

**CONSTRUCTING A FEMALE SELF IN THE  
NOVELS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND  
NAYANTARA SAHGAL :  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

**BY**

**SOMA BHATTACHARJYA**

**DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH**



**SUBMITTED  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENT FOR THE  
DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN ENGLISH OF  
NORTH EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY  
SHILLONG**

Thesis

NEHU LIBRARY  
Acc No... 10.2706 ✓  
Acc By... *[Signature]*  
Date..... 28-8-97  
Class by... *[Signature]*  
Sub. Head... *[Signature]*  
Enter : ..  
Date ..

DS

008. 954.30080352

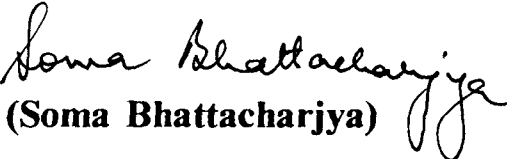
R.11A

**NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY  
PERMANENT CAMPUS, SHILLONG 793 022**

**DECLARATION**

I, **Ms. Soma Bhattacharjya**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of work done by me, that the contents did not form the basis of award of any previous degree to me or to the best of knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other University/Institution.


This is being submitted to the North-Eastern Hill University for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy in English**.

  
(Soma Bhattacharjya)

Candidate

  
(R.P. Sharma)

Professor & Head  
Department of English  
NEHU, Shillong.

  
(E.N. Lall)

Professor  
Department of English  
NEHU, Shillong.

**SEPTEMBER 13, 2003**

***A dream fulfilled***

***Thankyou God for all your blessings***

## CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b>	1
<i>The Great Indian Life Grows More and More Beautiful.</i>	
<b>2. Crossing The Laxman Rekha</b>	27
<i>Indu and Rashmi in <b>Roots and Shadows</b> and <b>This Time of Morning.</b></i>	
<b>3. We Are Not Sati - Savitris</b>	50
<i>Saru and Devi in <b>The Dark Holds No Terrors</b> and <b>A Situation in New Delhi.</b></i>	
<b>4. Who Wants To Be A Good Wife?</b>	72
<i>Jaya and Sonali in <b>That Long Silence</b> and <b>Rich Like Us</b></i>	
<b>5. Conclusion</b>	99
<i>Let's Look Forward To Tomorrow</i>	
<b>Bibliography</b>	119

---

## *Acknowledgements*

---

Years back as a child I remember learning a song, the tune of which even today I hum once in a while ; though I do not remember all the words; those which I do, I shall quote

*somewhere over the rainbow*

*blue birds fly*

*blue birds fly o'er the rainbow*

*why then o why can't I?*

*somewhere over the rainbow*

*skies are blue*

*blue birds fly o'er the rainbow*

*and dreams really do come true.*

Following innocently the message of this song which I carried in my heart for years now I set out on my adventure towards learning a few more new words and new ways of sentence construction laden with thoughts, passionate and sincere, by pursuing a Ph.D programme which was a dream I carried with me from a very early age. Chasing dreams, like pursuing a Ph.D. would not have been possible without the blessings of God almighty manifest on this earth in the form of wonderful people whom I came across at various points. These people saw to it that every step I took was another stepping stone in my attempt to cross my river of adventure and every pebble worth

the name turned out to be a nice smooth round one, not a sharp one that would cut the skin: indeed should I say that these wonderful people made sure that only round pebbles came my way so that my experiences remain like those smooth and sweet memories that one might not forget easily.

One such person certainly has been my teacher, Professor E.N.Lall. To Professor Lall I record my sincerest thanks for giving me the opportunity to pursue a Ph.D programme under his supervision. I also thank him for being patient with my, at times, erratic and immature ways. And above all I record my prayers for Prof. Lall for ensuring that this project reaches its desired closure in spite of his being faced with extremely difficult moments personally just before my submission.

To the Head of the Department, English, Professor R.P. Sharma, I record my thanks for his cooperation and kind heartedness in allowing me to complete my work in the department.

To Professor K.C. Baral, Director, C.I.E.F.L. Shillong Campus, I record my thanks for the enthusiasm he showed in my project and for the help which he offered every now and then. To other faculty members of the Department, Professor T.Ao, Dr. Esther Syiem, Ms. Nabanita Ganguly, Mrs. Nola Syiem and Dr. S.N. Singh I owe my gratitude for all their support in the form of their enthusiasm which to me was encouragement enough to once again chase my dream.

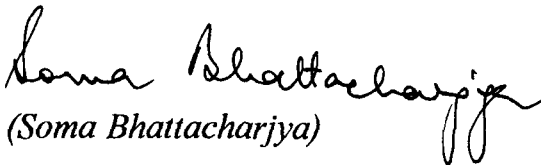
To the staff of the Department of English, specially “Kong” Riti, I owe my thanks

for all her affection which I shall carry with me for a long time to come.

To M/S Shivam Graphics, Nangloi, Delhi, I owe my thanks for laser typesetting and formatting the manuscript.

And finally, I would be selfish if I did not mention and acknowledge from my heart my sense of gratitude to a very dear friend, Debu (Debkusum, otherwise) for his active participation in my efforts to string my thoughts finally and beautifully into a meaningful Ph.D. thesis: his involvement in my work towards the end made an otherwise stressful enterprise an enjoyable one ; memories of which will remain sweet for quite some time to come.

Thanking all once again, people at home and at work, I record my gratitude to them for helping me complete my work in time and without any hurdles.

  
(Soma Bhattacharjya)

# 1

## Introduction

*The great Indian life grows more  
and more beautiful*

“One is not born but becomes a woman”

Simone de Beauvoir, **The Second Sex**

“I think the hardest lesson for me to learn - and I have not learnt it, one attempts to learn it everyday - is that the word ‘woman’ is not after all something for which one can find a literal referent without looking into the looking glass.”

Gayatri C. Spivak, **The Post Colonial Critic**

Gayatri Spivak's words "looking into the looking glass" has given impetus to the project for a definition of the female self. The female self cannot be found in a culture where an ideal of womanhood is imposed on woman. It has to be discovered by looking inwards and speaking from within the depths of the female psyche, an endeavor that sparked off the very movement of "her story" versus "his-story," a movement that aimed at locating fissures in patriarchy and converting them into massive cracks, so that the monolith called patriarchy collapses and a new consciousness emerges, nullifying irrational power structures in society. In this new order women would have a far greater role to play because then they would speak from the "unity and resonance of their physicality", "the corporeal ground of their intelligence".<sup>1</sup>

This in essence is the definition of the female 'self'. It is a state of being which is arrived at when the chord of existence is touched and awakened so that the female psyche is receptive to all sights, sounds, smells from the world outside and the woman lives and sustains herself by the richness of the experience gained thereof. It is a historical moment and the ability to sustain this moment marks the power of a woman centered novel, a feminist novel.

The dialectics of the definition of the female self in literary traditions in the western world presents a movement through three stages - "feminine, feminist, female".<sup>2</sup> These three stages sum up woman's attempts at producing texts of great

artistic and aesthetic value. First, women wrote under male pseudonyms like George Eliot, Currer, Elis, Acton Bell. In addition they rejected this subjugation and used literature as a means to dramatise the woes of wronged women. As for example the personal sense of injustice which novelists like Elizabeth Gaskell and Frances Trollope expressed in their novels of class struggle and factory life define in a way *the woman writer's role in terms of responsibility to her suffering sisters*. In the third and final phase women writers speak of female experiences from within the inner recesses of the female psyche. This phase celebrates female experiences and uses art as a means to uphold this truth. This truth speaks of the woman's body evoking a woman's language unique in itself, with a syntax hitherto unknown. This syntax reflects the rhythms of the woman's body, a situation that transcends the boundaries of plain physicality and enters the domain of that vital energy required for healthy and meaningful existence: an existence that breathes and lives by the very first icon of the individuality - I, the first of the personal pronouns denied to women in patriarchy. Virginia Woolf's novels which give shape to life being "a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness, to the end" along with Dorothy Richardson are most representative of this phase.

Female literary traditions across the globe have matured from "release"<sup>3</sup> of suppressed female creativity to that of asserting a place. Women's writing across

the centuries has exhibited tendencies ranging from a modest appraisal of domesticity to a joyous exuberance of the very essentials of existence. Women's writing across the globe indicates writing as a form of outlet for pent up feelings as well as a means of sharing such feelings with other women. Jane Austen's **Pride and Prejudice** to Virginia Woolf's **A Room of One's Own** exhibit this progression and range of women's experiences. What began as a form of inward joy in moments stolen from public eye has grown into a genre characterizing an identity, a definition of a self and a means of celebrating life itself.

Women's writing and feminist critical theory go hand in hand for the precise reason that women's writing has produced literature of aesthetic value; literature that can fulfill the twin purposes of education and pleasure. Women's writing talks from the conservative realms of the family, marriage, society and through an intrinsic mix of the real and the imaginative has created an image of the self. The image of the 'self' opposes the 'other' and moments of justapositioning of the 'self' and the 'other', of the 'self' overpowering the 'other' and finally of the self ruling the 'other' marks the tremendous emotional development of women authored texts as well as of the gripping powerful effect these texts have on readers. Therefore early feminist critical theory in favour of women being able to mother texts which can stand tests of time, hold much ground.

Women's writing in India presents a storehouse of creative efforts compris-

ing literature in the regional languages as well as in English. With the spread of English education in this country, a legacy of the British and the dominance of English as a world language, women's writing in India has grown substantially. Translations from the regional languages into English have made the works of writers like Rasheed Jahan, Ismat Chughtai, Indira Sant, K. Saraswati Amma, M.K. Indira, Amrita Pritam, Mahasweta Devi available to readers. Like their global counterparts women writers in India, too, have exploited the essence of living and of women surviving from close quarters of the family, marriage, society. However, given the unique blend of traditions and historical factors, Indian women writers have a different version of existential philosophy to put forward: one that is not overtly aggressive so as to pull down established structures but a sublimation of internalised energy to create a divine form apt for contemporary living within a given time— a self with its own space.

The literary appeal of women's writing in India have been acknowledge by many scholars, and the reasons are not far to see. Women's writing in India have been reflective of themes which are both domestic and contemporary; that is, women's writing have spanned from tales of domesticity to narratives reflective of ideological commitments. Such narratives have spoken of disorders and have sought to show signs of order in an apparently imbalanced system of operations. Women's writing today offers various themes for meaningful academic pursuits. In this re-

gard it is worth while quoting K. Satchidanandan who says—

Any meaningful discussion on women's writing today is, by compulsion, part of the larger enterprise of empowering women and this in turn joins hands with other 'transversal' struggles for social justice on various fronts, may they be of the Dalits and tribals against caste-hierarchy, of the radical democrats against imperialist economic and cultural interventions, of the workers and peasants against class exploitation, of the health activists against unethical medical practices, of the pacifists against nuclear proliferation and war-oriented planning, of the critical academics against the enslavement of knowledge to hegemonic power, of the secular intellectuals and people against varieties of communalism, of the civil rights activists against the suppression of individual and collective rights, of the environmentalists against pollution, poverty, deforestation and the disastrous displacement of populations in the name of a development that often benefits only the upper strata of society, and of the marginalized minorities, regions and languages against the forces that oppress them. These are not only struggles against dominant groups and ideologies but are also movements for democratic plurality, creative difference, cultural heterogeneity, healthier environment, better living standards, active peace and active non-violence, a liberating pedagogy and an egalitarianism that transcends distinctions of gender, class, race and community: in short for a truer and fuller democracy that combines a concern for the nation with a concern for our own endangered species.<sup>4</sup>

Women's writing in India, as mentioned earlier, embraces those volumes as well written in the regional languages. This wealth would have escaped our notice had it not been for the fact that colonisation of the country by the British ensured, the spread of the use of the English language. Therefore, texts were retrieved and

translated for the reading audience. A study of such literature reveals that our regional languages do have a long tradition of women's writings, especially poetry, but they have become visible on pan-Indian and international planes chiefly through anthologies of translations like *Women Writing in India*, *The Slate of Life*, *Truth-Tales*, *Inner Courtyard*, *Inner Spaces*, *In Other Words*, *Under the Silent Sun* and *In their Own Voice*. Translations of individual works by Qurratulain Hyder, Ismat Chughtai, Kamala Das, C.S. Laxmi (Ambai), Mahasweta Devi, Volga, Laxmi Kannan and others, and A.K. Ramanujan's translations of Akkamahadevi, Lal Ded and Tamil Sangam women poets are being reflected in studies on women's writings from different points of view. Women writers have also begun to receive fairer representation in literary anthologies and journals; and fairer treatment from publishers. We now have a substantial body of women's literature, the roots of which go well into the past, from the nineteenth century and early twentieth century with writers like Swarnakumari Devi and Ras Sundari Devi from Bengal, Ramabai Ranade and Lakshmibai Tilak in Marathi and Bandaru Acchamamba and Tallapragada Viswasundaramma in Telugu, to the seventeenth and eighteenth century writers like the long-suppressed Muddupalani in Telugu, Sanciya Hosannamma in Kannada, Bahinabai in Marathi and Mahlaq Bai Chanda in Urdu. There are also the devotional poets of the 12th to 15th centuries like Akkamahadevi in Kannada, Mirabai in Gujarati, Rajasthani and Hindi, Gangasati and Ratnabai in Gujarati, Janabai in Marathi and

Aatukuri Molla in Telugu. Folksongs and works of the Sangam poets of Tamil like Neccellaiyar and Velli Vitiyar of the last century before Christ, the Pali songs of the Buddhist nuns of the 6th century before Christ like Sumangalamata and Ubbiri are among the earliest products of women's writing of our country.

A study of women's writing in India also reveals some other interesting facts. Given the fact that the Indian subcontinent has had a history of colonization and conquests blended with a unique system of tradition and culture, women's writing throughout the spectrum of the twentieth century exhibits negotiations between the creative world and real world tasks; of fusions between the imagined and the ideological, of writing an identity for the people, for the society, while writing out an identity of one's own self. Women's writing tirelessly chalks out within time and space a symbolical history of <sup>their</sup> growth and contribution: as a writer, <sup>s</sup> as a member of society and ultimately as a <sup>w</sup> woman. This finds endorsement in Susie Tharu's Introduction to Women's Writing in India where she says: "we find that these are engaged in negotiations, debate and protest, invariably in areas that directly concern or are closely related to what it meant to be a woman in each historical moment". Different periods of history present different view points in the light of major developments of that period. Given below are some such notable events and their implications on women's writings.

### *Pre independence / Swadeshi*

The pre independence years inspired by Gandhiji's call for Swadeshi mark the early years of the twentieth century in the subcontinent. The policy of the British to divide and rule had implicit bearings on the general public and feelings of communalism, of religious identities had a definite contribution to the turbulent national fervour existing at that time. Nationalism was marked not just by riots, protests but also by a call for things indigenous: industries, cultures, traditions. Festivals were rediscovered, traditions revived and a new culture of reinventing a nation, a people was set afoot. It was an effort to give a definition to a nation, to discover a nation, to uphold the self of a nation.

The process of evolving the self of the nation is summarised by Indira Choudhury who says –

The evolution of icons of the self have as much to do with the structure of oppositional discourses as with modes of their articulation. Any investigation into the cultural domain of the colonized must take into account crucial questions about the politics of self representation. How are discourses of the self produced and elaborated within a colonially controlled domain? What are the ideological processes by which certain self images are naturalized? And what are the modes of legitimation deployed by self descriptive discourses in their attempt to liberate themselves from the colonial process of subjectification?

The exigencies of the nationalist project demanded multiple negotiations. Colonial stereo types had to be contested with different representations of the self, even though the latter bor-

rowed from the former. The process of signification generated considerable tension as it grappled to assimilate the very modernity of an Indian identity. So, in contrast to colonial descriptions of the preposterous diversity of Indians, nationalism attempted to present a homogenised Indian identity. But the fashioning of this new self left unresolved the tensions of traditional patterns of hierarchy across caste, community, class and gender. -----

Such attempts at self-fashioning are marked by two sets of negotiations: with the dominant discourses of colonialism on the one hand, and with various often pre-existing discourses produced by the colonised on the other. The cultural politics of this oppositional self image was neither revivalist nor reawakened but a redefined modern Indian. Its defining features were beyond doubt drawn from Hindu icons and concepts but they usually entered this discourse mediated by western notions.<sup>5</sup>

This quest for a national self was manifest by a strong urge to define the nation in terms of its religious identity. Prominent among such discursive discussions were the calls made for a reformulated Hinduism, a variety of Hinduism that was secular in outlook and upheld authentic Indian traditions. Such formulations undoubtedly added zest to the nationalist struggle for independence. However, a point of literary interest that can be read into the political struggle was that the struggle for religious identity construed gender as a new creation. Hinduism came to be seen as an insider and Islam, the outsider: setting up of a Hindu India came to be seen as the norm and progressively Islam was viewed with an “other” eye. For example, Kalyanamma’s (1894-1965) “Suryasthanana”. (sunset) show aggressively anti-Muslim feelings along with nationalist sentiments. This text successfully weaves

women and women's questions into that configuration. In that text the Rajput warrior Raja Mansingh who had given his sister Jodhabai in marriage to the Mughal emperor Akbar, is confronted one day by a woman (later revealed to be Jodhabai) who accuses him of having stained his sword with his mother's blood and of having betrayed the country and its women. She asks, "how could you sell a Rajput woman brought up to worship her motherland, taught from a tender age to worship Lord Shiva devotedly to an outsider in exchange for riches and power? Will you ever understand how that touch sears me?" ——— Source ?

Such pieces throw light not just on the obvious hostility between religious groups of people made explicit by British policies but also a reformulation of these religions and of a subject - selves configuration in the minds of their followers. This debate of subject - self / self-other opened up avenues of identity which would find articulation in later years, in post colonial India. In the light of the above it can perhaps be said that communalism as a phenomena of Indian politics cannot be brushed aside as a prejudice. It is something deeply embedded in the Indian psyche and gives logic and meaning to the cultural self of the nation.

### *Post Colonial India*

The history of postcolonial India is marked first by the violent partition. This is followed by years of economic reforms and of a movement towards an egalitarian society. These years are characterized by the statesmanship of leaders like Nehru,

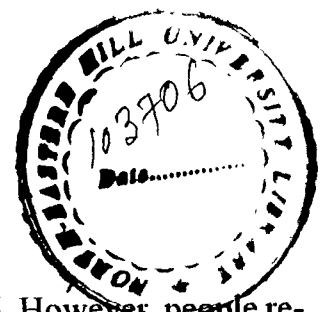
Sardar Patel, B.R. Ambedkar; years of putting into practice a democratic society visualized and nurtured with much care in times of stress, toil and tears. These years are also characterized by setting protocols of government, setting standards in legislative practices, enacting legislation: contextualising the modern Indian nation, defining the nation.

Economic policies of the Nehruvian years involved promises of economic independence to the Indian bourgeoisie and protection <sup>of what?</sup> in international markets as well as support to indigenous industry. Also, among the first major legislative initiatives was the Hindu Code Bill which sought to create a uniform law ensuring women some rights to property and succession and treating them as equal to men in relation to marriage and divorce. However, in spite of best efforts to give meaning and direction to the newly awakened nation, widespread dissatisfaction emerged as fissures in Nehruvian mixed economy surfaced by late the sixties. Plans of using latest state of art technology for achieving social gains met with problems, planners and administrators had not foreseen. This resulted in riots and violence in different parts of the country. Peasant revolts broke out in Bengal, Bihar and Kerala over food shortage while elsewhere workers went on strike for higher wages. Such uprisings were supported by students and intellectuals. If the preceding account is any indication of the nation's progress towards its own self and of defining an Indian nationality, then it is worth quoting B.R. Ambedkar's words on nationality—

Subjective psychological feeling. It is a feeling of corporate sentiment of oneness which makes those that are charged with it feel that they are kith and kin ----- National feeling is a double edged feeling ----- [It is] at once a fellowship for one's own ----- and an anti - fellowship for those who are not -----<sup>6</sup>

An analysis of Ambedkar's words reveal an interesting choice of vocabulary that indicates two things. One that the concept of one nation, one people therefore, one self necessarily involves the presence of the other. The self needs to be opposed to the other. Secondly, if this "oneness" is a "subjective" feeling, then it automatically follows that discourses on nation and nationality are to a large extent imagined and created. Hence such discourses are subject to change and revision. The self therefore, is written and rewritten like traditions and works of art which are built, created and made real.

Along with the process towards self realisation of the Indian nation was the process of making public women's issues. More and more women's groups began acting as pressure groups on governments and legislators. More and more demands were made to include women's issues on agendas. Post colonial India was fast moving towards a definition of its own self when a state of emergency was clamped in 1977. This was the turning point in the development of a creative nation, as for the first time restrictions were placed on the freedom of expression. Elections were postponed, civil liberties guaranteed under the constitution were suspended, hun-



dreds of activists were imprisoned or had to go underground. However, people resisted matters such as forced sterilization, slum clearance and city beautification projects. The voice of the people found utterance and emergency was lifted in 1977 and elections were held.

The voice of the nation finding expression in the post colonial period is indicative of the new lighted center from within which history had to be retold and literature written. This new center spoke of a variety of Indianness that did not draw succour from a cause-effect relationship, a story with chronological sequence as in the nationalist movement, but like a never ending process of growth and metamorphosis this new Indianness must be realized as a homogenous articulation signifying a melodious blend of cultures, politics, state and people.

Given this new anthropological situation one might ask who holds the authorship of this new 'centre' and where do women fit in? With the spread of English education in this country and with the transfer of power to Indian leaders in 1947, the center can be understood from a 'self-other' relationship. Britain was viewed as adversary in so far as producing texts is concerned. To answer the question as to who constitute people in the modern context, it is obvious that the answer lies in a mix of the landed gentry and the landless. The women's question in this context is best explained by Susie Tharu.

Study after study has shown that the logic underpinning development action

even when focused on women, is state centered. In other words, the interests of the state and the classes it represents will take priority over those of the people. ----- Further, development programmes have hidden agendas that exacerbate existing inequalities and leave women and other subjugated groups more marginalised than before. ----- The women's question was translated into one of electoral policy. A similar fate awaited the question of caste. ----- In the process, the politics of untouchability and the exploitation and oppression predicated on that politics were translated into an administrative task that might be attended to by relevant government departments. The politics of caste as well as the politics of gender were not only denied by the new dispensation, they were also contained ----- Imaginative artifacts of various kinds endorsed and extended these transformations as they set up a nation space.<sup>7</sup>

Mulk Raj Anand's Untouchables and Mahasweta Devi's Shishu focus on these aspects of nationalism.

The struggle for evolving a national identity, a national self spanned the first half of the twentieth century. This epoch as is obvious had implicit bearings on literary traditions of the times. Also, once independence was achieved, the project for a definition of the national 'self' did not automatically come to a close. The dimensions of the definition of the national 'self' progressed over the years through phases of political, economic and sociological changes bringing with it changes in the roles and status of women: indeed of the 'self' of the woman. This change is noticeable not just in literary productions as for example those by Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal but also in other forms of representations like films or even in the political world. Some of Aparna Sen's films or Mira Nair's films represent the impact of a society in transition on women and of the self of the woman surfacing

therein. That the 'self' of this great Indian society has grown and developed over the years and that women have contributed dynamically to its growth cannot be denied. This process has evolved a dynamic 'self' of the Indian woman manifest in various forms of representation. If in politics it is the image of the late Indira Gandhi that shines as a luminary then in Indo-Anglian literature the names of Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande simply cannot be ignored.

Shashi Deshpande was born in Dharwad and is the daughter of the renowned dramatist and Sanskrit scholar Shriranga. At the age of fifteen she went to Bombay, graduated in Economics, then moved to Bangalore from where she gained a degree in law. The early years of her marriage were largely devoted to the care of her two young sons but she took a course in journalism and for a time worked on a magazine. Her writing career began only in 1970 initially with short stories of which several volumes have been published. She is the author of four children's books and some novels. That Long Silence won a Sahitya Academy Award. Shashi Deshpande now lives in Bangalore.

————— Which year ?

Shashi Deshpande's writing career matured from a writer of short stories to one of fiction of much value. Talking of the influences that shaped her as a writer, she says in *of concerns, of Anxieties* "There are three things in my early life that have shaped me as a writer. These are: that my father was a writer, that I was educated exclusively in English and that I was born a female."<sup>8</sup>

Shashi Deshpande's major work focus on women even though she says that these are "human issues, of interest to all humanity".<sup>9</sup> However, she reiterates her stance as a women's writer and says,

yes I did and I do write about women. Most of my writing comes out of my own intense and long suppressed feelings about what it is to be a woman in our society, it comes out of the experience of the difficulty of playing the different roles enjoined on me by society, it comes out of the knowledge that I am something more and something different from the sum total of these roles. My writing comes out of my consciousness of the conflict between my idea of myself as a human being and the idea that society has of me as a woman. All this makes my writing very clearly woman's writing.<sup>10</sup>

One of the most prominent Indo-Anglian women writers, Nayantara Sahgal is the daughter of Mrs Vijaylakshmi Pandit. Nayantara Sahgal has authored both fiction and nonfiction. Her work reveals her flair for writing realistic, candid, but emotionally surcharged pieces. Most of her work revolve around the twin themes of politics and interpersonal communication: lack of which results in unhappiness and prevents human fulfillment. The novelist herself has made it clear that her novels "more or less reflect the political era we are passing through". But along with the political theme she also portrays the modern Indian woman's search for individual freedom and self realization. She delineates both the themes in a very subtle and intricate manner.

As outlined in the preceding pages Shashi Deshpande's and Nayantara Sahgal's

work focus, among other things, on the predicament of the modern Indian woman placed in contemporary society. Both novelists seem to address some questions pertinent to a society and to a people perpetually in the throes of change. Such changes are brought about by a modified vision on life, traditions, customs and all that has been regarded with sanctity till the previous moment. This scheme of questions also gives rise to the important questions on the educated middle class Hindu woman. Where does she belong in this dynamic Indian society? What role does she play? What does society expect of the modern Hindu wife? What options does the Hindu woman have? Can the Hindu woman live a healthy and meaningful life? Can she define herself in terms of the very first of personal pronouns - I? If so, then what is the concept of that 'I' ?

Arriving at a definite definition of 'I' for the Indian woman seems problematic as the very issue opens up a discussion which leads back to historic times. The word woman seems to have been shrouded in mystery and consequently all things associated with 'woman' - her physical attribute, her sexuality, her personal habits, her relationship indeed her very life appears prescribed; so that she remains controlled within boundaries. The term 'woman' seems to have been institutionalized by prevalent society of the times in terms of strict rules and regulations which had to be followed. The term 'woman' seems to have been codified as per needs of the times, of the society, indeed by men. In this regard it is worthwhile quoting Ashapurna

Devi who says –

The very word woman is a symbol of eternal mystery and enchantment, as if it is not enough that she is flesh and blood, but that she must be something higher than what she is. And so she is never asked to take part in the incessant activity of this workaday world. Woman, it seems was created to make the world more beautiful and man more ardent in his appreciation of beauty. ----- Women have always been misled by this imposed ideal of womanhood -----.<sup>11</sup>

Ashapurna Devi summarises Kunkum Roy's analysis of the status of women in Vedic times. She says,

what emerges then is that in both the Vedic traditions and the Manusmriti the relationships between men and women was structured in terms of inequality, even though specific elements of the relationships were emphasised to a greater or lesser degree in different contexts. ----- In other words, women tend to be assimilated to material resources, whereas men, by and large are differentiated from and in control of such goods. ----- Nevertheless, the difference envisaged between men and women was as sharp, if not sharper than that envisaged between and among men belonging to different social categories.<sup>12</sup>

Going by the above it is obvious that women were viewed as a homogenous class. This class, however, was without a homogenous identity, for the plurality of societal demands necessitated change in focal points, resulting in change in perspectives on women. The preceding sections on the evolution of 'self' of woman vis-à-vis the 'self' of nation explains this point. Women therefore, spoke of heterogeneous identities spread over time and space; not of one consistent entity across

historical boundaries. The Rig Veda spoke of women poets implying thereby of the involvement of women in day to day affairs. However, the invention of agriculture and with the arrival of a settled life based on agricultural produce and returns, women's position was relegated to the home and to domesticity. Gradually she became confined to the home and to domesticity and slowly she became a burden on society. This slumber carried on for centuries till reformist movements of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries attempted to wake this class from its deep rooted slumber.

At this point one needs to keep in mind that evaluating the women's question in India cannot be viewed through a westerner's eye. The essential biologism of the French feminist cannot quite be applied in the Indian context for the simple reason that women in India had no rights - not even the right to their bodies. Thus woman's body evoking a specific woman's language might not serve the purpose of understanding the Indian woman's question. In this context Malashri Lal's pertinent question in Law of the Threshold: "Can literary feminism in India find a paradigm from its own cultural resources?" assumes significance.

The answer to this question might be found in the character of Draupadi from the *Mahabharat* or in the works of the Rajput woman Mirabari. The second book of the *Mahabharat* narrates the struggle between two clans, the Kauravas and the Pandavas for the possession of a kingdom. Draupadi is the joint wife of the five

Pandava brothers. The Pandavas have successively lost all their possessions, including their kingdom and their own selves in a gambling match with the Kauravas. They are urged to stake Draupadi in a last throw of the dice. Yudishtir, the eldest brother does so and loses. Draupadi is sent for to appear at the court, even though as a Kshatriya woman, and a princess, she would not appear in public. Moreover Draupadi is in a menstruating state and hence ritually impure. She refuses to obey and tells the messenger instead: "Go and ascertain from the gambler whether he lost himself or me first." She is thereupon forcibly dragged by the hair and brought to the hall by Dhushasana, one of the Kaurava brothers. Again she repeats her question - did Yudishtir have a right to stake her if he had already become a slave? Her question is disregarded. Karna on the Kaurava side orders her to be stripped since, married to five men, against custom, she may be regarded as a "whore". Dhushasana begins to pull off her garments but miraculously more and more of them appear to clothe her and he stops exhausted. The blind old Kaurava king is persuaded to call for a halt to all this injustice and he offers Draupadi three boons as a compensation for the injustice done on her. With these boons she frees the Pandavas. The *Mahabharata* ends with the great war in which the Kauravas are defeated and killed and Draupadi is avenged. Commenting on the disrobing of Draupadi Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan says -

There are two cruxes that are usually recognized as being of special significance in the interpretation of Draupadi's agency: the first, her famous question; and the second, the means of her salvation. Her question: did Yudhishtar stake her before or after

he lost himself, is never answered, because it is unanswerable. ALF Hildebeitel, the noted Draupadi scholar, regards it as a *feminist* question since 'it challenges the men to consider ..... their lordship over and 'ownership' of women in contexts of patriarchy.' For him it is a 'class-action appeal' by Draupadi on behalf of women as a group which 'calls into question two kinds of male lordship: that of kinship and family, and that of the dharmic politics of kingship in the sabha or men's hall.' The philosopher B.K. Mattilal describes her question as the sole and 'unique' unanswered dilemma in the epic. But Mattilal too notes a displacement: Draupadi's question is 'more concerned with rights or legality..... than with the morality of the situation.' From his contemporary location he also concedes that it is a 'point [made by] a social rebel, presumably a non-conformist.' 'If Draupadi's questions were properly answered, it would have required a 'paradigm shift' in India's social thought.<sup>13</sup>

Or, for example take the case of Mirabai summarized by K. Satchidanandan -

Patriarchal traditions have canonized Mirabai as a harmless devotional poet with little streak of revolt in her. However an examination of her texts clearly reveals the dimension of her rebellion within the family and the kinship group and her fight against the injustices and discriminations she had to suffer just because she was a woman. The Rajput aristocrats who had developed an intricate system of patriarchal control through the segregation and seclusion of women, a fierce insistence upon woman's chastity and filial piety and the consequent valorisation of woman's sexual virtue, sanctions against remarriage and widow remarriage and the celebration of individual *Sati* as well as its collective form called *jauhar* must have been shocked by Mirabai's declarations of freedom and outright rejection of the conventional image of women written into her texts.

A study of Mirabai also ought to place her in the context of the Western Rajasthani and Brajbhasha traditions of language and

oral poetry besides analysing her relationships to the Krishna cult, to the *pan-Indian concepts of the Divine*, as also to her body, herself, her community and her God. Her class too is inscribed in her imagery as unlike other Bhakti poets who use *imagery from the kitchen and workplace in their poetry*, Mirabai uses symbols like *suhag-sindoor*, bangles, head ornaments and fine dress materials all denoting in her case a bondage to convention, class, and male power that forces woman to beautify herself and obstructs her self-realisation.<sup>14</sup>

Understanding the I/self of the woman protagonist in women authored texts within the Indian context poses psycho - social questions, answers to which lead to a clearer understanding of the framework of the text, the characters and of the vision of the author herself. Estimating the 'I' of the woman protagonist needs to be critically seen in terms of the range of her experiences, her developments and of her overall growth as a worthwhile member of society. That she is a woman and has rights to enjoy life and all that it has to offer, further that she has a right to defend and uphold her convictions, is the basis for estimating the success of the self of the woman. In conclusion, it is worth quoting the three principles outlined by Malashri Lal to understand what she calls the **Law of the Threshold** and by which one might arrive at a definition of the self of the woman. Those three principle are -

First, interior space. This is a real and psychological location on this side of the threshold which means that the characteristic positional tools of the narrative derive from conventions commonly assumed by the author and/or her readers.

.....

The second operational space for the narrative is the threshold itself.

In this the text offers a balance between the widening of the protagonist's experiences and the codes of conduct prescribed upon her by generations of patriarchal society. In this is embedded the clash between the real and the imagined, of promises of freedom, risk, glory as well as of strictness, restraint, authority and frustration.

The third conceptual space in the law of the threshold is of course the world beyond the home, taking count of its real and metaphysical components. This space is operative for the woman who has made the irremediable choice in her one directional journey. She has accepted the challenge of a gender determined environment designed for the promotion and prosperity of men, and must contend with prejudices against her attempts to appropriate her own space in the name of personal dignity and social justice. Remembering that she is alone and isolated in a situation which functions by male consensus and collectivity, she has to devise strategies for survival of the self and acceptance by the 'other' almost simultaneously. .... For the 'new woman' the courage of her convictions is all she can rely upon .....<sup>15</sup>

It is thus that as readers we can estimate a woman's self by the range of her experiences, her capacity to assimilate them as part of her being and her courage to grow from those experiences and live by the powers of her enlightenment thereof.

#### Notes:

1. Showalter Elaine, *The Feminist Criticism*, London, Virago Press, 1986.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Tharu Susie, *Women Writing in India*, Vol I, OUP, 1993.

4. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature: Positions and Propositions*, Delhi Pencraft International, 1999
5. Chowdhury Indira, *The Frail Hero and Virile History*, OUP, 1998.
6. Tharu Susie, *Women writing in India*, OUP, 1993.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Jain Naresh, *Tradition and Modernity*, New Delhi, Manohar Publisher, 1998
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*
11. Bagchi Jasodhara, *Indian Women, Myth and Reality*, Hydreabad Sangam Books, 1995.
12. Roy Kumkum, *Women and The Hindu Right*.
13. Rajan, *Signposts: Gender Issues in Post Independence India*, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2001.
14. Satchidanandan, *Indian Literature*, Pencraft International, 1999.
15. Lal Malashri, *The law of the Threshold*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1996.

# 2

## Crossing the Laxman Rekha

*Indu and Rashmi in This  
Time of Morning and Roots  
and Shadows*

Women's writing over the ages has demonstrated developments in themes ranging from tales of sorrow and suffering, denials of the basics of human dignity to a consciousness of those needs, and finally to an awakening and realization of those essentials of human dignity required for meaningful existence. Tales of sorrow and suffering have drawn parallels with tales of the colonizer and the colonized, of the colonized marking an indent in the colonizer's life and of finally converting that indent into a massive fissure and breaking loose from the colonization. Through such momentous role play of historical activity, visible in powerful texts by women writers, what we as readers experience is a sensitive growth of the spirit of the colonized, of a deliberate internalization of energy and ultimately a profound crystallisation of that energy to emerge as a powerful entity designed to leave a lasting impression on our minds. The text as such steps beyond the simple confines of just an artistic endeavor: it becomes a monumental record of growth and energy, of life and living, of self and society; indeed a beautiful document of things imagined as well as felt, of things lived as well as denied: a dichotomy so characteristic of our lives; almost like a leaf from life itself.

This being the general trend in women's writing the world over, women's writing in India has not been much distant thematically from those in other parts of the world. However, given the locale specificity of literatures produced at various points in history, women's writing in India too exhibit some characteristics. These

characteristics are unique to the Indian soil, Indian culture as well as to the Indian psyche. These characteristics bring the reader closer to the text: the text thus talks of leaves from Indian life in terms of smells, sounds, colours, movements and stagnations, religions and ceremonies. The text throws open minds of men and women, show their relationship, the tensions, the frustrations and the happiness therein. Of course, it may be argued that literature being a product of life, all literatures talk of relationships and related themes. But the point one needs to keep in mind within the context of women's writing in India is this, that the Indian subcontinent passed through a period of colonization. Therefore, women's writing in India, in terms of influences can be divided into two parts - women's writing in colonized India or pre independence era and women's writing in India in post colonial or post independence era. Even within these two phases one can trace various other influences specific to a number of years or a particular historical event (for example, in post colonial India, the Nehruvian years or the 1977 Emergency). But the fact remains that women's writing in India has grown as a genre to merit critical study. To elaborate one may say that women's writing in India has not in terms of themes been distant from the prevailing situation of the times, references to literature produced in pre independence era, for example, have been made in chapter I. Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us has reference to the emergency in post independent India. This does not in any way mean that women's writing in India deserves attention simply be-

cause of the fact that they have been politically conscious and have had an influence on the readers political consciousness. Texts authored by Indian women writers have satisfied both artistic and aesthetic needs of readers: these texts exhibit fine qualities of the writer to introduce, develop and build up themes, relationships and exemplify characters within a complex, heterogeneous Indian society. And like all great works of art, these texts too, show the continuity in terms of time and space, which in the Indian context highlight the pastness of the present: that our present is a product of our past and that our future will be determined by our present. This continuity in time and space accounts for the uniqueness of our country. In this regard one might to quote V.S. Naravane.

PERHAPS THE most impressive feature of India's cultural history is the deep sense of continuity that has been maintained through more than five thousand years of cultural development. In India, the past has always been gathered up in the present and carried forward into the future. When anything new is accepted, the old is not supplanted but preserved in a modified form.

'In no other country', says Max Muller, 'is the past so visibly present as in India, the southernmost home of the ancient family of Aryan speech.' (F. Max Muller : *India: What can it teach us ?* Delhi, Munshi Ram Manohar Lal 1961) (Reprint).

Like a mighty banyan tree, Indian culture has grown and begotten branches that have again become roots, and grown once again. That is why there has always been a tendency to disclaim originality, and to place one's work, even one's message, in a traditional framework. Thinkers, artists, poets and religious reformers did not try to project themselves as innovators even when they had something new to offer.<sup>1</sup>

The sense of continuity in the midst of change is an overwhelming reality in the great Indian scenario. Age old customs and traditions which have found mention in literary texts have acquired new meaning and dimension. For example Hindu icons like the Sita-Savitri images have on analysis reflected the bias towards preserving patriarchal traditions at the cost of the woman's self; or for example, the term Griha Laxmi, a term cunningly compounded to deify woman and to ensure that she confines herself to domesticity. And when all this finds reflection in woman authored texts, it assumes the significance of Sita crossing the Laxmanrekha. For then the texts would not conform to traditional practices where women would not occupy space, where women would not articulate and where women would not take part in any speech act - they would occupy what Spivak calls only "a space of silence". Giving voice to women or even giving women a right to think would in the traditional sense imply crossing the Laxman Rekha, which both Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal's heroines do successfully. This is what gives to them an identity.

Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal are both products of post colonial India. While the influences that shaped either of them as writers have been different yet a study of novels authored by them shows closeness to the Indian soil, to methods and practices in Indian society, indeed to the complex matrix called India. Their novels also show how keen observers they are of men and women, their relationships and of the position of women therein.

Indian society in post colonial era has been a society in transition - passing from the traditional to the modern. There has been a shift in value systems, shift in roles of men and women and therefore, a shift in lifestyles and expectations between men and women. It is in this continuously progressive society that Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal position themselves and explore the dynamics operating therein. The forces determining the operation of social dynamics are many - cultures, traditions, languages, needs, ambitions, frustrations. It is the continuous permutation and combination of these factors that determine the evolution of the average Indian. And in a fast changing society like ours, these factors often cease to be just factors, they become forces, forces that determine the lifestyles of people or even groom or break personalities. The overpowering impact of these forces on the lives of men and women give birth to a crisis: a crisis wherein one is confused about ones values or priorities, a crisis wherein one is face to face with a gap between the ideal and the real - of a difference in one's own self and the reflection in the mirror. It is a crisis that one perhaps never foresaw at any point of one's growth. It is a crisis that demands a new energy to overcome the situation or come to terms with it. This new energy might mean evolving a new value system or seeing anew the benefits in established order.

This is quite the situation Indu is placed in Shashi Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983). Indu as the study reveals belongs to a well to do South Indian

family. She is educated, rational and secular with little or no faith in things that do not lend themselves to logical explanations. She is strong-willed and believes in following the dictates of her mind and less of the pressures of society. So she chooses to marry Jayant, almost as a means to assert her individuality. Her marriage leads her through a process of discovery and realisation of the gap between the ideal and the real, of her losses and gains from life with Jayant. The novel reveals all this when Indu comes back to her ancestral home to attend the funeral of Akka, her father's aunt. This novel is as O.P. Bhatnagar say, "a woman's attempt to assert her individuality and realize her freedom. It depicts how it brings her into confrontation with family, with the male world and society in general". *Saurie*

The novel begins with a prologue in which there is a description of Mini's wedding. The wedding takes place only after Akka's death and control over family property is settled. The marriage shows Indu performing duties like any other woman of the family and yet continuously assessing herself in the light of all that is happening and all that has happened so far.

The novel introduces us to Indu, now a young woman of twentynine, with a flair for creative writing. The novel covers a period of ten years and moves backwards in time to show the development of the main woman character Indu in contrast to the other women in the novel.

The novel begins at a point when Indu is not quite at peace at her workplace.

At this point she receives the letter asking her to go back to her ancestral home. She returns home to a family she had disagreed with in terms of manners and views on life. On her return she gets the opportunity to briefly interact with Akka who dies soon afterwards. On her homecoming, Indu once again meets all members of her family amid a familiar established order; and as she does so events from her childhood flash across her mind's eye - for her to evaluate changes over time. In the middle of it all Indu meets Naren, her childhood friend. This is the point where Indu really evaluates herself as a woman and the narrative moves back and forth to reveal forces which have shaped Indu as she faces us, the readers at twenty-nine. We are privy to her thoughts, "But there's a difference between 18 and 29. At 29, knowing Akka and myself, I knew there would be neither repentance nor forgiveness on either side." (20)

As the novel reveals Indu has been married for the past couple of years. She had married Jayant with the belief that she would be completely happy as she could be her true self. But over the years she realizes that living with Jayant she has learnt to curb her desires. She does things that Jayant would want her to do, think as Jayant would want her to. It is as she confesses, "When I look in the mirror, I think of Jayant, when I dress I think of Jayant, when I undress I think of him. Always what he wants, what he would like, what would please him". (54)

In fact, she ceases to be the woman she had wanted to be. This is the contra-

diction Indu is faced with at a stage of her life when she has come back to her home and all eyes are looking at her for a judicious implementation of Akka's will. It is she who Akka chooses to control the property, the reason being perhaps as Jayant explain to Indu-"You're indomitable ..... Perhaps you are like her."

(6)

And yet when Indu meets Naren, she suddenly seems to lose all control over herself. She succumbs to the temptations of the moment, almost as a means to assert her womanhood. She is conscious of her feelings for Naren, it makes her vulnerable. And she does not shy away from the moment. Following this however, she is torn apart by thoughts of the wrongs she has done to Jayant - "Adultery ..... what nuances of wrong doing ..... no, it needs the other strong, word ..... what nuances of sin the word carries. I will now brood on my sin, be crushed under a weight of guilt and misery". (170)

The novel bears testimony to this kind of questioning in Indu's mind all the time. These questions assist in Indu's growth, that mark her out from the other women in the family, she thinks and grows as a result of it. She is not afraid of thinking. She had broken away from the traditional concept that women had no brains years back as a child in her teens. And when in an uncontrollable mood she had shared her hurt with Old Uncle who had said to her : "For a woman, intelligence is always a burden Indu. We like our women not to think ..... It's always going to happen to you

Indu. People are afraid, resentful of brains. Take it in your stride. And pity them".  
(36)

It is this thread that marks the progression of Indu. She rationalizes her feelings for Jayant, she arrives at a conclusion of the meaning of love; all this only when she comes home and meets Naren. With Naren she realizes the burdens of her marriage. She realizes to her horror that far from doing things in her own way, she actually does and lives life to Jayant's satisfaction. And not only this, she submits herself gradually in the name of love to Jayant; simply because she did not want conflict in her married life. One might even go a step further and say that as her's was a love marriage she wanted to make her relationship a success so that her family was not troubled. Again, her confession says it all -

*The hideous ghost of my own cowardice confronted me as I thought of this ..... that I had clung tenaciously to Jayant, to my marriage, not for love alone, but because I was afraid of failure, I had to show them that my marriage, that I was a success ..... And so I went on lying, even to myself. (115)*

In Indu's frustration one sees the contradictions between tradition and modernity. Here is a young woman who is caught between the demands of traditions and the demands of modernity of which she is a product. She is unable to break loose of all those customs and traditions on which she was brought up - how to serve food the right way, how to gather flowers in the morning, how to present oneself at a social gathering, how to arrange water for elders to bathe, how to light

the fire in the morning. She mastered all these mechanical acts as any other woman member of the family, and yet she was different. Her difference lay in her ability to rationalize her feelings. For example, when she commits “adultery” with Naren she broods over this act and comes to the following conclusion. “Wronging Jayant ? I winced at the thought. But had I not wronged Jayant even before this? By pretending, by giving him spurious coin instead of the genuine kind? I had cheated him of my true self. That, I thought dishonourable, dishonest, much more than this, what I have done with Naren. ? (188)

She discovers that there is nothing called “love”. It is only a concept that exists in books and movies and anyone who believes in it is trapped and becomes humble and dependent. The concept of love is false to Indu. So, when Naren asks her what the truth is, she says - “The sexual instinct ..... That is true. The material instinct ..... That is true too. Self interest, self love ..... They are the basic truths .....” (173)

Indu’s inner struggle shows her ability to confront her dishonesty with life, of the wide gap between the ideal and the real; and yet accept her predicament with ease. Her inner struggle gives her the courage to accept herself as she discovers herself to be, not a “pure woman” as she confesses and yet live life as per norms of middle class society. She finally decides to go back to life with Jayant even though she realizes that there is no real understanding between them. Her thoughts are

conveyed to us to reveal Indu's predicament. "Go back to Jayant. What kind of a life can you build on a foundation of dishonesty ..... Now I would go back and see that home, could stand the scorching touch of honesty. Nevertheless, I know I would not tell Jayant about Naren and me." (205)

Indu's mind clearly is always debating. If on the one hand she works for a woman's magazine, on the other she hates her womanhood because it was something thrust upon her: she hated it from the day she was made aware of it and had to conform to societal norms because she belonged to the womankind. Infact, this is what made her a rebel.

In this novel Shashi Deshpande presents/portrays a young educated modern Indian woman caught in the turmoil of accepting or rejecting established order while being influenced by scientific knowledge of the present age. She shows the flaws of the Sati - Savitri image and as such the question asked is where does a woman like Indu fit in? Should society reject her ? After all she has sinned. The other argument however, is this, that life being a process of growth, Indu's encounters with various situations help her to grow in spirit and achieve a new understanding with things around her. With this new image she seeks to establish a connection between herself and the outside world.

The conflict between traditions and modernity seems to be the implied dilemma in a society in transition, like ours - the great Indian society. And in this

diaspora replete with activities and movements back and forth in time and space a novelist like Shashi Deshpande or Nayantara Sahgal uses a woman protagonist as a mouthpiece for revealing the intricacies, beauties and tensions that sustain and help enhance self development of the woman, as it is the <sup>by</sup> self of the woman that is being highlighted and upheld as never before. This is the departure that the novelists make from accepted norms and once again cross the Laxman Rekha not under the guise of gullibility or vulnerability but deliberately to explore the world beyond the dreaded Laxman Rekha.

Nayantara Sahgal's **This Time of Morning** (1965) like Shashi Deshpande's **Roots and Shadows** deals with the tradition modernity problem. As the title implies, the novel is set in post independence era or rather in the morning after independence. The tradition modernity problem in this novel lends itself to discussion by focusing on a series of relationships. This novel also adds another feature intrinsic to the lives of us Indians - the place of Hinduism in our day to day lives. To quote Nayantara Sahgal's words on this issue taken from *Passion for India* -

What does it (Hinduism) mean today? How does this culture affect our conduct, our decisions, that sort of thing? What kind of person is the inheritor of this inheritance?

Hinduism is of interest to me because most of us are Hindus, but even those who aren't, live under the social and psychological overhang of Hinduism. *It is not something we can ignore, if we want to understand ourselves.*<sup>2</sup>

This Time of Morning as mentioned earlier is suggestive of the morning after independence. It captures those moments when men at the helm of affairs had to plan courses of action, implement programmes and chalk out strategies for the optimum use of resources. The novel is full of people close to seats of power, politics and given to a way of life full of laughing, drinking, dancing and making merry. The novel also implies as a result of its settings, forums for exchange of ideas, seminars, conferences, discussions, protests, demonstrations as means to establish a new society: after all this is the morning after independence, the post independent India.

As mentioned earlier, the plot in the novel takes shape through a series of relationships. At the center of it all is Rashmi and her decision to walk out on Dalip, her husband. She is the daughter of Kailash and Mira. Kailash is a lawyer who decides to give up his practice and join Gandhi's Satyagraha. His wife Mira is a devout woman committed to ancient Hindu traditions. The novel reveals that Rashmi's marriage does not last for more than six years. On her separation she meets Rakesh, a member of the I.F.S; someone who had secretly longed for her. Rakesh quickly senses what might be wrong with her - "It was marriage that had altered her, made her a moth trapped in cement" (108)

What actually went wrong in the marriage we do not know. Rashmi, now out of marriage meets Neil Berensen, the architect of the Peace Institute. His family is

away in Norway. Rashmi has an affair with Neil. But the novel shows the contrast between Rashmi and Leela. Leela takes a fancy for the American way of life but fails to live up to the pressures when she discovers that she is pregnant. Leela commits suicide. Other unhappy couples in the novel are Saleem and Saira on the one hand and Arjun Mitra and his wife Uma on the other. Uma as the novel reveals has taken to a lot of drinking and has no inhibitions about sex. The other character worth mentioning is Kalyan Singh. He is a minister without any portfolio. He is charismatic, so much so that young Nita who otherwise dreads the idea of marriage falls a prey to Kalyan Singh's charms.

As is evident from the novel, Nayantara Sahgal does not attempt moralising on what is right or wrong. She presents a situation which demands an interpretation of morality in a new light. It is an interpretation which rejects rigidity and favours freedom for the sake of growth. Nayantara Sahgal seems to question the oppressive nature of traditional marriages founded on Hindu rituals. It is a baffling mix of philosophy and superstition - one cannot accept any one in isolation. It is a crisis - "You cannot accept Hinduism in its entirety without harbouring ignorance and superstition too. You could not wholly reject it without destroying part of yourself, for it was the story of India". (40)

This being the author's view we see it exemplified in Rashmi's decision to walk out on marriage. It is apparent that she finds marriage oppressive. Her decision

shocks her mother -

“Rashmi’s announcement was worse than bad news. It was a mortal blow to all she held sacred. ——— What reason under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers.” (146)

Rashmi brushes aside all this and seeks freedom - including sexual freedom. When she gives herself to Kalyan she acknowledges her freedom to him - “The freedom to be myself. I’d never have known it but for you”. — b ?

In this novel, therefore, Nayantara Sahgal interrogates the dictates of traditions on the lives of women. It is apparent that she hints at the need for effective communication between members of society as a means of achieving spiritual freedom which is so essential to life. Rashmi’s relation with Neil shows her inner need for communication and to be completely alive to the sights and sounds around her: to experience life in all its magnificence as a woman. It is a concept by which women too, deserve the right to celebrate life. This is what Nayantara Sahgal seems to put forward in this novel. It is an unconventional idea, as, traditionally, women were not expected to know anything beyond domesticity; proving once again the limitations of the dreaded Laxman Rekha and boldly crossing it: an idea that is carried further in other novels, such as Storm in Chandigarh or The Day in Shadow. It is a situation in which women grow and live with honour as dignified human be-

ings. This is the first requirement before they make substantial and meaningful contributions to society.

In the preceding pages Shashi Deshpande's **Roots and Shadows** and Nayantara Sahgal's **This Time of Morning** has been discussed to bring out the complications of a society in transition and the effect on ordinary men and women. Clearly the focus in both these novels is women. The novels show the predicament of the main women characters, their tensions therein and consequently trace their development. The plot in the novels thicken as the chief women protagonists assume their true colours or rather as the authors would want them to be: after all the text is the means of communication between the author and the reader. The authors seem to suggest that placed in difficult situations the modern Indian woman can respond by following the will of her reason in a secular and rational manner.

Both novels even though set in post colonial India echo differences; differences in settings, value systems, interaction with the outside world: indeed the men and women portrayed in the novels are different from each other. Shashi Deshpande's **Roots and Shadows**, for example, is limited to a family, a home with its own set of problems unique in itself. Nayantara Sahgal's **This Time of Morning** however, steps beyond the confines of the home and addresses the problems of customs and traditions on a larger scale - on the larger Indian scene. These being the general differences, specific differences meet the eye of the reader when one carefully attempts

a character study of the chief women protagonists in both novels - Indu and Rashmi. These women function as mouthpiece of the authors in all situations that they encounter. The authors views being untraditional, the women characters too, exhibit traits of being non-conformists. They do not comply to the sati-savitri images. In this context P. Ramamoorthi's words might be quoted from "*My life is my own*"—

“The culture that created a Sita and a Gandhari has denied existence to woman except as a daughter/sister, a wife/daughter-in-law. The Hindu society has denied woman the possibility of being a ‘SHE’, a person capable of achieving individuation. She is a non person and as described in Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope: 'Women should not be': Man’s relationship with woman is most often the bond that exists between a master and a slave. Woman is an object and she is essential to man because it is in seeking to be made whole through her that man hopes to attain self realization. It is in such a culture in recent times, that voices of dissent are heard.<sup>3</sup>

One such voice of dissent is Indu’s. From a very early age, the novel reveals, Indu’s mind had been alive to the sights and sounds around her. She had taken pains to develop her opinions by questioning accepted standards and at a later date even rejecting some of them. Indu as we find in the novel is not able to completely break loose from traditional way of life: her ancestral home being symbolic of such a life, she comes back to her home to modify it. Thus in her relation with Naren she breathes fresh air and having done so, returns to her life with Jayant.

The essential point to consider while studying these novels is this, that the

authors carve out a space for their heroines to develop. Rashmi, for example, breaks the fetters of her marriage and thereby asserts her right to live as per her wishes. Her breaking away from the bounds of marriage reveal the limitations of traditional Hindu definitions of women as wife, mother, sister or daughter lived and realized within the confines of marriage: for marriage to a woman means after all assuming another identity in relation to a man. Rashmi's departure from age old norms shows the necessity of a 20th century educated Indian woman to explore the intricacies of life, so that the spirit is enriched. This exploration might mean ignoring middle class sexual morality and seeking freedom in sexual terms as well. It might mean discarding the image of woman as sex object to woman as a liberated joyous and autonomous being. Rashmi seems to move close to this ideal. In her relation with Neil and later with Kalyan Singh her words are significant. She thanks Kalyan for giving to her the opportunity to exercise her freedom. It is perhaps such a consciousness in Rashmi that shocks her mother, Mira. By contrasting Mira and Rashmi we very clearly see the divide between the traditional and the modern outlook as described by Nayantara Sahgal -

In every novel the heroine has moved one step further away from the stereotype of the virtuous woman into a new definition of virtue..... What does these three women (Rashmi, Saroj, and Simrit) walking out have to do with their virtue? The meaning of *sati* is a virtuous woman. And this is synonymous with self-immolation- a tradition arising out of the concept that woman is her husband's property and has no other life. Traditional virtue lies in staying put, suffering. The new woman does the opposite. No more *sati*, she is determined to live, and to live in self-respect. Her virtue is courage, which is

a willingness to risk the unknown and to face the consequences.<sup>4</sup>

To sum up the situation of these two women, Indu and Rashmi, we find that first of all both the women are placed in diametrically opposite frames. Indu's is a traditional set-up, the ancestral home being symbolic of it, the people therein are products of the system and do not question the same; Indu is the only exception. Rashmi's on the other hand is a much more progressive society with western educated intellectuals on the lookout for a new set of values which will benefit large masses of people. It is a society that thinks, acts and develops plans for the future. This does not mean that this society is away from age old traditions and customs. They are as much a product of the past as Indu's society is; the difference being that Indu's society still lives in it but Rashmi's lives in a modified version.

Secondly, in terms of their range of experiences we find that Rashmi's life offers more interaction with members of the outside world than Indu. Indu's life seems restricted to her home, members therein, and to her husband. The treatment of these two worlds is also different in both the novels. Shashi Deshpande takes pains to record every sight, sound, smell, colour; in fact every breeze that blows and shakes a leaf in the ancestral home finds a place in the reader's imagination. Sahgal's world on the other hand captures moments and words exchanged between people in a series of relationships. It is through the semantics of such utterances that we as readers conjure up visions in our mind's eye.

Thirdly, it is in terms of the actual experience that both these women undergo and sustain the pressures of growth that we are able to spot the differences between Indu and Rashmi. While considering the differences it is essential to look at Shormistha Panja's comments in "*Women and Literary Space*" where she says "It is about how they learn the new alphabet of their body and speak in non-habitual ways, in starts, pauses, ellipses and about how in the process they break syntax with its inbuilt structures of domination and subordination."<sup>5</sup>

Both women "learn the new alphabets of their body", infact they seek the freedom essential for growth and sustenance through a culmination of the sexual activity. In Indu's experience this seems a momentary but conscious escape from a life otherwise governed by prescribed rules of conduct. For Rashmi, however, this is a break away from norms unacceptable to her. Having experienced freedom which made her a conscious being Indu returns to her husband, to marriage, only to establish a renewed fresh relationship with the world around her. Rashmi on the other hand, rejects prescriptive behaviour. She rises above the constraints of morality and seeks enrichment of her spirit. So for both Indu and Rashmi crossing the Laxman Rekha consisted in courageously making amends in sacred societal conventions such as marriage so that they could experience freedom in order that their "corporeal ground of intelligence" was kindled and they had sufficient reason to celebrate the very essence of their femininity.

In conclusion one might say that both the writers talk of resistance, but not to imperialists. They talk of matters such as gender and class in Indian society. In this case applying the essential biologism of French Feminists may not be applicable. However, it is significant to observe that within a society still in the shadows of tradition, notes of dissent from an otherwise marginalized section - women, lend insight into the dimensions of change hitherto unseen. Such changes occur from within the four walls of the home to acquire larger proportions outside. If women like Indu and Rashmi can be models for other women placed in similar situations to follow, then the purpose of the text— being a means of communication between the author and the reader will be achieved. It is then that changes from within the four walls of the home will actually acquire larger proportions outside as visualised by the authors.

Notes:

- v.s.
1. Naravane, *A Cultural History of Modern India*, New Delhi, Northern Book Centre, 1991.
  2. Sahgal Nayanantara, "Passion for India", *Indian Literature*, Vol- 32, Jan-Feb, 1989.
  3. Ramamoorthi, *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. — ??
  4. Sahgal Nayanantara, "Passion for India", Indian Literature, Vol. 32, Jan-Feb. 1989. b? x
  5. Nanavati and Kar, *Rethinking Indian English Literature*, Delhi, Pencraft International, 2000. b? i

# 3

## **We Are Not Sati – Savitris**

*'Saru' and 'Devi' in the Dark Holds  
no Terrors and A Situation  
in New Delhi*

Writing as a form of outlet for suppressed feelings was the primary objective with which women started writing. This stage was characterised by writing in diaries, pamphlets etc. This stage was followed by women exchanging such notes as a means of sharing sorrows and seeking consolation. Gradually such practices led to that stage when women started writing novels for an intended audience, that is women. Capturing readership among women with the sole purpose of communicating ideas and generating a feeling of oneness and of solidarity has been the means of raising consciousness about issues related to women. Consciousness raising has been the massive task that women authors had set themselves to and achieved, thereby establishing a sense of sisterhood among women and also establishing the supremacy of the text as being a means for that end. Thus women being able to write and communicate ideas was proved through this woman to woman bonding.

Women being able to write and author texts was an unacceptable notion in patriarchy. Through a long drawn process women writers have established that not only can women author texts, but they can also author texts of great value – texts which can stand the tests of time. These great texts written by women talk of matters which are local and global, psychological and social, traditional and contemporary. Such texts record every minute detail in the

lives of the characters depicted and through such characterisation women authors explore in detail the hidden self of their chief women characters. Upholding the hidden self of the women characters results in that bonding between the author and the female reader because it is then that a woman to woman communication takes place : each understands why certain things are said or done or even why silence is maintained. This form of communication is something unique between members of the female of the species, each seeks in the other a support and a solace. To understand this point more clearly it will be worthwhile quoting Shashi Deshpande who says –

You know, like when I had just started writing, my husband and his brother were talking about their mother, my mother-in-law who was a widow. A Brahmin widow lives a very bad life. She was shaven, she could only take one meal a day, she could dress only in one kind of sari, she could not wear colour etc. I was just talking to my brother-in-law about how terrible her life was and he said: 'But she does not say it is terrible, she must be happy. I think she would tell us if it were terrible'. I thought then that men cannot hear, because unless she shouts they will not hear her. I can hear her without her saying things, you know, because we are on the same wavelength.

There is a kind of deafness in the gender barrier – between classes, between genders, between wherever there is a difference. There is this kind of a barrier which prevents us from hearing. To that extent men who read my books, many of them are made very uncomfortable. Maybe it would be a punishment for men to be made to read them (laughs). But I think more than anything else that it is enlightening. It opens up their minds..... Especially as my books go into the female

mind and the psychology of the human female which a text book may tell you about, but a living human being you create in a book can tell you much better because that person is real.<sup>1</sup>

Shashi Deshpande's words clearly suggest that women's writing has moved far ahead from patriarchal limitations summarised in the term "lack". Cora Kaplan explains the meaning of "lack" in **Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness** by stating that -

The phallus as a signifier has a central, crucial position in language, for if language embodies the patriarchal law of the culture, its basic meanings refer to the recurring process by which sexual difference and subjectivity are acquired ..... Thus, the little girl's access to the Symbolic i.e., to language and its laws, is always negative and/or mediated by intro-subjective relation to a third term, for it is characterized by an identification with lack.

————— ? page?

The term "lack" seemed to have been the dominant motif ruling patriarchal culture as Elaine Showalter puts it in "**Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness**"-

In **The Madwoman in the Attic**, for example, Gilbert and Gubar structure their analysis of women's writing around metaphors of literary paternity. 'In patriarchal culture,' they maintain, ..... the text's author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis'. Lacking phallic authority they go on to suggest, women's writing is profoundly marked by the anxieties of this difference: 'If the pen is a metaphorical penis, from what organ can females generate texts?'

————— pen?

However, with the movement to restructure literary traditions much has

happened in resurrecting women's writing as a genre worthy of critical attention. Indeed, if one goes back to Shashi Deshpande's words quoted a little earlier it would appear that Virginia Woolf's belief that women's literature holding the "promise of a precious speciality, a distinctly female vision" has actually become a reality. A woman authored text records every single moment in the life of a woman character, her happiness, her sorrows, her frustrations, her success; indeed every breath of hers finds mention in the text, so much so that one realizes that the essential predicament of the modern novel is this: loneliness of the individual in modern society. And once this stage is arrived at the journey inwards begins as well.

The journey inwards into the psyche of the main/central woman character of a given novel marks a fascinating journey, at once strange and beautiful, built on layers of experiences reciprocating all the time, in some form or the other, to external forces and at the same time developing a defense mechanism unique to the individual psyche. This journey inwards traces a consciousness apparently linear in motion but marked almost all the time by back and forth movements in terms of time and space, characteristic of change and development, characteristic of the process of existence, of life itself.

The dynamics of the internal workings of the individual woman psyche points to the tremendous latent energy within. This energy finds expression in various situations within the context of a novel. These expressions further disown the culture

created by a Sita or a Savitri or even a Gandhari whereby existence was denied to a woman except as mother, daughter, wife or sister. This culture effectively marginalized woman as the 'other' and denied to her the right to a 'self'. However, the workings of the mind of the woman, the consciousness of the woman protagonist dispel all such theories and establish the primal concern of feminists – that woman is a being. She is not an appendage to man and she is not an 'other'. She is an autonomous 'being' capable of finding her salvation through a process of trial and error. It is a rather moderate stand as compared to the extremists reactions in feminist literature of creating “female enclaves”.<sup>2</sup> It is an acceptance that women too, can live in a world where men also live. Such a stand lends itself to the exploration of the “feminine mystique”.<sup>3</sup> This exploration delves deep into the female psyche and reveals the mysteries of the life and situations the woman protagonist is placed in.

Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande are among the prominent Indo – Anglian women writers who deal with themes related to the Indian soil. Their novels talk of the multiple dimensions of a society in the process of change – moving from the old into the new and of evolving a new set of values acceptable to contemporary times. Against this background both the authors develop their narrative which then becomes a living testimony of the life and times we all are placed in; and in the center of all this flux is the central woman character of the novel. Indeed one might say that the world presented in the novel is the world as seen by the woman protagonist.

The narrative operates at two levels – one which describes the physical world the protagonist is placed in. This includes the homes, the buildings, the cities, the people, their relationships, success stories and stories of failure. The other level which is hidden from public eye is the more fascinating world of the inner being of the heroine. It is this inner being that binds the novel and gives to it a character. The inner being is perpetually hidden from public eye but finds expression in gestures, movements, eye contacts which the woman character establishes with other characters in the novel. It is the workings of this inner being that help us trace the development of the protagonist, understand her, particularly why she does all that she does or rejects certain things. This inner being is always active and dynamic, perpetually in the throes of change and development. The workings of this inner being give to the protagonist an identity.

Establishing this identity is by itself a step forward in the direction towards feminist writings. Age old cultures would have us believe that women cannot think. Therefore, she does not possess a ‘self’ – she always has to be an ‘other’: marginalized and ignored. However, the novels of Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal gives centrality to the inner being of their women characters.

Shashi Deshpande’s heroine Sarita in **The Dark Holds No Terrors** (1980) seeks the freedom to be an emancipated person by revolting against the wishes of her traditional, orthodox mother. The novel begins by showing a tired Sarita, also

referred to as Saru, returning awkwardly to her parents home after the death of her mother. Sarita returns awkwardly because it was she who at an earlier point has disagreed with her mother over issues ; as for example – over the decision to pursue a career or over the choice to marry Manu. She had also resented to accepting and following religiously age old customs and traditions designed to circumscribe the lives of women.

Sarita is an educated modern day Indian woman, a doctor by profession and a reputed one too. The roots of her frustration go back to her childhood days when Dhruva, her brother was born. The family had rejoiced over his birth, symbolic of the divide between the girl child and the male child. “They had named him Dhruva. I can remember even now faintly, a state of joyous excitement that had been his naming day. The smell of flowers, the black grinding stone ....” (152) As is quite obvious the mother was attached to the son, for it would be he who would light the funeral fire. However, Dhruva dies at the tender age of seven in an accident and Saru is blamed for it – “You killed him. Why didn’t you die? Why are you alive when he’s dead?” (152)

This antagonism between the mother and the daughter widens as the novel develops. For Sarita, the hurts of discrimination inflicted upon her while Dhruva was alive led her always to rebel against the wishes of her mother. The first step in rebellion was to pursue higher studies – she takes to medical studies and becomes a

doctor. Later, she marries a person of her choice. The novel recounts a bitter exchange of words between Sarita and her mother

“What caste is he?

I don't know

A Brahmin ?

Of course not.

Then cruelly ..... his father Keep a cycle shop”. (87)

Sarita's marriage to Manu is a means to assert her individuality. She marries Manu in the hope of getting love, affection and security which was hitherto denied to her. “I was hungry for love. Each act of sex was a triumphant assertion of our love, of my being loved, of my being wanted”. (35)

She succeeds in being loved and wanted by her husband till the point when her career starts taking an edge over his. This results in a divide between her and her husband and Sarita again is the unloved person she once was. The period covered between her marriage to Manu and the time prior to her success acts as a flight of fancy whereby her desires to be loved and cared for were fulfilled. The demands of her success meant her returning home late. It also meant a circle of friends different from her husband's. It also meant new visitors at home. Her inability to find time for

her home irritates her husband. He expresses it thus. “I am sick of this place. Let’s get out of here soon”. He no longer loves her the way he used to and Saru feels it. She starts hating the man-woman relationship which is based on attraction and need and not on love –

“Love ..... how she scorned the word now. There was no such thing between man and woman. There was only a need which both fought against, futilely ..... turning into a thing called love. It’s only a word she thought. Take away the word, the idea and the concept will wither away.” (65)

Sarita is placed in a difficult situation. She feels the disappearance of love and attachment which she had once developed. She is now faced with a psychological conflict. She has to balance between the urges of her womanhood and the demands of her roles in society. If on the one hand it is her pride at being a successful doctor and a woman at that, which is the issue, on the other it is the same woman vis-à-vis her societal roles that seem to cause impediments in her path to glory. Sarita however, does not shy away from the roles expected of her. She is keen to perform them to the best of her abilities, should time permit. All this leads to a communication barrier in her married life. The bliss in her conjugal relationship with her husband breaks down. He takes to sexual assault as a means to assert his masculinity. It terrifies and humiliates Sarita so much so that she cannot even speak of it, even to him – “And

each time it happened and I don't speak. I put another brick on the wall of silence between us. May be one day I will be walled alive within it and die a slow painful death." (88)

Sarita's life seems to raise questions related to the institution of marriage which seems to be a strange combination of several forces working upon two human beings. These forces ensure that both the man and the woman are able to fulfill their ambitions within marital life, while fulfilling their roles in society. The roles assigned to each person has both a functional and a psychological level. At the functional level a woman has to be a wife, a mother, a sister, a daughter. Similarly, at the psychological level she is expected to be a companion and a partner to her husband. The burden of balancing between the roles becomes a big task for Sarita. Her economic ascendancy results in a consequent fall in her domestic duties. She contemplates giving up her job, but Manu objects to this : "Come on Saru don't be silly. You know how much I earn. You think we can live this way on that?"

This burden of managing double duties results in discord in their married life, communication between them breaks down, disenchantment creeps in, the stage is just right for a separation.

At this point Saru receives the message of her mother's death and she goes back to her parent's home. On reaching there she finds that little has changed

physically. It is still the same home she was used to as a child. The only difference being that her mother is no longer alive to remind her of the fact that she is a woman which Sarita used to hate : “I can remember closing my eyes and praying ..... oh god, let it not happen to me. Let there be a miracle and let me be the one female to whom it doesn’t happen”. (55)

As Sarita returns to her parent’s home she is a much more awakened person than what she was when she left home. She has seen and experienced much more of life than her mother. Her experiences are both bitter and beautiful. The pleasant experiences are for all to see and judge. Sarita is a doctor of repute, someone who is looked upon with a lot of respect. However, the bitter truths of her life, the ugly facts of her marriage are facts she alone knows and will not share with anyone else. After all, she had married Manu by her choice.

In this novel Shashi Deshpande explores the internal conflict in an educated young woman placed in a situation wherein the ideal conflicts with the real, traditions conflict with modernity. Saru objects to traditions being thrust upon her on grounds that she belongs to the female of the species. Education makes her a changed person, one who expects more from people and from society. It is a consciousness which was not there in the older generation. As Marie Mies says :

The non conforming conduct of the women is not the consequence of an external necessity but of changed consciousness. They are not satisfied with the rhetoric of

equality between man and woman but want to see that the right *to an individual life and the right to development of their individual capabilities* are realized in their own lives.<sup>4</sup>

This is reflected in Saru's character, she represents the middle class working woman in modern India. She rebels against traditions but ultimately tries to compromise with existing reality. The transitional process of growth is recorded in the novel in different stages : flight to fancy, frustration, submission and finally an awakened acceptance.

Saru's predicament as the novel reveals is a psychological one, determined to a large extent by sociological factors. Her brother's death, her marriage, her success and the consequent strain in her personal life, all point to the hard realities of the modern Indian society where opportunities for upward mobility in society are open for both men and women; and it is a utilization of those opportunities that make life more challenging and rewarding. However, it is also true that in contemporary society new opportunities have also brought along with them new values. Implementing these values has meant interrogating established systems of relationships and redefining some or all the forces operating within those systems. Nayantara Sahgal's **A Situation in New Delhi** is an attempt at presenting such a restructuring of society.

Nayantara Sahgal's **A Situation in New Delhi** presents a violent aftermath following the death of Prime Minister Shivraj. This novel replicates the situation

which this country faced after the death of Nehru. The big question then was what will happen now that Nehru is no more ? Just as Nehru's death signified the death of a variety of parliamentary democracy so also A Situation in New Delhi portrays the chaos and confusion on the death of Shivraj. Shivraj is symbolic of a political system characterized by a set of values. He is survived by his widowed sister, Devi. Devi is a minister in the government.

A Situation in New Delhi needs to be appreciated in the light of three subplots. At the center of the novel is the Devi – Michael relationship. Michael, we are told is a British journalist. He was born in India, but left India to work in Britain. He has had close ties with India and particularly with Shivraj. He has also known Devi closely. On Shivraj's death Michael comes back to India and it is then that we have a glimpse of his relationship with Devi. Nayantara Sahgal takes pain to create the character of Devi. We are informed that she is a central minister. She is Shivraj's sister and she also has a son, Rishad. Devi is presented like other Sahgal heroines who seek self satisfaction in a society which is in transition. A society in transition, in the Indian context still lives in the throes of Hinduism which expects self immolation rather than self satisfaction from women. But Devi does not conform to norms. In her sexual relation with Michael one might read a coloniser – colonized story. Michael is British and he is completely under the spell of Devi. Their relationship is carried to a point where it is finally Devi who ends the relationship,

signifying India's demands for freedom. And even then Michael cannot forget India and Devi, significant perhaps of the complex nature of the Indo – British ties.

The plots in Nayantara Sahgal's novels often centre around relationships in the midst of trying political times. Thus in **A Situation in New Delhi** we see first of all the Michael – Devi relationship. This relationship is set in the aftermath of Shivraj's death. The death of Shivraj being symbolic of the death of an era, was characterised by anarchy, violence and loss of human dignity. In this situation the novelist plots the violent rape of Madhu in the University campus. Madhu's rape is the fall out of the chaotic situation rampant following the death of Shivraj. Madhu's public humiliation is a statement by the author about the plight of women in the contemporary times depicted. Consumerism and liberalization in society has reduced women to nothing but sex objects. The violence in public life leads to a total disruption of the dignity of private life and women are the worst sufferers. In this subplot we also see the author commenting upon marriages in India. With Madhu having brought about shame to her parents, her parents are now eager to marry her off which they think is the only solution. Devi tries her best to counsel them but to no avail. As she tells Michael – "Parents could be persuaded to delay almost anything except a girl's marriage. There was a tribal fanaticism about girl disposal."

It is this fanaticism that compels Madhu to end her life – signifying her release from traditions and a system governed by rules of self immolation, from a system

called patriarchy.

Another episode related to this is Pinky's marriage, which flaunts wealth. A culture of son-in-law worship is shown here, almost as a reminder that as long as sons-in-law are overvalued in the vulgar way that they are in Pinky's household, girls in India will continue to be correspondingly undervalued.

The third subplot is the Devi- Rishad – Skinny story line. Rishad, as mentioned earlier is Devi's son. Following the death of Shivraj, Rishad forms part of a group that attempts to erect a new value system. However, as a contrast to Shivraj's patient ways of persuasion and consensus, Rishad follows a policy of coercion. His methods are violent:- naxalite. He and his members believe in violence, as a means to establish order. Skinny is a friend of his. She is contrasted to Pinky in terms of her appearance and her commitment to action. She commits to help Rishad achieve his goals. Rishad dies before achieving his goals. However, the point worth noting is that in a society full of girls like Pinky, Skinny offers hope. She is young and will grow up in the mould of Devi. Nayantara Sahgal reposes hope for a violent situation in women such as Devi and girls such as Skinny.

Women like Saru and Devi who live by the dictates of their inner voice and being dispel all traditional notions that suggest that women cannot even think. Saru and Devi prove that they are not simply appendages to men, rather they live life and

experience the beauties that life has to offer so that they are an asset to society. They break away from traditional icons like Sita or Savitri in that their existence is not determined simply in relation to a man; they evolve an identity of their own. It is this identity which gives to them a reason to live for tomorrow.

In the preceding pages Shashi Deshpande's The Dark Holds No Terrors and Nayantara Sahgal's A Situation in New Delhi have been studied to discuss the predicament of women caught in the midst of tradition juxtaposed with modernity. Infact the conflict between tradition and modernity is the overwhelming issue in both novels ; the reasons for this are not far to see.

As mentioned earlier both Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal are products of post colonial India which is a product of the British legacy and of a decolonized national identity. It is also a product of the traditional Hindu order as well as of modern day rational influences from the west. This is to say that the India and its society that both Deshpande and Sahgal portray, is a complex of identities where the past is still embedded in the present and the present is still influenced by the past. In this situation one can neither disown the past completely and embrace the offerings of the present completely, neither can one be scared of the rumblings of the voices of change: one has to gracefully acknowledge the bricks of change in order to ensure that life goes on smoothly and securely.

Tradition versus modernity in a society in transition has been a central theme in the novels of both Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande. The novels show how the chief women characters cope with this problem. The novels also record each heroine's individual responses to the tradition – modernity divide. The texts in discussion bear testimony to the overpowering influences both these factors have on the lives of both Saru and Devi. The texts effectively show the extent to which traditions are accepted or rejected. The texts in discussion do not completely disown the past, they simply point to the pastness of the present and of how this shapes modern lives. Against this background both Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande position their women protagonists and it is against this background that differences in Saru and Devi can be understood. In other words one might say that the differences between these two women is a differences in the range of experiences – their lives beyond the “threshold”.

Saru's life in **The Dark Holds No Terrors** is restricted due to the sole reason that she belongs to the female of the species. Her western educated mind does not accept such a logic and she rebels at all levels – as a daughter and later as a woman. She chooses a career and decides to marry a man of her choice. Even though her flight of fantasy gives her momentary pleasure yet the demands of her successful career tell upon her and she finds herself lonely and rejected – with no one to share her sorrows. So, even though she has summoned the courage to live by her convictions, yet the novel shows her, towards the end, in a position of reconciliation

accepting with all that she had once rejected. This being the story line it is important to realize that Shashi Deshpande has succeeded in developing a vibrant stream of consciousness for Saru throughout the novel. It is this fact that marks this novel as distinctly woman centered: the woman's mind is alive and active to every sight and sound around her, she is a thinking being rejecting all patriarchal notions that women have no minds and cannot even think.

Nayantara Sahgal's A Situation in New Delhi clearly shows Devi having an active life beyond the home. Unlike Saru she did not have to rebel to seek that life, she inherited it. But the difference between her and Saru is this, that while Saru revolts to seek love and care and yearns for complete satisfaction till the very end of the novel, Devi enjoys sexual promiscuity as a means of fulfillment – reminding one of the French feminist Helene Cixous who said in *"The Laugh of the Medusa"* (1975)

Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same rationalization which serves the couple head/ genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is world wide. . .

Oral drive, anal drive, vocal drive – all these drives are our strengths, and among them is the gestation drive – just like the desire to write: a desire to live self from within, a desire for the swollen belly, for language, for blood.

— p?

Devi is not bound by traditional concepts of virtue whereas a good woman such as Saru is. Devi from the very beginning is poised at the “threshold” which Saru had to struggle to reach. From there Devi ventures out into an apparently man’s world to take decisions and frame destinies for many. This situation is succinctly summarized by Malashri Lal.

But poised at the threshold, she receives messages from the world out there too. It tells of other possibilities of her quasi manhood – freedom, risk, glory, death. Recall for instance the heroines of Nayantara Sahgal in **A Situation in New Delhi** or **Rich Like us**. Her women grow within tradition but have sufficient awareness of man’s professional enterprise to imagine adopting the manner of life for themselves. Sahgal places them amidst the corruptions of Indian politics and bureaucracy, testing their mettle in turbulent periods of civic reorganization.<sup>5</sup>

In conclusion one can say that the primary concern of both Sahgal and Deshpande is women in Indian society. However, they are not content in showing the sufferings that women undergo, they are committed to explore the details of the situation that their women are placed in. At this point it would be pertinent to refer to Nayantara Sahgal’s comment on the tradition – modernity divide.

As a Hindu and a woman, I am naturally interested in discovering sanctions for the liberty and equality of woman within Hinduism if I can. What makes woman great, apparently is some barbaric and wasteful sacrifice. Gandhari in the Mahabharat keeps her eyes bandaged all her life because her husband is blind. Anasuya in the Markandaya Purana is married to a leper ..... She even carries

him on her back when he orders her to take him to prostitute's house. If these are the deities we are reared on from childhood, can it be anything but a clever little plot to keep fools in slavery?

Nayantara Sahgal's outrage is apparent and it is perhaps this anger that gets reflected in her works time and again. That Hinduism is an intrinsic factor in Indian life cannot be denied. But what a Saru or a Devi seeks to project is this – a modified and a modern version of Hinduism that bases itself on logic and rationality rather than on blind faith and self sacrifice: a vision of life which is at once contemporary and individualized, a vision that means living and enjoying life from within the deepest recesses of one's being ; spreading delight all around, like one in whom the flame of life has just been kindled.

Notes :

1. Shashi Deshpande in interview with Joel Kuortti, "Years of silence came to an end", Bangalore, January 6<sup>th</sup>, 2000.

2. Ramamoorthy, *My Life is My Own : A study of Shashi Deshpande's women* in Sushila Singh ed. Feminism and Recent Fiction in English, Delhi Prestige Books, 1991, P. 116.

3. *Ibid.* P. 116.

4. Mies Marie, *Image of Woman in Shashi Deshpande's Novel.* — ? ?

5. Lal Malashri, *The Law of the Threshold*, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1996. P. 17.

6. Varalakshmi. S. "Nothing to lose but our chains", in Nilofar Bharucha and Vrinda Nabar ed. Post Colonial Indian Literature in English, Delhi, Vision Books, 1998. P. 369.

No notes to Cixous's The Laugh & Medusa.

\*\*\*\*\*

# 4

## Who Wants To Be a Good Wife?

*Jaya and Sonali in That  
Long Silence and Rich Like Us.*

*The Female of The Species.*

*Sometimes you want to talk  
about love and despair  
and the ungratefulness of children.  
A man is no use whatsoever then.  
You want then your mother  
or sister  
or the girl with whom you went through school,  
and your first love, and her  
first child - a girl -  
and your second.  
You sit with them and talk  
She sews and you sit and sip  
and speak of the rate of rice  
and the price of tea  
and the scarcity of cheese.  
You both know that you've spoken  
of love and despair and ungrateful children.*

Gauri Deshpande's poem "The Female of the Species" talks of echoes from daily lives of women engaged in domesticity – ungratefulness of children, rate of

rice, price of tea, scarcity of cheese ; matters that are not really of interest to men. It is evident that women seek the company of other women to discuss and enjoy such topics, because it is through such discussions that women find company and oneness within a society where they are isolated and marginalised. This kind of a woman to woman bonding results in a flow of words and emotions, not stated but felt and understood. Recording such unsaid utterances has been the task that women writers had set themselves to in their effort to communicate to women. And it is the record of such distinctive vocabulary that accounts for the speciality in women authored novels. Commenting on this poem, Shrmistha Panja says –

Logically, the topics of conversation, the price of tea, the scarcity of cheese, have nothing to do with what the speaker desires to communicate - love and despair and ungrateful children. What is interesting is that the conversation bears no metaphoric or metonymic link to love and despair. What is significant is that the very act of gathering these specific women around one - one's mother or sister, one's daughter, one's first love, her daughter (note the wonderfully undramatic female pronoun used in the eighth line, the economy with which Deshpande elicits her reader's wild surmise) and the friend one went to school with - is enough to give shape and visage to one's innermost desires and yet keep them non-articulated. It is the very rhythms of the chora finding expression, not in words, but in the silences between them. In "The Word Worker" Smita Agarwal writes. "I am/The Dreamer, words, the cocoon/I knit. Fixed forever in the / slim gap between alphabets/ I am the saboteur ....." (De Souza 65). Woman's language lies in the no-man's land, the spaces between alphabets.<sup>1</sup>

Articulating the "Spaces between alphabets" has been the project women

written have engaged themselves in for centuries now. The struggle for such a meaningful articulation has been a long and arduous one - one that has asserted the need for a life without fetters. This struggle which began ages back, with tales of domesticity reflective of a highly circumscribed life, has culminated in women themselves reading the "space between alphabets". This progression is reflective of the stifling hold patriarchy had on women and of how women in society over the ages struggled to live with it and how finally they broke away from it. Infact, this can also be seen from the manner in which women were involved in the production of literary texts. Mary Ann Evans wrote under the pen name George Eliot: - signifying that it is not a woman but a man who has authored such great texts. From this stage in literary history we move to a stage where an author, and a woman like Virginia Woolf makes a valuable contribution as "stream of consciousness" technique for others to follow. Such a transition from an object position to a subject position, from a peripheral status to a center stage location is a process of creating a space within which to grow and from within which to contribute to the world at large. This process of occupying center stage, rather of assuming centre stage, is what the French Feminist, Julia Kristeva crystallizes in the word "chora". Kristeva explains chora by stating that it is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e. it is not a sign); nor is it a position that represents someone for another person (i.e. it is not yet a signifier either); it is however, generated in order to attain to this signifying

position. It is the process by which significance is constituted.<sup>2</sup>

This “process” might consist in a movement from subjugation to freedom, from suppression to utterance, from mutedness to vocalization. Such transitions are deliberate, the woman writer achieves her designs through such meticulous role plays of historical activity. And when such a stage is arrived at, the symbolical meanings of such utterances are worth noting. Because such utterances do not comply with standards of conformity with regard to syntax or semantics; after all established rules of communication are rules constituted by patriarchy. So, the woman’s utterances speak her own rhythm, the rhythm of her life, her breath, of her body. It is about breaking silences thrust upon her. Such is the design of women authored texts which talk of women. These texts talk about women breaking the walls of silence that habitually surround them. It is about how women speak in a language hitherto unknown. It is about how women establish a new understanding with the world. It is about introspection and self analysis hitherto not associated with women.

Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence (1988) offers a treatise along lines stated in the preceding paragraph. It is a first person narrative and traces the protagonist Jaya’s journey through a plethora of doubts, guilts, smothered anger, frustrations, silences and finally to affirmation and articulation. The novel records Jaya’s process of self examination from the point when her husband, Mohan, decides

to move house from Churchgate to Dadar for economic reasons. Jaya acquiesces to her husband's decision, in silent resentment and shifts to a flat in Dadar. In their new surroundings, Jaya meets Kamat a neighbour of theirs in Dadar. Slowly a friendship develops between Jaya and Kamat and this friendship provides the much needed succour to Jaya's dull life. She realizes the meaninglessness of many activities in her life just as much as we the readers find out how constricted Jaya's life had become. One incident after another in the novel shows how Jaya or the victorious one had become an antonym of the word itself. Jaya was a marked opposite of the expectation of her glorious name.

In a carefully constructed narrative, the novel reveals how Jaya was brought up differently in a modern way by her father. She was sent to a convent school to receive an English education. The very fact that Jaya was able to speak a different language, English, as compared to many other women in the novel is an attempt to raise our expectations from Jaya; language after all voices a culture: and with English the objective of modernity and hence rationality are served immediately. However, the irony of the situation lies in the novelist's careful construction of the universality of marriage in the Indian social context : Jaya has to get married. She marries Mohan and at her marriage she is renamed Suhasini, or the timid one. From henceforth the novel recounts the tale of subjugation and suppression of Jaya, because she is no longer the victorious one - but the timid one. Thus even though Jaya is cast in a

mould suitable for contemporary living, yet the novel shows her transforming quite in lines with the other women in the story - who in a sense are muted. With a transformed Jaya, now see that she curbs all her desires - she does what Mohan would want her to do, lives as Mohan wants her to. Her life revolves around Mohan - quite like the other women in the family. Jaya fits herself into that class called women. However, unlike the other women she still carries a mark of distinction: she is creative and she can write. But even in this we find that Jaya writes to her husband's satisfaction. She writes to gain his appreciation. As a result her writing lacks flavour ; it is dull. Thus Jaya's transformation to Suhasini is complete, yet Jaya's inner voice is not dead. The following words from the text highlight this point - "These women of Mohan's family were right, I had decided, I would pattern myself after them. That way lay - well, if not happiness, at least the consciousness of doing right, freedom from guilt." (83-84)

This is a moment of self realisation for Jaya. She realises the extent of patriarchy and of how much unknowingly she, too, had internalised patriarchy. By being a creative writer she had managed to keep her ability to reason alive and vibrant, which she realised was the source of conflict between herself and her environment. Thus she decides to fall in lines with other women in the family and become silent and muted. Commenting on this Mrinalini Sebastian says –

This is a shocking moment of recognition for a woman reader

who has been broadly shaped by the dominant and obvious form of patriarchy. She recognises this as a normal situation in many families. This is a recognition of the micropolitics that is operative within many of the Indian families which are supported by and support in turn patriarchal relationships. . . .

It is through these moments of recognition that one more interesting aspect of the patriarchal set up is revealed: the perpetrators of the power structures within the family circle are most often women and it is the relationship of one woman to another woman mediated through a man that reinscribes the power of a woman over another woman. These are the women who have internalized patriarchy.<sup>3</sup>

In that homogeneous class called women to which Jaya also belong, she must be the odd one out. She must be the one bestowed with some form of individualism, some mark of distinction because it is through her that we as readers understand the authorial voice. Thus Jaya must be bestowed with a form of superiority inherently her own. This form of superiority is her ability to write. Jaya's situation raises questions about marriage in contemporary society. With Jaya having transformed herself to Suhasini, one would have expected a muted Jaya to continue the narrative. However, the narrative moves on to further the speciality bestowed upon her and Jaya eventually breaks her long silence.

The narrative is structured in such a way that the qualities of Jaya's superiority burst open and Jaya breaks away from mutedness. One incident after another builds up the tension for this great historical moment. One may look at some such incidents

in the text. For example, during her first pregnancy when Jaya suggests to Mohan that he should do the cooking, Mohan is highly amused by her suggestion because he thinks that cooking is not a man's job. Later we find that she is uneasy at the sight of Kamat doing his cooking because by this time she has internalised her husband's view that cooking was not a man's job. Here again, her relation to Kamat cannot be given a name. Kamat is their neighbour in their new flat and shows a lot of sympathy for Jaya, who, for the first time breathes fresh air in his company. Yet, this is the kind of relationship that society does not recognize. It does not fit into the slots of husband, brother, wife, sister, son, etc. This is perhaps the reason why Jaya panics and runs away at the sight of Kamat's dead body one day when she went to visit him; in spite of the fact that both she and Kamat had a lot of respect for each other. Then, one day Jaya discovers that she does not figure in the family tree that her uncle Ramukaka had prepared. When Jaya asks her uncle why her name is not included in the family tree, she is told that she now belongs to her husband's family and not to her father's. But this is only partly true as Jaya discovers that neither her mother nor her Kakis, her uncles' wives, nor even her grandmother Ajji, that indomitable woman - "who single handedly kept the family together" find a place in the family tree. Jaya observes that her name and existence are blotted out along with other women of the family. Then, take for example her attempts to write. In her anxiety to fulfill her roles as a wife and a mother, Jaya had not done justice to her own talents. In her

formative years she had made a good beginning as a writer by producing a story which had won the first prize and was published in a magazine. But Mohan's response to the story was most disheartening. He assumed that the story was about their personal life. He was apprehensive and hurt at the thought that people who knew him might think that he was the kind of person portrayed in the story. This incident had left a deep impression on Jaya and had affected her career as a writer. If this incident was analysed and to Jaya's advantage then it follows easily that Jaya can blame her husband straight away for her failure. As the novel moves forward, we are informed that Jaya continued to write even after this confrontation with her husband but under an assumed name, as many women have done under patriarchy. However, in this situation all her stories were rejected - they lacked something. Unable to understand why she seeks an answer from Kamat and he reminds her of her anger, of her passions: these were missing from her stories. These elements having been censored, her stories lacked the flavour which they should possess. To this Jaya promptly reminds him of what she had actually learnt from her husband that a woman cannot be angry, that anger makes a woman unwomanly. She also resorted to the excuse that most women give - that they have no time for serious work because of their household duties. All this points to a glaring fact about Jaya - that she too, like other women of her family had internalized patriarchy. At this point Kamat warns her - "I'm warning you - beware of this women are the victim theory ..... Take yourself seriously

woman. Don't skulk behind a false name. And work - work if you want others to take you seriously". (148)

Jaya, however, was in no mood to take such criticism. She had resumed her career as wife and mother. Meanwhile Mohan suggests to her that she should write light humorous pieces for the newspapers. This was when Jaya started her weekly column called "Seeta" which fortunately had now the approval of the readers and above all of her husband. This success makes Jaya reflective and she confesses - "For me she had been the means through which I had shut the door firmly on all those other women who had invaded my being, screaming for attention: women I had known I could not write about because they might - it was possible - resemble Mohan's mother or aunt, or my mother or aunt". (149)

The stage is now set for an upheaval - oppression under patriarchy must be overthrown and Jaya must speak. Jaya's articulation would mean giving voice to all the other muted women in the family. The novel reflects a continuity over time to show how women in patriarchy were suppressed and isolated. Thus Jaya's articulation is symbolic of a solidarity between the women in the family. Jaya's articulation is indicative of the collapse of patriarchy. At this point it is relevant quoting Amarnath Prasad who says –

"It is therefore, said that the contemporary and post modern feminist theory is a pluralistic, inclusive, complex and

multilayered feminist solidarity. It is essential for overcoming the oppression of women in its endless variety and monotonous similarity which is useful for contemporary feminist political practice too. Such practice is increasingly a matter of alliances rather than one of a unity around a universally shared interest or identity. It recognizes that the diversity of women needs experiences. This means that no single solution on issues like *childcare, social security and housing can be adequate for all*. Thus, some women share some common interests and face some common enemies, such commonalities are by no means universal; rather they are interlaced with differences, even with conflicts. So, the contemporary theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one women in a single colour”.<sup>4</sup>

Jaya, thus speaks. Through Jaya the novelist makes it clear that not only has patriarchy kept silent on the issue of women but also that under patriarchy women have recoiled from telling the truth about their own sex. When Jaya comes out of her emotional upheaval, she has sorted out a major problem with herself - she has resolved to speak. “I’m not afraid anymore. The panic has gone. I’m Mohan’s wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan’s wife. Now I know that kind of fragmentation is not possible. The child, hands in pockets, has been with me through the years. She is with me still”. (191)

And so, she puts down on paper all that she had suppressed in her seventeen years silence. What she had written is actually the novel. The novel is mostly concerned with women like Kusum, Mohan’s mother, and many other victims like her - victims of patriarchy and also of their own silence. **That Long Silence** puts into a

nutshell the history and evolution of women through four generations that Jaya has known and promises a better future for women.

Shashi Deshpande's novel puts forward women as a class theory. This class as is apparent is a marginalized one and the novelist constructs meanings from within that class; meanings of subjugation, oppression, elimination, even erasures. It is from within the dimensions of such meanings that new contexts are created, new solution to problems hitherto unsolved are evolved. Such solutions might be like Betty Friedan's solution to American women in the **Feminine Mystique**

The **Feminine Mystique** was written to identify a problem, elucidate the causes and effects of the problem and suggest solutions. It opens in reportorial guise, with an attempt to investigate a mystery: the mystery of why so many 1950s American housewives appeared to be suffering a nameless malaise characterized by feelings of depression and dissatisfaction. Friedan finds the solution to the mystery in the dominance of a concept she calls the feminine mystique. The feminine mystique combines two important ideas: first, that femininity is something special and precious, different from and yet complementary to masculinity; secondly, that this idea of femininity is best, even only fulfilled through marriage, motherhood and domesticity; what Friedan terms occupation: housewife.

The discussion goes on to suggest

while admitting that there are no easy answers to the questions posed by the problem of the feminine mystique, Friedan does suggest some concrete solutions, most of which demand changes in the individual. She argues that women must develop

a new self image involving a new life plan which puts housework and marriage in their proper places and allows time for a fulfilling, demanding career or other work outside the home.<sup>5</sup>

If Shashi Deshpande's novel That Long Silence fits into the argument for women as a class, then Nayantara Sahgal's novel Rich Like Us (1982) too, can be said to project similar thoughts. Set in the midst of one of India's most trying political moments - the Emergency, the novel recounts tales of women across generations within a family. It also refers to pathetic tales of suffering and injustice towards other women. This novel shows the arbitrary division and use of power in society where the arbitrariness is heavily weighted against women. And this fact is exemplified using the Emergency as motif.

This novel is a first person narrative by Sonali She is a young I.A.S Officer committed to her work and principles. Being western educated, she is rational and modern in her outlook. This novel recounts history, as it were, from Sonali's perspective and hence is a record of woman's experiences and can be viewed as a treatise on feminist ideology.

The novel, Rich Like Us, however, is not just about personal lives of women and men. This novel skillfully weaves together the personal and the political worlds to show how in patriarchal society power is monopolized by men - whether at home or outside. This is achieved through the story of Ram, for whom wives are things to

be used and not discarded but kept aside for future needs if he might have any. Thus the Ram - Mona - Rose plot occupies centre stage in the novel against which backdrop we might analyse the novel and its ideological foundations.

The novel focuses on the rich upper middle class Indians in post independent India. Therefore, off and on the scene shifts between India and England. To discuss the novel as a treatise on the evils of patriarchy, where man is not only the master of his own life but also creates the woman's destiny, one will look at the life of Ram and his relations with his wife Mona and his English mistress, Rose.

Ram meets Rose on a trip to England and even though he has a wife and a newly born baby back home, he freely courts Rose. He never for once tells her of his family in India. It is only when he is confident that Rose is deeply in love with him and will not desert him, that Ram informs Rose about his wife and son in India. Next he marries Rose without taking any cognizance of Mona's feelings. He brings Rose home and puts her up in the same house with Mona. This marriage to Rose however, was never legal nor religious. The arrangement that Ram strikes with both these women is convenient for him to maintain a superior status in relation to both these women: Mona is useful as a mother to his son Dev, and as a manager of the household, while Rose is good as a mistress, always showering love and attention on Ram with no children of her own to divert her attention. Ram seems to maintain

two parallel relations for his convenience without any regard for the feelings of both women. He resorts to a form of persecution where the hurts are not expressed and far less than. In this context it is worth quoting Pankaj. K. Singh who says –

**Rich Like Us** builds around more subtle forms of persecution of women where the blood does not show even though the wounds may be much deeper.<sup>6</sup>

Ram's insensitivity to the sufferings of both his wives is appalling. When Ram returns to Rose after spending the better half of the night with Mona, a restless and uneasy Rose protests that she cannot continue like this with Ram having two wives. At this Ram laughs it off saying - "Lord Krishna had three hundred".

Then, the moment he meets Marcella, another English woman at a social gathering he forgets all about Rose and her feelings and returns home at three in the morning. It is ultimately their identical suffering that bind Mona and Rose. But this stage is arrived at only after both the women go through a period of hating each other, instead of hating their oppressor (a situation which benefits their oppressor - Ram). Rose endlessly wishes for Mona's death and Mona even attempts suicide. Then with Mona on her death-bed, dying of cancer, Ram has no time to care about it; he is busy listening to the woes of another European woman. Neither does he have time to be a parent to his son Dev. When Rose informs him that Dev has been abducting girls from Miranda House and taking them to private rooms at the Ashoka

Hotel, Ram responds by saying - "A man has to get his experience somewhere."

Love becomes a trap for Rose and despite her suffering within marriage she cannot bear the idea of a divorce after getting used to living with Ram for so many years. At one stage Mona is given a separate flat to live in as an "honourably retired wife" and later Rose too, is made to live separately without any reason. When Ram tells Rose - "it would separation, not divorce," he actually speaks of his selfishness to keep her available for his own convenience.

The sufferings of both Mona and Rose create a sisterhood between them : this being the only means to withstand male oppression. On her deathbed, Mona looks to Rose for support and comfort, she longs to know more about Rose and her family. She longs to share her childhood memories with Rose. And Rose in her hour of distress looks to Sonali for comfort and help. In this male dominated world Sonali is the only woman who can live a life freely and according to her desires. But she has to pay a heavy price for her freedom and she has to remain single all her life. Entering into a partnership with a man would mean submitting to him completely. This she had realised when she saw her friend Bimmie turned into an "inanimate object" with "menaced hands resting submissively in her red silk lap" on her wedding day.

As mentioned earlier, **Rich Like Us** moves from the private to the public

worlds to show how rights of women are violated in society. The Ram - Mona - Rose story being a purely personal narrative, the novel draws upon incidents common to Indian society at large. For example, the novel addresses the issue of Sati and refers to authentic incidents of Sati by quoting diary entries of Sonali's grandfather dating back to the latter part of the 19th century or early 20th century. The illustration of Sati centers on Sonali's great grandmother, about whose life and death she learns by reading her late grandfather's private papers. Among his papers were two horrifying accounts of Sati that her grandfather had retrieved from his father's files. The first account, dated 1823, described a woman who initially agrees to become a Sati, changes her mind when the pain becomes intolerable. She later succumbs to her wounds in hospital. The second account tells the story of a young woman who like the first ascended her dead husband's funeral pyre voluntarily, but finding the flames too strong to bear falls off the pyre unconscious at the feet of the local magistrate. On regaining consciousness she insisted on being allowed to complete her act without any interference from the magistrate. The account stated that this woman achieved Sati. These two incidents preceded the death of Sonali's great grandmother who also committed Sati. However, the novel offers two possible explanations of her Sati. One, that she was forced by her relatives to burn herself in keeping with high caste traditions. Or secondly, that she voluntarily died in exchange for an assurance that her son would not be denied his share in patrilineal inheritance. Both

the options point to two aspects of Hindu traditions: first, of the cruelty of society towards a widow who is the victim and secondly that the victim realizing her limitations courageously manipulates the situation to her son's advantage. Of these two factors it is perhaps the first, that she was murdered holds ground if Sonali's grandfather's words are to be remembered - "All wives are good because they have little choice ..... The Hindu wife is a Hindu wife and can be nothing else." —† ?

The novel progressively shows Sonali's disillusionment with the India of the '70s - the real India. It does not match with the ideals she was brought up on. She was made to feel that in free India all were equal in the eyes of law, there was a prevailing sense of justice and well-being all around. However, as her experiences reveal to her that power is monopolized by a handful of "They" and "Them" and Sonali finds herself unable to identify with "They" and "Them". The reason perhaps may be located in what Teresa Hubel says :

When feminism fails to defend social and economic changes that can ensure decent lives for all people, the rights of women collapse into privilege for the few and exploitation for the many.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, even though the novel refers to the "madam" yet in madam's times lawlessness infringes upon the lives of peasants and disrupts personal peace. For example, the armless beggar's account of the atrocities on women committed by the police and of the disappearance of his wife who like many others must have

fallen prey to the lust of brick-kiln owners. And when Sonali suggests that there are laws that protect tenants, the beggar replies - "It's the landlord's raj in my village ....." When Sonali further asks him if any political party had helped him redress his situation, he replied - "They are all landlords at heart." (227)

Thus, even though the political sphere is dominated by "madam" yet madam's rule has engendered lawlessness at all levels and has compelled the frightening image of patriarchy to surface. It is because of this that there is the Ram - Mona - Rose story, the incidents of Sati, the armless beggar's tales or even forceful sterilization of servants.

In this intricately designed novel with layers and layers of meaning, Nayantara Sahgal seems to suggest that all is not yet lost. The fact that Sonali resigns from the beauracracy, her friend Ravi becomes Ravi once again from Kachru and Rose shows tenderness for the armless beggar, perhaps points to the fact that emergency will end, and that better sense will prevail. In conclusion it can be said that this novel is definitely woman centered because as S. Varalakshmi says :

"By exploring the thoughts and detailing specific female experiences, Nayatara Sahgal has presented certain social evils."

And the message through all this clear .....

..... Sahgal evidently wants to imply that women must consciously make efforts to liberate themselves. No one is going

to make it easy for them. A hide - bound, male dominated society never has and never will free its women on its own volition.<sup>8</sup>

In the preceding pages Shashi Deshpande's That Long Silence and Nayantara Sahgal's Rich Like Us have been discussed to assert the presence of reason in women which was a contested notion in patriarchy. Jaya in That Long Silence transformed herself from Jaya or the victorious one to Suhasini or the timid one under the presence of patriarchy. Her entire life revolved around satisfying patriarchal expectations. Thus she did as Mohan, her husband wanted her to, spoke as Mohan wanted her to, even think as Mohan wanted her to. She repressed her passions, her emotions simply because she wanted to satisfy patriarchal demands. And even after all her sacrifice and adjustments, Jaya finds that her existence holds no meaning – she discovers to her horror one day that her name along with the name of other women of the family do not find a mention in the family tree which her uncle had developed. Thus, Jaya's frustration is easily understood and Jaya speaks. In her articulation she gives voice to all the other women in the family as well - proving the presence of reason in women and also the capacity to use it for fruitful ends. Jaya we must remember was a creative writer as well. Similarly, Sonali in Rich Like Us resigns from the bureaucracy because she cannot accept the uneven power structure which leads to lawlessness and anarchy. The novel shows how uneven power structure in public life has its repercussions in private lives of ordinary men and women as well. In this uneven distribution of power women are the worst sufferers

because they are twice marginalised - once in marriage and in public life. To illustrate this point the novel refers to incidents of Sati, illegitimate relationships, incidents of sexual harassment of women as indicators of how in patriarchy women have no agency - neither over their lives, least of all over their bodies. It is thus that Sonali remains single and resigns from office. Both these novels need to be appreciated in terms of their artistic achievements as well as for the social realities that they bring to focus. Both the novels deal with the issue of women and are definitely women centric novels. However, the point where both the novels differ is in the treatment of the woman's issue. As Malashri Lal says in **The Law of the Threshold**.

The second operational space for the narrative", which is "the threshold itself. A tenuous balance is to be maintained as the protagonist and the text which is an expansion of her experience remain in this critical zone. This is the contested space between two kinds of influence. ————— P ?

These two kinds of influence are those that are shaped by customs, traditions and beliefs, while the other influence consists in the world beyond the threshold with beckonings of power, glory, freedom and risk.

Shashi Deshpande's, Jaya, in **That Long Silence** has to work her way to this threshold, while Sonali in Nayantara Sahgal's **Rich Like Us** is poised at the threshold because of her education and the society to which she belongs. Both Jaya and Sonali are bestowed with an identity, but Jaya has to develop her 'self'. At this point it may

be pertinent to refer to Jasbir Jain's comment for a distinction between self and identity.

Though they are words often treated as synonyms, I would like to make a distinction between them, identity being a characteristic or a condition which distinguishes a person and self being the individual consciousness as seat of subjective thought and action. The first is marked by external factors like class, caste, status and the rest of it, while the second, self depends upon body, mind, intellect and emotions, in short in the control a person exercises over these ..... Body implies the right to be. Emotions is equally relevant for it implies the right to respond, to feel, to relate .....<sup>9</sup>.

Thus Jaya has to go through the process of self discovery even though it has to be done in silence. Her period of silence is marked by a painful acceptance of her lot. Unknowingly she had assumed the identity expected of her, and for fear of rebuke, she had quietly gone into a life of erasure. Sonali's, on the other hand, is a vibrant world where the past and the present are continuously shifting grounds, moving into each others territories. In this kind of space, Sonali who is an educated young woman finds herself in a difficult situation as she cannot identify herself with the ruling class that controls the power. It is this class that shapes images and controls history, quite to Sonali's dissatisfaction. Sonali's position at the threshold like Jaya's signifies an anticipation of a new look at history and for a relocation of the object position assigned to women in patriarchy.

Therefore, when Sonali rejects the power equation by resigning from the beauracracy or when Jaya resolves to speak, we actually enter into what Malashri Lal calls - “The third conceptual space in the law of the Threshold” which is “The world beyond the home, taking count of its real and metaphysical components”

Jaya’s resolve to speak signifies her ability to have rejected patriarchal constructs of women. Through her all other women represented in the novel also find expression in their long suppressed voice. Jaya finally emerges as the victorious one and leads others on the victory path as well. Tradition versus modernity has also been a predominant theme in both these novels. Hindu customs and traditions, roles and expectations of the Hindu wife surface and are questioned. Infact, such roles are scrutinized and exposed through the tales of murder in the name of Sati in **Rich Like Us** or the narrative on the lifeless existence of generations of Hindu wives in **That Long Silence**. Thus, Sonali’s resolve to lead a single life shows her resolve to reject patriarchy and live her life to her satisfaction, free from subjugation. And Jaya’s resolve to speak is symbolic of Jaya’s rejection of traditional roles imposed on women as they do not in any way contribute to meaningful existence. In conclusion it can be said that both these texts move towards a new direction on the subject - object position. Both these texts successfully reposition the subject determined power balance in history/society and develop a centrality hitherto assumed impossible. The following words from Santosh Gupta’s might sum up for both the

texts in question:-

Jasbir Jain has given particular attention to the women as writers in the newly formed social realities. In her essay *Postcolonial Realities: Woman Writing History*, Jain says, 'women traditionally termed ahistoric, bring a new awareness to their treatment of history. Rejecting the hegemony of male projections they cross over to occupy a centrality ordinarily withheld from them.

Their work not merely reflects the difference between colonial and postcolonial contexts but also reflect a feminization of history'. In Nayantara Sahgal's novels like **Plans For Departure, Mistaken Identity** and **Rich Like Us**, Jain looks into the women's return to the past - immediate, a little far back, into the middle of the 19th century - to understand a sense of social traditions that have not reified women. Feminist perspectives contest the nationalist projections of its resolution of the woman question that had rocked the Indian elite in the 19th and 20th centuries.<sup>10</sup>

In the final analysis "**Who Wants To Be A Good Wife**" not only reverts the subject-object position in favour of women and assigns to women the subject position, but also traces the historical sequence of women losing agency and occupying object position in patriarchy. Thus when Jaya speaks, she speaks for generations of women who were muted before her and when Sonali resigns from office she does so in total disagreement with the uneven power structure prevalent in the society of the times she is placed in. Both Jaya and Sonali assert their own individual needs to lead a life of freedom. Thus when Jaya speaks and establishes a new understanding with her marriage, Sonali remains single. Sonali does not marry,

once again asserting her refusal to comply with patriarchal norms. **That Long Silence** and **Rich Like Us** challenges patriarchy by upholding a new consciousness in women. This new consciousness lives and exists by the first of the personal pronouns 'I'. Thus this new consciousness demands space for existence which if denied results in the execution of a resolution unheard of in patriarchy.

**Notes :**

1. Panja Shormistha, "*Women and Literary Space*", in Nanavati and Kar ed. *Rethinking Indian English Literature*, Delhi Pencraft International, 2000. P. 96-97.
2. Kristeva Julia, "*Revolutions in Poetic Language*", *Kristeva Reader*. —
3. Sebastian Mrinalini, *The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Post Colonial Arguments*. P.168. — ?
4. Prasad, *Critical Responses to Indian Fiction in English*, Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2001.
5. Watkins Susan, *20<sup>th</sup> Century Women Novelists, Feminist Theory into Practise*. P.34 — ?
6. Singh, "*Feminism and Nayantara Sahgal's The Day in Shadow and Rich*

*Like Us* : From the particular to the Ideological” in *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991, P. 142.

7. Hubel Teresa, “*Politics of the Poor and the Limits of Feminist Individualism in Rich Like Us.*” — ?

8. Varalakshmi. S., “*Nothing to Lose But Our Chains, Nayantara Sahgal’s Women in their Social Context.*” — ?

9. Jain Jasbir, “*Positioning the 'Post' in Post Feminism, Reworking of Strategies.*” in Jain and Singh ed. *Indian Feminism*, Delhi, Creative Books, 2001, P. 83-84.

10. Gupta Santosh, “*Feminist Interventions in Post-Colonial Theory*” in Jain and Singh ed. *Indian Feminism*, Delhi, Creative Books, 2001, P. 76.

\*\*\*\*\*

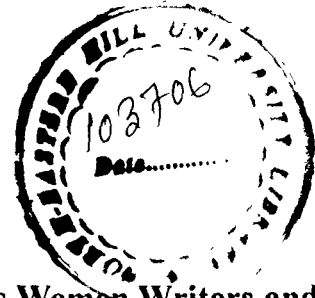
# 5

## Conclusion

*Let's Look Forward  
to Tomorrow*

In one's attempt to locate and define a female self within the Indian context one needs to examine not just the socio-cultural ethos of this country but also refer to western feminist literary traditions for a clearer understanding of the historical processes that have shaped the genre of women's writing. Within the complex Indian situation assessing the 'self' of the woman needs to be appreciated in the light of various factors – historical, political, social and cultural. Within such dynamic forces how does the Indian woman survive ? Does she control any agency in private or in public life ? Is her voice heard or is she muted ? In a society where the centrality of marriage cannot be overlooked, can the educated woman take a decision and remain single? What options does the Hindu wife have ? Can the woman live by the convictions of her inner voice ? These are some of the questions that this present study has attempted to address.

In one's attempt to understand the 'self' of the woman one has to examine literary texts and also the literary traditions to which those texts belong. While examining the literary traditions one comes across different factors that build up those traditions. For example, in western feminist literary traditions relocating voices of women in literary traditions has been a project feminist had set themselves to achieve in the twentieth century. This endeavor has yielded astonishing results. Ellen Moer's Literary Women (1976), Elaine Showalter's A Literature of Their Own (1977), Nina Baym's Woman's Fiction (1978), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's



The Mad woman in the Attic (1979), Margaret Howans's Women Writers and Poetic Identity (1980) point to the massive store-house of literature authored by women in a predominantly male oriented society. All these texts assert the centrality of female creative energy: a notion believed to be an impossibility in patriarchal society. Retrieving and assembling lost texts authored by women have been the means to voice resistance to traditional views on women while producing texts that speak of women and of women's experiences from within the innermost corners of ones being has been a means to display presence of reason; thereby contesting patriarchal notions that women cannot think. So, writing and articulating has been the space for voicing the subaltern and the narrative as such is the ground for resistance to phallogentricity.

A phallogentric vision would impress upon us the notion of "lack" as being the crucial difference as to why women cannot author texts of great artistic and aesthetic value. Further, this inherent 'lack' theory suggested that women have no existence at all - they cannot think or even dream - that they occupy a peripheral status in relation to men and survive in a wild, unaccounted zone. Feminists have contested this essentially biological view by putting forward the theory that women's bodies are the source of all their creativity - that the woman's body is a store-house of energy and a means to articulate reason through rhythms new and dynamic. These rhythms speak of experiences hitherto undreamt of and when such rhythms

are recorded in words and deeds, great texts of feminist literary value are born. This has been the endeavour women writers and feminists have set themselves to achieve: putting forward a specific woman centric notion of life, locating the woman's voice in patriarchy, talking of the specifically female experiences with a female voice.

Woman's body evoking a woman's language with a syntax and semantics inherently its own has been the concept with which feminists have sought to establish agency in the domain of discourses essentially controlled by men. This stand has sought to regain the freedom, identity and self-consciousness lost in the process of preserving and furthering a his-story. From his-story to her-story has been a long tale of gaining agency and dominant discourse position by offering resistance and challenging male authority in law', various forms of representation and literature.

Feminism as a discourse of dissent and resistance has sought to deconstruct characteristic notions of women as chattel—fit for nothing but domesticity and child bearing. Feminists have sought to enfranchise women from a marginalised object position and restore agency to them. Feminists have attempted to break the false prison walls binding women and give to them a truth fundamentally their own in a language which is essentially female and sacred for selfhood, autonomy and identity.

The quest for a self and the desire to establish an identity is an endeavor that

takes into cognizance the cognitive and the affective domains of an individual. Feminist writers and women writers (both these terms will be used synonymously) have attempted to establish identity of a woman by locating her lost 'self': the 'self' being connected to the dynamics of the cognitive abilities and identity being an outward display in behavioural terms as a worthwhile member of society. Through all this women writers have challenged patriarchal notions because women in patriarchy were not supposed to possess an inner voice - they were not meant to be, far less exist.

While attempting to assign to women a 'self' and an 'identity', feminists have also broken universal notions of womanhood defined essentially in terms of male desires and male imagination. The woman has always been the object of male subjectivity and has been defined in terms of her relation to the male needs in society. Her social role and position is also assigned by patriarchy. A woman's 'identity' is sought to be fixed and understood in terms of her being defined essentially by her sexuality and reproductive roles. In this quagmire how can the 'self' of the woman be retrieved? What would constitute her 'identity'? These are the questions that feminist writers have answered : the narrative being a representation of actual experiences recorded in moments hidden from public eye.

Mechanisms of power, control, suppression and marginalisation stand out

like sores in human history. A study of the socio cultural realities under such regimes of suppression and marginalisation would reveal unorganized voices of dissent and resentment. Locating such voices of dissent is the first step toward disrupting hegemonic control and when many such voices are located, the marginalised becomes a class ready to deconstruct monopolised power structures. Feminists, by locating women's voices across centuries have established women as a marginalised class in patriarchy and have attempted to restore dignity to this class by reverting sanctions over body, over sexuality, to women themselves: afterall, controlling agency over one's own body and sexuality is the first criteria towards achieving selfhood.

While considering the Indian woman's discourse one has to examine the socio-cultural ethos as well which often may not fit in with western feminist discourse. However, the basic tenets of feminism are as much relevant to us in India as those in the west. Therefore, the issue of Indian woman's discourse needs to be carefully placed in relation to western feminist theory so as to maintain its authenticity within the context of its own socio-cultural sphere.

To locate the position of the Indian woman one has to consider not just texts authored by Indo-Anglian women writers but also texts written in regional languages. The Indian subcontinent has passed through a period of colonization and so literature originating in this subcontinent at various points of history reflect the ethos of the

times. Such historical moments are captured in narratives written in regional languages and in the English language as well. Colonisation had ensured the benefits of English education to a large section of society. So, today, we have the advantage of having translated versions of regional texts along with texts written in English for scrutiny and analysis while arriving at a definition of the 'self', the 'I' of the Indian woman.

Development of the 'self' of the Indian woman seems to have been influenced by two factors - first, the British Raj and the struggle for independence and secondly, the intrinsic nature of Hindu customs and tradition in our lives.

The struggle for independence was marked, by among things by a unity cutting across race, caste and gender. Women, too, took an active part in the struggle for independence. This struggle for independence took the form of a united effort to give shape and identity in physical and spiritual terms to lakhs of people committed to the cause of nation formation. This process of nation formation can be read as the inception of the concept of nation-self which culminated in the historical transfer of power in 1947. From then onwards marks another episode in the development of the nation through years of economic reforms, technological reforms, political reforms, social reforms and legislative procedures. The process of nation building, of developing the self of the nation, of giving an identity to the Indian nationality has

been a continuous one, dynamic and contemporary.

The process of nation self-formation and the process of development of the 'self' of the Indian woman seemed to have been interlinked. Literature across the various periods of development in this subcontinent are reflective of this fact. Women wrote and contributed to the development of the Indian nation self: the themes, plots and characterization in narratives over the years whether in swadeshi or post swadeshi prove this point. Through all this the issue of uplift of women from centuries of slumber and denials seems apparent. Centuries of slumber cast on women because of the overpowering nature of customs and traditions on which girls were brought up on in their search for womanhood. Such customs and traditions would have young girls reared on images of Sita or Sati-Savitri, and would impress upon young female minds the necessity of curbing anger, frustration, jealousy, indeed all passions as essential to achieving femininity. Femininity, thus, would consist in developing an image of docility and submission; a being having a placid and stale existence devoid of any urges, devoid of any control over mind and body, devoid of any sexual urges. In such a situation the young female is left with little or no option but to be exceptionally conscious of her growth in physical terms and seek redemption in customs and traditions as a means to cope with changes which over the years make her ashamed of her body, of her sexuality. She thus has no choice but to adopt those practises which other women before her have done in their efforts to cope with their minds

and bodies, women who have unknowingly internalised patriarchy and supported its various facets, women who have lived lives by what men would have them to be - an eroticism effecting peripheral status to an already muted, scared object: a thing to cope with, not exist.

Such being the pathetic state of affairs, women's movement in the Indian sub continent has progressed towards upliftment of women. Women's issues have underlined government policies over the years. For example, the question of women's suffrage had been raised as early as 1917 when a delegation from the Women's India Association consisting of Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, Dr. Joshi, Begum Hasrat Mohani and fourteen others placed a memorandum before the Secretary of State, Edwin Montagu asking that women be enfranchised on the same basis as men. The All India Women's Conference which was set up in 1927 by the Women's India Association as a national conference on women's education, reconstituted itself into a permanent national body. This shift in women's demands from social reforms to franchise was perhaps the means to provide feedback to the government. The All India Women's Conference established branches all over India and entrusted sub-committees with the task of influencing government policy on such wide ranging subjects as women workers, rural reconstruction, national education, social service, women's health and employment, untouchability and literacy. The committees studied the questions, made recommendations to the government and demanded

that women be represented in all official bodies in which decision that might affect them were made. Such a voice reminds one of Pandit Nehru who said in 1942 -

Women should address themselves to local programmes of self defence and self sufficiency ..... Public morale depends greatly on how women feel and act ..... I am against treating women as helpless human beings who cannot look after themselves and who must run away from the danger zone..... So the only way to tackle the problem is to make women realise they have to and can face it.” Earlier he had lamented women’s “long habit of relying on other’s goodwill rather than on their own efforts” and retorted sharply to a complaint that the convention of nominating women to the Congress Working Committee had been broken, saying that the move “would ultimately be good for women themselves” for they had to fight as equals and not “imagine that your rights will be given to you or that they will drop down from somewhere, if you simply sit at home.’

In the process of the national self-formation the Emergency of the 1970s marked an important development in women’s movement in India. The publication of **Towards Equality: Report of the Committee On The Status Of Women In India** in 1974 reveals how unequal women’s access to development, to education and to health were. The report also revealed how limited women’s participation was in economic and political matters and also in law in spite of the constitution envisaging an egalitarian Indian society.

By the late seventies however, issues related to women were being raised at various forums and women’s groups were emerging across the country. Some such

groups were the Forum against the Oppression of Women, in Bombay, Vimochana in Bangalore, Stree Shakti Sanghatana in Hyderabad and Saheli in Delhi. The feminist journal *Mamushi* started in 1979 by a group of women in Delhi provided an important voice for the emerging movement. In 1979 in one of the earliest nationwide efforts, women's groups and individual activists from all over the country protested against a Supreme Court judgement that had acquitted two policemen who while on duty had raped a sixteen year old girl in a police station. Women's groups demanded a reopening of the case and later a change in the rape laws. This case highlighted the importance of debate on women's sexual rights in general, the relevance of "sexual history", biases in medical examination and the rights of women at the time of arrest. The rape laws were changed, the popular attitudes towards rape also changed and the women's movement acquired self-confidence and sense of solidarity and made a presence in national life.

That women's issues have made an indelible impression on the Indian national life cannot be denied. Apart from the publication of **Towards Equality** in 1974, publication of **Shramshakti** in 1980 and the **National Perspective Plan for Women** in 1988 investigate the issue of women with regard to their economic status. These studies underline the pitiable conditions of the working women and scant regard for their economic contributions to the family and society. The work environment makes them victims of gender biases inequalities which hinders their growth and

development, self-confidence and self worth. The Eighth Five Year Plan has devoted a special chapter on “Women and Development” as modernisation and westernisation have not brought about liberation for the average Indian woman. Women’s empowerment and upliftment can only become a reality if suitable laws are passed and implemented strictly. The move to enforce laws without fear or favour must be accompanied by attitudinal changes in society. The Indian Government’s National Perspective Plan for women has proposals for reservations at different levels of jobs and governance, unprejudiced and healthy projection of women in media and provisions for legal safeguards. The move to ensure 33% reservation of seats in parliament is also a hope in the direction towards greater equality for women. So, whether it is in law or the beauracracy or literature women have contested male hegemony. Representation in media, in films also have supported this fact. Aparna Sen’s films like “Paroma” or some of Mira Nair’s films have give voice to women. Even in commercial film productions like “Astitva” or “Chandni Bar” women’s issues have been projected.

As mentioned earlier, literature authored by women have served the dual purpose of furthuring nationalist sentiments as well as of investigating women related matters. Post colonial India has passed through various stages of nation development and literature is reflective of such momentous developments. Post-colonial India being a repository of a great society in transition from the old into the new, towards

evolving a democratic and republican society, literature once again has been reflective of this ethos: production of great poetry and novels by authors and poets such as A.K. Ramanujan, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Das, Anita Desai, Jayant Mahapatra, Dom Moraes, Nayantara Sahgal, Shashi Deshpande and more recently Vikram Seth, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, to name just a few are examples of the changes in perspectives on life and literature in the great Indian society. That this great society has volumes to record and contribute to the world at large is beyond doubt an unchallenged opinion. The spread of English education has had an impact on literary productions in post colonial India. Literary productions from India have had a global market and has sensitized the western world to the store house of talent that is India: an intricately woven matrix with its own peculiar means and methods which are at once unique and divine.

The great Indian Society as mentioned earlier has had various forces influencing its growth at various points of history. One of which has been the spread of English education and production of literary texts in English. Such texts talk of matters closely related to the Indian soil and Indian psyche. Thus we find that R.K. Narayan's novels talk of incidents from South India and Bharati Mukherjee talks of the problems of expatriate Indians. Similarly, Shashi Deshpande and Nayantara Sahgal's novels discuss man-woman relationship in contemporary society and analyse the position of women therein. Both the novelists explore the 'self' of the

women and point out how the 'self' of the chief woman protagonist grows and sustains itself in this dynamic society called India. This present study has attempted to understand this 'self' of the woman as projected by Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande.

"Constructing a female self" discusses in detail six novels - three by Shashi Deshpande and three by Nayantara Sahgal. These six novels are **Roots and Shadows**, **The Dark Holds No Terrors**, **That Long Silence** by Shashi Deshpande and **This Time of Morning**, **A Situation in New Delhi**, **Rich Like Us** all by Nayantara Sahgal. The focus of this study has been to arrive at a definition of what constitutes the female self within Indian society. Is it akin to western literary feminists definition of the female self where autonomy is achieved by exerting agency over one's sexuality? Or is it something new and unique which Indian literary feminism has to offer to the world?

This study has discussed in detail the chief women characters of the novels by showing points of distinction and agreement between the women protagonists. This study begins with chapter one. Chapter one - "Introduction" attempts to draw parallels between the development of the self of the Indian nation and the development of the 'self' of the Indian woman. A study of history and of literature produced at various points seem to suggest that the question of the development of the Indian

woman has been clearly linked to the political and economic situation of the times. Thus, expectations from women have varied from time to time and literature has been reflective of such changes. This chapter also traces the origins of women's writing in regional languages and seeks to locate the presence of women's voice in texts written long back.

Chapter two - "Crossing the Laxman Rekha" focuses on Indu in **Roots and Shadows** and Rashmi in **This Time of Morning**. The point where both the novels meet is this - that both women are face to face with traditional customs and traditions in Hindu society. The point of difference consists in how they react to the same. For Indu, her ancestral home is symbolic of all that has been revered so far - a traditional Hindu way of life. And even though she rejects all of it in her youth - she moves away from the house by marrying someone of her choice, yet returns to it at a more mature phase of her life to establish a more meaningful and modified understanding of all that she was brought up on. Rashmi, on the other hand, rejects the pressures of customs and traditions - she walks out of marriage. She is placed, as the title of the novel suggests in the morning after independence where old values are being questioned and attempts are being made to evolve new ones. So, for both Indu and Rashmi, crossing the 'Laxman Rekha' consisted in courageously making amends in sacred societal conventions, such as marriage (Rashmi it must be remembered suffered a broken marriage and Indu sought wholesome love in Naren, her childhood

friend - something which Jayant, her husband could not give her) so that they could experience as Rashmi says, “The freedom to be myself”. And this freedom was essential for living and sustaining “the corporeal ground of intelligence” - a matter that roots itself in the essential biologism of the female psyche and eventually gives reason to celebrate the very essence of femininity.

Chapter three - “We are not Sati Savitris” focuses on Saru in Shashi Deshpande’s **The Dark Holds No Terrors** and Devi in **A Situation in New Delhi**. Saru, like Indu in the earlier chapter rebels against the dictates of tradition by marrying a man of her choice. While marriage might have given her the satisfaction of having lived by the rulings of her rational mind yet she is compelled to strike a compromise between the ideal and the real by returning to her ancestral home and establishing a new understanding thereof. Saru’s state is the state of an educated middle class Indian wife. But the point of distinction in this novel is in the fact that Shashi Deshpande has traced the inner voice of Saru and presented her against the odds of subjugation, ignorance, defeat, isolation. Saru has no one to share her plight with. The novel recounts the transitional period of growth that Saru goes through. In the previous chapter Nayantara Sahgal’s **This Time of Morning** shows the rumblings of change and in this chapter **A Situation in New Delhi** shows a total collapse of value system. There is anarchy everywhere. Young girls are practically sold off in marriage, sons-in-law are worshipped and bought, girls are raped in public: here is an inhuman power

structure nullifying the existence of women. Such is the position in which Devi is placed in. She is a Minister in the Cabinet and the author seems to suggest that it is because of such women that times will be better. And the reasons are not far to see: because even though Devi is a widow, yet she lives by her will, she establishes and maintains relations for her satisfaction. She inspires others, qualities that normally one would not expect of an Indian woman committed to the cause of living by traditions, according to which a woman can be nothing more than a wife, daughter, mother or sister. Even though Devi and Saru live most of these roles in the novels, they are not muted in their responses to the situations around them. The centrality of marriage as an institution, the overpowering impact of customs and traditions and the dynamics of contemporary society do not dampen either Devi's or Saru's spirit. Unlike the typical Sati – Savitri images in which women cannot be expected to live beyond the roles specified for them, these two women not only live up to the demands of the moments they are placed in, but also respond in a manner which is both contemporary and individualized. Devi, as her name indicates spreads light and hope around her, inspires younger women, attracts men - enjoys the promiscuity of love and lives life like one in whom the flame of life has just been kindled.

Chapter four looks at the question "Who Wants to be a Good Wife"? and focuses on two extremely complex and beautiful novels - Shashi Deshpande's **That Long Silence** and Nayantara Sahgal's **Rich Like Us**. Jaya in **That Long Silence**

and Sonali in **Rich Like Us** are the subjects of study in this chapter. Jaya's is a plethora of doubt, frustration, repressed anger communicated through a first person narrative. The novel reveals the process of transformation from Jaya to Suhasini and finally to that great moment when Suhasini or the timid one becomes Jaya or the victorious one. **That Long Silence** records Jaya's period of mutedness, the reasons thereof and finally what inspires her to speak and be articulate once again. Jaya's articulation voices the mutedness of all other generations of women portrayed in the novel. Like Devi in the previous chapter, Sonali in **Rich Like Us** is faced with an uneven power structure where power is appropriated by a few, necessarily men. In this power structure the plight of women is pathetic as Sonali discovers. This novel uses the emergency as a motif to highlight the atrocities on women, and valorizes Sonali, symbolic refusal to accept the uneven power structures whether in public or in private life. Sonali remains single. *Who Wants to be Good Wife?* in the ultimate analysis questions the necessity of marriage in the light of Jaya's mutedness versus Sonali's articulation. If marriages in Hindu society mean a lifetime of burden and silence and loss of identity in the quest for the title - Good Wife, then Sonali's decision is rational and assertive.

Western literary feminists would assert the supremacy of the female body evoking a language specifically female with a syntax and philosophy distinctly its own. However, within the Indian context revolutions in such radical terms might not

be applicable. If centuries of suppression had denied to the women the right to experience the joys of her sexuality, then modern day education and the advantages of a liberal democratic society should ensure and restore to her the basic pride of being a woman and above all things, a human being.

“Constructing a female self” in the ultimate analysis attempts a definition of the female self in the Indian context. The female self is one in whom the inner voice is present and alive to the sights and smells around her. An understanding of this self is arrived at by studying texts authored by two women writers and tracing the presence of the inner voice in the chief women characters. The inner voice or the stream of consciousness of the chief woman protagonist bears testimony to her thoughts gained through experiences of having lived life consciously and meaningfully. The female self is one who lives by the powers of her convictions and modifies roles prescribed on her by society. She lives by the dictates of her intellect and achieves a new and more sustainable understanding with society and with the people in it. The female self in literary texts becomes a mouthpiece for the author as it is the woman writer who carefully constructs her for the readers.

Both Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande’s women protagonists - whether it is Indu or Rashmi, Saru or Devi, Jaya or Sonali, live by the very first of the personal pronouns - “I”. The novels trace the developments of this “I” through phases

of doubt, frustration, anger, adjustment and finally to joy. The narratives bear testimony to the woman's 'self' being active in a society steeped in ritualistic movements towards glorifying manhood at the cost of womanhood. However, the point of hope achieved in these novels is the projection of such woman characters mentioned above and it is for precisely this reason that both the novelists satisfy feminist agenda and can be regarded as feminist writers. That women can author texts of great value and at the same time talk of women in terms beyond domesticity and child bearing is a novel concept in a phallogocentric universe. In "constructing a female self" the issues raised are not just about women's suffering or marginalisation; they are about the 'self', the internal energy that vibrates to the rhythms of the motions of nature, to the emotions of people around, indeed to life itself.

In conclusion it can be said that the female 'self' in the Indian context is one in whom the inner being is alive and articulate, receptive to the sights and sounds from the world outside, willing to face challenges from beyond the 'Laxman Rekha', as well as gain experiences that kindle the "quasimanhood" hidden within. The female 'self' grows from the experiences of having lived a full life in terms of the mental, emotional and physical aspects. Nayantara Sahgal and Shashi Deshpande's women characters reveal their ability to sustain and live by the richness of experiences gained through strife, strain, pain and glory.

**Notes :**

1. Tharu Susie, *Women Writing in India*, OUP, 1993.

---

---

*Bibliography*

---

---

Primary Sources

**Novels by Shashi Deshpande**

Roots and Shadows, Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 1983.

The Dark Holds No Terrors, Delhi, Vikas, 1980

That Long Silence, London, Virago, 1988

**Novels by Nayantara Sahgal**

This Time of Morning ————— ?

A Situation in New Delhi, New Delhi, Penguin, 1988

Rich like us, London, Sceptre, 1987

Secondary Sources

Adam Barbara and Allan Stuart, **Theorising Culture**, UCL Press, 1995.

Armstrong Nancy and Tennenhouse, **The Ideology of conduct : Essays in Literature and the History of Sexuality**, Methuen, 1987.

Bharucha Nilofar and Nabar Vrinda, **Postcolonial Indian Literature in English**,

Delhi Vision Books, 1998.

Butalia Urvashi and Sarkar Tanika, **Women and the Hindu Right**, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1995.

Bagchi Jasodhara, **Indian Woman, Myth and Reality**, Hyderabad, Sangam Books, 1995.

Chowdhury Indira, **The Frail Hero and Virile History, Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal**, OUP, 1998.

Crane.J.Ralph, **Nayantara Sahgal's India, Passion, Politics and History**, Sterling, 1998.

Jain Jasbir and Singh Avdesh, **Indian Feminisms**, Delhi, Creative Books, 2001.

Jain Jasbir and Agarwal Supriya, **Gender and Narrative**, Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2002.

Jain Jasbir, **Women in Indo Anglian Fiction, Tradition and Modernity**, Delhi Manohar Publication, 1998.

Jain Jasbir and Amin Amina, **Margins of Erasure, Purdah in the Subcontinental Novels in English**, Sterling, 1995.

Knoriti Joel, "*Years of Silence came to an end*", interview with Shashi Deshpande, 2000, Kaplan Cora, **Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism**, Verso, 1986.

Lal Malashri, **The Law of the Threshold**, Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, 1996.

Nanavati, U.N. and Kar. Prafulla, **Rethinking Indian English Literature**, Delhi, Pencraft International, 2000.

Naravane V.S., **A Cultural History of Modern India** New Delhi, Northern Book Centre, 1991.

Moi Toril, **French Feminist Thoughts**. 

Prasad Amar Nath, **Critical Response to Indian Fiction in English**, New Delhi, Atlantic Publishers, 2001.

Rajan Rajeswari Sunder, **Signposts: Gender Issues in Post Independence India**, New Jersey, Rutgers University Press, 2001.

Sharma Sudarshan, **The Influence of Gandhian Ideology on Indo-Anglian Fiction**, New Delhi, Soni Books, 1982.

Satchidanandan K., **Indian Literature, Positions and Propositions**, Delhi, Pencraft-International, 1999.

Showalter Elaine, **The Feminist Criticism, Essays on Women, Literature and Theory**, London, Virago Press, 1986.

Showalter Elaine, **A Literature of Their Own**, Virago, 1984.

Sandhu Sarabjit, **The Image of Women in the Novels of Shashi Deshpande**, New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991.

Singh Sushila, **Feminism and Recent Fiction in English**, Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991.

Tharu Susie and K.Lalitha, **Women Writing in India, Vol I**, OUP. 1993

Delhi?

Watkins Susan, **20<sup>th</sup> Century Women Novelists, Feminist Theory into Practice**, Great Britain, Palgrave, 2001.

## **BIO - DATA**

- Name** : Ms. Soma Bhattacharjya
- Present Occupation** : Academic Officer (English) National Institute of Open Schooling (formerly National Open School), New Delhi.
- Address for Communication** : somabhattacharjya@hotmail.com
- Research Experience** : Researched in feminist literary criticism while working for M.Phil dissertation on “The Heart or the Hearth ? A study of the feminist vision in selected short stories from The Secret Self.” Awarded ‘A’ grade degree in 1996.
- Areas of Interest** :
- Curriculam development and material production.
  - Women's writing.
  - English Language Teaching.
- Participation in Seminars/Conferences/Workshops** :
- Presented paper in International

Conference on "World Languages in Multilingual Contexts", C.I.E.F.L. Hyderabad, India, 2001.

- Attended seminars on Distance Education organised by IGNOU, NIOS.

- Participated in ELT Workshops organised by British Council.

### Special Courses attended

- Represented India at Sri Lanka for a Hornby Trust, London and British Council, Sri Lanka organised course on "Multicultural Education and English Across the Curriculum, 2003.

- Attended course on "Teaching Spoken English" organised by Hornby Trust, London and British Council India, at Puri, 2002.

- Attended course on "Classroom Methods for a Communicative Curriculum" organised by British Council, Indian and Hornby Trust, London at Kolkata, 2001.

NEHU LIBRARY 103706  
Acc No. ....  
No B .....  
Date..... 28-8-07  
Class L .....  
Sub.Hea .....  
Enter by.....  
Transcribed by.....