

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

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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".¹

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".² 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"³ 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-

(Mention the large ages in which they originally wrote & their date of birth)

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.⁴

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 ^{their} growth and contribution: as a writer, ^s as a member of society and ultimately as a 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.⁵

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 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 -----⁶

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.⁷

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."⁸

Shashi Deshpande's major work focus on women even though she says that these are "human issues, of interest to all humanity".⁹ 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.¹⁰

Why? 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 Ashapura

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 -----.¹¹

Ashapurna Devi summarises Kumkum 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.¹²

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 bioglogism 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.¹³

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.¹⁴ ^ ^

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 upon¹⁵

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. \$?

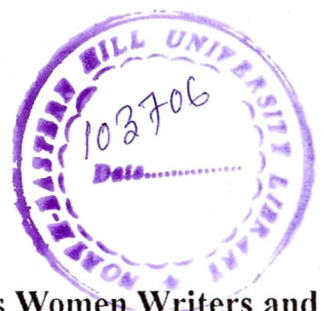
5

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.’¹

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 phallogentric 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.