The Mahabharata: with the completion of the traditional wedding ritual a daughter's ties to her maternal family are officially severed. Thereafter, her parents have no possibility of intervening in her favour should she receive improper treatment in her husband's family.

Padma's journey starts and is progressively transformed into the ritual journey back in which she is called to confront her personal past. Her defensive attitude reveals her unconscious fear of having to dig into her own concealed anxiety, that of losing Mallika to Karan, the long-absent father. Dreams, reveries and visions fragment the narrative discourse, allowing the past to become present while the stream of memories flows in the mind of the bewildered protagonist. Madhu and Anu are her support system acting as buffers to Mallika's questions about her father - unwilling to accept her father, yet shaped by him in a manner she doesn't even realise.

Appachana conveys to her reader the complexity of the social and psychological dynamic of self-denial. After thirteen years when Karan finally meets Padma she says that 'there was nothing now between them. It was all over.' Padma's story is moving and lyrical because the past is filtered by her hallucinated state of mind which entails her emotional involvement in her puzzled sense of loss and defeat.
Thus, the past is the inevitable appendage, hindering the compromise between Padma and Karan:

"Once she had given him his faith in her, given him his absolute belief in her integrity. Even as he had destroyed her faith in him, his own had remained intact. Intact those few years together, intact the long years after. Not anymore.... Nothing familiar about her expression either. Once he had known every play of light and shadow on it. More light than shadow. Her radiance captivating and enclosing him. Continuing in her absence.... for thirteen years. It wasn’t there anymore. He felt his body jerk. That light had been extinguished thirteen years ago ....'Everything that we ever felt for each other has become twisted and misshapen,’ she whispered. She shook her head despairingly ....'I’ve built another life for myself. I have Mallika, Shantacca, Madhu, Anu, Amma. But what do you have, Karan? Except the dream Padma?’ Even as she said it, she saw what lay in his face. She closed her eyes against it. ‘The dream,’ he spoke as though he were being throttled, ‘is over’ ....From the window across the room, he could see the streetlight. The same window from where he had, thrice, seen her framed. Now, within that window, inside the house, enclosed in a dreamlike, echoing time. Now, outside,
the silence. Silence cradling the echoing house, all, for a while, still.”(LN.p.508-510)

Fantasy and disillusionment became habits of thought and this aesthetic juxtaposition formulates and discards the assumptions of the past in order to create, phoenix like, the basis of a new awareness.

The novel rejects the classist, sexist and racist values upon which contemporary society lingers, but it also acknowledges their insidious & mesmerising power. The discourse of reminiscence ultimately creates a sense of intimacy that prevents any form of concept towards the human experience that is being narrated.

**Listening Now** is a feast of powerful word pictures, portraying the indignity, and yet ultimate dignity of being an Indian woman. It rips apart the mask of the middle-class Indian society, but could speak for women everywhere - they may speak a different language - but they listen similarly.

To conclude, although the code set down for the ideal wife by Vatsyayana certainly did not leave much time for contemplation, study or writing, one must remember that many women in rich and poor households alike, whether they were grandmothers, aunts or widows, were often good storytellers, transmitting to the next generations the legends and myths of earlier times.
The writing of today’s Indian women writers, from Chughtai to Deshpande to Appachana, stems partly from these literary and folk traditions, and partly from a modern college education. In writing about Indian life they are, in Anees Jung’s phrase, “Unveiling India”. They show, just by the act of writing, how women are emerging from the shadow - at once marginalising and repressive - of a culture that has traditionally devalued their work.
Further references to the following texts will be as under

The Crooked Line - CL
The Dark Holds No Terrors - DHT
Incantations and Other Stories - IOS
Listening Now - LN

1. Note: This form of revisionist myth making finds form in Shashi Deshpande’s treatment of the ‘Dhruva’ myth in The Dark Holds No Terrors, a work which forms part of the research substance of this chapter.

2. Tharu, Susie, and K Lalitha, eds., Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Present Volume 1, Delhi: OUP, 1993, pp. 58, 59


6. Tharu, Susie, op cit., p. 59


8. Note: For example, Raj Lakshmi Debi’s *The Hindu Wife* (1876), Ramabai Saraswati’s *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1886), Krupa Bai Sattianathan’s *Kamala* (1894) and *Saguna* (1895)

9. Tharu, Susie, op cit, p. 153

10. From *Gufaagu*, a short interview with Ismat Chughtai, functioning as the foreword to her collection of short stories titled *Kharid lo*, Lahore: Raffat Publishers, 1982


12. ibid., p. 279

13. ibid., p 267

14. Note: For example, *The Quilt and Other Stories*, New Delhi: Kali For Women, 1990

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15. Note: Chughai’s short story ‘Lihaf’ (The Quilt) created a storm of controversy for its subtle, covert portrayal of lesbianism.


19. ibid., p. 256


21. ibid., p. xviii


24. ibid., p. 758


27. ibid., p. 25

28. ibid., p. 55

29. ibid., p. 51