

Images and Representation of the Rural Woman

A Study of the
Selected Novels of
Indian Women Writers

JAIWANTI DIMRI



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Indian Institute of Advanced Study
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla

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JAIWANTI DIMRI

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Village and Village Woman—A Historic Overview

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a
temple with doors all shut?
Open thine eyes and see thy God is not before thee!
He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and
where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them
in the sun and in shower, and his garment is covered
with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him
come down on the dusty soil!

Rabindranath Tagore—*Gitanjali*

The construct of the rural woman is of vital significance for the centrality of the ‘village’ in the Indian literary canon. In any study of the Indian woman -- rural, urban or any subaltern group-- the nuanced framework of the Indian society needs to be kept in mind. “Western stereotypes and generalizations about Indian women are based on inadequate knowledge and class structure (India has a large middle class alongside a wealthy class and considerable poverty), regional context (women’s status and opportunity for education vary markedly within India), and India’s vibrant feminist organizations (working on health issues and violence against women, primarily)” (Riessman 119-139). The ambivalence is not delimited to class structure but is equally true of the hierarchies of caste, gender and religion.

Class structure in fact is not the only but one of the defining coordinates of Indian social structure. In fact the image of a woman in the social and literary canon is impacted by various

other factors such as the patriarchal structure -- Brahminical or feudal—the caste stratifications, gender binaries and locale. Cultural and regional factors are pivotal in shaping the status and position of women in various rural areas of India. “The changing position of Indian women [in this context the rural woman] has many facets and generalization is impossible because of the existence of considerable variations among regions and classes, between rural and urban areas, among classes and finally among different religious, ethnic and caste groups while in certain contexts, the Indian sub-continent is a single cultural region, in many others it is heuristically more rewarding to look upon it as a congress of micro-regions, differences between which are crucial” (Srinivas 7).

To begin with, the ‘Indian Rural’ in general, and the rural woman in particular have been some of the most subalternised, debunked and retrogressive categories in the postcolonial and feminist discourse in the post-independence era. The concentration of the Indian English feminist canon on the urban-centric metropolitan discourse to the marginalisation of native, subaltern voices and traditions from varying geographical and cultural sites in changing familial and social contexts in terms of caste, class and gender posits the imperative need to relocate the marginalised rural centre, and more importantly to reclaim the rural woman’s voice and images in their fiction. What postcolonialism often fails to recognise is that what counts as “marginal in relation to the West has often been central and foundational to the non-West” (Leela Gandhi IX).¹

Since the social constructs of the village and the village woman are complementary to each other and cannot be examined in isolation, there is the imperative need to locate the village woman in a contextualised locale for the purposes of the investigation of her images and representation in the backdrop of the social, economic and cultural variants. As Dirks has pointed out: “The power of colonial discourse was not that it created whole new meaning instantaneously but that it shifted

old meanings slowly, sometimes imperceptively, through the colonial control of a whole range of institutions” (Dirks 75). Caste, tribe, religion and the village are some of the key institutions to have acquired new signification in the colonial state.

Taking full cognisance of the facts that the Indian rural woman similar to any other construct of an urban, tribal or *dalit* Indian woman is not a monolithic entity, and the rural woman in the Indian literary canon—dominant as well as the feminist—is located on the periphery, this study seeks to examine and investigate the images of rural women and their representation in eight women-authored novels, two of which are written in English and the remaining six in five regional languages—Assamese, Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi and Kannada. These are Kamala Markandaya’s *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Ashapura Devi’s *Pratham Pratishruti* (1968, trans. *The First Promise*, 2004), Maitreyi Pushpa’s *Idannamam—This Is Not Mine* (1994) and *Chaak—The Potter’s Wheel* (1997) in Hindi, Indira Goswami’s *Une Knowa Howda* (1988, trans. *A Saga of South Kamrup*, 1993), M. T. Indira’s Kannada novel *Phaniyamma* (1976, trans. eponymously in 1989) and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (1997). Such a study is premised on what Fanon calls the “need to realise the ‘Truths of the Nation’ in the backdrop of the systematised polarisation of village as a geographical, social and cultural site” (Fanon 23).

Acclaimed at national and international level these selected novels are central not only to the feminist but also to the dominant canon for their representation of the rural woman suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in the nation state.² Realising fully the politics of representation and the polemics of subjectivity, the selection of these novels is foregrounded on their serious engagement with the feminist issues of identity, subjectivity, sexuality and resistance in a regional, localised context, on the one hand, and secondly for their localised focus on the women of caste, class and gender.

The Village: Context and Subtext

The term village in common parlance refers to an agricultural community, small in size that depends on crop cycles. In M. N. Buch's view 'the truly rural' village tends to be wholly dependent on agriculture, the community is well-knit and largely self-contained and a strong strain of homogeneity is evident' (qtd. in Buch 17). The word '*grama*' occurs in the *Rig Veda* more than a dozen times:

Goddess of the wild and the forest
 Who remains always unseen
 How is it that you do not seek the village?
 Are you not afraid?

(*Rig Veda*, Hymn to *Aranyani*—The Forest)

At the earlier stage of social formation the indigenous people and/or the marginal ones can be placed in two groups: The 'hunter gatherers' and the 'pastoralists.' The Aryans or the dominant groups can be studied as 'peasants' and 'townsmen.' The demarcation between the *grama* and the *aranya*, the village community and the hunting tribes respectively from the beginning 'reflects a perceived opposition between the two systems' (Thapar 2002). Next to the pastoralists in the social ladder came the peasants who were different from the other two mentioned classes as they were well settled on their land holdings and tilled their soil and cultivated their land from one generation to another. They were identified by the village or the areas they lived in. The peasant class was very important from the point of view of the society and the state as major revenue providers for their rulers. The government of the day had direct power over them and their resources of all kinds and in return they were promised security from external powers. A prominent feature of the peasantry was the presence of a strict, social hierarchy which was totally absent in the society of hunter-gatherers and the pastoralists. As compared to clans based on

kin-relations, the peasantry was marked by castes (Thapar 45-56).

The hierarchisation of the village community is substantiated in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* where a whole section is devoted to *Janapada Nivesa* (Formation of Villages). *Janapada* here is used to describe people inhabiting a fixed territory and by no means implies the 'State'. Unlike the West, the village in India has been an omnipresent reality. "The villager rather than the city dweller exemplifies certain traditional values of Indian life" (Verghese 116). Realising fully the centrality of the village in the national development programme the key issues of education, hygiene, cottage industries and health in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* are deliberated with the village community in mind the import of which is belatedly realised by political thinkers and ideologues in the nation state.

The study of village in India is to a fairly large extent impacted by Western thought and our intellectual understanding of an everlasting Indian village community as Aloka Parashar posits is the product of ideas embedded in a western consciousness (Parashar 17-42). The institution of village underwent substantive changes under the colonial rule presumably for subversive political and economic reasons. In colonial India village was studied primarily by the British revenue officials for the purposes of assessment of land for revenue generation. As a matter of fact not only in India but in other colonies too the interests of the colonial masters have most often clashed with the peasantry. It is now claimed that at the grassroot level the First War of Indian Independence in 1857 was led by the peasants who were serving the British army as sepoys and subedars subsequently joined by the non-military peasants of all castes, classes and religion in villages (Prem Singh 11). The Mau Mau movement of the Kenyan peasants preferably described by the veterans of independence as 'Land and Freedom Army' against the British colonial rule during 1952-60 also reiterates the conflicting interests of the colonisers and peasant community.

Realising fully the centrality of the peasant in any social structure Frantz Fanon emphasises the need to change the whole structure from the bottom up peasantry mainly because so long as the militant nationalist movements are restricted to towns, it has a limited appeal. It succeeds only when it reaches down to the peasant people. According to Fanon in colonial territories the proletariat is the nucleus of the colonial population which has been pampered by the colonial regime (Fanon 86). The majority of nationalist parties demonstrate a deep distrust towards the people of the rural areas but "... the native peasantry lives against a background of tradition, where the traditional structure of the society has remained intact, contrarily in the industrialized countries it is just this traditional setting which has been broken up by the progress of industrialization" (88). Despite the privileged position of urban proletariat, the puppet bourgeoisie, the *lumpen-proletariat* of the shanty town—finally they all fall in line with the stand made by the rural masses.

True to Fanon's claim the peasantry in the African colony emerged as the most effectively organised revolutionary class against the colonial forces. Correspondingly, the success of various tribal and peasant movements in India, the *Praja Mandal* movements of the peasantry in the princely hill states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand, for instance, depended on the strength of the 'bottom up' peasantry albeit the participation of the rural woman in these local movements has still been an unexplored territory of research manifesting the subalternisation of the woman's voice in the mainstream and subaltern discourse.³

The colonial discourse on Indian village is available in the form of revenue and settlement reports. However, the peasant class has always been important for the state, for the rulers in the past as revenue providers. The colonial stereotyping of the Indian village community had two ingredients: (i) the portrayal of the village as an idyllic and utopian political community – a society of equals, and (ii) its characterisation as a body of co-sharers of the soil. This emphasis on the village community as a

political entity in Manish Thakur's opinion tended to ignore the twofold paradigms of dominance and hierarchy within the village (9). Crucially though, as S. C. Dube has argued, the village in India is not a corporate group, it is an arena of cooperation as well as conflict characterised by an identity of its own. Contrary to the much publicised view, the Indian village is not a 'self contained little republic' (84), neither is it a self sufficient and self sustaining unit which is governed by the social hierarchies of caste, class, gender and religion.

The depiction of the village community as an arena of cooperation tends to ignore the paradigms of dominance and hierarchy embedded in the structural framework of the village at the micro as well as macro level. The conflicts in villages are often attributed to differences of caste, religion and ethnicity, however, the Marxists as well as the Marxist feminists critique them as a part of class struggle, a class struggle from above (Mies 133). In any attempt to examine and investigate the images of the rural woman in the literary canon the imperatives of dominance and hierarchy in the village community have to be fully taken cognisance of.

The 'village' in Western studies has been a unit of anthropological study, with its micro versus macro status in larger society, its definition as an organ and not as an organism of the socio-cultural whole, its isolate structure and the impact of the more 'sophisticate' urban political, economic, social and religious culture on the 'primitive and simplistic' village (qtd. in Sekhar 1). However, the villages in the past few years have been massively impacted by the dominant forces of globalisation, market economy, information technology and enhanced means of transportation and what remains of the village now is only '... a nostalgia for the myth of a village' (Jain 3), the 'imaginary homeland' syndrome of *Pather Panchali* of yesteryears or the nostalgic attempt of the migrant villager to recollect 'the name of that bird'- *Os Chidiya Ka Naam* in Pankaj Bisht's eponymous Hindi novel.

Crucially though, India has also an ancient tradition of urban

centres as is corroborated by the travelogues of foreign travellers who have referred to quite a few flourishing towns—some of them as administrative capitals, some of religious importance, others were centres of trade and seats of learning and Indus valley civilisation was primarily urban in character. Later in the colonial period the three presidency towns of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras owe much to the British and the cantonments, civil lines, mall roads and several hill stations have a foregrounding in the colonial past (Dube 85). Polemically though, the rise of the metropolitan centres as power centres and the subsequent shifting of the power centre from the site of traditional village to the city came to structurally disturb the socio-cultural dynamics of indigenous societies in the colony (Dube 84-93) .

The city-village polarisation in one's mind could be retraced to the colonial period. "The city culture became distinctly different from the village culture with the coming of the British" (Karnad qtd. in *Narratives of the Village 2*). Meenakshi Mukherjee too ascribes the disruption of the cultural rural background in India partially to the British rule (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 6). The dislocation of the tribal and village societies in the colonies in Asia and Africa in the wake of the collapse of the native social and political institutions and the spurious rise of metropolitan centres as power centres in the post-independent phase has been one of the legacies of the empire branching off into the worst form of mental and cultural colonisation. African writer Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) best encapsulates this transformational phase of cultural destabilisation in terms of the collapse of traditional values and institutions of tribe and village in the precolonial African society contestatory of the colonial stereotyping of the village community as a self contained mini republic in the Indian context.⁴

These rural-urban binaries are glaringly perceptible in historiography and literature in the exoticisation of the subalterns' knowledge of rituals and myths or the depiction of

the peasants as the powerless victims of landlords, money lenders, colonialists, and more recently of the industrialists by some urban novelists, artists and film makers. As a welcome change, the cinematic presentation of the village in recent years signals a sea change.⁵ What is imperative for our argument here is the fact of the British impacting the country's urbanisation manifest in the rural-urban hiatus. The compartmentalisation of the colonial world into two quarters—the native quarters and the European quarters or the two zones—the native zone and the settlers' zone was in line with the pure Aristotelian logic thus following the principle of pure reciprocal exclusivity (Fanon 29-32).

Adding on to the rural-urban interface the marginalisation of the peasant groups and communities in the wake of the rise of urban centres is a global phenomenon strongly contested and deliberated upon in the Asian and African postcolonial discourse. The peasant problem in Italy forms the foundational ground of Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. Similarly, the civil war in the U.S.A. in 1775 was firmly foregrounded in the conflicting interests of the urban North and rural South. Ranajit Guha and the subaltern critics' points of contestation pertaining to colonialist historiography in India also relate to the exclusion of the peasant and other subaltern groups in the nationalist historiographies, "... to ignore the subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project" (Spivak, *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture* 298).

No matter the village in the nation state has shifted to the periphery yet it remains the centre of the periphery: "The village in the modern Indian nation state is no doubt still placed on the periphery and yet it remains the centre of the periphery, effectively destabilizing the very notion of a city centre, and dislocating the centre-periphery equations" (Jain 4). Despite the polarisation of the village in the contemporary social and literary canon the village still remains the epicentre in the metanarrative of the nation state.

The historiographic trend from where the subaltern studies originated in India was a critical form of Marxism influenced by Gramsci and the British radical historians. Classically known as 'history from below' it initially involves a paradigm shift from the colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiographies to the history of the mass movements of peasants and tribals with a view to reclaim *The Small Voice of History* (the title of Ranajit Guha's book). The subaltern studies project has been of great interest and enquiry to the literary critics for its postmodernist orientations especially the delegitimisation of metanarratives and its critique of rationality. The Foucauldian notion of history, the power-knowledge paradigm and Edward Said's critique of the 'Orient' have also been instrumental in the relocation of the critique of colonialism from the economic and political domain to the domain of culture. The subalternist historians' objectives of retrieving the culture of the masses in terms of identities, memories and popular voices, on the one hand, and the acceptance of the autonomy of the subaltern subject and sovereignty of subaltern consciousness, on the other, are of interest for the feminists too for the commonality of concerns for the subaltern and woman positionality in the literary canon.

Initially, though the discipline of subaltern studies had not been informed by feminist theory, gender studies made a forceful entry in the subaltern studies project in India with Susie Tharu joining the subaltern studies group as editor for *Subaltern Studies*. X (1999), and the immersion of *Subaltern Studies* XI volume in the feminist mode for it is from within this feminist mode in Spivak's view that the subaltern must be rethought today. "S/he is no longer cut off from lines of access to the centre. The centre, as represented by the Bretton Woods agencies and the World Trade Organisation, is altogether interested in the rural and indigenous subaltern as source of trade-related intellectual properties of TRIPs' many ways are being found to generate a subaltern subject asking to be used thus" (Spivak, *Community, Gender And Violence* 319).

Despite the implicit and explicit dangers of appropriation of the rural and indigenous subaltern by the market forces as underlined by Spivak, the subaltern studies project has understandably been a major step towards the process of rethinking the role of groups such as peasants, lower castes, labourers and women in forming the course of history and the representation of marginalised subjectivities in the literary canon. This project of retrieving the history of the people of inferior rank in terms of social, economic and political location seeks to get rid of the elitism of colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiographies. For Foucault, the problem is no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits. The problem thus is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundation (Foucault 5). “In short, the history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature, seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favour of stable structures” (6). The project of retrieving the village as a geographical, social and cultural site and the village woman as the subject in the literary discourse in Foucauldian terms would be a step towards the rebuilding of foundation.

Referring back to the subaltern studies project—critical of the postcolonial historiography as a metanarrative of the elitist—it posits the need to forcefully incorporate the voices of the people of inferior rank or position in an assertion of the multiple, fragmented discourses of tribal, *dalits* and peasants. The polemics of representation and heterogeneity is indubitably implicit in the subaltern discourse in the form of the hierarchies within groups and sub-groups at the micro as well as macro level. The dynamics of dominance and subservience central to the subaltern and feminist discourse is comprehensively critiqued by Spivak in her influential essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The inclusion of the construct of the rural woman in this subaltern category

is, however, suspect and polemic as for the subalterns collectives' much publicised reclamation of the peasant movements vis-à-vis the essentialist historiography, the 'peasant' here belongs to the category of the 'human,' the 'universal.' And even more crucially, a woman's participation in the peasant, tribal or *dalit* movements across the country is still an invisible and unexplored territory, and as for feminism—Indian or western, the woman is treated in all discourses as a homogenised, monolithic construct.

The subaltern discourse is thus not free from theoretical traps and inherent contradictions and has no dearth of disclaimers from among the postcolonial, feminist and Marxist critics as well as the dissenters within the subaltern group, Sumit Sarcar and Ramchandra Guha, for instance. Jacques Pauchepadass has summed up these underlying contradictions within the subaltern discourse as the tendency of the subaltern historians to essentialise subaltern consciousness as a nature, to reify the category of 'subaltern' by assimilating it to an empirical social entity, the usability of the subaltern category or model in sociological terms which is so vast and heterogeneous that it is useless as an analytical tool, revival of the old debates on the status of popular culture, the categorisations of 'great' and 'little' traditions etc. clearly lacking sociological substance, and lastly no clear treatment of caste. The Marxists have criticized the subalternists' neglect of the study of the causes and context of the movements focusing exclusively on the forms of popular protest and ignoring the transformations in the nature of popular protest from one historical period to another, their generalizations of popular resistance as violent (Pauchepadass 106-111). From the feminist standpoint Spivak and Lata Mani refer to the polemic exclusion of the subaltern widow as the speaking subject in the famous debate on *sati* in the colonial state.

Criticism apart, the subaltern discourse is vitally important for shifting the focus from colonial modernity to cultural identity,

and in the present context of the study it has primarily been instrumental for locating the peasant in the cultural domain vis-à-vis the bourgeois elitist culture, the written culture vis-à-vis the oral popular culture in the indigenous genres of memory, popular voices and folklore for it is in this cultural domain the rural woman is firmly grounded.

The inclusion of the rural woman into the subaltern group by Ranajit Guha's own admission would invite the polemics of heterogeneity. Guha's broad categorisation of the subaltern groups entails six categories. The third category of 'Dominant indigenous groups' at the regional and local levels in which the rural woman could also be placed was by Guha's own admission polemic. "Taken as a whole and in the abstract this ... category ... was heterogeneous in its composition and thanks to the uneven character of regional economic and social developments, differed from area to area ... This could and did create many ambiguities and contradictions in attitudes and alliances, especially among the lowest strata of the rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants and upper middle class peasants all of whom belonged, *ideally speaking* to the category of people or subaltern class" (Guha 8).

The rural women in the select fictional texts in this study represent a heterodox group of rural peasantry in the caste and class hierarchy, only very few of these women could be classified as subaltern in social and economic terms since majority of them are not subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender or religion specificities, albeit the construct of the rural woman in the feminist literary canon is certainly subalternised. A sincere attempt is made here to critique the images and representation of rural woman in the feminist literary canon in the backdrop of the nuanced multi-layered, multi-faceted and multi-dimensional embedded structures of caste, and class in the Indian society.

The Rural Woman in the Nation State

The homogenised, monolithic construct of Indian rural woman is problematic from the postcolonial, subaltern and feminist perspective. The women for Simone de Beauvoir are not unchangeably fixed entities (qtd. in Hansen 6). Concomitantly, the entity of a rural woman is not an unchangeably fixed entity and is invariably subjected to social, economic, political, and lastly the patriarchal forces. As has been pointed out by Srinivas cultural and regional factors are pivotal in shaping the status and affecting the position of women in various rural areas of India. Given the multi-ethnic and multi-lingual variations in India, the homogenising of any construct of a woman—rural, urban, *dalit* or tribal—would not only be an intimidating task by simple logistics but is polemically related with the dynamics of heterogeneity and representation.

Equally polemical is the task of locating the rural woman in the nation state since nation and its cognates—‘national’ and ‘Indian literature’—too are contested categories within the postcolonial, subaltern and feminist discourse. Disclaiming the construct of nation as ‘a homogeneous time’ Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983) argues that nation lives in ‘homogeneous empty time.’ For Homi Bhabha the nation is located in temporality and the narrative of the nation is an inevitable ambivalence in one where the people were always in the making, in a process of historical progress not yet fully developed to fulfill the nation’s destiny, and in the other the unity of the people, their permanent identification with the nation had to be continually signified, repeated and performed (Bhabha 291-322). Anderson’s homogeneous empty time for a Marxist could be the time of capital (Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* 6). Partha Chatterjee finds many examples in the postcolonial world that suggest the presence of a dense and heterogeneous time of modernity (7-8) in the life of a nation with his critique of Satinath Bhaduri’s (1906-51) Bengali novel *Dhorai Charitmanas* (1949-51). The novel underpins signifying moments of departure in the low caste protagonist’s life

corresponding to the shifts in the nation's heterogeneous time. One could in an identifiable manner look for new trajectories and tropes in an attempt to explore the images and representation of the rural woman in the postcolonial heterogeneous time in the feminist literary canon.

Despite the fact that nation and its cognates—'national' and 'Indian literature'—are contested categories India does not cease to be a nation for a majority of people. Aizaj Ahmad "... recognises the actuality, even the necessity, of progressive and revolutionary kinds of nationalism, and it does not characterize nations and states as coercive entities as such" (11). Equally significant is Ahmad's critique of Indian literature wherein lamenting at our lack of knowledge of genres and movements of Indian literature he argues, "Can we, then in the present state of our knowledge, really speak of Indian literature as an object already there, available for theorisation?" (264). Significantly though, irrespective of all his doubts and reservations Ahmad ends up as an enthusiastic proponent of the 'nation' and of its cognate of 'Indian literature.'

In recent years the increasing focus on the peasant and tribal subjectivities in the literary canon demonstrates the centrality of the village in the nation state. Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning novel *The White Tiger* (2008) and Kamala Markandaya's posthumous novel *The Bombay Tiger* (2008) too address the polemics of these two Indias: "(of) Men with Big Bellies, and Men with Small Bellies" (Adiga 64). Focusing primarily on the city-village binaries, the subject position of the villager in these texts is suggestive of the new *avatar* of the villager in the nation state albeit the caricaturing of the village women diffuses the discourse.

Contrary to Adiga's shameless caricaturing of the village woman Amitav Ghosh's *The Sea of Poppies* (2008) is verily significant from the feminist standpoint for the central location of the village woman Deeti in the text and her gradual transformation in terms of speaking position and agency in the

Andaman bound ship among her *jahaj bhais and jahaj bahens*. The profuse and nuanced use of the Bhojpuri dialect by Deeti and her fellow prisoners is a welcome linguistic experiment in translating the cultural sensibilities of the non-English speakers in English language.

Dating back to Spivak's challenging and equally reflective query in 1985—"Can the subaltern speak?"—the feminist and subaltern critics have ceaselessly addressed the polemics of the speaking subject in the multiple, fragmented discourses of tribal, *dalits*, peasants, minority groups and women. By 'subaltern' Spivak meant the oppressed subject, the people 'of inferior rank,' the members of Antonio Gramsci's 'subaltern classes' whose voices, history and experiences had been largely missing from the dominant literary and social canon in the South Asian Studies. This project "to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian Studies" (Guha vii) was described by Guha as an attempt to study "the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way" (Guha vii).

The Rural Woman in the Dominant Male Canon: A Review

The novel is said to be a western genre that came to India in the early nineteenth century. However, in the last few decades there have been sustained efforts to investigate the complex configurations behind the emergence of this genre in Indian literature—Indian English as well as regional fiction. Most significantly, notwithstanding the impact of British writers and American missionaries in the early nineteenth century the prose narratives and chronicles in English and other regional languages as precursors of novel demonstrate the variegated indigenous traits in terms of locale and other socio-cultural specificities. What is pertinent for our discussion here is the foregrounding of these early novels in the rural landscape.

In the preindependence and early postindependence period—the transitional phase from colonialism to postcolonialism—the novel emerges as the most effective and viable medium of expression. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her earlier critical study *Realism and Reality* (1985) has traced the history of Indian novel from the initial stage of traditional moral fables to novels of purpose to finally shape into social novel. As an integral part of our socio-cultural milieu the rural novel in India can be located in this social domain. There has been a sustained discourse on rural life in pan Indian fiction that is most often a visible textual presence, and at times a submerged text, a subaltern subtext in a dominantly urban discourse “as muffled as the almost inaudible cry of a refugee from the village on a noisy city street” (Satchidanandan, *The Eye* 4).

In 1857, the year of the First War of Indian Independence the genre of novel registers its first appearance in India with Baba Padamanji’s Marathi novel *Yamunaparyatan*, and in half a century it proved to be the most popular literary genre among the newly educated Indians. Fakir Mohun Senapati’s (1843-1918) *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (*Six Acres and a Half*) as a debutante village-centric Oriya novel deals not only with the hegemonic exploitation of the peasants by a zamindar but is pivotal for its pronounced focus on ordinary men and women in a village with their day to day problems, and more prominently for its feminist concerns. The noted Hindi writer and critic Namvar Singh hails the year 1857, the year of the First War of Indian Independence, “... because the novel emerged in India only after this major political event, and that was not a coincidence” (Singh qtd. in Mukherjee, *Early Novels in India* 4).

The fictional corpus in the regional languages under consideration in this study in the early decades of the nineteenth century is foregrounded in the three major contemporary movements: (i) the reform movements, (ii) the national movement under the leadership of Gandhi, and (iii) the colonial

project—the outsider’s projection of the insider. Strategically anticolonial, the first two major movements intended to counter the colonial project of the feminisation of colony by way of a systematised projection of Indian male as ‘effeminate, weak and unmanly’ (Nandy xi) followed by their portrayal of ‘brown men’ as oppressive patriarchal agents for ‘brown’ Indian women, and white men as saviours of these brown women (Spivak, *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture* 297).

This discursive colonial agenda as Ashis Nandy argues is contested by the reformers and nationalists by a forceful assertion of *Khatriyahood* manifest in the proliferation of national and patriotic literature. Bankimchandra’s *Anandmath* and *Durgeshnandini*, Tagore’s *Gora*, Vrindavanlal Verma’s *Jhansi Kei Rani Laxmibai* and *Gadhkundar* are some of the notable illustrations of this genre of political and historical fiction though concomitantly the tradition of social realism has also flourished in the rural-centric novels wherein the ‘peasant consciousness’ and ‘women consciousness’ are centrally located. Notable among these signatory voices of the century are Munshi Premchand (1880-1936) from the northern states of Uttar Pradesh, then the Central Province Fanishwar Nath Renu (1921-1977) and Nagarjuna (1911-1998) from Bihar who are engaged in the problematics of the exploitation of the landless and tenant farmers under the zamindari system along with other co-related issues of poverty, hunger and debt.

The year 1936 could be hailed as a landmark in the history of rural Hindi novels for two events: (i) Munshi Premchand’s inaugural speech at the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) with his pronounced focus on the need for socially purposeful literary writing that would generate ‘*gati, sangharsh and baichani*’—dynamism, struggle and uneasiness to earmark the arrival of *yatharthvadi*—realistic novel in Hindi though Munshi Premchand had been writing socially purposeful writing since the twenties. In the corpus of Hindi fiction Munshi Premchand’s posthumous novel *Godan* (1936) is a canonical

text for its serious engagement with the dynamics of poverty, caste and orthodoxy along with the marginalised location of the poor village woman in an oppressive, caste-ridden feudal system. Unlike the mute positionality of the dispossessed peasant protagonist Hori in *Godan* Premchand has imbued the poor and dispossessed peasants with a voice in his earlier novel *Karmabhumi* (1932).

A comparatively less valorised event but of no less magnitude was the publication of Shiv Pujan Sahai's *Dehati Dunia* in 1936 that earmarks the advent of *Aanchalik*—region-specific—novel in Hindi to be eventually enriched and revitalised precisely two decades later by Fanishwar Nath Renu from Mithilanchal of rural Bihar. As the binary of the dominant elitist canon in Hindi fiction *Aanchalik* novel encapsulates in a spectacular manner the nativity of the native farmer in the local idiom and the local narrative forms of '*katha, upkatha, parikatha, kimvadanti*' employed by Renu in *Parati Parikatha* in a truly local form and linguistic idiom.

The *Aanchalik* novel in Hindi and Fanishwar Nath Renu complement each other. Notwithstanding the debate vis-à-vis the realism of Munshi Premchand and of Renu, *Maila Aanchal* (1954) and *Parati Parikatha* (1975) of Renu undeniably offer a cogent critique of rural India, 'the sub tale of the *parati*—the fallow land' in the new nation state poignantly highlighting the dispossession of the dispossessed farmers at the hands of the discursive and subversive social and political agencies comprising of the rich landlords and the money lenders, the priestly class and the nexus between the corrupt bureaucracy and the local goons. Over and above, the novel addresses the issue of gender with the sub story - the *upkatha* of Panduki who threw away her daughter jubilant at the birth of a son soon after to lose her son to death. Foregrounded in the villages of Meriganj and Paranjpur in the Purnia district of Bihar, these two village-centric narratives represent the microcosm of the impoverished peasantry in the nation state in the backdrop of the land reforms

and the abolition of zamindari system. Renu's genius lies in the narrativisation of the nuanced localised village realities in the local idiom offering the narrative voice to *the 'chiraiya, churmun and the bhanswar'*- the tiny bird, the small boy and the buffalo herder in the narrative (Renu, *Parati Parikatha* 16).

This is attempted with equal élan by Nagarjuna in his eponymous novel *Balchanama* and *Baba Bateshwar Nath* wherein the strategic device of narrativisation by the disempowered low caste Balchanama engages in the dynamics of subjectivity and agency in terms of the low caste subaltern voice in the nation state. Foregrounded in the writer's profound knowledge of the geographical terrain of the Darbhanga district in Bihar the sub-text of the novel entails the socio-political critique of the nation in the low caste Bhalchand alias Balchanama's 'naïve' comments on the socially and politically stratified feudal peasantry from the subaltern location.

These village-centric social novels are pivotal not only in the corpus of regional writing but in the dominant Hindi canon as well for their socio-ideological concerns of hunger and poverty, sex and violence, the binaries of tradition and modernity and critique of Gandhism during the crucial formative years of independence. At this crucial juncture when the genre of novel is translated into social novel, rural India finds a place of prominence in the Indian novel. Despite the centrality of the male peasant in these fictional narratives they are equally significant for the feminist discourse for the valorised location of village women in these texts. Dhania in *Godan*, Durga in *Maila Anchal* and Rabni in *Balchanama* are grassroot village women endowed with superhuman qualities of perseverance, courage, willpower, sacrifice, determination well qualified to challenge and defy tradition. Dhania's acceptance of the low caste pregnant Jhunia as her daughter-in-law anticipates the decisive role of an emancipated peasant woman in the construction of a casteless society.

Thus, these rural/regional novels are canonical for their focus

on the rural woman in the contemporary familial and social context. Interestingly, the focus in this rural-centric male discourse is not so much on the hegemonic patriarchal hierarchy as on the socio-economic hierarchies of the haves and have-nots, where the rural woman located in the common category is subjected more to the economic than the patriarchal oppression. In these socio-economic stratifications Balchanama's low caste poor grandmother, the high caste poor Brahmin widow and the poor Muslim Karimbaksh are pitted against Gunwanti, the rich zamindar's wife—the location of the low caste, high caste and the Muslim proletariat vis-à-vis the bourgeoisie woman determined by economic constraints—reflects the Marxist orientation of the writer.

The rural discourse in Hindi fiction is substantively enriched by Bhagwati Charan Verma, Bhagbati Prasad Vajpayee and Upendranath 'Ashk'. Bhagwati Charan Verma in his novel *Tedhe Medhe Raste* (1946) investigates the three ideologies of the Congress, the Communists and the Revolutionaries with the help of the three sons in a feudal family whereas in another of his novel *Aakhree Daon* the multi-faceted problems of a village are interrogated by the central female character Chameli.

More recently, Shrilal Shukla's *Rag Darbari* (1968) offers a powerful satirical commentary on the eroding moral values of the Indian society in the post-independence India. Located in the invented village of Shivpalganj in Uttar Pradesh, this Sahitya Akademi (1970) and Jnanpith award (2009) winning novel highlights the hegemonic binaries between the powerful and the powerless in a Machiavellian village community comprising of students, wrestlers, teachers, unprivileged villagers and *goondas*. A potent and poignant comment on the political opportunism, personal greed and selfishness of the powerful—the prime agents here too belong to the human category.

More recently, Rahi Masum Raza's *Aadha Gaon* (1966, trans. *A Village Undivided* 2003) vividly portrays the socio-cultural nuances of the Sayyad families of a village Gangoli inhabited

by a class of Muslims who are proud of their race and their unadulterated bones. As a welcome point of departure the victimised location of Sayyad women, the *Sayyaddanies* in matrimonial alliances is also explored in the text in the backdrop of the emancipatory paradigm of education. The regional variations of the rural novel are available, on the one hand, in Vidyasagar Nautiyal's *Uttar Baiyan Hei* and *Jhund Sei Bichura* foregrounded in the rough and tough but equally magical realities of the cowherds' lives in the picturesque and spectacular hill landscape of the Garhwal Himalayas, and the landscape and life of Kumayun region in Uttarakhand, on the other finds a vivid representation in Shailesh Matiyani's novels, notably in *Bavan Nadiyon Ka Sangam*, *Gopuli Gafuran* and *Muthbher*.

Moving on to Assam the tradition of prose narratives in Assamese is available dating back to the seventeenth century in the form of the narratives of the Ahom kings who ruled Assam for six hundred years. The fictional prose narratives in Assamese literature were simultaneously introduced by the American Baptist missionaries who entered Assam soon after the treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. As Tilottama Mishra has observed the Assamese prose narratives, both fictional and non-fictional did not use an ornate literary prose or *sadhu bhasha*. The style of the prose chronicles was simple, lucid and witty. This tradition of prose writing suffered a setback when the British adopted Bangla as the official language of Assam and introduced it as the medium of instruction in the schools of Assam (Mishra, *Early Novels in India* 25).

These chronicles known as the *Buronjis* which were written in both the mimetic and dialogic mode have preserved the oral tradition in Assam in the form of folktales. Rajnikanta Bordoloi (1869-1939) has the distinction of concentrating on the rural folk of Assam in his novels, *Manomati* (1900), for instance, where a lively peasant girl Pamila, the domestic maid is presented vis-a-vis the upper middle class female protagonist Manomati. Contrary to Manomati, the village lass Pamila evinces

individuality in her freedom of action and thought suggestive of the hegemonic rural-urban binaries.

In Bengal, the seat of the reform movements the novel emerges as a powerful genre to usher in social awareness. Social realism was ushered in the early twenties by Munshi Premchand in north India and his counterpart Sarat Chandra Chatterjee in Bengal. *Phulmoni O Korunar Biboron* by Hanna Catherine Mullen written in Bangla (1862) offers a realistic representation of the lives of the poor, illiterate and superstitious folk of rural Bengal. Located in the villages of Bengal, Sarat Chandra's novels *Palli Samaj* (1916) and *Arakhaniya* (1916) target the social evils of superstitions and orthodoxy; however, his novels are more pertinent for their pronounced focus on the middle class rural woman. Unlike Tagore's *bhadraloka* - the elitist class, Sarat Chandra represents the aspirations as well as the mundane realities of the low middle class women folk especially the 'women in double jeopardy' such as the poor widows and deserted wives. Despite his primary focus on the elitist class Tagore is of great interest and import to the feminist discourse for his widow-centric novels, *Ghare Baire* (1916), for instance, for its engagement with the trope of the widow's sexuality. Both these path breaking writers are instrumental in shifting the 'male' centre towards the 'female' in a very constructive manner and thus enriching the literary canon with feminine sensibility.

Though Oriya novel is not within the domain of this study, Fakir Mohan Senapati's (1843-1918) *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* (*Six Acres and a Half*) as a debutante village-centric Oriya novel deserves some deliberation here not only for addressing the hegemonic landlord/peasant polarities but for its pronounced focus on ordinary villagers with their day to day problems, and more significantly for its feminist concerns. The novel was serialized in the journal *Utkal Sahitya* during 1897-1899 prior to its appearance in book form in 1902. As Rabi Shankar Mishra has remarked that the novel is not only "about a bad landlord in a village ... his crime and punishment though appears to be

the basic framework of the novel” (Mishra, *Early Novels in India* 241). Significantly, it is Saantani, the wife of the brutal landlord who emerges as “the principal vehicle of Senapati’s interrogation of the nationalistic quest for a plot of land, and all that it entails” (Mishra 253). In a text of 160 pages, Saantani’s speech comprising of two sentences of five words each codifies the language of power in terms of the impregnated silence of the subaltern.

Saantani and Saria, another childless village woman in the text are endowed with the idealised virtues of compassion, tolerance and self evasiveness as opposed to the exploitative nature of the landlord and colonial masters reiterating the feminine principle as the bedrock of Indian value system. *Mamu* is another notable novel of Fakir Mohan Senapati where the axis is on rural-urban hiatus. Written in the backdrop of colonialism the intent “... is to uphold indigenous agrarian, communitarian traditions, and to reject new ideas and institutions of colonialism that accompanied the emerging urban culture and that supposedly opposed indigenous traditions” (Behera 178). The woman questions—widow remarriage and other co-related emancipatory paradigms—are centrally located in Gulvadi Venkata Rao’s Kannada novel *Indira Bai* (1899) and Goverdhanram Tripathi’s Gujrati novel *Saraswatichandra* (published between 1887 and 1901).

In the pre-partition Punjab the emergence of novel is cogently connected with British colonialism though the seeds of the novel can be retrieved from the indigenous narrative forms of medieval Punjab, for instance, the ‘historical romance.’ Prior to Bhai Veer Singh, the fiction of Christian mercenaries certainly had capitalist concerns, the publication of the Punjabi translation of *Pilgrims Progress* in 1859 and of *Jyotirudha* in 1882 are classical examples of such capitalist interests in the colonial state. These writings present the nuanced aspects of the Sikh community and of Indian civilisation and culture at large impacted by Christian culture, civilisation and capitalism. A marked shift in the

Punjabi novel is perceptible in the colonial period from its focus on the 'historical past' to the bourgeois urban middle class.

In the domain of the Punjabi rural novel, Sant Singh Sekhon's *Lahoo-Mitti* can be earmarked as the pioneering serious effort to offer social realism. Located in the rural landscape of Punjab, the novel explores the pains and pleasures along with the hopes and fears of the peasantry with the help of three protagonists—Kaur, Vijay Singh and Madan. However, it is Jaswant Singh Kantval (1919-) who is credited for finally liberating the Punjabi novel from urban locale and relocating it in the rural landscape of the Malwa region in Punjab. *Haani*, *Puranmaashi* and *Roopnar* are some of his famous rural-centric novels that offer a penetrating glance in the nuanced rural life in Punjab. The focus in his *Raat Baaki Hei* is on the unceasing struggles of the peasants. Another noteworthy writer who has widely explored the social realities of rural Punjab is Sohan Singh Seetal, the author of *Yug Badal Gaya*. As the self explanatory title suggests the novel reflects the transformation under way in feudal peasant society in Punjab. The strength of the novel lies in the delineation of the complex relationship of the protagonist with the prostitutes.

Among contemporary Punjabi novelists Gurdial Singh has the unique distinction of focalizing on the variegated experiences of the rural *dalits* and other low caste subjectivities in his widely acclaimed novels *Mari da Deeva*, *Aadh Chaanani Raat*, *Parsa* and *Aahan*. Imbued with deep insight and sympathy for the underprivileged section of society in terms of their social and economic marginalisation, Gurdial Singh's endeavour is to capture the trials and travails of these underdogs of society in a historical perspective in the backdrop of the rapid process of mechanisation and resultant transformation in the rural society.⁶

The early nineteenth century regional male-authored novels across the country thus evince the socio-political concerns and ideologies of the writers manifest in the binaries of possession/dispossession of land in feudal peasantries and the related ills of

poverty, hunger and violence in the private as well as the public domain. Although the peasant in these texts is most often located in the 'human' category, the novels in a significant way initiate the move to introduce the dynamics of caste and gender. Subhakanta Behera's remarks made in the particular context of Kanhu Charan's Oriya novels are operative to the larger body of contemporary literature too:

The ravages of the two World Wars and their attendant evils, rise of Marxism-Communism as a politico-economic and social ideology in a global perspective, and India's Freedom Struggle, Gandhian ideas and values, and post-independent India's struggle to come to terms with new realities and challenges in nation building, all put their imprint on Kanhu Charan's novels in one way or the other. (177)

The rural discourse in Indian English fiction in the pre and early independence era comprising of a complex grid of political, social, cultural and ideological coordinates is to a fairly large extent emblematic of Fanonian national culture. Aiming hard to map out the contemporary social reality in the new nation state these fictional texts could be interpreted as national allegories. A host of writers—Raja Rao, Menon Marath, Vasudev Reddy, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Humayun Kabir and Mulk Raj Anand—have offered a multi-faceted and multi-dimensional discourse on rural India in the backdrop of contemporary socio-political reality, the ideological strands of Gandhism, capitalism versus Marxism and the rural-urban interface. Significantly though, the rural woman is not invisible in this male discourse. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*, Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* and *A Goddess Named Gold* and Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri* are seriously engaged with the rural woman related issues of an indictment of patriarchal assumptions (*Gauri*), the rural-urban hiatus (*Music for Mohini*), women's agency (*A Goddess Named Gold*) and the rural woman as the repository of culture and memory (*Kanthapura*).

At the centre of Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1971) is Moorthy, a

Gandhian peasant crusading against Hindu orthodoxy. No doubt the concerns and perspective in this novel too are predominantly male but most crucially the narrative voice has been imparted to a garrulous, rustic blind Brahmin widow named Achakka. The old woman's narrativisation of the past in the tradition of *harikatha vachan* reflects the rural woman's hegemonic foregrounding in the oral tradition that goes on to consolidate the cultural artifacts in the long run. As Meena Shirwadkar posits *Kanthapura* is seminal for locating/representing the village woman in the public domain during the national movement. "These women shed their age-old taboos of caste, educate themselves, give speeches, become *sevis* and face lathi-charges" (Shirwadkar 119). Rao presents women like Rangamma engaged in a consciousness raising programme among village women in the colonial state, or the child widow Ratna going to school to showcase the evolution of the village woman as a bildungsroman character negotiating with the feminist postulates of subjecthood and agency.

In Anshuman Mondal's view Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* foregrounds the whole question of gender from the time onwards when the village is emptied of men and the novel focuses on the resistance of the remaining female inhabitants of the village to the policemen, the male embodiments of the colonial authority. "It is important, however, to recognise that Rao's gender representations—like those of many other Indian writers, thinkers, and ideologues—operated within the discursive framework of an ideology which had over the years elaborated a complex symbolism around signs of femininity" (913).

Vis-à-vis Rao's male-centric *Kanthapura*, Mulk Raj Anand's *Gauri* (1960) originally titled *The Old Woman and the Cow* is relatively a much more farsighted woman-centred novel for the presentation of a rebellious wife graduating from a state of object poverty to that of substantive economic independence as a cogent disconnect to the stereotyped image of the silent, suffering wife in a village patriarchy. In his serious and

meaningful engagement with variegated feminist issues such as wife-battering, marriage and motherhood, female chastity, menstruation taboo, sexist image of woman in patriarchal culture, commodification of women and their economic empowerment and most significantly, woman's identity Anand indicts the patriarchal village society. Contrarily, Anand's village-centric Lal Singh trilogy *The Village* (1954), *Across the Black Waters* (1940), and *The Sword and the Sickle* (1942), though primarily located in villages critique the contemporary socio-political reality from a male perspective and a transfixed male gaze.

Bhabani Bhattacharya's presentation of 'the Cowhouse Five'- a group of five women led by the teenaged female protagonist Meera against the 'foursome men' in *A Goddess Named Gold* raises the feminist issues of social and political agency for women in the backdrop of patriarchal oppression. "We have shouted in anger at the alien coat-and-pantaloon. Our dhoti-clad fellows are ten times worse" (Bhattacharya 43). 'The Cowhouse Five' in fact corresponds to the *panchayat* for women anticipating the role of women at the micro level in village *panchayats* and political agency at large in the nation state. The city woman's migration to village in the post-marital phase and the polemics of adjustment are minutely examined in Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* and *So Many Hungers* (1978), T. S. Pillai's *Two Measures of Rice* (1967) and T. Vasudeva Reddy's *The Vultures* (1983) are also centrally located in the villages. Located in a pre partition village in Punjab Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* is primarily a partition novel where women appear not as subject but as vulnerable objects of lust and desire.

Crucially, the corpus of Indian English writing and the *bhasha* novels share a commonality of ideological concerns in their primary focus on the socio-political issues of public domain and the feminist issues of identity and empowerment in the contemporary context of reform movement and Gandhian ideology. The contribution of these male writers in sensitising

the contemporary society towards the rural women-related issues advertently or inadvertently and thus opening the rural landscape as the prospective site for successive generation of writers is noteworthy and cannot be undermined.

Thus, one witnesses in colonial India the parallel development of two literary traditions, the native of the rural and the urban of the elitist tradition. Premchand's *Godan* (1936), Fanishwar Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954) and *Parati Parikatha* (1956) and Nagarjuna's *Balchanama* in Hindi, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyaya's trilogy *Pather Panchali* (1929), *Aparajito* (1931) and *The Song of the Road* (English translation) and *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (1936) by Manik Bandopadhyaya in Bengali are monumental village-centric *bhasa* texts in the native tradition despite the centrality of the male narrative voice in these narratives. *Pather Panchali* is no doubt a nostalgic microscopic narrative of the male protagonist Apu's exodus from the village to the city, but the equally eventful narrative of Apu's elder sister Durga, of her unfulfilled childhood dreams and adolescent realities culminating in her premature death is intermittently embedded in the main narrative. The retrieval of these marginalised women subjectivities—Durga or *Balchanama*'s sister Rabni in the dominant discourse—needs to be prioritised in the gynocritical project.

Most significantly, the first generation Indian English writers, to a fairly large extent, have promoted the native tradition of the underprivileged village folk. K. S. Venkataramani's *Murugan, the Tiller*, Anand's *Gauri* and *Lal Singh* trilogy and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* explore the multi-faceted and multi-dimensional reality of the Indian peasantry in the colonial and the new nation state in a language which is verily alien the tradition though is truly indigenous. R. K. Narayan's *Malgudi* novels could also be located in this native tradition with Swami and his friends as the innocent and uninitiated representatives of the Indian peasantry.

Barring a few noteworthy exceptions as cited above, the rural

woman's relegation to the margins in all these male-authored village-centric fictional narratives in terms of her role, voice, subjectivity and space is impacted by social and spatial constraints. Locating the woman in the private domain of family as a girl, wife and mother and in the public sphere as a participant in the freedom struggle or a prostitute Shirwadkar notices the primary focus in the early Indo-Anglian novel on the idealised silent, suffering wife, the *pativrata*, and secondly on the glorified mother in her most valorised manifestations of earth-mother and motherland. The glorified image of mother in Bankim Chandra's *Anandmath* would be an ideal illustration. The images of rebellious, revolting wives were delimited to the women from the lower strata of society—Gauri of Anand belongs to the family of cowherds, for instance. “It required an intellectually strong mind to come out of the Sita-Sati-Savitri image and the tradition of submission” (Shirwadkar 55). Nevertheless, the successive generation of male writers does anticipate the new village woman in the representation of empowered village women Ratna and Rangamma (*Kanthapura*) and Meera (*A Goddess Named Gold*).

In this ideologically and politically dominant rural-centric male discourse in the colonial and early decades of postcolonial state, the objectified location of the rural woman confirms the hegemonic centrality of the ‘male,’ hence the imperative need is to create a counter-canonical ‘female’ and ‘gynocritical’ discourse in terms of the feminist paradigms of identity, space, subjecthood and agency.

The Rural Woman in the Feminist Canon

An overview of the rural-centric male discourse has been offered here as a prerequisite for bringing it into a meaningful dialogue with the Indian English feminist discourse on rural woman not only in terms of equality but as Helen Cixous advocates, also in terms of difference. The Indian English women writers in the colonial and postcolonial period have, by and large, promoted

the genteel 'elitist' tradition representing a thin minority of the Indian society. "Given the dominance of English as a global language, and the political economics not only of publication but also of the circulation of knowledge" (Tharu 12), the English language texts are located at an advantageous centre of power and prominence.

Consequently, as a predominantly urban-centric discourse the Indian English feminist canon vis-à-vis the *Bhasa* fiction by women highlights the binaries of urban-rural, rich-poor, elitist-low middle class, educated-uneducated, privileged-unprivileged and so on wherein the latter category of the underprivileged is not merely the 'binary' but the 'conspicuous absentee' in this discourse. The promotion of an elitist, urbanite tradition situating a significant majority of Indian village women on the periphery of the literary canon would engage us in another larger debate related to the politics of representation that has been deliberated upon in the following chapter.

Despite the fact of the earlier generation of women writers in English promoting the elitist tradition with their concentration on the middle class city-bred women, their contestatory representations of silent, suffering and submissive wives as a disclaimer to the sanctimonious framework of the institution of matrimony have eventually registered a paradigmatic shifting of the images and representation of women from the tradition of submission and silence to one of transgression and speech in the regional women's writing. The large corpus of Indian English women writing from Kamala Markandaya to Shashi Deshpande, and more recently Manju Kapur has an imprint on the regional women writing in terms of 'influence' and 'intertextuality.'

Notably, Kamala Markandaya is the only exception among Indian English women writers to focus on the village woman. The corpus of her writing though largely village-centric and her representation of the rural woman at times non-stereotyped and unconventional, she can still be located in the dominant canon for the stereotyped portrayal of the village woman devoid

of the socio-cultural nuances and her limited knowledge of and participation in the socio-cultural life of the village—its rituals, and festivals etc. vis-a-vis the womenfolk of Maitreyi Pushpa, Dalip Kaur Tiwana or Krishna Sobti, for instance. Despite some firsthand experience of and familiarity with a village the limitations of an urban elitist Anglo-Indian writer are invariably discernable in Markandaya.⁷ Significantly though, she does anticipate in Rukmani the ‘new face’ of the Indian woman in an active participatory role in the private as well as the public domain on equal or rather superior terms. In the representation of Rukmini no matter in conformity with the patriarchal norms and her transgression maneuvered in a very tacit and diplomatic manner without collision with the patriarchal forces Markandaya foresees the new village woman’s negotiations with the feminist postulates of identity, subjecthood and agency.

In sharp contrast to the predominance of the elitist, upper middle class urbanite woman in women’s writing in English, the corpus of *Bhasa* literature has conversely been enriched by quite a few women writers with their penetrating presentation of the rural segment of society. Situating the rural woman in a convincingly realistic geographical locale and contemporaneity, these images of the grassroots village women are an index of the village woman’s social positionality in the colonial and nation state. Any study of the images and representation of the rural woman in fiction would be defunct and a meaningless exercise without a pronounced focus on the rural-centric fictional works of Amrita Pritam (Punjabi), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali) and Krishna Sobti (Hindi).

Partition of the Indian sub-continent has been a tragedy of unfathomable magnitude in the history of the nation followed by floodgates of violence, mayhem and carnage which is translated with an insurmountable degree of pain and anguish in the literary canon. In this historic battle the experiences of women are crucially significant since it was the woman’s body that became the site of violence, religious bigotry and political

and factional hatred. The creator of the most poignantly painful verse ‘*Aj Aakhan Waris Shah Nu*’ – ‘Today I would ask Waris Shah,’ an elegiac Ode of tremendous import, addressed to Waris Shah, an eighteenth century Punjabi poet. Amrita Pritam has translated with equal degree of anguish and angst the gendered experience of partition in her novel *Pinjar* (Trans. *The Skeleton*). In the portrayal of Puro, the simple village girl Amrita Pritam has captured the traumatic pain as well as the recuperative strength of a woman in shifting the focus from victimhood to defiance of patriarchal and territorial boundaries with the victimised protagonist’s decision to stay back with her Muslim abductor and her refusal to comply with the ‘recovery mission.’

Befittingly, as a welcome point of departure from the pervasive post-partition violence and mayhem Krishna Sobti’s poetic magnum opus *Zindaginama: Jinda Rukh* encapsulates the phenomena of pre-partition harmony and socio-cultural ambience in her native village Dera Jatta in Gujral which is the microcosm of pre-partition Punjab—the land of the Chenab and Jhelam rivers, the comely village women spinning the wheel, the lush green and fertile fields, the oil-coated thick *tanduri chapattis*, the colourful festivals of *Lhori* and *Baisakhi*, the games of *gulli-danda* and *souchi*, the granaries full of grain. And then the aftermath when the five rivers were halved into two, the Jhelam and Chenab had to be abandoned and she had to move towards Ravi-Vyas. The novel has not much of narrative, the author weaves the scenes into a mosaic of the cultural history of rural Punjab. Though the Shah family is at the centre of the narrative, the objective is not to concentrate on an individual-based narrative but to construct the saga of Punjab in socio-cultural and historical terms. As a novel written in Hindi with a spontaneous intermixes of Punjabi words with Hindi the novel is one of the finest examples of exemplary linguistic and cultural hybridity.

Mahasweta Devi is a distinguished writer-cum-activist from Bengal who has worked all through her life with the landless

tribals and peasantry of West Bengal, Orissa and Bihar. Located in the human category, the landless peasants and the dispossessed tribals in her novels are anti-zamindars and anti-Establishment. Contrary to Ashapura Devi's bourgeois women, Mahasweta Devi's grassroot peasant and tribal women inhabit a distinctly disempowered physical and social space. However, the extremely penurious and pressing circumstances of their life in terms of hunger, starvation, and poverty infuse these 'disempowered' women with an indomitable 'rural courage' (Bhat and Rao 17) not only to resist and withstand the adverse circumstances but subvert their exploitation in an admirably forceful manner. Dopdi Mejhen, the tribal woman in her short story *Draupadi*, Sanichari, the professional mourner in *Rudali*, Kowsalya, the courageous peasant woman of the tripartite peasant movement of 1947 in the short story *Mayer Murti* ("The Image of the Mother"), and Nandini, the Naxalite girl in *Hazar Chaurashir Ma* (*The Mother of 1084*) transcend the gender, class and caste boundaries as fearless fighters with their raw, superhuman Santiago-like courage of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* that comes only under pressure. For the physically battered and brutalised Dopdi confronting her predator Senapati with her mutilated body, the ambivalence lies in the female body no longer the hegemonic site of exploitation but a weapon of resistance. However, the focus in Mahasweta Devi's novels is more on the tribal subjectivities—male as well as the female than the village woman.

Village as the site and the village woman as the subject in the fictional narratives is thus vitally significant in the literary and social discourse for any debate on the nation state since "stories and communities are bound together in a symbiotic relationship, defining and interpreting each other" (Mukherjee, *Early Novels in India* 117). For Spivak the homogenised construct of the subaltern within the subaltern discourse is polemic for the exclusion of a woman's voice in it. Initially though, the same argument would contest the entity of 'woman'

in the dominant feminist canon for the marginalised location of 'rural woman,' on the one hand, and in *bhasa* literature, on the other where the rural woman is present for the suppressed location and representation of the women of lower caste and class hierarchy. One possibly cannot conceptualise a pan Indian discourse, literary or otherwise, on Indian woman to the exclusion of the rural woman who for centuries has been the repository of its traditions, culture and collective memory.

In the Indian English literary context Tabish Khair has conceptualised the socio-economic line of division in the opposition between the 'Coolie' (subaltern) and the 'Babu class' (Khair ix). Babus, according to Khair are middle or upper class, mostly urban, at times cosmopolitan, Brahminized and/or westernised and fluent in English. Contrarily, the 'Coolie' class is non-English speaking, not or not significantly westernised, not or less Brahminized, economically deprived, culturally marginalised, and, often rural or migrant-urban populations. "How, then, is it possible to write Indian fiction in English and fiction about Indians in English (henceforth 'Indian English fiction') without appropriating from a position of power or occluding Coolie/non-Babu realities and discourses?" (Khair X) Complicit in Khair's 'Coolie' class would be the rural woman in the nation state, Aravind Adiga's satirical categorisation of the Indians as the 'big bellies' and 'small bellies' is compatible with these broad socio-economic divisions in terms of the rural-urban binaries.

These Babu-coolie or rural-urban stratifications at the miniscule level are operative in the civil lines—the bazaar, mainstream-subaltern, and elitist-underprivileged polarisations in the literary canon. This dominant Brahminised, urban, cosmopolitan/metropolitan literary tradition is pervasively monopolised by the images of the city bred woman. As a welcome change in the last few decades, with an upsurge in the multiple discourses of regional, tribal, *dalit*, ethnic, minority and other subaltern groups, women's writings have acquired a wider

base in the form of creative endeavour and readership.

The peripheral and peripherised representation of the rural, semi-rural and under-privileged class of women in the literary canon needs to be critiqued in the context of the postcolonial, subaltern and feminist pedagogy. Given the fact of agency and valorisation of English as a globalised language, many local and indigenous languages and literary traditions are endangered, and subsequently dislodged by the metropolitan English discourse which in a polyphonic country like India is categorically a minority discourse. Moreover, this Anglophone discourse is deficit in terms of a nuanced vocabulary and literary idiom to capture and narrativise the specificities of a villager's socio-cultural life, and thus to translate the culture-specific life of the village woman who as the repository of a nation's social and cultural memory is imbibed with what Frantz Fanon calls the 'national consciousness' (199). The Indian English feminist writing is, by and large, subjected to such linguistic and cultural limitations.

The polarisation of the village (in this context the village woman) could be partially attributed to the colonial rule and thus is one of the legacies of the empire. The hegemonic predominance of the elitist, city-bred woman in the English canon is indicative of the cultural and mental colonisation that forms an integral part of the postcolonial anxiety. Colonisation as the postcolonial critics have argued operates not only at political level, but more so at psychological, social and cultural level. Following Fanon's categorisation of 'National Culture', the three phases of colonialism—colonialism, neocolonialism and anti-colonialism—could be collated into three parallel kinds of discourses: (i) the colonial discourse of the coloniser, (ii) the neocolonial Eurocentric discourse of the Indian-English writers, and lastly (iii) the anticolonial discourse in Indian English as well as *bhasa* literature.

The conquest and occupation of minds, selves and cultures—a form of civilisational imperialism, in the opinion of Ashis

Nandy was more insidious than the physical conquest of territory for it altered the cultural priorities of the colonised and fixed their gaze on Europe. “The West is now everywhere, within the West and outside, in structure and in minds” (Nandy xi). As for Homi Bhabha, the perverse longevity of the colonised is nourished, in part, by persisting colonial hierarchies of knowledge and value which reinforce the ‘dreadful secondariness’ (Said 209) of some peoples and cultures reflected in the denigration of native cultures. For Edward Said history, culture and literature are systems of thinking that represent the imperialist agency whereas J. M. Blaut holds colonialism responsible for promoting “a kind of Eurocentric diffusionism—a theory about the way cultural processes tend to move over the surface of the world as a whole” (1). The postcolonial discourse covers all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day.

Commenting on the culture and power interface Antonio Gramsci states that cultural domination works by consent and can precede conquest by force. “The supremacy of a social group manifests itself in two ways, as ‘domination’ and as ‘intellectual and moral leadership’.... It seems clear that there can, and indeed must be hegemonic activity even before the rise to power, and that one should not count only on the material force which power gives in order to exercise an effective leadership” (Hoare and Nowell 57). The hegemonic culture and power interface determines, and subsequently governs a discourse, literary or otherwise. In this entire anticolonial resistance mission the rural woman as an epitome of the community’s culture and traditions befittingly emerges as the most potent and effective resisting agent.

The disfiguring colonial epistemology in terms of the binaries of black/white, coloniser/colonised, subject/object, occident/orient has been largely instrumental in the proliferation ‘of Superior (Western) and Inferior (Indian) categories’ (Devy 3).

These qualified categories of the Superior (Western) and Inferior (Indian) are pervasive in the postcolonial discourse, specifically in the feminist discourse in the binaries of mainstream-subaltern, elitist-grassroot and in the context of our study—the rural-urban. *Swadeshi* charged categories such as the folk and the countryside are considered to be the repositories of the Indian tradition as well as Indocentric sites as opposed to Eurocentric models. As Said has argued in *Culture and Imperialism* the creative writer's consciousness is seen to be shaped by the imperialist tendencies prevailing in nineteenth century England. There is no denying the fact that the large scale proliferation of Eurocentric literary and theoretical paradigms in the colony has largely been responsible for dislocating and disintegrating the precolonial traditional tribal and rural societies culminating in the polarities of the urban experience of modernity and the native experience of *swadeshi* traditions.

More than half a century ago Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* had built a cogent argument against this kind of cultural and civilizational imperialism and his advice "to go into the interior that has yet not been polluted by the railways and to live there for six months" (Gandhi 90) is reiterative of the agency of village qualified enough to combat the forces of cultural and civilizational imperialism. Gandhi's prioritisation of the Indian village as the site for national liberation and development is now unequivocally accepted as the most viable mode of contesting the western hegemonic institutions of power and coercion.

The rise of the metropolitan centres as power centres and the eventual shifting of the power centre from the site of traditional village to the city came to structurally disturb the socio-cultural dynamics of indigenous societies in the colony (Dube, *Indian Society*). What is imperative for the argument here is the fact of the British impacting the country's urbanisation and thus paving the way for the rural-urban divide. The three presidency towns of Bombay, Calcutta and Madras owe much

to the British and the cantonments, civil lines, mall roads and several hill stations have a foregrounding in the colonial past. The prototypes of the stereotyped village woman translated into the cinematic representations of a village belle as a voluptuous and volatile *gaon kei chori* along with the other coordinates of a village woman are invariably foregrounded in this western-oriented consciousness.

Both interestingly and polemically, it is not only in the pre-independence and post-independent India that the subaltern native traditions of the people of inferior rank in terms of gender, caste and class have been eclipsed by the dominant elitist tradition, a historic review of Indian literature offers similar parallels and polarities. The Vedic period has comprised of various literary traditions apart from the dominant Hindu tradition, albeit the predominance of the Aryan tradition in classical Indian literature is a problematising issue for the contemporary Indian feminist critics. Uma Chakravarti points out the problematising absence of the “Vedic *dasi* (woman in servitude), captured, subjugated and enslaved by the conquering Aryans, but who also represents one aspect of Indian womanhood” (28). In India, the ‘Great Tradition’ of the classical elite and the ‘Little Traditions’ of the common folk have simultaneously flourished though the ‘Little Traditions’ of the common folk have been more liberal to women” (Jain and Mahan, Introduction 15).

In the backdrop of the above premises and pedagogical framework the following chapter broadly divided into three parts seeks to critique the relatively older construct of image vis-a-vis the novel paradigm of representation. The chapter is devoted to an exegesis of the image, the gradual process of change in the images of a woman in the backdrop of the socio-political configurations in the nation state, and the paradigm of representation in the feminist, postcolonial and subaltern context.

NOTES

1. For a forceful critique of English Language in India see Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989); Swati Joshi, ed., *Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History* (Delhi: Trianka, 1991). Print.
2. *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* are Jnanpith award winning novels—the highest national award for a literary work in a regional language; *And Such Is Her Fate* is a Sahitya Akademi Award winning text; similarly *Idannamam* is awarded Premchand Samman from Uttar Pradesh Sahitya Sansthan. Arundhati Roy's Booker prize winner *The God of Small Things* and Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* are globally acknowledged novels in English.
3. See for the fictional representation of the tribal Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, and for tribal movements Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar*, Shivaji Samant's *Mritunjaya* and Arun Joshi's *Strange Case of Billy Biswas*.
4. See for serious documentation of the institutionalisation of corruption and moral bankruptcy Chinua Achebe's *The Anthills of Savannah* (1987), *A Man of the People* (1966) and the short story collection *Girls at War* (1972); Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1963) and Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1970)—the Nigerian writers; the Ghanaian writer Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (1969), *Fragments* (1970), *Why Are We So Blest?* (1972) and the Kenyan writer Meja Mwangi's *Striving for the Wind* (1990). Concurrently, the village woman's lure for the city and the resultant ill consequences also come for discussion in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) in particular and other novels mentioned above in general.
5. For a critique on the Indian village see Alok Bhalla, *Realms of Desire: Some Gandhian Reflections on the Images of Rural India in Modern Times*; Alok Bhalla and Peter J. Bumke, ed., *Images of Rural India in the Twentieth Century*; Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj*, and Rita Brar's *Shifting Landscapes: The Making and Remaking of Village Commons in India*. For the cinematic representation of the village in contemporary times also see the films *Lagaan* and *Peepli Live* and Shyam Benegal directed *Welcome to Sajjanpur*.
6. For these details pertaining to the history of rural-centric discourse in Punjab I am grateful to Dr. Rajesh Sharma, Reader in English, Punjabi University, Patiala for making the material available to me from Punjabi in English translation.
7. Kamala Markandaya lived and worked as a social worker in a village under the "Experimental Living Programme" in the mid 1940s during the period of "Quit India Movement" but the nameless village in *Nectar in a Sieve* lacks verisimilitude.

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Chapter II

Images and Representation

We have endured long enough
Being pawns of the cowardly husbands
Now is the time to repay
The bloody ritual
Of smearing disheveled hair and blood.
We shall smear together
Our dragon pigtails with blood
Don't plait your hair now
Yagnasheni.

KARABI DEKA HAZARIKA

“Don't Plait Your Hair, Yajnasheni”

In common parlance image is used broadly and loosely for various purposes or objects and entails contextualised meaning. The dictionary meaning of image covers a wide range of objects—animate as well as inanimate: (i) It can be the representation of the external form of a person or thing in sculpture, painting etc. (ii) The character or reputation of a person or thing as generally perceived (iii) An optical appearance or counterpart produced by light or other radiation from an object reflected in the mirror, refracted through a lens, etc. (iv) semblance, likeness (*God created man in His own image*) (v) A person or thing that closely resembles another (... *is the image of his father*) (vi) A typical example (vii) A simile or metaphor (viii) (a) A mental representation b) An idea or conception (Pearsall and Trumble, *Oxford Dictionary* 705).

An image in a classical sense of the term is synonymous with

rupa, *bimba*, *pratima* and *murti* and is determined by tradition, cultural ideas and memory, symbols, and values. “Image as vision or idea, in fact, is to be regarded not so much as the reflection of social form as its profound matrix. Such images may be seen in myths and legends and art and prophecy and implicitly in socio-religious ethos. They are not historical scraps but perennial pointers of ideal possibilities” (Pandey 39). Thus, an image is not so much as the reflection of social form but its milieu translated in myths, legends, art etc. imbibed with ideal possibilities or potential to be translated as archetypes. In addition to these determinants a woman’s image is also impacted by her status in the familial structure, social and cultural milieu, class and caste and the value system. Since there are infinite variations in the status of woman in the Indian society, they posit problems in the homogenising of images. However, majority of literary models could be traced back to the hegemonic religious or classical texts—the epics, myths, folklore and legends that have been since antiquity the sustaining and sustainable sources of literary and social images.

The images of a woman in the Indian society with their literary prototypes can be placed under three broad categories: (i) The familial images of daughter, sister, wife, mother, mother-in-law, daughter-in-law, sister-in-law etc. in the natal and marital family in patriarchy albeit the image of wife is centrally located in the literary canon. The *Sadyabadhu* of Vedic literature was the domestic woman dedicated to the wellbeing of the family. (ii) The social images of women in the public domain as saints, warriors, achievers in the social/public domain and in their professional roles. *Brahmavadini* of Vedic literature are located in the category of ascetic engaged in the quest of truth, knowledge and spiritual pursuits. Later on, in the classical Sanskrit literature also these two variables of *Sadyabadhu* and *Brahmavadini* are improvised as the erotic and the ascetic (Dwivedi 46).

These familial and social images could further be classified

firstly as normative/ positive images which are socially and culturally approved. As opposed to these positive female images are the socially stigmatised images of a widow, a deserted/ estranged wife, a childless woman and a spinster. Under the normative value system of a village patriarchy the stigmatisation of these unmailed-chaperoned women is not only an accepted social phenomenon, but in strict conformity with the codified mode of behaviour in prescriptive and restrictive terms is enforced at the familial and social level. However, the patriarchal operations do vary from place to place and the images of women are subsequently determined by the patriarchal as well as the socio-cultural dynamics and the value system of a community as is validated in these fictional texts under study.

The self-perception and the interrelated process of identity formation for a woman are verily impacted by these familial and societal images. In the third, and perhaps the most significant category the self-images determined by one's self-perception can be located. The popularly accepted images as Jain and Mahan have observed, play a critical, if not a central role in the crystallisation of women's perception (Jain and Mahan, Introduction 20). However, the self-images of women are foregrounded in the feminist theoretical premises and postulates that posit the imperative need to present/represent the female perception of women's lives and articulate the reality of women's lives from the female, feminine and feminist perspectives—all that would be contestatory of the accepted familial and social images of women.

The image of a woman is gender, caste, class and culture specific albeit certain basic motifs and models of women have always enjoyed acceptability and valorisation in the Indian society for specific socio-cultural constraints. The mythical archetypes of Sati, Sita, Savitri, Arundhati, Damayanti, for instance, have sustained for long and been valorised in the dominant literary canon as epitomes of the paradigmatic *pativrata* paradigm and typecast as stereotypes in the canon—literary

and social. The social and political mechanism in a male dominated patriarchal social structure is prominently responsible for the propagation and polarisation of certain 'positive' and 'negative' female stereotypes which the feminist literary discourse seeks not only to disclaim or deflate, but to offer counter-canonical images in terms of the defining coordinates of caste, class, gender and religion.

Most crucially, as the noted Western feminists S. M. Gilbert, S. Gubar and Judith Fryer have argued the valorisation or polarisation of a female image is not an innocent act and is polemically related to the dynamics of patriarchy and representation.¹ Mary Ann Fergusson argues, and convincingly so, how the female social stereotypes throughout history have been reinforced by archetypes. Consequently, in every age, woman has been perceived primarily as mother, wife, mistress, sex object in relationship to man (Fergusson 4-5). The iconization of the mythical female archetypes, the *pativrata* Sati-Sita-Savitri and Damayanti, the transgressor Ahalya, the love-lorn Radha, the enchantresses Rati and Shakuntala, the seductive courtesans—celestial *apsaras*, Menaka, for instance, and the powerful mother figure of Kali and Durga in the Indian patriarchal society and their legitimised transference as social stereotypes has ultimately strengthened the patriarchal structure in maintaining the hegemonic binaries of dominance and subservience in terms of gender, caste and class specificities.

Over and above, the normative fictionalised images of the chaste and the self-sacrificing wife, the glorious mother, the obedient and self-effacing daughter and daughter-in-law predominantly dominate the canon and are suggestive of the overarching predominance of the 'Great' classical tradition as a disjunct to the pro-gender 'Little traditions' of the folk. This is not to disclaim the presence of unconventional and transgressing models of epic women in the elitist 'Great tradition'. Valorisation of the unconventional and transgressing models of epic women Tara and Mandodari, for instance, in the classical 'Great

tradition' is reiterative of the argument. However, as has been pointed out by Uma Chakravarti the 'Little traditions' of the folk vis-à-vis the classical 'Great traditions' have been more favourably inclined towards these transgressing epic women, which is substantiated by the iconisation of the *Panch Kanyas* and other transgressing mythical women in these 'Little traditions' of the folk. The representation of Draupadi in the *Pandav Lila* in Uttarakhand as goddess Kali, and the iconic representation of Draupadi in South India manifest the centrality of the transgressive women in these folk traditions.²

In a more recent article entitled "The Ideal Indian Woman" S. M. Channa too pinpoints the problematising focus on the Hindu middle class and upper caste woman in the literary canon in the colonial period and more recently in the print and visual media. "Thus the ideal Indian woman was the wife of the elite Indian man, the Brahmin *Pandit*, the Kshatriya ruler, or at best, the Vaishya householder. Left out was the woman, who was the labourer, the potter's wife, the washerwoman, the tribal woman and those who were not within the folds of high caste Hindu households" (Channa 40). Interestingly though, the rural woman is conspicuously absent among these notable variables of the grassroot Indian woman cited above.

Thus, certain basic motifs and models have enjoyed acceptability in society and literature. "What do a lascivious widow, a beautiful, virtuous virgin and an obedient wife have in common? They are all prevalent, male-conceived stereotypes of women in Western culture?" (Dicherson 221) The archetypal images of Sita, Savitri, and even Shakuntala, the latter though a transgressor per se for her violation of institutionalised marriage and normative sexual behaviour are canonised as literary models in the male canon to the exclusion of Draupadi whose polemical polyandrous marriage and later, assertion of voice in the *Sabha Parva* of the *Mahabharata* is problematic in the canon. The propagation of certain female archetypes vis-à-vis the polarisation of others would raise the questions of power and

hegemony, of the hierarchies of dominance and subordination in terms of the power of the powerful and the power of the powerlessness. A very intriguing instance of such strategic occlusion in the male fictional narratives is of the fictional representation of the *panchkanyas*.

“Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara Mandodari tatha
Panchakanya smaranityam mahapataka nashaka”

Remembering Ahalya, Draupadi, Kunti, Tara and Mandodari
Destroys the greatest sins.

Among these *panchkanyas*³, three of them - Ahalya, Tara and Mandodari - are from the *Ramayana*. Draupadi and Kunti are the celebrated women in the *Mahabharata* though reference is made to them in *Harivamsa* and the *Markandeya*, *Devi Bhagvata* and *Bhagavata Purana*.

Apart from the enigmatic use of the word *kanya* or virgin for these five women who in fact were married and were mothers, these women's actions in terms of their sexual behaviour and normative standards of morality were unconventional even by the present day normative standards of morality and could be termed as 'outrageously unethical.' All the five of them were bold enough to have had sexual relations with more than one man. Ahalya, the most beautiful woman and wife of sage Gautam conceded to god Indra's sexual advancement paying a heavy price for her adultery to be cursed to turn into stone and was ultimately redeemed by Rama. Draupadi agreed to be the wife of five husbands. She became the cause of war when the Kauravas tried to disrobe her in full court. Kunti was the classical unwed mother of Karna, whom she discarded and disowned to escape social censure. Later, with the consent of her impotent husband she conceived Yuddhishtir, Bhim and Arjun from the gods Dharma, Pawan and Indra respectively. Tara, the wife of the *Vanara* king Bali became the wife of Bali's younger brother

Sugriva after her husband's death on the condition that her son Angad ascends the throne. Mandodari, the wife of Ravana married her brother-in-law Vibhishan who had been crowned the new king after the death of her sons and husband Ravana in battle.

As a welcome paradigm shift the character of Draupadi has now increasingly been reclaimed and revisited in the Indian feminist canon: Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni*, Irvati Karve's *Yugantar* and Chitra Chaturvedi's *Mahabharati*, to cite a few notable instances. Correspondingly, the privileging of the silent, suffering Sita in the dominant literary and cultural tradition to the Sita who is mentioned in the *Rig Veda* as earth goddess blessing the crops and bringing fecundity and prosperity to the people, or the princess who could lift the bow which the mighty princes failed to do and who accompanied her husband to the forest against the pleas and advice of her parent-in-laws is debated in the recent feminist studies, Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale's *In Search of Sita* (2009), for instance. Meghnad Desai points out the enigmatic iconisation of Sita as an ideal wife who is 'passive and helpless and faithful to a fault' despite the presence of some strong women characters in the *Ramayana* like Kaikeyi, Tara and Mandodari (Desai 7). Similarly, in juxtaposition to the image of Shakuntala in the *Adi Parva* of *Mahabharata* as a calculative and ambitious woman who compromises with her virginity for her son's right of inheritance to the throne Kalidas's representation of Shakuntala in *Abhijnan Shakuntalam* as a woman endowed with a sense of self respect, independence of mind and feminine grace who could challenge the royal authority in the public space of the royal court has yet to be reclaimed in the feminist canon.

Here it would not be out of context to locate the images of women in a historical context. Following the categorisation of Altekar from the Vedic period onwards the woman images can be located into five broad heads: (i) The Age of the *Rigveda* from 2500 to 1500 B.C. (ii) The Age of the late *Samhitas*,

Brahminas and *Upanishads* from 1500 to 500 B.C. (iii) The Age of the *Sutras*, Epics and early *Smritis* from 500 to 500 A.D. (iv) The Age of the later *Smritis* and commentaries from 500 A.D. to 1800 A.D., and (v) 1800 A.D. to the present times.

With the exception of a few negligible derogatory references to women related to their fickle mindedness, the women are said to have enjoyed respect and considerable amount of freedom in the social and political life in the *Rigvedic* age. However, denied the right to hold or inherit property the polemics of women's property rights germinates here. Similarly, the position of women during the period of Late *Samhitas* is satisfactory and the practices of *sati* and child marriages did not exist. Sacred initiation (*upnayana*) of girls was a common practice and women had access to not only theology and philosophy with quite a few women opting for teaching career but enjoyed religious privileges and the right of voice in their marriage settlement.

Ironically, a diminishing return is witnessed in the position of women from 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. when a number of gender-friendly practices were discontinued to be outnumbered by anti-women dictates and practices. The discontinuance of *upnayana sanskara* of girls, widow remarriage and *Niyoga*, lowering of the marriageable age and institutionalisation of marriage had an adverse impact on the position and status of women. The suspension of widow remarriage and *Niyoga* which acknowledged a widow's sexuality thus earmarks the stigmatisation of a widow's sexuality. There was further deterioration in the social arena during the period of nearly five hundred years between 200 B.C. to 300 B.C. when Northern India was subjected to a series of foreign invasions. It is during this period that the ascetic ideals of *Upanishads* are upheld and concurrently Jainism and Buddhism began to gain ground.

The downward progression in woman's position in the form of their low status and esteem continued during the period of late *Smritis* (500 A.D. to 1800 A.D.) manifest in gendered

practices, ban on widow remarriage, revival of the custom of *sati* and polygamy and introduction of *Purda* system—all have a cogent connect with the low graph of women's social status and representation in the social and literary canon.

Locating the images of women in a historic background it could be averred that certain canonical texts have decidedly contributed in the formation of female archetypes. The archetypal images of women are drawn from great epics, Valmiki's *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas; concurrently *Manusmriti* and the *Dharmshastras* too have contributed in the formulation and conceptualisation of the defining imperatives for women. Undeniably, these Hindu texts have promoted the 'Great Tradition' interestingly though the oral 'Little Traditions' of the folk too emanate from them.

In a visible contrast to these Hindu texts the primary focus in Buddhism and Jainism evolving as protest religions against the hegemonic Brahminical religion was on renunciation. "One of the paradoxes of the Indian tradition is that the renouncer is a symbol of authority within society" (Thapar 63). This higher ideal of a social ascetic located her at a higher pedestal than the normative *pativrata* for her confidence and self dependence. This image of the female ascetic, however, could not sustain for too long mainly for two reasons – (i) Buddhism like Hinduism did not oppose patriarchy, and as Romila Thapar too ascertains, the *sanghas* replicated the lineage structure—*gana*, *kula*, *sakha*, *gaccha*, etc. (Thapar 87). Ironically, (ii) within the structural framework of the *sangha* women were discriminated. A nun, however advanced in faith, was subordinated to the youngest novice among the brethren (Basham 17). The claims of women to "... asceticism, priesthood, in fact to salvation itself, have been bitterly contested by men and even by women who have been socialised by patriarchal values" (Ramaswamy 26). The rural women's social conditioning on asceticism in these novels under study reflects such attitudinal biases and mind-set one

could attribute to their socialisation by patriarchal values.

Initially, the first generation women writers in English as well as other regional languages in the pre-independence and early independence period have largely subscribed to the mythical female models. Understandably, at the initial stage of their creative endeavour the world view of the first generation women writers was governed and determined by the contemporary knowledge systems and the female representations in the dominant canon. The images of women in the early novels of women writers in English as well as *Bhasa* literature more or less conform and subscribe to the patriarchal female images. In fact, at this initial stage there is no perceptible distinction between the male and female literary canon in female imaging or representation though gynocritical writing gradually imparts a distinctive character and dimension to the canon in terms of the nuanced portrayal of a woman in the family or society with their pioneering effort “to explore the causes of women’s suffering, the nature of suppression and sublimation” (Shirwadkar 58). The female characters in the early novels of Kamala Markandaya *Nectar in a Sieve* being one of them, at the surface level are in conformity with the patriarchal normative standards and at this stage there is no perceptible distinction between the male and female literary canon in their female images or representation.

A marked shift has occurred in the feminist canon in the last few decades in the reversal or subversion of mythical iconised images of women. The unconventional women Ganga, Matsyagandha, Kunti, Draupadi, Amba and Ambalika in the *Mahabharata*, contestatory models of Kaikeyi, Manthara, Tara and Mandodari in the *Ramayana* and *Ramcharitmanas*, Mirabai, the rebel saint poet of medieval India, Akka Mahadevi, a twelfth century saint poet of Karnataka, the eighth century woman poet Andal and the seventeenth century subversive woman saint Audei Akka from Tamilnadu are some of the subversive and transgressive women voices to be reclaimed and reinvented in

the canon in recent past.⁴ On similar lines the subaltern images of women heroes, Jhalkaribai, for instance, are reinvented and reclaimed in the subaltern Dalit discourse.

Barring the exception of Mirabai who was born and wed into the royal family of the Rana of Mewar in Rajasthan, all these transgressing women saints hail from modest rural family background. Publication of *Radhika Santwanam* by an eighteenth century Telgu poet Muddupalani born into a community of prostitutes, the countrywide reclamation of the autobiographies, biographies, memoirs of courtesans, singers and performers, *dalit*, tribal and other minority women writers in the last few years is reiteratively suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in terms of the shift from the patriarchal stereotypes to non-patriarchal representation.⁵ “With each turn in history, Meerabai, the saint poetess of medieval India takes a new avatar. While during the colonial period, she becomes one of the preferred icons of the non-violent nationalist imagination, in the postcolonial phase she emerges as an arch symbol of the marginalised and the subaltern.... As she is resurrected and re-invented, she undergoes strategic cultural transformations that quite significantly impinge on, and not just mirror the changing contours of culture in our time” (Akshaya Kumar 176).

Thus, the inference that change in the social and political reality is bound to affect and gradually transform the image of a woman in a specific community or society, and the social and cultural images of a woman are primarily responsible for the construction of the literary archetypes to be eventually translated or transcreated into stereotypes.

Since four of the novels selected for this study, *Nectar in a Sieve*, *The First Promise*, *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Phaniyamma* concentrate on the women-centric issues of the nineteenth century reform movement, a recapitulation of these reform and national freedom movement would bring these narratives in a historical context when Indian women take a leap from the restricted domestic domain to the public domain. At the initial

stage, the 'woman's question' is centrally located in all controversial debates on widow's remarriage, the practice of *sati*, the Age of Consent and women's education but as Partha Chatterjee argues, these woman-centric issues are eventually diluted by the close of the century so as to gradually disappear from the agenda of public debate and be subsumed by the meta politics of nationalism. The nationalists restrict the women's question in an inner domain of sovereignty which constitutes the true self and is thus the repository of cultural 'tradition' and women associated in patriarchy with the domestic space. In the background of the social reform agenda supplanted by the nationalist movement the woman's question becomes secondary, unobtrusive. Lata Mani goes a step further from Partha Chatterjee to assert that women are neither subjects or objects in this social discourse, "... but rather the ground of the discourse on *sati*" (Mani 117). The mutation of the woman question in terms of subjectivity and agency amounts to "the dialectical process of (dis)embodiment whereby the material being of womanhood is transfigured into a sign for something else (disembodiment) but the process simultaneously involves the ascription of woman as an embodiment of that something, in this case an identity" (Smith qtd. in Mondal 916). For Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in this entire imperialist debate on *sati* the lack of testimony of the women's voice-consciousness is polemic. The relationship between the imperialist subject (*sati*) and the subject of imperialism (saving the brown women from brown men) is ambiguous (Spivak, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 296-297).

The 'woman question' was certainly not the main question in the nationalist movement but as Sujata Patel argues femininity certainly acquires a distinctive presence in Gandhi's discourse during the nationalist movement. She perceives three distinctive phases in Gandhi's discourse on women: (i) Gandhi's attention to the 'woman's question' emerges during the first phase between 1917-1922 when he begins to move beyond the

framework of the nineteenth century reformers, and to elaborate ideas on women who asserted their place as thinkers and actors in the modern family; (ii) The second phase occurs after 1925 when Gandhi formulates the ideas formulated during the first phase. Redefinition of Hindu marriage and family in terms of its religious and moral sanctity within the contours of a national ideology thereby ascribing to women a distinct role in society as mother and wife which is also politically useful; (iii) The final phase occurs in the 1930s when Gandhi's discourse on women turns towards an idealisation of 'women as renunciator'—the absolute embodiment of non-violent courage. In Sujata Patel's opinion Gandhi is extracting and reformulating from the received ensemble of ideas on women. Most importantly, Gandhi continues to see the women's problem as an extension of the national question (Patel 288-321).

Adding on to Sujata Patel's exegesis of Gandhian discourse Mondal points out two significant shifts in Gandhi's discourse on gender. During the period 1917-1922, women came to figure prominently in Gandhi's writings for the first time which signalled recognition of the latest political potential of women for Gandhi. "Gandhi begins to lay down the basic postulates of his ideas on women in a manner which sanctions the 'home' as a viable political space" (Mondal 922). Gandhi's definition of courage earlier restricted to masculinity now extended to include women. The second decisive shift in Mondal's opinion is "... marked by the merging of Gandhi's discourse on *gender* with his discourse on *sexuality*" (Mondal 923). Gandhi at this point in his career had a specific kind of woman in mind—the woman who renounced everything: marriage, family, children, but most of all her sexuality (Mondal 924). However, the merging of the two discourses—non-cooperation and civil disobedience—signaled "a new political and ideological problematic in which the figure of 'woman as renunciator' was deployed as a rhetorical trope" (Mondal 926).

Gandhi's role in ushering in a qualitative change in the social

status of women in pre-independent India is verily crucial since 'home' is accepted as a viable 'political 'space' and femininity acquires a distinctive presence in Gandhi's discourse during the national movement.

Another contemporary social visionary to be seriously engaged with woman question is Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1884), the founder of *Arya Samaj*, the first reformer of immense import to offer consistent ideology of social reconstruction with a well defined place for women in it (Banga 247). A firm believer in Vedic infallibility, reform, education and the procreation of superior off springs were for him the variables of social reconstruction. In formulating a woman's life he advocated education for a girl child at home from the age of five to eight, schooling of special kind up to the age of sixteen apart from other normative duties which are problematising in the feminist context of identity, space, agency and gender discrimination—producing and bringing up children, especially male children, caring for the conjugal family, management of the household and supervision of the servants, dependence on the sons after the husband's *vanprastha* or demise, and finally dying without aspiring for salvation. All these patriarchal imperatives for women are an attempt to pervasively restrict the woman in the domestic space.

Arguably though, the gender question in *Satyarth Prakash* is debated with the upper and middle class woman in mind and the foundational premises and arguments foregrounded in *Manusmriti*, by and large, propound the patriarchal values of womanhood. Dayanand Saraswati's major contribution has been to the cause of women's education within the traditional value system. Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak* presents a critique of *Arya Samaj* reforms with the metaphor of *Kanya Gurukul* where economically disempowered girls are both the beneficiaries as well as victims of the institutionalised framework of *Kanya Gurukul*, and later on Sarang's representation in the novel as an 'educated' rural woman brings into crisis the emancipatory paradigm of education.

Gandhi and Dayanand Saraswati, the two stalwarts from Gujrat in the precolonial state, engineer the woman's cause though they are not without ideological differences and contextual variations. Interestingly though, with their rootedness in patriarchy both of them envisage the women's world as distinct from the male world thus denying to women scope for self-reliance, equality of opportunity and autonomy as individuals. As Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid have opined that "the normative in both Dayanand Saraswati and Gandhi essentially extended male authority over the lives of women, nevertheless they succeeded in 'reformulating' patriarchy and in creating additional space for women at home and in the public sphere, but they did not transgress it" (1-26).

In sharp contrast to Dayanand Saraswati and Gandhi's negotiations with the gender issue in the nineteenth century which are categorically located in the domain of patriarchy and ancient Hindu *Dharmashastras*, the woman question is addressed on more pragmatic and radical grounds by Jawaharlal Nehru. At a time when the mythical images of Sita and the Vedic intellectuals Gargi and Maitreyi were invoked to resurrect a glorious past as well as the ideal of womanhood, Nehru approached the woman question in the feminist context of equality and identity. Breaking away from the 'silent martyrdom of Sita' he turned to Chitrangada who demanded equality and no deification. Nehru's ideal of womanhood is of particular interest in the contextualised context of the rural woman for his appreciation for physical labour. "While the average woman in India, Nehru recognises, worked hard in fields, the problem lay with the urban woman still trapped with the stereotype expectations of society" (Som 34-54). More than rhetoric, his advocacy of the woman's cause was translated into a series of Acts during his prime ministership in independent India—the Hindu Marriage Act in 1951, Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act—all of which were passed in 1956 and the Dowry Prohibition Act in 1961. In a significant manner these

legislative measures address the contentious areas of gender discrimination—marriage, inheritance, adoption and guardianship.

Bengal, neighbouring Assam, Gujrat and Maharashtra have been the strongholds of the reform movements and the national freedom movement though in due course of time the entire colonial state came in its fold. Befittingly, the corpus of women's fictional writing from these regions manifests a new consciousness in terms of women's reappraisal of patriarchy. The impact of contemporary reformist movements and national movement on contemporary women could broadly be classified as twofold: (i) As women it offered them insight to review their positionality as subjects in the meta discourse of the colonial state, and (ii) The availability of new knowledge systems presumably enriched them with proffered opportunities as readers and as prospective writers. However, this needs to be examined as to how much of these social reforms and enlightenment knowledge systems could virtually reach the women in remote villages.

Foregrounded in the time-frame of pre-independence Bengal renaissance and the nationalist movement the images of village women in the novels of Markandaya, Ashapura Devi and Indira Goswami reflect a perceptible shift in the postcolonial period in terms of social and political agency for women. The contestatory and subversive representation of the female archetypes and stereotypes in both the novels of Maitreyi Pushpa demonstrates the impacting of contemporary debates on ecology and other feminist issues. Similarly, Arundhati Roy's novel is well informed with the socio-political awareness. All these factors are the determinants in the re/presentation of characters, male as well as female in these texts.

II

Thus, a very complex dynamics is at work in the formation of an image and its subsequent valorisation in the social and literary

canon that would engage us in the polemics of representation. Etymologically, representation defines an image, likeness, or reproduction of a thing, e.g. painting or drawing (Pearsall and Trumble, *Oxford Dictionary* 1223). Representations can be clear images, likenesses, material reproductions, performances and simulations. Representation can also be defined as the act of placing or stating facts in order to influence or affect the action of others. Representations—as these ‘likenesses’ in contemporary times come in various forms—in films, television, internet, photographs, paintings, advertisements, newspapers, posters and other forms of popular culture. Written materials, academic texts, novels, literary genres, journals and magazines etc. are also important forms of representation.

The construction, popularisation, memorisation, hierarchisation and omission of any social or culture-specific image has never been an innocent act, but on the contrary, is largely determined by the twofold paradigms of dominance and subordination in patriarchy, the cultural priorities of a community, and at the larger level by the social and political agency. One could refer to Paul Connerton’s notion of an ‘act of transfer,’ of ‘recall and forgetting’ that described cultural memory as “an act in the present by which individuals and groups constitute their identities by recalling a shared past on the basis of common, and therefore often contested norms, conventions, and practices” (Connerton 39).

Since antiquity, representation has played a decisive role in understanding the primary knowledge systems of literature, aesthetics and semiotics. The critical theories of Plato and Aristotle had taken cognisance of the correlation between representation and literature. Plato’s theory of mimesis, as is common knowledge, is foregrounded in representation and as for Aristotle, he considered each mode of representation -- verbal, visual or musical—as natural to human beings since mimesis is a natural instinct in man. As opposed to Aristotle, Plato looked at representation with more caution since he perceived representation as an intervening agency between the

viewer and the real which create illusions so as to lead one away from real things. Consequently, Plato had expressed the need to control and monitor representation—a fact that is forcefully reiterated in the modern postcolonial, feminist and subaltern discourse.

Despite the fact of representation being the reproduction/representation of a likeness, these representations are most often thought to be somewhat realistic, a clear image of the represented object and this is why it becomes imperative to constantly question representations: If there is always an element of interpretation involved in representation, we must then note who may be doing the interpreting. Ella Sholat claims that we should constantly question representation. Each filmic or academic utterance, she argues convincingly, must be analysed not only in terms of who represents but also in terms of who is being represented, for what purpose, at which historical moment, for which location, using which strategies, and in what tone of address (Sholat 173).

Representations are thus much more than plain ‘likenesses.’ They are in a sense ideological tools that can serve to reinforce systems of inequality and subordination; they have helped in the past to sustain colonialist or neocolonialist projects and are capable of sustaining such discursive projects at present too. Consequently, a great amount of effort and caution is required to dislodge dominant modes of representation and challenge the hegemonic force of representation. It could be posited that this force is not completely pervasive, and subversions are often possible.

The empiricist approach to representation proposes a distinction between the ways of interpreting and speculating nature. Since speculations are misleading, fictitious, biased and selective according to this model, interrogation of representation becomes imperative in the context of gender. It could thus be inferred that an image and representation of a subject in a literary artifact are inter-related and inter-dependent.

In the postcolonial pedagogy image has somehow become synonymous with representation. Representation is presently a much debated topic not only in the postcolonial, feminist or subaltern discourse but in the larger cultural studies project as well. The critical issues of cultural representation are elaborately explored by the postcolonial and subaltern critics and historiographers. A close examination of various forms of representations, visual, textual and otherwise would expose the different ways that these 'images' are implicated in power inequalities and the subordination of the subaltern, the colonised and women.

Most significantly, the term representation also has political connotations. For Edward Said, these representations can be very misleading and are motivated by ulterior motives. Said, in his analysis of the textual representations of the 'Orient' emphasises the fact that representations can never be exactly realistic. In any instance of written language at least, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation. The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made super derogatory any such real thing as 'the Orient' (Said 21).

The white man's representation of the African as a barbarian or at the most as the noble savage and later the Afro-American woman's representation in the mainstream American canon as a sexually provocative woman are notable instances of unrealistic, politically or culturally motivated representations. Representations of the 'Orient,' as Said has argued can never really be 'natural' depictions of the Orient. Instead, they are constructed images—images that need to be constantly interrogated for their ideological content and personal and political motivation. Correspondingly, the representation of the rural woman in the Indian feminist as well as the dominant

canon also needs to be critiqued in the backdrop of these ideological and political constraints or motivations.

Arguably, representations affect the ways in which actual individuals are perceived. Although some might view representations as harmless likenesses, they undeniably do have a real effect on the world. They are meant to relay a message and influence opinion and action. Therefore one needs to cross-examine the implicit ideological or political motivation for any representation mainly because the images or ideas formed in the mind have vast implications for real people in real contexts. Both the scarcity and the importance of minority representations yield what many have called 'the burden of representation.'

Since there are so few images of the rural women in the mainstream literature, that, literary and cinematic stereotypes are mistaken for actual likenesses. The stereotypes of the rural woman as a *ghagra chunri* clad *gaon kei chori*—the village lass or a woman with a long veil are mistaken for real. Therefore there is a need to ask, if there are so few, who will produce them? Who will be the supposed voice of the subaltern—rural woman, *dalit*, tribal and minority communities? Given the allegorical character of these representations, the investigating agency of a writer, scholar or artist—internal as well as external—is suspect. When the investigating agent or a certain image is read as metonymic, representation becomes more difficult and hazardous.

On similar lines Spivak too makes a distinction between *Vertretung* and *Darstellung*. The former she defines as 'stepping in someone's place to tread in someone's shoes.' Representation in this sense is a 'political representation,' or a speaking for the needs and desires of somebody or something. *Darstellung* is representation meaning 'placing there.' According to Spivak representation is thus 'proxy and portrait.' The complicity between 'speaking for' and 'portraying' must be kept in mind (Spivak, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* 275-290). Spivak addresses the problem of speaking in the name of, "...

the idea of the disenfranchised speaking for themselves, or the radical critics speaking for them; this question of representation, self-representation, representing others, is a problem. Spivak recommends 'persistent critique' to guard against constructing the other simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real 'Others' because of the ones who are getting access into public places due to these waves of benevolence and so on" (275-290).

This kind of interrogation is particularly important in the context of the representation of the subaltern. The problem does not rest solely with the fact that often marginalised groups do not hold the 'power over representation' (Sholat 170); as has been argued, it rests also in the fact that representations of these subaltern and marginalised groups are both flawed and few in numbers. Sholat asserts that dominant groups need not preoccupy themselves too much with being adequately represented since there are so many different and varied representations of dominant groups, that negative images are seen as the only part of the 'natural diversity' of people. However, "representation of an under-represented group is necessarily within the hermeneutics of domination, overcharged with allegorical significance" (Sholat 170).

Foregrounded on the assumption that a subaltern can stand in for other subalterns, the mass media tends to take representations of the subaltern as allegorical. Since representations of the marginalised are few, the few available are thought to be representative of all marginalised peoples. The few images are thought to be typical, sometimes not only of members of a particular minority group, but of all minorities in general. This collapsing of the image of the subaltern reflects not only ignorance but a lack of respect for the diversity within marginalised communities. Sholat also suggests that representations in one sphere—the sphere of popular culture—affect the other spheres of representation, particularly the political one.

The denial of aesthetic representation to the subaltern has historically formed a corollary to the literal denial of economic, legal, and political representation. The struggle to 'speak for oneself' cannot be separated from a history of being spoken for, from the struggle to speak and be heard (Sholat 173).

Spivak's pivotal question "Can the Subaltern speak?" articulates the fact that representation is a sort of speech act, with a speaker and a listener. Often, the subaltern makes an attempt at self-representation, perhaps a representation that falls outside "the lines laid down by the official institutional structures of representation" (Sholat 306). Yet, this act of representation is not heard. It is not recognised by the listener, presumably because it does not fit in with what is expected of the representation. Therefore, representation by a subaltern subjectivity seems nearly impossible. The rural women -- the widows, deserted wives, co-wives—are the subaltern women quite often denied the 'subject' and the 'speaking position' in the social and literary discourse with the polemic appropriation of the speaking agential voice by others which posits the need to question their representation in the backdrop of the diversified socio-cultural framework of a community.

There must be an effort to try and challenge status quo representation and the ideological work it does. The works of various Third World and minority writers, artists, and filmmakers attest to the possibilities of counter-hegemonic, anti-colonial subversion. 'Self-representation' may be a viable mode for challenging the status quo representation, however Spivak has in depth addressed the polemics of 'Self-representation' in her interview with Walter Adamson later published as "The Problem of Cultural Self-representation." Self representation, that Spivak contends is not a complete possibility, yet it is still an important goal. Increased self-representation or the inclusion of more individuals from 'marginalised' groups in 'the act of representing' could be one of the variables yet this is easier said than done (Spivak 50-58). Moreover, the inclusion of more minorities, in

this context -- the rural woman—in self representation will not necessarily alter the structural or institutional barriers that prevent equal participation for all in representation.

Spivak cautions the need to see “in what contexts, under what kind of race and class situations, gender is used as what sort of signifier to cover over what kind of things” (Spivak 52). The question of ‘speaking as’ for Spivak involves a distancing from oneself. “There are many subject positions which one must inhabit; one is not just one thing. That is when a political consciousness comes in” (60). A person ‘speaking as’ is confronted with the problem of distancing from one’s self, whatever the self might be. She pinpoints the problem when the listeners are ‘the hegemonic people, the dominant people’ (60), and they are listening to someone ‘speaking as’ something or the ‘Other.’ “When they want to hear an Indian speaking as an Indian, a Third World Woman, they cover over the fact of the ignorance that they are allowed to possess into a kind of homogenization” (60). This addresses the problematic of the homogenization of the subalterns as per se of the rural woman’s representation as the *gaon kei chori*.

The feminist anxiety relating to a woman’s location as the ‘Other’ in institutionalised patriarchy as well as the dominant discourse wherein “... they are always off-stage, off-side, beyond representation, beyond selfhood” (Irigaray, *The Speculam* 22), and therefore the persistent efforts of the feminist writers and critics on the creation of a counter-canonical literature and literary theories are crucially interspersed with the dynamics of representation. As Pam Morris has argued, our perception of reality is shaped largely by our representational systems which are manmade (Morris 8). On similar grounds, the psychoanalytic theory of Freud is challenged by French feminists for woman’s representation ‘in terms of deficiency or atrophy.’

The importance of gynocritical writing has been globally acknowledged by the feminists from all quarters – Western as well as Third World.⁶ In this context Elaine Showalter’s A

Literature of Their Own (1977) is canonical for her categorisation of female literary tradition into three historical phases -- the 'Feminine,' the 'Feminist' and the 'Female'—which, to a great extent, corresponds to the developing stages in Indian women's writing. Earlier 'feminine' phase is marked by an imitation of the male literary canon but in the 'feminist' phase women do register their protest by rejecting the accommodating postures of femininity. In the 'female' phase women have been rejecting both imitation and protest, turning instead to 'female experience.' One finds the female representations in Indian women's writing, to a fairly large extent, compatible with these three phases.

Since the time of the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's canonical feminist text *The Second Sex* the feminist focus has been on the investigation of gender representations as social constructions. According to Beauvoir's masculine principle, gender is hierarchically opposed to the male who is always the favoured 'norm' and the hegemonic concepts of masculinity and femininity are foregrounded in the social construction of gender. Mary Eagleton argues: "There is no inimitable, neutral link, between one's identity as a 'man' or a 'woman' and one's social behaviour" (158). Correspondingly, for Judith Butler, the ways in which the bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds constitute 'the illusion of an abiding gendered self' must be understood in view of the effects of gender produced through the stylisation of the body. "Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of facts" (Butler 140).

In India gender representation in the literary and social canon has a close connect with the imperialist regime that exported a diverse set of ideas, values and socio-cultural varieties in the colonised state. This is a widely argued fact that the notions of Victorian respectability in terms of its social and moral standards imposed barriers of reticence and reserve not only on the colonised Indian state but on the contemporary western mind

as well. As Leslie Fielder has observed, the American novelists tend to "... avoid treating the passionate encounter of a man and woman, which we expect at the center of the novel.... Indeed, they rather shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery, symbols of the rejection or fear of sexuality" (Fielder, Introduction xix).

Contrarily, a historic overview of the vast body of Indian literature comprising of the epics, the *puranas* and other popular folk traditions demonstrates an astounding exuberance of emotions and a celebratory attitude to love and sexuality. The Sanskrit plays of Kalidas and Bhavbhuti, Vatsyayana's *Kamsutra* and the iconographic representations, specifically in the temples of Konarka and Khajuraho uniformly reiterate the uninhibited Indian attitude to love and sex. Therefore the representation of Indian woman in the nineteenth and early twentieth century fiction—male as well as female -- on Victorian models is related to the polemics of representation. An attempt is made in the following chapters to investigate the images and representation of rural woman in contemporary women's writing vis-a-vis the indigenous paradigms, locale and socio-cultural value system.

Notably, the representation of the widow in the colonial regime is foregrounded in such polemics and politics of representation. In order to contest the colonisers' propaganda related to Indian widows' oppression by the Indian men similar to the black-on-black oppression paradigm, the social reformers underplayed the nuanced indigenous value system in favour of the western paradigms of Victorian morality. Focusing on whether or not images are negative or positive, leaves in fact a reliance on the 'realness' of images, a 'realness' that is false to begin with.

Thus to conclude, the valorisation or polarisation of a female image in literature and other forms of art has never been an innocent act and is polemically related to the dynamics of patriarchy and representation. The institution of patriarchy and

its operational mechanism will come for discussion in the following chapters.

III

The selection of these translated as well as original *Bhasa* novels in Hindi along with two novels in English by Indian women writers is premised on the following facts:

(i) The endangered location of innumerable indigenous languages and their literature in the backdrop of the dynamics of the institutionalisation of English is a global phenomenon. According to the old census in India, 1652 languages are spoken in India which are threatened by the spate of globalisation (Nemade, *Sahitya, Sanskriti Aur Bhumandalikaran* 18). The nation state is, functionally multilingual with forty seven languages used in education as medium. In addition to these officially recognised languages there are the oral languages of the tribes foregrounded in the oral tradition whereas the trajectory of the English language in India as Swati Joshi aptly puts it, is in a fundamental sense the trajectory of its urban middle class (Joshi 1-31).

(ii) The Anglophone discourse has limitations in terms of the constraints of vocabulary and local idiom to capture and likewise translate the nuanced socio-cultural sensibilities of the specific milieu. The dynamics of translating the culture-specific nuanced realities in the target language English is the foremost constriction and is widely debated in the literary and academic circles. For Aijaz Ahmad English is the language most removed in its cultural ambience from other languages and Meenakshi Mukherjee's reference to the strength of regional writers in their lack of self-consciousness about techniques and cultural dialectics also underscores the cultural rootedness of a regional writer (*Realism and Reality* 140). In a similar vein Tabish Khair also underlines the problem of mapping the Indian cultural and physical 'geographies' with an appropriate vocabulary in English.

In view of the threatening phenomena of large scale promotion of genteel 'elitist' tradition by Indian English women writers and valorisation of English language texts as quality texts, there is an imperative need to reclaim and relocate the images and representation of the marginalised subjectivities, the rural woman, for instance, from the corpus of *Bhasa* literature.

(iii) Elaine Showalter's insistence on gynocritical writing was later supplemented by Helen Cixous's advocacy for women's writing as the positive agenda of discovering an 'écriture feminine'—a feminine practice of writing. "And why don't you (women) write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" 259).

One is deeply conscious of the fact that for any kind of reclamation or relocation of female images in these village-centric novels the ideal critical framework should be Indocentric and indigenous since the western concepts and theories are willy nilly not compatible with these socially and culturally nuanced *Bhasa* texts. However, in the absence of any cohesive indigenous feminist theoretical framework, postcolonial, subaltern and feminist paradigms have been applied selectively, and critically. Situating the rural woman in the geographical locale of the village and the historical context of coloniality interspersed with a series of reform movements and the nationalist movement the literary prototypes of the rural woman and her representation is investigated in this study in the context of the feminist, postcolonial and subaltern pedagogy.

In the following chapters the images and representation of rural women of privileged class and caste hierarchy in Brahminical (*The First Promise; A Saga of South Kamrup*) and feudal patriarchies (*Idannamam* and *Chaak*) come for detailed deliberation. Unlike the feminists' umbrella term 'Brahminical patriarchy' employed by some feminist critics, Uma Chakravarti, for example, a clear distinction is maintained in this study between the Brahminical and feudal patriarchy whereas

underprivileged class of landless, tenant farmers (*Nectar in a Sieve*) are critiqued in the context of land and other patriarchal and feminist paradigms. Despite distinct variations in locale, language and time frame the high caste and class affinities are the binding factors for the *kulin* Brahmin, the '*bhadra*' women of Ashapura Devi and the '*sattra*' Brahmin women of the Vaishnavite *sattra* in *A Saga of South Kamrup*. Correspondingly, Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* too offers quite a few identical images of women in terms of their patriarchal positionality in the landlord Rajput class of Bundelkhand in Uttar Pradesh in the backdrop of the changing caste and class dynamics. In a hegemonic patriarchal setup that promotes the hegemonic institutions of family and marriage, the social constructs of single women -- widows, childless women, separated/estranged wives and divorcees—are located on the margin of the margins. The focus in the fourth chapter would be on the images and representation of these doubly marginalised subjectivities in three widow-centric novels, *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *Phaniyamma* and *Idannamam*.

Caste has always been one of the key institutions in the Indian society that came to acquire new signification and agency in the colonial state. The representation and images of the women of caste are examined in the fifth chapter in a historic perspective with a primary focus on Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* vis-a-vis the novels located in Brahminical and feudal patriarchies.

More than the social domain, it is in the cultural domain a rural woman excels and exuberates as the repository of the oral tradition in the form of stories, myths, *vrata kathas*, folklore, rituals and customs—all contributing to the nation's monolith of cultural memory, crucially though in the changing caste configurations, the city-village interface manifest in the large scale migrations from the villages to the cities and the conversion of arable land to industrial units have also impacted the socio-cultural complex of the rural populace. The rural woman

negotiating and mapping out the rural and urban territory, and concomitantly contesting the cultural colonisation is centrally located in this chapter.

In summation the study not only (i) contests and subverts the homogenised, monolithic constructs of the village woman and her representation as per se caste, class and gender, but conversely, (ii) investigates novel images and representation of village woman in the context of the postcolonial, subaltern and feminist pedagogy. The women subjectivities in these novels are not only depicted in their typified or stratified familial roles as wives, mothers, daughters, daughter-in-laws or as transgressing and contrastive images but, more importantly as individuated beings -- women with a 'body' and mind. The endeavour here is to vindicate the claim of the marginalised regional women writers of not only the early centuries but the contemporary writers as well with a view to locate, or relocate, as the case may be, the marginalised constructs of a widow, spinster, estranged co-wife in the private/public domain in terms of the defining feminist postulates of identity, subjecthood and agency - familial, social and political. Given the fact of the increasing polarisation of the village as a geographical, social and cultural site and the village woman as a socio-cultural construct in the dominant literary canon which is a signifier of civilisational and cultural imperialism, it posits the need to offer the counter-canonical feminist discourse on rural, tribal, *dalit* and other marginalised women that would be a welcome step towards syncretisation.

The select *Bhasa* novels in this study represent rural women of some specific regions, class and caste. As has been argued in a multi-lingual, multi-cultural and multi-faceted country like India there certainly cannot and should not be a monolithic construction -- a superimposing surface structure -- rural or urban. Such a study undertakes to identify and critique some dominant textual images of rural woman in the nation state, and whenever necessary, bring in the landmark male-authored

village-centric novels in dialogue with the works of their female counterparts. Krishna Sobti's magnum opus *Zindaginama* (1979), for instance, is imperative for its historic and cultural contexts, specially for the nuanced portrayal of the voluptuous pre-partition rural Punjab as a metonym of the undivided nation offering pictorial glimpses in terms of the socio-cultural specificities of a pre-partition village and the post-partition aftermath. In a similar way, essential and crucial are the *Bhasa* texts of Premchand, Fanishwar Nath Renu and Nagarjuna, Vibhuti Bhushan Bandopadyaya, Sharat Chandra and Rabindranath Tagore for their forceful and insightful depiction of the empirical realities of a common villager located in some remote corner of the country and have been brought into dialogue with the selected novels.

NOTES

1. For a serious documentation see S. M. Gilbert and S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Women Writers and the Nineteenth Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979); Judith Fryer, *The Faces of Eve: Women in the Nineteenth Century American Novel* (New York: OUP, 1976). These American feminists are critical of the American male canon for the presentation of a woman as a variant of the Eve figure. For a similar kind of stereotypical portrayal of high caste Hindu in Nepal see Lynn Bennett, *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983).
2. For a serious documentation of the transgressive epic women see Pratibha Ray, *Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi*, trans. Pradip Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Rupa, 1995); Mahasweta Devi, "Draupadi," *Breast Stories*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002); Shashi Deshpande, "Hear Me Sanjaya," *The Intrusion and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1993); Irawati Karve, *Yugant: The End of an Epoch* (Hyderabad: Disha-Orient Longman, 1969); Chitra Chaturvedi (Kartika), *Mahabharati* (New Delhi: Jnanpith, 1986); Shubhangi Bharbhare, *Mei Bhisma Nahin* (New Delhi: Jnanpith, 2005); William. S. Sax, *Dancing the Self: Personhood and Performance in the Pandav Lila of Garhwal* (New York: OUP, 2002); Saraswati Venugopal, "Specific Folk Forms Related to the Mahabharata Prevalent in Tamil Nadu," and P. Usha Sundari, "Draupadi in Folk Imagination," *The Mahabharata in the Tribal and Folk Traditions of India*, ed. K. S. Singh (Shimla: IIAS, 1993); Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale, ed., *In Search of Sita: Revisiting Mythology*

- (New Delhi: Penguin and Yatra Books, 2009).
3. For further elaboration of *Panchkanya* see Pradip Bhattacharya, "Panchkanya: Women of Substance," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, 5, 1 & 2, 2000. 13-56. Bhattacharya, "Apropos Epic Women: East & West – A Note," *Vyasa's Mahabharata: Creative Insights*, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Creative Writers Workshop, 1995).
 4. A young contemporary of Basavana, Akka Mahadevi was born in Sivamogga in the twelfth century. A devotee of Channamallikarjuna which literally means 'The Lord of White Jasmine' -- a name of Shiva, she believed that she was betrothed to Him but Kaushika, the local ruler forced her into marriage which turned out to be a disaster. Rejecting all human, carnal love for her personal God she left home and wandered naked in her search for her Divine Consort. Her *Vachanas* best express her desire for liberation from earthly bondage as well as her resistance to the patriarchal social conventions. For her *Vachanas* see A. K. Ramanujan, ed., and trans., *Speaking of Shiva* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1973).
 5. See for serious documentation the visual documentation of *Tamasha* performer Bitha Bai by organisations such as *Bhumika* by Hansa Vadekar; *Umrao Jan Ada-The Courtesan of Lucknow* by Muhammad Hadi Ruswa (1857-1931), trans., Khushwant Singh; Binodini Devi, *My Story and My Life as an Actress*, ed., and trans., Rimli Bhattacharya (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Bama, *Karukku*, trans., Laksmi Holmstorm, 2000, and Bama, *Sangati*, trans., Laksmi Holmstorm (New Delhi: OUP, 2004); *Achoot*, An Autobiography of Daya Pawar; *Alo Andhari*, The autobiography of Baby Haldar, trans., Prabodh Kumar (Kanchanpara: Roshnai Prakashan, 2002). For a forceful documentation also see Jaipal Singh, *Samaru: The Fearless Warrior* (Delhi: Shrishti, 2004); Salim Kidwai, "The Singing Ladies Find a Voice," *Seminar*, 540. August 2004; Lata Singh, "Courtesans And The Revolt: Role Of Azeezun In Kanpur," *The Indian Historical Review*, xxxiv, 2, July 2007: 58-78 (New Delhi: ICHR, 2007).
 6. For a useful documentation of these debates on gynocritical writing see Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1977) and for her theory of "Gynocriticism" see "Towards a Feminist Poetics," *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed., Mary Jacobes (London: Barnes and Noble, 1979); K. M. Newton, ed., *Twentieth Century Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, Reprint). For the psychoanalytic theories of French feminists see *French Feminism Reader*, ed., Kelly Oliver (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

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Chapter-III

The Rural Woman in Village Patriarchy

The caged bird sings
With a fearful trill
Of things unknown
But longed for still
And his tune is heard
On the distant hill
For the caged bird
Sings of freedom.

MAYA ANGELOU
“And Still I Rise”

The construct of the rural woman has been one of the most debunked, retrogressive and subalternised literary constructs relegated to the margins in the dominant postcolonial and feminist discourse in terms of caste, class and gender. However, given the geographical and socio-cultural variants and variations and the variables of caste, class, culture and religion -- all contributing towards the mosaic of the Indian rural woman in the nation state—the entity of the ‘Indian rural’ or ‘Indian urban’ woman as a homogenised, monolithic entity remains a contested and contestable entity.

Given the fact that patriarchy is the key institution to determine or govern the images and representation of an Indian woman, specifically the village woman in a village patriarchy, the first part of this chapter locates the village woman in a normative patriarchal framework—Brahminical and feudal as (i) negotiating patriarchy, and (ii) resisting patriarchy in various

familial and social roles. The second part would concentrate on the female images and their representation in four novels -- Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), Ashapura Devi's *The First Promise* (1968, trans. 2004), and Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* (1994) and *Chaak* (1997) in the contextualised context of the distinctive paradigms of land, women's sexuality, violence and female resistance.

The Rural Women Negotiating Patriarchy

Prior to any discussion on the images and representation of rural woman in the feminist literary canon it is imperative to locate the rural woman in the village patriarchy comprising of the underprivileged class of landless farmers as well as the privileged bourgeoisie landlord class that would be a crucial determinant in the imaging or representation of a rural woman. Patriarchy in simple terms is a system governed by the principle of domination and subordination. This system as a power game works in such a way so as to ensure the monopoly of power to men and marginalisation of women in the two overarching institutions of patriarchy i. e. family and marriage. In Helen Cixous's opinion patriarchy is maintained by the exchange of women as possessions from fathers to husbands always so as to control or gain something. This 'something' would embrace "... more masculinity: plus-value of virility, authority, power, money or pleasure, all of which reinforce his phallogocentric narcissism at the same time" (Cixous 63).

Patriarchy is not only a descriptive but an analytical term, and has been deployed to critique the key constituents of authority and power in any social system. Most crucially, in recent times the focus of feminist criticism is not only on the exploration of negative aspects of patriarchy but on its 'productive prowess as well' since the system amply rewards those "who learn to accept their defined roles as mothers and wives" (Geetha 5). Significantly, patriarchy entails both

productive as well as punitive aspects valorising the conformist and punishing the transgressor. As Ashapura Devi observes: “No matter how helpless or soft women were as species, they were like tigresses in their own territory” (*The First Promise* 429). Simultaneously, the power hierarchies percolate in the patriarchal structure to such an extent so as to permeate not only among women but also in the male domain as would subsequently be corroborated by the textual exegesis how all men are not perennially located in positions of power or authority.

The western feminists Kate Millet, for instance, consider family as an important site of victimisation for women. The term ‘politics’ in *Sexual Politics* refers to power structured relations in a patriarchal structure. “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family, it is both a mirror of and a connection with the large society, a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole. Mediating between the individual and the social structure, the family effects control and conformity where political and other authorities are insufficient” (Millet 25). However, Kate Millet’s American model for a family and society and her essentialist definitions of femininity with their axis on the experiences of middle class white women are contested by Indian and Afro-American feminists such as Bell Hooks and Audre Lorde. Given the fact of the locale and the socio-cultural variations in India, Indian feminists Madhu Kishwar, Kumkum Sangari, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, to cite a few notable names have problematised the tendency towards the essentialisation or homogenisation of western feminist paradigms in the Indian context.

Thus, the framework of a village patriarchy and the localised political, social, cultural and ideological forces at work have to be reckoned with for the purposes of the study of the Indian village woman. As Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid have argued, patriarchies are constantly reconstituted as political, social, cultural and ideological factors undergo modifications (*Recasting Women*). In a family of the underprivileged tenant

farmers in *Nectar in a Sieve*, for instance, the economic constraints are the major threat in the formation and execution of a joint or an extended family structure. Contrarily, the flourishing, economically empowered feudal familial structure in *The First Promise*, *Phaniyamma*, *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *Idannamam* and *Chaak* is pervasively far more conducive for the functioning of extended and joint families under benevolent patriarchs offering shelter to widows and other destitute female relatives. In fact the collaborating coercive and subversive patriarchal and social forces are jointly resisted by the benevolent patriarchal and feminist forces in *Idannamam* and *Chaak*. Manda's evolution from a simple village girl to a woman empowered with social agency in *Idannamam* is possible partly with the support of the generous village *Pradhan* and other village elders. Similarly in *Chaak*, initially full family support is extended to the female protagonist Sarang in her crusade against the discursive social forces responsible for the gruesome murder of her cousin Resham which is withdrawn only at the later stage when Sarang's social commitment is conflated with and diffused by personal priorities and ulterior motives.

The subaltern studies project offers valuable insights to envisage the patriarchal structure in a normative Indian village comprising of variations and complexities within the villages in the form of *jatis* (groups) and *upjatis* (sub groups). The patriarchal structure in the context of a village needs to be investigated in accordance with the subaltern conceptualisation of 'patriarchal benevolence' where the application of the normative power relationship paradigm in terms of the dominant and dominated is polemic. For Dipesh Chakraverty subalternity signifies "the composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of domination and hierarchy" (376). Going by the textual evidence the rural woman's resistance does not always overrule their acceptance of domination or hierarchy. Sumit Sarkar in a different context of a village scandal probes the ability of the powerless to know and manipulate, by the invocation of the notion of benevolent

patriarchy their own subordination. This distinctive ability of the powerless subalterns is defined by Sarkar as “an assertion-within-deference” (6). Significantly though, Hardiman has pointed out the tension between communities based solidarities and internal cleavages based on gender, caste, class, religion, age and so forth and the community and collective identities edging over the latter (10).

It could safely be argued that the subordination of the subaltern, in the contextualised context of the rural woman to domination may contain elements of assertion within deference. The female protagonists Rukmani (*Nectar in a Sieve*), Satyabati (*The First Promise*) and Sarang (*Chaak*) as housewives in their relationship with their spouses and Manda (*Idannamam*) in her relationship with Makarand, her fiancé are not categorically located in a position of absolute subordination but exhibit on several occasions a remarkable deferential assertion in the form of their overt and covert actions. As a woman of indomitable courage, independent will of mind and power of execution of her will Satyabati walks out of her marital house in an Ibsenian Nora-like protest after a marital life of thirty years against her husband’s tacit compliance with his overbearing mother in marrying Satyabati’s eight years old pre-pubescent daughter without her consent which is a violation of conjugal trust and her motherly rights. Implicit in Rukmani’s initiative in curing her barrenness with the silent support of Dr. Kenny’s benevolence without her husband’s knowledge are such instances of assertion with deference.

Correspondingly, for Manda her status as a single woman coupled with the stigma of a broken engagement is no obstacle in her growth as an individuated and self-actualized being. The empowerment of single female child -- semi-literate Manda and self-educated Satyabati—would deflate the emancipatory paradigms of education and gender marginalisation in village patriarchies. Conversely, Sarang’s participation in the public domain of the school locates her in the category of negative

model of transgressing women in the backdrop of her liaison with the school master, and thus a trespassing of the threshold of patriarchal benevolence. Located in feudal patriarchies these rural women may not transcend patriarchal injunctions or rules, they indubitably succeed in causing dents and fissures in the system and carve out the proverbial 'space' for protest and assertion.¹

However, the feminist critics, Gloria Goodwin Raheja, for instance, are critical of the subaltern studies project for paying little attention to women's challenges or resistance to patriarchal hierarchies frequently reinforced by the colonial rule. Barring a few exceptions, Guha's rereading of the speech of women preserved in fragments of judicial records concerning a death brought about by abortion (Guha 1987), the central consciousness in this discourse is occupied by the male subaltern (Raheja 5). Most prominently, Raheja finds women's challenges to patriarchal hierarchies in women's oral traditions in the form of folksongs, proverbs, stories and narratives etc. which come for discussion in the following chapters.

In addition to the above defining coordinates of subaltern resistance, the patriarchal operations vis-à-vis the women's negotiations in villages also need to be interrogated in the backdrop of the Foucauldian power/knowledge paradigm. Given the fact that power is the prop of the patriarchal system, in fact of all social systems, the negotiations of any kind at the personal, familial and social level need to be foregrounded in a person's knowledge of his/her world and the dynamics of power.² As Foucault argues, and convincingly so, power does not emanate from above but, on the contrary, is embedded in the structure. The fact that it is not complete but fractured would mean that an individual is not permanently located in a position of subordination. For Bhubaneshwari, the docile, nonchalant wife, cast in the '*pativrata* mode' in *The First Promise*, maintaining silence in her large marital family unlike her parental home where she ventured boldly, reflects her knowledge of the

patriarchal world. In another instance, dispossessed of her land and estranged from her mother after her father's murder, the orphan Manda (*Idannamam*) is still located in an empowered position initially as a beneficiary of patriarchal benevolence in the neighbouring village Shyamali, and later in her native village Sonpura in terms of social agency. Dispossession of land by discursive social forces does not impede her progression from an objectified, dislocated position of dependent in the household of Pancham Singh in an unknown village to the relocated subject position in her natal village Sonpura not only as the head of her family but also as an empowered woman with social agency.

Significantly enough, Foucault points out that it is in the relationship between the individual and the institution that one finds power operating most clearly. His work is very critical of the notion that power is something which a group of people or an institution possesses and that power is only concerned with oppressing and constraining. Rather than simply viewing power in a negative way, as constraining and repressing, Foucault argues that the most constraining, oppressing measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour. He is less concerned with focusing on oppression than in foregrounding resistance to power. Manda and Satyabati emerge as powerful women in the face of the 'constraining and oppressing familial and social powers' which bring in positive results for both the women. Satyabati's protesting act of crossing the patriarchal threshold deflates the 'power' of coercive patriarchal agencies though the role of Satyabati's mother-in-law in marrying off her teenaged granddaughter without the prior consent of Satyabati is not only violatory of a mother's rights but a sad reflection on the village matriarch's complicity in patriarchal oppression and propagation of hegemonic gendered traditions as its agents that would disclaim women's emancipatory claims in rural Bengal during the Bengal renaissance.

As a cogent connect to Foucault's critique of power, the conceptualisation of autonomy of the subaltern subject and sovereignty of subaltern consciousness in the subaltern discourse problematises the binaries of domination and resistance in a system. The subaltern critics Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash observe: "... In sum, neither domination nor resistance is autonomous, the two are so entangled that it becomes difficult to analyze one without discussing the other" (2-3).

Corresponding to the subalternist discourse the feminists too in the last few years have been engaged in reinvestigating the woman subjectivity and power interface. The earlier dyadic master/slave model that "... understands male power as domination and in the process fixes the meanings of sex and gender, masculinity and femininity" is under scrutiny (Brace and Davidson 104). The master/slave model is an approach that strives for security of identity, for a settled feminist territory. However, instead of homogenising women as a definable empirical group with a common essence and identity, there is a need to uncover and transform "all discourses, practices and social relations where the category of 'woman' is constructed in a way that implies subordination" (Mouffe 382). A large number of Third World feminists are engaged in formulating various ways of addressing the multiplicity of subject positions of women in terms of class, race, nation, ethnicity, sex, age and gender in relation both of men and to each other since they feel "... the need for a more complex, nuanced, and relational vision of gendered power" (Brace and Davidson 104). As Brace and Davidson have remarked, some of the most interesting and politically significant empirical work by Third World feminists recognises diversity and invites examination of the contradictory and conflictual ways gender, race and class come into existence in and through relation to each other.

It could thus be averred that located in a feudal patriarchy a village woman irrespective of caste, class or religion has to negotiate, contest or resist patriarchal operations in accordance

with her circumstances, temperament, sensibility and sensitization at familial and social level at every step of her life in the private/domestic space of her natal family initially as a daughter, and later in her affinal family as a wife, mother or vis-a-vis other post-marital relations, and if inhabiting the location of a doubly marginalised woman -- a widow or a childless woman, the negotiating strategy or variables can vary. Even in an ordinary situation such as movement in the public space of a village fair, religious place of worship or a public gathering, a village fair for instance, a village woman's move would be governed by localised patriarchal normative standards. In a hierarchal patriarchal system the domination versus subordination dichotomy is prevalent not only in terms of gender but within the category of women as well in terms of the hierarchies of mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, the *sumangali* wife/-widow, mother of a son-/ mother of a daughter, mother of a single child, a son-*aikbangia* (*Chaak*), 'fated to taste a single dish spoilt with too much salt' (*The First Promise* 127) / mother of many sons etc. In matters of day-to-day events too a woman's endeavour is directed towards carving out space for protest and assertion.

These areas of negotiations, permutations and contestation for rural women in a Brahminical or feudal patriarchy primarily relate to the paradigms of land, woman's sexuality and identity in terms of subjecthood, agency, and resistance. For the child-women protagonists, Satyabati (*The First Promise*) and Manda (*Idannamam*) the paradigms of identity, subjecthood, agency and resistance attain primacy to sexuality, conversely for Rukmani, the wife of a landless and impoverished tenant farmer (*Nectar in a Sieve*) and Bau, the widow (*Idannamam*) the axis is on the paradigm of land and not on the postulate of identity or sexuality. However, in case of Sarang, an average educated housewife (*Chaak*) the negotiations are initially aimed at resisting the exploitation of women by discursive patriarchal forces though later the battle line transgresses from the social/

public to the private domain for purely personal reasons. Among these feminist paradigms, land and sexuality paradigms are far more crucial for widows or other marginalised subjectivities, such as the deserted /estranged wives, co-wives as opposed to married women who are better protected within the institutions of family and marriage as discussed in the following chapter. The focus in this chapter is on the images of rural woman with the prime focus on the coordinates of identity, subjecthood, social agency and modes of resistance.

Rural Women Contesting/Resisting Patriarchy

Arguably, in a patriarchal structure of domination and subordination the defining coordinate of power is the focal point of contestation and resistance for the subordinate, dominated class of women. Since power is not autonomous and complete but fractured, the endeavours of female protagonists from Rukmani (*Nectar in a Sieve* 1954) to Sarang (*Chaak* 1997) intervening four decades of postcoloniality are conflated to negotiations strictly within the prescribed patriarchal framework.

The question of a woman's identity is crucially important for any formulation of feminist discourse -- western or Indian. Biological essentialism has been the bedrock of most traditional thinking about women used both to denigrate and to idealise them but always to justify the existing status quo of power structures. Therefore Freud's account of sexuality as socially and not biologically constructed establishing the fact that femininity and masculinity have no basis in biology but are constructed by the child's familial relationship are crucially important for contesting the notion of biological essentialism despite some of the feminists' strong reservations to Freud's controversial castration theory. Freud's postulates, as Mitchell has argued, are insightful for comprehending the psychic mechanism of patriarchal structure, and could be read as description and not prescription. Significantly, for both Freud

and Lacan the feminine identity is constructed on the basis of lack. This logic of exclusion or sameness, as Helen Cixous has argued in her famous essay “Sorties” in *The Newly Born Woman* (1975) works to deny women any role into creativity. Hence her most passionate appeal to women to follow her example -- her search for a sense of self as a way out, an exit, a *sortie*, from an exclusive identity and discover a positive feminine identity.

Elaine Showalter in her gynocritical project refers to three major phases common to all literary subcultures, namely, a phase of initiation, secondly a phase of protest and the last phase she describes as “a phase of self-discovery, a turning inward, freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity” (128). For both the teenaged female protagonists Satyabati and Manda their gradual progression from the phase of initiation to that of self discovery marks the shift in their positionality as the ‘Other’ in a natal patriarchal setup to the centre of action as active participants and agents undergoing transformation as individuated beings. Satyabati, the eight years old girl is a born rebel, a Nachiketa like truth seeker. Manda, on the contrary, initially figures in the text as a passive agent with a stoic acceptance of the turn of events in her life. At the initial stage it is Bau, Manda’s old grandmother who is centrally located as the head of the maleless family and the crucial decision to leave her village Sonpura—the protected private territory with her granddaughter to protect her in terms of custody and property taken by her. However, the grandmother is gradually dislocated from the central position of authority by the teenaged Manda firstly, as a decision maker, and later as the sustaining agent gradually registering a transition from the private to the public domain.

Power and domination are the two defining and sustaining imperatives of a woman’s identity. For Foucault knowledge is power whereas in the Marxist paradigm power is closely associated with capital. In a feudal society land acts as the power signifier in terms of identity and agency to a village woman. A

woman's identity familial as well as social has a cogent connect with the twofold empowerment and enlightenment paradigms. Foregrounded in the feudal peasantry of Bundelkhand and Brij region in Uttar Pradesh. Maitreyi Pushpa's both the novels address these polarities of dominance and subordination in a feudal society where the interface between power and land is crucial. As has been stated in northern India where the *Mitakashara* school of Hindu law is operative, a widow is entitled to maintenance by the joint family that polemically places her in a precariously vulnerable position. Land inheritance for women is polemic since it renders them vulnerable at the hands of discursive social forces as is substantiated in *Idannamam* where the disintegration of an all-woman family is foregrounded in the land rights of Prem, the widow and Manda, her daughter.

The axis in the feminist discourse is on the sexual abuse of women, the political character of sexuality and the unequal power of man involved in sexual relationships. Implicit in Luce Irigaray's positive quest is the plea for a way of theorising and representing the specificity of 'femininity' -- of women's sexual identity in positive terms. Not only do the personal relationships become political but sexual relationships also tend to acquire political dimension because they are socially constructed. Indian-English women writers Nayantara Sahgal, and more recently Manju Kapur have explored the coordinate of sexual identity in the context of urbanite middle class educated women but in the *Bhasa* fiction female sexuality within the institution of marriage is an invisible phenomenon presumably for the sanctimonious nature of man-woman relationship in marriage or the socio-cultural ethos. Most characteristically, Ashapura Devi and Indira Goswami do not allude even in a distant, illusory manner to a wife's sexuality; the host of elderly matriarchs and younger married women are nonchalantly represented as asexual and ephemeral entities. It is only in the context of the doubly marginalised women -- co-wives, estranged/separated wives or the widows—that the sexuality paradigm is addressed in these novels.

The representation of sexuality in Indian fiction, Indian-women's writing in particular demonstrates the dichotomy in Hindu philosophy that accepts pursuit of wealth (*artha*) and satisfaction of sexual desires (*kama*) as legitimised human activities (*purusharthas*) though hierarchically these two are the lowest of the four objectives (*purusharthas*) to be attained in this life, as imbibed in four *purusharthas*. Intriguingly, the value structure of the Hindu society entails a duality in relation to women who are in myth assigned benevolent as well as malevolent specificities. Kali and Durga are blood sucking goddesses, conversely, Laxmi and Saraswati are the bestowers of prosperity and knowledge. A corresponding duality is perceptible in the Indian response to sexuality. The canonised scriptural and literary texts -- the epics, the *Mahabharata*, for instance, the *Puranas* and classical Sanskrit texts—exhibit an exuberating, celebratory and salutary attitude towards love. A brilliant fusion of love and sexual pleasure in the *Sringara rasa* is centrally located in Sanskrit *kavya*. However, the heterodox faiths like Buddhism and Jainism have always regarded women as a stumbling block on the path of salvation. This anti-woman stance of the heterodox faiths is concomitant with the *Moksha* paradigm of Hindu philosophy that entails the renunciation of three *dharmas* of *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama* as the prerequisite for the attainment of *Moksha*. Later, during the national movement the trope of sexuality is significantly impacted by Gandhian notion of sexuality where sexuality is perceived as an essentially negative force, "...a 'drain' on one's energies and thus a mitigation of one's power (*shakti*)" (Mondal 924).

Foregrounded in the middle class ideology the Gandhian notions of sexuality and gender in a way strengthen the Indian patriarchal position on sexuality in the pre-independence era and have in turn impacted the contemporary literary canon. For Gandhi, sexuality was not necessarily anything to do with gender. As Bikhu Parekh posits it was in the first instance about power. "His theory of sexuality was integrally connected with his research for *Shakti* and formed an integral part of his theory

of politics” (Parekh 197). On similar lines the noted feminist critics Spivak, Lata Mani and Flavia Agnes too have critiqued the insidiously designed imperialist project of women centric reforms in the nineteenth century that has been discussed at length in the following chapter. On account of the oppositional move of quite a few social reformers to advocate Christian standards of morality, specifically the Victorian-puritan morality the trope of sexuality dovetails towards a repressive and subversive form.

Arguably, village is as much a site of co-operation as of conflict. A rural woman is most often the site of conflict as a victim of violence in the private as well as public domain. With the rising focus on the theme and discourses of sexuality the discourses on violence too have come to register their presence in the literary canon. In Maithreyi Krishnaraj’s opinion the connection of sexuality to “... pervasive violence against women has demonstrated the ideological and material hold of patriarchy in its manifest forms” (Krishnaraj, *Forward Patriarchy*).

Despite the rigorous efforts of social activists and feminists to reform laws and make them ‘gender friendly’ the factual evidence of violence against women forcefully substantiated and supplemented by the textual evidence is revelatory of the patriarchal mindscape and its strong hold on the key institutions of caste, family and marriage. The focus in *The First Promise*, *Idannamam* and *Chaak* is on the physical aspect of violence, the rape of two unmarried young girls Manda and Sugana and their oppositional response to the physical violation (*Idannamam*), wife battering (*The First Promise*), brutalisation of transgressive women by the family members (*Chaak* and *And Such Is Her Fate*) and sexual violence in marriage resulting in the death of the child bride (*The First Promise*) and violence in the public space (*The God of Small Things*). Conversely, the city-bred urbanite middle class woman in the novels of Indian-English women writers is more often the object of mental and psychological violence.

Ashapura Devi's serious engagement with sexual violence in marriage in the form of wife beating, dowry murder and mental violence of the *kulin* Brahminical practice of polygamy on the co-wife most poignantly reflects the objectified location of village women in Brahminical patriarchy in the pre-independence India. Correspondingly, the representation of an endless number of sexually abused and physically battered women located in the feudal patriarchies of *Jat* and *Ahir* peasants in both Maitreyi Pushpa's novels would deflate the claims of the institution of marriage as an umbrella institution for women wherein the transgressing widows -- Resham and Channa bibi (*Chaak*)—are the worst victims of the brutalized form of violence. Resham dies, Channa bibi survives only to emerge as a vindictive being to the fellow female members of her natal family and her insensitive behaviour needs to be examined in the backdrop of her own brutalisation.

The uncaged bird of Maya Angelou (the introductory epitaph in this chapter) no doubt leaps on the back of the wind, it is only the caged bird who knows the real meaning of freedom!

II

To begin with, a wide range of Kamala Markandaya's novels, *Nectar in a Sieve*,³ *The Silence of Desire*, *A Handful of Rice*, *Possession*, *Two Virgins*, *Pleasure City*, *Coffer Dams* written in the span of four decades from the 1950s to 1980s are closely or distantly related to village. The central consciousness in her latest posthumous novel *Bombay Tiger* (2008) is occupied by the dislocated villagers relocated in the city. *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), her debutante novel is significant for centrally locating the poor peasant woman in the speaking position of the text and thus offering the peasant woman's point of view in the early post-independence era, a time when the rural segment of society was peripherised in the dominant canon and the social construct of peasant was located in the human category. Written in the

early post-independent Nehruvian era that witnessed the spate of industrialization and the beginning of the polemical agriculture and industrialisation interface, the novel focuses on Rukmani, the daughter of an erstwhile rich village headman deprived of power and prestige in the post-zamindari phase in a nameless village in South India. Married at the age of twelve to a poor tenant farmer Nathan for want of a respectable dowry and physical charm Rukmani finally emerges as a fighter in terms of familial and social agency. "What for you," my mother would say, taking my face in her hands, "... my last born, my baby? Four dowries is too much for a man to bear" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 8).

The previous studies of *Nectar in a Sieve* have primarily focused on the representation of Rukmani as a normative Hindu woman, to borrow Shirwadkar's terms 'the idealised wife and mother in the Hindu family.' As a silent suffering village woman, a contented wife, and not by any means a demanding or a disgruntled woman despite an inferior marriage in terms of socio-economic status Rukmani is perseverance personified in the face of sorrows. This 'mother of sorrows' (Iyengar, *Indian Writing in English* 438) could be located in the much valorised category of an *Ardhangini* (complementary half) and *Sahadharmini* (helpmate) as the representative voice of acceptance and resignation in the face of natural as well as personal calamities maintaining the ideal *sthitpragya* state of mental equanimity, a *sambhava* to accept joys and sorrows in the same stride. Rukmani's acceptance of the vagaries of nature in the form of draughts and floods, the death of her two sons and departure of two young sons to Ceylon, prostitutionalisation of her only daughter Ira, their forceful eviction from their tenancy, and last but not the least the death of her husband in the town under strenuous circumstances with a sense of exceptional stoicism and fortitude is foregrounded in her belief in God and the internalisation of the fatalistic Hindu philosophy that keeps life pulsating for her. 'We are in God's hands.' Rukmani in Shanta

Krishnaswamy's opinion exemplifies the large mass of underprivileged women in rural India (Krishnaswamy 168).

Most crucially, the representation of Rukmani in the novel denotes a point of departure from the normative image of a silent suffering Sita-Sati-Savitri model of a wife, the stereotyped self-sacrificing, self-effacing woman to an active agent with the will and strength to act in a positive and constructive manner against the odds of life -- poverty, barrenness and a series of inflictions -- providential as well as natural in the private as well as public domain. Markandaya anticipates in Rukmani the 'new' rural woman in the nation state negotiating, on the one hand, between the rural-urban space and, between the private and public domain, on the other. Married below her natal family status she surpasses her ego to amicably adjust at the marital and social level, and later in town this partially literate peasant woman utilises her writing skill as a letter writer for economic empowerment.

Parallels could be drawn between Rukmani and Dhania, the poor peasant woman of *Ahira*n class in Premchand's *Godan* (1936) who too is a far more active, spirited and unconventional woman in her actions and approach than Hori, her submissive and suppliant husband. Dhaniya's unconventional actions and progressive approach deflate the boundaries between the private and public domain. Conversely, Rukmani, a self-reliant, resilient, hardy and sturdy woman of hierarchically high caste belongs to a complex, contradictory legacy in her acceptance of the conventional definitions of a woman's role and nature, a positionality that offers for her limited space for self-expression and self-assertion within the constricted ideological and social world she inhabits.

In addition to these specificities of a home maker, foregrounded in the knowledge of her patriarchal world and its mechanism Rukmani is governed by the 'composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of dominance and hierarchy' (Dipesh Chakraverty 376). Her complex, secretive act of

seeking Dr. Kenny's assistance in curing her barrenness secretly needs to be interrogated in the backdrop of the subaltern notion of the 'composite culture of resistance to and acceptance of dominance and hierarchy.' It could be averred that the representation of Rukmani is in conformity with the patriarchal norms and her transgression in the text is maneuvered in a very tacit and diplomatic manner without collision with the patriarchal forces or value system. Implicit in her secretive act is the knowledge of the patriarchal value system that puts a high premium on motherhood and stigmatises a barren woman especially in a rural setup and also her intuitive wisdom in offering no threat to the dominance of male attitude. Mahatma Gandhi's analogy of the British parliament with 'a sterile woman and a prostitute' would substantiate the stigmatisation of barrenness in Indian society (Gandhi 27). Later, Rukmani's poised subdued response to her husband's infidelity is also related to her knowledge of the double moral standards in patriarchy.

Significantly, Markandaya's representation of a *pativrata* woman along with the co-ordinates of chastity and fidelity in *Nectar in a Sieve* signifies noteworthy shift in the violation of conventional boundaries. This distinctive shift in the novelist's perspective is described by Shiv K. Kumar as 'a shift of values.' "What distinguishes her (Markandaya) most intensively from other Indian novelists is her acute awareness of a gradual shift in values that has been taking place" (Kumar 1). This gradual shift in Markandaya's female rural protagonists in their growing self assertiveness has been qualified as 'autonomy' by Shanta Krishnaswamy (Krishnaswamy 169). Corresponding instance in the novel is Ira's defiant choice to get into the flesh trade and Saroja's forages in the city in *Two Virgins* indicative of the increasing amount of self assertiveness and independence of will among rural woman.

Rukmani, the 'new' woman in the nation state has a close connect with her prototype in the colonial state in relation to

the concepts of 'femininity' and 'motherhood.' Imbued with the attributes of 'femininity' and 'motherhood' this partially educated, genteel and upright 'new' woman was pitted against the 'common woman' who was 'coarse, promiscuous and vulgar' in the nationalist movement (Suruchi Thapar 83). Besides lacking the veneer of gentility, these common women—the notch girls, street-vendors, fisherwomen or the washerwomen—lacked the middle class specificities of docility and submissiveness. "Femininity had to be projected in a particular way so that while it facilitated the Indian man's efforts to prove his 'masculinity' in the external domain it also maintained traditional patriarchal relations within the family by offering no threat to the dominance of male attitudes" (Suruchi Thapar 83).

The representation of Kunti, another peasant woman vis-à-vis Rukmani as the two variables of wife and mother in *Nectar in a Sieve* most glaringly reflects these binaries of the 'new' and 'common' woman. On the surface, both of these underprivileged peasant women share some striking similarities in their natal and affinal family status and circumstantial positionality as daughters of respectable peasants, and wives of poor tenant farmers and mothers of many children. However, their varying modes of acceptance and resistance locate them on different grounds as normative and transgressive models respectively. Rukmani is identifiable with the *pativrata*, the devoted wife who not only offers unconditional support and love to her husband against all odds despite the violation of conjugal fidelity by him but also never compromises with her chastity resisting the amorous overtures of lascivious men, the money lender Biswas for instance. Kunti as a contrastive model is presented as a woman of easy morals whose children were fathered by Nathan and not her husband. Confronted with similar prospect of hunger and starvation Kunti unlike Rukmani prioritises prostitution to physical labour or deprivation.

Crucially though, as a remarkable shift from the stereotyped

image of a 'fallen' woman Markandaya has imparted a spark to Kunti's personality as an unconventional transgressing woman who is courageous enough to admit with frankness her 'immoral' actions. "There is no life for me until I am whole again" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 86). As Indira Ganesan has remarked though Kunti is not the main character she leaves 'an indelible mark' on the reader (Ganesan, Introduction vii). A proud and a defiant woman in her own way she begs Rukmani for food with pride and stubbornness disclosing not only her extra-marital relationship with Rukmani's husband Nathan but threatening simultaneously to disclose to Nathan Rukmani's relationship with Dr. Kenny. Similar to Rukmani, Kunti's negotiations with Rukmani too are firmly grounded in her knowledge of patriarchal value system that puts a high premium on fidelity in a marital relationship.

As has been argued by Channa and other feminist theorists the images of the grassroot Indian rural women tilling the land, engaged in the drudgery of house work, fetching water from long distances, bringing firewood and thus maintaining the equilibrium between the inner and outer space are missing in the literary canon, specifically in the fiction of Indian English women writers. The representation of Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* in the early post-independence period is therefore crucially important for locating the underprivileged, grass root peasant woman at the centre of the text actively engaged not only in the drudgery of domesticity but in the production of labour as well—as a vegetable seller in her village, a letter writer and quarry labourer in the town. Rukmani corroborates Madhu Kishwar's description of the experiences of a woman in a peasant community in terms of deprivation (lack of access to food, health and rest) and landlessness; lack of control over resources, such as land, lack of access to instruments of labour, plough, for instance in Kishwar's view are the prime contributory factors towards peasant women's subordination (Kishwar and Vanita, Introduction). Significantly though, Rukmani has the strength

and the will to transcend these gendered constraints of her life to finally emerge as a 'giver' of hope and home to the orphan boy Puli. Returning to her village with the orphan boy Puli she offers him treatment for leprosy at the hands of her son and Dr. Kenny.

Written in 1954, a period that witnessed transition from Gandhian ideology to Nehruvean era of liberal capitalism followed by large scale migration of village population to cities in the wake of urbanisation Rukmani, Janki, Kunti and Ira represent the class of simple peasant women caught in the quandary of industrialisation negotiating between two modes of life—the rural and the urban. As a true child of the soil, Rukmani can relate to the land preferring pre-tannery quietude to the post-tannery commotion. "Even the birds have forgotten to sing, or else their calls are lost to us" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 33). Unlike her co-village folk she can visualise the long term negative impact of the tannery on the life of the common village folk. "I think the end of my daughter's carefree days began with the tannery" (33). True to her intuitive wisdom and farsight the sufferings of the villagers in the post-tannery phase are cogently related to the tannery.

Markandaya's later novel *Two Virgins* elaborately explores the predicament of the naïve but ambitious peasant girl Saroja in the city in this transitional phase of rural- urban interface. The young female protagonist's forays in the metropolis have tragic conventional consequences in terms of her sexual exploitation and loss of virginity. Correspondingly, in *Nectar in a Sieve* the city is employed as an evil force where Kunti and Ira get into the flesh trade, Rukmani loses her husband and Rukmani's daughter-in-law abandoned by her husband is left alone with her child. The opening of the tannery as a prelude to the employment paradigm of the Nehruvian era in the villages is partially successful but the euphoria soon turns into a nightmare. The clash between the factory owners and the labourers and the subsequent exploitation of the farmers-turned-

workers add to their woes precipitating and perpetuating the miseries of the poor tenant farmers.

The novel presents two prostitutes in the novel—Rukmani's eldest daughter Ira and Kunti—Rukmani's neighbour. For Ira, the deserted wife residing in her natal family, prostitution is a compulsive reality in economic and emotional terms. Moreover, the polemics of barrenness also could be related to prostitution in the case of Ira. The novel offers two variables of a barren woman—Rukmani, a barren woman for the initial seven years of her marriage who is cured of her infertility by Dr. Kenny at her own initiative and her daughter Ira, another barren woman not only stigmatised but also deserted by her husband. The birth of an illegitimate child to Ira indicts the patriarchal rural society that holds the woman responsible for infertility and the man is conveniently exonerated of the onus and stigmatisation.

From the western feminist standpoint prostitution epitomises the master/subject model of power reflecting women's identity as subordinate and women as sites of exploitation. For Sheila Jeffreys "prostitution is a form of brutal cruelty on the part of men that constitutes a violation of women's rights, wherever and however it takes place" (317). In Cathleen Barry's view prostitution makes all women vulnerable exposing them to danger and open to attack (Barry 317). Prostitutes are vulnerable to the only means of economic existence available to them because they are women, and because they are women, 'they are homeless, and poor' (Barry 196). Interestingly, this western feminist critique of prostitution is compatible with the textual representation of prostitutes. Prostitution for both these poor peasant women—Ira as well as Kunti (*Nectar in a Sieve*)—is the only means of economic existence at a time of famine and starvation. Both of them are verily 'poor' but not 'homeless.' Located in underprivileged families where the patriarchal heads fail to offer sustainable means to these women, it posits the need to recognise diversity in the multiplicity of subject positions. However, these two contrasting models of prostitutes

are located in two oppositional locations in terms of the specificities of 'good' and 'bad' women. Prioritising her youngest brother's need for food to her virginity Ira defiantly gets into flesh trade overruling the objections of her parents. Contrarily, for Kunti some degree of pleasure is also implicit in her choice of prostitution.

The presentation of these two 'fallen' women could be retraced to the Gandhian critique of prostitution during the nationalist movement, and secondly to the rural-urban hiatus in the early post-independence period that witnessed large scale migration of village population to cities. Apu in *Pather Panchali* and Munnu in Anand's *Coolie* are representatives of the vulnerable young migrant peasants to cities. As a notable exception the rural migrant woman's trials and travails in the city are focused in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The fact that Nathan dies in the city but Rukmani survives would validate the claim of a woman's strength and fortitude against heavy odds.

The female characters in the early novels of Kamala Markandaya apparently conform and subscribe to the patriarchal normative female images but the sub-text of *Nectar in a Sieve* presents new transgressive models and variations in the normative images of rural women. Rukmani is as much a conformist as a rebel, so is Ira. Similarly, Kunti is not a stereotyped fallen woman and could be located in the transnational tradition of unconventional prostitutes such as Emile Zola's Nana and Cyprian Ekwensi's Jagua Nana in these eponymous novels.

Ashapura Devi (1909-1995) is a path-breaking writer in the history of women's writing in India. A winner of several prestigious awards including Rabindra Puraskar (1966), the Bhartiya Jnanpith (1978) and Sahitya Akademi fellowship (1994) she is a prolific writer of over 176 novels and several volumes of short stories. *Pratham Pratishruti* (1968, Trans. *The First Promise* 2004) is the first narrative of the trilogy focusing on an eight years old child-woman located in the subject position

in the orthodox patriarchal society of *kulin* Brahmins in Bengal. Apart from the dynamics of the domestic world the trilogy—*Pratham Pratishruti*, *Subarnalata* and *Bakul Katha* narrates—the struggling process of a woman writer and the politics of acceptance and rejection in terms of readership and publication. Creativity translated into any form of writing is stated to be another very significant form of self expression for a woman. Satyabati's narrative is reconstructed by Bakul, her granddaughter but the creative aspirations of Bakul's mother Subarnalata, the second generation writer received such a jolt from her patriarchal family that in retaliation she set all the printed books on fire.

At the centre of the novel stands the figure of the eight years old Satyabati, an eternal truth seeker, true to her name and a born rebel whose ceaseless queries and uncompromising ways are problematic for the orthodox patriarchal society of *kulin* Brahmins first at her natal, and later at her marital family locating her in an oppositional relationship with Elokeshi, the archetypal mother-in-law. In her preface to the novel Ashapura Devi refers to the ways in which history has always overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. The prime agents in this domestic world of the 'ignored interior spaces of Bengal' (Devi, *The First Promise* Preface) comprising joint and extended families are women governed by the familial and social hierarchies in terms of relationships. "No matter how helpless or soft women were as a species, they were like tigresses in their own territory" (*The First Promise* 429).

Historically located in between the eighteenth and late nineteenth century Bengal, *The First Promise* with its pronounced focus on the women-related issues such as the emancipatory paradigms of women's education and widow remarriage, child marriage and the interrelated concept of *Gauridaan*, the Age of Consent and the practice of polygamy, the position of women in the joint family setup in village patriarchies vis-à-vis the upcoming nuclear families in the cities interrogated through

the central consciousness of the female protagonist Satyabati are firmly foregrounded in the reformation movement.

The pre-independence reformation agenda for the emancipation of women is fully translated in the representation of Satyabati alias Satya as a socially and politically informed woman in the contextualised context of a girl child's marginalised location in the contemporary Hindu society and her seething indignation against the socio-cultural gendered practices, biases and beliefs bordering on feminist anger. As Indira Chaudhary posits, the distance covered by the eight years old Satyabati whose transgressive skill of writing scandalised the female members of her community, to the Satyabati who took advantage of the anonymity of a city like Calcutta to go out and teach destitute girls is really remarkable when just to be associated with the world of knowledge amounted to the biggest act of transgression for an upper caste Hindu Brahmin woman (Chaudhary, *The First Promise*, Introduction). Given the background and patriarchal mindset that places Satyabati's act of secret self learning and Shankari's sexual transgression in the similar category and the representation of nameless women like Jata's wife, Punya and a horde of widows and co-wives in the novel in the mimetic mode, Satyabati's reflections, comments and acts are verily suggestive of the 'new village woman.'

In broad terms Satyabati's representation in the novel focuses on her role and positionality at three stages, initially as a daughter in the private domain of her natal joint family in village Nityanandapur under the benevolent patriarch and later in the twofold roles of wife and mother in her marital family headed by the archetypal tyrannical and irrational mother-in-law in village Baruiapur to finally transcend from the domestic domain to the public domain in the city of Calcutta as a socially and politically awakened woman no longer fighting her own battles but, on the contrary, imbued with an agential voice raising the voice of dissent and protest for the voiceless women like Patli on the one hand, and empowering the socially stigmatised girls

like Suhasini or teaching women in school on the other despite tremendous pressure within and without her family. In the opinion of Tarashankar Bandopadhyaya, the woman in Bengal was originally envisaged in a threefold role: As *Kinkini*, the daughter, *Kanakbati*, the mother, and most seductive and difficult of all, as *Madhusundari*, the consort (qtd. in Saumitra Chakravarty 15). Correspondingly, these three fold images of a woman are critiqued in the novel from the feminist standpoint.

Unlike Sarang (*Chaak*) and Manda (*Idannamam*) Satyabati has to wage her battles without the familial and social support. A constant eyesore to the traditional elderly matriarchs in her natal and marital household as a born rebel and eternal truth seeker Satyabati is able to negotiate the familial and public space with comparative ease and success and exercise subaltern autonomy with the cooption of patriarchal benevolence of her father Ramkali, and as a grown up woman in the city with that of Bhabatosh-master. A series of her actions such as her tomboyish escapades with the village children, the masquerading of Jatada in the village with the retinue of village urchins reciting her self-composed verses as a mark of resentment for the ill-treatment of his wife, her forages in the exclusive private domain of the widow-kitchen, and her fervent championing of young Sharda forced to share her husband with a co-wife demonstrate the spark of unconventionality and a streak of protest in Satyabati as a child as her father acknowledged with dismal admiration. "How could such a small girl think so deeply? What a fate it was a girl and it was all in vain" (*The First Promise* 23). However, her unconventional acts and behaviour never attain a serious dimension at the protected territory of her natal home due to the benign presence and thoughtful intervention of her father despite the oppositional pull of a host of traditional widows whom she could withstand with the support of an indulgent and broad-minded father.

In sharp contrast to the benevolent presence and appreciative support of her understanding father and a few doting and

forgiving female members, her mother and grandmother, for instance, in her natal family, the alien surroundings of her marital family dominated by a domineering and formidable mother-in-law offer a real testing ground to Satyabati. Initially though, as the daughter-in-law of extremely orthodox and censorious in-laws sharply opposed to her respectable parents, and the wife of a lacklustre, timid and effeminate husband, Satyabati exercises utmost restraint in speech which is one of the defining imperatives for women in patriarchy. However, her uncompromising and steadfast trait of character resurfaces in her firm decision to move out to Calcutta for the education of her children. Unlike her counterpart Bhabini, the wife of her husband's friend Nitai in Baruipur, who all along displays derision and attitudinal antipathy to Satyabati following her husband to Calcutta after a few years only when considerable damage had been caused to her husband, Satyabati is a woman with clear-cut priorities and no false pretensions.

Initially, with the cooption of the patriarchal benevolence invested in Ramkali Satyabati demonstrates an ideal example of subaltern deferential assertion in her multifarious actions -- her fervent criticism of polygamy, her request to be sent to her in-laws' house in violation of the social etiquette that demands absolute silence from dependable daughters on such occasions, and later in her marital family her refusal to touch the feet of her debauch father-in-law and enter the defiled worship room or her decision to move out to Calcutta overruling the vehement objections of her in-laws. In her final protesting act of crossing the patriarchal threshold too Satyabati is able to exercise the same deferential assertion in her mode of speech in terms of the subaltern silence with her mother-in-law, the prime culprit followed by the desired mode of balanced and respectful speech with her husband under utmost strenuous circumstances.

Deprived of the patriarchal benevolence and her rights as a wife and mother, Satyabati as a woman of indomitable courage, independent will of mind and power of execution of her will

finally walks out of her marital house of thirty years in protest against the betrayal of her husband and mother-in-law in marrying off her prepubescent daughter Subarna without her consent and as such a breach of conjugal trust and violation of her motherly rights. Satyabati's final protesting act of crossing the threshold for Kashi clearly reflects the finality of the conflict which is no longer ideological but has attained a serious dimension -- a point of no return—since this act is no longer located in the private domain and has a cogent connect to some of the fundamental woman-centric issues of the reform movement in terms of a woman's rights as a wife and a mother, child marriage vis-à-vis the concept of *Gauridaan* and the Age of Consent.

At the surface level woman's emancipation in the novel corresponds to their education on the model of the Gandhian/reformist emancipatory paradigm of education—*strishiksha*—that restricted women's education to the reading of scriptures and not for economic empowerment as is evidenced in the interaction between Ramkali, and the child Satyabati and her retort to her father. "Why should they (women) become cashiers? They'll learn to read the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. Then they'd not have to keep waiting for the Kathak to come around" (131). Initially supported in her pioneering endeavours of learning by her father, Satyabati's education is, by and large, self-dependent and self exploratory. The significant point of departure in terms of the implementation of her learning occurs in Calcutta in her constructive efforts to empower Suhas, the illegitimate daughter of Shankari and secretly teach women in a school run by the socially stigmatised Brahma Samaj characteristically as an honorary assignment as the *bhadraloka*.

However, for the socially stigmatised category of single women and widows, Suhas for instance, education is a praiseworthy means of economic and social empowerment. Satyabati's engagement with the much maligned activities of Brahma Samaj in the novel, her initiative to marry Suhas to

Bhabotosh master who had accepted the Brahmo faith, and later Suhas's employment as a teacher in a girls' school are reiterative of the changing social dynamics in the nineteenth century in the urban centres of Bengal. The intersection of the novel with Tagore's *Gora* in the contextualised context of Brahmo Samaj further locates the novel in the transitional phase of Bengal renaissance. Sadu, the illiterate deserted wife realises fully the importance of education for women whose reunion with her husband was delayed for decades for want of a scribe. "Had I learning enough to write a letter, I needn't have wasted my life away!" (502)

In the depiction of Satyabati Ashapura Devi has been negotiating with the cardinal feminist paradigms of identity, subjecthood and agency foregrounded in the dynamics of the domestic world which is in no way less consequential than the negotiations in the public world. Satyabati's paradigmatic queries, comments and retorts such as, "Who has made up your customs? Why can't they (the in-laws) love her a little more? What's the need for a woman to be born at all!" and the reflection that "God isn't so partial but men have made all that up" and many more such poignantly feminist statements are culture-specific emblematic of the grassroot reality. Though a single and much pampered child of a prosperous and progressive father, Satyabati cannot escape gender discrimination in the natal as well as the marital family. As a deeply sensible and sensitized child-woman she is interrogating these paradigmatic questions which could be conflated with the feminist paradigms of identity, subjecthood and agency.

Unlike the representation of Satyabati as the new enlightened woman resisting the normative patriarchal values and mindset, the representation of the co-wives in the novel is polemically supportive of patriarchy. Though Ashapura Devi's critique of polygamy offered from the subject position of a woman based on the long interaction between Ramkali, the patriarch and Satyabati, the eternal truth seeker could be very insightful for

the Indian feminist discourse in its search for indigenous paradigms, the problematics in the novel relates to the pro-patriarchal idealised presentation-representation of two variables of co-wives in Sharda and Patli, and Sadu and her co-wife both endorsing Ramkali's ideal of co-wives as sisters which deflates the contentious relationship of the co-wives in culturally reflected rituals like *seguti*. Satyabati's unusual request to her father to be sent to her in-laws' house before attaining puberty is foregrounded in this empirical knowledge of the co-wife's marginalised location. More than a sister, Sadu's co-wife elevates the former to the status of her mother. "May be you were my mother in another lifetime!"(458). The miraculous transformation achieved by Sadu in her husband's household and the sparkling radiance on her face in the post-union phase have been elaborately emphasised upon in the novel in the 'happily lived there after' fairy tale mode.

A critique of patriarchy could be constructed from the sub-text of the novel in the context of the marginalised location of doubly marginalised women, the widows, deserted or separated wives in patriarchal joint families functioning either under benevolent or malevolent patriarchs or matriarchs. Given the fact of Mukund Mukherji's crass and coarse demeanour and his purely material interests in soliciting Sadu back in his life as a maidservant for his house teeming with children and a sick, bed ridden wife, Sadu's voluntary decision to return to her husband's household is prompted by her empirical knowledge of patriarchal mechanism. When the choice is between two variables of exploitation—either to slog at her maternal uncle's house or at her husband's—her preference for the husband's house needs to be examined in the backdrop of her knowledge of a co-wife's position in patriarchy as her husband rightly avers: "After all, slaving at her husband's home isn't less honorable than slaving at her uncle's" (418). Contrary to the marginalised location of a widow, the co-wife's position in a patriarchal family is legitimised to the extent that her co-wife's sons also performed

her last rites and went through the rituals of mourning. This anxiety of the performance of her last rights is unsettling for the childless widow Mokshada. Moreover, ingrained in the mindscape of a village woman of Sadu's calibre are the motherly instincts, the desire to feed her husband and sons and Sadu is no exception to it.

Ashapura Devi belongs to the bourgeois league of writers who in view of the culture-specific moral value system do not overtly examine the sexuality paradigm. However, Sadu's decision to go back to her husband has a connect with the sexuality paradigm. For a sexually deprived woman whose slight body had never been appreciated, the lustful male gaze of 'a greedy old man' (443) is not repulsive but gratifying. Correspondingly, another pair of co-wives, Sharda and Patli too subscribe to the patriarchal assumptions of sisterly amicability. Initially though, Sharda conforms to the popular stereotype of a jealous, apprehensive and contriving co-wife hell bound to ward off the barb of the co-wife from her life. However, pitted against a submissive, withdrawn and non-competitive enemy in her co-wife, Sharda voluntarily retires from the scene to 'amicably' resolve the crisis in an identical 'happily lived after' fairy tale mode. The realisation that the crisis in Sharda's life as a co-wife was not resolved but withdrawn dawns on Ramkali at a later stage; his initiative to take Mokshada and Sharda along with him on pilgrimage is atonement for his guilt. He makes an offer of a plot of land to Sharda which is declined by her. As an offshoot of her marginalised location, Sharda's over indulgence in her son resulting in the latter's degradation, points out another trajectory of the co-wife syndrome.

In the Indian village society the notion of a woman's identity is interspersed with patriarchy that strategically restricts a woman's freedom. *Vis-à-vis* the indomitable Satyabati represented in the novel as a contestatory patriarchal model of a daughter, wife, mother and a woman at large, the novel offers

contrastive images of faceless girls and women—Jata's wife without a name and Satyabati's cousin Punya in her natal village, and the ever smiling Sadu and ever-censorious Bhabini in her marital village. The significant point to be noted is that both of these oppositional characters Sadu and Bhabini are inspired by Satyabati. Sadu's bold move to be reunited with her husband is invariably inspired by Satyabati, so does Bhabini inadvertently emulate her arch rival Satyabati in her actions.

Juxtaposed to Satyabati and Bhabini in the nuclear familial setup are not only the nonchalant representations of lacklustre and emaciated figures of doubly marginalised widows, co-wives and deserted wives but also the overworked and over exhausted wives of wealthy, propertied class of men too are situated in disempowered centre of power in the extended joint families in village patriarchies. No matter the domestic territory offers some autonomy to these affluent, *sumangali* wives, their physical and emotional needs remain unattended and uncared for culminating in various kinds of physical and mental ailments and premature deaths.

The untimely demise of Satyabati's mother Bhubaneshwari, the wife of a renowned doctor from cholera is a sad reflection on the position of women in large joint families functioning under 'benevolent' patriarchs. The theme of suppressed wives in extended joint families is repeatedly addressed in a number of Rabindranath Tagore's stories, "Haimani" and "Letter from a Wife," for instance. The letter is an indictment of the woman's husband who had all along been a mere spectator, a passive participant in suppressing the desires and interests of his wife and also other women in the extended family. The nuanced socio-cultural familial setup governed by the principle of exclusivity in a family and the subsequent compartmentalisation of the male and female territory offers scant opportunities for dialogue and communication for the spouses and there are women of Satyabati's calibre who could trespass or surmount these social injunctions. As the wife of the patriarchal head

Bhubaneswari is saddled with numberless responsibilities and less authority in the presence of elderly women in the family.

Correspondingly, the untimely demise of Bhubaneswari, Kashishwari and Mokshada's deteriorating health are a disclaimer to the patriarchal benevolence within the extended joint family system in the villages and would be contestatory of the representation of archetypal, monumental images of matriarchs in a joint family setup as women of indomitable courage and indefatigable energy. As the Afro-American feminist Barbara Christian has observed in the context of Afro-American women, they do not always endure, "... that many of us were destroyed within and by our own families" (Christian 199). The division of Satyabati's extended joint family in her natal family in later years reiterates the unviability of the institution of extended joint family.

In the Indian patriarchal structure the male child is always prioritised to a female one and the various gender discriminatory practices are conflated with the socio-cultural framework of the Indian society. Consequently there is an inherent ambiguity and ambivalence in the mothers' attitude to their daughter/s and vice versa. "... we remain life-long in a complex formative relationship with our mothers, and also with ourselves as actual and potential mothers of daughters" (Bannerji 189).

Intriguingly, the patriarchal setup is not very conducive for the evolution of mother-daughter relationship in an affluent joint family setup. The novel presents three variables of the mother-daughter dyad in Bhubaneswari and Satyabati, Satyabati and her daughter Subarna and Shankari and Suhasini, incidentally all of them the only child. Satyabati as the daughter of a wealthy patriarch is located in an empowered position in social and economic terms, however, the joint family setup at her natal family offers scant opportunities and time for an intimate and reciprocal relationship to grow between the mother and daughter. As a daughter married at the tender age of eight and sent to her marital family nearly two years later, Satyabati

lacks the maturity to fully comprehend and appreciate the nature of this bonding, and by the time she is mature enough to give full credence to the relationship, her mother is no longer alive.

The repetition of the same pattern of apathy in Satyabati's relationship with Subarna reiterates the marginalised location of young mothers in joint and extended families due to the internalisation of patriarchal values and the subsequent insensitisation of elderly matriarchs. Elokeshi's insensitivity to empathise with Satyabati as a bereaved daughter and later towards (Satyabati's) motherly rights creates a forcible lifelong cleavage between Satyabati and her daughter, the intensity of the hurt caused by this separation is narrated in the sequel *Subarnalata*. Unlike these two variables of mother-daughter dyad, Shankari finds relatively more time with her illegitimate daughter Suhas in a metropolitan city imposing a false identity of a widow on her unmarried daughter to impart her social acceptability. Her intention to facilitate her daughter's life is implicit in Shankari's suicide. Significantly though, the relationship between Satyabati and Suhas is the most intimate and rewarding of the three variables in emotional terms establishing the primacy of social bonding to the biological bond.

Initially though, *The First Promise* presents the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law duo in a circumscribed location of conflict, the escalation of the animosity and the subsequent shifting of the conflict from the private to the public domain is not delimited to internalisation of patriarchal norms by women but is suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in terms of the feminist postulates of identity and a woman's right of 'Voice' as a mother. Categorically subscribing to the representation of a stereotyped mother-in-law, Elokeshi in her dominating, domineering, overbearing, orthodox and overimposing attitude and aptitude claims unchallenged supremacy in the familial hierarchy. A strong willed, individuated daughter-in-law of Satyabati's calibre with the added advantage of a strong natal

family support consolidates the duo's diametrically oppositional location. The repetition of Elokeshi's prototype in Muktokeshi, the mother-in-law of Satyabati's daughter in Ashapura Devi's later eponymous novel *Subarnalata* reiterates the insensitisation of elderly matriarchs in the village patriarchies. Located in the position of the archetypal oppressors these victimising mother-in-laws in Nabaneeta Dev Sen's opinion are themselves the victims of the complex social structure with the internalisation of the patriarchal values that imparts a false sense of power to them in their act of exercising power over other young women.

Located concomitantly in the two villages of Shyamali and Sonpura in the rocky Vindhya hills Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* offers a penetrating glance to the 'new village' in the nation state as the site of 'development' in terms of the large scale appropriation and conversion of arable land into quarries dislocating in the process the landed farmer from his land to be relegated into the marginalised location of a 'prospective labour' on his land. Pitted against the combined inside and outside forces of the quarry and crusher owners and the nexus between the neo-rich and the police, the powerless villager here belongs to the human category as the partaker of these 'development' programmes. The sensitisation of the dispossessed and disillusioned villagers to their systematised marginalisation in their own land by the discursive and subversive forces and their mobilization into a collective force is achieved by Mandakini or Manda—a young native villager, a co-sharer of the same destiny with the support of benevolent patriarchal agency.

The emancipatory paradigm of education is deflated in the context of the female protagonist with bare minimum primary education though her transformation from a state of victimhood to one of empowerment in terms of an agential voice and social agency is partly circumstantial, and partly contrived. The wide thematic concerns of the novelist bordering on propaganda

relate to numerous social and political issues—eco-feminist and environmental concerns, employment paradigm, labour problems, the role of *panchayats* and the government welfare schemes, rampant corruption in the public domain, Hindu-Muslim relations, and in the midst of it all the common villager's struggle for means of sustenance and basic amenities of life represented in the text by the metaphor of hospital. Correspondingly, the woman-centric issues of extra marital relations, land paradigm, widow remarriage and post-widowhood ramifications are also interspersed in the text.

The evolution of bildungsroman Manda into a social activist against the anti-environmental development programmes causing the erosion of hills and reference to Parichu Thermal Plant that embodied the *mahaparve* -- the grand event of development for a small minority and destruction for many—has distinct resonance with the real life activist Medha Patkar's ecological concerns. What saves the novel from a simple rhetoric is its foregrounding in the cultural memory and the oral tradition.

Implicit in *Idannamam* -- This Is Not Mine—is the attainment of an ideological state of non-belongingness by the female protagonist when one can distance oneself from the personal priorities and interests to identify with the larger social cause renouncing the personal for the impersonal. More than the central location of the female protagonist in the novel, the significant point of departure is her central location in the bottom-up power centre—a reflection on the positionality of the village woman in the village, the micro unit in the nation state in terms of her increasing participation and acceptance in the public domain by the homogenised village populace. In this hegemonic battle of the powerful and the powerless, the barber, the tailor, the *koli*, the *teli* as well as the benign village *Sarpanch* and other well meaning villagers, and last but not the least the womenfolk are mobilised at the initiative of Manda to unite against the profit-making, anti-environmental forces represented by Abhilakh Singh and his coterie of drunkards and womanisers.

The power of these subversive forces is verily productive in bringing the villagers of different ranks, groups and allegiance to a common platform for a common cause where the personal becomes the political culminating in a series of personal tragedies of greater dimension—the rape of the village girl Sugana by Abhilakh Singh and his murder by the rape victim, Sugana's death in the hospital after her fatal self immolating attempt—precipitating the crisis for Manda in particular and the villagers at large. The novel has an open ending, at the social level there is every possibility for Mandakini's arrest for her 'complicity' in the murder of Abhilakh Singh, her oppositional 'Other' and Sugana's death, however, at the personal level the sudden arrival of her former fiancé Makarand on the scene as the newly appointed doctor in the city hospital vindicates not only her long years of singlehood but her struggle for the public cause as well. "Still at her back someone's footsteps are there" (*Idannamam* 368).

Primarily a woman-centred novel *Idannamam* focuses on three rural women of three generations in a feudal family of *Ahir* Rajput peasants in the Vindhyaçal region of Uttar Pradesh—Bau, the grandmother, Prem, the daughter-in-law and Mandakini or Manda, the only child who is left alone with her grandmother after the murder of her father Mohinder Singh by the subversive social forces, and remarriage of her mother Prem to Rattan Singh, her sister's husband and thus a close relative. It is Rattan Singh, a contriving politician who instigates Prem to fight for the custody of her daughter Manda and thus initiate a seven year long battle between the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law duo in emotional and legal terms. Crucially though, the battle for the custody of Manda is firmly foregrounded in the paradigm of land as Bau rightly admits. "Nobody wants Manda. Everybody is after my land" (*Idannamam* 99).

The patriarchal marginality of Bau as a widow and a childless woman forces her to opt for an alternative patriarchal protection in the neighbouring village with a distant relative, Pancham Singh. Finally the appropriation of ancestral property by the

contriving and coercive patriarchal forces represented in the text by the combined forces of Rattan Singh and Abhilakh Singh of Sonpura village and Govind Singh of Shyamali reflects the exploitation of the doubly marginalised women in the private as well as public domain. Bau, an old widow of grit and determination with long years of empirical wisdom as a *zamindarin* strategically seeking refuge with her ten years old grand daughter in the joint family of Pancham Singh —‘dada,’ as the benign patriarch is popularly called—showcases the appropriation of patriarchal benevolence by knowledgeable women. The dedication of the novel to ‘Dada and Kakko’ is an acknowledgement of this patriarchal benevolence. However, within the household of the ‘benign patriarch’ the defeat and subsequent humiliation of the well-intentioned benign patriarch by the subversive and discursive male forces reflects the hierarchies of power and the subversive patriarchal operations in the male domain.

Dislocated from her village Sonpura and relocated in the household of Pancham Singh in the objectified location of a refugee Manda as a child is subjected to not only physical displacement but a series of traumatic experiences in emotional and psychological terms -- rape, broken engagement, low esteem and physical and emotional displacement—until the time she has relocated herself in the subject position with an assertion of her identity. Once she declares to her grandmother: “Bau, now it won’t be possible for me to stay here any longer. Not for a moment” (151), and the decision is taken and jointly implemented by the duo, there is no turning backward for Manda in terms of subjecthood and agency in the private as well as social domain.

The representation of Manda in the text opens up new trajectories in terms of the feminist postulates of subjecthood, voice and agency. Returning to her dilapidated parental house landless and penniless after seven years of self-imposed exile, the young protagonist is able to relocate herself not only as the

familial head in a manless family of two unmaled chaperoned women but in participatory leadership as well. Manda's transformation from the subaltern familial and social position of dependence to one of authority, dependability and participatory leadership in the larger social context of the village community is crucially related to woman's agency within the prescriptive and normative patriarchal structure unlike her counterpart Sarang in *Chaak*.

Manda, the new village woman gradually emerges as an empowered woman in terms of social agency despite strong resistance from the discursive forces. Disappointment in the private domain does not obstruct her growth, her progression from 'self' to a 'selfless' state. This new woman in the village, a microcosm of the nation state, has verily traversed a long way from Satyabati. Unlike the village community of *kulin* Brahmins in *The First Promise* the familial and social support system in *Idannamam* is fairly supportive and sustainable to an aspiring and well-meaning village girl. Manda's social agency in a significant way exhibits the changing face of the village woman and needs to be interrogated in the backdrop of the stigma attached to a single woman where getting on in years above twenty, they were not considered "decent morally, hence much social pressure is exerted to have them married" (Cormark 157).

The representation of Manda as a *Ramayana* reader exhibits the new configurations in the villages in terms of caste hierarchies albeit the female ascetics—the *jogins* and *bairagins*—have always been located in the socially venerated space. The Thakurain's offering of customary gifts to Manda which are due to a Brahmin priest on the plea: "We do not know-baman-herdsman. You are a daughter—a virgin. Far more worthy of worship and respect—the images of Sita, Parvati and Saraswati" (174) are invariably suggestive of new caste hierarchies. Scriptural and mythological knowledge is employed now and then by simple village women to contest ritualistic and caste hierarchies. The role of the *Ramayana* narrator for the female protagonist is

initially an economic and circumstantial necessity, however it ushers in for her the decisive point of departure from the private to the public space.

The *Ramayana* more than an epic is *Dharmshastra* (Iyengar, *The Epic Beautiful 2*) unique for its abiding religious and spiritual consciousness of the people of India, notably the deeply religious folk, women in particular who have over the years internalised the epic, Manda as the prototype of *jogin* Mira easily earns the respect, admiration and goodwill of the *Ramayana* listeners. Moreover, the gathering of *Ramayana* listeners at Manda's house is adroitly sensitised by the benevolent patriarchal agency about the more mundane issues of social significance and relevance to the village community leading to the concerted efforts of the villagers towards constructive welfare programmes.

Manda's social acceptability in the public domain has a cogent connect with the register of *Bhakti*. The deeply religious sensibility of the womenfolk is manifest in the novel in their internalisation of the epics and profuse references to epic and puranic characters. Realising fully the deeply religious mindset of the rural folk the social activist turned *sanyasi* Kayale Maharaj employs the religious agency to achieve his social emancipatory goal. The collaboration between the religious and social agency represented in the text by Teekam Singh alias Kayale Maharaj and Manda respectively alludes to the collaborative role of religious and social agency for constructive social purposes in the villages historically foregrounded in the *Bhakti* movement. Repeated references to Manda as a *jogin*, or *tapasvini* aka a *Mirabai* are verily an attempt to locate her in the valorised religious domain.

Polemically though, Manda's evolution as a social activist is dramatic, somewhat unconvincing. The significant point to be noted is the shift, the point of departure in terms of the crisscrossing of the predefined social hierarchies and roles for women in a feudal orthodox patriarchy. The young, average-educated protagonist's entry in the social sphere and her final

victory in bringing the hospital in operation in her village despite the opposition of the subversive and discursive social forces is a vindication of the rural woman's empowerment in terms of subjecthood and social agency. In a very significant way the large scale support of the heterodox village community to Manda beyond the caste, class and gender binaries despite her marginalised patriarchal and social positionality as a single woman and the stigma of a broken engagement are a disclaimer to the notion of a woman's legitimised subordination in patriarchy.

Historically locating Manda in the Bundelkand region, the author revives the popular region-specific image of queen Luxmibai of Jhansi. In her crusade against the discursive social forces Manda is located in the category of the pre-independence *Veeraganas*—the warrior women, a popular icon in the pre-independence male canon—in Vrindavan Lal Verma's *Jhansi kei Rani Luxmibai* and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Anand Math*, for instance albeit the image of the nation is submerged with the *veerangana* mother in the latter text. 'The *veerangana* evinces exemplary virtue in her conduct and behaviour, displays a sharp mind and mature wisdom and retains throughout a fierce passion for the defense of her people/nation/principality. Rajan Mahan's specifications of the *Veerangana* image as a warrior woman committed to a cause, a resolute courageous fighter, who more often than not, emerges victorious in battles to combat intrigue and treachery, and in a broad sense, emblematic of the forces of 'good' which invariably triumph over the designs of 'evil' (Mahan 250) are compatible with Manda.

Manda succeeds where Sarang in *Chaak* fails. These two contrastive models of village women demarcate the patriarchal boundaries within which transgression and resistance for a woman is admissible and permissible. Both these binary paradigms of patriarchal benevolence and malevolence are categorically related to the sexuality paradigm and the coordinates of chastity and marital fidelity. Contrary to the

feminist paradigm of sexuality, self fulfilment in Manda's case is negotiated not with the fulfillment of her bodily needs but with the rejection of her physicality. The novel presents Manda as a spiritually ennobled being in the role of *Ramayana* narrator. 'You have become a jogan,' bemoans Bau. The acceptance of Manda in the public domain has a close connect with the socially valorised chastity and spirituality paradigms. Her single status with the history of a broken engagement still finds acceptability and partial admiration with a tradition bound rural society that valorises the essential virtues of honesty, chastity, integrity and devotion to a social and religious cause.

Conversely, Sarang's relationship with the bachelor school master Sridhar is acceptable neither in the private space of her family nor the public sphere of a village inhabited by a sizable majority of *jat* peasants. Her father-in-law's indifference to this extra marital relationship has deeply personal reasons and as such is not related to the patriarchal benevolence. In fact *Chaak* interrogates some very important culture-specific issues in terms of a woman's participation in the social and political arena and the dynamics of social and moral ethics. The feminists postulate that the personal becomes political is subverted here. The reversal of the political to the personal level situates Sarang in a very weak and flimsy ground staking her conjugal happiness and familial and social goodwill. Her unconventional actions such as the violation of the notion of conjugal fidelity bring into crisis the feminist notions of freedom and space. The close brush of Sarang's husband with death and the open ending of the novel somehow correspond with Tanika Sarkar's critique of *strishiksha* which was deeply foregrounded in two separate dyads in the reform movement—the educated woman and the widow—and the immoral woman and the educated one finally emerging into a single, triangulated structure. "The two base terms—the widow and the immoral woman—may be merged to constitute the apex terms" (Tanika Sarkar 157)

Bringing *Idannamam* (1994) in dialogue with Mulk Raj

Anand's *The Road* (1974) inhabited by *Ahir* Rajput peasants similar to *Idannamam*, the shifts in terms of the prioritised centre in these two texts, presentation-representation of characters and thematic priorities could at one level be treated as the signposts of the nation's progress in the span of two decades, and secondly as two variables of male and female writing. Headed by the Sarpanch Thakur Singh the village Goverdhan in *The Road* is an all pervasive male world where the *Ahir* Rajputs are located at the apex of the social pyramid though Pandit Suraj Mani has an equally important role to play in maintaining the caste hierarchy. The prototype of benign Pancham Singh is available in the Gandhian lambardar Dhooli Singh and measuring up to his benevolence is the figure of Bhikhu *chamar*, the visionary. In this predominantly male world the women are relegated to the hegemonic location of the 'Other' lacking the will and initiative to act independently.

Unlike Anand's village women in *The Road* the womenfolk represented by the likes of Manda and Sugana in *Idannamam* have acquired subjecthood and agency. The villages in both these novels in the post-independent state are a site for progress and transformation. The road under construction in the eponymous novel is as much a signifier of progress in the Nehruvean era as of caste conflicts. Contrarily, the quarry in *Idannamam* is relegated to a signifier of environmental hazard and appropriation of the arable land and the subsequent dispossession of the son of the soil by the market forces. The significant point of departure here is the subject position of the female protagonist Manda in mobilizing the peasants-turned-labourers against the contractors. To establish a connect between feminism and eco-feminism and correlate the woman's agential voice with the social activists, Medha Patkar, as has been pointed out would not be a far fetched proposition.

Manda's friend and comrade Sugana in her familial and social endeavours is located in a marginalised territory as the daughter of social reprobate Jagesar who is employed by Abhilakh Singh

against his own family culminating in the rape of his daughter Sugana. In the paradigmatic battle between the quarry and crusher owners on one side, and the dispossessed villagers on the other, Jagaser's loyalty is with the subversive forces for the petty gains of wine and woman. However, Jagaser's cooption by the subversive forces for personal motives and gains is stereotyped in terms of the consequences. Prior to her death Sugana had attained autonomy of thought and behaviour vindicating not only her honour and feminine grace but winning the battle for the village folk with the murder of Abhilakh Singh, the eternal perpetuator of crime and intrigues in the village.

In a very significant way *Idannamam* presents the rural woman not only as a social but a cultural construct as the repository of the traditional wisdom, cultural memory and oral traditions that has been deliberated on in the following chapters. The contentious, counter-canonical views offered by illiterate, semi-literate village woman about the mythical archetypes of Savitri, Sita and Draupadi in the novel and their ability to relate the myths to the personal or contemporary context, the attempt to correlate Shabri to herself by the low caste quarry labourer Leela, for instance, reiteratingly substantiate the rural woman's cultural orientation.

The representation of Kusuma, the transgressing co-wife in the novel is a pronounced comment on the local variations of patriarchal responses in the villages to asocial and immoral transgressive actions by women and need to be scrutinised in the backdrop of the subaltern paradigms of patriarchal benevolence, assertion-with-deference and the idealisation of the feminist notions of womanly virtues and motherhood. In a normative patriarchy, sexual relationship between a daughter-in-law and father-in-law is a violation of the prescriptive social and moral ethics as is acknowledged by the transgressing daughter-in-law herself: "*Anuj vadhu, bhagini, sut nari/sun sath kanya sam ye chari*" (*Idannamam* 81)—'Listen O wicked soul! The wife of brother, sister, daughter-in-law-like daughter are these four.'

Given such a restrictive and prescriptive social code, the tacit support of the 'benevolent' patriarchal forces of the patriarch Panchal Singh, his wife Kakko, Bau and Manda to this socially unviable and unbecoming relationship is problematic and has to be critiqued firstly in relation to (i) the transgressor's marginalised/victimised location in the family, (ii) Kusuma's circumscribed positionality as an 'ideal woman' in the pre-transgression period in her family, (iii) the vindication of her fertility. The poor, childless woman's victimisation in her marital family by the combined forces of her in-laws and husband is crucially interspersed with the coordinate of dowry and not fertility as is professed by the coercive forces. The birth of a child to Kusuma from her extramarital relationship reiteratively exonerates her from the stigma of barrenness shifting the onus to her husband. Relocated in the empowered location of motherhood Kusuma is strategically emboldened to appropriate the patriarchal benevolence with a deferential assertion and concomitantly carve out space for herself and her child in the antagonised marital family despite strong opposition in the larger interest of her son. The fight here as elsewhere in Maitreyi Pushpa's other novels *Jhula Nut*, *Alma Kabutari* and *Chaak* is not gender based but is determined by the polarities of interests and priorities in public/political sphere.

Contrary to the representation of the rural woman as a domesticated woman entangled in the dialectics of the domestic world, the village women of Sonpura are a sensitised and united lot actively participating in various village welfare programmes and in their crusade against the discursive and subversive forces. Thus, the illiterate Sugana can unearth the politics of power in the unequal distribution of electricity. "There is light at the crasher, not at our place" (194). More than an intoxicant, religion is a supplement to their empirical knowledge and for their participation in the public domain. As a welcome point of departure there is no hegemonic compartmentalisation in the male and female world in the village Sonpura, an epitome of the 'new' village in the nation state.

Etymologically *Chaak* (1997)—the potter's wheel signifies the cycle of time. Deeply informed with feminist consciousness the novel engages with the feminist postulates of women's sexuality, violence against women, resistance and social and political agency. The metaphor of the potter's kiln has also been explored by Chitra Mudgal in her urban-centric novel *Aavan*. Located in a village named Attarpur inhabited predominantly by jat peasants in the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh, *Chaak* revolves round the murder of a young fallen pregnant widow Resham by her family members and the reactive response to the ghastly murder by her cousin Sarang, a co-resident of the same village leading to a long battle that attains greater social, economic and legal dimensions. However, this gruesome murder is certainly not an unprecedented event in the long history of the village as is substantiated by the woeful narratives of the old Kherapatin dadi and Dhola, the traditional village chroniclers who mourn a series of 'unnatural' deaths of transgressive village women. From Chandana to Resham there have been so many women to share the same destiny. Rukmani was found hanging on a loop, Ramdai jumped into the river and Narayani drowned in the river. "Entering the Earth in the manner of Sita Maiyaa, these helpless women sacrificed themselves for the sake of their honour" (*Chaak* 7). These untimely, enforced deaths of transgressing women were transformed into calamitous deaths.

Sarang, the main female protagonist is presented as a feminist in her thoughts and actions since her adolescent days in *Kanya Gurukul* from where she was finally expelled for her non-conforming attitude and anti-establishment activities. Later in her post-marital phase, unlike a normative wife and mother she trespasses the image of a 'housewife mother' in Betty Friedan's terms. Fulfillment as a woman for Friedan had only one definition -- of the 'housewife mother.' Sarang's transition from the housewife mother to a self assertive woman in the public domain though unconvincing, to a fairly large extent, is suggestive of

the transitional phase in the new village woman's notions of sexuality and fidelity. "In recent years the study of body has blossomed from a neglected area of social science to a focus of attention from feminists and others" (Holland et al 21).

However, the blatant assertion of their sexual urges and desires by illiterate village women—widows, (Resham), married women (Sarang)—is contestatory of the normative images of the marginalised women subjectivities in village patriarchies that crucially projects the careful construction of disembodied sexuality. Holland et al have argued, "Talking about what women do with their bodies and what is done to their bodies, exposes and threatens the careful social construction of disembodied sexuality" (24).

Contrary to the semi-literate Manda's participation in the public domain in accordance with the conventional moral and ethical norms the educated and married Sarang's transition from the private to the public domain is resented by the patriarchal agency for the violation of the sanctimonious notion of marital fidelity. Initially though, Sarang's participation in the public domain has the tacit support of her father-in-law, the benign patriarch and partial support of her educated husband but the problematising intimacy of the protagonist with the school master to finally develop in an extramarital relationship engages in the dynamics of feminist agency and patriarchal value system, on the one hand, and more seriously the polemics of representation on the other.

Sarang could be classified as a radically transgressing woman not only by the normative socio-cultural value system of a village peasantry but also the comparatively more liberal and cosmopolitan socio-cultural framework of an urban township also does not offer space for women for such transgressions. The novel has invited much flack and needs to be examined in the backdrop of the socio-cultural specificities of a feudal patriarchy. The questions that need to be posed are: Is Sarang truly representative of a wife and mother in a normative village

in the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh or of the familial positionality of an educated woman in a joint feudal patriarchy? These paradigmatic culture-specific questions are crucially related to the dynamics of representation.

The portrayal of Sarang as a traumatised woman in the first part of the novel deeply resentful of the brutal murder of her cousin Resham by the latter's family members is convincing and laudable. The feminist writing on sexual abuse and violence against women has been intensely preoccupied with the trope of memory, trauma, and transmission in the family and in society (Thirsch and Smith 13). However, Sarang undergoes a trauma of a very different kind. By no means a direct victim of violence, the trauma in her case is internalised to the extent of personal identification, similar to Shashi Deshpande's female narrator's identification with the rape victim in *The Binding Vine*. The intensity of Sarang's identification with Resham's brutal murder is substantiated by the fact of its transmission to her husband and his cooption by the female protagonist as a resisting agent against the subversive patriarchal forces in terms of his supportive commitment to punish the guilty.

Of the eight novels selected for this study *Chaak* addresses the sexuality paradigm in the context of the village women of all age, caste and class and marital status. The sub-text of the novel not only contests the claims of 'exclusivity' and the prescriptive and restrictive patriarchal code in the context of the twofold paradigms of woman's sexuality and violence but also problematises the much valorised notions of chastity and marital fidelity. The physical exploitation of the vulnerable young girls from the socially and economically deprived sections of society in the public domain of educational institutions such as a *Kanya Gurukul* is reiterative of the dichotomous Hindu value system as well as the oppressive patriarchal structure.

The novel presents three variables of sexually and mentally exploited young girls in Shakuntala, Sharda and Sarang in the *Kanya Gurukul*, an exclusive female institution. Impregnated

by an undisclosed inmate of the *Gurukul* and abandoned by her father to rot there, Shakuntala is left with the only viable option of committing suicide. In another instance, the sexually deprived Sharda's physical relationship with the mess servant is the cause of great shame and humiliation to her. Unlike these two inmates Sarang's infatuation with the elderly Sanskrit teacher does not transcend the social boundaries with the timely revelation of his flirtatious character.

In the village Attarpur the women's nuanced engagement with sexuality is operative at two levels—the surface level and the submerged level. At the surface level the prescriptive and restrictive codes are strictly followed so as to impose outrageous penalties on the transgressing and fallen women, specifically the widows like Resham and Pachanna bibi of high class peasantry. Resham has to pay the penalty for her transgression with her life, Pachanna bibi is subjected to brutal physical violence in the domestic domain for her post-widowhood transgression at the behest of her father. However, secretive and clandestine transgressions at the submerged level are carried on by women well versed in the mechanics of patriarchal operations. Thus, the wrestler Kailasi Singh is secretly approached by a childless woman for sexual intercourse for purely practical reasons—to conceive and escape the stigma of barrenness. Similarly, the elderly matriarch Kalawati's physical relationship with the young wrestler Kailasi Singh is by her own definition for 'philanthropic' purposes -- to resurrect the impotent wrestler to win the wrestling bout against Doria, the main culprit to vindicate the cause of Sarang. The sexual act between Kailasi Singh and Kalawati is one of the most bizarre instances in the novel that would contest some old patriarchal myths in terms of marital fidelity and validate the Western-orientated sexuality paradigm.

In sharp contrast to the notion of marital fidelity Kalawati's uninhibited and somewhat casual attitude towards extramarital sex and her blatant acceptance of it reflects the contrastive

value system in the social hierarchy. “We Jat women carry along with us the *bichia* (toe ring) in our pocket and wear it for the man we fancy” (104). Such form of assertion is certainly not operative in the community of high caste *Jat* women—Bari bahu and Panchana bibi or the long list of victimised women from Resham to Chandan as Bari bahu admits to Sarang. “Sarang, if the jats come to know who was with their daughter-in-law/daughter, first they would slice off the neck of that male, take the woman to docks later” (70).

Thus, the novel offers contrasting images of village women in a social hierarchy offering greater amount of space to women of lower social hierarchy. Kalawati, Resham and Sarang are identifiable in terms of their uninhibited attitude towards sexuality albeit the attitudinal similarities are operative at the surface level only since the high class women are strictly governed by patriarchal rules and violation of the normative rules is punishable as is witnessed in the case of these high class *Jat* women. Contrarily, the low class women Kalawati Chachi, Longsiri bibi and initially Haripyari too are offered much more space in the private and public domain than their high class counterparts. Consequently, the actions and social behaviour of these women of lower social hierarchy are less conventional in terms of the patriarchal norms. Ironically, the planned immolation of Haripyari along with her daughter and son-in-law by her husband’s nephew in retaliation against her daughter’s inter-caste marriage deflates the whole argument.

For Kalawati of low *Jat* peasantry physical relationship with Kailasi Singh is more of a therapeutic act than an emotional or physical act. For the rustic wrestler rooted in the myth of celibacy as an imperative for physical valour, his libido is a painful burden, still greater is the painful realisation of his impotence. The woman’s body is treated in the context of Kalawati as an instrument of resurrection and regeneration. Corresponding to the prostitute Chandri’s motherly response to Praneshacharya’s cry of ‘Amma!’ in Anantmurthy’s *Samskara*, Kalawati resurrects

the demoralised wrestler on the empirical plane which is why the representation of Kalawati as a maternal controller and aging femme fatale fails to attain artistic excellence and aesthetic sublimity as in *Samskara*. One of the defining coordinates of sexuality is the state of sublime transcendence which is lacking in Kalawati's redeeming act and she figures as a crude woman than a female fatale.

Lastly, the powerless but knowledgeable Sarang's subtle appropriation of Kailasi Singh against her own village wrestler Doria who is the prime culprit in Resham's murder and had molested her too demonstrates the phenomena of assertion-within-deference. Evoking benevolent patriarchy Sarang invites Kailasi Singh to her own village and is able to exploit the situation to her own advantage.

III

To sum up representation—literary or otherwise—is never an innocent act and needs to be constantly interrogated in the contextualised social, political and cultural contexts. Taking over from our argument in the previous chapter that the representation of a woman in general, a rural woman in particular, in terms of caste, class and gender specificities has a cogent connect with the dynamics of patriarchy, one of the primary objectives of gynocritical writing is not only to interrogate, contest or subvert the hegemonic patriarchal images of women but also to simultaneously offer counter-canonical images and representations from the feminist standpoint.

The gynocritical portrayals and representations in these novels noticeably differ pertaining to a woman's familial or social positionality and the shift in narrative voice as well as point of view. Satyabati leaves her home in protest, Mandakini moves from passive reception of her destiny to active participation signifying a moving off from the domestic/private sphere to the public/political sphere. The category of the co-wife and the

'other woman' also finds a nuanced representation in these novels. The wife has the social sanction to perform auspicious rituals but the co-option of the co-wife by patriarchy for its own interests and gain is very sly and subtle. Ramkali's envisioning of co-wives as two sisters is an over simplification of a gendered practice. Patriarchy can define and co-opt any custom, practice and convention for its convenience, therefore Ashapura Devi's critique of polygamy from the narrative position of the female protagonist Satyabati is vitally significant in terms of the feminist investigating agency.

The rural women in these four novels written in the span of four decades are broadly located in two kinds of patriarchal systems—Brahminical (*Nectar in a Sieve* and *The First Promise*) and feudal (*Idannamam* and *Chaak*)—that function at the surface level on the principle of domination and subordination. The essentialisation of these systems is, however polemic and needs to be minutely investigated and interrogated in the backdrop of (i) the subaltern notions of autonomy, patriarchal benevolence and assertion-within-deference, and (ii) the Foucauldian power/knowledge paradigm. Irrespective of the defining coordinates of caste, class and gender the rural woman is not always the perennial 'Other' in these village patriarchies but is capable of dislocating or relocating the patriarchal power centre and attain autonomy within the system with the cooption/appropriation of 'patriarchal benevolence' or an 'assertion-within-deference' as the case may be. Crucially though, it is imperative for a woman to be foregrounded in the 'knowledge' of the system for the purposes of the contestation or subversion of the system in the private domain of the natal or marital family or the public domain. For instance, Satyabati (*The First Promise*) and Sarang (*Chaak*) as wives in their relationship with their spouses and Manda (*Idannamam*) in her relationship with her fiancé are not located in a position of absolute subordination, the failure of both Satyabati and Sarang as wives in their marital families has a cogent connect with the paradigm of identity in

the former, and the power/knowledge paradigm in the latter case.

In the threefold representation of Satyabati as *Kinkini*, the daughter, *Kanakbati*, the mother, and *Madhusundari* as consort Ashapura Devi contests the stereotypes but it is in the representation of Satyabati as a woman that she anticipates the new woman in the nation state. It is imperative for a woman negotiating or resisting patriarchy to be firmly foregrounded in the strategic knowledge of her world and its mechanism. The negotiations of the child-women Satyabati and Manda and the poor tenant farmer's wife Rukmani offer variables of the knowledge/power paradigm vis-à-vis Sarang and Resham.

Crucially though, the rural women in these village patriarchies are not always the oppositional 'Other,' the knowledgeable women are empowered enough to assert their identity, attain autonomy manifestive of their subaltern consciousness with the cooption of patriarchal benevolence as is substantiated in Rukmani's context and Manda and in a limited degree Sarang too albeit Sarang's assertion lacks the defining coordinate of 'assertion-within-deference.' The fact that semi-literate women Satyabati and Manda can and do register their voice of dissent and protest in their respective patriarchies would substantively endorse the concept of subaltern autonomy in the subaltern discourse that finds neither domination nor resistance as autonomous. Along the same lines the feminists too in the last few decades have been engaged in reinvestigating the hegemonic meanings of sex, gender, masculinity and femininity. Without any pretentious claims these rural-centric novels too interrogate the new meanings of sex, gender, masculinity and femininity in the feminist context.

The concentrated efforts of the female protagonists Rukmani and Satyabati are primarily directed towards negotiating the dynamics of the domestic world, for a woman like Rukmani from an underprivileged rural class survival under strenuous economic conditions is the prime priority. As for Satyabati from

a thriving propertied class her endeavours in terms of an assertion of identity too are initially located in the domestic domain. Her entry in the public domain is possible at the later stage only after her exodus from the village to the city of Calcutta as an independent woman located in a nuclear family. Both Satyabati and Manda are representatives of the 'new' village woman in the nation state, the former with her paradigmatic Nachiketa-like feminist interrogation of patriarchy and the latter in terms of social and political agency. The anti-patriarchal feminist queries and the thought-provoking insightful speculations of Satyabati, the child-woman can identifiably be located in the nineteenth century reform movements. 'Who makes rules' in the present feminist context of 'who represents whom' is expressive of the basic feminine anxiety of ever being confined to the objectified location of the 'Other.'

The First Promise ends on a significantly signifying note of protest indicative of the paradigm shift in the semi-literate village woman's positionality in the patriarchal peasant world in terms of an assertion of a woman's right of 'Voice' as a mother and wife in the private domain and her subsequent arrival in the public domain. Though the village woman's empowerment in *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* is addressed in the context of the 'three pronged phalanx' (Chaudhary, *The First Promise* Introduction) for the girl child of the reform movement—widow remarriage, restraining child marriage and advocating girl's education, the subject positionality of the two child-women—Satyabati and Giribala is suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in terms of the feminist paradigms of subjectivity, woman's voice and agency. Unlike Satyabati and Giribala Manda transcends the patriarchal boundaries translating her marginalisation into a constructive and socially useful protest within the confines of patriarchy.

In traditional tribal and village societies the mother-daughter relationship is one of the most gratifying and rewarding relationships and the sisterhood paradigm is operative in the

context of the mother-daughter relationship offering ample familial and geographical space to them for intimacy and companionship. Interestingly, all these novels present mothers of daughters. Satyabati and Manda are the only daughters, the sons are relegated to the background in *Nectar in a Sieve* and the prime focus is on Ira, the only daughter. Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) and Ammu (*The God of Small Things*) have a male sibling but the widowed/separated daughters in these two texts are centrally located. However, contrary to the normative mother-daughter dyad these novels present contestatory models in relation to the circumstantial and socio-cultural variations. The joint family setup, for instance, offers scant opportunities and time for the development of an intimate emotional relationship between the extrovert daughter and introvert matriarch in *The First Promise* and the realisation of neglecting her mother belatedly dawns on Satyabati on attaining motherhood. Nevertheless the timid, low profile and extremely docile Bhubaneswari twice crosses the threshold for the sake of her daughter Satyabati. In the first instance she secretly departs to her natal home to know the contents of Satyabati's writing on a piece of paper, and in the second instance she violates the social etiquette to speak to her husband in public to share the news of her daughter's pregnancy with him.

In the battle line drawn between her grandmother and mother in *Idannamam* the seven years old Manda is pitted against her estranged mother and all her attempts to reconcile her grandmother with her mother fail, albeit the mother and daughter are emotionally reconciled to each other despite the grandmother's antagonism. The only normative, somewhat stereotyped mother-daughter dyad is present in *Nectar in a Sieve* where the assiduous engagement of the mother-daughter duo in jointly combating poverty and the threat of starvation, leaves very few opportunities and time for an emotional dialogue or sharing between the two.

In a very significant way the mother-daughter relationship in

the Indian, specifically the rural context is contestatory of the French feminists' basic premises. These novels refute Simon de Beauvoir's contention that it is deceptive for a woman to dream of gaining through the child a plentitude, a warmth, a value, which one is unable to create for oneself and an absurdity '... to regard the child as a universal panacea' (Beauvoir, "The Mother" 20-27), and secondly Irigaray's premise that the daughter becomes the image of the mother, sees herself as the guarantor of her mother's life and how without the daughter the mother's life becomes impossible (Irigaray 1). Prem (*Idannamam*) certainly gains a moral strength from her daughter Manda's growing status as a social activist but her life certainly does not become impossible without Manda. A child brings joy only to the woman who is capable of disinterestedly desiring the happiness of another, one who without being wrapped up in the self seeks to transcend her own existence. Once Prem surrenders her self-interest to the happiness of another, in this contextualised context—to Bau and Manda—she transcends her own existence. Manda, thus is both 'a responsibility and an opportunity' (Stekel qtd. in Beauvoir 23) for Prem to exonerate herself which she does by gaining through her child a plentitude, a warmth and a sense of fulfillment.

However, the significance of the mother-daughter relationship and the subversive mechanism to distort it has been articulated by the French feminist Irigaray. She demonstrates with the Greek myth of the mother-daughter pair of Demeter and Persephone the ways in which patriarchy in the figure of the Greek male gods, intercepted women's idyllic existence and did irreparable damage to mother-daughter relation. As Penelope Ingram has pointed out, Irigaray goes on to argue 'that the relationship between mother and daughter and the establishment of a genealogy of woman is absent in western culture because we have forgotten the mythology and the language of the ancients' (Ingram 52). Irigaray attributes the current squandering of fruits and harvests, the exploitation and destruction of the earth to

the initial separation of mother and daughter when society moved away from agriculture and the goddesses of fertility were abandoned (Irigaray qtd. in Ingram).

As an oppositional model of the mother-daughter relationship there is the polemic mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship in Indian society, a disclaimer to the feminist sisterhood paradigm that attains a wider socio-cultural dimension in a hierarchical village patriarchy. The elderly widows and the old matriarchs have their strongholds in the villages and their knowledge of rituals, customs and scriptures locates them in a position of authority vis-à-vis the younger women specifically their daughter-in-laws. The young Ramkali's exposure to public shame for a minor lapse in the worship of the family deity by his ritualistic widowed aunt cost him banishment from his native village. Hierarchically the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship is foregrounded in the power model of domination and subordination which is subversively conducive for the internalisation of the patriarchal norms and values by the elderly matriarchs culminating in a perverted subscription to patriarchal value system. The primary ground of contestation in *The First Promise* is the patriarchal mindset and subsequent dehumanisation of the mother-in-laws, Jata's mother and Satyabati's mother-in-law, for instance.

The strategies and mode of resistance vary from person to person, Satyabati's first confrontation with her mother-in-law as to 'Why did you hit me?' is primarily ideological, logical and secondly, unconventional. Contrarily, the silence of Jata's wife reflects the other extreme of the internalisation of patriarchy. The polemics in *Idannamam* has far greater and serious socio-economic repercussions in terms of the feminist coordinates of land rights, widow remarriage and sexuality.

Despite variations in locale, language and time frame the high caste and class affinities are the binding factors for the *kulin bhadra*—the elitist Brahmin women of Ashapura Devi and the *sattra* Brahmin women of the Vaishnavite *sattra* in A

Saga of South Kamrup. Correspondingly, Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* presents high class/caste Jat Rajput village women enjoying identifiable patriarchal positionality despite changing caste and class configurations in the backdrop of neo socio-economic rural setup. The operational mechanism of these social hierarchies in the feudal patriarchies of Uttar Pradesh vis-a-vis the lower Jat peasantry in Punjab (*And Such Is Her Fate*) is a revealing comment on the pro-women patriarchal traditions, socio-cultural practices and value system in low caste communities.

As a significant point of departure, the shifting of the conflict from the private to the public domain in *The First Promise* and *Idannamam* is not delimited to internalisation of patriarchal norms but has a cogent connect with the feminist postulates of identity (*The First Promise*) and sexuality (*Idannamam*). Elokeshi categorically subscribes to the representation of a stereotyped mother-in-law in her dominating and overimposing attitude claiming unchallenged supremacy in the familial hierarchy. Conversely, *Idannamam* begins with the presentation of the mother-in-law/daughter-in-law duo in a confrontational position in the public space of the court overtly for the custody of Manda but implicit in the conflict are the coordinates of land, female sexuality and widow remarriage. Since the focus in the novel is on the post-widowhood period of Prem when she had abandoned her marital family, there are few references to her relationship with Bau, her mother-in-law but unlike her counterpart Elokeshi, familial hierarchy is not claimed by Bau and is apparently not the cause of conflict.

Juxtaposed to these unyielding and uncompromising widowed matriarchs are the benign matriarchs—Kakko (*Idannamam*), Bhubaneswari (*The First Promise*) and the strong willed Bau—who at first glance emerge as archetypal homesteaders. These 'home steaders' are the archetypal 'givers', and to use Cixous's idiom they are blessed with a 'feminine libidinal economy of gift.' In Cixous's opinion, "If there is a self proper to woman,

paradoxically it is her capacity to deappropriate herself without self-interest: endless body, without “end” (Cixous 87). However, the ‘magnanimity’ of these bourgeois women of the feudal class in terms of a forgiving attitude to the moral lapses of their husbands’ could also be ascribed to their knowledge of the patriarchal world that prompts these ‘benign’ women to overlook the male transgressions for the comforts of life.

The female representation in these novels in terms of their acts of protest and dissent is, by and large, still located in the domain of patriarchy and it is only in the portrayal of the transgressing and rebel widows, co-wives or deserted wives that normative patriarchal standards are contested and violated which comes for elaborate discussion in the following chapter. Unlike *The First Promise* and *The Saga of South Kamrup* where sexuality is an invisible phenomenon and is associated with sin on the Christian puritan model, Maitreyi Pushpa has widely explored the submerged layers of women’s sexuality not only in the context of the doubly marginalised women but the married women as well.

NOTES

1. For this subaltern critique I am grateful to Arild Engelsen Ruud, “The Indian Hierarchy: Culture, Ideology and Consciousness in a Bengali Village Politics,” *Modern Asian Studies*, 33, 3. 1999: 689-732. Print.
2. I am aware of the polemics of an uncritical application of Foucault’s critique to the Indian rural context in view of Partha Chatterjee’s notion of ‘representativeness’ that underlines the fact that Foucault’s notion of governmentality does not apply to the colonial/postcolonial context. The European bourgeois identity has been the main object of Foucault’s analysis and the polemics of the unviability of the European model is debatable. Similarly, Spivak’s reading of Foucault through Derrida, especially the “method” chapter from *The History of Sexuality, I*, enlists the tensions between the two senses of the word ‘power’ in Foucault, the whole deconstructive enterprise the relationship between critical and dogmatic philosophies of action. Nancy Hartock, “Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women,” *Feminism/ Postmodernism*, ed., Linda J. Nicholson offers a feminist critique of Foucault’s theory of power. However, these theoretical traps do not deflate Foucault’s major findings and are applied in the Indian rural context. For further

documentation see Jaiwanti Dimri, "Constructing a Critique of a Spinster in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*," *Narratives of (Dis)Content: Critical Essays on Commonwealth Literature*, ed. M. Dassan (Chennai: Emerald, 2006) and "Margins within Margins: Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*," *Diasporic Studies: Theory and Literature*, ed. Gurupadesh Singh (Amritsar: GNDUP, 2007).

3. The film *Peepli Live* (2010) produced by Bollywood actor Amir Khan on the theme of contemplated/enforced suicide of a landless farmer, coincidentally named Natha released after fifty years of the publication of *Nectar in a Sieve* is a sad comment on the plight of landless farmers in the nation state. More than a historic context, it has a contemporary context of the power dynamics operating in the rural and industrial sectors. Instances of the peasants' resistance to industrial projects on agricultural land are witnessed in the contemporary peasant uprisings in Nandigram and Singur and the Naxalite movements in Telengana and Dantewada that reflect the polarisation of the rural and urban sectors of society.

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Chapter IV

On the Margin of Margins: Shifting Locales, Familiar Faces

... stale air,
Fusty remembrances, the coiled spring stair
That opens at the top onto nothing at all

SYLVIA PLATH
“Widow”

Call me ‘widow’ hurl curses, revile
But my ringing laughter you cannot stop
Made in this image, I am the creation
You cannot stop my breathing, my life
Snatch from my lips both song and lyric
But you cannot stop the music of my soul
Cover me with ignomy tar me with shame
But my inner radiance you cannot stop.

KAMALA BHASIN
“You Cannot Stop the Spring”

A patriarchal structure is governed by a systematically legitimised order of hierarchies strategically maintaining the hegemonic male dominance in the system which is subsequently transmitted to other social categories in terms of caste, class and gender. These hierarchies among women are manifest in the binary categories of married women versus widows, childless women, co-wives, deserted and estranged wives and so on. In a patriarchal system valorising the institution of matrimony,

the socially stratified categories of women are located on the margin of margins.

Foregrounded in these initial arguments, this chapter is divided into three parts --the first part provides the theoretical background and framework to locate the Hindu rural widow in patriarchy in a historical context mainly in terms of her property rights: secondly, the twofold paradigms of sexuality and violence; and lastly the feminist modes of acceptance and resistance in a patriarchal peasantry. The second part would mainly concentrate on the textual images and representation of rural widows in the backdrop of these paradigms in M. K. Indira's *Phaniyamma* (1976, 1989) Indira Goswami's *A Saga of South Kamrup* (1988, 1993) and Ashapura Devi's *The First Promise* (1968, 2004)—all the three texts written in the span of two decades—from 1968 to 1988 are located in Brahminical patriarchies of Assam, Bengal and Karnataka respectively. Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* (1994) and *Chaak* (1997) located in the feudal *Ahir* patriarchies of Bundelkhand and *Jat* peasantry in the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh respectively are interrogated vis-à-vis the Brahmin widows in the texts cited above in the backdrop of the feudal patriarchal structure. As compared to these widow-centric novels the widow question in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is relatively not central to the text, and would therefore be briefly examined. The third part of the novel as usual is the summing up.

Located in the Brahminical patriarchies of Karnataka, Assam and Bengal respectively the upper caste Hindu widow subjectivities in *Phaniyamma*, *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *The First Promise* and the feudal patriarchies of Bundelkhand and Brij region in Uttar Pradesh in *Idannamam* and *Chaak* are a reflection not only on the patriarchal operations in the Hindu peasant societies but at the larger context could be interpreted as codifiers of rural woman's progression from the 'preindependent post-reformation era' to 'post-independent post-Gandhian nation state.' Vis-à-vis these widows of high caste

and class hierarchy, the widows in the landless, disadvantaged peasantry class in Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and widows of low caste and class hierarchy in Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* share striking similarities in terms of their familial and social location in patriarchy, modes of patriarchal operations in relation to the binaries of domination and subordination, cooption of patriarchal benevolence and the feminist paradigm of resistance despite their varying caste and class affiliations.

Despite the imperialist or the nationalist propagandist designs or motives, the widow question was centrally located in the pre-independence reform movements and the issue later came to be addressed in the nation state in legal terms with the introduction of a series of constitutional amendments. Implicit in the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act of 2005 is the nation's commitment to bridge the gender gap and address some of the vexing questions of gender inequalities of the Hindu Succession Act of 1956 so as to redress gender inequalities on many fronts, such as inheritance of agricultural land, *Mitakshara* joint family property, parental dwelling house, widows' rights etc. concomitantly though it is a sad reflection on the woman's positionality in legal terms in the nation state and would validate the reasons for these women writers' representation of rural widow in relation to the 'outdated' and 'obsolete' preindependent issues in these texts.

Governed by the normative patriarchal structure and value system, the social category of the widow and similar categories of unmailed chaperoned single women-widows, spinsters, childless women, separated/estranged wives and co-wives are located on the familial and social margins suggestive of a cultural colonisation which is claimed by postcolonial and culture study critics to be the worst form of colonisation. A patriarchal system provides comforting self-definitions and norms, which, however restrictive and limited, also amply reward those who learn to accept their defined roles as mothers and wives. Wifeness and motherhood are glorified and granted not only social sanction,

but also eulogised in literature, art and religion so that women do actively want to essay their social roles (Geetha 6). The institutional importance of motherhood in traditional Asian and African societies is reflected in their literary canon, correspondingly, the institutionalised importance of the motherhood paradigm in the rural patriarchies in India is substantiated by the textual exegesis.¹

Semantically, the very word *rand* (widow) means 'inauspicious' and 'sorrow.' Imbibed with all kinds of negativities, most prominently a 'stigmatised invisibility' in the familial and social space, the widow in upper caste Hindu society is subjected to a lifelong asceticism and self denial in terms of depersonification. The archetypes of the widow are available in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the canonical texts. Crucially though, Valmiki's qualifying epithet of wretched - *kripana* - for a widow (*Ramayana* 16/18) corresponds to the circumscribed images of the 'stigmatised' widow, however, the canonical texts have offered anti-canonical images of widows. Ravana's widow Mandodari, for instance, remarried Ravana's step brother Vibhishana, Bali's widow Tara remarried Bali's younger brother Sugreva, both the proposals for widow remarriages initiated and solemnised at the command of *purushottam* -- the most ideal man Ram.

Arguably though, these marriages among the non-Aryan classes of *Asuras* and *Vanaras* have a cogent connect with the dynamics of power, the fact of the prevalent practice of widow remarriage among the common people is validated by these notable precedents. One may deflate the significance of these two epic female models in the 'Great tradition' for their *Asura* and *Vanara* lineage but the Kshatriya Kunti's inclusion among the *Panch kanyas* has greater signification since it was Madri, King Pandu's second wife who unlike Kunti accepted satihood. The valorisation of the unconventional wives—Tara, Mandodari and Kunti as *Panch Kanyas* in the 'Great Tradition'—is supportive of our argument that the stigmatisation of the widow

in the literary canon is a later development and needs to be interrogated in the backdrop of the polemics of representation.

Given the fact of a woman's acceptability and valorisation in terms of predefined, man-created 'role models,' it naturally follows that women who did not subscribe to prescribed role models were relegated to the category of 'dangerous' and 'deviant' (Ramaswamy 10). The concept of female deviant behaviour in Vijaya Ramaswamy's opinion clubs together the most variegated social categories of women—widows, prostitutes and saints. The only common factor among these three categories of women is that none of them has a male owner/husband. The widow thus is located in a very weak and fragile territory in terms of patriarchy and the dynamics of power. Most crucially, the representation of a widow and her prototypes irrespective of caste, class and gender in the pan Indian feminist literary canon is very likely to expose the seamy underbelly of the post-independent, post-globalised Indian nation state. For any broad emancipatory claims of the rural woman in the nation state the key issues of agency and hierarchy are vitally significant. The focus here is not on tracing a line of normative fictional images of these doubly marginalised subjectivities but, on the contrary, to look for new trajectories in the presentation-representation of the rural widow in terms of caste, class and religion in the Indian feminist canon suggestive of a paradigm shift if any, from the precolonial to the postcolonial period. The selection of these women-authored *Bhasa* novels is related to the centrality of the rural women in these texts that would not only contest and subvert the gender representation of women in the urban/metropolitan discourse but dislocate the centre.

One could begin by interrogating some *yaksha nari prashna*—some essentialist feminist questions to oneself. Has there been any substantive change in the representation of a widow in the literary canon over the years who has for so long been overloaded with all the prefixed negativities as the eternal binary of the glorified and valorised constructs of *sumangali*, *saubhagyawati* -

- the auspicious wife and the *putravati* -- mother of a son in the canonical texts, literary or otherwise? More potently one needs to probe if the childless widow, the most victimised woman subjectivity in a Brahminical or feudal patriarchy has escaped the hegemonic systematised oppression and suppression that denies her a voice and agency. The hegemonic postulates of bygone years that once a woman ceases to be a wife, especially if she is childless, she is stripped of personhood and enforced to a stigmatised invisibility in her natal as well as marital family, and that a woman is acceptable and valorised only in terms of man-created roles are still operative? Or, to ask, has the tradition been revisited in terms of the most repressed and suppressed social categories of unmale chaperoned women—widows, prostitutes, women saints and spinsters in villages, the micro unit in the nation state?

Before deliberating on these problematising issues the construct of a widow needs to be placed in the historicized colonial context of social reforms and national movement vis-à-vis the widow-centric literary discourse where the widow-question in terms of widow remarriage, abolition of the practice of *sati*, Age of Consent and property rights is vociferously debated by the contemporary social reformers, thinkers and ideologues—Isvarchandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotiba Phule and Pandita Ramabai Saraswati—to cite a few remarkable signatures. At the initial stage in the national movement the ‘woman’s question,’ in this context the widow-question was centrally located in all controversial debates and dialogues but as Partha Chatterjee posits towards the close of the century the woman question had disappeared from the agenda of public debate to be gradually replaced, or to say, subsumed by the ‘greater’ issues concerning the politics of nationalism (Partha Chatterjee, *Recasting Women*). Lata Mani goes a step further from Partha Chatterjee to argue that women are neither subjects or objects in this discourse “... but rather the grounds of the discourse on

sati” (Mani 117). An ‘interesting’ inference elicited by Anshuman Mondal from Partha Chatterjee and Lata Mani’s critique of *sati* is that the discourse on *sati* was a ‘foundational moment’ in the widow discourse on social reform which in turn was to be enveloped into national discourse (Mondal 16). And as for Meenakshi Mukherjee, women’s education and the amelioration of the plight of the widows were two major aspects of the social reform movement (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 80).

Consolidating his pro-widow remarriage position in Saint Parashar’s discourse which is counter-canonical to Manu’s ethical position, Iswarchand Vidyasagar vindicated the practice of widow remarriage as a salutary practice, simultaneously Dayanand Saraswati prioritised the ancient practice of *niyoga*-levirate unions. Highly critical of the Brahminical tradition, Jyotiba Phule blamed the great ‘Aryan Institution’ for the plight of widows which not only upholds the custom of child marriage for the mistreatment of widows but also imposes enforced widowhood on hapless widows. One of the most remarkable women voices of the age, Pandita Ramabai Saraswati exposed the double standards of morality in the Brahminical patriarchy which advocated widow remarriage and a negligible few offering to do so, on the one hand, and if some did, ostracizing them on the other. More crucially, as Lata Mani and Spivak argue in this entire interface between the oriental and occidental ideologies on the issue of *sati* the widow’s voice is polemically subalternized as the speaking subject. “Super slave or superhuman, women in this discourse remain eternal victims” (Mani 97).²

However, for a large body of critics all these reformers and religious thinkers are greatly influenced by ‘the Western concepts of manhood and womanhood’ (Nandy 22). Except for Ishwarchand Vidyasagar who in Ashis Nandy’s view gave primacy to social reforms over politics, the majority of contemporary reformers and ideologues Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and Swami

Vivekanand, for instance, were inscrutably conscious of the Western world view. "It was no longer possible to give priority to cultural reform over mass politics without ignoring the fact that a psychological invasion from the West had begun with the widespread internalisation of Western values by many Indians, and an over-emphasis on the reform of the Indian personality could only open up new, invidious modes of Westernisation" (Nandy 24). There is simultaneously an oppositional view which rules out the possibility of the Victorian values in terms of morality and social ethics to have percolated the contemporary Indian society (Tanika Sarcar).

Thus, the inference that the widow question which was centrally located in all the social reform movements at the national or local level was transmitted to the nationalist movement at large to be finally deployed as a rhetorical trope and be subsumed by it. Gandhi's envisioning of the Indian woman 'as a renunciator' in Anshuman Mondal's opinion "... embodied in the socially marginalised figure of the widow, was never designed to answer women's *social* issues. Indeed, its purpose was the very opposite: to idealise 'woman' as a 'sign' in the respective ideological contests over which vision of India should prevail" (Mondal 926).

In a very substantial way this widow-centric social discourse is supplemented and strengthened by a parallel, equally fertile and proactive literary discourse on the widow in the dominant canon in the popular genres of fiction, poetry and personal narratives in the precolonial period. With the prevalence of polygamy among the Bengali *kulin* Brahmins early widowhood was a genuine problem in the nineteenth century in Bengal and the widow-centric discourse had a sound basis in the contemporary social reality (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 103).

Correspondingly, the social scene did not much vary in other parts of the country as is manifest in the contemporary widow-centric male canon -- *Indira Bai* (1899) in Kannada by Gulavadi

Venkata Rao, Baba Padmanji's *Yamuna Paryatan* (1857), *Pan Lakshyant Kon Ghetto* (But Who Cares?) by Hari Narayan Apte in Marathi, *Saraswatichanda* (published between 1887 and 1901) by Goverdhanram Tripathi in Gujrati, Bankimchandra's *Vishvriksha* and *Krishnakanter Vil* (1876), Rabindranath Tagore's *Chokher Bali* (1903) and *Gora* (1910), Saratchandra's *Badi Didi* (1913) and *Charitraheen* in Bengali, *Bibasini* (*The Exile* 1891) in Oriya and Premchand's *Premashram*, *Prema*, *Pratigya* and *Vardan* in Hindi -- these are some seminal texts to offer the social critique of the widow.

Gulvadi Venkata Rao's Kannada novel *Indira Bai* (1899) is not a village-centric novel but is canonical for addressing the centrally located women questions, the emancipatory paradigm of widow remarriage and other women-related key issues of reform movements in the nineteenth century. The widow Indira Bai's empowerment in terms of education and her remarriage with the son of her father's former servant Bhaskar Rao engages in the dynamics of caste, class and gender. Similarly, Goverdhanram Tripathi's widely acclaimed *Saraswatichandra* also engages in the polemics of widow remarriage. Unlike *Indira Bai* the male protagonist *Saraswatichandra*'s marriage with the younger sister of his beloved widow Kumud in the eponymous novel demonstrates the novelist's ambiguous position on the issue of widow remarriage. Interestingly, the trope of spirituality has been employed by the novelist to evade the feminist issues of bodily needs and woman's sexuality.

The second half of the nineteenth century, popularly known as the period of Bengal renaissance witnessed proliferation of fictional prose narratives for the newly educated literate including the new middle class woman "...who claimed cultural superiority over western woman ... over the women of the preceding generation who had been denied the opportunity of freedom by an oppressive and degenerate social tradition; and superiority over women of the lower classes who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom" (Partha

Chatterjee 129). As Jasodhara Bagchi has observed for a majority of writers Bankimchandra, for instance, novel writing was a part of the social obligation of an intellectual in a colonial society facing the strictures against the poverty of culture produced and consumed by his own class. Rajul Sogani classifies the ideological positions in these hegemonic texts delimited to one of these three -- the reformist, the orthodox and the one negotiating between the first two. More or less in the nature of social documentaries from the male power centre the widow in these widow-centric novels is relegated to the objectified periphery of patriarchy and the micro narrative of the widow in this metanational narrative is certainly not centrally located.

Arguably, the notion of land ownership to individual family members in general, particularly the women in India is located in the colonial rule. Village has been one of the key institutions to undergo substantive transformation in the colonial period. In the precolonial period the inheritance of property, including land was governed by varying region, religion, caste and family specific local customs. In the backdrop of the western individualistic notions of humanism vis-à-vis the family and society the indigenous notions of joint and extended family, a woman's property rights (land being the most substantive form of property) and patriarchy too were invariably impacted during the colonial rule. It has been argued that prior to the colonial rule no notion of property existed in the Indian society not only for women but for men as well in the joint and extended families. Flavia Agnes deliberates on the polemic intervention of the British legal system in the indigenous legal systems in the realm of Family Law in India especially the joint-family property law that restricted and deprived women of their share in the joint-family property. Totally disregarding the local customs, negative interpretations of the *Smritis* were relied upon to deprive women of their well-established customary rights over property, Blacktonian views obtaining primacy over Manu with

the claim of universality. “Since they (British jurists) could not comprehend the plurality of the prevailing non-state legal systems, and locally-evolved practices, British jurists disturbed established customs of the community” (Agnes 119-120).

Referring to the much-publicized Bengal Sati Regulation Act, 1829, the Age of Consent Acts of 1860 and 1891, the prohibition of Female Infanticide Act of 1872 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 Flavia Agnes exposes the British agenda to project indigenous systems and practices as pre-modern and barbaric. The Hindu Gains of Learning Act of 1930 by helping the English-educated males to safeguard their individual earnings out of the joint-family pool paved the way for men’s individual property rights. “... Unfortunately for Indian women, instead of an enhancement of their right to property, the scope of this was curtailed and became redundant within the changing character of property” (Agnes 121). Even more crucially, the Privy Council curtailed women’s rights to hold and alienate property under the institution of *stridhan* and reduced it to a concept accepted in the English law as that of limited estate disqualifying women from their right to will or gift away their *stridhan*. The British concept of ‘revisioners’ was introduced into the Indian legal system wherein all property dealing by Hindu widows could be challenged by the husband’s relatives. “Gradually, the Hindu widow lost her right to deal with her property and on the least pretext, the property would revert to the husband’s heirs” (Agnes 122). Furthermore, the court’s ruling proclaiming that property inherited by a daughter from her father is not *stridhan* and extending it to the property inherited by an unmarried daughter from her mother and later including it in the property inherited from all female relatives, all avenues for the continuation of *stridhan* in the female line were blocked.

In the backdrop of these detrimental and subversive changes in the property rights of women one can envisage and empathise with the marginalised location of the widows—Durga and

Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) and a host of other Kulin Brahmin widows—Mokshada, Shibjaya, Kashishwari and Shankari (*The First Promise*) in their marital families in the villages and appreciate their preferential choice for their natal family location. Land rights for Satyabati, the only daughter of Ramkali is not a contentious issue in *The First Promise* which would automatically go to the share of Ramkali's brothers and their sons after the marriage of Ramkali's only daughter though Satyabati's father-in-law thought otherwise. "Your Bamun-dada has an eye on the father-in-law's property" (*The First Promise* 147). Since Satyabati is not a contender for her father's property she is no threat to the prospective male inheritors in the joint family. Contrarily, in the feudal peasantries in *Idannamam* and *Chaak* land rights of a widow or a daughter are problematic for contriving patriarchal and social agencies. In the former case, the transference of land by Mohinder Singh to his wife Prem in his life time is the prime motive for her cooption after the death of her husband, similarly the custody case for Manda also is interspersed with her land rights as the legal heir to her deceased father's property. Correspondingly, the sub-text in *Chaak* exposes the land rights of the widow Resham and her child in the womb as the real motive behind Resham's murder which is projected as an 'honour' death.

The register of power in the rural agricultural context is intricately interwoven with the ownership of land, however from the feminist point of view a widow's subjectivity and sexuality paradigms are much more crucial than economic or social empowerment in terms of land ownership. As Bina Agarwal posits, in the Indian rural context, the most significant form of property is arable land and as for women "... arable land is the most critical form of property, valued for its economic, political and symbolic importance" (2-3). Most significantly, the notions of identity, power and social status are closely entwined with property. With the decline in communal land, privatised land has acquired an importance today which it did not have even a

century ago and rural women's dependence on agriculture was and still is greater than men mainly because "... there is little immediate possibility of large numbers of rural women finding entirely non-land-related means of livelihood." And consequently, "... land will continue to occupy a place of primacy in rural livelihoods in general and female livelihoods in particular for quite sometime" (Agarwal 6). Marxist feminism considers woman's domestic confinement as an outcome of the necessity to continue male ownership of private property (Datar 363).

The genesis of Hindu laws in terms of women's rights to property and inheritance can be traced to the *Dharmashastras* and the related commentaries on them. In northern India where the *Mitakshara* school of Hindu law has been operative, a widow is entitled to maintenance by the joint family which consequently places a woman in a disadvantaged position in terms of economic independence and subsequent social empowerment. The *Dayabaga* School of Hindu law practiced in Bengal and neighbouring Assam, on the contrary, permitted a widow to succeed to her husband's share and enforce partition if there were no male descendants. On the death of the husband the widow became a co-partner with other brothers of the husband and could enforce partition of her share. "Hence, unlike under *Mitakshara*, women inherited an interest in all property, irrespective of whether it was ancestral or separate. This also meant that the probability of a widow or daughter inheriting some property was somewhat greater under *Dayabhaga* than *Mitakshara*" (Agarwal 10).

Notwithstanding the degree of profound concern for the widow in the public domain the upper and lower caste binaries do permeate within this category and the social as well as fictional centre is predominantly occupied by the upper caste Hindu widow. As Partha Chatterjee too posits, the focus in all the social reforms was on the education of women from the upper strata and thus the inference that the rural women of caste and lower class were not the beneficiaries of these

emancipatory programmes. Phaniyamma in the eponymous novel, all the widows in *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *The First Promise* are illiterate or semi-literate. Manda, the young protagonist in *Idannamam* can barely read and write though with this bare minimum degree of learning she is able not only to sustain the twosome -- herself and her grandmother as the *Ramayana* narrator in the time of dire financial crisis and deprivation but gradually evolve as a social activist. Subarnlata in Ashapura Devi's eponymous novel moves out of her marital village to Calcutta to educate her children, and later her daughter Bakul, one of the beneficiaries of this migration to the city would eventually turn into a novelist imbibed with the authorial voice of *Bakul Katha*.

The woman question in general, in this context the polemic familial and social positionality of a village widow is intricately related to power paradigm. As a number of critics have posited Indian women are keenly aware that their reproductive capacities are an important source of power.³ The question of power is centrally located in various ideologically opposed discourses—be it postmodernism, an anti-authoritarian movement or poststructuralism—a critique of historicism or the anti-imperialist postcolonialism. Critics from Marx to Foucault including Said, Fanon, Bhabha, Spivak and the feminists—black as well as white—have in their own ways addressed the polemics of power. The feminist discourse critiques the dynamics of power in patriarchy and how the sources of power in terms of capital, property and knowledge paradigms have always been manipulatively restricted to the male domain⁴. Countryside and city in Raymond F. Betts' view are the two landscapes of decolonisation. “Decolonisation, so regularly interpreted as a set of political problems involving local national and international relations, was also rooted in the countryside and grounded in the city” (Betts 51). In the Indian rural context there has always been a clear connect between land and power, land being the prime co-ordinate of power.

The polemics of a widow's property rights is interrogated in the pre-independence male canon notably in the Oriya novel *Bibasini* (*The Exile* 1891) by Ramashankar Rai, Saratchandra's Bengali novels *Badi Didi* (1913) and *Pathanirdesh* (1914) and Tagore's *Gora* (1910). In *Bibasini* Sadashiva's widow is deprived of her property by the cunning Goverdhan Das. The widow Hemnalini in Shararchandra's *Pathnirdesh* (1914) is denied money to go on pilgrimage because she has no share in property. Similarly, the widow Harimohini in Tagore's *Gora* (1910) is forced by her brothers-in-law to relinquish her share of property and then turned out of doors. However, the paradigmatic feminist problems remain unresolved partly because of the objectified location of the woman in these novels in a voice 'not their own.' The widows in these *Bhasa* novels more or less subscribe to the normative images in terms of the denial of voice and agency.

The question of representation, self-representation or representing others, speaking in the name of, as has been argued is problematic and demands a persistent critique to guard against constructing the 'Other' simply as an object of knowledge, leaving out the real 'Others' because of the ones who are getting access into public places. As Susie Tharu and K. Lalita posit, woman's writings "have fed into and elaborated the course of dominance and the investment of gender in it, but they have also deflected and refigured that course" (Tharu and Lalita 116). This could be corroborated from Meenakshi Mukherjee's critique of Saratchandra 'who was considered something of a rebel in Bengal, a challenge to orthodoxy and a threat to the establishment' (102). Notwithstanding Sarat Chandra's sympathy for the transgressing widows, their amorous relationships hardly ever culminate in marriage or any kind of fulfillment. What Meenakshi Mukherjee typifies in the context of Saratchandra as "... the ambivalence of the educated Indian middle class which has compassion for the exploited, but is reluctant to disturb the social order in which it has a vested interest" (Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality* 105) relates to most

of the contemporary male writing.

Women's sexuality is a focalising issue in the feminist canon across the globe. The issues of women's sexuality, their assertion or rather celebration of bodily claims have been widely debated and addressed in the fictional works of Indian English writers, more prominently in Nayantara Sahgal and Manju Kapur and more recently in the feminist canon. Eighteenth century texts, *Radhika Santwanam* by Telugu poet Muddupalani, for instance, has been reclaimed for its subversive celebration of a young girl's coming of age and her first experience of sex. However, in a Brahminical patriarchy it attains a problematising dimension for various socio-cultural constraints. In a traditional patriarchy legitimising the channelisation of a woman's sexual energy in a stringently organised system of reproduction, says Uma Chakravarti, there is an overwhelming concentration on the profound danger represented by the sexuality of the widow. Patriarchal practices among the different castes, in her opinion though dissimilar, are part of a larger structure of caste, production and reproduction forming a basis for the hierarchies of castes, cultures and a system of production in which the low castes labour and reproduce labour whereas the high castes do not labour and reproduce only ritual specialists (Chakravarti, *Economic and Social Weekly* 2250). The prescriptive texts have laid down stringent codes of behaviour in order to not only ensure the repression of a widow's sexuality but its abrupt termination (2251), the ritual of tonsure symbolically marks the renunciation of the widow's sexuality (2248).

The 'non-labouring' high castes' stringent control of female sexuality becomes the index for establishing the highest rank in the caste system and the experience of widowhood needs to be situated in a certain kind of production relations. The portrayal of the widows in canonical male fiction, some of them already cited above more or less subscribes to Uma Chakravarti's iconic upper caste women specificities. Conversely, the women-authored *Bhasa* novels, *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *The First Promise* and *Idannamam*, for instance, offer solid ground for the

contestation of the iconic caste specificities in terms of the labour non-labour binaries. The upward class mobility of women in the choice of profession and vocation and subsequent social behaviour is manifest in the literary canon. Manda's social acceptability as a ritualistic performer in *Idannamam* is substantive of this transformation in gender production relations.

The beginning of an increasing concentration on woman's sexuality and its repression could be located in colonial rule. As Ashis Nandy has argued, '... colonialism was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes' (Nandy 4). A historical overview of classical Indian literature and culture is reiteratingly suggestive of the uninhibited attitude of the people with regard to the notion of sexuality-male or female. The growing over and undertones of repression and suppression are a later development that could be attributed to the series of foreign invasions in the pre colonial state and later to the impact of Victorian morality in the colonial state in terms of the ideals of respectability which imposed 'barriers of reticence and reserve.' It could be inferred that the widow-centric fictional narratives in the nineteenth century colonial India are, to a fairly large extent, impacted by the paradigms of Victorian morality and respectability.

Given the connect between the twofold paradigms of female sexuality and violence, widowhood reflects the worst form of violence that denies physicality to a physically alive person. Desexualisation of a sexual being is as brutal a practice as castration or female circumcision. In addition to the violation of the physical rights of the body, it is the cultural marginalisation of the widows in a culturally nuanced village society that causes the worst form of mental agony to the widows.

II

M. K. Indira's *Phaniyamma* (1989) originally written in Kannada in 1976, a short novella of 140 pages in bold print presents an idealised Brahmin widow (1840-1952) in the insular and

orthodox Brahmin community of Malned in Karnataka who in the span of 103 years of widowhood did not earn anybody's reprieve in the private or the public domain in terms of her behaviour as a widow, and therefore was extolled as a paradigm of virtue, an exemplary model of a circumscribed widow. "... no other woman like his sister Phani had ever been born or would be in the future" (3). At the surface level Phaniyamma's unconditional subscribing to the hegemonic patriarchal model of a widow reminds of her earlier prototype in Raja Rao's *Akayya* as an example of self effacing Indian womanhood. In both the texts, the high-born widows denied of a natural fulfilment of their conjugal and maternal desires as wife and mother in life, find in silent unacknowledged heroism and ceaseless sacrifices a meaning to their existence. Mohini's mother-in-law, a selfless widow, for instance, as a watchdog of traditions is often accrued a place of pride in Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* (1952).

Widowed at the age of nine and becoming *Madi* at the age of fourteen, Phaniyamma is assiduously engaged in attaining perfection as a widow—*manasa, karmana, vacha*—in thought, actions and words in terms of her superhuman, uncomplaining adherence to the prescriptive and restrictive code for a widow. Most significantly, her victory lies not in subscribing to the code but in a strategic shift from the subject position of a 'taker' to a 'giver' initially in the private and later in the public domain.

Phaniyamma's journey of widowhood beginning at the pre-pubertal age of nine with a temperamental 'disinterested attitude' (52) to the second stage of renunciation - 'a true tapasvini' (54) at the age of twenty to finally attain a state of self annihilation in the service of others envisages a normative image of a circumscribed widow. A widow unclaimed by her in-laws and thus left with no alternative but to spend the rest of her life in the natal joint family of fifty members, Phaniyamma's life is initially governed by Bentham's principle of utility. Her anxious efforts to make herself useful to one and all in the private

domain of the kitchen, to the countless women in the family delivering babies, mothers recovering from childbirth in the post-natal stage and later to excel in the public domain as a gifted midwife to critical delivering women irrespective of caste and class hierarchies locates her in an empowered position of a 'giver.'

However, Phaniyamma's gradual progression from a disinterested and dispassionate mental frame of mind to one of renunciation in terms of physical and material comforts entails a variety of experiments such as the application of the juice of the unripe fruits of *ummathana* on her head to get rid of her hair on her head and thus the expenses of the barber, delimiting her diet every day to be able to restrict it to two bananas and a tumbler of buttermilk a day at the age of seventy, and as for other physical needs—she required a couple of white saris once in three or four years. Her strategic silence to avoid unnecessary confrontation in the private domain among women, her non-interference in others' affairs is reciprocated, everybody not only loves this woman with 'her mouth shut and her hands busy' (98), but in the family circle she is situated in an uncontroversial location. "Who did not want to have an Ancheyathe who prepared after the day's work, all those tasty things for other palates-happala, shavige, baalaka?" (74)

Phaniyamma, the ideal, circumscribed widow often referring to herself as 'a barren tree' (97), 'a bamboo pole eaten by white ants' (74) presents a disconnect to the transgressing widow Dakshaajini in the novel. Unlike the speculative Phaniyamma Dakshaajini—a strong-willed, beautiful and spirited woman—widowed at the age of sixteen resists not only *madihood* but goes to defy all widow-related patriarchal prescriptive and restrictive norms in social and physical terms. Her affinal family keeps her in their house purely for selfish reasons. "Her mother-in-law getting old, and there are tens of people in the house to be looked after" (106). Impregnated by her young, unmarried brother-in-law she not only withstands excommunication but

is determined to marry her brother-in-law despite patriarchal pressures and persuasions. The *madi* women in fact were a great asset in joint families for their help in various household chores such as milking the cows, cooking food, churning buttermilk, bathing new born babies and mothers.

The interrogation of the constructs of *pativrata*, purity and virginity along with the Hindu customs and traditions by a uniformly circumscribed widow Phaniyamma in her old age—after all those years of unconditional adherence to the prescriptive as well as the restrictive code subverts this hegemonic patriarchal text into a feminist text. The dichotomies and dualities in the socio-ethical system do not remain unnoticed by the illiterate Phaniyamma. She is certainly not the one to ‘make’ knowledge but to closely and minutely comprehend and internalise the knowledge system foregrounded in patriarchy with its cracks and fissures. Her observations of the dichotomous social and ethical norms in the context of mythological and real life characters bring into crises not only the normative social ethics but Hindu mythology as well for a systematised gender discrimination. The beheading of mythological Renuka, the wife of Jamdagni by her son Parshuram at the behest of the latter’s father for the violation of the patriarchal norm of fidelity for looking at the reflection of the *sanyasi* who sat on the opposite bank of the river and her transformation into a stone as a mark of punishment for another transgressing act of sleeping with a god who visited her in the guise of her husband are critiqued by Phaniyamma vis-à-vis the transgressing acts of men and the qualitative punishment. A man sleeping with hundred of women was still treated as ‘pure as fire’ (94). A similar dichotomy is operative in the operation of the purity/impurity paradigm. A man sleeping with an untouchable woman could regain purity by a change of the sacred thread, contrarily, “... if a woman looks at another man, she’s a whore” (96). The social markers of purity too, the identification of a widow with a shaven head, for instance need to be interrogated. A widow touched by a

male barber was still a *madi*, widows with full heads full of hair were relegated to the realm of impurity. “So what if a woman has hair on her head? Does all the impurity rest there?” (109)

In a very significant but subtle way M. K. Indira’s presentation of Dakshaajini, as a defiant, spirited woman—a contrastive image of a widow to docile, submissive Phaniyamma and the latter’s unprecedented defense of Dakshaajini subverts the text into a feminist text. Most crucially, in the backdrop of Phaniyamma’s unquestioned and thus exemplary adherence to normative patriarchal value system all through her life, this old, non-interfering and reticent widow’s defense of Dakshaajini’s decision to refuse *madihood* and other social injunctions finally deflates the circumscribed representation of a widow. For a person inhabiting the marginal territory it is imperative to have knowledge of one’s world and its functional mechanism. Implicit in Phaniyamma’s studied silence is her knowledge of her world where power is located in the male territory. “Power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity ... where is it to be found? How is it to be developed? Are relations of power between the sexes comparable to other kinds of power relations?” (Hartsock 157).

Here it would not be out of context to critique *Phaniyamma* vis-à-vis U. R. Anantmurty’s canonical but equally controversial novel *Samskara* (1965) and examine the two Brahmin protagonists, the widow Phaniyamma and the celibate *grihastha* Praneshacharya in these two texts as two contrastive models in terms of their submission and transgression of the paradigmatic Brahminical virtues of chastity, sexual and ritual purity and adherence to social and moral code. Initially, the profound knowledge of the Brahmin priest Praeshacharya of Hindu scriptures supplemented by his impeccable and unblemished character and extraordinarily exemplary behaviour in the private as well as public domain earns him the unconditional praise and veneration of his friends and foes. However, the cathartic act of his sexual transgression has implicit and explicit

social, moral and religious ramifications for the hero and the Brahminical/Hindu society at large. As an oppositional, contrastive female model Phaniyamma's superhuman control on her sensual and physical desires locating/consolidating her position as a circumscribed Brahmin widow is concomitantly a vindication of orthodox Brahminism and tradition. Contrarily, the transgressing act of Praneshacharya no doubt dislocates the 'Acharya' -- the guru from the glorified Brahminical centre, his relocation in the human category as an ordinary, vulnerable man imparts to him a tragic dimension and grandeur which is certainly lacking in the portrayal of Phaniyamma.

Indira Goswami's Assamese novel *Une Khowa Howda (The Termite-eaten Howdah of a Tusker)* translated into English as *A Saga of South Kamrup* is symbolic of the decaying power of the *sattra* -- the institution of religious monasteries in Assam in the transitional pre and post-independence period when at the backdrop of the anti-feudal land laws augmented by the communist uprisings in Assam the tenant farmers, mostly opium addicts were at loggerheads with the *Adhikars*. The conferring of the title of *Adhikar* in the *sattra* to both men as well as women is significant from the feminist point of view for locating a woman in the male power centre. The combination of the two hierarchies of power, the priestly and the landlord class would ostensibly locate women in a position of power as rulers of the *sattras* to collect the revenue from their tenant farmers and to give them religious discourses. Significantly, the time frame in this novel published in 1988 is 1948 and so the trajectories of the *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Idannamam* are indicative of the transformation in the rural widow's familial and societal positionality and negotiating strategies.

Arguably, power in the rural context is intricately interwoven with the ownership of land. The locus of power in an agricultural peasant society in India resides in land ownership. The representation of the three upper caste 'elitist' Brahmin widows of one extended or, in a way a semi-joint family between the

age group of sixteen and forty in an extremely orthodox Brahminical patriarchal setup in the *sattras* of Amaranga in Assam in *A Saga of South Kamrup* is very significant vis-a-vis the dynamics of their property rights and access to the two topmost hierarchies of power—as *Adhikars* their Brahminical status and as landlords, control of the political and economic power centre. Durga, the elderly widowed sister of the *Adhikar* is the stereotype of a widow as a victim of the oppressive mechanism of patriarchy. Saru Gossainee, the young, beautiful widow of the *Adhikar*'s uncle is apparently located in an empowered centre as the *Adhikar* of three *sattras*. Giribala, the youngest of the three relatively enjoys more freedom in terms of her mobility in the public sphere and as the daughter of the rich *Adhikar* but her self-immolation problematises the woman empowerment paradigm in economic and emancipatory terms. The three childless Brahmin widows in the extended, or rather a semi-joint family between the age group of sixteen and forty might share similar geographical locale and space but they are unevenly positioned as per their economic status and social positionality. Two of them eventually die, Giribala, the youngest of them commits suicide at the tender age of sixteen, Durga dies of consumption at the age of forty, only Saru Gossainee survives her disillusionment. Incidentally Saru Gossainee is the only widow to inherit her husband's property. Given the fact of a gap of forty years of postcolonial periodicity between *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Idannamam*, the widow's face has not undergone substantive transformation in economic, social and cultural terms.

The *Dayabhaga* school of Hindu law practiced in Bengal and Assam aimed at protecting the widows' land and inheritance rights to immovable property and the fictional/textual images of widows should hypothetically correspond to and substantiate the widow empowerment paradigm. The dispossession of the native's land by the cunning, manipulating outsiders across the globe has been a polemic issue since the time of Shakespeare's

The Tempest and as of now in the present post-globalised phase of urbanisation and industrialisation the polemics of land has attained serious dimensions in social, economic and political terms. As an explanation of the land issue in Algeria, Frantz Fanon wrote *The Wretched of the Earth*. In Claude Meillasoux's view, in India basically there are two kinds of castes: those who hold the land and those who do not (89-111). Gender inequalities have prevailed in laws governing the inheritance and holding of arable land—the most valuable form of property in India (Agarwal 1995). Patriarchy in Helen Cixous's view is maintained by the exchange of women as possessions from fathers to husbands always so as to control or gain something. In contrast to the 'masculine' libidinal economy of 'property,' a 'feminine' libidinal economy is that of the 'gift' (Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman* 16).

One vitally responsible factor for gender stratification in the past has been the anti-women land laws situating women in a vulnerable position in terms of economic and social empowerment, and as of now, the property rights of women remain more of an exception than a rule. The representation of the disadvantaged women in *A Saga of South Kamrup* is determined by the land laws, and is irrevocably interlinked with the dynamics of their property rights.

Saru Gossainee, the thirty year old widow as the owner of three *sattras* initially offers the image of an economically empowered woman vis-à-vis Durga, the widow deprived of her property rights in her affinal family and forced to find refuge in her natal family. As *Adhikar* of the three *sattras* Saru Gossainee moves freely in the public domain collecting revenue from her tenants, performing religious ceremonies and other rituals for her tenant disciples. Unlike the other two widows, Durga and Giribala, Saru as the beneficiary of patriarchal benevolence was not deprived of her land and property. Described as '... awfully brave, so courageous' (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 7), she manages the *sattra* in conformity with the normative strictures imposed

on a widow. “She was so conservative, an extremely orthodox, ritual addicted widow” (147) offering moral strictures to her disciples. However, this period of self dependency is short lived and very soon she is contemplating of hiring some help. “Why should she not have somebody she could rely on, to give her company” (14). Arguably, her woes and miseries are not related to the land paradigm but are more crucially related to the feminist paradigm of sexuality, and secondly to the emancipatory paradigm of education; her economic exploitation by her trustworthy employee points out the problematic of an illiterate woman’s empowerment.

In an upper caste rural Brahminical patriarchy of the *sattra* the combined ownership of clergy and land eliminates, to a fairly large extent, the labour-non-labour polarisation referred to by Uma Chakravarti in terms of caste, on the one hand, and the division of private and public sphere, on the other. If at all these binaries are operative, they operate at a submerged level. Saru Gussainee as the *Adhikar* of three *sattras* and with the cooption of Mohidhar Babu, a poor young Brahmin much below her in the caste and class hierarchy succeeds in temporarily dislocating the male-centric power centre and gender binaries. However, towards the close of the novel Saru Gussainee also subscribes to the image of a stereotypical, emotional fool duped and devastated by her emotional and physical vulnerability rather than the male insensitivity. Deprived of her treasure and dislocated from the power centre she presents the image of a pitiable, defeated and disillusioned woman.

The subversive patriarchal agency thus poses an imminent threat to pro-widow land and inheritance laws in rural societies dislocating in the process the widow from the twin power centres to the ‘muted subject position of the subaltern woman’ (Spivak 295). This is evidenced in the context of the two *Vaishnavaites* widows of propertied class of *adhikar*, that is, the *sattra* owners - Durga and Giribala—who are not only forced to find shelter in their natal families but are denied property rights in their

marital families. Interestingly though, the natal families also accept the unjustified situation unopposed presumably as a mark of social etiquette or dignity. The 'pro-widow' property rights under the *Dayabhaga* school in *A Saga of South Kamrup* need to be critiqued in the contextualised context of P. V. Kane's critique of a sonless widow in a joint Hindu family in Bengal and the subversive hostility of the surviving members to get rid of the widow by subversive means, satihood, for instance, and secondly in the context of colonial intervention in the Indian legal system. The whole gamut of widow's property rights in *A Saga of South Kamrup* is intricately interspersed with the question of power which as usual is located in the patriarchal domain and thus is contestatory of the woman empowerment paradigm.

In plain feminist idiom the denial of property rights to Durga could simply be defined as a form of subversive patriarchal mechanism but what is more polemic to the feminist postulates of male-on-female oppression and sisterhood in this instance is the subsequent cooption of the victimised women as coercive agents in the system and the relocation of the victim to the victimizing location. "Now things have changed. You are a widow. Come, wash your face and hands. There are so many people waiting to see you" (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 22). The implicit apathy for the recently widowed Giribala in the seasoned widow Durga's tone is not amiss. In a similar vein, the boastful declaration of another victim, Giribala's mother "... it is only one girl. I can keep four or five other girls like her" (23) is a vain attempt to atone for her daughter's marginalised location in her marital family. These two variables indicate the patriarchal configurations raising the polemics of subjecthood and agency of the marginalised women. These two old and young widows, Durga and Giribala, residing in their natal house have not made much headway in terms of a supportive familial or social system. The twin institutions of family and society as usual remain insensitised to their problems, aspirations and physical or emotional needs. Giribala's initial act of bravado in terms of

her defiance of the curious gathering of women after her arrival to her natal house as a widow is short lived. Being unequipped to withstand the mounting familial and social pressures manifest in a series of restrictions and injunctions she prefers to commit the hara-kiri.

The dispossession of the property rights of Durga and Giribala could be retraced to the polemics of *sati* in the nineteenth century. In fact the origin of the prevalent practices of *sati* in Bengal is distantly related to the widow's property rights and has also been examined by A. S. Altekar in *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* in the context of the widow's rights of inheritance. P. V. Kane, the great historian of the *Dharmasastra* has observed: "In Bengal (the fact that) the widow of a sonless member even in a joint Hindu family is entitled to practically the same rights over joint family property which her deceased husband would have had ... must have frequently induced the surviving members to get rid of the widow by appealing at a most distressing hour to her devotion to and love for her husband" (Kane qtd. in Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 300).

Giribala, the youngest of the three widows in the novel presents the positionality of a widow in a Brahmin dominated village in Assam in the early post-independence period. Unlike Saru Gossainee's covert and illusory relationship with her employee Mohidhar in her exclusive, private world, Giribala's relationship with Mark, the American missionary researcher is apparently far more real and open to the public gaze. Saru Gossainee's affair with her confidante is a secret scandal, Giribala's an open one. However, there is no distant possibility of this relationship materialising into a permanent matrimonial relationship for Mark is a confirmed missionary well in possession of his emotions and aware of his limits. Moreover, the womenfolk in Giribala's natal family act as watch dogs to protect the sanctity of institutionalised widowhood. The fire purifying ceremony assigned for Giribala reiterates the unified familial and social

forces against any kind of violation of the social and moral code by a widow. Realising the situational futility Giribala self immolates herself registering her protest in a self destructive way.

On her return to her natal village as a widow Giribala had displayed a spark of her defiant temper to the village spectators with her declaration. "You have seen me now. I am still alive! I will live on and have a better life than all of you" (8). Her initial positivism, the brave front though retaliatory and impulsive lasts for less than a year, eventually cracking down under insurmountable familial and social pressures. That the surface aggression and determination was a façade is evident in her *hara-kiri*. Though maintaining the same attitudinal defiance, Giribala denies the same spectatorial crowd any amount of perverse satisfaction at her cost with her fatal refusal to emerge alive from the purifying hut as a humiliated or chastised being. By and large, this self-destructive mode of protest and resistance against the patriarchal and social forces could be at the best described as a consciousness raising exercise.

Self immolation has been one of the most widely practiced and culturally viable forms of resistance in India. The self immolatory female practices of *Johar* in Rajasthan and *sati* in various parts of the country have enjoyed countrywide social sanction presumably for their foregrounding in the twofold 'valorised' institutions of patriarchy and religion. The iconisation of mythical Sati, Shiva's consort who self immolated herself in the *yajnakund* of her father King Daksha Prajapati is a well known Hindu myth. Therefore Giribala's self immolation needs to be interrogated in the contextualised religious context of the practice of *sati* as well as in the personalised context of the novelist. Indira Goswami has offered a detailed reference to the practice of *sati* in her family "... and my father's eldest sister was married in the family of "adhikars" of Rajapukhuri whose husband was the grandson of Bishnupriya devi who had immolated herself on the burning pyre of her husband during

the time of general Jenkins, the Commissioner of Assam in 1834 and became a “satee” (Goswami, *Life Is No Bargain* 10).

Purification by fire is one of the most valorised and widely practiced *samskaras* central to Hinduism, a culture-specific rite or ceremony of tremendous social and religious import in the Hindu religion. Foregrounded in the socio-cultural ethos of the community the purificatory rites and ceremonies are uncritically accepted and practiced by the religious rural folk. Semantically *samskara* means: “Forming well or thoroughly, making perfect, perfecting, finishing, refining, refinement, accomplishment ... Making sacred ... Making pure, purification, purity ... Any rite or ceremony” (Rev. F. Kittel 1479). The purification rite ordained for Giribala was presumably aimed at making her perfect, sacred and pure after her ‘defilement’ but her polemic self immolatory act subverts the purifying *samskara* into a transgressive, anti-religious act. This incident in the novel has resonance of the purificatory rite of the mythical *Agnipariksha* of Sita where the archetypal suspect’s preference for the lap of mother Earth is manifestive of her protest in terms of her refusal to be appropriated by the patriarchal agent Rama. The prime suspecting agent is not only a vindication of Sita’s purity but subversion of the purifying act.⁵ In the backdrop of this religious and personal knowledge Giribala’s self immolation is verily not a defeatist or an escapist, but inscrutably a subversive act performed consciously and not religiously so as to deflate the ritual signification of the act.

Religious acts in general are synonymous with passive, unquestioning obedience where the actor is not a free but a passive agent. Conversely, Giribala’s self immolatory act as an active agent does not reflect her passive or unquestioning obedience to ritualistic practices but characterises a transgressive and subversive form of defiance along with the sub-text on *sati*. Unlike the cooptive and appreciative crowd gathered around the funeral fire of the *sati* designate in the past, the village crowd of Amaranga exhibits a nonchalant mood. In juxtaposition to

the conforming first generation vaishnavaite widows Durga and Saru Gossainee, the second generation teenaged Giribala's resistance to the prescriptive social code is translated in her act of self immolation.

Ashapura Devi's *The First Promise* abounds with the images of widows of all age groups from young Shankari to old Dinatarini along with a host of other widows—Mokshada, Shibjaya and Kashiswari either closely or distantly related to Ramkali, the rich and benign patriarch. The presence of the host of these helpless, invisible and unwanted widows finding refuge in their natal house is a poor reflection on the efficacy of the *Dayabhaga* law in terms of the widows' property rights and its efficacy in economic and social terms. The emaciated and haggardly figure of the once dominating Mokshada in her natal village, Shankari's suicide in the city of Calcutta coupled with the invisibility of other widows in the public space, exposes besides the defunct land rights of the upper caste and class widows, that are more of an exception than a rule, the lacunas in the patriarchal joint family system governed by the principle of exclusivity, the cultural marginalisation of the widows in a culturally nuanced village society, and lastly the widow remarriage paradigm.

The representation of the two contrastive models of circumscribed and transgressive widows Mokshada and Shankari in the novel deflates the patriarchal restrictive and prescriptive code and the widow remarriage paradigm as empowering paradigms for widows. As a circumscribed widow religiously adhering to the patriarchal purity/pollution paradigm and dietary and dress code etc., Mokshada for a considerable length of time is located in the valorised position of an 'ideal circumscribed widow' exercising authority in the domestic territory. However, the distinctive deterioration in Mokshada's physical and mental health with an adverse impact on her personality would contest the register of renunciation as an effective variable for widows unlike Phaniyamma. "But it had broken her (Satyabati's) heart

to see how shattered that once fearsome person now appeared” (*The First Promise* 301). Mokshada’s violatory actions such as eating fish from the non-vegetarian kitchen has a cogent connect with the Freudian claims of the inter-relationality between the repression of sexual desires and psychological aberrations in the person.

In binary opposition to Mokshada the representation of Shankari in the novel firstly as a transgressive, and later as a fallen widow who scandalizes in her youth her patron Ramkali’s household on a day of marriage celebration is also premised on patriarchal assumptions. The priest’s verdict equating a fallen woman with a dead person is reiterative of not only the patriarchal mindset but more poignantly the socio-cultural framework of village patriarchies that does not offer space for sexual transgression for a widow. The betrayal of Shankari by her paramour similar to that of Prem (*Idannamam*) followed by identical repercussions in terms of physical exploitation and loss of social prestige reiteratingly demonstrate the unviability of the widow remarriage paradigm in the Indian rural context across regions and time. The novel also addresses the polemics of the legitimisation of illegitimate children born to fallen widows in society shifting the onus to the transgressing widow.

As has been stated the marginalised women subjectivities have to negotiate the patriarchal world with their empirical knowledge of it. Mokshada, for instance, though a distant relative of the patriarchal head is able to exercise authority in the house as a staunch circumscribed widow intimidating others with her formidable adherence to the prescriptive and restrictive code. Located in the valorised location of an ‘exemplary widow,’ she further consolidates her fragile position as a distant relative in the house with the cooption of the patriarchal benevolence of Ramkali, the patriarchal head.

Crucially though, the gradual deterioration in the personality of Mokshada in her physical and mental health is contestatory of the register of renunciation as an effective and lasting mode

of resistance and also the power/knowledge paradigm. No longer desirous of carrying on the façade of authority and kinship, the distant vision of her ritual mourning on charitable grounds to be performed by Ramkali in the absence of a close kin is painful to her. As Satyabati ruminates, the matured Mokshada's transformed personality as a withdrawn and pensive woman in a way is foregrounded on the knowledge of her positionality in the household. "What then had been the basis of her authority? Or was it precisely because she had no such right that Mokshada used to flaunt her vain power? Because she knew too well that the hollow wall would collapse the moment she let it go?" (302).

Correspondingly, the transgressing widow Shankari betrayed by her paramour is lost in the city of Calcutta serving as a 'paan maker' in a rich family of low caste people. Saddled with an illegitimate daughter she is forced to impart the false identity of a widow to her unmarried daughter. Shankari's suicide and Mokshada's pathetic condition are a potent comment on the patriarchal claims of benevolence to widows and a disclaimer to the widow remarriage paradigm as an empowering paradigm. As a disjunct to these two variables of widows, the relocation of Shankari's daughter in the empowered social centre as an educated woman and Mokshada's advocacy of Satyabati's move to migrate to the city for the education of her children reiterate the need to emancipate women in social and economic terms. "All my life I [Mokshada] have lashed out at you [Satyabati].... Now I see that you are a winner. You have shown us! It's really good that you hatched this plan-[move out to city]" (298).

Dinatarini, Shibjaya, Kashiswari and Mokshada uniformly represent the class of conformist widows in terms of their obedience to the prescriptive and restrictive social code. Most remarkably, they do succeed in creating for themselves some space and agency in their private/domestic territory with their inherent or imbibed knowledge of the patriarchal mechanism. These women, to a fairly large extent, succeed in attaining power with the knowledge paradigm with their culinary skills,

adherence to rituals, social customs and conventions. For such workaholic Hindu widows, kitchen is the space where they can not only wield power but also devise indigenous ways of entertainment. Thus Mokshada, the self-styled proprietress in the domain of kitchen looked after the 'ritual purity of the food that entered the kitchen' (10) busy in preparing pickles and various varieties of sweets especially to please Ramkali and consolidate her marginalised positionality in the family. Unlike Durga, Mokshada and Alamelu (*Two Virgins*) certainly carve out some space for themselves, however, the internalisation of patriarchy by these widows relocates them in patriarchy as complicit agents of oppression or suppression.

The focus in *The First Promise* is not so much on disembodied sexuality of the widows in Brahminical patriarchies as on the cultural marginalisation of the widows in a culturally nuanced society. The practice of tonsure, the dietary and dress code, purity/pollution paradigm and the notion of exclusivity in patriarchy consistently work towards the legitimised cultural marginalisation of widows. Similar to cultural colonisation which is the worst form of colonisation, cultural marginalisation of the socially ostracized women in joint and extended families is operative in social, economic, physical and psychological terms.

Moving on from the Brahminical patriarchy of Assam and Bengal to feudal patriarchy of Bundelkhand region in Uttar Pradesh as depicted in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam*—the lives of two widows of two generations, the old matriarch Bau and young daughter-in-law Prem are largely governed by the polemics of land rights. Foregrounded in the feudal peasantry of a village Sonpur in Bundelkhand apparently governed by the *Mitakshara* school of Hindu law, the polarities of dominance and subordination in a feudal patriarchy are manifest in *Idannamam* though the sub-text evinces ample evidence of patriarchal benevolence.

The prime motivating force behind Rattan Singh's live-in-relationship with the young widow Prem and the ensuing legal

battle between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law duo for the custody of Prem's teenaged young daughter Manda is crucially foregrounded in the polemics of land and inheritance rights. Bau, the elderly mother-in-law takes refuge in the neighbouring village of Shyamali with her relative Pancham Singh in the aftermath of her widowed daughter-in-law Prem's desertion of her marital house for her brother-in-law Rattan Singh's house. Despite vast dissimilarities in terms of their acts of submission and violation of the prescriptive social code and mental framework both the widows inscrutably become the site for patriarchal operations. Prem's commodification by her paramour Rattan Singh, on the one hand, and the embezzlement of Bau's land by conniving and contriving patriarchal forces despite the intervention of benevolent patriarchal agency is suggestive of the widows' systematised marginalisation in a rural patriarchy partly on account of the subversive patriarchal operations but also due to denial of the sources of knowledge to women. It is only when a woman succeeds in relocating herself in the subject position as Manda does she can resist or desist patriarchal agency with or without patriarchal support. The victimisation of Prem at the hands of the combined subversive and coercive forces of Rattan Singh and Abhilakh Singh is foregrounded primarily in her objectified location. The long debate between Bau and Manda in *Idannamam* offers a contemporary critique of widowhood in a historic and socio-cultural context.

Similarly, the pregnant widow Resham's murder in *Chakk* is foregrounded in the polemics of land rights of a widow's illegitimate child and is not an honour killing as projected. Resham's illegitimate child, more than a social embarrassment, could be a potent rival to the family as a claimant to the ancestral land and property. Most crucially, the defeat of the benign and gender-friendly patriarchs in these three texts vindicates the feminist claims of a discursive patriarchal structure. The appropriation of Manda's land coupled with the exploitation of

her vulnerable widowed mother in physical and economic terms and the latter's cooption against her own family despite a very strong patriarchal support system (*Idannamam*), Giribala's self immolation and the plight of Saru Guissainee and Durga (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) engages us in a new kind of debate in the nation state where even the rural widow in the upper caste and class hierarchy is denied social agency and agential voice and is located on the margin of margins nullifying the tall claims of patriarchal protection and benevolence.

The dynamics of land operates at an altogether different level in poor peasantries though here too the site of victimiation as usual is the woman. In Dalip Kaur Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* the *Mahabharata* tale is inverted to the level of ordinary peasantry where the jealousy of four brothers culminates in the murder of the female protagonist's husband. More than a subversion of the *Mahabharata* narrative the polygamous marriage in the novel is related to the dynamics of land. In fact most polygamous marriages in villages are practiced to avoid the division of land and the non-cooperating women have to face the repercussions as Bhano does. Correspondingly, the members in the *Jat* peasant family in *Chaak* are not averse to the young widow Resham's marriage to her deceased husband's foolish brother, Resham too comprehends the dynamics of *jar aur joru* - the cogent connect between 'land and a woman' too well. "You (Sarang) too would understand this very fact that Doria needs a woman and Than Singh needs both-land as well as labour. How profitable would it be for my elder brother-in-law Than Singh master that I go to Doria's share along with the share of Karamveer and my brother-in-law gets two slaves free of cost—his strong built foolish brother and I as his wife in the bargain" (*Chaak* 22).

Thus, the widow remarriage paradigm in an underprivileged *Jat* peasantry has an altogether different dimension for here it functions as a viable and profitable option to keep the land within the family. Both the widows—Bhano and Resham—are

coaxed to marry their brother-in-laws/law and the crisis in both the instances is precipitated by the widows' refusal to comply with the scheme.

This is not to say that these novels uniformly project women as passive agents of patriarchal oppression and violence. Greater the oppression and suppression greater would be the resistance, the interface between dominance and resistance is paradigmatic. "Dominance gives rise to resistance, and resistance emerges as a consequence of power play" (Bande). Representation of resistance in women's fictional narratives articulates both the existence of the dominant power structure and the female desire to disavow and defy the structure. In the backdrop of Third World liberation movements there has been a proliferation of resistance literature manifest in "a significant corpus of literary writing, both narrative and poetic, as well as a broad spectrum of theoretical analysis of the political, ideological and cultural parameters of this struggle" (Harlow xvi). Resistance in the present context signifies 'literary resistance' which need not necessarily be oppositional or contesting, it can be cooptive.

In a very significant way these women as co-agents of patriarchy would learn to create fissures in the system from within, and as Foucault would say it is in the relationship between the individual and the institution that we find power operating most clearly rather than simply viewing power in a negative way, as constraining and repressing. Foucault's argument that even the most constraining and oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behaviour rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behaviour is valid here for the likes of Kusuma (*Idannamam*) and Durga and Saru Gossainee (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) who are as a rule not always the passive dupes but emerge as active agents co-opting the combative/subversive strategies of resistance.

Judged by normative victimhood paradigm Durga would fit into the archetypal victim model. So would Prem in *Idannamam*.

The metaphors of a 'ghostly witch,' 'an old vulture,' 'the graveyard' for Durga are intermittently evoked to corroborate the image of the 'glorified' victimhood. The following introductory remarks of the commentator locate Durga in the archetypal 'glorified victim' frame: "Out of the three widow characters, only Durga did not fight against her *inevitable fate*.' She accepted *destiny*, observed all the rituals with *implicit faith*. But she was also hounded by human vultures, who snatched away all her possessions"(Kotoky 69).

Contrarily, it could be argued that within the patriarchal familial framework Durga is neither a passive dupe nor a passive recipient but an active subject and agent for her actions are contestatory of the above-quoted remarks of the author. One could, for instance, envisage in her observance of all prescribed rituals and injunctions a kind of strategic subversive mechanism that one learns as an insider within an institution. For a person inhabiting the marginal territory or space in an institution it becomes imperative to have a systematic knowledge about one's world and its functional mechanism. Mokshada of *The First Promise* is another potent example of a conformist who can subvert patriarchy in her own interest within the restricted boundaries of her defined role with the co-option of Ramkali, the patriarchal head. The transgressing women like Ammu (*The God of Small Things*), Saru Gussainee and Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) and Kusuma (*Idannamam*) can create fissures in the patriarchal power centre mainly because of their knowledge of the dynamics of patriarchy.

These subaltern subjectivities are not only significant for highlighting the paradigmatic binaries of dominance and subordination but in a more significant and systematised way attest the Foucauldian paradigm of power/knowledge. As Sara Mills posits, Marxist theorisations such as that of Louis Althusser, of the State's role in oppressing people, have been found to be largely unsatisfactory since they focus only on one way traffic of power, from the top to downwards (Mills, *Michel Foucault*).

Foucault's bottom-up model of power with his focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society, offers an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested, and allows an analysis which focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes.

Correspondingly, the widows Saru and Bau in *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Idannamam* respectively and Mammachi in *The God of Small Things* as the proprietress of Paradise Pickles & Preserves Factory confront the challenging circumstances of their life in a positive way with the cooption of men—Saru with the co-option of Mohidhar Babu, a poor young Brahmin much below her in the caste and class hierarchy, Bau with the cooption of benevolent patriarchal agency of Pancham Singh—a benign patriarch and Mammachi with the cooption of her son Chako. Durga's preference for her natal family at the cost of the forfeiture of her property rights in her marital family too is presumably foregrounded in her knowledge of the patriarchal mechanism that offers to a widow greater degree of freedom and space in her natal family. It is altogether a different trajectory that Saru loses the battle at the subterranean level at the hands of Mohidhar, her confidante—a contriving 'poor' employee who runs away with the cash and the box of Durga's golden ornaments. These 'marginalised' women's knowledge of patriarchy as insiders invariably empowers them to a certain extent in dislocating or relocating the power centre from within.

Supportive of the argument is the fact that these women are not always located in the victimised location but quite often emerge as active subjects and knowledgeable agents capable of negotiating, to a fairly large extent, the balance of power in their favour. Similarly, in the backdrop of repeated references to Prem's emaciated figure, disheveled appearance as a sexually exploited and battered woman and her defiant withdrawal of the custody case of her daughter Manda along with an amount of fifty thousand rupees to her daughter much against the

pressure from discursive forces undoubtedly denotes the shift in the victim/victimiser paradigm. Likewise Resham, the rebel widow in *Chaak* is murdered no doubt but the taking up of her cause by her cousin Sarang with no personal stake in the matter is suggestive of the new trope in the victim/victimiser binary.

Resistance thus emanates from within. Equipped with their knowledge of the dynamics of patriarchy these women can dislocate/relocate the power centre as and when the need arises. Durga's portrayal as the stereotyped victim deprived of not only her property rights but of access to her marital house also needs to be interrogated in the same context of the power/knowledge paradigm. Significantly, Durga is advised by a group of women folk to stay in her marital family in order to claim her share in her deceased husband's property. "Maichana, listen, to get your property you must go back and stay in your husband's village" (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 82), an advice that had earlier been endorsed by Indranath.

Crucially, Durga's enigmatic silence on her property rights could be translated as the subaltern silence impregnated with hidden meanings and intentions. Could we not in her overt preference for her natal house under the protection of her, rich and benign *Adhikar* father and equally considerate future *Adhikar* brother look for knowledgeable motives? Was her natal family not a safer and far more comfortable location than her hostile marital place? Thus, the inference that her marked preference for the natal family location at the affordable cost of the forfeiture of her property rights, is foregrounded in her superior knowledge of the patriarchal support system. Her silence on the polemic issue of her property rights in her matrimonial family could be construed as the most nuanced example of the 'subaltern speak.' Among various resistance modes, silence manifests one of the finest and nuanced modes of feminist resistance. Barring one exception of outburst when her desire to go on pilgrimage is thwarted by her sister-in-law, Durga throughout maintains a paradigmatic silence. Similarly, her final decision to go alone

to her marital family is also firmly grounded in the knowledge paradigm that would consolidate her position as an ideal *pativrata* widow.

In addition to the knowledge paradigm, Durga's 'spoken' desire to go on pilgrimage could be viewed in two ways. As Meenakshi Mukherjee posits a journey is especially significant experience for a woman who normally inhabits an enclosed space (*Realism and Reality* 76). Secondly, it has an implicit connect with the 'unspoken' knowledge of the valorised spirituality paradigm in the Indian patriarchy where the patriarchal values are subsumed in the domain of female spirituality and its other co-ordinates in the form of possession, spirit medium, esotericism or Shamanism. Not only in India but in many south Asian and African societies patriarchal values tend to be subverted or rejected in the realm of female spirituality. A woman in the spiritual field may defy every social norm, reject marriage, transcend all stereotypes, violate notions of 'feminine modesty' and break ritual taboos, tradition, orthodoxy and convention which attempted to control her and seek the godhead—the women saints Akka Mahadevi, Karaikkal Ammeiyar and Mirabai are a few notable examples. Irigaray's critique of spirituality is appreciative of the societies of East for their vindication of female spirituality and she relates the marginalisation of women in the west to the Judeo-Christian religions which predominantly believe in male God (qtd. in Ingram 46-72).

Complicit in Durga's passionate desire to go on pilgrimage could apparently be the subversive attempt to carve out some public space for herself as opposed to the claustrophobic private space. Much in a similar way Giribala's assistance extended to Mark, a Christian missionary scholar in retrieving ancient Assamese manuscripts has similar undertones. No wonder the rural women, more specifically the widows find refuge in spirituality.

The stereotype of a widow is available in the poor old granny

in *Nectar in a Sieve*. Deprived of any familial or social support the old lady is a self-sufficient and self dependant woman. However, her unattended dead body found by the roadside reflects the plight of the old, solitary women and the declining sense of collectivity and community feeling in the villages. Rukmani's lament that the hospital in the village could be of some help to the old ailing granny reveals the infra-structural drawbacks in the villages, the lack of health, sanitation, drinking water facilities etc, for instance. The women folk in the villages are the worst victims of these social ailments. Widows like Alamelu (*Two Virgins*) are relatively fortunate to have their natal family support and despite their marginalised location and subsequent ill treatment within the family they are at least saved from the ignominy of a pathetic roadside death.

In a patriarchal setup a widow is invariably relegated to a position of stigmatised invisibility. Extreme level of victimisation is largely responsible for generating in a widow a kind of perversity signifying the internalisation of patriarchy to such an extent that they emerge as complicit agents of oppression and suppression. *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *The First Promise* and *Idannamam* concentrate on elderly, normative widows' dislocation from the site of victim/victimised to that of victimiser that could partly be attributed to the internalisation of patriarchal norms. Durga (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) emerges as the greatest predator for her young, vulnerable niece Giribala causing the latter incessant humiliation and embarrassment on several occasions for the slightest breach of prescribed social or moral code. Her various self-imposed subversive acts to 'safeguard' Giribala's conduct in public and private are evidently motivated by and grounded in perversity. Correspondingly, Bau's (*Idannamam*) hardened stance towards her transgressing daughter-in-law Prem is also grounded in her patriarchal orientation that demands a strict and unconditional adherence to the prescriptive and restrictive code to which she too as a widow had subscribed. The shifting of location from the site of

victim to victimiser for Mokshada (*The First Promise*) in relation to the women folk in the household also works in similar lines. Only Phaniyamma is a notable exception to the rule with the total annihilation of her self, the 'I' which requires an exceptionally strong physical and mental makeup and religious/spiritual orientation.

It could arguably be inferred that these elderly widows' attitudinal and aptitudinal antipathy towards the womenfolk is foregrounded in their location in an exclusively female world in a Brahminical patriarchy where the male members maintain what Fanon in the colonial context defines as 'the principle of reciprocal exclusivity' (*The Wretched of the Earth*). Patriarchy in definitive terms functions on the principle of domination versus subordination. These hierarchies percolate in the structure to such an extent so as to permeate among women too in terms of a systematised hierarchisation between the elderly and younger widows. For instance, Dinatarini, Shibjaya, Kashishwari and Mokshada are presented vis-à-vis the fallen widow Shankari (*The First Promise*), Bau vis-à-vis Prem (*Idannamam*) Phaniyamma vis-à-vis Dakshaajini Phaniyamma and Durga vis-à-vis Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*). The contrastive images of circumscribed widows are uniformly juxtaposed to the transgressing and fallen widows; with the sole exception of Dakshaajini all the transgressing widows end up as losers in emotional and social terms.

Disembodied Female Sexuality

The sexuality paradigm is no longer an alien paradigm but has been identified as one of the defining and deciding coordinates in the contemporary Indian feminist canon. Arguably, in the backdrop of the changing socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts of urbanisation, market economy and onslaught of print and visual media female sexuality is revisited and reclaimed in the literary canon. However, this is not to disclaim

the presence of sexually liberated and assertive women, specifically the widows in the male canon. As a significant point of departure from his two illustrious contemporaries Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Sarat Chandra, Tagore had insightfully addressed the dynamics of a widow's sexuality in *Chokher Bali* as early as 1903. When a lot has been said about the subversive feminist modes of resistance, the fact of a widow's exploitation at the sexual, social and economic level is the most common but the most devastating and problematizing proposition from the feminist point of view. Money and property are verily the Marxian paradigms of power lack of which dislocates the position of a widow, Durga and Shankari in terms of social esteem and economic stability. Conversely, the exploitation of the economically empowered Saru Gussainee and Prem's marginalised location in the second marriage, the pregnancy of the widow Resham and her murder and Sarang's relationship with the school teacher and last but certainly not the least Giribala's problematic self immolating act -- all are reiteratively suggestive of the new trope of female sexuality.

A Saga of South Kamrup apparently engages in two types of negotiating strategies in terms of sexuality—the one manifest in the imaginary that would reiterate the Freudian postulates of women's sexuality and the signification of dreams as indicators of a person's repressive and suppressive desires. This duality partly sustains the young and beautiful widow in the socially sanctioned definitive role. Her dream-world becomes the site for the fulfillment of her unfulfilled and suppressed and repressed desires. But the question 'for how long?' remains inconclusive in this open ended text. Conversely, another variable in terms of Giribala's self-immolation is far more crucial and polemic.

Giribala, the youngest of the three widows is the only woman to have partial access to education and substantial natal family support from her father, the present *Adhikar* and full sympathy from her brother, the future *Adhikar*. Polemically though, education for Giribala does not signify empowerment—physical,

familial or social. In the backdrop of Giribala's comfortable familial and social positionality in the comfort zone her self-immolation contests both the economic empowerment and the emancipatory paradigms. Unlike Durga, for Giribala, economic and social security in terms of money and natal family support is certainly not the problematic zone as is collaborated by her mother's retaliatory remarks to the probing women folk about her daughter's share in her deceased husband's property.

Giribala's father, the patriarchal head of the *sattra* is a benign patriarch, so is her brother, the future *Adhikar*. Giribala's problematic act of self immolation therefore needs to be investigated firstly, in the context of the practice of *sati*, and secondly in the context of a young widow's sexuality. The sancronisation of the act of self-immolation of a widow in the Hindu *Dharmshastras* translated into a socially canonised practice is a well known fact.

The discourse on the widows' sexuality in *A Saga of South Kamrup* also needs to be critiqued in the context of the Vaishnavite cult simply for the fact that the widows here belong to the Damodariya Vaishnavite sect. The *sattradhikar* and their tenant disciples in the Kamrup district were the followers of saint Damodar Deva who was the disciple of saint Sankar Deva. Vaishnavism, an offshoot of the Bhakti movement flourished in many parts of India especially in Bengal under the disciples of Chaitanya, known as Gaudiya Vaishnavites, Assam and the Brij region of Uttar Pradesh. As a non-conformist Hindu cult, the Vaishnavites' celebration of the love of Radha, a married woman with Krishna in the Bhakti register relates to the legitimisation of transgression in love. Radha, the transgressing woman's conceptualisation as the 'archetypal beloved' finds its literary co-ordinates in abundance in the contemporary literature. As Rajul Sogani avers, the construct of the transgressing widow first originated in Bengal where Vaishnava poetry had long celebrated the love of Radha for Krishna. In *A Saga of South Kamrup*, the social attitudinal complacency to

Saru Gossainee's amorous relationship with Mohidhar Bapu, her low caste Brahmin employee could be critiqued in the aforesaid Vaishnavite context of Radha-Krishna love paradigm.

Unlike Maitreyi Pushpa's serious engagement in *Chaak* and *Idannamam* with the sexuality paradigm, Indira Goswami does not offer a radical transgressive model of a widow in Giribala in terms of the violation or defiance of the prescribed moral code of virginity and suppression of sexual desires. Contrarily, Resham's blatant assertion of her sexuality in *Chaak* is a violation of the Hindu value system that valorises disembodied sexuality in general but most forcefully in the context of a widow. Sumi, the female protagonist's remarks in Shashi Deshpande's *A Matter of Time* in this regard are an indictment of the Indian female mindset. "Female sexuality, we're ashamed of owning it, we can't speak of it, not even to our own selves" (Deshpande 191). However, the widow Resham's public assertion of her sexuality deflates what Irigaray defines as a positive quest for theorising and representing the specificity of 'femininity'—of woman's sexual identity in positive terms.

Significantly though, unconventional models of women exhibiting uninhibited assertion of sexuality are available in epics and Puranas in the persona of Surpanakha (*Ramayana*), Devyani and Vishakha (*Mahabharata*) with their contestatory female attitude towards sexuality, "... she (Surpanakha) spoke of her desires, she flaunted them. And therefore, were the men, unused to such women, frightened? Did they feel threatened by her? I think so. Surpanakha, neither ugly nor hideous, but a woman charged with sexuality, not frightened of displaying it—it is this Surpanakha I'm going to write about" (Deshpande 191). Correspondingly, Dakshaajini (*Phaniyamma*) too is located in the domain of unashamed and extrovert widows for not only breaking the silence on the tabooed subject but unlike Resham in finally subverting her sexual transgression/exploitation to a favorable end in terms of her prospective marriage with her seducer. Irrespective of the situational variations in the context

of these transgressing widows, both these variables have a distinct connect with the land/property paradigm. The happy denouement in Dakshaajini's case needs to be viewed in the backdrop of her seducer's familial location as her brother-in-law and thus as an insider not a potent threat to the family property like Resham's undisclosed paramour.

The significant point to be noted is that such overt transgressions are not to be overlooked beyond caste hierarchy as is evident from the disapproving familial and social stance towards Giribala's relationship with Mark, a Christian missionary. The ironic implications are implicit. The Christian missionary Mark's honesty and self control is juxtaposed to the villainy of Brahmin Mohidhar who runs away after the embezzlement of Saru's land deeds and Durga's ornaments in the bargain. Combining the transgressive and fallen woman models of a widow in the persona of Giribala her self-exploitative act of self-immolation would engage us in a gynocritical discourse on the polemics of 'what does a woman want.' Arguably, a woman aims at something beyond the economic or emancipatory empowerment. A woman's right of self determination and self assertion of the bodily needs is the point of contestation here.

At the outset of the nineteenth century two separate kinds of fear were associated with *strishiksha* -- women's education, namely, the fear of sexual intrigues and the impending threat of widowhood. Indranath's desire to educate his widowed sister, Satyabati's pioneering attempts at self education, and later her bold step to migrate to Calcutta with the primary objective of educating her children can be associated with the emancipatory programmes of Brahmo Samaj and the *strishiksha* paradigm. Corresponding to Tanika Sarkar's arguments that the educated woman shares with the immoral one, an extra-marital desire (Sarkar 157-158), Satyabati's self-educatory efforts are under severe censorship of orthodox men and women in the village as well as the city and Sarang with all the predefined negativities

of an educated woman vis-à-vis the domesticated, chaste, good village women advertently or inadvertently substantiates these fears. Sarang's defiance of the social standards of morality is not restricted to verbal protest but her relationship with Masterji corresponds to the violation of conjugal morality and brings her very close to widowhood. Contrarily, the sub-text in *Idannamam* in terms of the feminist claims of sexuality and widow remarriage evinces the conformist approach with its primary focus on the more complex post-remarriage consequences, the widow's sexual exploitation and commodification. As a matter of fact all the three remarried widows -- the *kulin* Brahmin Shankari (*The First Promise*), Prem (*Idannamam*) and Bhano (*And Such Is her Fate*) from the *Jat* peasantry of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab respectively—are uniformly subjected to sexual exploitation and commodification.

Most significantly, representation of a person, in this context of a widow remarried or otherwise is not an innocent act and needs to be constantly interrogated in the backdrop of political, economic, cultural and ideological motivations at work in the projection, popularisation or valorisation of an image of a person or vice versa. The politics of representation is no longer restricted to the binaries of Orient/Occident, coloniser/colonised in the postcolonial discourse or the subject/other polarities in the feminist discourse but is operative in the native discourses of the rural, *Dalit*, tribal etc. The representation of Resham as a 'sexually liberated widow' posits the need to examine her representation in terms of authenticity and motivation. Resham's 'feminist' questions similar to Satyabati's questions are foundational questions related to the definition of a sinner, for instance. "Who is a sinner-you or me? One who gives birth or the one who forces to abort the child)... Are you oblivious of the difference between the living and the dead?" (*Chaak* 19) What is it that locates these two rebellious interrogators in two dissimilar locales vis-a-vis the coordinates of identity, subjectivity and agency? It is in the contextualised context of

these defining and determining coordinates that the politics of representation comes in. Given the location and socio-cultural character of a normative village of *Jat* peasants in U. P. and the familial positionality of Resham as a peasant house wife in a joint family, her interrogation of patriarchy and the 'liberated, unconventional attitude' towards her act of sexual transgression sounds unconvincing and violatory of the principle of verisimilitude.

Maitreyi Pushpa's portrayal of Resham as a sexually uninhibited woman has resonance of Krishna Sobti's *Mitro Marjani* in the eponymous novel (1967) that has invited much flake for the re/presentation of an unusually extrovert and uninhibited married woman in terms of her assertion of sexual claims in the conventional rural setup. However, the historical location of Sobti's *Mitro* in the domain of sexual transgressors as the daughter of a prostitute and the rigid, lukewarm response of her ill-natured workaholic husband to her sexual advances to some extent vindicate *Mitro's* violation of social and moral code. Significantly, *Mitro* has been imbibed with a vivacious personality and a distinct individuality in terms of not only her asocial lingua franca and abandoned exuberance but also her selfless actions in the larger interests of the family without the self consciousness of the sacrificing act. Given the fine streaks of *Mitro's* personality her narcissist and celebratory attitude towards her sexuality impart to her a credibility which is denied to Resham. The polemics of Resham's sexuality can be critiqued in the context of Irigaray's plea for positive quest for theorising and representing the specificity for 'femininity'- of women's sexual identity in positive terms. Resham's assertion of her sexuality violatory of this specified 'femininity' cannot be defined in positive terms in the rural socio-cultural context.

In the last few decades there has been a spate of feminist writings in India in English as well as the corpus of *Bhasa* literature. Quizzically though, quite often feminism collates with the bold and blatant assertion or a superimposed celebration of

female sexuality. The writer's engagement in *Chaak* and *Idannamam* with the cardinal feminist postulates of a disembodied woman's sexuality, violence against women, the twofold paradigms of identity and social agency for women in the context of two marginalised subjectivities—Resham and Kusuma respectively needs to be interrogated in the backdrop of the polemics of representation and the implicit and explicit danger of the proliferation of the 'discourses of knowledge' on sexuality Foucault is wary of (*The History of Sexuality*). As Foucault has observed, one may experience a sense of gratification by daring to speak openly on a subject considered to be a taboo as Resham does, this daring act of speaking on a taboo subject for Foucault has the appearance of a deliberate transgression, of consciously defying established power, and the knowledge of being subversive.

Maitreyi Pushpa seeks to represent transgressing women as opposed to the construction of socially disembodied woman's sexuality in her portrayal of Kusuma, the deserted co-wife and Resham, the fallen pregnant widow. These two variables of sexual transgressors need to be investigated vis-a-vis the feudal patriarchal value system, and even more crucially in the context of the nuanced socio-cultural milieu of a village. The tacit family support to Kusuma's transgressive alliance with the uncle of her husband is partially palatable in view of her victimised location as a tortured and ill-treated woman in her marital family, on the one hand, and the marginalised location of her paramour as a sickly, uncared-for bachelor. Kusuma's transgressive sexual relationship by her own admission is violatory of the normative social code, however, it has a cogent connect with her social stigmatisation as a barren woman and the subsequent diminishing familial positionality. As Catherine Kohler Riessman has remarked: "(A) child solidifies a wife's often fragile bond with a spouse in an arranged marriage and improves her status in the joint family and larger community" (112). It could be averred that the socially stigmatised relationship between these

two marginalised beings is located within the threshold of patriarchal benevolence, conversely, Resham's representation as a liberated and emancipated widow is brought to crisis in the backdrop of her asocial, undemocratic language and behaviour.

Widow Remarriage Paradigm

The widow remarriage paradigm has been attached with social stigmatisation in the social and literary canon in the colonial state albeit as has been argued by various Indologists and historians, Altekar for instance, widow remarriage was not prohibited in India and was practiced in many village communities mainly for economic constraints—for the protection of family land. The customs of 'Chaddar dalna' in Punjab and 'Bachiya Karna Vida' in Bundelkhand have been socially sanctioned practices. As already stated the widow question with its prime coordinate of remarriage was centrally located in the nineteenth century reform movement, however the literary representations of the remarried/resettled widows in these novels are contestatory of the remarriage variable.

The widow remarriage paradigm in the Brahminical and feudal patriarchies conforms to the normative patriarchal value system corresponding to the dominant male canon for the post-remarriage repercussions for the vulnerable widow. The female sexuality paradigm in terms of a woman's right to sexual pleasure is deflated not only in upper caste and class Brahmin and feudal patriarchies but is defunct and problematic among the low caste *Jat* peasantries and high class Syrian-Christian families as well. For the remarried widows Shankari (*The First Promise*), Prem (*Idannamam*) and Bhano (*And Such Is Her Fate*) their second marriages culminate in calamitous consequences—all of them left high and dry by their paramours after their sexual (Shankari, Bhano) and economic (Prem) exploitation. Single parenthood, poverty, prostitution, loss of social prestige and low self esteem are the normative consequences of these remarriages. The social

order does not signal any positive and progressive change for these remarried widows in the nation state as partakers of a similar kind of shame and ignominy as their fictional counterparts in the pre-independence male canon. If the social acceptability and destigmatisation of the widow are to be taken as signatory points of departure or change, the widow in the nation state has not made much headway from Bankim Chatterjee's *Kundanandini* (*Bisbriksha*) and *Rohini* (*Krishna Kanter* Vii).

The portrayal of the transgressing Shankari vis-à-vis a horde of law abiding and conforming widows in *The First Promise* is attuned to the dominant canon. The highly venerable priest's advice to Ramkali to consider a fallen woman as good as dead is reiterative of the patriarchal mindset, concomitantly though the stereotyped patriarchal mindset is interrogated in the novel by the female investigating agency of Satyabati. Linda J. Nicholson rightly avers that since women have to define themselves against the dominant discourse, they often speak the language of the dominant employing various subversive strategies in terms of parody and mimicry (Introduction). The inter-caste matrimonial alliance between Shankari's daughter Suhas, a proclaimed widow and Bhabtosh Biswas needs to be examined in the historic context of Ramabai Saraswati's critique of the double standards of morality in the Brahminical patriarchy which advocated widow remarriage with very few people coming forward, and if some did, ostracising them.

In a very significant way, the fallacy of the widow remarriage paradigm as an empowering paradigm is forcefully substantiated in Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate*. Located at the bottom rung of the class and caste hierarchy, the remarried widow Bhano's endless chain of problems in terms of social prestige and security are disclaimers of remarriage as an emancipatory paradigm. In the first instance, Bhano is subjected to brutal misery on account of fraternal jealousy for her refusal to be the co-wife for all the five brothers culminating in the murder of her husband, and

later as the remarried wife to be legitimately stigmatised as a woman of easy moral—both the variables are crucially revelatory of the intricacies of the patriarchal power structure where woman is always positioned in an objectified and commodified location for various reasons and purposes.

Extra marital relationships have been closely interrogated in the fictional writings of the first generation Indian English women writers. The female protagonists' engagement in liaison, adultery and divorce in Nayantara Sahgal, for instance demonstrates their overt as well as covert rejection, subversion and contestation of the patriarchal institutionalisation of matrimony. Implicit in Anita Desai's presentation of mentally and psychologically disturbed women is the critique of the institution of marriage and the underlying virtues in terms of conjugal happiness, compatibility and companionship etc. The portrayal of the widows in the novels of regional women writers Ashapura Devi, Indira Goswami and Maitreyi Pushpa discussed here as transgressors or fallen widows indubitably takes into cognisance the woman's sexuality paradigm. Resham (*Chaak*), Prem (*Idannamam*), Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) and Shankari (*The First Promise*)—all these literate, semi-literate young rural widows are transgressors in their own right. However, the act of transgression for these widows identically dovetails into a defeat in terms of personal disillusionment, physical and economic exploitation and social stigmatisation. Resham is burnt alive, it is her cousin Sarang who fights a losing battle for the deceased victim, the pervasive silence of the father of the unborn child meanwhile reiterating the marginalised location of the woman in terms of her physical vulnerability. Similarly, Prem is degraded to the status of a prostitute handed over by one man to another to be physically and emotionally devastated, Giribala's rebellion is translated into her self-immolation, Shankari's fate is in no way different from that of Prem as she too is impregnated and abandoned by her paramour in the city. Confronted with the bleak prospects of the impossibility of matrimonial settlement

for her illegitimate young daughter, suicide remains to be the only viable alternative for Shankari.

The close connect between these transgressing widows and their counterparts in the male canon specifically in the novels of Premchand, Bankimchandra and Rabindranath Tagore emphatically reflects the unviability of the widow remarriage paradigm in the Hindu rural society. The economic and sexual exploitation of the educated widow Gayatri by her manager Jnanshankar in Premchand's *Premashram* despite her superior economic and social positionality deflates the emancipatory paradigm of education for widows.

It could thus safely be inferred that in the backdrop of the Indian socio-cultural milieu, the village community is still governed by the patriarchal normative standards and the woman's sexuality paradigm is still an alien imposition, a virtual *Vishvriksha*—the 'Poison Tree' in the mental and social space. A woman's sexuality in general, a widow's in particular is visualised as a dangerous and disruptive force, it often transpires into a site for settling the familial and social battles and therefore needs to be channelised. "Woman's sexuality symbolizes manhood: its desecration is a matter of such shame and dishonor that it has to be avenged" (Menon and Bhasin 43).

Doubly Marginalised Women in Patriarchy

A patriarchal structure is strictly governed by a systematised order of hierarchies manifest in a strategic maintenance of the hegemonic male dominance among all castes and classes. These familial and social hierarchies transmitted to women operate in the binary configurations of the *sumangali* wife and the widow, the deserted wife, co-wife and the spinster; the widow and the co-wife, the mother of a son and the mother of a daughter/s, childless woman. Burdened with all the negativities these marginalised women are unequivocally located on the margins of patriarchy.

Going by the textual evidence the portrayal of Kusuma in *Idannamam* and Reshma in *Chaak* is apparently very significant for breaking the stereotype of an estranged, victimised wife and the conformist widow respectively. The transgressing women have verily enjoyed considerable amount of sympathy in the male canon, notably in the novels of Sarat Chandra but transgression is seldom followed by social approval or sanction in terms of marriage or legal property rights. Young Kusuma, a beautiful but deserted wife is denigrated by the adverse circumstances of her life not only to the status of a menial help in the joint household of her in-laws but forced to stay in the same house in the midst of her husband and her co-wife. Kusuma's forays into an adulterous relationship with her father-in-law's younger unmarried brother culminate in the birth of a posthumous son and the legitimisation of this illicit relationship by the patriarch Pancham Singh is his acknowledgement of the illegitimate son's property rights. The substantive support to this violating relationship in terms of social and moral ethics could be suggestive of the changing patriarchal values in villages with quite a few supportive progressive men folk resisting the subversive forces of patriarchy. In Kusuma's celebratory and exulting attitude towards her sexual experience, Maitreyi Pushpa could be located in the third historical 'Female' phase in the literary tradition (Elaine Showalter) when women reject both imitation and protest and turn instead to 'female experience' redefining and sexualising their 'external and internal experience.' Reshma's post-widowhood relationship and her subsequent pregnancy are apparently not supported by her marital family, however the presentation of such an unconventional character by normative socio-moral standards in itself suggests the women writers' uninhibited approach to sexuality. The fight here or elsewhere in Maitreyi Pushpa's other novels *Jhula Nut* and *Alma Kabutari*, for instance, is not gender based but is determined by the polarities of interests and priorities in public/political sphere.

The category of the co-wife and the 'other woman' also finds a representation in these novels. The wife has the social sanction to perform auspicious rituals but the co-option of the co-wife by patriarchy for its own interests and gain is very sly and subtle. 'Don't two sisters live under the same roof? Can't a co-wife be seen as a sister rather than a 'barb' (*The First Promise* 67). The aggrieved first wife Sharda (*The First Promise*) prefers the marginalised location of a co-wife to widowhood. "A widow! ... She would rather share the house with a hundred co-wives. Was there a curse worse than that of being widowed?" (*The First Promise* 103) Correspondingly, Saudamini's decision to move into the large family of her husband as a co-wife to escape the drudgery of her maternal uncle's family relates to her empirical knowledge of the co-wife's position in patriarchy which can define, co-opt and subvert any custom, practice and convention for its convenience. Therefore Ashapura Devi's feminist critique of polygamy foregrounded on the long interaction between Ramkali, the patriarch and Satyabati, the eternal truth seeker, the feminine prototype of mythical Nachiketa could be both insightful and innovative for the Indian feminist discourse in its search for indigenous paradigms.

The status of the doubly marginalised women subjectivities does not portend any change among the Anglicised Syrian-Christian community of *The God of Small Things*. At the very outset, Baby Kochamma apprises Ammu of her status as a divorced daughter and more so as a divorced daughter from an intercommunity marriage. A married daughter had no position in her parents' home. As for a divorced daughter—according to Baby Kochamma, she had no position anywhere at all. And more so as a divorced daughter from a love marriage, she had virtually no position, ironically though, herself a victimised, a doubly marginalised woman, Baby Kochamma does not join hands with the co-victim in the desired spirit of sisterhood but with the system.

Arguably, Baby Kochamma conflates with the oppressive

patriarchal system and not with Ammu mainly because unlike Ammu who remains a transgressor till the last moment of her life, Baby Kochamma has internalised the system so as to accept 'the fate of the wretched Manless woman'(Roy 45). Baby Kochamma is the by product of a society that indoctrinates women with patriarchal values in a very systematised and coercive manner. "... she (Kochamma) is awful ... but she also has a very sad story... she represents to me how terribly a society treats a woman and that it makes them that ... for me the real tragedy is when something terrible happens to a person is not the terrible thing, but the terrible person it makes you" (Roy, Interview, Nov. 2003 Web). Mammachi, Baby Kochamma and the village women are all in league in the denunciation of Ammu and her children seemingly for her non-compliance with the patriarchal norms and values in terms of her intercaste marriage, and later her clandestine affair with a low caste paravan which is an offence of far greater dimension no longer delimited to the private domain.

Vis-à-vis the intercaste marriages of Ammu and her brother Chako the novelist pinpoints the colonial mindset of an Anglicised Syrian Christian community where an intercaste matrimonial alliance with a white woman is a matter of pride. "It is through the endearing mimicking of their uncle Chako's own verbal overtures to Western culture and his hubris induced by British Ivy League education and the dotting of their class conscious grandmother over their mixed cousin Sophie Mol, that we find the exemplification of the typical Indian mindset that is torn between being loyal to one's own culture, and the secret yearning to distance oneself from that culture out of an unspoken understanding that it is in some way inferior to the Anglo/Colonial complex that has pervaded those that Europeans have subjugated throughout history".

III

The images of doubly marginalised category of women—widows, estranged-separated wives and co-wives are available in plenty in these novels located in Brahminical and feudal patriarchies, however when juxtaposed to their counterparts in the dominant male canon, the gynocritical portrayals and representations remarkably differ in terms of the familial or social positionality, modes of resistance and shifts in point of view of the widows' and other marginalised categories of women. The representation of these women is also caste specific and one could draw parallels between the images and representation of the hierarchically superior Brahmin women in *The First Promise* and Indira Goswami's *A Saga of South Kamrup*. The social hierarchies, on the contrary, operate at a totally different level in the feudal patriarchies in Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate*, a novel about the lower *Jat* peasantry in Punjab and feudal peasantry in *Idannamam* and *Chaak*.

Vis-à-vis the circumscribed widows the transgressing widows in these novels could broadly be located in two categories: (i) The widows in love (ii) The transgressing and fallen widows. Unlike the transgressing widows Shankari and Giribala, Saru Gossainee is able to maintain her dignity in the public space despite tremendous emotional and psychological stress at the personal level and submerged scandals. Drawing distinction between the widow in love and the transgressing widow Rajul Sogani observes the strength of the widow in love in surmounting the emotional stress and maintaining the status quo in the public domain in terms of dignity and honour. However, a widow in love has to undergo a greater degree of conflict, the tension between bodily desires and conscience in the backdrop of the oppositional pull of the personal and social forces. Thus Saru Gossainee has to cope with the dismal feelings of betrayal in absolute isolation. "Ah! There lay her love entangled in the

net like a snake.... Everything has come to an end" (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 204).

Corresponding to the uninhibited and celebratory attitude of volatile and extrovert epic women Surpanakha, Vishakha and Devyani towards their sexuality in the classical tradition these novels present the nuanced images of illiterate, semi-literate, extraordinaire extrovert village women—Sarang, Kalawati (*Chaak*) and Resham (*Idannamam*) exhibiting similar kind of liberated attitude towards their sexuality. Given the fact that representation is a political act, the portrayal of Kusuma and Resham as the transgressing models of a co-wife and widow respectively needs to be interrogated in the context of the socio-cultural specificities, locale and feudal patriarchal setup. The significant point of departure in *Idannamam* and *Chaak* is the trope of sexuality. Bau, an elderly and circumscribed widow in her adherence to the normative social code demands similar strict adherence to the code from her younger, widowed daughter-in-law and the violation of the code by the latter reflects, on the one hand the generation gap, and, on the other prioritisation of tradition. The co-option and subsequent exploitation of the remarried widows in *The First Promise* and *Idannamam* in sexual and economic terms by the coercive social forces is a vindication of the patriarchal code in prescriptive and restrictive terms locating these novels in the mimetic male tradition.

Women's property rights in general, specifically of the widows are cogently connected to women's marginalisation in a patriarchal system. Ranajit Guha's subaltern discourse was foregrounded in the property rights in Bengal (Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Perishable Empire*). More than an empirical reality, property rights of widows and other marginalised categories of women in various parts of the country are still a documental- legal reality, in fact a subversive empowerment paradigm as is uniformly witnessed in the case of the widows Durga, Giribala, Mokshada, Shankari, Prem and Resham and

the co-wife Kusuma representing the Brahminical as well as feudal patriarchies in the states of Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. Crucially though, both Maitreyi Pushpa and Indira Goswami contest the variable of land or money as a gender-empowering paradigm. Manda's loss of property is not a hindrance in her upward growth in the familial and social space. Similarly, Giribala's self-immolating act and Saru Gossainee's betrayal at the hands of her male confidante are foregrounded in the feminist paradigm of woman's sexuality and not in their property rights and thus a categorical disclaimer to the twofold paradigms of economic empowerment and stigmatised disembodied sexuality of a widow.

The foregrounding of these women in the pre-independence period in relation to the twofold empowerment and emancipatory paradigms and the key issue of widow remarriage in the patriarchal framework of a village patriarchy are in a way a reflection on the positionality of rural woman in the villages in the nation state. Central to the discussion in this chapter are the images and representation of widows as deviants, rebels and non-conformists in social terms refusing to compromise with darkness despite their location in the realm of darkness. One need not reject a system but can certainly cause ripples, cracks and fissures in the system. These gynocritical novels are seminal for offering new openings and pathways in terms of the widows' responses to, and acceptance or defiance of widowhood under variegated geographical, social and cultural locales that are not merely the 'signified' to tradition but 'signifiers' of the 'individual talent' in the dominant tradition.

NOTES

1. For a serious documentation of glorified motherhood in traditional African and Asian societies see Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*; Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. Correspondingly, for the valorised location of mother in Afro-American novels see Toni Morrison, *Beloved* and Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills* and *Mama Day*.
2. For detailed discussion on the practice of *sati* manifestive of the systematised,

religiously sanctioned and socially valorised marginalisation of widows see Tanika Sarkar, "Conjugalities and Hindu Nationalism: Resisting Colonial Reason and the Death of a Child-Wife," *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001) 191-224; Ishwarchand Vidyasagar's treatises, "Shakuntala" and "Seetar Banabas" were meant to arouse public consciousness on the question of the remarriage of child widows.

3. Also see Leela Dube, ed., *Visibility and Power: Essays on Women in Society and Development* (New Delhi: OUP, 1986); P. R. Jefferey and A. Lyon, *Labour Pains and Labour Power: Women and Childbearing in India* (London: Zed, 1989).
4. I find Foucault's discourse on Power/Knowledge extremely useful and insightful for an understanding of the widow's positionality in patriarchy and the operation of power relations in patriarchy where the oppression does not come from above but is embedded in the social structure.
5. Some notable instances of the subversion of *samskara* occur in U. R. Anantha Murthy's *Samskara* (1965) and Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain*. For a person inhabiting the marginal territory or space within the hierarchal patriarchy it becomes imperative to have a systematic knowledge about one's world and its functional mechanism. See Jaiwanti Dimri, "Constructing a Critique of a Spinster in Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey*," *Narratives of (Dis) Content: Critical Essays on Commonwealth Literature*, ed. M. Dassan (Chennai: Emerald, 2006).

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Chapter V

Rural Woman as Caste

Yes, this is the time to speak out
Awaited this moment all these years avidly;
Not for me alone
But, for all of us, this is the moment!
Time to dismantle demarcations;
Come dear
Let us speak out freely!

YAKOOB (Telgu poet)
“*Maa Tlaa Duda M*”

I am still a prohibited human being
Mine is an expelled breath
Tying a brab tree leaf to my waist
And a tiny spittoon to my mouth
Manu made me a wretched human animal among others
The moment he left a mark of prohibition on my face
My race was gradually murdered.

YENDURU SUDHAKAR (Tamil poet)
“Nethuti Prasna” (Bloody Question)

The trinity of caste, class and gender has been the locus of tension and conflict in India in terms of its socio-cultural history and the subsequent caste, class and gender specific representations in the literary and the social canon. The term caste occurs first in Spanish, but was applied by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century to the rigid social divisions found in

the Indian subcontinent (Pearsall and Trumble, *Oxford English Reference Dictionary* 227). These social divisions are mostly operative among the Hindus but are also practised among the Muslims, Christians and the untouchables as well. Originally derived from the Portuguese word *casta* it signifies lineage, breed or race but in the Indian socio-cultural context the defining variables of *varna*, *jati*, *jat*, *biradri* and *samaj* are the qualifying denominators of the institution of caste.

Dharma (the law of social order), *artha* (prosperity), and *kama* (pleasure) are stated to be the three *purusharthas*—pursuits of human existence in the Hindu tradition. To act according to the rules of his *dharma* for a person would imply the acceptance of his position and role in society for each individual on the basis of the caste in which a person was born and the norms which had been enunciated for that caste by the authors of the Law Books (Thapar 6-7). The Brahminical caste formulated the rules and strategically tried to maintain the hegemony of its caste in the form of a system of social hierarchies. “Rights were extended primarily to the privileged upper castes. The lower order had only obligations. The burden of society fell most heavily on the shoulders of the *sudras* and the untouchables who could claim hardly any rights and privileges” (Thapar 31).

In maintaining the social, political and caste hierarchies advantageous beliefs, rules and laws are propagated by the people in power in self interest and the powerless are indoctrinated to gradually accept these hegemonized beliefs and rules as ‘truths.’ Significantly for Foucault truth like knowledge is not an abstract entity and each society strategically circulates its own ‘regime of truths’ (qtd. in Sara Mills 74). In a very sly and subtle way certain statements are popularised in society through print and visual media in terms of the reproduction in books and other forms of representation such as films, paintings and posters etc. and transmitted in the social and literary discourse to be eventually internalised as ‘commonsense knowledge.’ The socio-cultural marginalisation of the *shudras*

in the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy is compatible with the Foucauldian premise, the caste hierarchy is maintained with the propagation of certain ideological beliefs, myths and practices to ultimately contribute towards the Foucauldian regime of truths.

Characteristically, an intricate feature of caste in Hindu society as Romila Thapar posits is that an individual is born into a particular caste and cannot acquire the status of any other caste. A person's birth in a particular caste is associated with the concept of *karma*. However, a person can improve his lot by conforming to *dharma* and can be reborn at a higher status in his next incarnation (Thapar 31). Reiterated and supplemented by many epic and puranic tales this 'knowledge' has infiltrated into the socio-cultural memory of Hindu society as one of the hegemonic 'truths.'

The genesis of the four major caste stratifications of the Hindu society into the hierarchical categories of *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya* and *Shudra* corresponding to the four parts of human body—the head, the body, the hands and the feet respectively is foregrounded in the *Purushsukta* of *Rig Veda*. The four *varnas* in the *Purushsukta* are mentioned in order of hierarchy wherein the first three are called *dwija* -- twice born while the *shudras* occupy the lowest position in the social hierarchy. The *Purushsukta*, an important part of the *Rig Veda* most commonly contains twenty four *mantras*. It is the following much debated *mantra* (text thirteen) that entails the crux of the caste stratification in the Hindu society:

*Brahminosya mukhamasit. Bahu rajanyah kritaha
Uru tadasya yadvaishyaha. Padhyagam shudro agayate.*

(*The Purush Sukta*,

[www.stephen-knapp.com/purush_sukta htm](http://www.stephen-knapp.com/purush_sukta.htm)).

From His face (or the mouth) came the Brahminas. From His two arms came the Rajaya (the Kshatriyas). From His two thighs

came the Vaishyas. From His two feet came the Shudras.

Crucially though, scholars are divided on this popular and hegemonic interpretation of the *Purushsukta* and the contestatory interpretations of the *Purushsukta* disclaim these social hierarchies vis-à-vis the human hierarchies. The versatile Sanskrit scholar Abhinav Gupta in his seminal work *Paratrisika Vivarna* offers a nuanced culture-specific exegesis of the *Purushsukta*. “Of the castes -- Brahmanas, etc, there is no fixed principle, for the caste distinction is artificial. The specification that Brahmanas alone are entitled for instruction can convince the silly herd. This has been conclusively clarified in detail by the Lord in ‘Mukutsamhita.’ In Trika, it is established without any effort at proving” (Abhinav Gupta 84).

Moreover, the analogy of the *shudras* with feet corresponding to their lowest position in social hierarchy engages in the polemics of reclamation of certain normative indigenous cultural paradigms vis-à-vis the western paradigms. The Indologists’ exegesis of the *Purushsukta* reiterates that the feet in Indian cultural milieu occupy a place of power and reverence and the act of touching one’s feet connotes a symbolic transference of energy from the sustaining pillars of human body—the feet to one’s head. Hence, it could safely be inferred that the analogy of the *shudras* with the feet in the *Purushsukta* is not a disparaging or demeaning preposition.¹ Arguably, the invisibility of such contestatory interpretations of the *Purushsukta* and other similar traditions vis-à-vis the hegemonic interpretations needs to be critiqued in the backdrop of the polemics of representation and valorisation of certain ideologies and value systems.

Other canonical Hindu texts offering the primary theoretical framework for social stratifications and supportive of the hierarchical caste system of Hindu society have been the *Manusmriti* and *Dharmshastras*. What is significant in the contextualised context of the low caste woman is her pervasive invisibility in these hegemonic texts in her subsuming within the two constructs of the ‘woman’ and the ‘low caste.’ In contrast

to these canonical Hindu texts, the anti-Brahminial religions—Buddhism and Jainism—which evolved as a protest against the institution of caste and Brahminical hegemony can be credited for the new caste configurations. In a very significant way the open, unconditional entry of men and women in the Buddhist *sangha* irrespective of caste and class contributed towards the consolidation of women's position within the arch institution of religion. To cite an instance, the fictional representation of the spectacularly beautiful city courtesan Amrapali, the *nagravadhu* in Acharya Chatursen Shastri's Hindi novel *Vaishali kei Nagarvadhu* offers a culturally nuanced representation of a spiritually elevated and transformed low caste prostitute's relocation in the social hierarchy.

Correspondingly, the tantric traditions of *Shaivism* not only deflate the social stratifications in terms of the four castes but most prominently ascribe to women greater degree of significance as the depository and medium of power—*Shakti*. Correspondingly, the *shurdras* as *Chandalas* are also located in an empowered position in various tantric practices.

Undeniably, the dynamics of caste in Hindu society primarily foregrounded in the *Purushsukta*, *Manusmriti* and the *Dharmshastras* has been at the core of all debates at all levels—social, ideological, religious and political in the colonial as well as the nation state. A series of political events taking place during the period of nationalist movement—the demand for separate electorate for the untouchables, Puna Pact, Gandhi's fast unto death and the ongoing dialogue between Gandhi and Ambedkar are cogently related to the polemic issue of caste in the colonial state. Crucially though, what is significant in the present context of the study is the location of the *shudra* in the canonical liturgical texts and the untouchable, the *Dalit* in the hegemonic literary and social texts in the human category.

However, the defensive claims of the mainstream Hindu ideologues about the determination of caste in the past as on merit and not on birth are disclaimed by the *Dalit* critics. Gail

Omvedt's textual elucidation of the *Purushsukta* and the conceptualisation of *varna samkara* in *Bhagwad Gita* contest these claims in toto. Caste, for Gail Omvedt, is an ongoing reality in India reflected in the fact that the vast majority of marriages still take place within the *jati*, and employment and occupation to a large degree follow caste. In her opinion, the self-interest of the elite mainly lies behind this maintenance of the *varna* order (Omvedt, "Caste in India").

Arjun Dangle, the noted Marathi *Dalit* writer defines the construct of *Dalit* not as a caste, but as "a realisation and is related to the experiences, joys and sorrows, and struggles of those in the lowest stratum of society. It matures with the sociological point of view and is related to the principles of negativity, rebellion, and loyalty to science, thus finally ending as revolution.... Caste is at the root of most Dalit literature, as its literary manifestation is based on its experiences. The horizons of Dalit literature are expanding. The reason for this, I feel is that the word 'Dalit' traditionally connotes wretchedness, poverty, and humiliation.... Dalit means masses exploited and opposed economically, socially, culturally, in the names of religion and other factors ... Dalit literature revolts against oppression and exploitation and demands social and economic justice" (Dangle 164-265).

The caste paradigm has been subsumed by the *dalit* paradigm in the literary and social canon, the latter being more politically informed and radical. In sharp contrast to the caste identity imposed on the low castes, the construct of *dalit* is the erstwhile low caste's preferred term of reference for himself. Originating from the Sanskrit root word *dal* it literally means to crack, open or split. Thus, inherent in the caste identity is the objectified location of the low caste in the caste hierarchy subjected to oppression and suppression and the resultant ills of humiliation and hurt. Contrarily, implicit in the *dalit* paradigm is a self assertion of one's social and cultural identity and a marked shift from the objectified location to the subject position that has

often been equated with the black assertion in the Afro-American discourse.

What is more important in the feminist context is the increasing focus on the *dalit* woman subjectivities in the contemporary *dalit* and non-*dalit* women's writings emblematic of the desirable paradigmatic shifting of the centre to the margin. As early as the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pandita Ramabai had registered her protest not only in words but in action with her conversion to Christianity exposing the dual moral standards of the Hindu intellectuals relating to caste.

I beg of my Western sisters not to be satisfied with looking on the outside beauty of the grand philosophies, and not to be charmed with hearing long and interesting discourses of our educated men, but to open the trap-doors of the great monuments of ancient Hindu intellectuals, and enter the dark sellers where they will see the real workings of the philosophies which they admire so much

(Ramabai 312).

One of the primary objectives of literature is to translate and transmit the social reality, the social reality of caste has consistently been interrogated in the literary discourse in English and regional languages. As early as 1936 Premchand's *Godan* engages in the dialectics of caste in a very radical manner with a pronounced focus on the inter-caste marriage paradigm. No matter the fictional representation of a socially prohibited *anulom*² marriage between the upper caste Brahmin boy Matadin and the low caste girl Silia and the birth of a child from this union may be a foregone conclusion even by the contemporary standards, the fictional representation is invariably suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in the domain of caste.² The unflinching support to the transgressing couple by the high caste poor but resilient Dhania not only demonstrates the defiant and courageous attitude of the female protagonist, it is also

indicative of the decisive role women could play in villages in bridging and breaking the caste taboos.³ A few years later the polemics of caste in the colonial state is interrogated in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* from the subject/speaking position of the young sweeper boy Bakha offering the insider/subaltern untouchable's point of view.

The centrality of the caste paradigm is manifest in the pre and post-independence Hindi fiction in the contemporary socio-political contexts. Apart from Premchand's *Godan*, Nagarjuna's *Balchanamma* (1952), Fanishwar Nath Renu's *Parati Parikatha* (1954) and Amrit Lal Nagar's *Nachyo Bahut Gopal* (1978) are some notable Hindi novels to deliberate on the dynamics of caste in a nuanced region and culture-specific context in the early decades of independence in the nation state. Renu's *Parati Parikatha* explores the caste hierarchies which are operative among all castes and sub-castes in the village Paranpur in Bihar. These caste operations at the micro level in the villages present the dynamics of caste in the Indian society at large. Thus, the doctor of the landed peasantry threatened by the Rajput community in *Balchanamma* offers a cogent critique of the women of feudal landlord class in Bihar for here in this novel it is not the institution of patriarchy but these women of feudal peasantry who emerge as perpetual oppressors of the economically and socially deprived class of downtrodden Balchanmmas. Down south U. R. Ananmurthy *Samskara* (1965) is significant not only for its potent critique of Brahminism in particular, and Hinduism at large but most crucially for the superior positionality of the caste 'Other' Chandri, the prostitute in the text vis-à-vis the entire Brahminical fraternity of the *agrahara* who emerge as petty Lilliputians to her in their familial and clannish jealousies and loyalties, greed and vested interests.

In the wake of the large scale movement of population across and outside the country in the backdrop of globalisation and industrialisation, the normative framework of Indian society in

general, particularly in the cities has noticeably impacted the caste configurations. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* investigates the changing caste dynamics in the city where the dislocated/relocated village-bred subaltern low caste men and women can easily cast off their low caste identity and appropriate fake caste identity. Similar instances of the appropriation of fake caste identity by villagers in the city to facilitate their job requirements are referred to in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak*. Aravind Adiga's cynical reference to the two castes in terms of the big bellied rich and small bellied poor too maps out the new caste configurations in the metropolitan centres where the social stratifications are increasingly determined by the paradigm of money—the new signifier of power and are no longer the accidents of birth. “Only those who live in villages know how suffocating and traumatic day-to-day life can be for those at the bottom of the ladder” (Srinivas xxi).

Crucially though, the caste system in the villages too has been reshaping and reconfiguring into a work system since the early decade of independence. “Ten years after independence in villages caste system was enjoined with work system. For instance, chamars disposed off the dead animal, made shoes, teeles drew the kolhu, the shepherds herded sheep and supplied wool and milk, the potters made pitchers, bowls and cups for the farmers and the barbers were in charge of services like shaving, making leaf plate and bowls, and acting as messengers” (Pushpa, *Idannamam* 25). Maitreyi Pushpa goes on to narrate the phenomenal transformation in the villages in terms of caste mobility from 1980 to 1990 onwards when the villages transformed into a concrete form with the gradual transformation of arable land into quarries (*Idannamam*) impacting in a very significant manner the normative caste configurations.

The *Ahir* girl Manda's upward mobility as the *Ramayana* narrator and the extramarital relationships between the high caste *Rajputs* and low caste *Rout* women in *Idannamam* (1994),

the sexual relationship between the low caste paravan Velutha and high class Syrian Christian Ammu in *The God of Small Things* (1997) and the extramarital relationship between a high caste Jat woman Sarang and a low potter caste teacher in *Chaak* (1997)—all these texts written in the last decade of twentieth century invariably suggest remarkable shifts in the social caste hierarchies in villages albeit the sexual exploitation of low caste women by high caste men (*Idannamam*), the extra marital relationships of high caste Brahmins with low caste women (*The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup*) on the one hand, and the tragic, and brutal end of Velutha at the hands of subversive social and political agencies (*The God of Small Things*) on the other, would deflate the claims of the upward relocation of the untouchable subjectivities in the caste hierarchy in the nation state.

As has been argued at the outset, caste, tribe, religion and the village were some of the key institutions to acquire new signification in the colonial state. Irfan Habib explains the later creation of the unmentioned fifth caste of the untouchables or the 'scheduled castes'—those outside the pale of caste system altogether created by the displacement and absorption of the hunting tribes by Aryan and Aryanised peasant communities (161). It is this 'unmentioned fifth caste of the untouchables that is represented by Velutha in *The God of Small Things*. Although Dalip Kaur Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* focuses on the Jat peasantry in Punjab which is a hierarchically low placed community, the high caste practices and preferences dominate the lives of the community, specifically of the womenfolk. Vis-à-vis these low caste subjectivities, Markandaya's portrayal of the high caste prostitutes Kunti and Ira in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) is a poignant reflection on another dimension of the marginalised location of impoverished and underprivileged high caste women in the social hierarchy. Dislocated from the high caste and class hierarchy these economically disempowered women can be relocated in the domain of the caste 'Other.'

Admittedly, the novels studied here are not by *Dalit* women writers and thus do not offer the insider's point of view on caste based experiential, firsthand reality that would undeniably be an ideal preposition, and invites the polemics of representation. In the past few years the *dalit* women's writings in regional languages have enriched the literary canon in the genres of autobiography or life histories, short stories and poems and their availability in English and Hindi translations offer them a wider national as well as global readership.⁴ The availability of the fictional works of the Marathi *Dalit* writer Urmila Pawar and Tamil writer Bama in English translations vouchsafes not only the growing interest and popularity of their writings but the shifting of the margins to the centre. However, barring a few exceptions, Bama's *Vanmam* (Ventetta) and *Sangati* or *Events*, for instance, the genre of autobiography so far has been the most popular genre of expression with *dalit* women writers.⁵ Given the socio-economic constraints and limited access to means of education at the initial juncture of their creative endeavour, the genre of autobiography invariably comes to this underprivileged caste of women as the most potent and manageable means of literary expression.

Intriguingly thus, the representation of the people of caste by the non-*dalit* majority community would engage us in the polemics of investigating agency, the subject/speaking position, his/her social, economic and cultural location, and lastly the ideological or political motivation that have been examined in the introductory chapter. The polemics of representation does not only relate to the postcolonial, feminist, subaltern and culture studies discourse but could be retraced to the pre-independence debate between Baba Sahib Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi pertaining to the untouchables' representation in the political context. Gandhi's vehement opposition to Ambedkar's argument that the upper-caste Congress leaders could not properly represent the untouchables is a well known historic fact. Most significantly, Gandhi's arguments were firmly

foregrounded in his understanding of the nuanced socio-cultural framework of the Indian village society foregrounded on the hypothesis of composite culture (*Hind Swaraj*). Arguably, the polemics of representation of a *dalit*, a tribal or a woman by a non-*dalit*, non-tribal and male writer respectively needs to be interrogated in the backdrop of the debate since antiquity that posits faith in an artist's ability to transcend the self and identify himself or herself with the universal subject.⁶

The investigation of the images and representation of the caste 'Other' in the *Bhasa* as well as English language novels by non-*Dalit* writers—Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Dalip Kaur Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* and Maitreyi Pushpa's *Idannamam* and *Chaak* penned down in the span of nearly five decades of postcoloniality and postmodernity in variegated geographical, social, economic and cultural locales would be suggestive of the paradigmatic shifts, if any, in terms of her location-dislocation-relocation within the institution of caste in the nation state.

This is not to disclaim the presentation-representation-representation of the caste 'Other' or other marginalised subjectivities in Indian English fiction albeit his/her presence has been subsumed, rewritten and marginalised and co-opted as a filler. A vast majority of critics, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Naik, and more recently Tabish Khair have pointed out the problematising predominance of the elitist, middle class in the English literary canon. The Indian English gaze in fiction is polemically concentrated upon the urban classes, or at the most the rural middle class and upper caste bourgeoisie subjectivities. With the partial exception of Mulk Raj Anand the lower castes are denied subject positions and a narrative voice relegated to objects of clinical interest, curiosity, compassion or at the most upper caste benignity. Tabish Khair's reference to the stereotypes of lovable, happy, docile slaves like Bhedia in Raja Rao's *On the Ganga Ghat* (1993) or Javni in the eponymous

story in *The Cow of the Barricades* (1947) substantiate this argument (Khair, *Babu Fiction*). The parallels between these stereotypes of the caste 'Other' in the Indian fiction and the African noble savage as well as the Afro-American docile slave and the caring mammies in the hegemonic imperialist texts exhibit a kind of double colonisation manifest in the hierarchal relationship of the exploiter/exploited, possessed/dispossessed and the coloniser/colonised. According to Ganesh N. Devy the disfiguring colonial epistemology in terms of the binaries of subject/object, black/white has been largely responsible in the proliferation of Superior (Western) and Inferior (Indian) categories. The subaltern categories of the tribal and *dalit* as the inferior/subaltern social categories correspond to the coloniser/colonised paradigm, and even worse, is similar to the cultural colonisation in the colony the Third World academia are still grappling with.

II

The lower caste woman is located outside the *varna* system prescribed by Manu and the *Smriti* code of sexual morality in Hindu society. In Uma Chakravarti's opinion, "... the cultural oppression operating in the lives of *Dalits* and women, especially on women of the lower castes is far more [dehumanizing] than economic exploitation, which we consider as the dominant feature of class, itself" (*Gendering Caste* 7). Endogamy has been regarded as a tool for the perpetuation of caste and gender subordination and endogamous marriages implicitly and explicitly contribute in the physical exploitation of low caste women as is repeatedly corroborated by the novels under study.

Polemically though, as Uma Chakravarti posits the ideology of the caste system pervades the Muslim and Christian communities also in India (Chakravati, Prologue 2). The adherence of Syrian-Christian community to upper caste Hindu ideology in *The God of Small Things* is witnessed on several

occasions at familial and social level. In addition to the disparaging treatment meted out to the paravan Velutha by the Syrian-Christian women folk, Ammu's twins born out of an inter-caste marriage are also low placed vis-à-vis their cousin Sophie Mol with an Anglo-Indian parentage. In addition to being a signifier of the colonial hang over it concomitantly reflects the complicity of women in maintaining caste and gender oppression, dividing women and erasing the possibility of sisterhood (Krishnaraj xii). Correspondingly, the objections of the low caste barber woman Longsiri bibi in *Chaak* to her daughter's relationship with Bisundeva, a low caste Khatik Brahmin are crucially foregrounded on his low position in the Brahminical hierarchy. "He wouldn't be wooing you were he a Brahmin. Won't even spit on you" (*Chaak* 116).

In the recent past there has been a growing, at times aggressive assertion by *Dalits* of their caste identity in the *Dalit* discourses of history, literature and popular forms of culture where the focus is categorically shifting from negativity to proclaimed positivity, from victimhood to cultural assertion. The reclamation of the women heroes Jhalkaribai, Udadevi, Aventibai and Mahaviridevi in the First War of Independence in 1857 in recent past, constitutes a significant part of the *dalit* cultural project.⁷ Notwithstanding the polemics of historicity what is of particular interest and significance here in this study is the reclamation of the images of rural woman of caste on the one hand, and the relocation of the site of dislocated village in these subaltern discourses, on the other.

Characteristically though, the subaltern location of the low caste woman in the *varna* system and the *Smriti* code, offers her relatively greater degree of freedom in the private as well as public domain than her upper caste counterparts especially in her familial and matrimonial relationships, for instance. The women in matrilineal societies have been located in an empowered position in terms of the feminist postulates of identity, subjecthood and agency. The custom of bride price

prevalent among many communities in Asia and Africa vis-à-vis the dowry system seeks to consolidate the position of women in these societies in socio-economic terms where women could obtain their freedom by returning the bride price (Agnes 114). However, over the period of time the gender friendly customs and practices have been either subsumed or subverted by the patriarchal system. The patriarchal operations in *And Such Is Her Fate* exhibit the appropriation of these gendered practices for subversive and discursive ends.

III

Located in Brahminical patriarchies *The First Promise*, *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Phaniyamma* focusing primarily on high caste Brahmin women, specifically the widows do not overtly engage with the dynamics of caste. Of these three novels the pronounced focus in the eponymous novel *Phaniyamma* is on the circumscribed Brahmin widow. Barring the exception of *The God of Small Things*, the remaining seven novels under study are located under two representational systems—Brahminical and feudal. Since the primary focus in *A Saga of South Kamrup* and *Phaniyamma* is on Brahmin widows of the propertied class, the low caste woman is subsumed in the main text. Similarly, the central consciousness in *The First Promise* is prominently occupied by the child-woman Satyabati, the primary focus is on gender issues in the colonial state and not on the caste paradigm. As a matter of fact the caste affiliations are very strong within the upper Brahminical patriarchies so as to strictly maintain the principle of hierarchy and caste purity in terms of the purity/pollution paradigm, endogamous marriages and principle of exclusivity in other matters of social intercourse. The low caste tenant farmers are invisible in *A Saga of South Kamrup*, albeit their indignation and resentment against the landlord ultimately culminates in the murder of the *Adhikar*.

The stigmatisation of widowhood and the resultant socio-

cultural and socio-economic malpractices in these Brahminical patriarchies are to some extent foregrounded in the caste hierarchy and purity/pollution paradigm. As Indranath is informed by the priest in *A Saga of South Kamrup* the Brahminical hierarchy in the *sattr*a in terms of endogamous matrimonial alliances had not been violated since 1400 A. D. The only progressive shift marked in the domain of caste was the reported incidents of some *Adhikars* from south bank to have formed matrimonial alliances with ordinary Brahmin girls of low social hierarchy. Crucially though, the unsolemnised matrimonial alliance between the high class Brahmin, the future *Adhikar* Indranath and low class Brahmin girl Eliman is reiterative of the exclusive nature of the Brahminical patriarchy. There is more than one reference in the novel to the high class Brahmin landlords' extramarital relationships with low caste women. "Everybody knew the Gossain used to present that low caste woman *phutt* [an ornament] and *doogee* [pendent]" (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 106). Similarly, Giribala's husband shamelessly admitted his clandestine relationships with low caste women. Arguably, Giribala's self-immolation is foregrounded in her empirical knowledge of the castiest Vaishnavite patriarchy's strict adherence to endogamous marriages where an inter-religious matrimonial alliance is not even a distant possibility. The polemics of inter-religious marriage is diffused in the text with Giribala's self immolation and the exclusive location/representation of her paramour in the domain of religion as a devout missionary.

Juxtaposed to the high caste and class bourgeoisie peasant women in *A Saga of South Kamrup* are the counter-images of women of low caste and class in social hierarchy. These low caste robust, jovial, boisterous and 'apparently' simpleton women's participation on occasions of familial rejoicing and social festivities may project them as uncomplicated generous souls, but devoid of any moral scruples. These insensitized women can violate the limits of human sympathy on least

provocation. Their spectatorial and censorious attitude is witnessed on several occasions, such as on young Giribala's return to her natal family as a widow, her transgressive act of tasting fish, a forbidden delicacy for a widow and her fatal entry into the purifying hut.

A Saga of South Kamrup offers the twofold variables of village women as perpetuators of caste hierarchy and also as contestatory models. The potter's son recollects how once Giribala's mother had dragged her daughter away from his lap when he had picked up Giribala, then a little girl to play with her. Contrarily, Saru Gossain initiates a low caste *Kachari* to a higher social status by performing hard and arduous initiation rites. Correspondingly, the extraordinarily circumscribed Phaniyamma's decision to facilitate the complicated delivery of an untouchable woman overruling the familial pressure and censure is suggestive of the significant points of departure in the attitude and behaviour of women of upper social hierarchy in terms of caste.

As a woman-centred novel, the primary focus in *The First Promise* is on the bildungsroman Satyabati and by the author's own admission on the dynamics of the domestic world. However, a feminist critique of caste could be constructed in the novel in the backdrop of reform movements, the city-village interface, and lastly the degeneration of feudal societies in colonial Bengal, an important factor examined by Rajat and Ratna Ray in their insightful study of rural politics in Bengal between the Zamindars and Jotedars (99). The critique of caste in the Brahminical patriarchy is significant for the co-option of women as complicit agents in the maintenance of the hierarchies of caste presumably for their internalisation of patriarchal values, crucially though, the imminent change in their mindscape is also witnessed in Satyabati's various anti-castiest actions, her symbolic protest against her father-in-law, migration to the city and learning the *Mlecha* language despite the threat of losing caste, and finally her active participation in the social emancipatory programmes

of Brahmo Samaj, an anti-Brahminical organisation in Calcutta.

The caste paradigm investigated in *The First Promise* from the subject position of the female protagonist broadly relates to three contentious areas: (i) The purity-pollution paradigm, (ii) The polemic extra marital relationship of high caste Brahmins with women of low caste, and (iii) The new caste configurations in the colonial state. Interestingly though, the dynamics of caste is not interrogated in relation to the polarised high castes and the low caste but in the context of the operative intra and inter-caste hierarchical divisions among the high castes. The Brahminical caste identity of Ramkali was painstakingly maintained in his *kayastha* patron's household belonging to the relatively lower caste hierarchy with the provision of a separate kitchen for the Brahmin boy; in another instance Nabakumar's bosom friend Nitai, also a *Kayastha* could not partake food from his Brahmin friend's kitchen, a restriction Satyabati and Nabakumar can violate in the city of Calcutta only at a comfortable distance from the censorious eyes of village folk.

In the natal familial setup of Satyabati maintaining the purity of kitchen is the top priority of Mokshada and the widows' claim to the position of an 'ideal widow' in general depends on their adherence to the normative purity/pollution paradigm. Mokshada's obsession with the purity/pollution paradigm manifest in her various actions and speech in terms of safeguarding the purity of the vegetable kitchen where the cow dung had to be brought from their own cows and not from the neighbours who ate 'unclean' things and repeated references to caste contribute at large to the castiest familial framework. The fear of losing caste looms large in the consciousness of village folk for the slightest breach of the socio-moral code. The provision of a separate kitchen for the Brahmin boy Ramkali, and later the main objections of Elokeshi and Nabakumar to the family's migration to the city are categorically related to the fear of losing caste.

Corresponding to *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *The First Promise*

also exposes the sham and hypocrisy of the high caste Brahmins, Satyabati's father-in-law Nilambar in particular for the latter's extramarital relationship with a low caste woman without any threat to his high caste identity, and more polemically with least intervention or objection from the family quarters. The acceptance of such anti-castiest male practices is more polemic for the tacit silence of Nilambar's quarrelsome, domineering wife Elokeshi to this intercaste relationship; a censorious and orthodox woman who is by no means a passive agent but an intimidating personality in her actions and mode of behaviour in private and public discourse. Arguably, her solidarity with the defaulting husband is suggestive of the internalisation of patriarchal value system by women so as to overlook and uncritically accept the male transgressions.

The only significant shift in the feminist mode of resistance is witnessed in Satyabati's symbolic act of protest against the defaulting male agency in her refusal to touch the feet of her father-in-law and enter the worship room 'defiled' by his 'touch.' More than a simple protest, Satyabati's protesting act subverts the meaning of 'defiled' and 'touch' by relocating these gender and caste specific qualifiers in the high caste male domain. As a cogent disconnect to Elokeshi's standpoint Satyabati's contestation of the threatening prospect of losing caste on the grounds of her father-in-law's polemic relationship with the low caste woman is an attempt to interrogate the caste paradigm from a feminist perspective. "If your father can keep his caste, if he still has the right to touch the holy stone, I too shall not lose caste if I go to Calcutta" (*The First Promise* 229).

Significantly though, the novel reflects the changing caste dynamics with two variables of a low caste family's elevation in the social hierarchy, and conversely the declining social positionality of the feudal propertied class in the city in the colonial state. Nabakumar, the only son of the rich peasantry and his family are relocated in a disempowered position in terms of class hierarchy in Calcutta as tenants of the neo-rich low

caste landlord where Shankari, another Brahmin widow has been employed as a 'paan maker.' Satyabati's concentrated efforts to retain her 'pride' by maintaining a laboured distance from the 'coarse' wealthy family and her refusal to accept her relocated positionality as a 'subordinate' are foregrounded in the typical Brahminical mindset. " 'A subordinate!' Satya had been outraged. 'I'm not their subordinate! I pay them rent to live here' " (321). However, the rice ceremony of the child in the low caste rich landlord's family is an occasion to ultimately bring the two hierarchically opposed female representatives in a confrontational position. Satyabati's attitudinal apathy and derogatory perception of the whole gamut of it is reflected in her various subversive actions such as her refusal to take her sons with her to the function and bring the *chyada* home for them which is a conventional practice, her expensive gift of a golden chain to the child despite economic constraints, for instance, that reiteratingly confirm her Brahminical superiority complex which is more disconcerting in the backdrop of her broadmindedness and unconventionality in thought and action. "She was a Brahmin dining at a sudra's!" (334). The authorial support to Satyabati's caste superiority vis-à-vis her low caste counterpart in the novel evidently reflects the mainstream social positioning on caste.

In sharp contrast to the dignified high caste Brahmin Satyabati the coarse personality and demeaning demeanour of the low caste affluent Boro-Ginni alias Rani-ma are pointedly highlighted in the novel as disclaimers of the latter's higher social hierarchy. The caste purity of the high caste has been maintained by the low caste wealthy family by sending a Brahmin messenger to Satyabati. "... What if she refuses an invitation because the messenger is a sudra!" (322) and later with the preparation of a salt-free meal for the high caste guests. The only visible change is manifest in Satyabati's acceptance of the meal at the house of a *sudra* that would have been utterly unviable in the village. "She finished her meal [quickly] and went looking for Panchu's mother" (334).

Thus the caste operations in the villages and the cities reflect the new caste configurations in the colonial state in the contemporary socio-economic contexts. Arguably, in the backdrop of the diminishing power of the propertied class and decline in their rental income (Rajat and Ratna Ray 99) a new class of professionals represented in the novel by Nabakumar and Nitai was relocated in the cities as tenants in small apartments and as office-goers interacting with a heterodox group of people of caste and class. The new situation and circumstances caused by the socio-economic constraints not only marked the shift from exclusivity to inclusivity but concomitantly problematised the hegemonic purity-pollution paradigm. Unlike Satyabati, her husband's offer to share the boarding and lodging with Nitai is solely prompted by economic constraints, economic interest is prioritised to social propriety. Relocated in the lower social hierarchy as a tenant and office goer with moderate income Nabakumar's social behaviour is governed by and attuned to the dynamics of caste unlike Satyabati's caste superiority due to the latter's confinement in the domestic space and unfamiliarity with the changing caste dynamics in the public domain.

This is not to say that the low caste people were perpetually situated in a disempowered location in villages. On the contrary, they are well integrated in the socio-cultural framework of the rural society so as to enjoy power and prestige in their respective spheres. The barber's wife in *The First Promise* though low in social hierarchy is one such person to be located in an empowered position as a messenger, a connector between the natal and marital family of Satyabati wherein a dominating, overbearing and ill-tempered woman of Elokeshi's calibre also can ill afford to displease her in view of her nuisance value in the public domain. "Nobody irritated her, nobody dared to. She knew everybody's secrets, visited everyone, and there wasn't a soul who did not seek her help in times of trouble" (146). Her prototypes are available in abundance in villages across the

country finding ample representation in *A Saga of South Kamrup*, *Idannamam* and *Chaak*.

The imperative of education had been pivotal in diffusing caste polarities and for the formation of new caste configurations in the cities as well villages in the nineteenth century Bengal. The acceptability of low caste Bhabtosh Biswas as an English language teacher among the villagers of Baruaipur barring a few ineffective dissenting female voices like Elokeshi manifests such attitudinal transformation among village folk. "And the sons of brahmins were being taught by a sudra! The end of Kaliyug was near!" (*The First Promise* 151). Much later, the matrimonial alliance initiated by the Brahmin Satyabati between Suhas, a sensitised Brahmin girl with Bhabtosh Biswas of a low caste hierarchy verily reflects the narrowing caste boundaries in the cities in the colonial state that could be attributed to the anti-castiest reform movements, the Brahmo Samaj in particular in Calcutta.

These two novels, *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* focusing primarily on the bourgeoisie women of the Brahminical propertied class are indubitably informed with the changing caste dynamics in the nation state and have interrogated the caste paradigm in terms of the prevalent dichotomy in the male domain. Kamala Markandaya's debutante novel *Nectar in a Sieve* also located in Brahminical patriarchy initially appears to be a radical departure from the canon in its shifting of the locale from the city to the village in the early decades of independence and thus diverting the gaze on the subaltern peasantry comprising of a heterodox population of women as farmers, vegetable sellers and the socially ostracised class of prostitutes. Kunthi, the low caste prostitute is the caste 'Other' with a face and identity no matter negative for negativities too undergoes a transformation with the passage of time for the simple truth that reality is never absolute. The feminist postulate that takes a revised view of female sexuality would concede to Kunthi's forages into another

territory not as transgression but as willful assertion of her physical self as an individuated being.

Kunthi, the beautiful, fiery woman for Rukmani is an evil incarnation of the temptress born with a 'fire in her body, men burn before and after' (*Nectar in a Sieve* 86). A repository of all the mythicised negativities, namely, cruelty, trickery and manipulation for the purposes of the realisation of her ill-begotten desires, she is depicted as a carrion eater benefiting from the collapse of others in her most detestable encounters with the 'saintly' Rukmani. Ira and Rukmani's goodness originates in their passive acceptance of suffering, Kunthi's evil is interlinked with her refusal to be the archetypal self sacrificing and self-annihilating canonised woman. Caste and class injunctions are widely operative in the upper castes in terms of a control over not only their familial and societal behaviour but the physical self as well. In the backdrop of Meena Shirwadkar's observation that women will emerge as uninhibited, multifaceted individuals only when they cast off the Sita-Sati-Savitri postulate, it could be posited that Kunthi's sexual transgressions are indicative of her self-assertive individuality.

Markandaya's depiction/projection of the woman and the caste 'Other' is verily substantive of not only the novelist's appropriation of the male canon in its value system and socio-cultural nuances in the early post-independence period of the mimetic mode but an internalisation of the hegemonic caste hierarchisation and paradigms as well. However, the sub-text could be reclaimed in a gynocritical context of rediscovering and reinventing the unexplored impregnated silences of women in rural India.

It is imperative to reflect on the image of the caste 'Other,' Veluthan or Velutha in Roy's *The God of Small Things* to bring him in dialogue with the women as caste. The Parsi writer Dina Mehta's *And Some Take A Lover* (1993) in hind side reports the Gandhian nationalist Sudhir Mahipal's marriage to a nameless

Harijan woman under strenuous circumstances. The denial of a face and a voice to the Harijan woman in the novel is clearly suggestive of her desired invisibility and social stratification/subalternisation in terms of an identity and public space consequently failing to register a lasting impact on the readers.

The genesis of Veluthan popularly known as Velutha, the low caste paravan in Roy's *The God of Small Things* could be traced back to Mulk Raj Anand's Bakha in *Untouchable* (1935) despite disparities in terms of geographical locale and cultural climate. A parallel reading of these two fictional texts separated by a margin of more than six decades poignantly reflects the 'viable un-dieable reality' to borrow Roy's idiom, of the social positionality of the caste 'Other' and his relationship with the privileged mainstream. Bakha's 'posh, posh, posh sweeper coming, posh, posh, sweeper coming' has traveled down south to the village of Ayemenem in Kerala inhabited by the community of erstwhile immigrant Syrian Christians. The womenfolk of this apparently socially and economically empowered Syrian Christian community reminisce the 'good, old days' when the paravans, the ancestors of Velutha crawled backwards to sweep away their footprints to save the high caste Brahmins and Christians from contamination. Bakha, the untouchable located in pre-independent India is verily far more aggressive and active than his docile and patient counterpart Velutha in the independent nation state who has over the period of time mastered the art of 'subaltern speak.'

Unlike their typecast submissive mode of speech, Bakha and Velutha have been endowed with physical prowess and professional excellence. These 'positive' attributes in the opinion of Tabish Khair are in fact the subversive form of *Hiranyagarbha* ceremony when in ancient Aryanised/Brahminised society the tribal king was born again from a vessel of gold given to the officiating Brahmins for their trouble.

The *Hiranyagarbha* ceremony is repeated here in (*The God of Small Things*) at a higher level of sublimation and complexity. In fact the image of a

'god-like' subaltern is a common conceit in making the Coolie narratable. It is employed by Mulk Raj Anand as well. It is almost as if lower-caste characters can only be portrayed non-pejoratively by turning them into avatars of Brahminized gods. (Khair 142)

Tabish Khair has a significant point to make here for one witnesses many instances of such kind of brahminisation of the untouchables in Indian Fiction. The focus on the clean habits of Bhikhu, the *chamar* in Anand's *The Road* indubitably manifests the writer's good intentions to present the untouchable favourably but in the process of attributing to the character Brahminical, high caste specificities, the character is dislocated from his geographical and socio-cultural locale. Another revealing example is of Mrs. Nirgunia in Amritlal Nagar's Hindi novel *Nachyo Bahut Gopal* wherein the Brahmin identity of Mrs. Nirgunia married to an untouchable deflates the empowerment paradigm of an untouchable woman in economic and socio-cultural terms. Correspondingly, the portrayal of Sridhar, the brahminised teacher of *prajapati* -- the potter caste in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak* also subscribes to a similar Hiranyagarbha mode.

However, Khair is highly critical of Roy's God of Anglicized Cultural Imperialism forming the circle of the westernised Syrian Christians that connects more easily with dominant aspects of international culture than most of the 'threatening Indian majority.' The significant point of departure in the novel occurs with the occurrence of actual physical union between a high caste woman and a man of caste, no matter how repulsive and improbable it may sound to the highly sensitive Syrian Christian fraternity. "Respectable Syrian Christians must feel that the book, however, maligns the community and particularly its womanhood. The explicit reference to sex is bad enough but a Syrian Christian woman would make love to an untouchable youth is clearly obscene" (Abraham 3). Similar to Bama's female prototype in her autobiographical novel *Karruku*, the conversion to Christianity fails to obliterate the mark of untouchability for Velutha nor does his physical and professional excellence and usability at the family production factory—Paradise Pickles and

Preserves—bridge the gap between him and the upper caste matriarchs Mammachi and Baby Kochamma.

The relationship between caste and gender as Leela Dube posits is a very intricate one in terms of food and rituals, and secondly in relation to marriage and sexuality, the main arenas of contestation (*Visibility and Power* 1986). Food invariably constitutes a critical element in the ritual idiom of purity and pollution. Women, the key players in the process of socialisation are also the principle protagonists in this arena. The task of safeguarding food, averting danger and attending to the grammatical rules which govern the relational idiom of food falls upon women. Notions of safety relating to both purity/pollution entail various kinds of restrictions and constraints on women in the task of processing, preserving, cooking and distributing food. The doubly marginalised widows, for instance, menacingly register their presence in the space of the kitchen. In Anand's *Untouchable* two instances are substantive of this claim—Bakha is reprimanded on two occasions, in the first instance, by the upper caste mother of an injured child he had taken home and thus defiled him by his touch, and in another instance, for sleeping on the wooden doorsteps of the house and thus polluting the place. Both the instances reflect the internalisation of the pollution/purity paradigm by the high caste women and their complicity in maintaining caste oppression.

Most interestingly, in Roy's *The God of Small Things*, the social dialectics has taken an overt economic dimension in the person of Mammachi, the proprietress of "Paradise Pickles & Preserves Factory" who as a shrewd business woman has no reservations in utilising and thus co-opting the services of a low caste paravan in her pickles factory. Employment of Velutha, a low caste paravan in the "Pickles and Preserve Factory" is contestatory of the pollution/purity paradigm. Later, Mammachi's strong opposition to Ammu's relationship with an untouchable invariably places her in the upper Brahminical caste category. Mammachi has obviously no reservations in utilising the manual

labour of a low caste paravan, but a little later is totally hostile to the very idea of Velutha's touch of coarse black hand on her daughter's breasts (*The God of Small Things* 257). Similarly, Baby Kochamma, the sexually-starved woman's disbelief at '(H)ow could she stand by the smells' (78) reveals a mindset in no way dissimilar from the hegemonic Brahminical mindset.

Notwithstanding the vehement reactions and protests of the Syrian Christian women folk to the socially unviable relationship, the consummation of love culminating in a physical union between the untouchable man and the 'untouchable' woman has great signification in the context of women's sexuality and the patriarchal institution of matrimony. Leela Dube writes that the caste system is premised upon the cultural perception of a fundamental difference in male and female sexuality and the cultural schemes underlying the caste system are based upon a fundamental difference between male and female bodies in terms of their vulnerability in a physical, sexual act. Sexual involvement is a much more serious matter for an upper caste woman since the physical act causes an internal pollution. The metaphor of an earthen and a brass pot for a woman and a man respectively distinguishes the level of vulnerability for both the agents. The fact that these dominant Brahminical caste specificities have over the period of time not only been co-opted but internalised by other non-Hindu communities is validated in the text.

Physical union occurs between the upper castes and lower castes in a submerged, subsumed level in Premchand's *Godan* and Anand's *Untouchable* too, however, the dominant agents or victimisers in both the cases are the upper caste Brahmins, Matadin and the priest respectively. Velutha, the transgressor has to pay the penalty for his unthinkable offence with his life. Ammu's futile attempts to save Velutha mark a distinct break from the social canon in terms of breaking age-old caste specific alliances and forging new ones. Inhabiting the metaphoric centre of power and oppression Inspector Thomas Mathew at the police

station corresponds to the Senanayak in Mahasweta Devi's famous eponymous story "Draupadi". Dopdi, the subaltern tribal woman in Mahasweta Devi's story though physically battered and bruised succeeds in vindicating her victimisation with her naked body, conversely, the *dalit* subaltern in Roy's *The God of Small Things* dies a defeated man.

The symbiotic relationship between Ammu and Velutha, the two subalterns in terms of gender and caste at the police station first in their brutal objectification, and later in death attains greater dimension. One of the feminist premises is an emphasis/recognition of the female body from a feminine perspective and not merely as an object of male gaze. Ammu's fatal relationship with Velutha lifts off seven years of oblivion when for the first time her body is not an object of male gaze and the site of exploitation. Velutha in this sense is the second coming of Bakha, something that Bakha could not even dream of Velutha achieves with a premium on his life.

Located in a non-Hindu, presumably non-castiest westernised society in a small village Ayemenem in Kerala, the male metanarrative of caste is invariably enriched by the smallish, localised women narratives. This woman's narrative of the caste 'Other' goes on to refute essentialism of any kind in favour of many smallish narratives that go on to add to the subaltern collective in a significant and considerable way. Ammu, the loser has really traversed miles away from Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, the traditional ever-forgiving Hindu *pativrata* who in many ways is similar to the hegemonic white woman conveniently shifting the onus on to the black woman for all the sexual transgressions and misdemeanours of her white husband.

Eho Hamara Jivana (1962), the Punjabi novel by Dalip Kaur Tiwana translated into English as *And Such Is Her Fate* (1980) takes a totally different dimension of a woman's commodification in a feudalistic rural low class *Jat* community. The novel invites comparison with Rajinder Singh Bedi's *Aik Chadar Maili Si*

(1962) transcribed into a film with the same title in thematic concerns but here the similarity ends. Unlike Bedi's novel which ends on a positive note implying a subtle vindication of patriarchal practices, *And Such Is Her Fate* confronts the situation from the subject position of a woman unraveling in the process not only the variegated images of an underprivileged woman in the familial space as a wife, widow, a barren woman and a co-wife fully subscribing to the patriarchal injunctions and in the public space as a bread earner.⁸ Unlike the representation of privileged rural women of high social hierarchies in Ashapura Devi, Indira Goswami, M. K. Indira and Maitreyi Pushpa, Tiwana's *Bhano* is neither a transgressor, nor a rebel. Despite her restricted conformity to the patriarchal norms she emerges as the worst victim of the patriarchal forces reiterating women's appropriation by patriarchal forces as agents of oppression and suppression. Located in the position of a subaltern who does not speak, the protagonist's last, but certainly not the least significant act of crossing the threshold bareheaded—without the *dupatta* though a small, symbolic act of defiance has a wider dimension in terms of the feminist postulates of subjecthood and agency.

Unlike the upper caste women in brahminical patriarchy, a woman in a low *Jat* peasantry is not subjected to stringent moral and social injunctions in the form of repressive sexuality, monogamy and observance of normative social and moral code of conduct. Judged by the feminist paradigm of agency *Bhano*, the young twenty eight years old female widow is located in a position of power endowed with the right of bride price in her natal family and remarriage in her marital family. As Flavia Agnes has remarked the custom of bride price was prevalent in most communities (*Communities, Gender And Violence*).⁹ Intriguingly, *Bhano*'s woes and miseries are grounded in her adherence to the normative brahminical social and moral code that is found defunct and nonfunctional in a low *Jat* peasant patriarchy.

The novel addresses the polemics of a woman's commodification in a society where a woman is bought and sold in the matrimonial market as a saleable and thus transferable commodity. The objectified location of Bhano in her natal family as a daughter, and later as a widow in her first marital family followed by a 'wife designate' in her second husband Narain's house also engages in the polemics of social agency for women in a jat patriarchy that offers in principle relatively more social space and agency to a woman with the variables of widow remarriage and bride price, ironically the patriarchal operations and the caste and class hierarchies operate in an identical manner in a Brahminical as well as the low *Jat* patriarchy. Bhano, for instance, belongs to the dominant caste of *Jats* but is low placed in the social hierarchy as a member of the class of deficit producers. These caste and class hierarchies within the *Jat* community are as claustrophobic and subversive as any other form of Hindu patriarchy—the brahminical patriarchy of *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* or the feudal patriarchy of *Idannaman* and *Chaak*. Absolute submission to the codified as well as decodified patriarchal norms by women is an imperative and any kind of transgression or rebellion is punishable and is stringently penalised by the patriarchal agency.

Bhano's refusal to be the common wife in a polyandrous marriage frustrating the matrimonial aspirations of the four unmarried brothers of her husband culminates in the death of Sarban, her husband by his hostile brothers albeit the murder was not planned but accidental. Bhano's tragedy is partially grounded in her divided positionality in terms of the dual standards of transgression and submission. Paradoxically, her identification with the mythical Sita is not attuned to her earlier stand as an active agent refusing to oblige her brothers-in-law. The image of Sita is so ingrained in the consciousness of a village woman that identification with her in terms of her patriarchal positionality as a silent suffering wife comes in a natural way. However, in an economically deprived familial framework the

brothers' desire to marry their eldest brother's wife has a cogent link with the socio-economic constraints of a subsistence economy. The polyandrous marriages in agrarian societies are correlated with the dynamics of land aimed at the prevention of division of family land (in hill communities, for instance, where the land holdings are small and scattered) but in a landless peasantry where bride price and not dowry is the prerequisite for marriage, polyandrous marriage is an enforced choice for women as well as men.

As has been posited in the preceding chapters the feminist canon seeks to revisit, reclaim and resurrect the mythical archetypes of women. Draupadi, the wife of the five Pandavas, one of the most maligned mythical archetypes has in the past few decades been reclaimed and reinvented in regional women's writings. Bhano's position in her husband's family as a prospective wife to the five brothers corresponds to Draupadi's predicament but the inversion of the epic tale in Bhano's refusal to marry the four brothers engages in the polemics of woman's voice and agency in the contemporary feminist context. Bhano is punished with widowhood after one year of her marriage but the polemics of her ownership remains unresolved. The four brothers will not let go off the booty. Bhano located in the public domain of patriarchy 'is a merchandize' (Gill, Introduction). Similar to the self-destructive protesting acts of Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) or Shankari (*The First Promise*), Bhano's protest can be bracketed in a similar category of negative protest. In her first self destructive act Bhano was saved from self immersion in the Ganges by Narain but that is a different trajectory.

Arguably, a woman, a widow in particular is offered some social space in the *Jat* peasantry with the variable of remarriage. Among quite a few peasant societies in Punjab the remarriage of a widow to the brother of her deceased husband is a common practice popularly known as *Karewa* or *Chadar Pana* or *Churi Dalna*—the fictional and cinematic representations are available in Rajendra Singh Bedi's *Aik Chadar Maili Sei* and in the

onymous Hindi film. However, *And Such Is Her Fate* is a telling comment on the patriarchal mechanism manifest in the subversion of such female emancipatory and empowering practices, for instance, the remarriage or the resettlement variable for Bhano in due course of time turns out to be not a redemptive but a coercive alternative. Her stigmatised social position as 'that, these, such woman' of easy morals locates her in a vulnerable social location in physical and social terms in relation to men as well as women which is, to a fairly large extent, far more repressive and claustrophobic than the higher caste marginalised subjectivities in Hindu brahminical patriarchies.

The institution of marriage in a brahminical patriarchy offers social security and a fairly considerable amount of respectability to a woman. An underprivileged woman's location outside the umbrella institution of marriage tends to be highly vulnerable in terms of her low social esteem and thus accessibility to men in the domestic as well as public space. In a socially unsanctioned matrimonial relationship with Narain, Bhano is located in a precarious situation subjected to physical and social violence in and outside the family. With the reputation of a woman of easy virtue she is molested by Jagar and is an object of lustful desire for the boozier fraternity of Narain, on the one hand, and of public ridicule and derision for the village women like Dialo and Bachni, on the other. Violation of patriarchal normative social strictures by a woman locates her in the public domain as a common prostitute, a huntress or a trickster as the binary of the 'good' wife. "A woman who runs away from her father's house – do you call her good?" (*And Such Is Her Fate* 25).

The significant point to be noted here is that the definition and contextualised meaning of space is not gender specific but caste and class specific. A low *Jat* peasant woman's mobility from the domestic to the public space of farm land, public wells, place of worship does not embody empowerment but is impacted by the socio-economic constraints. Bhano's incessant nagging

by the village hogs Dialo and Bachni reiterates the paradigmatic woman-on-woman oppression when women emerge as patriarchal agents of gender oppression and suppression. Barring the exception of Santi, the sisterhood paradigm is a disclaimer in such instances. Dialo and Bachni as coercive patriarchal agents are in no way less formidable than Jagar or Narain's coterie of boozers for Bhano. The gossip mongering Dialo and Bachni belong to the homogenised constructs of crude rustics omnipresent across cultures and geographical locales. The rustics of Shakespeare and Thomas Hardy best represent such crude, happy-go-lucky class of rustic commentators. Devoid of the comicality and simplicity of Shakespearean and Hardian rustic women, Dialo and Bachni are juxtaposed to the good village woman, Santi.

The twofold Foucauldian paradigms of power and knowledge can be mapped out in the text in the contextualised context of Bhano's marginalised location. In broad terms, the gender representation in the novel can be classified into the categories of victims and victimisers or the winners and losers. Bhagwanti, Narain's first wife, Dialo and Bachni are presented as a disjunct to Bhano. However, there is also a third category of women—Santi and Kartari, the old matriarchs. Bhagwanti, Narain's third wife who initially replaces and finally displaces Bhano from the domestic domain is the binary of Bhano for her superior knowledge of her world. Foucault's insistence on the pervasive heterogeneity of power and its rootedness in the social structure is compatible here. In a *Jat* peasant patriarchal structure power is embedded within the familial and social structure and at various levels it is shared in limited measures by men as well as women.

For Narain's first wife who repeatedly runs away from her husbands "... giving them the slip after a month or two" (4) the practice of bride price is a profitable venture. Bhano's successor Bhagwanti is a woman of easy morals who delivered a child barely seven months after her first marriage and was

consequently abandoned by her first husband. She finally succeeds in replacing the virtuous Bhano with her knowledge of the maternity paradigm. Unlike Bhano she is an emotionally strong woman with no hangovers of the past. As the mother of a son whose paternity is in suspect, can tilt the balance in her favour. Similarly, Dialo and Bachni lead an unhassled life with their knowledge of the world in terms of linguistic nuances and social behaviour. The empowered location of all these women is primarily foregrounded in their knowledge of their respective world. Contrarily, Bhano's victimised positionality in the text could partly be correlated to her lack of knowledge of her patriarchal world. Unlike Narain's first wife and Bhagwanti, his second wife Bhano fails to employ the strategic benefit of the practice of bride price in her favour. It is imperative for a woman to be well equipped with the knowledge of patriarchy and the socio-economic dynamics of the society to countermand its power structure.

Most crucially, Bhagwanti's final victory is acclaimed with the socially and culturally valorised motherhood paradigm. As the mother of male heir, Bhagwanti is undeniably situated in a superior social space in a patriarchal setup where reproduction for women is an imperative and the reproduction of male progeny is a necessity. The paternity of Bhagwanti's child is suspect but it is not challengeable. Foregrounded in the knowledge of the socio-economic dynamics of *Jat* peasantry that needs male children to till the land as deficit producers Bhagwanti as the mother of male heir attains a position of power. Bhano's marginalised position as 'a social leper' is substantive of the fact that the normative patriarchal constructs of a chaste and domesticated wife, the self effacing, self sacrificing religiously inclined woman, the submissive co-wife and the affectionate stepmother are categorically disclaimed in a low *Jat* peasant patriarchy. The author in her autobiography *A Journey on Bare Feet* reflects the valorised position of the male child in an agrarian society not only for the purposes of inheritance or for his skills

of production but the nuanced socio-cultural fabric of the society in terms of the festivals, functions—familial as well as social and the rituals is intricately entwined with the male child. A woman's position in her marital family is significantly consolidated with the natal family support system. The lack of natal family support locates Bhano on a fragile ground.

Certain images of women, however, are not caste or class specific but gender and culture specific. Imbibed with the collective cultural wisdom the 'good' old matriarchs, Santi and Kartari vis-à-vis the foul mouthed Dialo and Bachni offer contrasting models of the sisterhood paradigm.

As has been argued, the register of Bhakti often imparts subjecthood and social agency to the socially deprived women in patriarchy. The acclamation of women saints—Mirabai, Akka Mahadevi and Audai Akka—incidentally all upper caste women is substantive of their resistance to patriarchal injunctions and its positive outcome in terms of their transgression in the male domain. The high caste Brahmin Saru Gossainee and Manda from pastoral peasant class too achieve social agency in the domain of spirituality, contrarily Bhano's failure to carve out for herself some space in the public domain of the Gurudwara in the backdrop of the lustful overtures of the *bhaiji* of the Gurudwara is a potent reflection on Bhano's inferior location in the caste and class hierarchy.

The novel at the subterranean level also addresses the question of power for women' specifically the enlightenment paradigm. Adding on to the argument in the preceding chapter, for the reformists in the nineteenth century women's education constituted one of the smallish narratives in the metanarrative of the colonial state. Empowerment of the women of caste in terms of education and subsequent economic and social empowerment now constitutes the micro narrative in the macro narrative of the nation state. Urmila Pawar's story "A Childhood Tale" (Comp. Chakravarti and Gill *Shadow Lives* 378-402) is a moving account of a widowed illiterate *Dalit* village woman's

attempt at ensuring that her daughter goes to school and thus to have a less oppressive existence. The mother's love and concern for her daughter is strong enough to impart her the courage to face the oppressive casteist Guru and transcend the caste, class and gender hierarchy.

It is therefore imperative for a woman of a specific caste or class to acquire her caste and class specificities in terms of the locale, the socio-economic and the socio-cultural nuanced framework of the society. Bhano, the comely, modest, accomplished woman is invariably a paragon of virtues by the normative standards of domesticity. As a domestic, homemaking wife she excels in domestic chores such as cooking, house keeping, knitting, sewing, singing, dancing and so on. A self-respecting, soft spoken, reserved, god-fearing, religiously inclined, chaste-woman—her defeat at the hands of Bhagwanti, her binary—a shrewd, quarrelsome, deceitful, unscrupulous, woman of 'loose' morals engages one in the polemics of essentialisation of virtues and the subsequent categories of 'positivities' and 'negativities.' Bhano's essentialised Brahminical virtues in the context of a low *Jat* peasantry are proved defunct and ineffective. Unequipped with the knowledge of her world, a village of *Jat* peasants in Punjab Bhano's Brahminical virtues are critiqued in the novel.

The high caste *Jat* and *Ahir* women of the feudal peasantry are centrally located in Maitreyi Pushpa's both the novels *Idannamam* and *Chaak*, however, the changing dynamics of caste in terms of inter-caste man-woman relationship in and outside institutionalised marriage and social hierarchy is critically examined in both the novels. The changing caste configurations are investigated in *Idannamam* with two caste variables operating in the two neighbouring villages of Sonpura and Shyamali. Characteristically, the investigating agency in *Idannamam* is offered to a female -- the elderly circumscribed widow Bau—moving between these two villages of Sonpura and Shyamali well qualified to perceive the relative changes between these

two villages in terms of hierarchy, hegemony and agency. Divided into two caste hierarchies where the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Yadavs belong to the higher caste hierarchy and the Kurmis, Lodhis, Basoras and Chamars to the lower order, the caste hierarchy in predefined roles is observed in village Sonpura. The low caste Basora women patiently wait for their pots to be filled by any of the high caste women gossiping and comfortably squatting on the ground easefully abiding by the social injunctions. However, the chamars have constructed separate wells for their personal use outside the vicinity of the village.

Conversely, the caste stratifications have considerably been diffused in another village Shyamali where the register of Bhakti has been instrumental in the unification of the people of all castes under the superimposing category of 'devotee.' To the utter disbelief of Bau the low caste Mithu and Ramkisun *kumhar* -- the potter—as leading singers are very well assimilated in the upper caste hierarchy. Similarly, on the occasions of community feasting the low caste are the first and not the last to be served food as was the usual practice in Sonpura and other villages.

Given the fact of the growing rural-urban hiatus, the village women are in the know-how of the shifts and changes in the caste configurations in the cities to be eventually impacted by them. Thus, Bau, an orthodox and circumscribed widow, knows that "... in the cities all the paddy is sold at one rate of twenty seven rupees a seer. Who is going to ask if you are a pandit or a bhangi?" (*Idannamam* 197). The caste dynamics in the village of Attarpur in *Chaak* is substantively impacted by the reported instances of Longsiribibi's son, a Brahmin by caste working as a masseur in the city and conversely, Sridhar, a potter by caste teaching in the school in the village. However, the utter frustration and subsequent castiest reaction of Longsiribibi to her son's degradation in terms of caste hierarchy is a powerful comment on the rigid caste affiliations and castiest mindset of the villagers at large, most particularly the role of rural women

as complicit, proactive agents in maintaining caste stratifications.

In a very significant way the extra-marital relationship of Sarang, a high caste *Rajput Jat* woman with Sridhar of lower caste hierarchy on equal terms needs to be critiqued in the backdrop of the changing caste dynamics in the villages. Vis-a-vis the first generation women Kalawati and Longsiri bibi the second generation village women Sarang and Gulkandi represent the new village woman trespassing the threshold of caste with clear conscience and undeterred determination. Educated in a *Kanya Gurukul*, an educational institution which is associated with Arya Samaj, an anti-castiest organisation, Sarang's gesture of touching the feet of Sridhar as a mark of respect to an esteemed guru in total disregard of public censure is suggestive of the new trope in the caste paradigm.

Crucially though, the climatic denouement of the inter-caste marriage between a *khatik* Bisundeva and Gulkandi of the barber class culminating in the honour killing of the transgressing couple along with Gulkandi's mother Haripyari by the city-returned Harprasad in his familial and social authority as cousin of the transgressing bride and *pradhan* of his caste panchayat respectively deflates the claims of changing caste configurations in the villages, Harprasad's complicity in the murder is even more problematizing in view of his earlier claims of caste equality and the diffusion of caste boundaries as per se his own admission there was virtually no difference 'between a *nai* and a *baman*'; "Harprasad had told his Amma the times had changed, now you can abuse any one, no one is big and small, all castes are equal. So why should we be afraid? ... These days *bamans* are considered equal to *naies*" (*Chaak* 254). The political motivation in Harprasad's crime, the ulterior motive to consolidate his vote bank in view of the forthcoming elections is a potent comment on the interface between caste and politics in the villages.

As has been argued the most widely critiqued stereotype of the low caste woman in the Indian English and *Bhasa* literature

has been of the upper caste male's low caste concubine which is not only contestatory of the purity/pollution paradigm but exposes the dubious socio-moral value system of the Hindu patriarchy. The dichotomy is inherent in the bourgeoisie women writer's evasive treatment of the subject in the Brahminical texts, *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup*, for instance. It is only in *Idannamam* that the construct of the low caste concubine has been examined in a larger social, economic, political and feminist context. Crucially though, the sub-text of the novel subverts the objectified location of the low caste concubine vis-à-vis the female labourers, the normative wives of the *Raut* labourers. The *Raut-Sahariyas* working as labourers in the quarries are in fact the displaced *Bhil* and *Ghumantu*—the wandering tribals of Lalitpur, Sagar, Guna, Tikamgarh and Chatarpur forced to work as low paid labourers after their evacuation from their land in the backdrop of the Narmada dam, an issue of greater political dimension and import which is taken up in the text by Kayele Maharaj, a social activist turned sadhu. These *Raut-Sahariya* families residing in two and a half feet *tapariyas* under deplorable living conditions offer a powerful critique of the development paradigm in the nation state, the focus here is on two variables of female acceptance and resistance. Lachcho and Avadha, the impoverished and famished wives of the labourers forced to a dehumanised existence with virtually no food to fill their bellies. The wedding party of Avadha's girl child dies en masse after consuming the poisonous meal consisting of small fish, crabs and all kinds of insects obtained from the contaminated water of the pond for want of money to buy grain. So is the plight of Lachcho battling for the life of her sick, overworked husband who is intoxicated by the contractor to regain 'energy' to work.

These two normative images of wives cast on the *pativrata* mode have been juxtaposed to the two low caste concubines Leela and Ayodhya. As the concubine of the *Ahir* Rajput Abhilakh Singh, Leela is located in an empowered position in

economic terms, working as a complicit oppressive agent. 'Taraka is ruling the Rauts' (*Idannamam* 230). With the rich high caste contractor at the beck of her call, she is feared and detested by her own community. Conversely, the young *Raut* girl Ahilya emerges as a subversive agent by way of transferring the venereal disease to her middle aged paramour Jagesar, an *Ahir* Rajput. The prostitutionalization of these tribal women labourers is related to the much wider ramifications in terms of the tribal problem in the wake of the 'development programmes' in the nation state

In summation, the caste stratifications are widely rampant in the Indian rural society and the social hierarchies are maintained with the complicity of women. However, the interrelated paradigms of caste and untouchability have never been monolithic and unilinear in its practice. Surprisingly, there is a replication of the dominant social order within the non-Brahminical communities—the Muslims and the Christians. The Syrian-Christian community of *The God of Small Things*, for instance, is stratified in terms of social hierarchies. Correspondingly, the castiest divisions are operative among the low *Jat* peasantry as in *And Such Is Her Fate*. For Karanth this may be one way for the lower caste communities of articulating an independent cultural identity besides demonstrating dissent against hegemonic social order (2004). It could be argued that more than an articulation of an independent cultural identity or a demonstration of dissent against hegemonic social order the replication of the dominant social order by the lower caste communities is suggestive of the hegemonic system to have penetrated into the foundational social structure of other castes over the period of time.

These novels located under Brahminical, feudal and Christian patriarchies are informed with the dynamics of caste and a critique of caste could be constructed from their sub-text from the feminist perspective in the nation state. For Uma Chakravarti, the anti-Mandal movement in 1990 was an

important moment in defining the need to understand caste from a feminist perspective (*Gendering Caste* 3). It may be a coincidence, but the three post-Mandal novels, *The God of Small Things* (1997), *Idannamam* (1994) and *Chaak* (1997) have addressed the dynamics of caste in the neo- socio-political setup from the feminist perspective albeit the location of the investigating agency, the high caste and class bourgeoisie woman within the oppressive/dominant system is arguably problematising. If a literary representation is to be treated as the reflection of social reality the caste 'Other' has verily come a long way from Anand's untouchable siblings Bakha and Sohini to Arundhati Roy's Velutha.

Among the low caste women the upper caste male's low caste concubine is not only contestatory of the purity/pollution paradigm but entails the dichotomous socio-moral value system of the Hindu patriarchy. As Desai and Krishnaraj posit women were literally seen as 'gateways' to caste system (35). Thus while the dominant castes enforced strict measures to control and maintain the sexual purity of their own high caste women, they had the license for sexual relationship with low caste women. The fictional works of non-*dalit* writers from Munshi Premchand to U. R. Anantmurthy are pivotal for sensitizing the vast range of readership to the inherent dichotomies in the social and moral value system, and as social critiques of the institution of caste the import and signification of these texts is seminal to the dominant as well as the *Dalit* discourse.

As a welcome point of departure the caste configurations have verily undergone a sea change in the cities and the caste boundaries are increasingly determined by the paradigm of work in urban cities where the men folk can and do adopt fake high, and sometimes low caste identities as per their circumstantial necessities and professional requirements. However, the process of change is relatively slow in the villages and opportunities for such caste digressions or deflations within the social framework of village patriarchies are distant. The oft reported instances in

the media of the role of *Khap Panchayats* in imposing extreme punitive measures against the violatory in-gotra as well as inter-caste, inter-community matrimonial alliances and similar instances of collective violence against women in the villages are verily substantive of the socio-cultural framework of village patriarchies which are still governed by the principle of 'exclusivity.' Located in such an 'exclusive' patriarchy, a woman belonging to the stratified category of a widow, a deserted wife or a co-wife in a brahminical patriarchy, shares a similar social positionality of denied autonomy as the caste 'Other.'

NOTES

1. For this critique of the *Purushsukta* by the renowned Sanskrit scholar Abhinav Gupta and women's position in tantric Shaivism I am grateful to Dr. Bettina Baumer, Former Fellow IAS, Shimla; and for the counter-exegesis of the *Purushsukta* and the canonical Hindu texts I am thankful to Gail Omvedt, Former Fellow IAS, Shimla.
2. The concepts of *anulom* and *pratilom* marriages in Hindu society by definition denigrate women. A marriage where a boy of upper caste marries a girl of lower caste is approved and called *anuloma*, while marriages of women of ritually pure groups with men of lower status were considered *pratiloma*.
3. The defiant acceptance of the low caste relationship of her son by Dhania in *Godan* and Beatrice's act of baptising the stigmatised twin new-born girls in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* though far fetched by contemporary social and moral standards reiterate the centrality of a woman in any act of social protest.
4. The genre of autobiography has been employed by *dalit* women writers as an effective medium for articulating their experiences. *Antasphut* (1981) by Kumud Powde written in Marathi is the first published narrative by a *Dalit* woman. Also see Urmila Pawar's autobiography *Aaydan* in Marathi, translated into English as *The Weave of My Life* where the writer links her mother's act of weaving baskets, i. e, *aaydan* to her own act of writing. For a serious documentation of *dalit* novel by women see the Tamil *Dalit* Christian writer Bama's *Vanmam* (*Ventetta*).
5. In *Sangati* or *Events* Bama breaks the conventional form of novel writing with a nuanced intermixes of autobiography and fiction prioritising the community to the individual.
6. Aristotle's *Theory of Poetry*, Philip Sidney's *Defense of Poesie*, Keatsian principle of "Negative Capability" and later Jungian claims of the visionary potential of a creative writer are reiterative of the poet's capability to transcend the self so

- as to identify with the subject.
7. For a serious documentation of the reclamation of Jhalkaribai see Badri Narayan, *Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics* (New Delhi: Sage, 2006); B. S. Visharad, *Virangana Jhalkibai* (Aligarh: Anand Sahitya Sadan, 1964); Mohandas Nemishyarai, *Veerangana Jhalkari Bai: Chitramay Jivani* (New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2000 in Hindi).
 8. As a subversive feminist text *And Such Is Her Fate* could be compared with Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, a subversion of Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*.
 9. The polyandries in the hill societies of Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh follow the custom of bride price, corresponding to it Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* confirms its prevalence in African society.

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Chapter VI

Images of Rural Woman: Cultural Contexts

And may her bridegroom bring her to a house
Where all's accustomed, ceremonious;
Ceremony's a name for the rich horn.
And custom for the spreading laurel tree.

W. B. YEATS
"Among School Children"

Well, that collective history——
One pine tree as part of a forest——
That's over now,
This morning I became a log.

ERICA FUNKHOUSER
"The Log"

Locating the Indian rural woman in the micro unit of a village patriarchy, the images as well as the representation of the rural woman as a social construct are primarily delimited in the domain of the family. However, the images of rural women cannot be restricted within the normative categories of feudal or Brahminical patriarchies as exclusive familial and social constructs but have to be critiqued in the larger socio-cultural context of a village community in the nation state since the rural woman more than a social construct, is a cultural construct and her role as the repository of the oral tradition in terms of folktales and folklore, anecdotes, rumours, proverbs and maxims, myths, family and local history, ritual practices along with the

local narrative forms of '*katha, upkatha, parikatha, kimvdanti*' (story, sub-story, metanarrative and heresy respectively) to borrow Phanishwarnath Renu's idiom is seminal not only in the feminist study circles but in recent historiography and culture study projects as well.

According to the dictionary of anthropology, "All that which is socially transmitted in a society, including, social, ideological, and religious patterns of behaviour" (Narayan 37) is culture. In an age of cross-national boundaries in a globalized world and more and more emphasis on multiculturalism and the notions of hybridity and multiplicity, the issue of cultural identity attains a serious dimension in terms of the polarisation of the marginalised and subaltern identities vis-à-vis the homogenization of culture. Therefore Said's 'elitist' anxiety for the assertions of minor ethnic groups is arguably misplaced and intriguing. "A new and in my opinion appalling tribalism is fracturing societies, separating peoples, promoting greed, bloodying conflict and uninteresting assertions of minor ethnic or group" (Said 20).

However, all that is transmitted in society, especially a society with a history of centuries of imperial domination as has been the case with the colonies in Asia and Africa, the experiences of people are not always worth remembering, and decolonisation strategies have constantly been employed towards the filtering and purging of the colonial experience. Most significantly, the domain of culture foregrounded in villages has been a relatively less impacted domain in the colonial state and the cultural artifacts of music, dance and other popular forms of oral traditions have been the best means of resisting the discursive forces. As Fanon observes, the native peasantry lives against a background of tradition, where the traditional structure of society has remained intact, whereas in the industrialised countries it is this traditional setting which has been broken up by the progress of industrialisation (Fanon 88).

The villages in India were and still are the fountainheads of

culture. Their distancing from the power centre in the colonial and nation state locates them on the periphery but concomitantly it has also contributed in their mental and cultural decolonisation. As has been argued at the outset the village and the village woman were relatively less colonised constructs in socio-cultural terms in the colonial state mainly due to the distancing of the metropolitan colonial power centres from the villages which is why the institution of patriarchy in villages with its twofold defining co-ordinates of family and marriage did not witness structural or ideological changes as its counterpart in urban cities. The position of a woman in village patriarchies—Brahminical or feudal—was and is still determined and governed by the defining parameters of caste, class, gender and religion.

The increasing recognition of the oral resources in recent Indian historiography, culture studies projects and feminist studies in a very significant way reflects the binaries of the elitist culture versus indigenous culture, and dominant history versus local history. The folksongs and the folklore have been the primary catalysts in the formation and preservation of the cultural, racial memory of marginalised, ethnic groups and communities in the villages across the globe among the Native Americans, Afro-Americans and the aboriginals in Australia. In the Indian context, the indigenous cultural sources in the form of the inverted folksongs and stories with new texts and contexts have invariably played a pivotal role in the construction of a positive *Dalit* caste identity. The women in tribal and peasant societies have emerged as the preservers of orality, a fact that has been forcefully substantiated by Fanon. “The memory of the anti-colonial period was very much alive in the villages where women still croon in their children’s ears songs to which the warriors marched when they went out to fight the conquerors” (Fanon 90).

Given the fact that the central consciousness in these novels under study is pervasively occupied by the women of high social

and caste hierarchy, these fictions at the macro level can be critiqued as social documents for their firm foregrounding in history. *A Saga of South Kamrup* as a revisitation of more than a hundred years of colonial history, *The First Promise* as the social critique of women-centric nineteenth century reform movement, and both the novels of Maitreyi Pushpa and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* as socio-political critique of villages in general and village women at large, conversely, *Nectar in a Sieve* and, *And Such Is Her Fate* are a sad reflection on the marginalised location of the landless peasantry over a period of two and a half decade. Situated in varying geographical locale and socio-cultural space in the nation state, these novels are seminal for the dominant canon as socio-cultural critiques. Interestingly, the micro subaltern history and culture of the villages vis-a-vis the dominant history and culture in these novels can be reconstructed from the oral narratives in the form of *Dholas* and *Alhas*, *Vratkathas* and ritual practices which are so well integrated in the villagers' psyche, particularly the female psyche so as to constitute the collective cultural memory.

It is in this domain of orality by rote passed on from one generation to other that the Indian rural woman is firmly grounded both as a potent 'narrator' and a 'listener.' As viewers of the various forms of theatrical performances in the villages and listeners of the *Ramayana*, *Bhagwat* and various *Vratkathas* these rural women contribute in the preservation, promotion and popularisation of these indigenous art forms. The womenfolk in *A Saga of South Kamrup* of all castes and class, Saru Gossainee being one of them are ardent admirers of Vishnu Ojha, a mesmerising performer. Satyabati, at the tender age of eight years can narrate all the songs related to the ritual of *seguti*, a co-wife centred ritual. The theatrical representation of the epic and puranic tales coupled with the nuanced narrativisation ultimately go on to reinvent and reinvigorate the storehouse of cultural memory. The rural women's rootedness in orality is manifest in Maitreyi Pushpa's both the novels, even in the

narrativization of the simple familial events, the illiterate Bau's narration of the events leading to her son's death to her granddaughter Manda has traces of the popular form of 'katha narration.' "Alas! My Woes! The narrator of the tale of the son's demise is the mother, and the daughter, the listener" (*Idannamam* 23).

In the last forty years or so the western feminist scholarship has been seriously engaged in redefining culture and reinvestigating the cultural memory and gender interface. The interrogation of the hierarchy of the written word vis-à-vis the oral word has been of great significance in the subaltern discourse and of special interest to feminist scholars for the firm foregrounding of women in orality. The feminist focus is more and more on the retrieval and inclusion of women's works in the form of memories, life histories, stories, songs and artifacts. As Marianna Hirsch and Valerie Smith have observed that the scholars working in other areas of cultural and collective memory-- especially national memory and counter-memory, and testimony have begun to engage with feminist theoretical analyses of gender, sexuality, race, nation and class (3-4).

Memory thus is vitally significant from the feminist perspective. As is evident from the subversive and contestatory body of literature and history of the marginalised, subaltern groups recollected, reinvented and narrativized memories eventually shape into legitimised history constituting their own 'regime of truths.' The role of the women in tribal, African societies in transmitting the memory of the colonial period has been reiterated by Fanon. Correspondingly, the narrated memories of the Afro-American women's agonizing journey in slave ships to the United States, and later of their harrowing experiences in tea plantations sparked off the civil war. The vast body of native, aboriginal, African and Afro-American literature has been resurrected and reinvented from the memories of grandmothers, grand grandmothers.

The point worthy of note here is that the paradigm of memory

is not new but has been a validated source of literature and polity in Indian antiquity. The Vedic texts have been mainly classified into two categories -- *shruti* (what is heard) and *smriti* (what was based on memory). Similarly, *niti* (policy) and *smriti* (memory) have been the two primary principles of *Dandniti* (science of politics). The nuanced use of memory as a narrative technique is found in abundance in the epics, puranas and classical Sanskrit literature.

However, an interpretation of memory is by no means a simplistic process since an element of provisionality is polemically associated with it, for memory is not fixed in mind; transmitted memories especially of pain can be selective and go on changing and reshaping. Trauma, memory, memorisation and transmission are some of the defining coordinates of cultural memory. The best instance of employing the apparatus of memory—cultural as well as collective—for various purposes, for instance in the reconstruction of past, in the nurturing of ethnic consciousness or as a therapeutic devise one comes across in the Afro-American women's writing—Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Paul Marshall and Alice Walker, to cite a few examples. Most notably, the reconstruction of the family history by Alice Walker, the representative female voice from rural American south with the memories of her 'mother's garden' is the best example of an intersection of individual memory with the cultural memory. Correspondingly, her American counterpart Willa Cather's rural-centric novels too make a penetrating journey through the memory lane. Vis-a-vis the black women's experience of racial oppression, there is substantial and contested literature on women's experiences in the Holocaust that distinguishes it from the experiences of men.

In the Indian context the recent gendered studies of partition in the Indian sub-continent vis-a-vis the hegemonic partition literature are a powerful comment on the common woman's enduring capacity for silence in terms of the nuances of the subaltern speech. One of the focalised areas of gendered cultural

memory relates to sexual abuse and violence against women that has been intensely preoccupied with memory, trauma, and transmission in the family and society.¹ However, the rural woman in these women-authored partition texts of Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginama*, Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* and Qurratul-ain-Haider's *Aag Kai Dariya*, for instance, are also represented as cultural constructs—the repositories of oral wisdom and rich cultural heritage breaking the social stereotypes of the sexually abused and battered women located in the objectified/ victimised location in the hegemonic male canon.

Of all these novels, Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak* offers the most varied and culturally nuanced examples of the collective memory of rural women which in the larger context of the village community contributes to the local, subaltern history of women. What saves the novel with too many feminist strands from its propagandist trap is its foregrounding in the cultural memory. Thus, the mournful singing of *Dhola* to the heterodox village community in *Chaak* serves the dual purpose of entertainment and diffusion of animosity by way of offering a common platform to hostile groups, and thus temporarily diffusing the climate of tension. For the emotionally battered Sarang, the organiser of the *Dhola*, the event serves as a therapeutic device so as to transcend the personal and immerse it with the larger human misery. *Vis-à-vis* the male folk singer, the female Kherapatin *dadi's* narratives in a native form of ballad are a powerful comment on the fate of an endless number of transgressive and fallen village women from Chandana to Resham who have been intriguingly kept alive in the public memory by these rural chroniclers in their folksongs and folklore despite systematised patriarchal interventions to obliterate their memory. Thus, the simple, non-literate women act as catalysts in the formation of the collective memory. It is the profuse and nuanced employment of the various forms of folk songs in the form of *kajari*, *biraha*, *doha*, *champai* popular in north India, especially in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with specific socio-

cultural contexts employed by Maitreyi Pushpa in *Idannamam* and *Chaak* that locates these two novels in the genre of *aanchalik* novel in the tradition of Phanishwarnath 'Renu' (Rajendra Yadav, Preface *Chaak*).

Interestingly, most of these folksongs are women-centric and women-oriented, and are recontextualised and improvised in the changing contexts. Various versions of the folktale of king Pirtham and queen Manjha one finds in all patriarchal communities that valorise motherhood and birth of son concomitantly stigmatising barrenness but the narrativization of the tale in the local Bundelkhandi dialect in *Chaak* accrues a regional, linguistic and cultural dimension to the tale. In a very significant way the sub-text of the folk tale explores along with barrenness the traditional cures for barrenness, familial jealousies and intrigues of the co-wives in the inner courtyards of palaces in the backdrop of the rights of inheritance to the throne and property, and lastly the paradigmatic providential and philosophic wisdom that entails the crux of Hindu philosophy. *Jako rakhe sayian, maar sake nai koi --* no one can kill one who is protected by God. Interestingly, the employment of the improvised versions of songs for ulterior personal and political motives is manifested in *Chaak* when a *rasiya*—a local form of song sung on the festive occasion of holi—*dako pari gayo lohare devaria, mai mar gayi dar ka mare*—(Oh God !the dacoit is after my house/I was dead scared) entails the dig at the opponent and is well taken in. "Listening to the song, Kuwarpal was infuriated. This song is meant for us. The high caste had plotted the robbery in our house. I shall *rapot*" (*Chaak* 356).

Correspondingly, the chants in the ritual of *seguti* (*The First Promise*) relate to a woman's protection from the 'barb' of a co-wife. A design with rice paste is drawn on the floor with flowers and creepers and on the corners and sides are drawn the ladles, spoons, pots and pans. The sharply contrasted colourful flowers and creepers to the commonplace utensils poignantly demonstrate the oppositional location of the co-wives which is

further reflected in songs: “Ladle, ladle, I swear on my life/Off with the head of the stupid co-wife!”, ‘Cup, cup, cup!/The white police have come/To nap the co-wife’s mum!’, ‘Husking pedal, husk the rice/The co-wife dies and I feel nice!’, ‘Fist of grass, fist of green/May she be blind and ugly as sin’, “The trees I chop to make me a shed/With the co-wife’s blood I make my feet red!” (*The First Promise* 69-70). Full of spite and venom, these chants entail the feminist critique of the patriarchal practice of polygamy widely practiced among the *kulin* Brahmins of propertied class in rural Bengal in a nuanced culture-specific idiom. Imbibed in the desire to nab the co-wife’s mum are the negative stereotypes of an interfering mother of a woman and the white police, the red blood on the feet of the narrator corresponds to the *alta*-clad feet of young, village women while the husk of rice, the trees and the green grass locate the chants in the geographical locale of a village.

These folk songs, stories, anecdotes and so forth sung or narrated by non-literate, semi-literate village women at the subterranean level can be examined as modes of resistance to the patriarchal hierarchies and self expression. These are always situated communicative practices that may serve to reproduce a social order, to critique and undermine it, or something in between (Bauman and Briggs 1990). For instance, the *suatas* sung in the month of *savan* in the Bundelkhand region of Uttar Pradesh (*Idannamam*) making it mandatory for women to speak out truth during the pious month offer opportunities for women to speak out their hidden, unspoken secrets, an excellent opportunity indeed for the cathartic purgation of their emotions they may not find in the private patriarchal space. The women performing the ritual of taking daily bath in village ponds or wells sing these nuanced *suatas* narrating and sharing each other’s secrets. This is how Kusuma is able to publicly disclose her physical relationship with the metaphoric allusion to have been ‘touched by a dog.’

More than an opportunity for self expression, a welcome

diversion from the humdrum domesticity to the rural women, these folk songs in vernacular, native languages contribute in a significant way in the preservation of indigenous languages confronting the imminent threat of extinction in the wake of a globalised world heading towards monolingualism or at the most bilingualism.² The remark made by Raja Rao in a different context that English is the language of our 'intellectual framework' while the languages of regional literature belonged to our 'emotional framework' (*Kanthapura*, Forward) relates to the dynamics of language of rural and urban women too as emotional and intellectual variations. The proximity to nature and earth that sensitises them to the shades and sounds of nature, the cry of the crow and the cooing of the sparrow, the familiarity with the folk music accompanied by a variety of indigenous instruments—*mridung*, *ramtulla*, *aiktatra*, *dholak* and *dholakiya*, *manjira*, *khartal* and *chimta*, *chikara* and many more, listening to *Vratkathas* and similar religious discourses verily add an emotionality to the language of rural women as compared to the intellectual diction of the middle class urbanite women.

Similarly, the plot of *A Saga of South Kamrup* moves on with the regaling anecdotes, gossips and recollected memories of gossiping, nose-poking women fossilising the binaries of caste and class. Vis-à-vis the centrally located high class Brahmin widows is the gossip monger Guimani befriended by the elderly Gossainee for an update on the village news, the vivacious and vibrant Eliman and her elderly mother like maid endeavouring to move up her ward in the class hierarchy with the cooption of patriarchal benevolence. The notorious accounts of the debauchery of Giribala's husband or the prepubescent girls Giribala and Elimon attaining puberty, the clandestine relationship of two village sisters with white officers and the humorous, hilarious accounts of the befooling of their husbands later by the white officers are manifestive of the collective, culturally nuanced memory of women that ultimately goes on to enrich the local history of the region. The prototype of

Guimani is available in Kalavati Chachi (*Chaak*) who too is occasionally welcomed by Sarang for an update of the village gossip, however, she is concomitantly dreaded and distanced in normal circumstances by womenfolk for her dangerous potential for airing scandals and rumours.

The significant point to be noted is the disadvantaged location of the women of the bourgeois feudal class vis-à-vis the lower caste and class hierarchy who invariably enjoy greater degree of freedom in terms of speech, action and familial and public domain. Vis-à-vis the rural women of high caste and class hierarchy, these novels also offer the counter-images of hierarchically low placed women in social hierarchy as robust, jovial, boisterous, uncomplicated women collectively participating on occasions of familial rejoicing and social festivities. Intriguingly though, devoid of moral scruples and social graces these jovial, merry making and generous souls can metamorphosise into heartless, censorious eternal perpetuators on least provocation. Their perversity in exposing a high class Giribala or a low class Kalawati is manifest on many occasions. As participants and spectators, their attitudinal and aptitudinal apathy to the victims reflects the level of their insensitisation as social beings.

The folksongs and stories sung and narrated by these non-literate village women in *A Saga of South Kamrup* that form an inseparable part of local history are a reiterating comment on the fossilized boundaries between history and fiction. The pre-independence and early post-independence history of Assam in terms of the plight of the opium addicts both male as well as female, and the communist upsurge in the region leading to the rift between the landlords and the tenant farmers culminating in the death of the noble Adhikar, the major contribution of the foreign missionaries in the documentation of local history from original vernacular sources, the nuanced relationship between the common villagers and the white officers contestatory of the binary domination-subordination or

coloniser-colonised paradigm upturning the location of the native villager vis-à-vis the white sahibs who could exploit the situation by virtue of his superior knowledge to his own advantage would willy-nilly substantiate the primacy of the oral word on the written word and culture. The white officer in the following song has been integrated into the cultural memory of the villagers just like the white police of the *seguti* song:

'Pick up your sticks,
Gora paltan has come
To the hills of Jalukbari
To burst their bombs.

(*A Saga of South Kamrup* 104)

True to Fanon's claims the village women croon in their children's ears not only the misdeeds of the contemporary white sahib, but invoke the brutalities of the notorious Sultan Gazi in these folksongs.

Correspondingly, *Idannamam* also reflects the intersection between memory and history and their integration into the socio-cultural life of village communities. In the village Shyamali and other villages of Bundelkhand the rural folk celebrate the festival of holi on the day of full moon but the following day is observed as a day of mourning for it was on this fateful day that Jhansi was annexed by the British forces and the queen of Jhansi and her subjects as a mark of protest did not celebrate the festival of holi.

The subaltern studies project is not without disclaimers from among Marxists, sociologists, feminists and their own ranks for the theoretical traps and inherent contradictions, however, it has been of tremendous import for shifting the critique of colonialism from the economic and political plane to the cultural domain and the privileging of the subaltern culture to 'bourgeois culture' to make a transition from colonial modernity to cultural identity. "Gradually, many of them (*the subalternists*) have passed

from one binary opposition – elite/subaltern - to another - Western modernity/ indigenous culture” (Pouchepadass 117). As Arild Engelsen Rudd too posits, India represents a society more conducive to an elaboration of the concept of culture than Italy (721).

Reclamation of the images of rural and other subalternised categories of women in the feminist literary canon manifests the process of cultural decolonisation which the postcolonial discourse seeks to attain. As participants in the nuanced socio-cultural life of the community, in terms of festive occasions such as child birth and marriage or mournful occasions -- death and bereavement or social festivals such as fairs, community gatherings in the private as well as public domain—the rural women in all spheres emerge as potent cultural agents. Firmly grounded in oral traditions their profound knowledge of rituals and social customs is witnessed on several social occasions as singers of lullabies as well as elegiac songs as *Rudalis*, for instance as per the occasional demands, as social chroniclers (Kherapatin *Dadi* of *Idannamam*) and folklorists they reinvent and reinvigorate the oral tradition. As narrators of *Vratkathas* and listeners of *Vratkathas*, *Ramkathas* or *Bhagwat* and other *Puranas*, the songs of *mirasis*—the professional singers and family hagiographers, their contribution in the proliferation and preservation of these cultural artifacts cannot be diluted.

Interestingly though, the village patriarchies offer ample opportunities for villagers for entertainment with indigenous modes and forms of entertainment. As has been argued at the outset village is as much the site of cooperation as of conflict and the complicity of women in both the areas is substantiated in these texts. The collective concern of the villagers en masse in positive and negative terms is witnessed on two occasions in *The First Promise* -- the news of the death of Jata's wife and Raghu's unconsciousness that bring the entire village community to the scene. Intriguingly though, the village folk, women especially have no moral scruples in regaling at the cost of others

and extract juices and honey from the life around them. The semi-fatal unconsciousness of Jata's battered wife caused by her mother-in-law offers them ample opportunity for excitement "... in the dull theatre of their humdrum lives, there were few opportunities to witness such scenes" (*The First Promise* 18).

Vis-a-vis the refined and sophisticated women of the affluent feudal class these novels abound with the portrayals of gossiping, quarrelsome women in the lower social hierarchy often using asocial lingua franca. Kalawati, Longsiri bibi, Haripyari (*Chaak*), Bhagwanti, Dialo, Bachni (*And Such Is Her Fate*) and Kunti (*Nectar in a Sieve*) are such uncouth rustic women who attain a fair degree of empowerment with a language which is imitative of the male jargon suggestive of their familiarity with the politics of language in the social context. More importantly, these women are virtually the custodians of indigenous, traditional wisdom. In times of dire need their knowledge is employed in aborting unwanted pregnancies (*Chaak*, *Korja*) or chastising transgressing women (*Chaak*) which implies both their complicity in patriarchal oppression as well as their accessibility to indigenous sources of knowledge.

Tradition and Modernity

The hold of tradition was and is still certainly very strong in villages especially among womenfolk who apart from voluntary self subscription to age old ritualistic practices enforce strict and unconditional adherence from fellow women to these practices, customs and conventionalities so as to emerge quite often as oppressive patriarchal agents. As Lata Mani and Spivak have argued, the justification of the colonial project in India in the nineteenth century depended upon their attempts to blow out of proportion the Indians' blind submission to the dictates of tradition and the rigidity of customs leading to such barbaric and inhuman practices like *sati* and child marriages. However, Gloria Goodwin Raheja's 'rereading' of the folksongs is

contestatory of the colonial stereotyping of the South Asian women as ‘passive and silently submissive to “tradition” (Introduction 3).

Primarily foregrounded in the women-centric issues of reformation (*The First Promise, A Saga of South Kamrup, Phaniyamma*), social agency for women in the nation state (*Idannamam, Chaak*), disempowerment-empowerment of poor peasant women (*Nectar in a Sieve, And Such Is Her Fate*) and the *Dalit* paradigm (*The God of Small Things*), the investigation of tradition vis-à-vis modernity in these novels from the subject position of rural woman is insightful in the contemporary context of globalization, market economy and the spate of visual and print media.

Intriguingly though, the investigation of patriarchal traditions in some of these novels is not contestatory on feminist lines. Most prominently of all these novels, M. T. Indira’s *Phaniyamma* is not in disputation with tradition, but in conformity with it. Phaniyamma’s life as a widow transcending the physical plane with her renunciation of the sensory pleasures so as to bear the sorrows and joys of her life with equanimity—a *sambhav*—has a cogent connect with the foundational principles of Hindu religion and philosophy one attains by virtue of one’s *samaskara* in terms of *shruti* (what is heard) and *smriti* (what is based on memory). The twofold virtues of Hindu religion have been *ksanti* (patience) and *tyag* (renunciation). The virtue of *ksanti* was co-opted in Buddhism and encapsulates an entire spectrum of truths about moral life (Pabitra Kumar Ray 18). That a routine, matter to fact subscription to ritualistic practices is not religion, nor is it mandatory to master liturgical or philosophical text has been one of the foundational arguments in Anantmurthy *Samskara*.

As has been argued *Phaniyamma* is informed with feminist sensibility, however, the representation of Phaniyamma as a circumscribed widow in ethical and moral terms so as to have internalised the religious and philosophical wisdom of antiquity to perfection is a reiterative vindication of tradition rooted in

the *samaskargat* (attained through *samaskara*) knowledge one acquires by virtue of one's birth in a family. *Bhagwad Gita*, more than a sacred Hindu text is a philosophical text that has shaped the lives and thoughts of generations of simple men and women across the country. Born in a Hindu Brahmin family, certain social and moral values are internalised by Phaniyamma, thus the philosophy of *Karma Yoga* in terms of the path of detached action is translated into her personality. The theory of *Nishkam Karma* or selfless action in *Bhagwad Gita* exhorts a person to perform all the actions with the mind concentrated on the Divine renouncing attachment and looking upon success and failure with equanimity. The action without attachment or wisdom has been propounded as a fundamental requisite for all the three paths—*Jnana Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga* and *Dhyana Yoga*.³

Karma is of two kinds, one which emanates from God, the sacrificial performances, for instance, second type of *karma* comprises of ordinary work, the duties of a house-holder that has the effect of binding the individual in strings of attachment. In order to be free from such attachment it is imperative to perform work dispassionately. Moreover, action without attachment is preferable to inaction. The *Karma Yogi* performs duties in a disinterested and detached manner without looking forward to end result. Such a *Yogi* is indifferent to pleasure and pain, things good or bad, success or failure, and is believed to have attained the state of *Brahman*.

In addition to the concept of detached action, the concept of renunciation in *Bhagwad Gita* has been elaborately examined under three categories: (i) *Tamasika* renunciation where the doer leaves his regular, obligatory work on account of mental confusion or ignorance, or *Moha*, (ii) The second type of renunciation is of *Rajasika* type where the doer abandons the work, out of fear of physical pain, this renunciation is not fruitful and productive of any merit. It is only when work is done as duty, without any attachment or expectation of results, such renunciation is qualified as (iii) *Sattvika* renunciation. This third

category of *sattvika* renunciation is of supreme importance as it flows from peace, it is superior even to *Jnana* and *Dhyana Yoga*. Phaniyamma's actions best translate selfless actions which are performed by her in a detached and disinterested way. Her *Karma* consisting of ordinary household chores in an extended joint family in a dispassionate manner irrevocably locate her in the category of a *Karma Yogi* and her renunciation as of the highest category of *Sattvika*.

What is of utmost significance and interest in this context is that this knowledge has not been acquired by the non-literate widow through the authenticated written sources of knowledge but is inherited by her as an integral part of her cultural heritage and memory. It could safely be inferred that as a woman born in a Brahminical family, she has acquired this knowledge in a natural, effortless manner, nothing exemplifies traditional and cultural wisdom of rural women in a better way than Phaniyamma. It may be a coincidence, but the investigation of tradition in the backdrop of Hindu religion and philosophy by M. K. Indira's illustrious male predecessors in Karnataka, Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*,) and Anantmurti (*Samaskara*), and to a fairly large extent R. K. Narayan (*The Dark Room*) with a pronounced focus on non-literate village woman reflects the village woman's internalised wisdom and comprehension of tradition.

Correspondingly, the social positioning on the issue of widow remarriage in these novels is not contestatory but supportive of the patriarchal postulate of restrictive woman's sexuality. The exploitation of the remarried widows Shankari, Prem and Bhano in physical and economic terms and the tragic end of widows Giribala and Ammu, for instance, contemplating inter-caste remarriage is a vindication of patriarchal traditions suggestive of the unviability of the widow remarriage paradigm.

The other traditional taboo in a patriarchal society relates to menstruation taboos, and as Leela Gandhi argues, locating menstruation in the public domain is foregrounded in the patriarchal purity/pollution paradigm with a view to strictly

regulate female sexuality. Given the fact that a Brahmin girl must be married before the attainment of puberty to avoid social stigmatisation many hurriedly solemnized mismatched matrimonial alliances are formed in the villages. The two brahminical texts—*The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* elaborately address the issue of prepubescent marriages and menstruation taboos. Satyabati's stay in her natal family after her marriage is related to her puberty. Correspondingly, the poor tenant farmer woman Rukmani's anxiety to marry her daughter prior to the attainment of puberty is also in accordance with the Brahminical patriarchal value system. The customary practices of *gauri daan* and *gauna* are respectively related to the pre and post puberty period that make it mandatory for parents to perform *gauri daan* of prepubescent girls and they are allowed to retain them in their natal family till the attainment of puberty. The prepubescent girls like Satyabati can relatively enjoy freedom from wifely duties for some time. Later, the hurriedly performed marriage of Satyabati's daughter by her mother-in-law foregrounded in the concept of *gauri daan* and Nabakumar's reference to Satyabati's own *gauri daan* by her 'progressive' father compels Satyabati to debate the issue with her father who despite his relatively enlightened and anti-establishment approach and inherent patriarchal benevolence had performed the *gauri-daan* of his prepubescent daughter.

Similarly, the prepubescent Giribala's marriage to a sickly and debauch man and her early widowhood in *A Saga of South Kamrup* are crucially foregrounded in such anti-women cultural practices. The role of prying, meddling and uncouth rustic women in the perpetuation of such gendered practices is deliberated in the novel in the context of two grossly victimised Brahmin girls from the high as well as low Brahmin hierarchy, Giribala and Eliman respectively. The low class Eliman is as great a victim of the menstrual taboos as her high class counterpart Giribala. The elder Gossainee's outburst of anger against such rumour-mongering women reflects the plight of

unmarried menstruating girls. “You snoop meddling women! You used to hide behind those bamboo clumps like leopards and peer at her clothes for marks of menstruation.... And again you would have gone to the Gossains of Garoguli and Tuhbhakali and declared that the daughter of Amaranga Gossain had become an out caste” (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 27).

Highly critical of menstrual taboos Julia Kristeva showcases the dichotomy pertaining to the polluting objects of public domain and feminine domain. For Kristeva, ritualisation of defilement entails a strong concern for separating the sexes which means giving men rights over women. Categorising the polluting objects into two types, excremental and menstrual, she underscores the politics of representation for “(N)either tears nor sperm, for instance, although they belong to borders of the body, have any polluting value” (Kristeva 171). Excrements such as decay, infection, disease, corpse etc, she argues succinctly, stand for the danger to identity that comes from without—the ego threatened by the non-ego, society threatened by its outside, life by death. “Menstrual blood, on the contrary, stands for the danger issuing from within identity (social or sexual), it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and through internalisation, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva 171). More than a signifier of sexual difference, menstrual taboos by repressing maternal authority, which Kristeva defines as ‘the trustee of that mapping out of the self’s clean and and proper body’ (171) are ‘an attempt to throttle matrilineality’ (175).

A ritual⁴ in common parlance signifies a prescribed order of performing rites in a community. Though Kristeva maintains that all language and culture sets up separations and order by repressing maternal authority, she also insists that this repressed authority returns in religious rituals, literature and art. The ritual of *amoti* celebrated during the month of *Assarh* (July) in Assam is related to menstruation. It is said that Mother Earth menstruates at this time and is therefore unclean. Digging of

earth is forbidden during this time and the doors of the famous Kamakhya temple are closed during the ritual performance. The widows are debarred from partaking in festivals like *amoti* and a widow had to remain on a bed of bamboo for three days, was not allowed to eat cooked meal and for answering the call of nature "... she must cover the soles of her feet with bark from the areca tree" (*A Saga of South Kamrup* 9). Another ritual of *ayati* too pertains to menstruation. *Ayati*, an auspicious married woman placed the auspicious basket on the pounding stone when a girl had her first menses after marriage. The women who remained in the house throughout their life without having any menstrual cycle are stigmatised and likened to *deldahi tiri* in *A Saga of South Kamrup*.

In contrast to these gendered ritualistic practices, some of the contestatory ritualistic practices offer some space to women, when women have the license to overcome the moral strictures and speak out, and share the female silence. The ritual of *suata* (*Idannamam*) celebrated in the month of *savan* -- the monsoon season—making it mandatory for women to speak nothing but truth offers an ideal godsend opportunity to exonerate themselves from their claustrophobic, unspeakable secrets.

More than repetitive acts, these ritualistic practices constitute a part of collective action taking place at a set time and location making use of symbolic objects, words and actions. The Hindu brahminical society has been conforming to various ritualistic practices since the Vedic period. The villages as the stronghold of tradition subscribe to rituals despite socio-economic constraints. Premchand's *Godan* presents an ironic account of a starving, famished Hori's conformity to the ritual of gifting the cow, the only means of family's sustenance to the priest for the peace of the departed soul.

Arguably, the hold of ageold traditions is so very strong on the non-literate, semi-literate rural women that they emerge as staunch patriarchal agents of oppression and suppression in the familial as well as the public space. However, the perceptible

change in the mindset of these women cannot be denied. Saru Gossainee's interpolation of the scriptures to prevent a married man from a second marriage and thus prevent his wife's relegation to the marginalised location of a co-wife is a fine manifestation of the new trope in women's revisitation of tradition. The image of a mellowed down, repentant Mokshada in *The First Promise* verily subverts the iconic image of a circumscribed, tradition-bound widow.

Thus, it could be argued that the rural women's participation in various social and religious rituals cannot always be undermined as a part of customary or conventional practice which is always hostile to doubly marginalised subjectivities. On the contrary, these ritualistic practices quite often offer them social and cultural space. Despite the Brahmin widows exclusion from participation in auspicious rituals like *amoti* in Assam and other auspicious ceremonies in Bengal there were various social and religious ceremonies and occasions where the widows had the social sanction to perform. They could, for instance, blow the conch shell and do the ululation.

Cutting across the caste and class specificities, Hindu women in general, particularly the rural women, observe ritual fasting days for various purposes, most often for the wellbeing of the men folk—their husbands and sons. Firmly foregrounded in patriarchy these *vratas* or fasting days need to be interrogated in the contemporary context of the globalised market economy, consumerism and accessibility to visual and print media. Interestingly, there is a reference to the *vrata* of *karva chauth* in *Chaak*, a novel addition to the itinerary of the fasting days for women in the village. The celebration of the newly introduced *karva chauth vrata* by the fraternity of village women in a profuse and spectacular manner with great fanfare and elaboration in terms of the public display of cosmetics, ornaments, expensive clothes and gifts comes for elaborate discussion in the novel. A relatively moderate gift of artificial, gold plated ear rings for Kalawati chachi's daughter from her husband is the cause of

aggravation of contention between the estranged couple and embarrassment for the girl's mother and concomitantly an occasion of hilarity and subversive pleasure for the congregation of women. This is a popular fast undertaken by married Hindu women to pray for the longevity of their husbands and is associated with marital bliss. However, as Malashri Lal observes the romance of conjugality has been transferred to the market economy to the extent that expensive gift giving and elaborate costuming have become a part of the observance of a fast which called simply for the benediction of good health (*In Search of Sita*).

Another *vrata* that too demands from widows a similar kind of total abstinence from food and water is the fast of *Ekadashi*. The widows in the household of Ramkali (*The First Promise*), and Durga, Saru Gossainee and Giribala (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) give ample evidence of the strict and self punishing routine. Therefore the popularity of the fast of *Karva Chauth* vis-à-vis the anonymity of *Ekadashi vrata* which is in no way less rigorous and self punishing than the former has a cogent connect with market economy that can appropriate rituals, customs and traditions for monetary gains. The appropriation of the poor village folk and tribals etc. as consumerists is also related to the dynamics of market economy that can appropriate or misappropriate a custom, ritual or convention for purely materialistic gains.

The improvised versions of the *vrata kathas* and the nuanced ways of observing fasts in different parts of the country are a reflection on the personal and collective genius of women to contextualise the *kathas* in a personal, local or social context. However, the important questions that need to be asked in Malashri's opinion are as to how the feminist critique would address these conditions. Is it more power to women if they recognise and modify the old customs to their advantage, as in retelling/interpreting the stories behind the *vrats* they observe? Is it a triumph or a defeat when the market economy is guided

by women's choices? In the politics of change, is the new woman imaging herself on the old and regressive, or is she reinventing tradition? (Lal, "Promises to Keep"). The dowry paradigm is another crucial paradigm in the contemporary context that is polemically related to the market economy. The poor Brahmin mother-daughter dyad of Rukmani and Ira (*Nectar in a Sieve*), Eliman (*A Saga of South Kamrup*), Bhano (*And Such Is Her Fate*) and the poor inmates of the *Kanya Gurukul* (*Chaak*) are all poor, hapless dowry victims.

The significant point to be noted is that these novels do not only offer a simple overview of the ritualistic practices or customs in Brahminical and feudal patriarchies but, on the contrary, interrogate these ritualistic practices etc, in the contemporary social, economic and cultural contexts. *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* are well informed with quite a few gendered traditions, the marriage of prepubescent girls valorised as *gauridaan*, for instance. Satyabati's final act of protest registers the feminist anger against women's degradation to objectification. Correspondingly, the events leading to Giribala's self immolation in *A Saga of South Kamrup* are foregrounded in the imperative of a prepubescent marriage. The female investigating agency and agential voice in both the novels is unanimously critical of this traditional practice. In sharp contrast to these two female protagonists located in the pre-independence era of social reforms, the social acceptability of twenty seven years old unmarried Manda in the public domain of the village (*Idannamam*) in the nation state is undeniably suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in the tradition of *gauri daan*.

Commensality on occasions of joy as well as sorrow is an inseparable part of village culture albeit at the subterranean level these ceremonious occasions go on to promote or promulgate patriarchal norms and values. The ban on the participation of widows, for instance, on the occasion of collective feasting consolidates their marginalised location

within the institution of patriarchy. *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* located in Brahminical patriarchies refer to many such occasions of collective feasting—rice ceremony, *shradha* ceremony, marriage ceremony and so on which brings the village community to a common platform apart from offering them sumptuous meals.

What is significant in the feminist context is the investigation of the ritual from the subject position of the marginalised and doubly marginalised women as the case may be. Thus, the elaborately organised *shradha* ceremony of Bhubaneswari presents a painful opportunity to the childless widow Mokshada to investigate her marginalised location vis-à-vis a dead *saubhagyavati* woman survived by her husband. Correspondingly, on a festive occasion the newly widowed Giribala is tempted to taste the forbidden fish and thus exposed to public ridicule and censure. Correspondingly, the sub-text of *Nectar in a Sieve* exposes the irrelevance of a grand marriage feast in a family of a landless poor farmer facing starvation and extreme penury.

Thus, it could be posited that the rural women's participation in various social and religious rituals cannot always be undermined as a part of customary or conventional practice which are categorically hostile to doubly marginalised subjectivities. Conversely, these ritualistic practices quite often offer them ample social and cultural space.

Another paradigm polemically related to antiquity is the caste purity paradigm widely practiced among the high caste Brahmins with the women's complicity in its propagation and preservation. As has been argued in the previous chapter the caste paradigm is critiqued in these novels from the feminist perspective.

Mythology and Fiction Interface

Mythology has been the foundational ground for the imaging of the Indian woman in the literary canon—male as well as

female. Surprisingly, myths are more influential than reality, and quite often accrue new meanings to reality. As Romila Thapar observes, myth is in a sense a prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of preserving and giving significance to an important aspect of the past. Though myths cannot be used as descriptive sources on the past, their analysis can verily reveal the more emphatic assumptions of a society (Thapar 294). The myths in the process of their transmissions and transmutations do not follow a linear but a meandering course between various representational modes. The significance of mythological models for women has been substantively emphasised by Irigaray for symbolising the relation of women to their bodies. Irigaray's mythological models provide western woman with the kinds of representation of herself which are unavailable to her in her culture and that speaks for Irigaray's appreciation for the eastern cultures where women find ample representation in mythology.

Significantly, the feminist focus in India in recent years has been on the interrogation of mythology in terms of the representation of woman and the reclamation of the transgressing, progressive mythical women—the *panch kanyas* and Draupadi for instance, for the purposes of constructing positive female identity. During the period of nationalism that witnessed unprecedented participation of women across region, class, caste and religion in the movement, the mythical images of Sita, Savitri, Damyanti as paragons of Indian womanhood, and Gargi and Maitreyi as *vidushi* -- the learned women—provided focal points of reference for the nationalists and the reformers. Gandhi as a staunch exponent of middle class morality found the defining figure of Sita as the most befitting model of Indian womanhood partly for her moral strength, but more so for her normative attributes of self-effacement, self sacrifice, fidelity and unfaltering loyalty to her husband.

Conversely, for Nehru what was more appealing than the silent suffering of Sita was the ideal of equality for women which

he found in Arjuna's consort Chitrangada in *Mahabharata* (Som 38). Polemic and ironic it is that the mythological image of Sita and not of Chitrangada that has outlasted in the cultural and collective Indian memory. None of these novels ever allude to Chitrangada, the champion of equality who 'had warned against being deified and kept on a pedestal as also being neglected and ignored' (Som 35-36). Bhano's identification with Sita (*And Such Is Her Fate*), the subversion of the iconic fire purification ceremony (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) and Manda's valorised role as the *Ramayana* narrator (*Idannamam*) reiteratingly substantiate the all-pervasive presence of archetypal Sita in the Indian rural woman's psyche.

Myths are symbols and signs that codify values and beliefs and shape the culture whereas myth making is the action of modifying and renewing these modifications. One of the primary objectives of gynocritical writing is to interrogate, reinvestigate and revisit the old myths and reinvent new myths. Revisionist mythmaking as a potent instrument of resistance and creative self assertion represents the feminist angst to redefine the traditional myths and to reconceptualise and relocate woman's relation to and place in culture.

The contemporary women's discourse is engaged in the recreation of an emancipatory, counter-mythology wherein the mythic tale or the mythic figure is appropriated for altered ends. Northrope Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) has classified the traditional canonical myths but the feminist theorists have inquired into their structural patterns and deciphered the politics of foregrounding male experience and beliefs through them. The myth of Draupadi as the wife of five Pandavas in *And Such Is Her Fate* is reverted for here Bhano unlike Draupadi refuses to be the wife of the four brothers. Similarly, the popular myth of Sita's *Agni parikha* -- the test of fire—is subverted in *A Saga of South Kamrup*. Ironically though, the reversion or revision of the myths in both the instances does not potent any positive ends for the female protagonists.

The Register of Bhakti: Spirituality Paradigm

Gendered spirituality in the Indian society has received mixed response. Prior to the attainment of sainthood and social veneration "... women could respond to their spiritual calling only by risking their reputation and being termed deviant" (Ramawamy 1). The register of Bhakti in the Indian rural context has always gained wider social acceptability. The Bhakti movement in the past was widely popular for being 'anti-caste, pro-poor, pro-women, anti-elitist, anti-Sanskrit, and it affirmed that genuine love of god was sufficient to achieve salvation' (Srinivas, Introduction xv).

Unlike the Judeo-Christian religion where God is figured as masculine and there is no woman God, Hindu religion widely accepts women as goddesses notwithstanding the cliché that the deifying of women is symbolic and far from the harsh ground reality. However, the spirituality paradigm as a socially and culturally valorised paradigm is employed by women as a viable means for empowerment. At the higher level spirituality entails transcendence that could be attained by the prescribed four paths—*Karma Yoga*, *Jnana Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga* and *Dhyana Yoga*. In common parlance spirituality for women is interspersed with *Bhakti* -- devotion—and is widely practiced or 'claimed' by widows and other marginalised subjectivities in villages with a religious/cultural orientation. Manda's valorisation as a *Ramayana* narrator, the pilgrimage of Mokshada and Sharda to the holy city of Kashi and Durga's unfulfilled desire for pilgrimage has a cogent connect with the spirituality paradigm.

The conceptualisation of feminist spirituality has been a source of great interest and empowerment for some western feminists since the 1970s and the goddess spirituality movement has verily impacted western feminist thought. Irigaray's two seminal feminist texts *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974/1985) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1977/1985) address the issue of female divine vis-à-vis the Judeo-Christian religions which are foregrounded in a patriarchal church and a male

divine and do not allow women to attain the status of goddesses. Conversely, as Irigaray argues the matrifocal societies accept the notion of female divinity uncritically. Irigaray goes on to suggest the possibility of setting up an alternative society with the acceptance of the rites of other women-centric cultures and traditions that take note of female divinity and where sacred women find representation. Patriarchal religions, like Judaism and Christianity, are thus considered to be the foundation of women's erasure (Ingram "From Goddess" 51).

Unlike the western feminist circles the conceptualisation of female spirituality is not a novel phenomenon in the Indian social and literary canon and the women saints have received mixed response in terms of social acceptability in the domain of *Bhakti*-devotion and spirituality. None of the women in these novels attain the state of what Irigaray defines as a 'transcendent divine' which enables a woman to reach beyond her corporeal figuration in the symbolic order and to reach the horizon, the infinite of becoming that the divine offers (Ingram "From Goddess" 54). The spirituality paradigm is addressed in Maitreyi Pushpa's both the novels with two variables of spirituality—Manda as the *Ramayana* narrator (*Idannamam*) and Manohar's wife as a possessed woman (*Chaak*).

Manda as a *Ramayana* narrator, Saru Gossainee as the spiritual head of the *sattrā* and the numerous 'religiously inclined' widows in Brahminical patriarchies attain social respect and credibility in the villages. Notably though, Manda, Saru Gossainee and the Brahmin widows cannot be located in the category of spiritually empowered women since their religious acts are determined by economic and socio-cultural constraints and they have not transcended the corporeal self. For Manda the role of *Ramayana* narrator is an economic necessity, and as for Saru Gossainee it entails her duty as the *Adhikar* of the *sattrā*. In sharp contrast to these bourgeoisie women, the public domain of the gurudwara fails to offer spiritual peace and security to the low caste Bhano (*And Such Is Her Fate*) where she is ironically

located in the victimised location of a sexually vulnerable woman subjected to the lustful male gaze of the *granthi*. None of these women succeed in attaining the ultimate state of transcendence or sainthood where all boundaries of caste, class and gender are diffused and deflated.

Vis-à-vis the female transcendent spirituality, spirit medium and spirit possession cults have been widely popular in the tribal and peasant societies of Asia and Africa where a woman is temporarily located in an empowered centre in the public domain of religion.⁵ The French feminists Luce Irigaray and Helen Cixous also celebrate women's difference from men at all levels—psychic, physical and intellectual. Thus promoting feminine irrationality and sexual anarchy, Cixous in *Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays* (1986) valorises the stigmatised constructs of witches, hysterics and homosexuals as the most dangerous rebels of patriarchy. Manohar's wife, a nonentity as a nameless village woman in real life is relocated temporarily in an empowered centre in the state of possession. As Iris Berger has observed, cult activities in African and Oriental societies serve as venues of protest against male domination and reiterate women's authority, no matter temporary in ritual ceremonies or similar situations (157-58). The representation of Manohar's wife as an uninhibited possessed woman when she enjoys the license to trespass the social and moral taboos also engages in the paradigm of repressed sexuality of women in a patriarchal system.

Hindu-Muslim Interface

Of all these novels, the Hindu-Muslim dynamics has been addressed in *Idannamam* only in the context of the village Shyamali as the stereotyped model of composite culture not only in terms of the new caste configurations within the Hindu community but the inter-community syndrome as well. Though inhabited by only two Muslim households of Chief Saab and

Banne Master, the communal harmony in the village is foregrounded on the wisdom and goodwill of two benevolent elders, Chief Saab and Pancham Singh from both the communities. With the initial focus on the trope of communal harmony—the iconic *Ganga-Jamuni* culture in terms of mutual respect for each other's customs and conventions, socio-religious beliefs and practices the deciding shift in the idealised inter-community relationship is caused partly for personal, but more so for political reasons. In its pattern of mutual trust and respect and the breakdown of trust the novel follows the mimetic mode of Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, Rahi Masoom Raza's *A Village Divided*, Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginaama* and Qurrtul Ain Haider's *The River on Fire*, to cite a few notable examples.

What is intriguingly significant in the context of the present study is the invisibility of the Muslim women in *Idannamam* in terms of the denial of identity, speaking voice and subjecthood to them and their generalised representation. Thus, the matriarch Anwari Begam offering shelter to Manda and Bau in her house is an invisible presence in the novel despite references to her generous hospitality and sensitised behaviour in terms of the Hindu paradigm of purity/pollution and socio-cultural nuances. The food for Bau and Manda is brought from a Brahmin household and Manda is offered only the *rumali roti* and vegetable curry from the Muslim kitchen to the exclusion of meat. On the occasion of the *raksha bandhan* not only the ceremonious *bhunjiya* - the tiny shoots of barley have been procured but Anwari's small son Shakeel clad in a new *sherwani* suit ready with the *rakhi* for his wrist and a gift for his 'sister' Manda.

Similarly, the five daughters of Banne master too are an invisible presence, the molestation of the two daughters by the Hindu miscreants on the festive occasion of *holi* from Panchal Singh's family causes the rift between the two communities which is later precipitated by the Hindu village hooligans with the defilement of the mosque as an offshoot of the demolition of

Babri masjid. Crucially though, the symbolic act of damage control is performed by the illiterate Kusuma by cleaning the defiled mosque which has virtually a symbolic signification since the damage to the Muslim households is irreparable in mental and emotional terms culminating in their mass exodus from the village. Later, the single status of Banne master's daughters and their prostitutionalization for economic constraints alludes to a significant dimension of the Muslim women's marginalised location in society vis-a-vis the emancipatory education paradigm.

Here it would be worthwhile to bring *Idannamam* in dialogue with a contemporary Muslim woman-authored novel *Korja* (1997) located in the rural landscape of Jagdalpur in the tribal belt of Bastar region. The strategic evasion of representing a Muslim woman by a Hindu woman writer is perceptibly related to the polemics of representation, but more to the sensitive nature of the inter-community relationship. Maitreyi Pushpa's Muslim counterpart Mehrunnisa Pervez dares to engage with the polemic Hindu-Muslim amorous relationship in *Korja* without taking it to a conclusive end. The inter-community relationship is carried on in a clandestine manner and the sensitive issue is strategically evaded with the elimination of the Hindu lover Amit from the scene with his untimely demise. Interestingly, the polemics of physical relationship too is conveniently dissolved with the impotency of Amit. Intriguingly, there is no opposition, not even a murmur of disapproval or reproach from any quarters to this relationship. "Nobody knew about the love between Kammo and Amit" (*Korja* 221). And finally, the suicide of Kammo, the Muslim female protagonist aborts the polemic issue of an interreligious marriage. The portrayal of an exceedingly poor household of four Muslim women between the age group of twenty to eighty-two comprising of two widows, an unmarried daughter and a granddaughter forsaken by the father offers a penetrating account of the hardships in the lives of the doubly marginalised

women as deserted wives, daughters of estranged parents, poor girls as victims of male lust living below the poverty line. In sharp contrast to these lively, close-in-life images the image of the Hindu spinster Mona is ephemeral taken up to superlatives of 'extremely beautiful', withdrawn, love-lorn who tidied up the lives of the three orphan Muslim boys after the matriarch's death."Mona didi tidied up the lives of all the three of them" (*Korja* 231).

The tropes and trajectories in terms of the Hindu-Muslim interface are certainly not new, the inter-community relationship is addressed in *Korja* at an imaginary plane that could only be located in the mindscape, but certainly not in the landscape. In *Idannamam* too the sensitive issue of inter-community relationship is not elaborately addressed, however it is well informed with the political dimension of the problem that has always been the major threat to the composite culture of a village community. Correspondingly, in *Nectar in a Sieve* too the representation of the Muslim wives residing in the officer quarters of the tannery is illusive devoid of a face and speech. Rukmani as a vegetable seller has an access to their household albeit all that she could perceive were the pale faces of those wealthy Muslim women. The exclusivity of the Muslim community, more pertinently of the womenfolk is explicit in the text.

As a welcome exception, the only woman-authored Hindi novel to encapsulate the pre-partition village in Punjab in all its pre-partition glory in economic, social and cultural terms is Krishna Sobti's *Zindaginaama* which explores the nuanced inter-community interface in the pre-partition Punjab in a relatively more conducive and amicable background. The novel is a fictional reiteration of Bob van der Linden's argument in his book *Moral Languages from Colonial Punjab: The Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs* (2008) that the religious boundaries in the rural Punjab were extremely fluid as standards of behaviour, categories of thought, conceptions of time, notions of purity and impurity and of the sacred and profane were not

marked by great differences (Linden 50)—a statement that is vindicated in the fictional writings from Punjab, Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, to cite one example.

Rural-Urban Hiatus

As a matter of fact, the dividing silken line between the rural and the urban segment for a vast majority of population in India even today is very thin. One major factor responsible for the migration of the villagers to urban lands has been the scarcity of the arable land in the backdrop of the industrialization in the initial post-independence phase. Rukamani's son Thambi refuses to take to farming for the same reason. "If it were your land or mine.... I would work with you gladly. But what profit to labour for another and get so little in return?" (*Nectar in a Sieve* 52). By the time the novel ends, the village has shaped into a mini town, the erstwhile huts have given way to brick-and-cement pigeonholes. Markandaya's successive novels - *Two Virgins*, *A Handful of Rice*, *The Coffer Dam* and *Pleasure City* have consistently focused on the villagers' predicament in the transitional phase of industrialisation.

Initially though, only the men folk moved to the townships in search of work and their families were constrained to remain behind in villages for economic or social reasons. The rich landlords like Nabakumar in *The First Promise* owned two settlements—one each in the village and city. The rural-urban interface finds its culmination in Markandaya's posthumous novel *Bombay Tiger* (2008) where two village boys outdo the city people in the manner of Balram of *The White Tiger* with their cooptive prioritisation of the new values in a world where money equates power.

In a very significant move Markandaya shifts the focus on the migrant village women like Rukmani and her son Murugan's wife caught in the rural-urban hiatus in *Nectar in a Sieve*. The innocent but ambitious female protagonist Lalita's forays in the

city in her later novel *Two Virgins* (1975) have tragic conventional consequences for her in the loss of virginity and physical exploitation, however the novel suggests new tropes and trajectories in the paradigmatic rural and urban space, and even more importantly the widening of the geographical space for an ambitious village woman trying to make it big in the city.

Likewise, the young village women of rural Bengal, Satyabati and her prototype Bhabini and Shankari (*The First promise*) also migrate to Calcutta for different reasons. In the following trilogy Satyabati's daughter Suvarnlata also follows her mother's footsteps for similar practical emancipatory gains. As the young women of the propertied class, for Satyabati and Bhabini migration reflects the new trope of nuclear family in the cities in the backdrop of the emancipatory paradigm of education and the rich peasantries' preference for white collar jobs. As for Satyabati, the emancipated village woman the education of her children is the chief motivating force behind her migration though her husband, the only son of a prosperous landed class is initially reluctant to settle down in the secondary position of a tenant in the city as a salaried man. The shifting locale of the city signifies the evolutionary process in the life of the bildungsroman female protagonist in the post-reformation phase in terms of the education and the nuclear family paradigms vis-à-vis the joint family setup that offered limited scope and opportunities for individual and familial growth.

Contrarily, Bhabini's belated migration relates to the unviability of the male peasant migrations to urban centres owing to economic constraints or the pressures of the joint families. The constant deterioration in Nitai's character cogently related to his single status enforces his parents to ultimately send his wife with him. Interestingly, the metamorphosis in Bhabini's character from a submissive and docile person to a fire brigand extrovert is suggestive of the marginalised location of the young daughter-in-laws in joint families in terms of the retarded growth of personality.

Juxtaposed to the neo rich class much below in caste hierarchy, the physical and mental dislocation and relocation of the rich peasant families in claustrophobic spaces gives rise to another set of problems. Oscillating between the urban consciousness and rural consciousness it is a Herculean task for Satyabati to maintain a stable identity and engender high social and moral values in her children with relatively restricted means. Dislocated from her village Satyabati is located in the diasporic state of in-betweenness and suffers from similar psychological and cultural pressures.

Vis-à-vis the migrant village women to the cities these novels also represent the urban migrant women to villages. Sukumari, the younger sister-in-law of Bhubaneswari, is not appreciated by her elder sister-in-law for her urbanite embellishments, for instance the beautification of a fan for in her opinion the defining parameters for a village woman would be the winnowing of grain and the milking of cow. Significantly though, the sub-text of *The First Promise* involves the positive aspect of such rural-urban hiatus. In fact Sukumari has been the prime motivating force at the back of Satyabati's self-learning efforts. Similarly, Sarang's (un)village like behaviour could be attributed to her education in a *Kanya Gurukul*.

Down south *The God of Small Things* focuses on women of three generations in the post-independence phase caught between this in-betweenness. Ammu temporarily goes from her natal village Ayemenem in the hope of betterment only to return as a widow. Rahel moves out of the village to the U. S. but comes back to Ayemenem dejected and defeated. The pattern in terms of the gender priorities for the urban locale is identical in terms of education for children and rejection of joint family for a nuclear family setup.

Given the fact of the receding binaries in the rural-urban sector in the nation state, one witnesses the new phenomena of dislocated city women relocated in villages such as Sarang (*Chaak*) and Ammu (*The God of Small Things*) what Homi Bhabha defines 'as a contingent' 'in-between' space that

innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (Bhabha, “DissemiNation”). It would not be a too far-fetched proposition to ascribe the unconventional, transgressive behaviour of these two dislocated city women to their urban upbringing or exposure. In many ways similar to the diasporic situation, these displaced city women in villages have to negotiate between two terrains in the pre-natal and post-natal phase. This experience of inhabiting two geographical and cultural spaces is bound to create a kind of diasporic consciousness marked by the dichotomies of dislocation versus relocation.

Reference could also be made to Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* that represents an urbanite, well educated protagonist dislocated from the metropolis of Bombay to be relocated in a *haveli* in Rajasthan in the post-marital phase. After overcoming the initial phase of dislocation in an affluent and tradition bound landlord family the female protagonist Gita is assimilated in a family where the women in *pardah* are said to be thriving under considerate and affectionate patriarchs. Gita’s ‘innovative’ moves are at the most delimited to opening a small school in one of the rooms of the *haveli* strictly meant for the children and maids of the *haveli*. Her willing surrender of her ‘right to speak’ entails the problematic of empowerment in terms of education, the corollary of knowledge which is power related for here, as one perceives knowledge fails to empower the protagonist in the real sense of the term.

Reverting back to the initial argument that for any imaging or representation of the Indian woman—tribal, *dalit*, rural or even urban—the defining imperative would be to examine the rich corpus of *Bhasa* literature, it could be stated that the non-literate and semi-literate rural women in these women-authored *Bhasa* novels located in varying geographical locales emerge as powerful cultural constructs with their firm foregrounding in orality in terms of their knowledge of rituals, customs, mythology and indigenous sources of knowledge. The major thrust of postcolonial and feminist discourse has been on the contestation

and subversion of cultural colonisation admittedly the worst form of colonisation. It is in these relatively newer domains of subaltern and culture studies that the rural woman emerges as the most powerful and effective resisting agent confronting linguistic and cultural colonisation with her rootedness in native languages, customs, culinary skills etc, without even knowing it.

As is substantiated by the textual exegesis, more than social marginalisation it is cultural marginalisation that functions as the worst form of oppression for the marginalised subjectivities of widows, childless women, mothers of single girl child or mothers with a history of terminated, aborted pregnancies in the patriarchal system. The loss of her first child in the womb is as great a psychological and emotional trauma for Satyabati as the painful realisation of her relegation to the category of an inauspicious woman in the socio-cultural domain, to cite an instance.

Vis-à-vis these *Bhasa* texts, the two novels in English—*Nectar in a Sieve* and *The God of Small things* exhibit a pervasive lack of cultural variety and socio-cultural nuances of rural life which would reiterate Meenakshi Mukherjee's reference to an English language writer's limitations in translating the nuanced empiricity in a foreign language. Located in a nameless village somewhere in south India, the representation of Rukmani in the novel is stereotyped. Barring a few occasions of collective community participation and commensality, the village women are conspicuous by their absence. Corresponding to it Ammu, a city-retained belle in *The God of Small Things* is located outside the periphery of the domestic and public world of Ayemenem and thus the inference that it could be her sense of abject dejection born out of her alienation that brings her closer to Velutha.

This is a common complaint that the villages and the village folk are fast losing their rural identity in the backdrop of a globalised world and growing market economy. Quite a few

novels published in the last few years or so have pondered on the subsequent transformation in the migrant city-based village idiot's personality from childlike idiocy to rascality represented by Balram Halwai of Adiga's *The White Tiger*. Concomitantly there is massive co-opting of gullible village women as consumerists at the cost of the loss of their cultural identity and conversion of arable land into quarries dislocating the farmers from their land to be relocated in their own land as labourers—a threatening preposition with which Maitreyi Pushpa has been engaged in both her novels. It is at this crucial juncture that a rural woman's social and political agency is superimposed on her cultural identity, at such prophetic moments in history the transformation of a Sita into a Kali is always welcome.

The villages in India were and still are the centres of culture but their systematised distancing from the urban power centre first in the pre-independence and later on same lines in the nation state located them on the periphery of the dominant canon. The urban centres of the colony became the easy targets of the cultural imperialism and civilisational project of the empire, the villages, on the contrary, could ward off the imperialist culturalism with their indigenous, self-sustaining modes and means of living for a considerably longer period.

Most prominently, the matriarchs in the hierarchal patriarchy of the villages have had a strict control in matters of rituals, customs and ceremony. Raja Rao's blind woman in *Kanthapura*, Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve*, Mokshada in *The First Promise*, and Bau in *Idannamam* (the examples would be too many) represent such rural women who reflect Gramscian intellectual and moral leadership qualities in times of social and political urgency. The sustenance of the oral and the folk traditions by these illiterate and semi-literate women in the stronghold of villages is substantively suggestive of their cultural leadership in the contemporary context of the problematic dominance of the written word over the multifarious, multidimensional and multifaceted discourses of orality.

NOTES

1. For a theoretical documentation see Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1989); Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, nd); Nancy K. Miller, *Getting Personal: Feminist Occasions and Other Autobiographical Acts* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Felicity A. Nussbaum, *The Autobiographical Subject* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1989). Also see Toni Morrison's *The Milkman* and *The Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *In Search of My Mother's Garden* and Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* for a serious documentation of woman's collective racial, cultural memory.
2. For a forceful documentation see Bhalchandra Nemade, *Nativism (Desivad)*, (Shimla: IAS, 2009) and his tract *Sahitya, Sanskriti Aur Bhumandalikaran*, trans. by Dr. Girish Kashid (Mumbai: Lokvangmaya Griha, 2004). In November 16-18, 2005 an international conference on the theme of 'Endangered Planet in Literature' was held in Istanbul, Turkey where Gayatri Spivak as key speaker shared her anxiety for the endangered languages of the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe with the delegates.
3. Of the four *Yogas*, *Karma Yoga* exhorts detached action, *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge, *Bhakti Yoga*, the path of devotion and dedication and *Dhyana Yoga*, the path of union with Brahman through meditation and contemplation. 'Some realise the self or supreme by meditation, by its aid, the self within, others by pure reason, others by right action' (XIII/24).
4. For a forceful documentation of ritual see Marvin Meyer and Richard Smith, ed., *Ancient Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999); Frank Salamone, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals and Festivals* (London: Routledge, 2004); Jasbir Jain, *Narrative of the Village* (Jaipur: Rawat, 2006). Also see Malashri Lal's unpublished paper "Promises to Keep: Women's Ritual Fasting in India," presented in a seminar on *Beyond Binaries & Borders: Intercultural Interdisciplinarity*, at University of British Columbia, Vancour, Canada on March 13-14, 2009.
5. For a fictional representation of women as spirit mediums and possessed by spirits see the Afro-American women writers, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Also see the African woman writer Grace Ogot's *Land Under Thunder* and see Jaiwanti Dimri's, "Margins Within Margins: Rohinton Mistry's *Such A Long Journey*," *Diasporic Studies: Theory And Practice*, ed., Gurupadesh Singh (Amritsar: GNDUP, 2007).

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Chapter VII

Conclusion

Full are my pitchers and far to carry
Lone is the way and long
Why, O why was I tempted to tarry
Lured by the boatman's song?
Swiftly the shadows of night are falling
Hear, O hear, is the white crane calling.

SAROJINI NAIDU
"Village Song"

Reading and writing is a social act and every text, however simple and prosaic it might appear, has a context, subtext and is governed by the principle of intertextuality. Similarly, representation—literary or otherwise—is never an innocent, but a political act that needs to be constantly interrogated in the contextualised social, political and cultural contexts. The representation of a woman subjectivity in the canon—literary or social—in terms of caste, class and gender specificities has had a cogent connect with the dynamics of patriarchy especially in the Indian society as is substantiated by the projection, popularisation or valorisation of certain mythical archetypes vis-à-vis the polarisation of transgressive epic women in the dominant canon.

One of the primary objectives of gynocritical writing is not only to interrogate, contest or subvert the hegemonic patriarchal constructions of women but to concomitantly offer counter-canonical images and representations of women by revisiting mythology and other canonical texts from the feminist

standpoint. Female representation has been in recent times one of the areas of contestation in the literary and culture studies circles and the modes of subversion and resistance are addressed in the gynocritical project by means of the revisitation of the traditional sources of knowledge, myths, folk and other popular traditions to be subsequently translated into a counter-canon.

The construct of the rural woman is vitally significant for any imaging of the Indian woman in the nation state for her firm foregrounding in the cultural moorings, ironically though she has been a subaltern construct in the dominant as well as the feminist canon wherein the central consciousness is polemically occupied by the urban middle class woman suggestive of a kind of a cultural and civilizational imperialism that still nourishes the hegemonic hierarchies of knowledge and values reflected in the denigration of native/indigenous/*Bhasa* literatures and culture in the erstwhile colonies. The polarisation of the village woman is partially foregrounded in the marginalised location of village in social and political terms in the colonial state. Reclamation of the colonised's history, literature and culture has been a well known part of decolonisation project, initially a subject of interest and enquiry for the political historians and political scientists but at present, it is a matter of deep concern for social scientists, literary historians and culture studies experts, all aiming at devising effective counter-productive strategies for (i) the redressal and retrieval of the lost history, literature and culture, (ii) and for the creation of new literary and critical indigenous paradigms and pedagogy in the nation state. A study of this kind is aimed at the fulfillment of these objectives.

An image in the classical sense of the term signifies *rupa*, *bimba*, *aakriti*—all connoting reflection. Notwithstanding the theoretical points of difference Plato's mimetic theory of art and Aristotle's theory of imitation admit an artist's creative potential to translate the reality in an art form though these imitations or reproductions can never be exact but either

superior or inferior to the exact object of imitation. The archetypal constructions of women are determined by social and political factors, subjective preferences and priorities and therefore the imperative need to examine them against the grain.

Given the fact that the image of a person, a rural woman in this context in the canon—literary or social—is impacted by the variables of patriarchal structure and geographical locale, the caste and gender binaries and socio-cultural factors, the rural woman needs to be located in a proper perspective in view of these imperatives. These eight selected women-authored novels from varying geographical, social and cultural locales written in the span of four decades of post-independence and postcoloniality are broadly located in two kinds of representational systems—Brahminical and feudal patriarchies that function at the surface level on the principle of domination and subordination. However, the villages are as much the site of cooperation as of conflict and the complicity of women in both the domains is witnessed in these texts.

The essentialisation of these systems is, however, polemic and the representation of rural woman has been investigated in these fictional narratives in the backdrop of (i) the autonomy of the subaltern subject and sovereignty of subaltern consciousness, patriarchal benevolence and assertion-within-deference, (ii) the Foucauldian power/knowledge paradigm, and lastly (iii) the feminist postulates of identity, subjecthood, agency and resistance. The rural women—Rukmani, Manda, Sarang, Bau, Satyabati, for instance—are able to act in accordance with what Dipesh Chakraverty defines as resistance to and acceptance of domination and manipulate subservience with an assertion-within-deference in Sumit Sarker's terms.

This is not to state that the patriarchal structures in the villages have become less oppressive and subversive to women. Patriarchal operations work in a systematised way for the legitimised subordination of women and the areas of contention for the rural woman in a village patriarchy relate primarily to

her land rights and rights to her body. However, in the conceptualisation of a woman's position in patriarchy, the political, social, cultural and ideological factors need to be taken into account which are not static but, on the contrary, in a process of constant transformation and modification.

The subaltern studies project is not without disclaimers for the theoretical traps and inherent contradictions, however it has been influential in rethinking the role of groups such as peasants, tribal, *dalits*, other minority groups, and women. The peasant can further be divided and is divisible into the varied categories of rural gentry of impoverished landlords, rich peasants, upper middle class peasants, deficit producers, share croppers and so on, and brings into crises the very paradigms that critique the essential postcolonial historiography and literature. What is significantly pertinent to this study is the subalternised construct of the 'rural' inclusive of the specificities mentioned above. The locus standi in this study therefore has been on the investigation of the images and representation of rural woman in these fictional narratives in the backdrop of the feminist and subaltern pedagogy.

However, the limitations of the subaltern historiography have to be taken cognisance of since (i) it has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class but not as an 'entity' whose will and reason constituted the rebellion. The peasant in this discourse is located in the category of the 'human' and is a homogenised construct, and (ii) for the invisibility of the rural woman in this discourse. Similarly, the predominance of the Eurocentric feminist theories and the lack of a proper indigenous theoretical framework is a great impediment for critiquing the body of *Bhasa* literature. The endeavour has been to examine the compatibility of the western theories and apply them selectively and critically.

The images of the village woman in this study have been delimited to three broad categories as familial, social and cultural constructs negotiating the private as well as the public territory

as daughters in their natal family, as wife, daughter-in-law, mother-in-law etc. in their marital family or as widows, co-wives, deserted/separated wives in their natal or marital families, the caste 'Other' in hegemonic Brahminical and feudal patriarchies and lastly as cultural actors/participants in the life of the community. Most importantly, the women subjectivities are not categorically delimited to these stratified familial or social roles but excel as individuated beings. Satyabati (*The First Promise*), Manda (*Idannamam*), Sarang (*Chaak*) and, to some extent, the most circumscribed widow Phaniyamma too cross the patriarchal threshold in the course of their negotiations and permutations with the feminist postulates of identity, subjecthood and agency. Ironically though, their acts of protest and dissent are still located in the domain of patriarchy and normative patriarchal standards are contested or violated only by transgressing and rebel widows, co-wives or deserted wives. Unlike *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* located in Brahminical patriarchies where sexuality is an invisible phenomenon and is associated with sin, Maitreyi Pushpa and Arundhati Roy do map out the submerged layers of women's sexuality.

More than representing the rural woman in normative familial and social roles, the women are situated in the patriarchal and social framework which is often juxtaposed to the power model in terms of hierarchy. Power is associated firmly with the male and masculinity. The power politics in the villages (*A Saga of South Kamrup*, *Idannamam*, *Chaak* and *The God of Small Things*) does not always operate on the Marxist mode of the binary opposition between the rich landlord and the poor farmer, but concomitantly exposes the exploiters from within their own ranks corresponding to the Foucauldian power model wherein power does not always emanate from above. The textual evidence is substantive of the fact that the rural woman irrespective of the constraints of caste, class or gender is not always the perennial 'Other' in these village patriarchies but is

capable of dislocating or relocating the patriarchal power centre and attain autonomy within the system with the cooption or appropriation of 'patriarchal benevolence' or with an 'assertion-within-deference' and in a most characteristic manner with the knowledge of her world as the case may be.

Admittedly, it is imperative to acquire the 'knowledge' of the system for the purposes of contestation or subversion of the system or to carve out proverbial space. As Foucault articulates knowledge and power complement each other. One leads to another, and also, one is the result of the other. Corresponding to the Foucauldian power-knowledge model Satyabati (*The First Promise*) and Sarang (*Chaak*) as wives in their relationship with their spouses and Manda (*Idannamam*) in her relationship with her fiancé are not located in a position of absolute subordination albeit the areas of contestation for Satyabati and Sarang as wives demonstrate the two conflictual grounds for rural women in terms of the defining feminist postulates of identity and sexuality on the one hand, and the variables of women in positive and negative terms, on the other.

The identity paradigm is crucially important for any formulation of feminist discourse. A woman's negotiations with her identity by Elaine Showalter's categorisation can be placed into three major phases—a phase of initiation, secondly a phase of protest and the last phase of self-discovery, a turning inward when a person is freed from some of the dependency of opposition and concentrates on a search for identity. Most traditional thinking about women is foregrounded on biological essentialism. Therefore Freud's account of sexuality as socially and not biologically constructed establishing the fact that femininity and masculinity have no basis in biology but are constructed by the child's familial relationship are crucially important for contesting the notion of biological essentialism. Significantly, for both Freud and Lacan the feminine identity is constructed on the basis of lack. This logic of exclusion or sameness as Helen Cixous has argued works to deny women

any role into creativity. Therefore she appeals to women to search for a sense of self as a way out, an exit, a *sortie*, from an exclusive identity and discover a positive feminine identity.

Interestingly, the illiterate, semi-literate and non-literate rural female protagonists in these women-authored texts are engaged in a search for the self, a search for a positive identity leading to self actualisation. The negotiations and permutations of the women protagonists in *The First Promise* and *A Saga of South Kamrup* are, by and large, related to the dynamics of the domestic world, conversely a concerted attempt is made by Maitreyi Pushpa to shift the women from the domestic to the public domain. Manda combines the social activism of Medha Patkar, the devotion of Mirabai and the heroism of the *veerangana* Laxmibai, her native predecessor. The village women of Sonpura are a sensitised lot not only as active participators in various village welfare programmes but also resisting the discursive and subversive forces with equal vehemence. More than an intoxicant, religion is a supplement to their empirical knowledge, and for their participation in the public domain. In sharp contrast to the women of the bourgeoisie feudal class, the women of the lower social hierarchy are relatively accrued much more space in the familial and social sphere than their high caste counterparts.

As a welcome point of departure from the dominant canon wherein the central consciousness is occupied by the wife and the daughters – Satyabati, Manda, Giribala and Ammu—are centrally located in these women-authored texts. Manda and Satyabati represent the ‘new’ village woman, one who interrogates tradition in terms of patriarchy. Satyabati’s paradigmatic question—‘Who makes rules?’ in the present feminist context of ‘who represents whom’ entails the basic feminine anxiety of ever being located in the objectified location. The subject position to these two young child-women is substantively suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in terms of subjectivity, woman’s voice, the right of ‘Voice’ as a mother

and lastly, familial and social agency. More than Satyabati, it is Manda who finally emerges as an empowered modern village woman in terms of social and political agency. This 'new woman' in the village, a microcosm of the nation state has traversed a long way from Satyabati whose feminist anxiety and concerns are located in the colonial state. The familial and social support system in village Sonpura is positively supportive and sustainable and the upward mobility of the female protagonist in an upper caste role as the *Ramayana* narrator reflects the desirable mergers in caste hierarchies.

The focus in these fictional narratives is not on the stereotyped representation of women in familial and social locations as socially ostracised widows, oppressive mother-in-law and sister-in-law, jealous co-wife, scheming neighbour, a silent suffering wife or a submissive daughter. In a marked welcome departure from their counterparts in the male canon, these gendered subjectivities and representations remarkably vary in terms of their subject position in the narratives so as to critique the marginalised or doubly marginalised women's familial or social positionality, modes of resistance and shifts in point of view from the feminist standpoint.

Women's property rights in general, of the widows in particular in villages have a cogent connect with their legitimised marginalisation in a patriarchal system. Ranajit Guha's subaltern discourse as Meenakshi Mukherjee too admits in *The Perishable Empire* was remotely related to the property rights in Bengal. Since the rural woman in these fictional texts belong to the landlord class, their familial and social positioning is impacted by the land laws in the colonial and nation state. The transference of the power of native feudal landlords to British revenue collectors and occupancy rights to the peasants greatly diminished the power of the landlord class (Rajat and Ratna Ray 99). As the daughter of a disempowered village headman Rukmani's marriage to a poor tenant farmer (*Nectar in a Sieve*) is foregrounded in the declining socio-economic status

of her father. Conversely, Satyabati's land rights to her wealthy father's property are the prime motivating force behind her matrimonial alliance. *The First Promise* also brings into focus the changing social dynamics in the nineteenth century in the wake of the diminishing power of the feudal lords that witnessed a rapid decline in the rental economy and the exodus of the feudal class to cities relocating them in the objectified location of tenants and office-goers. In another instance, the murder of the young *Adhikar* at the hands of his disgruntled and emboldened tenant farmers (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) reflects the changing dynamics in the landlord-tenant farmer interface on the eve of independence.

More than an empirical reality, property rights of widows and other marginalised categories of women in various parts of the country are still a documental-peripheral reality quite often employed as a subversive empowerment paradigm as is uniformly witnessed in the case of the land rights of the Brahmin widows Durga, Giribala, Mokshada and Shankari, the *Ahir* Rajput Prem and *Jat* Rajput Resham and Kusuma which is a revealing comment on rural women's legitimised polarisation in the village patriarchies in the states of Bengal, Assam and Uttar Pradesh. The women's land rights, specifically of the widows under the *Dayabhaga* and *Mitakshara* school are comprehensively critiqued in four novels located in Brahminical (*The First Promise*, *A Saga of South Kamrup*) and feudal patriarchy (*Idannamam*, *Chaak*). Notwithstanding the difference in terms of locale, class, familial and social positionality all the widows irrevocably inhabit 'victimised' locations, and if a fictional narrative is to be admitted as a social text, the intertextuality would be a sad reflection on the much publicised women empowerment and emancipatory paradigms in the villages in the nation state.

The notable exceptions are the two child-women Manda and Satyabati for whom these variables of land or money are not the prerequisites for empowerment. Since their negotiations are partly related to the subaltern notions of autonomy, patriarchal

benevolence and an assertion-within-difference, and partly to the feminist paradigm of identity and self actualisation, subjecthood and agency, Manda's loss of property does not hinder her upward growth in neither the familial nor social space and it is defunct in Satyabati's case who is not a contender for her father's property. The images of transgressive women vis-a-vis Satyabati and Manda offer contrastive models of rural women in terms of the positive and negative feminist postulates cited above.

In the last few years there has been a phenomenal global spate of feminist writing in India that brings to the forefront the hitherto unexplored areas of female experience, the feminist postulate of sexuality being of great interest and enquiry to women writers and feminists. As a significant point of departure, the trope of sexuality has been addressed by Maitreyi Pushpa and Arundhati Roy in the hegemonic context of a woman's right to and celebration of her body (*Chaak*, *Idannamam*) and caste (*The God of Small Things*). More than an indictment of the orthodox morality foregrounded in patriarchy, these images and representation of 'sexually liberated women' concomitantly invite the polemics of representation which would require the investigation of the speaking subject, who is represented, for what purposes and the socio-cultural or socio-political context which in the Indian rural context is extremely important.

Polemically, quite often feminism collates with the bold and blatant assertion of female sexuality and in the proliferation of the 'discourses of knowledge' on sexuality that Foucault has forewarned. As Foucault points out, the daring act of speaking on a taboo subject has the appearance of a deliberate transgression, a consciousness of defying established power and of subversiveness. Female sexuality in *Chaak* and *The God of Small Things* is vulgarised, in *Idannamam* it is sublimated, in *Phaniyamma* and *The First Promise* evaded whereas in *A Saga of South Kamrup* it is repressed on the Freudian pattern. The portrayal of Kusuma (*Idannamam*) and Resham (*Chaak*) as

sexually liberated women is problematizing in the backdrop of the socio-cultural specificities, locale and feudal patriarchal setup and is interspersed with the polemics of representation.

The foregrounding of a majority of these texts in the pre-independence time frame with a marked focus on the typecast twofold empowerment and emancipatory paradigms in the rural patriarchal framework is apparently a dismal reflection on the positionality of rural woman in the villages in the nation state. Located in Brahminical and feudal patriarchies, the bourgeoisie propertied class of rural woman occupies the central consciousness in these novels. The engagement of these women writers with the women-centric issues of reformation movement in terms of widow remarriage, widows' property rights, sexuality, childless widows, self-immolation and forced immolation are a potent comment on the rural women's positionality in general, of the doubly marginalised women subjectivities in particular in the villages and have to be contextualised in the contemporary socio-political context.

As a disjunct to the valorised representation of a widow's stigmatised and disembodied sexuality in the dominant canon, the sexuality paradigm in these texts is debated in the contemporary feminist context. These gynocritical representations of widows as deviants, rebels and non-conformists in social terms refusing to compromise with darkness are verily suggestive of new tropes and trajectories for offering new openings and pathways in terms of the widows' responses to, and acceptance or defiance of widowhood which are not mere 'signified' to tradition but the 'signifiers' of the 'individual talent' in the tradition. One need not reject a system but can certainly cause ripples, cracks and fissures in the system from within. Unlike the transgressing widows Shankari, Giribala and Resham Saru Gossainee's submerged sexual scandal, for instance, has a cogent connect with the knowledge paradigm.

Intriguingly, the primary focus in *Idannamam* and *Chaak* is on the nuanced images of illiterate, semi-literate and

extraordinaire extrovert village women Sarang and Kalawati (*Chaak*) and Resham (*Idannamam*), for instance, who furnish ample evidence of an unconventional and liberated attitude towards their sexuality reiterative of the fact that the literary stereotypes of women are reinforced by the mythical archetypes. In their uninhibited and celebratory attitude to sexuality these volatile women bear semblance to the volatile, candid epic women Surpanakha, Vishakha and Devyani.

Given the extended or joint familial setup of village patriarchies, the matriarchs have their strongholds in villages and the patriarchal operations are manoeuvred with the cooption of these women as mothers, mother-in-laws and in various other interpersonal relationships. Paradoxically, the institution of patriarchy lacks the support system and commitment to protect and sustain these homesteaders against odds. The untimely deaths of Bhubaneswari, Kashishwari, the deteriorating health of Mokshada, (*The First Promise*) Durga's pathetic plight (*A Saga of South Kamrup*), and appropriation of Bau's land in *Idannamam*, to cite few instances, deflate the claims of patriarchy as a protective umbrella institution imbued with patriarchal benevolence in an extended or joint family system.

Adding on to the premise of the specificities of the patriarchal operations under Brahminical, feudal and Syrian-Christian patriarchies, the images of women are a disconnect to normative feminist assumptions. The paradigmatic mother-daughter relationship operating in three of the novels, *The First Promise*, *Idannamam* and *The God of Small Things* brings into crisis the basic French feminists premises, firstly Simon de Beauvoir's argument that it is deceptive for a woman to dream of gaining through the child a plentitude, a warmth, a value, which one is unable to create for oneself (Prem), and secondly Irigaray's argument that the daughter becomes the image of the mother (Manda, Satyabati and Giribala) and perceives herself as the guarantor of her mother's life and how without the daughter the mother's life becomes impossible.

The three variables of the mother-daughter dyad in Bhubeneswari and Satyabati, Satyabati and her daughter Subarna and Shankari and Suhasini in *The First Promise* lack the hegemonic bonding for varying reasons. The joint family setup at Satyabati's natal family offers scant opportunities and time for an intimate, reciprocal relationship to develop between the mother-daughter duo. The repetition of the same pattern in Satyabati's relationship with Subarna reiterates the marginalised location of young mothers in joint and extended families. Unlike these two variables, Shankari as a single woman finds relatively more time for her illegitimate daughter Suhas in a metropolitan city and her suicide is intended to facilitate her daughter's life. In fact the relationship between Satyabati and Suhas is the most intimate and rewarding one authenticating the primacy of social bonding to the biological bond.

Contrary to Beauvoir's premise Prem (*Idannamam*) certainly gains a moral value from her daughter Manda's growing status as a social activist albeit her life certainly does not become impossible without Manda. A child brings joy only to a woman capable of transcending the self which Prem does by gaining through her child a plenitude, warmth and a sense of fulfillment. Nevertheless the mother-daughter dyad in these two texts is informed with the limitations in terms of an emotional bonding and intimacy which is altogether missing in *The God of Small Things*. As a stereotyped mother, Mammachi's preferential treatment of her son Chako alienating the daughter in the familial space is overtly responsible for her move to forge alliance elsewhere.

The mother-in-law/daughter-in-law dyad is presented in a circumscribed location of conflict in the dominant canon and the replication of it in these women's writing reflects the rural-centric patriarchal and social dynamics. The escalation of the animosity and the subsequent shifting of the conflict from the private to the public domain in *The First Promise* is not only delimited to internalisation of patriarchal norms by women but

is in a significant way suggestive of new tropes and trajectories in terms of the defining feminist postulates of identity and a woman's right of 'Voice' as a mother firmly foregrounded in the nineteenth century reform movement.

This is not to disclaim the women as caste in these texts which are well informed with the dynamics of caste and a feminist critique of caste in the rural segment of India in the nation state could be constructed from them. As Uma Chakravarti has pointed out the anti-Mandal movement in 1990 was an important moment in defining the need to understand caste from a feminist perspective (Chakravarti 3). Incidentally, the three post-Mandal novels, *The God of Small Things* (1997), *Idannamam* (1994) and *Chaak* (1997) map out the dynamics of caste in the neo socio-political setup from the feminist perspective from the location of the high caste and class bourgeoisie woman.

The caste stratifications are widely rampant in the Indian rural society and the social hierarchies are tacitly maintained with the complicity of high caste women manifestive of their internalisation of patriarchal norms and value system and even more crucially their vulnerability to the system. However, it needs to be kept in mind that the interrelated paradigms of caste and untouchability have never been monolithic and unilinear in its practice in the Indian society and ironically, the dominant social order is operative within the non-Brahminical communities (*And Such Is Her Fate*), the Muslims and the Christians (*The God of Small Things*). For Karanth this may be one way for the lower caste communities of articulating an independent cultural identity besides demonstrating dissent against hegemonic social order. Arguably, more than an articulation of an independent cultural identity or an assertion of dissent against hegemonic social order the replication of the dominant social order by the lower caste communities indicates the infiltration of the hegemonic system into the foundational social structure of other castes over the period of time.

As a welcome point of departure the caste configurations are in a transformational phase in the cities and the caste boundaries are increasingly determined by the paradigm of work in urban cities where the men folk can and do adopt fake high, and sometimes low caste identities as per their circumstantial necessities and professional requirements. Anyhow, the process of change is relatively slow in the villages and opportunities for such caste digressions or deflations within the social framework of village patriarchies are very few and rare. The oft reported instances in the media of the role of 'Khap panchayats' in imposing extreme punitive measures against the asocial in-gotra as well as inter-caste, inter-community matrimonial alliances and similar instances of collective violence against women in the villages are verily substantive of the socio-cultural framework of village patriarchies which are still governed by the principle of 'exclusivity.' Located in such an 'exclusive' patriarchy a woman in double jeopardy, i. e, a widow or a deserted wife, co-wife in a Brahminical patriarchy shares a similar social positionality as the caste 'Other'.

Further, as signifiers of the social caste configurations the women of caste and inter-caste relationships have a vital significance in these novels. Tiwana's *And Such Is Her Fate* in a way critiques the empowered location of low caste women in the absence of a Brahminical moral code in a low *Jat* peasantry and Bhano's woes have a cogent connect with her upper caste morality. More than a condemnation of an inter-caste *anulom* relationship, *The God of Small Things* concentrates on the problematizing prevalence of Brahminical code in a Syrian-Christian community deflating the claim of the Christian community as a castless society. Over and above, the polemic issues of caste, gender and religion are cursorily discussed in these novels and are evaded or aborted.

The key institution of caste in these women-authored novels is critiqued from the subject position of a woman. Bau, Satyabati, Sarang, Kalawati, Longsiri bibi, Mammachi, Baby Kochamma

and many more interrogate the caste paradigm from their respective class and caste locations. The import and signification of these non-*dalit* texts is seminal not only for the feminist but equally so to the *dalit* discourse for offering the new variables and caste configurations in the villages. Notwithstanding the contemporary theoretical debates on the polemics of representation, the fictional works of non-*dalit* male writers from Munshi Premchand to U. R. Anantmurthy have been pivotal in not only sensitising the vast range of readership to the dynamics of caste but also as persistent critiques of caste in the colonial and nation state.

And lastly but most decisively, it is in the domain of subaltern history, culture and orality by rote passed on from one generation to other that the Indian rural woman is firmly grounded as a cultural construct. Inhabiting the varying geographical and socio-cultural locale in the colonial and the nation state, the rural woman as a 'narrator' and 'listener' of the *kathas*, *upkathas*, *parati kathas* and *kimvadantees* has been substantively contributing in the preservation, promotion and popularisation of the indigenous art forms and oral narratives in the form of *Dholas*, *Alhas*, *Vratkathas* and various multifaceted ritual practices which are so well integrated and inherent in the villagers' psyche, particularly the female psyche so as to constitute the monolith of collective cultural memory.

In the last forty years or so, the feminist focus has distinctively shifted to theoretical analyses of gender, sexuality, race, nation and class wherein memory plays a decisive role. As is corroborated from the subversive and counter-canonical body of literature and history of the marginalised, subaltern groups, these recollected, reinvented and narrativised memories eventually shape into legitimised history constituting their own 'regime of truths.' In a very significant way in the formulation-reformulation and conceptualisation-reconceptualisation of collective cultural memory the rural women emerge as catalysts. Maitreyi Pushpa's *Chaak* offers the most varied and culturally

nuanced examples of the collective memory of rural women which in the larger context contributes to the local, subaltern history of women.

Similarly, the narration, revisitation of folk songs and folklore by the non-literate and semi-literate village women is conflated with the modes of resistance to the patriarchal hierarchies and self expression. These are in fact situated communicative practices that may serve to reproduce a social order, to critique and undermine it, or something in between. The participation of these women in various social and religious rituals and customary practices cannot be underplayed as gendered practices for these ritualistic practices such as *seguti* (*The First Promise*), *suata* (*Idannamam*) and the singing of *dhola* (*Chaak*) or the befooling of the white officers by simple villagefolk (*A Saga of South Kamrup*) offer the heterodox community of rural women not only social and cultural space but simultaneously diffuse the inner and outer tensions.

Bringing the rural women in English language and *Bhasa* texts in a meaningful dialogue, it could be averred that the rural women in *Nectar in a Sieve* are situated in an idealised, often romanticised location of a nameless village that lacks variety and at times conviction. Correspondingly, women in the village of Ayemenem in *The God of Small Things* are invisible in the text. In sharp and welcome contrast to these English language texts, the rural women in the *Bhasa* novels are located in convincing and lively geographical locale and their representation in the backdrop of the socio-cultural nuanced life of the village community imparts them a character and credibility.

A gynocritical study of this kind, it is hoped, would not only contest and deflate the cultural and civilisational imperialism and the offshoots of globalisation but is also imperative for shifting the critique of colonialism from the economic and political domain to the cultural domain from the 'bourgeoisie culture' to 'indigenous culture.' If these texts are to be critiqued

as smallish, localised rural narratives in the metanarrative of the nation state and the discourse on the village woman is to be constructed from their text and sub-text, it would certainly bring in 'influence' and 'intertextuality' in terms of the modern subaltern, Foucauldian and feminist discourses, but as a microcosm of the nation state these fictional representations of the rural woman are to be critiqued as codifiers of the evolutionary process from the colonial times to the present.

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