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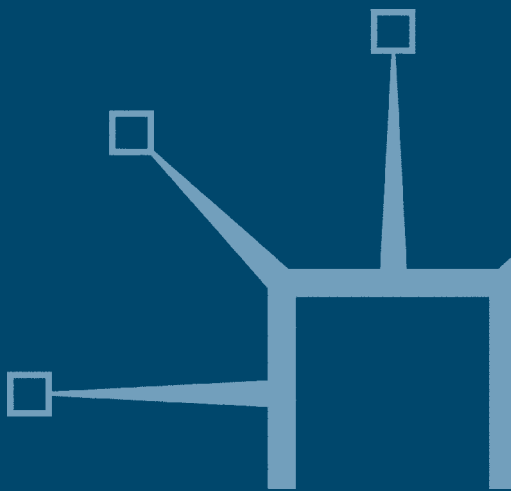
Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing

Elizabeth Jackson



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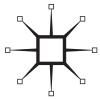

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This book is dedicated with love to my daughters, Mary Catherine Fitzgerald and Rebecca Bland Fitzgerald, and to my son, Thomas Randolph Fitzgerald.

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Abbreviations

BV	*The Binding Vine* (Deshpande 1992)
CLD	*Clear Light of Day* (Desai 1980)
CP	*Cry, the Peacock* (Desai 1963)
DHNT	*The Dark Holds No Terrors* (Deshpande 1980)
DS	*The Day in Shadow* (Sahgal 1971)
FF	*Fasting, Feasting* (Desai 1999)
FOM	*Fire on the Mountain* (Desai 1977)
GH	*The Golden Honeycomb* (Markandaya 1977)
HR	*A Handful of Rice* (Markandaya 1966)
LS	*That Long Silence* (Deshpande 1988)
MI	*Mistaken Identity* (Sahgal 1988)
NS	*Nectar in a Sieve* (Markandaya 1954)
RLU	*Rich Like Us* (Sahgal 1985)
RS	*Roots and Shadows* (Deshpande 1983)
SC	*Storm in Chandigarh* (Sahgal 1969)
SR	*Small Remedies* (Deshpande 2000)
TTM	*This Time of Morning* (Sahgal 1965)
TV	*Two Virgins* (Markandaya 1973)
WSWG	*Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (Desai 1975)

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Introduction

This book examines the treatment of feminist issues in the novels of Kamala Markandaya (1927–2004), Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927), Anita Desai (b. 1937) and Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) in order to identify how Indian feminism differs from other feminisms which reflect different cultural concerns. There are different types of feminisms (liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, French feminism, etc.), and the very meaning of the term 'feminism' is continually being contested. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as 'advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes'. Some feminists, however, emphasise *difference* rather than *equality*, and some wish to challenge masculine values themselves rather than grant women equal rights within a male-oriented culture. My own understanding of feminism is based not so much on what it *is* as on what it *does*: it seeks to analyse and redress the power imbalance between the sexes. It takes on different forms in different contexts, based as it is on various critical analyses of male privilege and women's subordination within different societies. Using this broad, functional understanding of feminism, my purpose here is to identify the particular feminist concerns of Indian women novelists writing in English and to examine the ways in which they are handled in their fiction.

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are the best-known and most prolific Indian novelists writing in English who have been self-consciously engaged with women's issues. Moreover, their work – collectively and individually – spans several decades, enabling a study of its development over time. I have chosen four novels by Markandaya and five each by Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande which best express their feminist concerns. These are *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *Two Virgins* (1973) and *The Golden*

Honeycomb (1977) by Kamala Markandaya; *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) by Nayantara Sahgal; *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993) and *Small Remedies* (2000) by Shashi Deshpande.

The feminist concerns expressed in these novels can be broadly classified into four thematic areas, each of which corresponds to a chapter in this book: women, cultural identity and social class; marriage and sexuality; motherhood and other work; women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy. The final chapter analyses the formal aspects of their writing in order to examine how these thematic concerns are expressed and to investigate possible connections between their feminist consciousness and writing techniques.

At this point it would perhaps be helpful to clarify the epistemological status of the novels, which function on a number of levels in my argument. While they are mainly seen as fictional expression, they also point to social and historical realities – for example, in their depiction of sati during the twentieth century (*RLU* 1985), curtailment of the education of daughters (*FF* 1999), child marriages (*FOM* 1977) and the emphasis on status and image in contemporary Indian bourgeois society (*CLD* 1980). At times the novels can also function on a metaphorical level – as exemplified by my discussion of *Two Virgins* (1973) in which I suggest that the character Saroja can be seen in some ways as emblematic of Indian feminism during the 1970s. The issue of literary realism arises when the fictionality of the texts and their function as social critique are related, and in this context I address realism as an artistic and critical issue in the final chapter.

In order to establish a contextual framework, I begin this introduction by providing a discussion of Indian feminism, including a brief history of the women's movement in India. I then go on to review the work of other literary critics who have written on feminism in the Indian novel in English, in order to show how my study differs from previous ones.

Indian feminism

The concept of feminism has been controversial in India and other developing nations for a number of reasons. On the one hand, traditionalists argue that it alienates women from their culture, religion and

family responsibilities; while some on the left see it as a diversion from the more important class struggle or the struggle against Western cultural and economic imperialism. Underlying both views is the assumption that feminism is an essentially Western ideology – an assumption that has been unwittingly supported by what Chandra Mohanty (1988) has described as the ethnocentric focus of Western feminist discourse. While Mohanty has also been critical of the tendency of some Western feminists to lump together 'third world women', Ania Loomba has drawn attention to the reverse tendency in India to oversimplify 'Western feminism'. This oversimplification flattens out the differences between varieties of Western feminism and ignores, for example, 'the critiques of black or other women of colour, or indeed the work of a great many women of all colours that has articulated the relationships between gender, sexuality, class, nation, race and culture' (1993, p. 274). However, while Loomba is careful to say that she does not wish to erase nuances within Western feminism that she thinks are glossed over in India, she nonetheless agrees with Mohanty that ethnocentrism still pervades 'a lot' of Western feminist discourse. One consequence is that feminists in India are invariably chastised for being influenced by Western modes of thought. According to Loomba:

> It is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal traditions would seek to marginalize women's movements by calling them un-Indian. In fact, such a rhetoric seeks to disguise the indigenous roots of women's protest in India. This is not to argue that Western women's thinking or organisations have not influenced Indian feminists. Cross-fertilisations have been crucial to feminist struggles everywhere. But given the history of colonial rule, the burden of authenticity has been especially heavy for women activists in India.
>
> (pp. 271–2)

This is evident, for example, in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), in which any espousal of women's rights is perceived as an aping of Western ways.

The historical reasons for this resistance to feminism in India extend well back into the nineteenth century, when the 'woman question' was a central issue in debates over reform in India. Enamoured of their 'civilising mission', influential British writers like James Mill condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women. Indeed, a significant tool used by colonial ideology to 'prove' the inferiority of the subject population was the

question of the status of women, as reported by Christian missionaries who argued that the moral inferiority of Indians was demonstrated by their barbaric treatment of women. Thus one of the main justifications for British rule in India was the argument that Indian women required the protection and intervention of the colonial state.

There was no uniform movement for reform of gender practices, but different campaigns on specific issues were taken up at different times in different parts of India. The main issues included sati (widow burning), female infanticide, child marriage, purdah (female seclusion) and restrictions on female education. Although sati was outlawed in 1829, it has never been fully eradicated, as suggested in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985). Sahgal also provides fictional narratives of female infanticide, child marriage and purdah in *Mistaken Identity* (1988). While these practices persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there had been indigenous reform groups in all parts of India from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, including the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the National Social Conference, all of which aimed to 'modernize' Indian society, including gender relations. Nivedita Menon explains that

> [b]y and large, these movements as well as the resistance to such reform were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. Prominent sections of the bourgeoisie were intent on reforming what colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of Hindu society, while resistance came from revivalist nationalists who challenged the colonial interventions into 'Indian tradition'.
>
> (1999, p. 4)

Essentially the nationalists were divided between those who wished to 'reform' gender ideology in India along Western lines and those who sought to 'revive' a traditional culture, seeing women as emblems of indigenous religion and family traditions.

Partha Chatterjee (1989, p. 237), in an influential essay, has explained the way in which the Indian nationalist movement resolved the 'woman question' in accordance with its preferred goals: 'In the main, this resolution was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual.' In the material sphere, Britain had subjugated India (and other colonies) through its superior techniques in science, technology, economic organisation, statecraft and so on: 'But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture' (p. 239).

Hence the dominant nationalists developed and popularised an ideology whereby women were responsible for protecting and preserving the inner core of the national culture – its spiritual essence – 'at home', while men had to learn the superior techniques of organising material life 'in the world' in order to overcome imperial domination. So according to this ideology, the 'new woman' must learn literacy, numeracy and 'modern' housekeeping, but she must also be responsible for observing religious rituals, maintaining cultural tradition and ensuring 'the cohesiveness of family life' (p. 248). The 'spirituality' of her character had to be expressed in her behaviour, dress, demeanour and so on. We see this, for example, in Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985), in which Sonali feels constricted by gender-based codes of dress and decorum which are imposed on her but not on her male contemporaries (*RLU*, p. 112). Chatterjee points out that these restrictions are class-specific, and concludes, 'The new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct … has generalised itself among the middle class … but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes' (1989, p. 251). Thus, for example, Anita Desai's middle-class protagonists are shown to suffer the emptiness and ennui of family-bound lives, unlike their poorer counterparts whose sufferings do not include domestic confinement.

It was in the political struggles against imperialism that large numbers of Indian women of all social classes began actively to participate in life outside the home, and in doing so they had the support of many nationalist political leaders who saw the advantages of mobilising women. Gandhi, in particular, was very conscious of the power that women could have in a non-violent struggle, arguing that they are by nature non-violent and have great ability to endure suffering. The opponents of women's political participation voiced a number of objections. They warned of traditional gender roles breaking down, and some based their disapproval on the sanctity of religious beliefs and practices. Despite the objections, the activity of women in the nationalist movement radicalised some of them into articulating their own grievances, drawing parallels between imperialist oppression and patriarchal oppression. Sahgal, too, consistently makes connections between patriarchy and other power structures in all of her novels.

It is important to note, however, that there were distinct regional differences in the number of women who joined the nationalist movement as well as the extent to which they synthesised women's interests with nationalist issues. For example, the demonstrations of Bengali women were smaller and their activities more radical than those of

Bombay women. Although a number of Bengali women espoused a feminist ideology, they consistently put it aside in favour of the broader struggle. Some of them picketed and joined processions, and a few were recruited by revolutionary groups, occasionally becoming directly involved in revolutionary acts. In 1932 Bina Das attempted to shoot the governor of Bengal and Pritilata Weddedar led 15 men in a raid on the Chittagong Club during which the revolutionaries shot and injured several people. By 1933 most of the Bengali revolutionaries were in prison, and in this tumultuous environment it was difficult to generate interest in women's rights.

In Bombay, by contrast, the substantial Parsee and Christian communities tended to be more supportive of female rights and female education, and the large Gujarati population found the message of Gandhi, their fellow Gujarati, especially appealing. Processions of one to two thousand women, accompanied by their children, were not unusual in Bombay at this time. Most of their leaders also belonged to women's organisations, and they articulated a clearly 'feminist nationalism', their goals being *swaraj* (self-rule) and women's emancipation.

In North India issues of women's rights received little attention even though many of their leaders were committed to feminist issues. It was here that Kamala Nehru wrote and spoke about the 'degraded plight of women', Vijayalakshmi Pandit worked for many years with women's organisations and female students were inspired by an ideal of male–female equality. However these feminist ideas only permeated elite circles, and when these leaders began to organise women's processions, they became acutely aware of the strength of conservative attitudes (Forbes 1996).

Following Independence in 1947, the Constitution conferred equal rights and status on all citizens, forbidding any discrimination on grounds of caste, religion or gender. However, the Hindu Code of 1955 introduced inconsistencies in the area of personal law (regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) by granting specific rights to Hindu women which were denied to Muslim women on the grounds that Muslim personal laws were considered part of the religion of Islam. For instance, polygamy has been banned for everyone except Muslims, although a majority of Muslim women favour its removal (Gandhi & Shah 1992, Jha & Pujari 1996). A more fundamental problem is that the law has had limited success in changing deeply rooted social attitudes and practices in India. In spite of constitutional directives regarding equal pay for equal work, and free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14, most Indian women earn much less than

men for the same work, and a much higher proportion of boys than girls attend school. As seen in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), even middle-class Indian families sometimes terminate their daughters' education at an early age when it suits them to do so. This novel also draws attention to the dowry problem, which the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has failed to remedy. Dowry, far from being eradicated, has grown to greater proportions, so that many brides and their families are under pressure to provide expensive 'gifts'. Reports of dowry deaths are horrifyingly frequent – averaging over 6000 per year, according to the National Crime Records Bureau of India.[1] Child marriages, too, are still not unusual in rural India (despite the law), as we see in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).

Despite sporadic criticism, the Indian government's commitment to gender equality was not seriously challenged until the 1970s, when the so-called second wave of feminism in the West was receiving widespread attention in the Indian media. 'Toward Equality', a government-commissioned report on the status of women in India, which came out in 1974, charged that women's status had not improved but had, in fact, declined since Independence. According to Geraldine Forbes, 'the heat and energy generated by *Toward Equality* and the emerging research data provided the intellectual foundation for a new women's movement' (1996, p. 243). Like most social movements, this feminist movement in India is neither homogeneous nor monolithic in nature but ideologically and strategically diverse, so that it is perhaps more accurate to refer to 'Indian feminisms', whose fictional expression is explored in this book.

The women's movement that began in India during the 1970s grew out of a number of radical movements of the time. For example, women emerged as the principal activists in the Chipko movement, which challenged commercial forestry and forest-based industrialisation on environmental grounds. Many of the Indian women who participated in peasants' and workers' movements were, like their predecessors in the nationalist movement, radicalised into questioning their gender-based subordination. In this respect, they also resembled American activists who supported civil rights movements and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations before going on to protest against gendered oppression as well. Indeed, feminist movements everywhere have drawn inspiration from – and in some respects developed from – movements against other forms of social injustice.

In India, the declaration of a state of emergency in 1975 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi interrupted the development of the fledgling women's movement. Many political organisations were driven

underground, thousands of activists were arrested and most who remained at liberty focused on civil rights, such as freedom of speech and the rights of political prisoners. The lifting of the emergency in 1977 led to a renewal of some of the earlier movements, and women's groups were formed all over India but mainly in the major cities. According to Radha Kumar:

> The distinguishing features of the new women's groups were that they declared themselves to be 'feminist' despite the fact that most of their members were drawn from the Left, which saw feminism as bourgeois and divisive; that they insisted on being autonomous even though most of their members were affiliated to other political groups … and that they rapidly built networks among one another, ideological differences notwithstanding.
>
> (1995, p. 64)

Ilina Sen has drawn a distinction between the 'autonomous women's movement' and 'the women's movement acting in conjunction with mass organizations or political parties' in India (2004, p. 201). She notes that the autonomous women's movement is comprised primarily of the urban intelligentsia, who have 'remained cut off from the mass of Indian women' and that consequently these urban groups sometimes find 'greater kinship in "feminist" groups in the West rather than with the mass of women in India'. She goes on to concede, however, that

> [t]he women's platforms emerging in the context of mass movements do not necessarily provide women with significant representation in the leadership of the overall movements. In this respect, the situation does not appear to have changed much from the pre-Independence mobilization of women for a national cause, although it is an achievement of no mean proportion that women are forcing leaders of various movements to take cognizance of special issues relating to gender.
>
> (p. 201)

Markandaya, Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande are among the urban intelligentsia, and they write fiction rather than feminist analysis as such. Their perspectives, however, can offer valuable insights into the dynamics and complexities of human relationships, and their feminist concerns can be placed within historical and theoretical frameworks. Their representations of marriage and sexuality, for instance, implicitly

critique ideologies of women as property, which can lead to (male) abuses of power within the family and in the wider society. Indeed, the problem of violence against women was the initial focus of feminist campaigns in India during the 1970s. Campaigns against rape, domestic violence and dowry deaths escalated during the 1980s, attracting considerable support from men as well as women. Among the incidents that played catalytic roles were the Mathura rape case of 1978 and the Maya Tyagi rape case of 1980. Both were cases of custodial rape by the police which led to nationwide protests and the formation of the Forum Against Rape, which eventually grew into the Forum Against Oppression of Women. Rape, a major theme in Deshpande's novels, is also featured in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) draws attention to the sense of sexual threat that pervades the lives of young girls in India, and this widespread problem of sexual harassment (or 'eve-teasing', as it is called in India) is identified by a number of academics (Chacko 2001; Nabar 1995; Puri 1999) who argue that it impedes women's freedom, mobility and sense of security. Domestic violence is fictionalised by all four novelists: Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Sahgal in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Deshpande in *That Long Silence* (1988) and Desai in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). The government responded to urban campaigns against gendered violence with legislation, but according to Geraldine Forbes:

> Hard questions about the deeper causes of this violence and the ability of the law to remedy this situation were rarely asked. The result has been a decade of extraordinary legislation and subsequent despair because these laws have meant so little in practice. Once passed this legislation depended for enforcement on men whose view of women and their place in the world had not changed.
>
> (1996, p. 249)

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a series of countermovements against feminist ideas by politically conservative sections of Indian society in a context of growing communalism and fundamentalism. In 1985 a test case was taken up by the Supreme Court relating to Shah Bano, a Muslim divorcée, who sought maintenance from her husband under a secular interpretation of the law of marriage and divorce. Her case received widespread support from the press, but the government bowed to the weight of counteropinion originating in orthodox Muslim circles against this 'interference' in their 'community rights'. It enacted the Muslim Personal Law Bill under which Muslims in India would

continue to be governed by Sharia law, thus reasserting Muslim women's position of legal inequality. Another case in which the problems and needs of women were soon submerged by the discourse of 'community' was that of an incident of sati in Rajasthan in 1987. When feminists condemned this practice, there was a profusion of attacks on the women's movement itself, with some Hindu fundamentalists claiming sati as a community 'right'. Both of these cases point to the role of religion and cultural tradition in justifying gender oppression, as well as the more general link between gender ideology and cultural identity which is examined in the first chapter of this book.

While gendered violence has been repeatedly identified as a major problem in India, other feminist campaigns have been even more contentious – particularly the critique of the family and the challenge to the image of the ideal Indian woman as accommodating, self-sacrificing and devoted to serving her family. In the chapter on motherhood and other work (Chapter 3) I discuss the ways in which the novels participate in this critique of the Indian family and traditional ideals of female self-sacrifice, particularly within the maternal role.

The emphasis on family and community in Indian society has important implications for feminism in India. The first is that those who oppose feminism tend to do so on the grounds that it is an 'individualistic' ideology which is anathema to the more communal orientation of Indian culture:

> In India, most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community.
>
> (Kishwar 2004, pp. 30–1)

While it is true, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out, that in the West 'the women's movement has primarily focused on enlarging opportunities for individual women' (1991, p. 32), it has also begun more recently to offer 'a sustained critique of that individualism from which it derives' (p. 230). My book suggests some of the ways in which Indian feminists contribute to this critique of the excesses of individualism – for example, in Anita Desai's novels, which implicitly criticise both patriarchy *and* rampant individualism.

The second implication of the family-centredness of Indian culture is that it affects the way in which conflicts are handled – including the

conflicts that inevitably accompany the sort of social change advocated by feminists. Anuradha Roy (1999) and Suma Chitnis (1988) have both emphasised that Indian culture places greater value on accommodation and compromise, as opposed to confrontation and categorical choice. The chapter on women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy (Chapter 4) tests this assertion by examining fictional representations of the ways in which Indian women respond to the particular patriarchal ideologies and practices with which they are confronted, as well as the ways in which these have changed over time. Thus the first four chapters offer a developmental and comparative analysis of the feminist concerns of these novels, while the final chapter analyses their formal expression, all with a view towards identifying the distinctive features of Indian feminism.

Survey of critical literature on feminism in the Indian novel in English

There have been numerous essays and articles on Indian women novelists and their feminist concerns, but very few book-length studies focusing on more than one author. The major books which have taken a comparative approach to novels in English by Indian women writers include Meena Shirwadkar's *The Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* (1979), Shantha Krishnaswamy's *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English, 1950–1980* (1984), Vijayalakshmi Seshadri's *The New Woman in Indian-English Writers since the 1970s* (1995), K. Meera Bai's *Women's Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers* (1996), Anuradha Roy's *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* (1999) and Jyoti Singh's *Indian Women Novelists: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Study* (2007). Each of these has focused on only one or two of my four chosen novelists, not all have explicitly dealt with their feminist concerns, and only Jyoti Singh's book has incorporated a study of fiction since the 1980s.

Shirwadkar (1979) and Krishnaswamy (1984) focus on images of women in India by twentieth-century male and female authors until the 1970s, tracing their development from romantic idealisation to realistic portrayal. Krishnaswamy identifies an increasingly feminist consciousness in the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, the former in the form of a recurrent female 'quest for autonomy' (p. 163) and the latter in the form of 'radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality' (p. 237). Sesahadri (1995) endeavours to trace a 'new' literary tradition in fiction by Indian women during the 1970s and 1980s which depicts the urban middle-class Indian woman's

individual journey towards 'selfhood and freedom' (p. 60). Chandra Chatterjee (1996) and Meera Bai (1996), too, examine ideas of autonomy and individuality for the 'new' woman in Indian novels between 1950 and 1980, focusing on the protagonist's 'emerging awareness of the individual self' (Chatterjee, p. xii), her 'longing for recognition, self-expression and self-fulfilment' (Bai, p. 7). Roy (1999) surveys 'the fictional depiction of the various forces working on women in contemporary Indian society' (p. 19), stirrings of revolt in the protagonists and the ways in which 'the feminist consciousness expresses itself through a variety of resolutions … from solipsist withdrawal to accommodation to outright rejection' (p. 20). Finally, Jyoti Singh offers a 'feminist psychological study' of selected novels from the 1980s and 1990s, including Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980). While Roy offers perhaps the best-developed comparative analysis to date of the feminist aspects of Indian novels in English, she confines her discussion to just one book by each author, with two each from the 1960s and 1970s and only one from the 1980s.

The existing critical literature has also tended to focus on the novels themselves without placing their feminist concerns in a larger theoretical context. For instance, there has been very little analysis of the relation between gender, cultural identity and social class in these novels. Discussion of cultural identity has tended to focus on the role of 'tradition' in gender oppression, while discussion of social class has seldom gone much beyond the observation that these novels tend to focus on the lives of middle-class – and, in the case of Sahgal, upper-class – Indian women, with Markandaya being the only exception. Vijayalakshmi Seshadri (1995, p. ix) argues that 'the vision of the traditional woman' in Markandaya's novels 'was intended to show how tradition combined with poverty oppressed women more than men'. However, what is needed is a more detailed examination of the ways in which gender oppression is shown to be influenced – indeed, determined – by cultural, social and material factors in all of these novels.

More attention has been given to the fictional treatment of marriage and sexuality in the Indian novel in English, particularly by Shirwadkar (1979), Bai (1996) and Roy (1999), all of whom note the emphasis on 'the double moral standard of chastity for the wife and permissiveness for the husband [which] is operative in a number of novels' (Shirwadkar 1979, p. 49). Roy also discusses the fictional representation of marriage in India as 'an institutionalized form of the domination of women by men' (1999, p. 30), as well as the themes of sexual repression, psychological stereotyping and 'the age-old ideal of *pativrata* – a belief

in the total submission to the will and welfare of the husband' (p. 49). However, the scope of these analyses could usefully be extended to incorporate a wider theoretical and developmental context.

Given the cultural emphasis on motherhood in India, it is surprising how little has been written about its treatment in the Indian novel in English. In 1991, Susheila Nasta brought together a most interesting volume of essays titled *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia*, which explores the ramifications of the mythology of motherhood within the context of postcolonial literature. Most of these examine notions of 'mother-nations', in contrast to the more literal approach of the essays in Usha Bande's collection *Mothers and Mother Figures in Indo-English Literature* (1994), which largely focused on traditional images. My book examines the ways in which contemporary Indian women novelists are challenging traditional ideas about motherhood in India.

Some attention has been given in the critical literature to women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy in these novels, but the analysis tends to be limited by its focus on only one or two novels by each author. Thus Markandaya's female characters tend to be described as 'conformists and traditionalists', in contrast to Sahgal's heroines who 'fight against injustice';[2] but this is an oversimplification which is not supported by examination of a greater range of their fiction. While the major female characters in Markandaya's later novels (particularly *Two Virgins* and *The Golden Honeycomb*) tend to be more rebellious than the males, many of Sahgal's female protagonists are remarkably passive and long-suffering (for example, Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh*, Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* and Rose in *Rich Like Us*). Desai's and Deshpande's protagonists tend to *develop* more over the course of the narrative, and this development is emphasised by Anuradha Roy in her discussion of Deshpande's *That Long Silence*. She notes that the protagonists of Deshpande's earlier novels, too, had tried 'desperately' to fit the image of the ideal wife 'before learning to question the image itself' (1999, p. 50). However, because her discussion of Desai's novels is limited to *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), she concludes that Desai's protagonists are 'sensitive and painfully lonely women who have perforce taken the path of retreat to confronting the forces which attempt to repress their existence as individuals' (p. 111). We shall see Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) as a major counterexample to this argument, and we shall examine in more detail the ways in which women in all of these novels react to patriarchy because this is arguably one of the distinctive features of Indian feminism.

Finally, I wish to extend and refine the existing feminist analysis of form and narrative strategy, which has generally not extended much beyond the observation that Indian women writing in English tend to confine themselves to the 'realistic domestic novel'. Seshadri suggests that this is because 'in current women's fiction a serious and conscious attempt is being made to depict woman in a realistic fashion without idealizing or belittling her' (1995, pp. 125–6). Roy, on the other hand, sees the continuing use of the realist mode as a limitation (1999, pp. 144–5). However, I hope to show that Indian women novelists have been more formally experimental than this argument suggests. While it is true that their novels can broadly be classified as 'realist', they use a variety of narrative techniques, and of course there are different types of realism. Kamala Markandaya developed a sharply satirical style, which reaches its apogee in *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). Nayantara Sahgal's writing develops from the straightforward linear narratives of her earlier novels to the more complex narrative structures of *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988), which involve multiple narrators, shifting perspectives and movements backward and forward in time. Desai has been even more experimental, particularly in her earlier novels, in which her explorations of individual consciousness involve recurring symbols and motifs, unreliable narrators and highly subjective perspectives. It is important to remember, however, what these novelists are aiming to achieve in their fiction. Their aim, I would suggest, is not a display of technical virtuosity for its own sake but rather a critique of Indian society and gender ideology which need not necessarily be expressed in an 'experimental' way.

In summary, then, my book is a developmental and comparative approach to feminist aspects of Indian fiction in English which departs from previous scholarship in a number of ways. Firstly, it offers an updated analysis of novels in English by Indian women writers which incorporates those from the 1990s and places them in a larger developmental context. Secondly, it focuses on the specific feminist concerns which are actually grappled with in these novels: marriage and sexuality; motherhood and other work; women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy. In addition to analysing these concerns in the context of 'Indian' and 'Western' feminist discourse, my book further attempts to identify the culturally specific features of Indian feminism through an examination of the connection between gender, cultural identity and social class in these novels. Finally, it offers an analysis of form and narrative strategy in the context of feminist literary theory.

1
Women, Cultural Identity and Social Class

Introduction

The power dynamics involved in gender relations are linked in complex ways with those of cultural identity and social class – which are themselves interconnected. This introductory section provides some background on the relevant interconnections as a framework for analysis of these issues in the novels themselves. In India the constituent elements of cultural identity include nationality, ethnicity, religion, caste, social class, regional affiliation and language, and my discussion focuses on those particularly relevant to the novels under consideration: nationality, religion, caste and social class. Social class is discussed here as *both* an economic position *and* a constituent element of cultural identity. Less weight is given to caste because in the urban milieus in which most of the novels are set, class hierarchy has largely replaced caste hierarchy as a relevant structure of power.[1] It is also worth noting that all four novelists are Hindu, middle- to upper class and, in the case of Markandaya and Deshpande, Brahmin. (Desai's cultural identity is further complicated by her mixed German and Bengali parentage.)

With a few exceptions, the earlier novels tend to envision cultural identity in terms of 'India' versus 'the West' and the later ones in terms of religious affiliation (e.g., Hindu or Muslim). This is in keeping with the rise in communal politics within India towards the end of the twentieth century. Long-standing concerns about Western cultural imperialism have also been incorporated into this recent surge of identity politics.

It is widely recognised that women's identities are constituted as much by nationality, social class and other categories of identity as they are by sex and gender. However, a growing body of feminist research

suggests that what Irene Gedalof describes as 'the active management of women' also helps construct those other categories of identity to begin with (1999, p. 201). She argues that women are subordinated but also 'enabled, foregrounded and made central to processes of identity constitution' (p. 37). Clearly, it is the female body's capacity for birth that makes women crucial to the preservation of a particular community's integrity and purity. In addition, women's responsibility for the organisation of the home and the socialisation of children makes them crucial in cultural – as well as biological – reproduction. For this reason, cultural control over women is fundamental to the continuity of tradition and community identity. However 'tradition', and women's place in it, is constantly being contested, reinvented and reinterpreted, and a number of scholars have analysed processes of 'redescribing women' in redefining national and other community identities.[2] It is also important to note that there can be more than one version of the feminine at play in identity-constituting processes and that these processes stem from a variety of, often conflicting, agendas.

Within this complex framework, nation, religion and other categories of identity emerge as 'imagined communities' involving culturally inscribed markers of difference and belonging, with women functioning as important symbols of differences between groups. These differences are expressed through visible signifiers such as dress (e.g., veiling for Muslim women) so that according to Neluka Silva, 'the female body becomes the terrain on which [group] distinctions are made visible' (2004, p. 23). Nira Yuval-Davis has also argued that 'women are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour, both personally and collectively' (1997, p. 45). This is why women in some communities are sometimes severely punished – and in the worst cases, tortured or murdered – by their relatives for breaches of conduct which are perceived as bringing dishonour and shame on their male relatives and community. Even in less extreme situations, so-called cultural traditions are often used to legitimise the control and oppression of women. Indeed, some feminists have argued that strict cultural codes of what it is to be a 'proper woman' have been developed to keep women in an inferior power position (p. 47).

Feminist contestations of patriarchal constructions of cultural identity have included pointing out both the multipositionality of identities and the synthetic nature of culture itself. There has also been a more general critique of nationalism (and other identity-constituting projects) as an endeavour to project a 'pure identity' through myths of origin, which marginalise those outside the privileged groups.

In addition, it has often been noted that multiple positionings of identity are the norm for individual men and women. In the Indian context, these include considerations of gender, nationality, religion, class, caste, region and language – not to mention all the hybrid possibilities within and between these categories. It is in the context of power relations that particular identities are asserted, as Madhu Kishwar explains: 'A group or person may begin to assert a particular identity with greater vigour if it provides greater access to power and opportunities. … Alternately [*sic*] a person begins to assign a high priority to a particular basic identity if he or she perceives it as threatened or suppressed' (1999, p. 250).

This link between identity assertion and power relations has important implications for Indian women in a number of contexts, including those of social class, religion and the question of 'Westernization', but before exploring these it is worth making some brief comments on the overarching connection between gender, power relations and 'culture' in general. Culture is never monolithic but often full of internal contradictions, and Nira Yuval-Davis has argued that it is 'always used selectively in various ethnic cultural and religious projects within specific power relations and political discourse' (1997, p. 38). Because all contemporary cultures are synthetic, incorporating elements from other civilisations as well as their own internal heterogeneity, 'cultural discourses often resemble more a battleground of meaning than a shared point of departure' (p. 41). Importantly, gender relations are at the heart of cultural contestations, and 'because of the central importance of social reproduction to culture, gender relations often come to be seen as the "essence" of cultures as ways of life to be passed from generation to generation' (p. 43).

Gramsci wrote of the 'common sense' of a community – the largely unconscious way in which people perceive the world. He argued that it reproduces structures of dominance by 'encouraging an uncritical acceptance of an existing state of affairs' (Joseph 1993, p. 808). A further insight which Gramsci offered was that culture and ideology express the worldview and thinking of a particular class or group. While his analysis focuses on the link between culture and social class, the general point that culture participates in the maintenance of systems of power is equally applicable to other structures of dominance, such as patriarchy. Therefore, the 'description and management' of women is involved in the maintenance and reproduction not only of gender inequality but also of all forms of social inequality (Sangari and Vaid 1989, p. 5). For example, in their discussion of the patriarchal caste hierarchy, Liddle

and Joshi have argued that 'the material benefit to men of controlling upper-caste women's sexuality was the reproduction of legitimate heirs and the maintenance of caste purity for the retention of caste property and culture' (1986, p. 92). In the twentieth-century context, Partha Chatterjee has described the nationalist construction of the 'new' middle-class Indian woman in opposition to *both* 'Western' women *and* women from lower socio-economic strata in terms of cultural codes governing their dress, demeanour, domestic roles and so on (1989).

This focus on the role of culture in maintaining social inequality has significant political implications in India and elsewhere; as Sarah Joseph has argued, 'politics is no longer seen as arising out of the struggle to control political and economic resources alone but also out of the struggle to control meanings and symbols' (1993, p. 807). Others believe that with the decline of socialist hopes from the late 1980s onwards there has been a lamentable shift towards 'identity politics' in feminist theory and other social criticism which has led to losing sight of questions of class and economic inequalities (Fraser 1995, John 1996). These economic inequalities are difficult to ignore in the Indian context, and indeed they have not been ignored by any of the four authors, each of whom emphasises the brutalising effects of extreme poverty – and its particular association with domestic violence – in at least one of her novels. This is a delicate issue, because not only is there a desire to avoid stereotyping the poor as violent and brutish – and Markandaya takes particular care not to do this – but domestic violence can occur among the elite as well, as we see in Sahgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980). Nevertheless there is an undeniable link between severe economic deprivation and social problems. Mulk Raj Anand has suggested that 'in the slums men have no property except women, whom they can use for their ease, as unpaid slaves in the house, vehicles of lust, and as victims from whom they can take out pain [*sic*]' (1994, p. 3). However, Markandaya consistently depicts lower-class Indian women as oppressed more by poverty than by patriarchy, and Sahgal emphasises in *Rich Like Us* (1985) that their extreme poverty and powerlessness also render them vulnerable to abuse by men of *all* social classes. Finally, it can be argued that if some men at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy use their gender privilege to cope with their class oppression, so too do many elite women use their class privilege to cope with their gender subordination – as Deshpande's protagonists who employ cheap domestic labour are guiltily aware.

It has been observed that patriarchal oppression tends to intensify not only in situations of poverty but also in situations of communal conflict, as Kannabiran and Kannabiran explain: 'The growing helplessness that men experience in a hostile environment is sought to be compensated by a reassertion of power and control over women within the family' (1995, p. 129). This patriarchal control is justified and strengthened by religious ideology, whether it is Hindu, Muslim, Judaeo-Christian or any other.

In India there has been a long-standing tendency among conservatives of all religious persuasions – and also among some leftists – to dismiss feminist ideas as symptoms of 'Westernisation'. Perhaps one of the most cogent recent contestations of this tendency has been Uma Narayan's essay 'Contesting Cultures: "Westernization", Respect for Cultures, and Third-World Feminists', in her book *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third World Feminism* (1997). She begins by pointing to the ways in which Indian feminist contestations are responses to problems women confront *within India* rather than simple 'emulations of Western feminist political concerns' (p. 4). She also urges critical attention to the 'selective, self-serving and shifting ways' in which certain changes – notably those involving gender roles – are castigated as symptoms of 'Westernization', while other changes are regarded as innocuous and consonant with 'cultural preservation' (p. 22). It is, in her view, understandable that among the general population 'the sense of cultural anxiety created by rapid social change often results in responses that focus on changes in gender roles as the paradigmatic symptom of cultural threat and loss' (p. 20). However, it is particularly ironic that criticism of feminist ideas on the grounds that they are 'Western' can come also from 'other intellectuals whose own political perspectives are indebted to political theories such as Marxism and liberalism that have "Western" origins' (p. 6). Narayan notes that what counts as 'Westernization' seems to vary considerably with time and place and community (p. 28), and that men seem to be permitted a greater degree of cultural latitude in making changes than are women, and are less frequently accused of 'Westernization' (p. 27). Moreover, she points to the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between changes over time and changes due to Western influence (p. 24).

One of the most frequently cited differences between 'Indian' and 'Western' conceptions of identity is that the former is predominantly communitarian and the latter predominantly individualistic (Kakar 1981, Nabar 1995, Chaudhuri 2004). While Hindu culture has indeed traditionally centred on family, caste and community, a number of

scholars (Fox-Genovese 1991, Nabar 1995) have also pointed out that individualism is linked to the growth of capitalist values, so that there is an economic dimension as well. While the connections between economic development and cultural values lie outside the scope of this book, several general points are relevant here. The first is that pre-capitalist societies in the West, too, were strongly hierarchical and community-oriented. The second is that the social and economic processes associated with the growth of individualism in India have important similarities with those of the West. Specifically, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out in her discussion of the Western historical context, 'individualism for women lagged far behind individualism for men, as individualism for the dispossessed of all races lagged far behind that for the propertied' (1991, p. 43). Furthermore,

> those who were trying to make their way in the newly competitive world of capitalism and individualism found it tempting to cast women as the natural custodians of harmony and nature. For men to be fully self-realizing individuals, women must be self-denying.
> (p. 129)

This is remarkably similar to Partha Chatterjee's description of the nationalist construction of middle-class Indian women as the guardians of indigenous culture and tradition 'at home', thus enabling their husbands to pursue individual power and status 'in the world' of competitive capitalism (1989).

Finally, while 'feminism as an ideology developed in interaction with the development of individualism and cannot be understood apart from it' (Fox-Genovese 1991, p. 138), a number of feminist scholars have critiqued the excesses of individualism and advocated a more communitarian orientation for feminism (Ruddick 1989, Fox-Genovese 1991, Kishwar 2004). This tension between individual and family/community interests, and between individual rights and social responsibility, is a recurring theme in contemporary women's fiction in India, and we shall see it particularly in the novels of Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. It is at the heart of ongoing debates over gender ideology in India, dividing Indian feminists as well. Seemanthini Niranjana has suggested, for example, that the concept of the individual self is fundamentally a Western imposition, at odds with Indian preferences for a more relational model of identity (1994, p. 32). On the other hand, Nivedita Menon has noted that many feminists in India 'feel the need to reject community identity as an overriding one … [because] the

rights claimed by communities vis-à-vis the state – autonomy, selfhood, access to resources – are denied by communities to "their" women' (1999, p. 31). In reflecting on the dangerous attractions of communalist discourse to provide a sense of belonging to women, Sikita Bannerjee argues that feminism needs to offer an alternative but equally compelling sense of collective identity (1995, pp. 228–9).

Especially interesting is the ambivalence expressed by Madhu Kishwar, a founding editor of one of India's most popular feminist magazines, *Manushi*. In a famous article entitled 'A Horror of "Isms": Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist', she has repudiated feminism on the grounds that it is 'Western' and that it is 'an offshoot [*sic*] of individualism and liberalism. … In our culture both men and women are taught to value the interests of their families and not to make their lives revolve around individual self-interest' (2004, pp. 30–1). Elsewhere, however, she has complained of Indian women's lack of belonging and individual rights *within* families:

> [An Indian woman's identity] is often riddled with a sense of insecurity. This is because in patrilocal, patriarchal societies like ours, she is denied roots even in her parental family. In most parts of India daughters are considered *paraya dhan* (an alien's wealth) and excluded from full membership of their natal families after marriage. … Even in her marital home, her rights are fragile. In case of breakdown of her marriage, she can easily be turned out of that home.
>
> (1999, pp. 251–2)

The implications of this are worth considering because they fly in the face, so to speak, of conservative rhetoric about Indian women's 'place' in the home/family. Leaving aside for a moment the question of a woman's subordination within the family, if even her *place* there is tenuous, it turns the whole argument on its head. Whatever the merits of family belonging and community identity, it does suggest a need for individual rights as well. As we shall see, Anita Desai draws attention to the potential vulnerability of women who have not been socialised and educated to survive apart from the family. While this situation works well for some (Tara in *Clear Light of Day*, 1980), others can be trapped in a loveless marriage (Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*, 1977), dependent on a repressive and exploitative family (Uma in *Fasting, Feasting*, 1999), actively abused by their families (Anamika in *Fasting, Feasting*, 1999) or suffering from dire poverty because they are not looked after by

their families and unable to support themselves despite a supposedly privileged background (Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain*, 1977).

It is perhaps inevitable that gender ideology in India is riddled with such striking conflicts and inconsistencies, given the colonialist and nationalist legacy which continues to complicate an already eclectic mix of cultural traditions still competing with one another. As Anuradha Roy has pointed out, 'patriarchy in India is constituted along a complex ideological grid in which gender, race, caste, class, religion, colonialism, nationalism all have a determining role' (1999, p. 24). This chapter examines the impact of these factors on the lives of Indian women as portrayed in the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.

Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya seems to think about cultural identity more in terms of the 'east/west' dichotomy than in terms of the various religious and ethnic communities within India. Almost without exception, her Indian characters are Hindu and her Western characters are English, and the clash of values between these two groups is a recurring theme in her novels. Indeed, this cultural divide tends to overshadow the gender divide as a source of conflict in her fiction. In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), for example, the gentle Nalini is contrasted with the anonymous arrogant memsahibs to whom her tailor-husband Ravi must deliver the finished garments. These white female customers are invariably depicted as selfish, peremptory and insensitive towards Indian tradesmen and servants. However, while Markandaya's novels tend to be more concerned with racial prejudice and economic oppression than with gender oppression as such, they also draw attention to the ways in which these various forms of social injustice overlap.

An awareness of the extent to which the quality of an Indian woman's life depends on her husband's economic position is evident from Markandaya's first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Although Rukmani, the protagonist, was born into a modestly prosperous peasant family, her marriage (at age 12) was to a poor tenant farmer because there was no dowry left for her, the youngest of four daughters in a family whose modest fortunes were declining. Because her husband Nathan was kind, Rukmani enjoyed a few happy years before a combination of factors drove them into such desperate poverty that their lives became a struggle to survive and feed their family. In this situation,

the issue of gender equality is less relevant than the extreme poverty, which oppresses men and women alike.

Nectar in a Sieve (1954) also contains Markandaya's only reference to Muslim women, in Rukmani's observation of the wives of Muslim officials involved in the construction of the tannery in her rural village:

> They stayed mostly indoors, or if they went out at all they went veiled in bourkas. It was their religion, I was told: they would not appear before any man but their husband. Sometimes, when I caught sight of a figure in voluminous draperies swishing through the streets under a blazing sun, or of a face peering through a window or shutter, I felt desperately sorry for them, deprived of the ordinary pleasures of knowing warm sun and cool breeze upon their flesh, of walking out light and free, or of mixing with men and working beside them. … Who could endure such a filtering of sunlight and fresh air as they do?
>
> (*NS*, p. 52)

Her friend Kali has a different view:

> 'They have their compensations,' Kali said drily. 'It is an easy life, with no worry for the next meal and plenty always at hand. I would gladly wear a bourka and walk veiled for the rest of my life if I, too, could be sure of such things'.
>
> (ibid.)

This exchange between the two peasant women is intended less as a feminist protest than as an illumination of stark human predicaments. Rukmani and Kali are imagining a choice between hunger and captivity, and each is clear about which she would choose if she could – the author's implication being, of course, that no human being should have to endure either of these wretched conditions. The implied feminist message about the incarceration of Muslim wives is balanced against the critique of an economic system which generates such desperate poverty that many people are constantly worried about not having enough to eat. Some would, given the choice, happily endure a life of captivity in order to be free of this worry. While the novel is mainly about economic hardship, the link between cultural identity and gender oppression is neatly summed up in the explanation given to Rukmani for what she sees as denial of the most basic human freedoms to Muslim women: 'It was their religion, I was told' (*NS*, p. 52).

Here we have an example of gender restrictions not only justified by religious ideology, but also functioning as a signifier of cultural 'difference' – that is , Muslim identity in a predominantly Hindu milieu. In this case the gender restrictions can also be interpreted as a display of relative affluence, in the sense that these secluded women are not required to work in the fields.

Economic hardship is once again a central theme in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), though here the protagonist is male and the setting is urban rather than rural. Ravi, the main character, is presented as an angry young man who increasingly directs his anger against women. From the beginning of the novel, his frustration over his poverty is expressed in the form of hostility towards women: 'Bitches, he thought, all of them: greedy for free labor, grudging a rupee to some poor devil in the bazaar who would have been glad of the money' (*HR*, p. 18). His attitude softens somewhat when he falls in love and marries, though he never refers to his mother-in-law without the use of gendered animal imagery, calling her at various times a bitch, a sow, an old cow and a nanny-goat.

While Ravi is desperately frustrated by poverty, the women in the novel accept their economic status because, unlike the men, they are not mobile enough to be exposed to other social classes:

> 'Ah yes, brother-in-law goes about and sees things and they give him fine ideas', sighed Thangam. 'He is not like us, stuck all day long in this stuffy house'.
>
> (*HR*, p. 124)

Ravi's gentle wife Nalini increasingly has to bear the brunt of his disillusionment with the world. Unable to cope with mounting economic problems and humiliated by his inability to support his family, he becomes violent towards his docile and submissive wife because of the feeling of power it gives him. This is in keeping with feminist arguments linking poverty with patriarchal oppression: '[Patriarchies encourage] men lacking wealth and power to keep control in the only way they can – over women and children' (Hasan 1994, p. xxi).

Two Virgins (1973) draws attention to the way in which affluent men can use their economic power to prey upon less privileged women. Here the young female protagonists, Lalitha and Saroja, are not poor, but they live in a rural village without modern conveniences like refrigerators and cars, which Lalitha longs for. Mr Gupta, the visiting film producer, is able to take advantage of her because she sees him as someone who

can offer her a film career and a 'better' life in the city. When her parents travel to the city to confront him about her pregnancy, his superior economic position enables him to wield power over all of them. He does pay for an abortion, but not before his sneering servants have made them wait a week to see him while they run up bills they cannot easily afford in an unpleasant guest house. Dazzled by his home, his servants and his apparent sophistication, they are in a relatively powerless position when he blames Lalitha for her pregnancy: 'The gist of it was that Lalitha had flung herself at him, he had never been so pestered in his life' (*TV*, p. 219).

Lalitha's younger sister Saroja understands the social barriers to a permanent relationship between her sister and Mr Gupta:

> [She] wondered wildly why they couldn't solve the problem by the two of them marrying, Mr Gupta and her sister. … In her heart of hearts she knew why, the truth was that although both were Hindus, which was the important thing, their levels were different. … [She] hoped devoutly, prayed with as much fervour as she could command that society be reorganized to make room for the baby.
>
> (*TV*, p. 179)

Thus Saroja is portrayed as a sensitive and thoughtful adolescent whose comprehension of the implications of social inequality is growing but still limited: she is not aware, for instance, that her sister means nothing to Mr Gupta. She does, however, vaguely imagine the possibility of a different type of social order.

In some ways this tale of the seduction of a gullible young woman by a rich man who has no intention of marrying her is a well-worn fictional theme – as in, for example, Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. If these novels are concerned with the use of economic power in the victimisation of women, *Two Virgins* (1973) adds a complicating third factor to the issues of gender and social class: that of the disturbing impact of imperfectly understood 'Western' values on a traditional Indian rural society. The teenage Lalitha's vulnerability has apparently been exacerbated by an unfortunate combination of ignorance (arising from traditional taboos) and her father's permissiveness (arising from his exposure to liberal 'Western' ideas during the course of his education). Ironically the educated father ('Appa') turns out to be much more naïve than his traditional sister-in-law Aunt Alamelu who warns him that Mr Gupta is after his daughter. He dismisses her suspicions as lack of sophistication: 'It is the dismal

paucity of your education, he said, that must be blamed for your limited horizons'[3] (*TV*, p. 105). The tragedy of Lalitha's seduction, pregnancy, abortion and final disappearance into the city, then, illustrates the way in which a supposedly progressive idea ('freedom' for girls) can lead to its opposite: in this case, sexual exploitation and the resultant destruction of a young life. The implication for feminism seems to be that it needs to be sensitively adapted to different cultural contexts, without taking the West as the norm.

While the novel can be seen, on one level, as a cautionary tale about the dangers *for women* of the sexual freedom endorsed by Western liberalism, the gender ideology of traditional Indian society does not go uncriticised either. Again, its spokesperson is Aunt Alamelu who tries to indoctrinate Lalitha's sister Saroja into traditional Hindu thinking about women: 'What Aunt Alamelu was saying in a variety of ways was that women were born to suffer, which Saroja did not want to believe, being a woman herself' (*TV*, p. 172). In the end, Saroja adopts neither her aunt's fatalistic acceptance of female suffering nor her sister's facile embrace of superficial Western 'freedom', both of which turn out to be forms of entrapment for women. It never becomes clear, however, what values Saroja *does* come to accept in this coming-of-age novel. So in some ways *Two Virgins* (1973) can be seen as a dramatisation of the competing gender ideologies within India. There are those (like Aunt Alamelu) who adhere to traditional thinking, others (like Appa) who naively embrace Western liberalism and still others (like Lalitha) who fall victim to the ideological confusion. Most interesting of all, perhaps, is Saroja who rejects both traditional notions about gender and the uncritical importation of Western ideas about it, but is not yet sure what she wants to replace them with. In this sense, Saroja can be seen as emblematic of Indian feminism itself.

Nayantara Sahgal

Sahgal's fiction highlights – and problematises – women's role in cultural reproduction, apparently advocating individual female emancipation as a way of resisting the gendered restrictions associated with women's position as symbols and 'cultural carriers' of their respective communities. In this respect, Ramesh Chadha has noticed 'a visible progression in her vision':

> In the earlier work the female characters have vaguely craved freedom and attempted to shake off orthodox conventions and

> moribund tradition, whereas in the later novels the women have freed themselves from bondage and regained their [individual] identity.
>
> (1991, pp. 267–8)

In India, however, the kind of individual emancipation apparently advocated by Sahgal is possible for only privileged women because the vast majority are dependent on their families for survival. Indeed, Joya Uraizee has argued that despite her feminist sentiments, 'Sahgal is severely limited in her social criticism because her elite status keeps her removed from the daily contact with economic hardship and exploitation' (2000, p. 46). To some extent this is true, though we shall also see that Sahgal's novels show a keen awareness of the ways in which class privilege can be compromised by gender disadvantage in India.

Cultural conflict concerning gender ideology takes a number of forms in Sahgal's novels. In *This Time of Morning* (1965), Rashmi's belief in individual freedom is not in keeping with traditional Hindu values, which generally favour social obligation over individual fulfilment. Her mother Mira holds the traditional Hindu view that happiness and fulfilment lie in social duty rather than in individual freedom. Mira, however, is from an older generation, and Sahgal's younger female characters, by contrast, all seek individual freedom from male domination. Rashmi in *This Time of Morning* (1965), Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Mother in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) all walk out of their marriages, and Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985) deliberately remains single because of the restrictions marriage imposes upon women in India.

If mothers are expected to pass on cultural values to their children, this process is usually depicted as unsuccessful in Sahgal's novels, often because the values of her protagonists are at odds with the dominant ones in their social milieus. In this sense, mothers can sometimes exercise a subversive influence by attempting to bring up their children with alternative values. We see this in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), for instance, where Simrit opposes the increasingly materialistic values of her husband, his colleagues and the wider society. True, their son Brij chooses to live with his father after the divorce because of the comfortable lifestyle and material luxuries he can provide, but the other children remain with their mother who is portrayed as having superior moral values, including compassion and integrity. Moreover, it is not clear whether Brij will remain with his father or, more importantly, adopt his values in the long run. It could be argued that Simrit's values in

The Day in Shadow (1971) are in keeping with a 'truer' Hindu tradition, but this is *not* the case in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) where Bhushan's mother (who is never named but called only 'Mother' throughout the novel), despite her apparent powerlessness, subtly influences her son in the direction of rebellion against tradition and societal expectations. She does this not overtly and perhaps not even consciously, but through her own profound dissatisfaction with her assigned role, which the sympathetic Bhushan is sensitive enough to discern and comprehend. Mother and son thus share an unspoken opposition to the boundaries placed upon each of them, and both rebel in their own way – Mother by eloping with her Muslim lover in the end, and Bhushan by consistently refusing to settle down in Vijaygarh with a 'suitable wife', having seen what conventional marriage can do to women.

In addition, cultural values are not always accepted by the generation to whom they are being transmitted. We see this, for example, in *Rich Like Us* (1985) where Sonali rebels against her mother's pressures on her to idealise marriage. Benign or not, mothers often end up having little or no influence over their children, as illustrated by the gentle Mona's powerlessness over her wayward son Dev, who in fact conforms to the values of the wider society instead of those of his mother and stepmother in *Rich Like Us* (1985). Here the supposed maternal role in cultural reproduction is effectively bypassed. Moreover, intergenerational influence can flow in both directions. In *This Time of Morning* (1965), for instance, Mira is at first horrified by her daughter Rashmi's decision to seek a divorce but later, after much reflection, comes to realise that

> [t]he moral order did not degenerate, nor was it enshrined forever in unchangeable patterns of behaviour. It had to be refashioned and protected in every age and every generation found its own way to do this. Mira was not reconciled to Rashmi's attitude but she could concede it.
>
> (*TTM*, p. 169)

One implication of this is that generation can be included among the categories of cultural identity, along with religion, social class and so on. Another is that cultural reproduction is shown to be a dynamic process, incorporating external influences and social change.

Women's role in *biological* reproduction, as we saw in the introductory section, can give rise to anxieties about interbreeding with the 'other' in areas where ethnic or religious 'purity' is highly valued. While

there are no legal restrictions on intercommunal marriages in India, the Hindu/Muslim divide is preserved and reinforced through powerful social taboos against intercommunal sexual relationships. *Mistaken Identity* (1988) draws attention to the way in which these taboos are enforced through restrictions on women. Bhushan's Hindu mother is secluded in purdah until the very end, when she elopes with a Muslim man named Yusuf. This comically unlikely ending seems devised specifically to dramatise the anxieties which give rise to restrictions like purdah in the first place. Bhushan himself had enjoyed a clandestine relationship with a Muslim girl named Razia until they were discovered together – a discovery with much more serious consequences for Razia than for Bhushan: 'Who is going to marry the slut now?', asks Bhushan's father (*MI*, p. 59). Although Razia had not been completely incarcerated in purdah like Mother, the degree of her seclusion was such that she was restricted to her home and the Female College for Domestic Arts, her affair with Bhushan having been carried out during sewing lessons when she regularly escaped the school premises. The communal riots sparked off by the discovery of their relationship illustrate the strong feelings behind the taboo against intercommunal relationships (as well as suggesting its absurdity):

> A mob of five or six hundred had made Hindu-Muslim war with knives, stones and broken bottles on the front lawn of the Female College. Someone set fire to one wing and the mob stampeded in to loot pots and pans and sewing machines with yells of 'Allahu Akbar' and 'Ram Ram'. Then they went on a rampage through the town, and the killed and raped count was rising in the hospital. … It sounded the most inventive religious riot in years, each side spurred on by unmistakable signs from heaven.
>
> (*MI*, p. 57)

Thus Sahgal seems to be suggesting in this novel that relationships between men and women are not 'private' but very 'public' in their implications, in their effects, in the customs and taboos surrounding them.

Sahgal's novels also suggest that even women's clothing (more than men's) takes on political implications as a public signifier of cultural identity within India, supporting Neluka Silva's argument about the female body being the 'terrain on which [group] distinctions are made visible' (2004, p. 23). Razia's Muslim identity in *Mistaken Identity* (1988), for example, is signified by her (unwilling) use of the burka,

which she impatiently throws off whenever she can. This uncomfortable and restrictive garment is treated with gleeful disrespect by both Razia and Bhushan:

> 'How do you walk in that hideous thingamajig, how do you *breathe*?' … I looked at the ugly shroud I was still holding and put it to its first decent use. I spread it on the ground in the shade of the wall, took her hand and drew her down beside me.
>
> (*MI*, p. 52)

Thus the burka, that emblem of Muslim female 'modesty', becomes a convenience in the very situation it is intended to *prevent*. If the burka (for Muslim women) is uncomfortable and restrictive, so too is the sari (for Hindu women) which Sonali complains about in *Rich Like Us* (1985): Ravi, as a man, had 'never had a sari throttling his legs, making walking in the wind and running to catch a bus a threat to life and limb' (*RLU*, p. 112).

These restrictions, irksome as they are, can appear trivial compared with the horrifying abuse of subaltern women highlighted in *Rich Like Us* (1985), where a beggar tells Sonali of women labourers being abducted into sexual slavery by corrupt businessmen and policemen. He speaks tearfully of the disappearance of his own wife who, like many others, must have fallen prey to the lust of the brick-kiln owners (*RLU*, p. 246). These atrocities, which are narrated indirectly in the novel, are a rare example in Sahgal's fiction of social class as a factor in gender oppression. More often, her novels focus on the lives of the elite.

While Sahgal's novels rarely portray severe economic deprivation, they do show that economic inequality operates not just between social classes, but also *within families*, so that it is gender-based as well as class-based. For example, many of her supposedly privileged female protagonists are controlled and manipulated by the men on whom they depend for financial support. Only the single and self-supporting Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985) is portrayed as having control over her own life. Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) continues to be manipulated by her husband even after their divorce because of her financial dependence on him. Her economic oppression is expressed in the so-called Consent Terms of their divorce whereby she is landed with a heavy tax burden on stock shares intended for their son, which are being held in her name until he comes of age. Although this tax burden will wipe out any earnings of her own in the meantime, it seems fair to the lawyers and courts because it provides for the son's inheritance, which seems

to be their main concern. Simrit signed the Consent Terms without understanding their implications because she has never been in control of money and is therefore ignorant of financial matters. Her husband has had access to the best legal advice and she has not. Thus, despite Simrit's supposedly 'elite' status, Sahgal wants to show how she, 'like most women, can be casually exploited because she is so eminently exploitable' (1997, p. 17).

For even the *non*-divorced women in Sahgal's novels, family wealth does not necessarily impart financial security, as illustrated by the predicament of Rose in *Rich Like Us* (1985). Though she worked hard to build up the family business, it is soon to be inherited by her corrupt stepson Dev, who is likely to leave her penniless after her husband's death. (True, Rose is English by birth, but she has been a wife in an Indian family for 47 years.) Similarly, Som's financial legacy in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) is exclusively for his son, no provision having been made for his ex-wife and their three daughters. If marriages breakdown – as they do in *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971) – it is the wives who leave the family homes, which are assumed to belong exclusively to the men.

Finally, Sahgal's novels highlight three forms of gender oppression to which upper-class Indian women have been especially vulnerable: sati, purdah and polygamy. Although banned since 1829, sati (the immolation of Hindu widows) continued to be practised surreptitiously well into the twentieth century, as illustrated in *Rich Like Us* (1985) which includes a passage from a manuscript written by Sonali's grandfather describing his mother's sati as murder and not suicide (*RLU*, pp. 149–50). Viney Kirpal explains that in most cases, 'the satis were widows from the upper classes, who were burnt to deprive them or their minor dependents of their inheritance' (1996, p. 175).

We have seen in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) that both Hindu and Muslim women have been subjected to various forms of purdah. Purdah practices in India have varied over time and between regions, ranging from restrictions on women's mobility to total incarceration within the home. Vrinda Nabar has also explained that 'While purdah among the Muslims by and large relates to a woman's relationship with the world outside the home and begins at puberty, Hindu purdah generally has reference to a woman's role in her marital home and begins after marriage' (1995, p. 138). All forms of purdah are also displays of class privilege, the implication being that families who keep 'their' women in purdah can afford to forgo the income from their labour outside the home.

Another traditional pitfall for upper-class Indian wives has been polygamy. Before independence, Hindu men were allowed to have more than one wife, as Muslim men still are, though normally only a wealthy man – like Ram in *Rich Like Us* (1985) or the Raja of Vijaygarh in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) – could afford to do so. In *Rich Like Us* (1985), when Ram takes a second wife, his first wife's protest is 'far from silent. Calling upon the Almighty to spell out what she had done in this or past lives to deserve such outrageous treatment, she had wept with vigour' (*RLU*, p. 60). And Ram's justification is simply 'my religion lets a man have more than one wife' (*RLU*, p. 44).

While Sahgal's novels thus highlight the ways in which class privileges are often compromised by gender disadvantages, they seem unaware of the ways in which class privileges outweigh gender disadvantages. For instance, there is a deafening silence throughout Sahgal's fiction on the lives, thoughts and feelings of the domestic servants who figure in the margins of all of her narratives. Their labour is literally taken for granted in the way that some men have traditionally taken women's domestic work for granted – delegating uncongenial duties to less privileged people without much thought. Thus Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) are eventually able to free themselves from patriarchal domination and pursue individual fulfilment only because they have domestic servants who can look after their children. Moreover, it is only privileged women like Saroj and Simrit who are in a position to end their marriages; poor, uneducated women with no means of supporting themselves and their children do not have this option. These issues are not explored in any of Sahgal's novels.

So we see that some women can escape patriarchal domination by exploiting their class privilege, but only if they become self-supporting. Raj remarks to Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) that for individuals as well as nations, 'independence has no meaning unless it's economic', as she herself is discovering through the consequences of her grotesquely unfair divorce settlement (*DS*, p. 10). By explicitly comparing individuals with nations and identifying economic power as a powerful weapon of social control within the family as well as in the public sphere, Sahgal is linking the two spheres by showing that similar power structures operate in both.

Anita Desai

In her fictional exploration of the individual female consciousness, Anita Desai is in effect opposing the traditional Hindu conception

of identity which is communal rather than individual. She creates characters who are sensitive, introspective and individualistic to the point of eccentricity, so that they emerge as misfits in the conventional environments in which they are placed: 'I am interested in characters who are not average but have retreated or been driven into despair and so turned against or been made to stand against the general current' (quoted in Bala and Pabby 2002, p. 3).

Most of Desai's protagonists, then, are middle-class Indian women who are at odds with the cultural norms which shape their lives, and her fiction seeks to unravel their complex responses to the limitations imposed by culturally sanctioned codes of feminine thought and behaviour. These codes are family-based and family-supported so that the family itself emerges in these novels not only as the transmitter and reinforcer of restrictive gender roles and the dominant force in women's lives, but often also as the *only* force in their lives. Desai's protagonists, aware of their own entrapment within family relationships which circumscribe their lives and seek to stifle their individuality, react in various ways. Some, like Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and to some extent Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), withdraw into a subjective world, thinking and acting in ways which society must deem neurotic or even mad. Others, like Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), cultivate a coldness and detachment, refusing, for self-preservation, to give of themselves. *Clear Light of Day* (1980) marks a turning point in Desai's fiction in the sense that the protagonist's struggle for self-actualisation turns out to be successful, having been achieved in the end through a willing acceptance of her nurturing role in an autonomous fashion which transcends social restrictions. After *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Desai turns to male protagonists in her next three novels before returning to the subject of the family in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Here she offers a sharp critique of women's collusion in patriarchal practices, as well as comparing the ways in which Indian and Western families oppress their members (both male and female) through culturally determined role-playing which denies and ignores individual needs.

Jyoti Nandan suggests that

> [i]t is the emphasis on fate in the Hindu culture that keeps marginalised groups such as women and the lower classes in India from challenging their subordinate status in society. The lack of action to improve one's circumstances is clearly linked with the belief in the twin theories of *karma* (the reward or punishment in this life for one's actions in the last) and *dharma* (the obligation to accept

> one's condition and perform duties appropriate to it). In Hindu society … it is the *dharma* of the wife to worship her husband and it is the *dharma* of the husband to be worshipped.
>
> (2002, p. 190)

While Desai's urban middle-class protagonists are not consciously beholden to traditional Hindu beliefs, the cultural emphasis on fatalistic acceptance of one's circumstances is shown to exercise a subtle but powerful hold over the consciousness and relationships of even the most ostensibly 'modern' characters. Maya, in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), tries to rebel against fatalistic thinking, but because of the powerful paternalistic influence of first her father and then her (older) husband, she has never encountered any alternative perspectives. Desperate to escape what she fears to be her fate, she ironically succumbs to it, losing first her sanity and then her life because of the lack of alternative emotional and intellectual resources available to her. 'Modern' men that they are, Maya's husband and father would both scoff at the astrological prediction that terrifies her, if they knew of it. However, they strongly endorse the fatalistic thinking which underpins superstition, and their unrelenting attempts to impose such a way of thinking on Maya are shown to be among the major causes of her emotional deterioration and eventual breakdown.

If fatalism is one of the props holding up patriarchal ideology in India, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) offers a damning indictment of it by showing its effects on the psyche of a sensitive young woman who has always been exhorted to 'accept' male authority and male ways of thinking which are alien to her nature. The association of fatalistic thinking with patriarchal ideology is emphasised by the fact that it is Maya's father who brought her up this way, her mother having died early on in her life. In no way overtly cruel or deliberately unkind, the father is portrayed as a benevolent despot who lavished attention and love on his daughter while systematically stifling her powers of individual thought and action so that she remains childish and insecure even as a young adult. Paternal authority has been exercised through gentle but repeated insistences that one should accept without questioning, resign to the inevitable: 'It is best to accept' (*CP*, p. 52). 'It must be accepted as it is – you will find that to be the wisest course' (*CP*, p. 53).

Anuradha Roy argues that

> [i]n Maya's case, the form of male domination on the female psyche is through the benevolent tyranny of an authoritarian father who

> destroys his daughter's potentiality of growth to feed his own sense of power. The powerlessness of women is thus generated within the structures of the family, through apparently nurturing institutions and individuals.
>
> (1999, p. 29)

It is true that Maya's father would not tolerate any questioning of his authority, as evidenced by his rejection of his rebellious son, Arjuna. However, he also appears to have a genuine belief in the wisdom of accepting the status quo – a belief shared by his friend Gautama who becomes Maya's husband. Gautama, while professing to mock mythic traditions through the power of logic and intellect, ironically uses his logic to support the most traditional views of Hindu philosophy: resignation and acceptance of whatever life brings, by virtue of the philosophy of non-attachment inherent in the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation. It is just such a traditional philosophy of detachment from life that Maya rebels against, and Afzal-Khan concurs with Roy in identifying it as 'male' (1993, p. 63). Certainly, the novel itself supports such an identification – for example, in Maya's observation that Gautama 'saw no value in anything less than the ideas and theories of human and, preferably, male brains' (*CP*, p. 99). Equally telling is his reaction to being interrupted by Maya while expounding his detached philosophy of life to her: '"Now what is it?" he sighed, in utter disgust. "Really, it is quite impossible to talk to a woman"' (*CP*, p. 124). He will not listen to any challenges that Maya tries to make, dismissing her views as 'Occidental' (*CP*, p. 124).

Desai's novels support feminist arguments that it is particularly in the area of gender ideology that any challenge to the status quo is perceived as an aping of Western ways and therefore undesirable.[4] One illustration of this is in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) when the protagonist Uma's cousin Anamika has suffered a miscarriage after being beaten by her husband. The community reaction is telling. They wonder if she will be sent back to her family – not *choose* to return because she has any say in the matter, but be *sent* back because she is 'damaged goods', now unable to bear children. As Jyoti Nandan reminds us, keeping face before the community is of utmost importance, and it is a great shame for a woman 'given' in marriage to return to her parents' home (2002, p. 188). Uma's mother articulates the conventional reaction to the prospect of Anamika returning home: 'How can she be happy if she is sent home? What will people say? What will they think?' (*FF*, p. 71). It would be easy to dismiss this as a blame-the-victim mentality,

but that would be underestimating the extent to which an Indian woman's happiness and well-being are socially based. We are not privy to Anamika's thoughts about whether social disapproval or physical violence would be more painful for her, but it is significant that Uma's opinion that Anamika would be better off with her parents than with her husband is perceived as 'Western'. When Uma shrugs off community reaction, Mama angrily asks her if that was what she learnt from the nuns at the convent. Ironically, the possibility of the adult Anamika's living independently of husband *and* parents is never considered.

The association of female emancipation with Westernisation in the minds of those who oppose both is again exemplified in Papa's attitude towards Dr Dutt:

> It was a distinguished family, and if the daughter was still unmarried at fifty, and a working woman as well, it was an aberration he had to tolerate. In fact, Papa was quite capable of putting on a progressive, Westernized front when called upon to do so – in public, in society, not within his family of course.
>
> (*FF*, p. 141)

The ironic tone here emphasises that while Papa is prepared to defer to the 'aberrations' of those he sees as his social superiors, he also expects the women in his family to defer to him as *their* superior.

Having suggested that women's oppression in contemporary India is located within the family, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) goes on in the latter part to portray an American family which is no less dysfunctional in order, perhaps, to debunk the myth that life is generally 'better' for women (and men) in the West. As the title *Fasting, Feasting* suggests, the problems in the Indian family seem to arise from lack and those of the American family from excess. In contrast to Uma in India who is shown to lack what she needs – freedom, opportunities, respect – the Patton family in Massachusetts (seen through the eyes of Uma's brother Arun) seem almost a caricature of excess, with Mr Patton's insistence on cooking huge steaks on the barbecue every night, Mrs Patton's overflowing supermarket trolleys, Melanie's binge eating, Rod's obsessive exercising. As Ralph Crane points out:

> There is something almost cartoonish about Desai's description of this American family, something not quite real ... which perhaps highlights the fact that Desai is not so much trying to

> describe or explore American family life in this novel as compare it with Indian life.
>
> (2000, p. 50)

We must remember, too, that this family is depicted through the perspective of the timid Arun who is lodging with them for the summer and experiencing a kind of 'culture shock' as he observes their very different way of life. Despite these superficial differences, he gradually begins to notice striking similarities in the dynamics of family power politics – for example, Mr Patton with 'his father's very expression, walking off, denying any opposition, any challenge to his authority' (*FF*, p. 186). More poignantly, Arun later sees in Melanie

> a resemblance to something he knows: a resemblance to the contorted face of an enraged sister who, failing to express her outrage against neglect, against misunderstanding, against inattention to her unique and singular being and its hungers, merely spits and froths in ineffectual protest. How strange to encounter it here, Arun thinks, where so much is given, where there is both licence and plenty.
>
> (*FF*, p. 214)

Thus despite the modern Western emphasis on individualism, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) makes the point that even in the West, women's individuality is often not recognised. In particular, eating disorders (like the one suffered by Melanie) have a close connection with the pressure to conform to 'ideal' body shapes promoted by the media.

More interesting, perhaps, than Desai's brief fictional foray into women's oppression in the West (if it is indeed oppression), is her portrayal of the impact of 'Westernisation' on individual women in India. Rajeswari Mohan argues that

> [w]hile [a Western-style] education empowers women it also locates them at the nexus of contradictory gender ideologies, because it often valorizes an individualism that puts pressure on indigenous constructions of femininity that emphasise nurturing, self-denial and filial piety. Further contradictions are engendered by its advocacy of Western ideals of femininity based on the nineteenth-century middle-class figure of the 'angel in the house' and subsequently that of the housewife-consumer.
>
> (1997, p. 48)

In some ways, Victorian ideology, with its emphasis on a supporting role for women, reinforced Hindu tradition. However the situation of the elderly Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) illustrates the plight of the woman caught between the contradictory discourses of British imperialism and Hindu patriarchy. On the one hand, her education – music and French lessons – is in keeping with a colonised native elite's desire to emulate bourgeois British cultural norms in the upbringing of daughters expected to assume a status-enhancing wifely role. On the other hand, she is simultaneously subject to Hindu inheritance law under which sons are the sole inheritors of their father's property. Because she has remained unmarried and because 'Westernization' has apparently freed the men in her family from the responsibility of looking after her in her adulthood, she has been forced into the public sphere by the need to earn a living. Her qualifications being of the genteel sort, she cannot support herself adequately, and because of her anglicised ways, she is also perceived as a misfit in the 'real' world. Ila Das is typical of Desai's characters in the sense that although she is highly individualised, her predicament is peculiar to the middle class.

Fire on the Mountain (1977) does refer to the oppression of poorer Indians, but in most of Desai's other novels, they function almost as a backdrop to the lives of her middle-class characters, seldom intruding upon their consciousness except as an inconvenience (in the case of 'problem' servants) or as a spectacle. *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), for instance, contains a darkly comical scene on the streets of Bombay in which:

> The ayahs were warring – Goanese women, Mangaloreans, fisher folk turned domestics, Bombay women, huge-hipped, deep-thighed, pink-gummed and habitually raucous, they were pushing each other, then pulling, tearing each other's frocks and pink and green saris, then dragging the rips together. All were bawling.
>
> (*WSWG*, p. 42)

The comedy here includes an unmistakable note of disdain for the rough appearance and behaviour of lower-class women, and it is difficult to determine whether this is the attitude of Sita watching the scene in horror, the narrator, or both. Class snobbery appears again in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), when Bim is invited for tea at Dr Biswas's home:

> Had Mrs Biswas dressed for it? Bim had never seen anyone so dressed. So bathed, so powdered. She seemed to be dusted all over with flour.

> Perhaps she had fallen into a flour bin, like a large bun. But she smelt so powerfully of synthetic flowers, it must be powder after all. … [Bim] was given a platter with all the goodies already heaped on it – so many biscuits, so many pieces of *mithai*, so many fritters and a spoonful of chutney. Similar plates with exactly the same number of goodies were handed to Dr Biswas, one kept by her. … A china cabinet against the wall … housed little plaster figures from Germany – a miniature beer mug, Hansel and Gretel skipping in a meadow, a squirrel dressed in a daisy chain. … There were clay toys in cane baskets – yellow bananas, green chillies. A parrot. A cow. A plastic baby. And they all stared at Bim munching her way through the goodies.
>
> (*CLD*, p. 90)

Here again, because the description of a 'tacky' lower-middle-class home and anxious hospitality is so vivid and witty, it is difficult to escape the impression that we are being invited to sneer, or at least to pity Mrs Biswas for her poor taste. Certainly the feeling of discomfort by both hosts and guest alike is vividly conveyed, and there may be an implicit criticism of Bim for heightening the tension rather than attempting to put her anxious hosts at ease. She has been characterised in the novel as self-confident enough to do this, while Dr Biswas has been portrayed as shy and befuddled, but also kind and well-meaning. The comedy and pathos of this scene points to the class-consciousness and emphasis on image in contemporary India.

This emphasis on image can prevent middle-class women from confronting and rebelling against their oppression – a situation we see in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), where the proverbial double standards enable Nanda Kaul's husband to keep both a wife and a mistress. As Carmen Wickramagamage suggests:

> A certain sense of class pride or perhaps her own vulnerability as a private housewife without an independent income diminishes her ability to protest. After all, like Ila Das', her education must have been of the kind that prepares the upper middle-class woman for her status-enhancing role in the house with piano, singing and dancing lessons, not the kind of skills that would qualify her to take up outside employment. Perhaps her socialization in bourgeois propriety had also prevented her from protesting against her husband's behaviour as vigorously as she could. Nanda Kaul's tragedy, then, would seem to stem from the different imperatives of class and gender that play

> on her subjectivity – contradictory imperatives which make her complicitous sometimes as a class subject in the oppression she finds herself subjected to on the basis of gender.
>
> (1994, p. 27)

Even more tragic is the situation in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), where class pride and emphasis on image cause Anamika's parents to try to deny and cover up the abuse she is receiving from her husband instead of trying to help her. When Anamika is unable to be at Uma's wedding, her mother assures everyone (including perhaps herself) that her daughter's marital family loved her so much that they couldn't bear to let her out of their sight for a single day (*FF*, p. 89).

We have seen that the reminiscences of Nanda Kaul and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) constitute a veiled critique of a fashionable upbringing which leave women incapable of dealing with real problems – a situation recognised and articulated by Ila Das: 'We thought we were being equipped with the very best – French lessons, piano lessons, English governesses – my, all that to find it left us helpless, positively *handicapped*' (*FOM*, p. 127). Living in a village as a social worker on a below-subsistence-level income, Ila's life is a struggle not only because of the material deprivation she suffers, but also because she is perceived as an oddity and is jeered at and pushed aside at every turn. Carmen Wickramagamage argues that

> [t]he village men's antagonism towards her as the village Welfare Officer is no doubt compounded by her disdainful attitude towards them as her social inferiors. But if Ila resorts to class in her effort to stand against the men who appear less amenable than the women towards her attempts to reform existing social practices, Preet Singh resorts to a uniquely gendered revenge – rape, before death by strangulation – to regain his superiority over her as a man in a culture governed by an ideology of female subordination.
>
> (1994, p. 34)

Preet Singh's specific grievance against Ila Das is that she is trying to prevent him 'giving' his seven-year old daughter in marriage to an old man in exchange for two goats and a quarter of an acre of land. So in this novel the oppression of the village women is hinted at by this one detail of a child marriage, as well as Ila's earlier lament to Nanda that 'the women are willing, poor dears, to try and change

their dreadful lives by an effort, but do you think their men will let them? Nooo, not one bit' (*FOM*, p. 129). In the battle between class and gender, which results in Ila's death, the village women's voices are not heard; the battle, in fact, is fought over the right to speak for them.

Shashi Deshpande

Unlike Markandaya, Sahgal and to some extent Desai, Shashi Deshpande does not explicitly thematise the 'east/west' divide. Mrinalini Sebastian has observed that her novels 'generally represent a culturally closed world where very little transaction takes place across the boundaries' (2000, p. 13). But this, of course, depends on what is meant by 'boundaries'. True, there are no noticeable non-Indian characters in her fiction, and the protagonist is invariably an educated, middle-class Brahmin woman who is confronted by a crisis in her life. However, there are significant cross-class encounters in *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Binding Vine* (1993), religious differences in *Small Remedies* (2000) and caste issues in most of her novels.

In terms of literary references, Jasbir Jain points out the 'multiplicity of intertextualities from different cultures' whereby Deshpande 'liberally refers to the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *Upanishads* and is equally free with Shakespeare, Dickens and writers like Agatha Christie, bringing both east and west and the sacred and the profane together' (2003, p. 195). The references to Hindu mythology are particularly significant in light of their relation to gender ideology in India. In narrating her story in *That Long Silence* (1988), Jaya turns repeatedly to the idealised women of the epics as prototypes of Indian womanhood: Sita, Savitri, Maiytreyee, Gandhari. According to Chanda, Ho and Mathai:

> This concept of womanhood is an eminently patriarchal construct and emphasizes suffering, duty and silence. And Jaya's universe is replete with women who subscribe to this notion of womanhood: her neighbour, her domestic servants, Mohan's mother, his sister.
>
> (1997, p. 61)

Jaya herself, like all of Deshpande's protagonists, is critically aware of the role of Hindu mythology in promoting female submissiveness. When her husband's company is under investigation for corruption, he

is advised by his boss to 'lie low' for a while, so he and Jaya retreat to a modest flat in an obscure part of Bombay:

> I remember now that he assumed I would accompany him, had taken for granted my acquiescence in his plans. So had I. Sita following her husband into exile, Savitri dogging Death to reclaim her husband, Draupadi stoically sharing her husband's travails … No, what had I to do with these mythical women?
>
> (*LS*, p. 11)

Critical awareness, however, does not always translate into action, as Jaya realises while reflecting upon her remarkably traditional behaviour as a wife, mother and writer of light articles for a women's magazine.

Not only do the traditional myths about women in Indian society continue to exercise a powerful hold over the collective consciousness; they are reinforced by more modern versions of the same ideology. For instance, during her adolescence and young adulthood, Jaya had reacted against the traditional myths and was strongly attracted to images portraying the new lifestyle of the urban affluent middle class constructed in the media. However her middle-aged perspective during the course of the narrative enables her to see that the traditional and modern images of women are not so very different after all. According to Santosh Gupta:

> The women are the targets of these ads as they are both the consumers, and are themselves objectified into beautiful 'objects' valued by men as status symbols. … The romantic stories of love and marriage, the dreams of a cosy gleaming home, and good living are attractive to these young women for they seem to differ radically from the dull, drab lives led by their mothers and other women. It is only after a few years in this kind of life that the women realize – as Jaya, Indu and the other heroines of Deshpande do – that the ground reality actually consists of their complete captivity within the patriarchal set-up. The centre of power remains the man.
>
> (2000, pp. 195–6)

This construction of the middle-class Indian woman in the mass media as a housewife-consumer as well as a commodity herself is, of course, a relatively new phenomenon associated with the growth of the

capitalist economy in India during the last few decades. Prior to that, gender ideology in India had been constructed through traditional folklore, rituals, prescriptive conduct codes and restrictions, as Deshpande's protagonists recall when remembering their childhoods. Most of them had rebelled against these restrictive codes of behaviour, only to find themselves adhering to them during their married lives.

The young women's falling back into traditional patterns of behaviour as soon as they have their own families would seem to suggest the extraordinary power that the patriarchal family continues to exert in India, as well as its remarkable resistance to changes in gender roles. Cicely Palser Havely accepts the centrality of the family in Indian society as a 'given' and argues that 'The assertive individualism of Western feminism does not suit a family-based society. Thus Jaya achieves not autonomy, but an acceptable instatement of herself as daughter, sister, wife and mother' (1998, p. 236). One of the problems with this argument is that it assumes family ties and individualism to be mutually exclusive – which is not the case in Deshpande's novels, where despite the intricate networks of familial relationships, importance is always given to the individual. Another problem with Havely's argument is that it fails to take into account the many permutations of 'the family' in India. Is it the traditional joint family depicted in *Roots and Shadows* (1983), the nuclear family of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), the extended family of *That Long Silence* (1988) – and how far does it extend? – or even a complicated step-family arrangement like the one in *Small Remedies* (2000)?

Deshpande herself asserts the continuing importance of the family in India, admitting that she 'can't see people in isolation; they are parts of families' (Holmstrom 1998, p. 246). Her novels certainly bear this out, being thickly populated with sprawling extended families and locating each individual firmly within a familial and a social context. However, she shows in *Small Remedies* (2000) that family structures and gender roles need not be rigid or prescriptive, even when family ties are strong. Here the upbringing of the protagonist, Madhu, is depicted as consistently loving and supportive but also distinctly unconventional. Her mother having died during her infancy, she was brought up by her father and his (male) servant until the death of her father when she was 15. Afterwards she went to live with her Aunt Leela, who was generally regarded as 'the black sheep of the family. A widow who had remarried. And what was worse, infinitely worse, married a *Christian* man' (*SR*, p. 45). Madhu forms strong ties with Aunt Leela, her second husband Joe and his son Tony, and the resulting 'family' is comically

depicted through the perspective of her more conventional in-laws at her wedding:

> I am like any other bride in my Benaras sari, green bangles and silver toe rings. But there's Tony – who is he? Acting like a host, distributing the *akshada* before the ceremony. … And Hamidbhai, in spite of his English suit, unmistakably a Muslim, and Joe, so intimate with me and yet so clearly not-a-Hindu – they are all mysteries to the guests. Only Sunanda and Rahunath make sense. … But what exactly are they? They're her Kaka and Kaki, Som's mother says. Distant cousins of her father's. It's better than explaining that they're the bride's aunt's first husband's family.
>
> (*SR*, p. 104)

Despite the general bemusement at the wedding, Madhu notes: 'I am immediately taken into the heart of Som's family, I am one of them right away' (*SR*, p. 105).

The effects of cross-cultural unions, however, are not unproblematically depicted in the novel. There is Madhu's childhood friend Munni, daughter of a famous professional singer from a wealthy Brahmin family who left her husband and eloped with her Muslim lover Ghulam Saab, 'a step so great that even today it would require enormous courage' (*SR*, p. 166). Munni consistently denies the obvious fact that Ghulam Saab is her father and later severs ties with both of her parents because she apparently feels deprived of a sense of religious community.

If religion is one way of defining cultural identity in India, caste is a less obvious one. As noted earlier, all of Deshpande's protagonists are Brahmin, though Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) challenges her family's restrictive notions of cultural identity by marrying a non-Brahmin and by ignoring caste customs. Her great-aunt Akka, far from being the stereotypically self-denying Brahmin widow, owns the large ancestral home and controls the traditional joint household in the manner of a stern patriarch. It is she who symbolically accepts cultural difference by bequeathing the family property to Indu, the niece who married someone from outside the community.

Despite these challenges to restrictive notions of cultural identity, Mrinalini Sebastian argues that

> The world of Deshpande's novels is a world that is rooted in a certain idea of tradition, of culture and even though there exists a kind of

> conflict between tradition and changed values, it does not really suggest transnational or translational elements because nowhere do we really see this culture coming into conflict with any 'other' form of culture.
>
> (2000, p. 155)

This is certainly true with regard to gender ideology, even in *Small Remedies* (2000) where cultural difference is *presented* but never really explored. In particular, none of Deshpande's novels indicates any gender-based differences in the lives of, say, Brahmin and non-Brahmin women, or even Hindu and Muslim women, though class-based differences are highlighted.

Having eschewed caste as a category of cultural identity, Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) reflects on the way in which social class, for people like herself, is just caste by another name:

> We Indians can never get away from caste. If we've rejected the old ones, we've embraced new ones. Do I think of myself as a Brahmin? Rarely, if ever. But I'm the educated, intelligent, urban middle class. We have our own rules, our own pattern, to which I adhere as scrupulously as Atya and Kaki observe their fasts and pujas.
>
> (*RS*, p. 58)

A more radical disowning of privilege is effected by Madhu's Aunt Leela in *Small Remedies* (2000). Her young cousin Hari is interested in Aunt Leela because she had been a freedom fighter and Communist party activist, but Madhu can see that he is disappointed by the little that she can tell him:

> I may not know when Leela officially became a member of the Communist Party, but I can tell Hari where the beginnings were. Leela has often told me how she dislikes her natal family regarding itself as something special. … What had they done, except hold on to lands which they had inherited, lands which they had done nothing to deserve? And there is the story of the bangle woman who came every month to equip the females of the family with glass bangles. 'We had to wear our oldest saris when she fitted us with the bangles and after we'd finished we had to have a bath because she'd touched us.' …
>
> This was when, I imagine, Leela moved away from caste and disowned it. It meant nothing to her, which is why she alone in

> the family accepted my parents' marriage. … I don't think Hari is interested in this Leela, in these personal matters …
>
> His Leela is the public figure; my Leela is the woman who made me a part of her life after my father's death and brought me out of the terrifying emptiness I faced when he died.
>
> (*SR*, p. 98)

The point here, of course, is that Leela's personal life is very relevant to her political views and that Hari's insistence on separating the two is a classic case of a man failing to see that 'the personal is political'.

Deshpande's novels suggest that while class privilege undeniably brings advantages, it can, in certain circumstances, also be a handicap for some women. Aunt Leela's contemporary, Savitribai, had to overcome enormous obstacles to become a professional singer because at the time it was not considered respectable for a woman of her class. Respectability has been one of the most powerful tools for patriarchal control of upper- and middle-class women in India; as R. K. Sharma observes, Deshpande's heroines are all burdened with heavy inhibitions because of their social class (1998, p. 108).

On the other hand, these 'inhibited' women in Deshpande's novels are well aware of the fact that their own difficulties are nothing compared to those of their poorer counterparts. In this respect they differ from Markandaya's, Sahgal's and Desai's privileged characters, most of whom appear to take the services of their domestic staff for granted and know little about their lives. Thus we see Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) not only aware of her reliance on Jeeja to save her from 'the hell of domestic drudgery' (*LS*, p. 52), but knowing all about Jeeja's life, her family and her many troubles. In *The Binding Vine* (1993), we see not only Priti's remark about 'thank[ing] God every day [that she] can leave this drudgery to someone else' (*BV*, p. 36), but also Urmi befriending a poor woman in the hospital whose daughter has been raped. Despite their somewhat guilt-ridden awareness of the plight of the working-class women upon whom they depend, Deshpande's protagonists do use their services so that they themselves can have some time and some freedom to think and write.

Far from idealising working-class women or suggesting a sort of 'female solidarity' across the social classes, Deshpande portrays some of the class tensions that inevitably prevail in a society of such vast inequality. In *Roots and Shadows* (1983), for instance, Indu and the old

woman working in the kitchen appear to have defensively superior attitudes towards each other:

> The old woman spoke contemptuously. I knew these women had their own standards for judging people. Nothing about me … my academic distinctions, my career, my success, my money … none of these would impress her. To her I was just a childless woman. To get married, to bear children, to have sons and then grandchildren … they were still for them the only successes a woman could have. I had almost forgotten this breed of woman since I had left home. … Each one of them, riddled with ignorance, prejudice and superstition, was a world of darkness in herself. And, even more amazing was their ignorance of their own darkness.
>
> (*RS*, p. 116)

However, it is also hinted that the old woman's 'contemptuous' attitude may be based not on Indu's childlessness (as she believes) but on her blind snobbery, deftly conveyed in her assumptions about working-class female 'namelessness':

> These women … they are called Kaku and Kaki, Atya and Vahini, Ajji and Mami. As if they have to be recognised by a relationship because they have no independent identity of their own at all. And, in the process, their own names are forgotten.
>
> (*RS*, p. 117)

The irony here is that not only does the old woman assert, when asked, that her name is Ganga, but that Indu's relatives too are known only as Akka, Atya, Kaki and so on. Clearly, the woman Ganga is a convenient scapegoat for Indu's insecurities about her own 'equality', which we will explore in subsequent chapters.

While lower-class women are always minor characters in Deshpande's fiction, their struggle for survival and self-respect supports P. G. Joshi's claim that 'lack of educational and economic opportunities, especially for women, has made patriarchy even stronger among the working class' (2003, p. 177). In Deshpande's novels, the domestic servants are typically poor and illiterate women supporting their families and their husbands, who are often unemployed and alcoholic. In spite of poverty, childlessness – or even not having a male child – is treated as a calamity for which women are blamed. Childless or not, sole breadwinner or not, the working-class women of Deshpande's novels are often abused

and/or abandoned by their husbands. The life of Jeeja in *That Long Silence* (1988) is presented as a harrowing example:

> 'Don't ever give my husband any of my pay,' she had warned me when she had started working for me, giving me a hint of what her life was like. There had been days when she had come to work bruised and hurt, rare days when she had not come at all …
>
> And I was wrong when I thought that Jeeja's life had changed because her husband was dead and she had cast off those auspicious symbols of wifehood. The … son, Rajaram, now drank and beat up his wife, Tara, so that Tara and her three children had become Jeeja's responsibility.
>
> (*LS*, pp. 51–2)

However, even here, the younger generation is represented as bolder. For example, Tara does not suffer as resignedly as her mother-in-law Jeeja. But it is Manda, the little granddaughter, who shows the potential for a better future. Manda is portrayed as a cheerful child, despite all the drudgery in her life. She helps Jeeja in her chores and does a host of other odd jobs, contributing her bit towards the upkeep of the family. Pitying her, Jaya reflects on her future: 'She looked like her grandmother as she set to work briskly; and Cassandra-like I saw her future in an instant – marriage, a drunkard for a husband, children, more children, poverty, ill health, cruelty, work, more work' (*LS*, p. 163). But later, Jaya notices with surprise that Manda understands English, so 'the Cassandra in me was snubbed. Manda was going to school, she would be well educated, she would not be like her grandmother' (*LS*, p. 164).

Shakutai in *The Binding Vine* (1993) articulates a working-class woman's aspirations for her daughter: 'I wanted her to have all that I never had – education, a good life, a good marriage, respect from others' (*BV*, p. 112). However, she also reveals the fear of vulnerable lower-class women in India through her first reactions to the news that her daughter (who is lying in a coma) was raped:

> It's not true, you people are trying to blacken my daughter's name. … Don't tell anyone, I'll never be able to hold my head up again, who'll marry the girl, we're decent people. Doctor,' she turns to him, 'don't tell the police. … If a girl's honour is lost, what's left? The girl doesn't have to do anything wrong, people will always point a finger at her'.
>
> (*BV*, pp. 58–9)

Sadly, her fears about what 'people' will think are later confirmed by the comments of the police officer who expresses the prevailing prejudices against 'girls of that class': 'For all you know, she may be a professional, we see a lot of that. But, if you ask me, the man said, she must have been out with a boyfriend – girls of that class always have boyfriends the families know nothing about' (*BV*, p. 88).

In addition to the fear of social stigma, there is the fear that the girl will never get married, which seems incomprehensible to the doctor until Urmi explains to him the simple reason for the working-class fixation on marriage for women: 'Security. You're safe from other men' (*BV*, p. 88). This is echoed by Jeeja in *That Long Silence* (1988) while Tara is actually hoping for her husband's death after a drunken brawl: 'That girl, let her have her kumkum on her forehead. What is a woman without that? Her husband may be a drunkard, but as long as he is alive, no one will dare cast an eye on her' (*LS*, p. 160). In Deshpande's novels, the fear of sexual assault seems to be strongly felt by lower-class women, as Shakutai says to Urmi: 'Women like you will never understand what it is like for us. We have to keep to our places, we can never step out. There are always people wanting to throw stones at us, our own people first of all' (*BV*, p. 147). Urmi disagrees, insisting that it is not 'different' for her because she too feels sexually vulnerable, but she appears to underestimate the fears of working-class women – not just of sexual assault, but of victimisation in general, sometimes even within their own homes. Shakutai offers a poignant example of this in describing her sister's married life: 'After marriage she changed. She was frightened, always frightened. What if he doesn't like this, what if he wants that, what if he is angry with me, what if he throws me out?' (*BV*, p. 195). Deshpande, however, emphasises that oppression within marriage is not limited to working-class families, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The introduction to this chapter briefly surveyed feminist theory on gender ideology as a function of cultural identity, focusing on nationality, religion, caste and social class as the categories most relevant to the novels under consideration. However, an examination of the novels themselves suggests that generation can be an important factor as well. We have also seen that particular gender practices often have multiple cultural and economic determinants. For example, sati, polygamy, purdah and the compulsion for Muslim women to wear burkas, all of

which are critically portrayed in Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988), are shown to have several functions. They display a woman's religious/cultural affiliation (i.e., which group 'owns' her), they display class privilege and they preserve cultural 'integrity' by controlling women's sexuality. These restrictions are also sanctioned by religious ideology, which has historically justified the patriarchal control of women.

The fictional treatment of religious ideology is rather subtler in Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) and Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988), which examine the effects of traditional Hindu thinking on the individual female psyche. As we have seen, the sensitive Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is destroyed partly by her inability to adapt herself to the tenets of Hindu philosophy espoused by her husband and father: fatalistic acceptance of patriarchal authority coupled with an attitude of 'non-attachment' which is completely alien to her nature. In *That Long Silence* (1988) Jaya becomes aware of the subtle but powerful influence that Hindu mythology has had on her thinking and behaviour as a self-effacing wife whose only purpose is service and blind obedience to her husband.

In addition to women's function as symbolic bearers of a particular group's identity and honour, the chapter introduction discussed women's role in cultural reproduction. This role is interrogated in Sahgal's novels, some of which show mothers to be complicit with patriarchal ideology – for example, Nita's and Rashmi's mothers in *This Time of Morning* (1965) and Sonali's mother in *Rich Like Us* (1985). Other mothers are shown to be ineffectual in passing on cultural values – for example, Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Mona in *Rich Like Us* (1985) – or even to have a subversive influence on their offspring, like Mother in *Mistaken Identity* (1988).

Social class, as we have seen, is both a category of cultural identity and an economic position in any given society. While all four authors draw attention to the ways in which poverty oppresses women more than men in India, Desai and especially Sahgal highlight the ways in which even elite women are subjected to patriarchal oppression. Educated and socialised to be dependent on their families, middle- and upper-class women's training in 'propriety' and 'respectability' has also left many of them too inhibited to protest against injustice. In addition to the major forms of gendered oppression to which elite Indian women have historically been subjected (sati, polygamy, purdah), Sahgal's novels are concerned with the male control of power, privilege and economic resources within families.

Finally, the gendered aspects of cultural identity were discussed in terms of the perceived 'east/west divide' – or, in this case, socially constructed ideas about 'India' versus 'the West'. We saw that any changes in gender roles are often perceived in India as symptoms of 'Westernization', partly because there is a very real and understandable resistance to cultural imperialism in general. Far from being posited as a solution to Indian women's problems, uncritical Westernisation is in fact shown in many of these novels to be at best a mixed blessing, and more often inappropriate or even a further problem for Indian women. We have discussed the plight of Indian women 'caught in the middle' between contradictory cultural discourses concerning gender ideology: Lalitha in Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) and Ila Das in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), both suffer, in different ways, the 'worst of both worlds', having Western-style 'freedom' without the resources to cope with it. Moreover, Desai suggests in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) that the individualism espoused in Western cultural discourse is not, in fact, the reality in the West any more than in India. Her portrayal of the Patton family in Massachusetts shows them to be equally bound by social pressures and conventions – albeit different ones to those of the Das family in India. The tension between individual identities (popularly associated with 'the West') and community identities in India was discussed at some length in the chapter introduction, but Deshpande suggests in all of her novels – most particularly in *Small Remedies* (2000) – that individual and community identities need not be mutually exclusive. Each of her characters is strongly individualised but also firmly located within a family and community. Nowhere in her fiction is there any association of individualism with 'Western' or 'un-Indian' values.

One of the challenges for Indian feminism, it seems, is to address the concerns of individual women within a framework of strong family and community ties. While altering the power structures within families and communities with long-standing traditions of gender inequality is a monumental undertaking, grappling with the economic inequalities of the wider society is perhaps the most difficult and necessary task for feminism in India. As argued by Maitrayee Chaudhuri – and illustrated particularly in the novels of Kamala Markandaya – 'it does not take a peasant woman very far even if she becomes equal to a peasant man who is himself brutalized, exploited and oppressed' (2004, p. xxxiii).

2
Marriage and Sexuality

Introduction

In India, as in the West, sexuality has been a major political issue for feminists as well as a source of divisions among them. Given the enormous efforts that have historically been made to control female sexuality – from chastity belts in Europe to purdah in India – it is not difficult to see why sexuality should be such a central feminist concern. This introduction briefly outlines some of the key issues and debates, as well as identifying points of convergence and difference between Western and Indian feminist views of marriage and sexuality.

On the most general level, the categorisation of the feminist literature itself presents a striking difference: Western feminist writing on marriage has tended to be separate from the literature on sexuality, focusing on women's economic dependence, domestic exploitation and subordinate position within the household. (These economic issues are examined in the following chapter on Motherhood and Other Work (Chapter 3)). While recognising sexuality as an important part of the marital relationship, Western feminists have tended to treat it separately because of the ubiquity – and greater social acceptability – of *non*-marital sexual relationships in the West since the 1960s. Indian feminists, on the whole, have tended to make a stronger link between marriage and sexuality. As Jyoti Puri has argued in her book *Woman, Body, Desire in Post-colonial India* (1999), 'if marriage is where women are able to be sexual persons, then it is probable that sexuality would be seen as a central aspect of the marital relationship' (p. 116). I would add that conversely, the marital relationship has been seen as a central aspect of sexuality in India, where non-marital sexual relationships have normally

been seen as transgressive – particularly for women. It is for this reason that I have chosen to link marriage with sexuality in my analysis, and to consider the more overtly economic aspects of marriage in a separate chapter.

With regard to sexuality itself, there is much common ground between the views of Western and Indian feminists, both of whom have attacked the double standard of morality which has historically entitled men to sexual freedoms denied to women (Nabar 1995, Jackson & Scott 1996, Jain 1998). While in the West there has been greater acceptance of sexual freedom for women in recent decades, the double standard is now being eroded in India, as we shall see. As Jackson and Scott point out, this double standard has also divided women themselves into two categories: 'the respectable madonna and the rebarbative whore' (1996, p. 3) – a binary construction critiqued by Indian feminists as well (e.g., Kakar 1989).

Kalpana Viswanath has suggested, however, that in India there is relatively less concern about sexual freedom than about women's vulnerability to sexual violence and coercion (1997) – which has, of course, been an important concern for feminists everywhere. A number of early second-wave feminists in the West developed analyses of sexual violence which underlined the ways in which it serves as a mechanism of social control, keeping women in their place (Brownmiller 1976, Jackson 1978). In India it can be argued that the threat of sexual violence does keep women in their place, literally as well as figuratively, and a number of writers have noted the resulting restrictions on women's mobility (Viswanath 1997, Puri 1999).

One of the strongest theoretical elaborations on the centrality of sexuality in maintaining women's subordination is that developed by Catharine MacKinnon. MacKinnon draws upon Marxist class analysis in arguing that, just as the exploitation of labour is the root of capitalist class relations, so is sexual exploitation fundamental to male dominance: 'Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away' (1982, p. 515). She and others (such as Andrea Dworkin) have attacked the sexual objectification of women in beauty contests, pin-ups and pornography and the commodification of women through prostitution. Nivedita Menon, however, has pointed out that in India 'the feminist critique of the sexual commodification of women is increasingly finding it necessary to define a space in opposition to critiques of sexual freedom and autonomy coming from conservative, particularly right-wing Hindu sections' (1999, p. 23). It is also notable that while a number of Western feminists

have advocated lesbianism as an alternative – or resistance – to the unequal male-female relationship, this consideration has been less prominent in Indian feminist discourse.[1] In MacKinnon's view, gender divisions and women's subordination are founded on heterosexuality, which 'institutionalises male dominance and female sexual submission' (1982, p. 533). Stevi Jackson argues, however, that 'in making sexuality so central to the analysis of women's subordination, MacKinnon over-privileges sexuality and gives insufficient weight to other forms of domination' (1998, p. 20).

It is, of course, possible to see patriarchy as based on male exploitation of women's labour as well as their bodies, and to make connections between production and reproduction. Mary O'Brien's conceptualisation of reproduction includes the biological processes of conception, gestation and birth and the social relations involved in nurturing a child. In her view:

> Both production and reproduction start from basic human needs: to eat and to breed, to survive as individuals and as a species. However, in satisfying these basic human needs we enter into *social* relationships, and it is these which shape the conditions under which we produce and reproduce and which have, historically, produced structural inequalities of class and gender.
>
> (Jackson 1998, p. 20)

She goes on to argue that the discovery of paternity presaged the beginnings of patriarchy:

> This knowledge simultaneously included men in reproduction and excluded them from it. Men became aware of their alienation from their own seed and of their lack of an experiential sense of generational continuity. To establish their place in the succession of generations they needed to appropriate the fruits of women's reproductive labour as their own, co-operating with other men to maintain their individual rights.
>
> (ibid.)

O'Brien's argument, I would suggest, is highly relevant in the context of Indian feminism, which consistently emphasises the control of women's sexuality as integral to the maintenance of patriarchy and patriliny (Visnawath 1997, Jain 1998). In particular, Jyoti Puri has examined the notion of sexual respectability which, when internalised by women,

can become 'an instrument of social control over their gendered bodies and sexualities' (1999, 77):

> Normative prescriptions of premarital chastity appear to be central to what counts as sexual respectability for … middle-class women. … These normative prescriptions … are overtly linked to the premise of national cultural identity. As *Indian* women, premarital nonchastity is unthinkable.
>
> (1999, p. 115)

Puri and others have also noted that in India the honour of the family is centrally located in the behaviour of women: '*Izzat* [family honour] seems to be a female-linked commodity. Its preservation is incumbent upon women's behaviour alone' (Nabar 1995, p. 115). The paradox here is that according to Puri, Indian ideology 'does not indicate active, desiring female sexualities but views young girls and women as the objects or victims of male sexuality' (1999, p. 78). In the Western context, too, Jackson and Scott have argued that

> [w]ithin dominant cultural discourses, men are cast as the active initiators of sexual activity and women as passive recipients of male advances; men's desires are seen as uncontrollable urges that women are paradoxically expected both to satisfy and to restrain. These dynamics have been analysed in relation to a range of phenomena from everyday sexual harassment on the streets or at work, to rape.
>
> (1996, pp. 17–18)

The problem of sexual harassment, in particular, is emphasised by Indian feminists to such a degree that one is tempted to conclude that it is especially ubiquitous in India, and indeed Jyoti Puri has found that

> [t]his type of behaviour – being slapped on the bottom, being touched on the breasts, being whistled at, being deliberately brushed against, receiving cat-calls or sexually suggestive comments – consistently appears in the narratives of … middle-class women.
>
> (1999, p. 87)

She notes that these instances provoke not only fear and anxiety among young girls but also parental concern leading to protective restrictions.

Thus 'awareness of the female body is heightened in the experiences of women on a daily basis as they make the transition from childhood into adolescence and adulthood' (1999, p. 101). Adult women in India, she finds, appear to see harassment as their responsibility; their accounts emphasise their own abilities to restrain the sexual aggression of men through 'defensive strategies and avoidance mechanisms' (1999, p. 96). This, of course, translates into self-imposed restrictions on women's freedom and mobility in public spaces.

In addition to the danger of sexual aggression (both actual and perceived), Kalpana Viswanath argues that in the Indian context, the cultural ideology of purity and pollution plays an important role in controlling women's behaviour and the spaces they can occupy. She explains that,

> [p]urity and pollution are central categories that determine social relationships in Hindu society. Within the caste hierarchy, there are certain castes which are considered inherently more or less pure. … Within the context of women's lives, purity and pollution take on a further dimension as these are closely linked to their sexuality and fertility. Women's bodily experiences of menstruation, childbirth, lactation are also seen to define them as polluting or impure.
>
> (1997, p. 315)

In his book *Intimate Relations* (1989), Sudhir Kakar argues that Indian social norms seek to channel women's sexualities within the institutions of marriage and ultimately motherhood, and Vrinda Nabar notes that 'most families still feel a sense of irrational horror at the thought of a daughter remaining unmarried even if she is economically independent and seems reasonably self-contained' (1995, p. 74). Jyoti Puri's research appears to show that most Indian women 'seem to take for granted the social mandate of marriage for women' (1999, p. 153). Further, 'while there is no prescribed age for marriage, women are expected to marry young' (1999, p. 137). I would suggest a connection between the social necessity for marriage and the reportedly pervasive problem of sexual harassment in India; in particular, an unmarried woman is perceived as 'public property'. As Liddle and Joshi explain, 'any woman resisting the domestic stereotype of woman as private sexual property is defined as sexually available to anyone' (1986, p. 184).

Within the marital relationship itself, however, there are clear signs of a contemporary ideological movement towards acceptance of gender

equality – at least in theory and at least among the middle class. Jyoti Puri's study has found, for example, that young middle-class Indian women tend to want 'mutual, egalitarian marriages based on friendship and respect' (1999, p. 143). She argues that 'These middle-class women's narratives are shaped by transnational cultural discourses [of gender equality … which] help them negotiate the deep-seated inequalities in their roles as wives and daughters-in-law (1999, p. 153).

The egalitarian 'transnational cultural discourses', I would suggest, are in direct competition with traditional Hindu ideals of wifely devotion, service and self-sacrifice which still influence Indian social patterns. Hindu women are enjoined in numerous myths and legends to serve their husbands like gods, and that their devotion to their husbands should also extend to their in-laws. Manu is explicit on this point: 'A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities' (*The Laws of Manu* 5.154, quoted in Jain 1998, p. 14). Suma Chitnis explains that

> [the] term *pativrata* (literally translated as 'one who is vowed to her husband') connotes a wife who has accepted service and devotion to her husband, and his family, as her ultimate religion and duty. The ideal of the *pativrata* is romanticised through legend, folklore and folksong, and reaffirmed through ceremonies of different kinds.
>
> (1988, p. 90)

The ultimate *pativrata* or the ideal woman in Hindu culture is personified by Sita, the heroine of the epic *Ramayana*. According to Sudhir Kakar, 'the ideal of womanhood incorporated by Sita is one of chastity, purity, gentle tenderness and a singular faithfulness which cannot be destroyed or even disturbed by her husband's rejections, slights or thoughtlessness' (1981, p. 66).

In the Western context, too, gender oppression is often complicated by romantic love. As Sheila Rowbotham has argued, 'The relationship of man to woman is like no other relationship of oppressor to oppressed. It is far more delicate, far more complex. After all, very often the two love one another' (1973, p. 34). Moreover, if we are tempted to conclude that Indian cultural ideology is unique in promoting romantic love as primarily a wife's devotion to her husband, it is worth noting that research has often found a similar imbalance in emotional relationships between wives and husbands in the West as well.

For example, Caroline Dryden reports in her recent study of married couples in the UK:

> The overwhelming impression I received from my discussions with the men in my study group was of an unwillingness to see the world from their wives' perspective. This was completely the reverse with the women, who often spent a considerable time in interviews talking about their husbands' perspective and apparently trying to understand their husbands' problems and points of view.
>
> (1999, p. 143)

There are, of course, feminist concerns about marriage in India, which do not, on the whole, apply in the Western context. Perhaps surprisingly, the concept of arranged marriages does not appear to be among them (except in the case of child marriage, which tends to be confined to the rural peasantry). Although it is claimed that 95 per cent of the marriages in India are arranged, Jyoti Puri explains that 'distinctions between love marriages and arranged marriages are more ambiguous than clear-cut. For example, parents may legitimize mutual attraction between a young woman and man of the same class by arranging the marriage' (1999, 139).

Of much greater concern to Indian feminists is the problem of dowry, which at the very least positions daughters as financial liabilities – and sons as financial assets – to their natal families, and in the worst cases results in dowry-related murder. Nandita Gandhi sees dowry as an exemplification of modern Indian materialism and greed for consumer goods. She states that 'the system of dowry degrades and commodifies women and is one of the manifestations of the low status of women in Indian society' (quoted in Nandan 2002, p. 175). Madhu Kishwar's view on dowry has a slightly different emphasis. She argues that dowry is a transfer of wealth from the men of one family to those of another with the bride acting as a vehicle of transfer. Its significance is not primarily economic but political in that it defines a power relation between the man and the woman (Kurian 1999, p. 74). Especially illuminating is Srimati Basu's identification of the central question of what the dowry is a payment for:

> A display of the givers' wealth that brings them social status? An acknowledgement of the receivers' status and the payment required to become their kin? Compensation for the labour

> value of a person from the family which can now benefit from their labour? Incentive to the family taking on an economically unproductive liability? Appreciation for a groom's current market value? One or more of these criteria come into play, depending on individual and group resources, monetization and other forms of status.
>
> (2005, pp. vii–viii)

She argues that in some circumstances, 'the hierarchy created between groups can become the conduit for extortionate demands, and the material and ideological dependence and subservience for women enshrined in the ideology of *kanyadan* [the gift of the virgin daughter] exacerbates their vulnerability as well' (2005, p. xiv).

In summary, then, there are a number of ways in which Indian feminist views of marriage and sexuality appear to distinguish themselves from those of the West. Apart from the special problem of dowry, there seem to be different emphases rather than different concerns altogether. In general, Indian feminist discourse tends to concur with the radical Western feminist view of sexuality as central in maintaining women's subordination – the notion, as Viswanath puts it, of 'how patriarchy rests on the foundation of the controlled female body' (1997, p. 318). This manifests itself in restrictions and taboos, as well as in dangers and threats. The restrictions include, for example, regulations related to menstruation (reflecting ideologies of purity and pollution), as well as restrictions on women's freedom of mobility in public spaces (reflecting ideologies of purdah or female seclusion). Indian women can also be restricted by internalised notions of honour and respectability, which seem to depend primarily on their sexual behaviour – reflecting the old 'double standard' which now operates to a lesser extent in the West. The dangers and threats range from sexual harassment to sexual violence and rape – all of which are heavily emphasised in Indian feminist discourse. If, as Christine Delphy (1984) and others have argued, marriage operates as the means by which men gain control of female reproductive functions and women's domestic labour, this mechanism continues to operate successfully in India, where even the current generation of young women appear to take the social mandate of marriage for granted. Within middle-class marriages in India, research has shown that discourses of gender equality now operate alongside older ideologies of wifely subservience and self-sacrifice, and the resulting tensions provide fertile ground for fictional exploration.

Kamala Markandaya

The central importance of marriage in an Indian woman's life is evident in all of Markandaya's novels. In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) the peasant practice of marrying early is explained, apparently for the benefit of Western readers:

> I kept Ira as long as I could but when she was past fourteen her marriage could be delayed no longer, for it is well known with what speed eligible young men are snapped up; as it was, most girls of her age were already married or at least betrothed.
>
> (*NS*, p. 39)

The young bride leaves her parents' home and goes to live with her new husband, who normally expects to be in a position of superiority and authority. Indeed, Nathan's acceptance of his wife Rukmani's (relatively) superior learning is presented as exceptional: 'I am sure it could not have been easy for him to see his wife more learned than he himself was, for Nathan could not even write his name; yet not once did he assert his rights and forbid me my pleasure, as lesser men might have done' (*NS*, p. 17). Supportive as Nathan is, he is also shown to have a selfish side, as revealed in his infidelity, for which Rukmani places all the blame on the 'other woman', Kunthi: '"It is as you say a long time ago," I said wearily. "That she is evil and powerful I know myself. Let it rest"' (*NS*, p. 90). Here the double standard of morality, wherein the woman is held more culpable for a sexual transgression than her male counterpart, does not seem to be questioned by the author, who portrays Kunthi as manipulative and unscrupulous.

While there are three instances of men leaving their wives in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), the idea of a woman leaving her husband is shown to be unthinkable, no matter what the circumstances. In *A Handful of Rice* (1966), when Puttanna is thrown out of the family home for stealing his father-in-law's money, it is assumed that his wife will have to go with him even though it is *her* father's money that has been stolen (without her knowledge) and *her* family home that she has to leave: 'No edict bound her, but she knew – they all knew – that where a man went, there his wife must go, and with her would go the children' (*HR*, p. 220). Here it is difficult to determine to what extent the author is critiquing (or merely lamenting) the view of wives as the property of their husbands. She does, however, repeatedly draw attention to one of its *effects*, which

is the view of young unmarried girls as sexual prey because they are not yet 'owned':

> I think the end of my daughter's carefree days began with the tannery. She had been used to come and go with her brothers, and they went whither they wished. Then one day, with many a meaningful wink, Kali told us that it was time we looked to our daughter. 'She is maturing fast,' she said. 'Do you not see the eyes of the young men lighting on her? If you are not careful you will not find it easy to get her a husband.'… Thereafter, although we did not admit it to each other, we were more careful of Ira. Poor child, she was bewildered by the many injunctions we laid upon her, and the curtailing of her freedom tried her sorely, though not a word of complaint came from her.
>
> (*NS*, pp. 33–4)

> [Amma gave her daughters] a lecture on the need for decorum. Especially in cities, she said, the need was greatest there, men took advantage of the slightest lapse, the least fall in grace or modest behaviour encouraged their lusts. Saroja got the impression of males prowling the streets like wolves, on the lookout for girls like her sister and herself to seduce.
>
> (*TV*, p. 197)

Here we see the social practice of 'eve-teasing' (sexual harassment) leading directly to restrictions on the freedom of young girls, as reported by Indian feminists (Nabar 1995; Viswanath 1997; Puri 1999). We also note the cultural assumptions about the importance of marriage and of premarital chastity, as well as the female responsibility for sexual propriety. These assumptions appear to be taken for granted by the narrator of *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), but the ironic tone of the second passage from the later novel *Two Virgins* (1973) provides an unmistakable hint of social critique.

Written during the early years of the second-wave feminist movement, *Two Virgins* (1973) also draws attention to the confusing messages about sexuality given to young Indian girls by their elders. If Saroja and Lalitha are given to understand that they should avoid attracting men, they also notice that female attractiveness is rewarded:

> She knew Lalitha was borne in Appa's mind more frequently than Saroja, from the number of times he brought presents for her but

> forgot about Saroja. She didn't hold it against Lalitha, she understood Lalitha was nicer to give things to, being so beautiful and graceful, and with such winsome ways as well.
>
> (*TV*, p. 26)

Most confusing of all, to Saroja, is the hypocrisy and disagreement exhibited by her elders, who appear to be at least as confused about sexuality as she is herself. The clearest example of this is Amma's flirtation with the visiting Sikh hawker, which makes Saroja and Aunt Alamelu uncomfortable. Aunt Alamelu has been ostentatiously watchful and disapproving so that when he leaves, Amma rounds on her: 'Can't one be allowed to choose a few toilet articles, she cried, advancing on Aunt Alamelu, without you behaving like a basilisk?' (*TV*, p. 47). Amma later turns to Appa for support:

> He made a little speech, said how narrow-mindedness was the curse of India, and urbane intercourse between men and women a mark of civilization. It made Saroja feel uneasy, she kept remembering the looks that Amma and the hawker had exchanged, and tendrils of her hair brushing against him as they bent over his suitcase. It made her feel worse when Amma rounded on Appa, reminding him of his daughters and of the dangers of too-free association between the sexes which he was advocating, which brought Aunt Alamelu back on her side. There was a lot of flux, a shifting of positions which Saroja found unsettling.
>
> (*TV*, pp. 49–50)

If Saroja is understandably confused about sexuality, she is not at all confused about the position of an Indian woman without a husband:

> Appa was also younger than Aunt Alamelu, but although she was older, Aunt Alamelu tried hard not to cross him. She didn't have the status. You didn't have status if you hadn't a husband, and if you had no father like Chingleput it was almost as bad.
>
> (*TV*, p. 13)

This phenomenon is referred to in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) as well: Jayamma 'spoke shrilly, in the domineering tone she had not dared to use since widowhood had lopped her status' (*HR*, p. 242).

Mohini in *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), by contrast, gains power by *not* being married to her lover, a maharajah who is controlled by

the British Agent under the Raj. He can have more than one wife and wants very much to do so, but his mistress Mohini refuses to marry him and join the system as a junior maharani: 'The British have tied you hand and foot and you don't even know it. Do you want me to be shackled like you?' (*GH*, p. 32). Throughout the novel, Mohini is shown to enjoy and exercise power over the Maharajah without having the obligations of a wife: 'Not for the first time Bawajiraj ponders his wisdom in picking this girl. No one in the entire state treats him as peremptorily' (*GH*, p. 40).

It is interesting to note the shift in Markandaya's presentation of women with 'strong' personalities, suggesting her deliberate attempt by the 1970s to dismantle the positive image of the *pativrata* (subservient, self-sacrificing wife). In *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), powerful women like Manjula, Mohini and the young Usha are presented as attractive and intelligent, in contrast to Jayamma in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) who is negatively portrayed as 'shrill' and 'domineering'. In her earlier novels, non-assertive women like Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) and Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) are presented in a positive way, whereas the same quality is shown to be an unattractive trait in *The Golden Honeycomb*'s (1977) Shanta Devi. Here Markandaya vividly describes the dampening effect of wifely dutifulness on a marriage:

> Bawajiraj's wife, the Maharani Shanta Devi, lives a life apart from her husband. It is also subservient, in that almost every aspect of it is indented and adapted to allow for his development. If in the process she is herself stunted or warped, partly she is unaware and partly she is reconciled. Indeed she believes – it has been bred in her, and in her kind, immemorially – that a woman's supreme attribute lies in her ability to submit to men in general and to her husband in particular.
>
> The distortions that have been worked in her to accommodate him are, by a bitter if inexorable twist, the very attributes that most irk Bawajiraj. He thinks of her, when he thinks of her at all, as tepid and timid. … She, for her part, feels his apathy even when he lies with her, which he does as a matter of routine and convenience, and is angered, a sullen anger that turns her leaden in every aspect of their intercourse. They resent each other.
>
> (*GH*, p. 42)

Thus Markandaya seems to be critiquing the traditional Indian ethos of female submissiveness not just because of its negative impact on the

women themselves, but also because of its undesirable effects on the relations between men and women. It is a far cry from her idealisation of the self-sacrificing Indian wife in her earlier novels, reflecting her stronger feminist consciousness by the 1970s.

Nayantara Sahgal

Overall, Sahgal's fictional depictions of marriage in India portray it as an institution which serves the needs of men at the expense of women, concurring with Liddle and Joshi's view that it is 'built upon the subordination of one sex to the other' (1986, p. 216). Her novels offer the sharpest critique of marriage among the four writers being discussed here, and she presents the only female character who explicitly rejects marriage because of the constraints it places upon women. Remembering the weddings she had seen in her childhood, Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985) resolves never to marry, for the brides seemed to her like prisoners, with their clothes like tents, their jewellery like chains and their postures submissive (*RLU*, p. 54).

In *This Time of Morning* (1965), the unscrupulous Hari Mohan's attitude towards his wife is summed up caustically: 'She was there to be used and he used her, but he paid no more attention to her than if she had been a block of wood' (*TTM*, p. 197). Even the admirable Kailas who genuinely loves his wife Mira is shown to have a happy marriage only because she is content to be self-sacrificing, always putting his needs and desires first. Their daughter Rashmi, by contrast, is not as willing for her identity to be submerged, and this tenacious individuality is perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of her marriage:

> A part of her had married a man, loved him, given herself to the task of making a home, and suffered the wilderness that only two mismatched people can create. But there was a self that stood free from all this, the unsurrendered core of her, the waiting, watching, guardian spirit that belonged to no man.
>
> (*TTM*, p. 127)

Total 'surrender of the self', however, is shown to be no guarantee of a husband's loyalty or kindness in *Rich Like Us* (1985), where Ram takes a second wife despite Mona's steadfast devotion. Meanwhile Ram, insensitive to the suffering of both of his wives, appears to 'have it all', with Mona managing the household and bringing up his son Dev, and childless Rose as the 'mistress-wife' until Marcella comes along. When the

equally selfish Dev grows up and marries, his wife Nishi is constantly counselling herself to act with 'silence, dignity, constraint' in her dealings with him (*RLU*, p. 233). Even the wife of the more sympathetic Ravi Kachru disappears 'unimportantly into the anonymity of good wives' (*RLU*, p. 173). Sonali's grandfather had reflected on the plight of the good Hindu wife whose life is essentially a sacrifice: 'My mother … was a good wife, I used to think. But now I believe all wives are good because they have little choice' (*RLU*, p. 143).

At times Sahgal's fictional representations of the power structures within Indian marriages become almost like morality tales of husbands as evil oppressors and wives as innocent victims. Som in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), for instance, is portrayed as rich, powerful, materialistic, insensitive and grotesquely domineering. He has no interest in Simrit as anything other than a sexual possession, considers that she should be automatically subservient, allows her to make no decisions and seldom even talks to her. Inder in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is not such a caricature of an evil man, but he is shown to be insanely jealous and emotionally abusive because of a relationship his wife Saroj had before she had even met him. His attitude reflects the strong cultural taboo against premarital 'un-chastity' for women, and unlike *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) gives us access to the husband's thoughts:

> The past rose in dreadful images to taunt his manhood. Jealousy had caught him unprepared. … He was maddened by it. When it came over him he sat looking at Saroj with a revulsion that had ancient, tribal, male roots. … There were people he knew who would have flung her out with the rubbish, considered her used, soiled, and unfit for marriage. Somewhere he had read there were primitive societies that demanded the blood of virginity as evidence of female purity. No man need be cheated of that. He had been cheated.
>
> (*SC*, p. 102)

Inder's anger over Saroj's premarital relationship is thus presented as extreme, irrational, even pathological, eventually culminating in physical violence against her. The husband's culturally sanctioned view of his wife as property is also linked with notions of purity and contamination, in the sense that a woman who has had relations with another man is deemed to be 'polluted' – a view which Saroj herself explicitly refutes in a later conversation with her friend Vishal Dubey (*SC*, p. 198).

Vishal Dubey himself appears at times to function as a mouthpiece for the views of the author, as when he expresses outrage that women are seen only as 'wives, daughters, mothers [who] belonged to their men by contract or by blood. Their sphere was sexual and their job procreation. They were dependents, not individuals' (*SC*, p. 195). He jokes to Saroj (with a serious point) that

> [i]f chastity is so important and so well worth preserving, it would be easier to safeguard it by keeping men in seclusion, not women. … The biological urge is supposed to be much stronger in men, so it is they who should be kept under restraint and not allowed to roam free and indulge their appetites.
>
> (*SC*, p. 197)

The hypocrisy of Inder's position is emphasised by his extramarital affair, which adds to the novel's feminist critique of permissiveness for men (before and during marriage) and chastity for women ('virginity' at marriage, followed by eternal faithfulness to the husband even if he philanders).

If *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is at times didactic about the double standard of sexual morality, so too is *The Day in Shadow* (1971) on the plight of the divorced Indian woman. Ram Krishan explains in the narrative that:

> The Hindu woman traditionally has no rights apart from what her husband or her father choose to bestow on her. The law has changed some of that, but attitudes haven't changed much. … A woman can apparently still be used as a convenience for tax purposes by her husband even after he has divorced her.
>
> (*DS*, p. 168)

The lawyer, Mr Shah, had earlier explained to Raj that

> [d]ivorce is not part of our tradition. … It is rare. Arrangements made to last during a marriage do not, after all, provide for the possibility of a divorce. And so this arrangement was left as it was for convenience sake. [The convenience of the husband, that is.]
>
> (*DS*, p. 146)

Sahgal's novels critique not only the way in which marriage functions in India, but also the way in which it is overemphasised in Indian

society. Traditional Indian weddings are treated in an almost scornful manner in *Rich Like Us* (1985):

> The sanctity of hoary tradition had not kept Ram attached to his first wife. He had described his elaborate wedding to Rose, hours long, starting at the carefully chosen hour of 1 a.m. of a sweltering May night. Priests poring over horoscopes had picked the date and the hour. Every detail of it had been planned to suit the stars, the sacrament complete with incense, flowers, rice, butter, priests chanting scripture, steps around the fire, hundreds of guests as witnesses. If all that hadn't been proof against failure, what good was it anyway?
>
> (*RLU*, p. 45)

Significantly, the non-marital relationships between men and women are portrayed as more egalitarian than the married ones throughout Sahgal's novels. A number of her female protagonists leave their marriages to begin new, more fulfilling relationships: Saroj with Dubey in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Simrit with Raj in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Bhushan's mother with Yusuf in *Mistaken Identity* (1988). The essentially problematic nature of all romantic/sexual relationships, however, is indicated by Bhushan's description of his complicated egalitarian relationship with his Parsee girlfriend Sylla in *Mistaken Identity* (1988):

> I genuinely believe lovers should enjoy what they can of each other, the one-fifth they can willingly surrender without haggling. We managed beautifully, but always in single file. We took turns being aggressor or pacifier, flirting with the idea of marriage, not wanting it, wanting it. We never simultaneously wanted anything.
>
> (*MI*, p. 122)

Still, such relationships, it is suggested, tend to work better than most: 'She and I were a definite improvement together on either of us' (*MI*, p. 126). Nowhere in her fiction does Sahgal ever portray a happy, egalitarian Indian marriage, so she seems to be implying that once a relationship is institutionalised in this way, it becomes politicised in the sense that patriarchal power structures come into operation.

In critiquing the power structures within Indian marriages and dramatising the more egalitarian nature of non-marital relationships, Sahgal is in effect advocating sexual freedom for women as well as men. In all of her novels, she presents the exploitation of women as primarily sexual rather than economic. The predatory Kalyan in *This Time of Morning*

(1965) manipulates his female employees by seducing them; Inder's cruelty towards his wife in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is based on irrational sexual jealousy and Som in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), rather than wanting to know why his wife has stopped sleeping with him, simply throws her out with a punitive divorce settlement. Rose and Mona's suffering in *Rich Like Us* (1985) is caused by Ram's bigamy and philandering, and even Mother's purdah in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is a way of keeping her as an exclusive sexual possession for her polygamous husband. It can be argued that sexual exploitation is also economic when women's bodies are treated as male property and when sex is treated as a service provided by women for the benefit of men – an attitude which is consistently critiqued in all of Sahgal's novels.

Anita Desai

Many of Desai's novels explore a particular aspect of marriage in post-colonial India from a female perspective. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) examines power relationships within marriages, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) features violence against women and *Clear Light of Day* (1980) looks at women's attitudes towards marriage. The exploitation of single women is examined in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and again in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), which also highlights the commodification of wives, as well as touching upon some of Desai's earlier concerns. Each of these novels explores other themes as well, but these are the principal ones pertaining to marriage.

In its characterisation of Maya and her husband Gautama, *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) implies a pair of binary opposites, the male being linked with rationality and intellect and the female with intuition and emotion. In contrast to Gautama, who emerges as dogmatic, unimaginative and crushingly logical, Maya desires passionately to live and love, but her sensibility and sensitivity are always derided and denied by her dry, cerebral husband. The novel emphasises the impassable gulf between a woman who celebrates 'the vivid, explosive, mobile life, the world of sound, senses, movements, odours, colours, tunes' (*CP*, p. 92), who is intensely 'attached' and 'involved' and her coldly rational husband who preaches his philosophy of non-attachment. In his handling of the death of Toto, Maya's pet dog, Gautama is decisive, practical, yet quite unable to comprehend its traumatic impact on her. Later her longing for him to share her response to the beauty of the starlit night finds no response but one of cold, even ugly, practicality: '"They are

so bright tonight," I pleaded. "Well, I hope bright enough to spot a fly if it falls into my dinner," grumbled Gautama, who was no romantic' (*CP*, p. 24).

This extreme mismatching of temperaments is aggravated by what Anuradha Roy describes as 'Gautama's inability to respect Maya as an equal, a human being with the precious right to think and behave differently from him' (1999, p. 32). Even if we do not necessarily accept the gender stereotyping which associates the masculine with reason and the feminine with emotion, the novel does emphasise that the male has always determined what values should be considered 'superior'. When Gautama contemptuously dismisses the idea of burial rights for Maya's beloved dog as meaningless sentimentalism, she attempts to remonstrate: '"But how can you tell which facts matter?" I cried. "I mean, how can you dictate? Oh, Gautama, pets mightn't mean anything to you, and yet they mean the world to me"' (*CP*, p. 16). But yet she lacks the confidence to take the argument further; she is grateful for his presence, afraid of losing even that uncertain support. Roy argues that

> [i]n Maya, Anita Desai creates an epitome of the many women who have passively accepted their dependent, inferior status within marriage; unable to find sustenance either from within themselves or from any broader interests, they cling desperately to their husbands, pathetically grateful for occasional moments of intimacy or companionship.
>
> (1999, p. 74)

Maya, however, is not as passive as Roy implies. She does at times try to challenge Gautama's inflexibly held views, but he barely listens to her and has an extremely patronising attitude towards her:

> You have done it once again, Maya. You go chattering like a monkey, and I am annoyed that I have been interrupted in my thinking. But, being a creature of pure instinct, you do, every now and then, stumble – purely by accident, I'm sure – upon the salient point of the problem.
>
> (*CP*, p. 16)

> 'Yes, yes,' he said, already thinking of something else, having shrugged off my words as superfluous, trivial.
>
> (*CP*, p. 19)

Gautama's attitude is shown to have a devastating effect on Maya's self-esteem, which has, in any case, never been encouraged or nurtured. Her intensely imaginative responses to everything around her suggest that she is a young woman of enormous creative potential whose personal development has been systematically stifled, not just by her father and then her husband, but by a patriarchal culture which belittles women and restricts their opportunities. Sensitive as she is, with no occupation and no outlets for self-expression, her inner life takes on an added intensity, and she increasingly withdraws into her private world of fantasies and fears. What emerges is a narrative of neurosis, and the novel movingly portrays her gradual slide into insanity.

It is important to note, however, that Gautama is no heartless egoist, no brutal tyrannical figure; on the contrary, he shows an admirable degree of patience in handling the hypersensitive Maya. Distraught and helpless after the death of her dog, she waits for him to come home and 'handle' the situation, which he does, 'quickly and quietly like a surgeon's knife at work' (*CP*, p. 6) – the surgeon's knife being an ambivalent image which suggests a combination of kindness and destructiveness. Again, aware of his wife's love for animals and the void in her life arising from the death of Toto, he gives her a lovely cat whose beauty and delicacy she delights in. But the cat is aloof, emerging as a symbol of the inadequacy of what she is given in meeting her real needs. Sunaina Singh has suggested that

> [Maya's distress at the beginning of the novel is] not so much because of the death of her pet dog but because of the lack of warmth, sympathy and understanding of Gautama. … Gautama scarcely ever comprehends Maya's need for him. It is the consequent agony of loneliness and neglect that drives Maya to a state of craziness.
>
> (1995, pp. 40–1)

I would argue, however, that Maya's unmet needs appear to go beyond the conventional female need for 'love and understanding' from the husband; she craves not just emotional involvement but respect for her values, her perspective, her thoughts and feelings. In one last confrontation before she retreats into her world of fantasy, she attempts desperately to make him understand her point of view: 'I was overcome with a desperate timidity, begging him once more to answer, to come and meet me half-way in my own world, not merely demand of me, brusquely, to join him in his' (*CP*, p. 198). Although Maya succumbs to insanity in a clinical sense, we are implicitly invited to consider whether Gautama's

values are really more 'sane' than Maya's. As Jasbir Jain asks, 'Who is the wiser of the two – Gautama who dreads passion or Maya who is lost in emotion?' (1982, p. 43).

If *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) delicately points to the power imbalance in a contemporary Indian marriage, *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) refers to outright abuse through the traumatic memory of a young girl recalling

> her father, home from a party, stumbling and crashing through the curtains of night, his mouth opening to let out a flood of rotten stench, beating at her mother with hammers and fists of abuse – harsh, filthy abuse that made Raka cower under her bedclothes and wet the mattress in fright.
>
> (*FOM*, p. 71)

This novel ends with an even more horrific spectacle of male violence against a woman – the rape and murder of Ila Das, who is trying to prevent a child marriage. Geetha Ramanthan has suggested that the sexual violence here has its own terrible 'logic' as a punishment for a woman who interferes with men's transactions of female sexuality (1993, p. 28).

The idea of women as commodities is again highlighted in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) when Anamika's scholarship to Oxford is used only as a marriage qualification because 'naturally her parents would not countenance her actually going abroad to study – just when she was of an age to marry – everyone understood that, and agreed' (*FF*, pp. 68–9). The dowry system, too, is implicitly criticised in the novel when Uma's parents are cheated out of two dowries in the process of trying to 'marry her off'. As we saw in the introduction, Indian feminists have developed a number of interpretations about the significance of dowry, with general agreement that one of its *effects* is to contribute to the widespread preference for sons in India. I would raise the possibility, however, that this is confusing cause with effect; in other words, the real reason for 'giving away' daughters with a dowry might be that they are not particularly valued so that another family is in effect being bribed to take the dependent daughter 'off their hands'. Either way, the cycle of dowry and devaluation of daughters is shown to be self-perpetuating in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999).

Other aspects of marriage in contemporary India are examined from several angles in *Clear Light of Day* (1980). At the beginning of the novel, we see Tara attending to her husband Bakul who emerges as more ridiculous than domineering because of his pompous manner and all

the petty little services he requires. Sitting on the veranda in the early morning while Tara and her sister Bim stroll through the garden having an important conversation, he won't pour his own tea but sullenly waits for Tara to do it for him (*CLD*, p. 7). Later she sets out his clothes for him, holding up ties for him to choose – a service which appears to diminish his dignity rather than hers (*CLD*, p. 11). Even the reference to Bakul's 'improvement' of his wife has an unmistakably mocking tone:

> Gradually he had trained her and made her into an active, organised woman who looked up her engagement book every morning, made plans and programmes for the day ahead and then walked her way through them to retire to her room at night with the triumphant tiredness of the virtuous and the dutiful.
>
> (*CLD*, p. 21)

Throughout the novel, however, Tara is shown to subtly but effectively resist Bakul's overbearing control of her life. Instead of running around sightseeing in Delhi with him, she calmly but stubbornly stays at her sister's house, visiting and reminiscing. While her external behaviour is traditional and subdued, she is clearly demonstrated to possess a remarkable degree of inner autonomy. Moreover, as Renu Juneja points out, 'we may note Desai's care in avoiding all hints of self-sacrificing womanhood in Tara by making her escape into marriage during a time of immense crisis for the family – when, after the death of the parents, Bim must cope with Raja's illness and Aunt Mira's alcoholism' (1987, p. 84). Far from restricting and confining her, Tara's marriage to a diplomat has actually widened her horizons and enabled her to have a comfortable and interesting adult life in desirable locations like Geneva and Washington. Ironically, it is the unmarried Bim who has stayed behind in Old Delhi to nurse their tubercular brother Raja back to health, cope with their alcoholic Aunt Mira and look after their disabled younger brother Baba who will be dependent on her all his life.

Desai, in fact, seems to make a point of showing in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) that it is not always wives, but often single women, who are disadvantaged in India. Bim, when young, had viewed marriage as a limiting of possibilities. Her disgust at the early marriage of the Misra girls prompts the passionate declaration that she herself will never marry. While one of the ironies of the novel is that Bim's adult life turns out to be rather restricted in space and activity, another irony is her accurate warning that the Misra girls 'might find marriage isn't enough to last them the whole of their lives' (*CLD*, p. 140). Abandoned

by their husbands, Jaya and Sarla 'return home to a pathetic existence as exploited drudges of wastrel brothers whom they support by running a preschool' (Juneja 1987, p. 84). Thus the social practice of preparing daughters for nothing but marriage is strongly criticised in the narrative.

Before succumbing to alcoholism, the widowed Aunt Mira had been exploited as well, bringing up the Das children single-handedly while their parents occupied themselves with card games and visits to the club. When their childhood world collapses, Bim takes charge, looking after everyone and managing family affairs because the eldest son Raja evades the responsibility after she has nursed him to health. It is she who must worry about 'the rent to be paid … people to be fed every day, and Tara to be married off, and Baba to be taken care of for the rest of his life' (*CLD*, p. 67). Even later in life, we continue to see Bim in this role because she never marries. But while the middle-aged Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) is at least free to manage things in her own way because her parents are no longer living, the middle-aged Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is still very much a 'daughter', living in her parents' home, continually at their beck and call. She is denied autonomy, being constantly occupied with petty tasks for them. So if wives can be seen as possessions in India, so too, it seems, can daughters, and Desai's novels bleakly suggest that the fate of Indian women who remain single can be at least as unenviable as that of those who marry.

Shashi Deshpande

In India, as we have seen, myths, cultural models, romantic songs and films help a woman accept the structures of marriage, but as Jasbir Jain points out, 'there are no role models available for managing life without a husband'. She explains that 'husbandlessness, in any form, is perceived as personal failure – failure to attract a husband [if a woman is single], or keep him [if separated], or failure to look after him [if widowed]' (2003, p. 84). Consequently, Deshpande's protagonists tend to blame themselves for their marital difficulties until they begin to question the cultural belief that marital happiness is the sole responsibility of the wife. This is dramatised, for example, in *That Long Silence* (1988) where the middle-aged Jaya looks back with distaste on her unquestioning acceptance of cultural 'wisdom' during her youth:

> 'Remember, Jaya, the happiness of your husband and home depends entirely on you,' Ramukaka had said in his pompous,

> head-of-the family manner, and I, naïve fool that I was, had bridled at the importance the statement had conferred on me.
>
> (*LS*, p. 138)

Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) reflects upon the lack of support that accompanies this impossible responsibility: 'Everything in a girl's life, it seemed, was shaped to that single purpose of pleasing a male. But what did you do when you failed to please? There was no answer to that. At least, no one had given her an answer so far' (*DHNT*, p. 163). Even as an educated professional woman, Saru still finds herself wondering whether her marital crisis could have been prevented by adherence to the traditional Hindu ideal of total subordination to the husband:

> She thought of the woman in the Sanskrit story from her schooltext. The woman who would not disturb her husband's sleep even to save her child from the fire. A woman so blessed, it was said, that Agni himself came and saved the child. Now she thought … who wrote that story? A man, of course. Telling all women for all time … your duty to ME comes first. And women, poor fools believed him. So that even today, Madhav's mother considers it a punishment to be deprived of a chance to serve her husband. And yet … if I could believe in that … if I could put my husband above all else?
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 207)

Unquestioningly putting a husband first, however, creates its own problems, as Jaya discovers in *That Long Silence* (1988). Having spent years blindly going along with whatever he decreed, she is shocked to discover him to be involved in a corruption scandal: 'Mohan had managed to get the job. I never asked him how he did it. If Gandhari, who bandaged her eyes to become blind like her husband, could be called an ideal wife, I was an ideal wife too. I bandaged my eyes tightly. I didn't want to know anything' (*LS*, p. 61).

Given the total self-abnegation advocated by traditional models of Hindu wifehood, it is not surprising that Deshpande, as a self-proclaimed feminist, condemns this ideology in her fictional and non-fictional writings. All of her protagonists are struggling to discover more acceptable ways of 'being married', but surprisingly they never seem to consider the idea of *not* being married. None of Deshpande's fictional characters remain unmarried, and marital separation is always envisioned in her novels as purely temporary. This apparent assumption of marriage as

a 'given' is so consistent throughout Deshpande's fiction that Doreen D'Cruz concludes:

> Deshpande goes further than defending marriage; she sees it as a necessary institution, which safeguards women from rampant commodification. … Given the widespread cultural degradation of women, Deshpande seems to think that any marriage is better than none. So Rajaram, the violent husband of Tara, is worth saving from death, because he stands between her and her general commodification.
>
> (1993, pp. 467–8)

It is important to remember, however, that this view of Rajaram's 'worth' is that of his mother-in-law Jeeja, and that it is not necessarily endorsed by the author or even the narrator of *That Long Silence* (1988). Moreover, the use of marriage as a means of saving women from rampant commodification is explicitly criticised in *Small Remedies* (2000) where Madhu has heard Hari 'speaking angrily about the rehabilitation plans for the *devadasi* women which seem to centre around marriage. As if there are only these two options for the women – marriage and prostitution – and to get away from one you need the other' (*SR*, p. 210).

Marriage – particularly *arranged* marriage – can also be seen as a form of commodification itself, as Jasbir Jain points out: 'Marriage [in India] is viewed not as self-fulfilment, but as fulfilment of a social and a familial duty where the body is foregrounded as a commodity' (2003, p. 74). This is strikingly evident, for example, in Urmi's description of a 'first-night ceremony' at the end of a wedding in *The Binding Vine* (1993):

> The couple sat stiffly, side by side on the bed, while the women performed an *aarti*, singing the song in subdued notes. In fact, a funereal solemnity hung over all of us during the ceremony. I could not see the girl's face, for she looked steadily down throughout, but I could see that her hands were trembling uncontrollably. And the back of her neck, I can remember that, looked like a lamb's, waiting for the butcher's knife to come down upon it.
>
> (*BV*, p. 63)

Jasbir Jain points out that all of the 'myths, religious taboos, spheres of exclusion and cultural narratives' structuring women's lives in India centre around the female body: 'its visibility and invisibility, its cycle

of development and its sphere of use' (2003, p. 204). And according to P. G. Joshi, the occurrence of sexual aggression seems to be rooted in 'the assumption that woman is no more than her body' (2003, p. 120). Shashi Deshpande deals with this issue with unusual forthrightness, writing about marital rape in *The Binding Vine* (1993), if rape is not too strong a word to describe the imposition of a sexual relationship on an unwilling young wife. In going through the diaries and poems of her mother-in-law Mira, who had died in childbirth at the age of 18, Urmi is saddened to discover her real feelings about her arranged marriage:

> It runs through all her writing – a strong, clear thread of an intense dislike of the sexual act with her husband, a physical repulsion from the man she married. When did it begin? Before marriage? During the girl-viewing ceremony? When he came with his parents to officially 'look' at her? Or did it have its genesis later, during their first night together? What is it like with a man you don't know?
>
> (*BV*, p. 63)

This novel also features the much more violent rape of a young girl in the slums – by her uncle, we learn at the end. Near the beginning, our attention has been drawn to the way in which some Hindi films make a spectacle of rape in a way which sanitises and almost glamourises it, while at the same time emphasising the value of female 'purity':

> The villain's back fills the screen, then the girl's anguished face as she backs away from him, arms held out before her, defensively, appealingly. The back moves, muscles ripple across its expanse, the girl's mouth opens in a scream…
>
> 'Cut!'
>
> 'Thank God! The censors never fail us, do they?'
>
> [The film ends with] the villain dead, the hero nobly offering to marry the heroine despite her 'spoiled' state, the heroine just as nobly refusing and then dying at his feet, her purity restored by his forgiveness.
>
> (*BV*, p. 35)

Deshpande's novels provide numerous other examples of ambivalent attitudes towards women's sexuality in India, highlighting the ways in which it is both glorified and reviled, both overemphasised and misunderstood. She shows through the resentful recollections of her

protagonists that in traditional households the concept of 'womanhood' is presented to adolescent girls as something shameful and unclean:

> 'You're growing up,' she would say. And there was something unpleasant about the way she looked at me, so that I longed to run away, to hide whatever part of me she was staring at. 'You should be careful now about how you behave. Don't come out in your petticoat like that. Not even when it's only your father who's around.'
>
> And so it became something shameful, this growing up, so that you had to be ashamed of yourself, even in the presence of your own father.
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 62)

Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) recalls her first menstruation, when Kaki had told her:

> baldly, crudely, how I could have a baby. And I, who had had all the child's unselfconsciousness about my body, had, for the first time, felt an immense hatred for it. 'And don't forget,' she had ended, 'for four days now you are unclean. You can't touch anyone or anything.'
>
> And that had been my introduction to the beautiful world of being a woman. I was unclean.
>
> (*RS*, p. 79)

If the female body in India is regarded with disgust, it is also romanticised in classical and popular culture, as we see in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) when Saru is discussing a Hindi film with friends during her student days:

> 'You remember,' he said, 'that gesture of hers, when she's dancing before the man who wants to buy her? … One gesture, but, my god, so full of coquetry, disdain, femininity, pride. And those eyes behind the veil. … A man would give away kingdoms for such a gesture, such a look … '
>
> 'It sounds very romantic, doesn't it, when you put it that way? But remove the veil of romanticism and you'll see the ugly truth of prostitution and exploitation behind it.'
>
> 'There speaks the doctor,' he mocked me. 'You can't see anything but dirt, disease and sick bodies everywhere, can you?'
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 154)

Here Saru's friend has deftly evaded the issue of the distance between male fantasy and the lived reality of women's lives. So strong is the cultural emphasis on women as objects of the male gaze that they are at times induced to hide their own feelings and desires, as we see in *Roots and Shadows* (1983): 'It shocks him to find passion in a woman. It puts him off … [I am] a woman who loves her husband too much. Too passionately. And is ashamed of it' (*RS*, p. 83). Deshpande herself has commented on this situation as an example of the way in which 'Indian women are forced by a bigoted society to repress their sexuality' (quoted in Atrey and Kirpal, 1998, p. 26).

It is important to emphasise, however, that while her novels tend to feature marital crises, Deshpande does *not* depict all Indian women as victims of sexual exploitation or sexual repression. Nor does she portray all Indian marriages as unequal and/or unhappy. On the contrary, she presents different *views* of marriage, different *effects* of marriage and different *types* of marriage throughout her novels.

In *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), as we have seen, Saru has become a victim of her husband's sadistic aggression, for which she partly blames herself, noticing in Mohan 'something missing in the eyes, in the face, in the man himself. And, oh god, maybe I'm the one who's taken it away from him!' (*DHNT*, p. 48). Her mixed feelings of guilt, anger and despair are eloquently expressed in her imaginary speech to a group of female students:

> Listen, girls, she would say, whatever you do, you won't be happy, not really, until you get married and have children. … No partnership can ever be equal, but take care that it's unequal in favour of your husband. If the scales tilt in your favour, god help you, both of you.
>
> And so you must pretend that you're not as smart as you really are, not as competent as you are, not as rational as you are, and not as strong either. You can nag, complain, henpeck, whine, moan, but you can never be strong. That's a wrong that will never be forgiven.
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 137)

Saru, we understand, is not just disillusioned but traumatised, having seen her marriage develop from a loving partnership into a nightmare of brutality by night and eerie 'normality' by day. She cannot, until the end, bring herself to confide her problem to anyone, being inhibited by both ancient taboos (which prevent women from speaking frankly

about sex) and modern taboos (which assume that a respected doctor like her would never be victimised in this way).

In contrast to Saru's disillusionment in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), a broad range of attitudes towards marriage is expressed by the various characters in *Roots and Shadows* (1983). Here, despite her complaints about the indignities of finding a husband, Mini displays a pragmatic attitude towards marriage, appreciating the security and enhanced status that it will give her. The bridegroom is neither attractive nor intelligent, but she sees the advantages of being 'looked after' by a wealthy man, having been 'no good at studies' (*RS*, p. 125). Despair over Mini's lack of choice leads to Indu's cynical reflection that 'Behind the façade of romanticism, sentiment and tradition, what was marriage after all but two people brought together after cold-blooded bargaining to meet, mate and reproduce so that the generations might continue?' (*RS*, p. 3). She does, however, recognise the enhanced status and self-confidence it can bring to women with no other sources of self-esteem: 'How often had I seen marriage turn shy, demure girls into assertive matrons overnight?' (*RS*, p. 3). And yet, despite Indu's cyncism, we later learn the depth of her feelings for her own husband whom she has chosen herself:

> To me … good fortune means … this above all. That Jayant should be with me. Always, all the time, forever. So how am I different from you, Atya? From you and Kaki and Sunanda-atya and all the rest of you women to whom the greatest calamity is life without a husband? What difference does it make if our reasons for thinking this way are different?
>
> (*RS*, pp. 32–3)

Here her identification with her tradition-bound elders suggests that she feels herself to be as trapped by genuine love as they are by tradition and duty. Her Old Uncle, however, later reminds her that marriage creates dependence for men as well as women: 'The whole world is made of interdependent parts. So why not you?' (*RS*, pp. 106–7)

Interdependency is cast in a disparaging light by Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988), who thinks of herself and her husband as 'two bullocks yoked together' (*LS*, p. 12). She now sees wifehood as a 'habit' of 'sustaining and supporting' the husband rather than feeling any real love for him (*LS*, p. 98). In this sense, her marriage has become what Adele King describes as 'largely a kind of business arrangement, in which it is a woman's job to support the man in his dealings with a hostile

world' (1990, p. 162). Determined to be as honest as possible, Jaya states at the beginning of her narrative that she is not 'writing a story of a callous, insensitive husband and a sensitive suffering wife' (*LS*, p. 1). On the contrary, she sees her marriage as 'a delicately balanced relationship' in which both have 'snipped off bits' of themselves to 'keep the scales on an even keel' (*LS*, p. 7). In the past she has tended to agree with her aunt that 'A husband is like a sheltering tree … without the tree you're dangerously unprotected and vulnerable' (*LS*, p. 32). However, by the end she has recognised that sheltering trees 'do not allow anything to grow beneath them' (Jain 2003, p. 83). Her searching analysis of her own marriage is accompanied by reflections on other marriages which Rani Dharker describes as 'a mosaic of marriage; women come and go, aunts, cousins, mother, mother-in-law, friends, acquaintances, each providing a different slant on marriage, a dozen sub-texts to the main text of a protagonist whose marriage is collapsing' (1994, p. 57).

Recent social change, however, is suggested by the fact that the most egalitarian marriage in all of Deshpande's novels is that of the young Lata and Hari in *Small Remedies* (2000). Here there is an acceptance of each other's failings, a recognition of the need for personal space, no hierarchy and no fuss about chores, as well as what the observer-narrator recognises as a strong bond of love between them. While Deshpande may be suggesting here that relationships within the younger generation in India are becoming more egalitarian, it is important to note that this young couple are childless. If wifehood is losing some of its connotations of female sacrifice and subservience in India, motherhood might not yet have progressed as far in that direction, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Conclusion

As noted in the introductory section of this chapter, one of the distinguishing features of radical feminism is its emphasis on sexuality as a central basis of women's subordination. I also argued that Indian feminist discourse tends to concur with this view, focusing on issues of sexual aggression (violence, coercion, harassment), as well as the various means of controlling female sexuality – including ideologies of respectability based on female sexual behaviour, compulsory marriage, wives as property, and so on.

Of the four authors examined in this book, Shashi Deshpande offers the strongest support for this radical feminist view through her fictional representations of the controlled female body as the basis of patriarchy

in India. As we have seen, her novels feature dramatisations of sexual violence, sexual threat and sexual repression, as well as (contested) ideologies of female 'impurity' and pollution. The main focus of Nayantara Sahgal's feminist critique is marriage itself, which she apparently sees as an institutionalisation of male privilege. Her novels, particularly those of the 1980s, offer damning critiques of marriage in India, consistently portraying wives as victims of their husbands' selfishness and insensitivity, in contrast to the much more egalitarian non-marital romantic relationships in her fiction. We have seen that while Sahgal has consistently dramatised the unequal power structures within marriage, Desai has taken issue – particularly in her later novels – with the notion that gender oppression is *necessarily* a function of marriage.

Turning to the specific issues raised in the introductory section, we note a striking development in Kamala Markandaya's treatment of female sexual morality and sexual freedom in the Indian cultural context. In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), for instance, Nathan's marital infidelity is presented as the fault of the scheming 'other woman' – implying that men are weak and vulnerable to seduction so that sexual morality is the responsibility of women. The additional need for the *appearance* of female sexual propriety is shown to result in restrictions on the freedom of adolescent girls, though the significance and implications of this are not developed in the narrative. Rather, the curtailment of Ira's liberty is presented as one more hardship in the life of a peasant whose material circumstances are already difficult enough. *Two Virgins* (1973), on the other hand, takes a more critical approach to these issues, offering an interesting fictional exploration of the complexities and contradictions of cultural discourses regarding female sexual morality in India. Unlike Markandaya, Sahgal – even in her early novel *This Time of Morning* (1965) – never appears to endorse the conventional view that sexual morality is primarily a female responsibility. On the contrary, the unscrupulous Kalyan is presented as much more culpable than the women he seduces; they, on the other hand, appear as innocent victims of his predatory nature. Moreover, the double standard of sexual morality is strongly attacked in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969).

Desai and Deshpande, however, show less concern with sexual freedom than with women's vulnerability to sexual aggression, which we identified as a central concern of Indian feminist discourse. The overt victimisation of women through rape features in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) and also constitutes a major theme of two of Deshpande's novels: *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) and *The Binding Vine* (1993). Deshpande's view of the female body as the primary locus

of gender oppression is also expressed through her critique of cultural ideologies, which define women as 'impure' or 'polluting'.

We also noted in the introductory section that Indian feminists tend to critique the conventional power imbalance within the marital relationship without fundamentally interrogating the centrality of marriage in Indian society. Among the four novelists, Sahgal is the only one to explicitly question this social mandate, while the other three tend to confine their criticism of marriage to the way in which it functions in India. Male abuse of power within the marital relationship features in many of the novels by all four authors, though there are also more subtle examinations of the nature and effects of wifely subordination, as well as a noticeable development of its handling within the oeuvre of each novelist. Kamala Markandaya does not question the *pativrata* ideal to any significant extent in her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), in which Rukmani's unquestioning endurance of suffering is presented as the epitome of female virtue. *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), by contrast, presents 'spirited' women as more attractive than dutiful wives who are portrayed as tepid and dull. Consistently critical of marriage in India, Sahgal seems to suggest in *This Time of Morning* (1965) that in order for it to function well, the husband must be morally 'good' (like Kailas) and the wife must be willing to always put his needs and desires first (like Mira). The narrative even offers two counter-examples: the power-hungry Hari Mohan who abuses his wife, and the individualistic Rashmi who is apparently *not* ill-treated by her husband but yet lacks her mother's quality of self-sacrificing devotion which Sahgal suggests is necessary for the smooth functioning of a marriage in the Indian social context. As we have seen, her later novels offer progressively stronger attacks on Indian marriage as inherently oppressive to women. Desai's *Clear Light of Day* (1980) takes a lighter approach to this issue, satirising male privilege within bourgeois Indian marriages through its comical portrayal of the petty services expected by the pompous Bakul. However it also questions the yoking of wifehood with victimhood by presenting the unmarried women (Bim, Aunt Mira, the Misra sisters) as much more oppressed than the married ones (Tara, Mrs Das). Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983) offers a wide-ranging examination of marriage within Indian society, comparing the attitudes of the young, educated protagonist Indu with those of her more traditional relatives. All of her novels display a tension between Hindu ideals of wifely devotion and self-sacrifice and the contemporary movement towards gender equality within marriage.

Given the emphasis of Indian feminists on dowry as a major problem, it is perhaps surprising that Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is the only novel by any of the four authors to examine this issue – and even here, it is a relatively minor element in the narrative. With Uma's dowry, there is dishonesty and swindling, but no threats, coercion or apparent financial hardship. On the other hand, the novelists appear to regard the concept of arranged marriage as more problematic than the general literature on Indian feminism would seem to indicate. A number of the novels – Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* (1965), Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), Deshpande's *The Binding Vine* (1993) – hint at the idea of arranged marriage as a form of socially sanctioned rape, though Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983) also concedes that it can have its benefits in some circumstances.

In general, then, there is substantial concurrence between the feminist concerns about marriage and sexuality which are explored in the novels and those that are identified as central to Indian feminist discourse – most notably, the male monopoly of power and privilege within the marital relationship, as well as the wider problem of gendered violence. Underlying both of these issues is the view of women as property, which is also critiqued in both the novels and the general feminist literature. In addition, particular issues are addressed by particular authors – for example, Sahgal is concerned with sexual freedom, Deshpande with the cultural view of women as 'polluting' and Markandaya with the problem of sexual harassment and its resulting restrictions on women's freedom and mobility. While there is much common ground between Indian and Western views of marriage and sexuality, the novels themselves tend to give special attention to the distinctively 'Indian' manifestations of gender oppression, including Hindu patriarchal ideology, arranged marriage and cultural notions of female 'impurity'. In addition, there is a strong emphasis on the problem of gendered violence, which is arguably the issue of greatest concern to Indian feminists.

3
Motherhood and Other Work

Introduction

The fictional writings of all four chosen novelists reflect the central importance of motherhood in India, which has also been noted by any number of scholars (Kakar 1981, 1989; Nandy 1990; Sharma 2003). Sudhir Kakar has argued that

> Hindu society is of course not unique in revering motherhood as a moral, religious, or even artistic ideal, but the absolute and all-encompassing social importance of motherhood, the ubiquitous variety of motherhood myths, and the function of offspring in ritual and religious (not to mention economic) life all give to motherhood in Indian culture a particularly incontrovertible legitimacy.
>
> (1981, p. 78)

Not only is it unusual for a woman in India *not* to become a mother,[1] but any other occupations that Indian women undertake (paid or unpaid) appear to be so secondary to their maternal role that I have chosen to classify them as 'other work'. This introductory section examines Indian ideologies of motherhood, as well as feminist critiques of the ways in which constructions of motherhood and female domesticity have structured women's lives and psyches. These critiques have originated mainly in the West, though Indian feminists (Bannerjee 1991; Chakravarty 1998) have also drawn attention to the oppressive nature of the all-encompassing maternal role for women.

The improvement in an Indian wife's social status from the time of her first pregnancy has been widely noted (Derné 2003; Kakar 1981, 1989; Puri 1999). Kakar has argued that 'the public discourse of all

patriarchal societies stresses motherhood as the primary if not the sole reason of woman's existence' (1989, p. 143), and the cultural preference for sons rather than daughters is so strong that stories of Indian women being abandoned by their husbands for their alleged inability to bear a son are not uncommon. Because of the recognition and social rewards that accompany the birth of a son, Kakar has explained that the mother may thus be inclined to indulge him 'with a readiness for practically unlimited emotional investment' (1981, p. 116). Ashis Nandy suggests that these circumstances tend to produce sons and men who idealise their mothers to such an extent that an Indian man is 'more a mother's son than a woman's husband' (1990, p. 36), and Ashok Nagpal notes that the experience an Indian mother imparts to her daughters as infants 'does not result in an equivalent degree of idealization' (2003, p. 61). This is borne out by Usha Bande's observation that in Indian fiction, mothers tend to be idealised to a far greater extent by male than by female authors (1994). Nandy has gone on to argue that one of the major obstacles to gender equality in India is the fact that there 'the mother-son relationship is the basic nexus and the ultimate paradigm of human social relationships' (1990, p. 37):

> To make the issues of emancipation of woman and equality of the sexes primary, one needs a culture in which conjugality is central to male-female relationships. One seeks emancipation from and equality with one's husband and peers, not with one's son. If the conjugal relationship itself remains relatively peripheral, the issues of emancipation and equality must remain so too.
>
> (1990, p. 41)

While it is true that the intense mother-son bond is both a cause and a result of the widespread favouring of sons over daughters in India, the larger problem with the idealisation of mothers is that it can create impossible demands on *real* women and circumscribe them within a maternal role which promotes their self-sacrifice, as Shashi Deshpande has argued: 'Actually, as far as women are concerned, the mother myth, an immensely powerful one, is a huge burden. … We have made it almost impossible for us to get past the image of the ever-forgiving, the always-sacrificing mother' (2003, p. 97). Western feminists, too, have argued that the predominant image of the 'ever-bountiful, ever-giving, self-sacrificing mother' is 'a socially supported *myth* designed to keep women in their place' (Bassin et al. 1994, p. 3). In the 1970s, feminist theory directed considerable attention to dismantling patriarchal

ideologies of motherhood, and this generated ongoing debates among and between feminists and non-feminists alike.

Early second-wave feminists like Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett and Betty Friedan pointed out a strong link between women's oppression and their naturalised position as mothers. Their writing on motherhood was in many ways linked to the writing on housework, focusing on its drudgery, its role in excluding women from access to power (in the form of careers outside the home), as well as what Jo Van Every has described as 'the disjuncture between women's experience and its cultural image. In particular, feminism opened up a space in which the negative aspects of motherhood could be expressed' (1995, p. 60). Other feminist writers – Dorothy Dinnerstein, Nancy Chodorow, Adrienne Rich – suggested that motherhood has afforded women considerable power, creativity and insight (albeit largely unacknowledged) but also challenged the myth of motherhood as all-fulfilling for women.

These early critiques, I would suggest, are narrowly focused on the experiences of white middle-class women in Europe and North America, and of course cultural values and practices are more varied than they imply. For example, motherhood has arguably been more empowering for Indian women than for Western women, and Chilla Bulbeck has raised the possibility that negative views of motherhood are due to modern Western social conditions and values:

> Although western feminists have seen motherhood as a prison, this might have less to do with anything inherently disempowering about giving birth and taking responsibility for raising children. Rather it might reflect the isolated nuclear family with little kin support, the lack of power or prestige that is accorded to mothers and older women, and the almost one-dimensional focus on economic resources to assess power and status in many anglophone societies.
>
> (1998, p. 99)

In this sense, Evelyn Glenn's suggestion that motherhood confers status but not power (1994) and Jo Van Every's reference to the 'low self esteem brought about by the focus of women's lives on the needs of others' (1995, p. 90) are ethnocentric ideas because they fail to consider cultural contexts in which social relationships are more highly valued than individual achievement. As Bulbeck has pointed out, some women 'gain considerable strength from their connection with others and mutual obligations which derive from community roles' (1998, p. 16).

The existence of historical and social variation has led many scholars to conclude that motherhood, like other relationships and institutions, is socially constructed rather than biologically inscribed. Evidence refuting the ideology of 'maternal instinct' comes from studies of post-natal depression which reveal the extensive 'emotional work' that must be done by new mothers to produce socially appropriate feelings and repress inappropriate ones (Ferrée 1990, p. 869). Evelyn Glenn has pointed out that 'mothering and gender are closely intertwined: each is a constitutive element of the other' (1994, p. 3). By gender, she means 'socially constructed relationships and practices organized around perceived differences between the sexes'. Importantly, these differences are *not* inherent qualities linked to biological sex; rather, they – like ideologies of motherhood – are 'continually constituted, reproduced, changed, and contested'. But by depicting motherhood as women's 'natural' role, 'a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction, and denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering' (p. 9). Sharon Abbey and Andrea O'Reilly argue further that '*biological expertise* of mothers is often used to justify a partner's abdication of sharing fully in childcare responsibilities. In reality, this so-called *expertise* develops as a result of repetitive practice' (1998, pp. 19–20). Early sociological theories (such as those of Parsons) also explained women's responsibility for housework as an extension of their mothering role, and research on households and labour markets have confirmed that childcare obligations are the most important influence on women's role both at home and in the labour market. Ann Oakley, however, highlighted the incompatibility between housework and mothering, thus challenging the argument that women's responsibility for housework arose from their so-called biological suitability for childcare (1974). Moreover, it can be easily observed that the only aspect of childcare for which men are biologically unsuited is breastfeeding, and even that rarely continues beyond the first year of a child's life.

Using a psychoanalytic framework, Nancy Chodorow developed an account of how the pattern of female childcare is transmitted by the very experience of being mothered by women (1978). She argued that an orientation towards nurturance and care becomes part of women's personality because 'the process of identity formation [in girls] takes place through continuous attachment to and identification with [the mother]' (Glenn 1994, p. 4). That is, the fact that children are usually cared for by women not only creates in girls a desire to have children, but also leads to their being better able and more willing to care for them than men. To break this self-perpetuating cycle, she suggests that

men be persuaded to participate more equally with women in looking after children. Hopefully, this would lead to changes in the psychological development of girls and boys and to gender equality. Diane Richardson, however, claims that 'the reason men do not share childcare is because they do not want to, not because they are incapable. It is to their advantage that women do most of the housework and the work involved in looking after children' (1993, p. 117).

Also influential in theorising about motherhood without resorting to natural or biological explanations is Sarah Ruddick's endeavour to account for mothers' concern for nurturing and protecting children. She does so in two ways: by attempting to show that mothers' nurturance involves higher philosophical thought (as opposed to instinct), and by arguing that women's 'maternal thinking' (a commitment to nurturing life and an inherent opposition to its destruction in war) develops from 'doing mothering' – that is, maternal practice. The implication is that anyone who engages in mothering would develop these same concerns (1980, 1989). She and others believe that the values of care traditionally associated with women's mothering should be more broadly disseminated throughout social relations. Another theorist who celebrates the values of mothering and their potential benefit to society if not controlled in a patriarchal institution is Miriam Johnson. In her book *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives* (1988), she argues that the role of mother has been subsumed under the inherently subordinate role of wife, thus suppressing its potential strength.

All of these formulations reject the idea that mothering is *necessarily* oppressive and instead emphasise that women's oppression is located in the social relations within which they mother. A number of feminists have characterised housework, childcare and other caring responsibilities as unpaid labour, and there is now a sizeable literature on the ways in which women have been exploited within the family. In their book *Familiar Exploitation* (1992), Delphy and Leonard have argued that

> [t]he exploitation of wives … consists not in getting less than we might for the hours we work (which is to apply an inappropriate capitalist measure to family labour), but in the appropriation of potentially all our labour and in our dependence and subordination. … Personal dependents [wives, slaves, serfs] do not exchange a fixed amount of a particular sort of work for wages, but rather owe their entire work capacity, devoted to whatever needs doing in exchange for protection (from other members of the dominant

> group) and maintenance (the dominant group having appropriated the productive resources).
>
> (1992, pp. 260, 262)

The maintenance a wife receives is not related to the work she does, but is determined by her husband's income and his generosity. The direct appropriation and non-exchange of women's labour is particularly clear when a wife is also in employment, earning enough to meet her own maintenance costs, but is still expected to do the bulk of the childcare and housework – or else be responsible for finding nannies and cleaners whom she pays out of her own earnings: 'In such circumstances [a wife's] provision of domestic work can no longer be justified by the economic exchange to which the servitude of the housewife is often attributed' (p. 117).

Study after study in India, the UK and the US reports that women continue to have major responsibility for childcare and domestic work regardless of whether they are also in paid employment outside the home (Abbey and O'Reilly 1998; Dryden 1999; Suppal et al. 1996). In the Indian context, Liddle and Joshi have argued that

> [w]omen's responsibility for both domestic and paid work not only worsens the conditions of their lives and demands twice the labour of men, but also prevents them from being able to perform either job adequately except at great cost to themselves, reinforcing male supremacy both at home and at work.
>
> (1986, p. 160)

Many Western feminists, too, believe that women's disadvantage in employment is related primarily to their domestic situation (Abbey and O'Reilly 1998; Van Every 1995).

Carole Pateman emphasises that the organisation of the public sphere is dependent on particular kinds of work being done in the private sphere (1988). In other words, paid employment has been constructed as a gendered (male) form of work that takes a full-time support system at home for granted, and carrying responsibility for domestic work does have measurable occupational costs. Myra Ferrée has pointed out that in the majority of two-earner households, wives are supplemental earners rather than 'co-providers' in their own and others' eyes:

> But when only husbands are seen as providers, only husbands are entitled to the support that this role presumes. Sharing the

> provider role can be threatening to men who have constructed their ideal of masculinity on this economic ground, so that even women who are providers lack the support systems at home for this role.
>
> (1990, p. 874)

While the provider role (male or female) is not without its costs and conflicts, economic dependence has obvious drawbacks. These include decreased control over one's own life, decreased control over the distribution of financial resources within households, decreased power within the family and – in the worst cases – increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Obviously missing from all of these analyses is the fact that most families cannot afford for the wife (or for that matter, the husband) to be economically dependent in any case. Also underplayed is the role of domestic servants, which is particularly prominent in India. In this context, Liddle and Joshi have argued that 'because the men do not do their share of domestic work, the only solution for a professional woman in a nuclear family is to buy the domestic labour of lower-class men and women' (1986, p. 150). Of course many housewives also employ domestic 'help', but Delphy and Leonard have insisted that they do so as 'their husband's delegate and domestic manager' (1992, p. 97). A fuller conceptualisation of the redistribution of domestic work (specifically 'mothering') has been offered by Evelyn Glenn:

> The concept of mothering as universally women's work disguises the fact that it is further subdivided, so that different aspects of caring labor are assigned to different groups of women. Historically, more privileged women have been able to slough off the more physical and taxing parts of the work onto other women. … Often the women who perform these services are mothers themselves. … The racial division of mothering labor simultaneously buttresses gender and race privilege: it permits white, middle-class women to enjoy the benefits and status of being mothers, and elevates them to the position of 'mother-managers'. It also releases them for outside careers if they desire them.
>
> (1994, p. 7)

Despite her peculiar American focus on race, Glenn's argument, I would suggest, is applicable to *all* societies (including India) if we extend it to

incorporate all domestic work in addition to 'mothering', and if we take 'race' to mean social class.

With regard to women's *non*-domestic work, there is a vast body of literature and statistics that I do not propose to review here because it is less relevant to the novels under discussion, which focus primarily on the domestic lives of middle-class and elite Indian women. It is worth emphasising, however, that both in India and in the West, workplace norms have been framed for men who enter employment unencumbered by the demands of domesticity, childcare and housework. Some elite women can operate as what Elizabeth Fox-Genovese calls 'the functional equivalents of men', either because they are childless or because they can afford full-time high-quality childcare, thus 'leaving working-class women to shoulder the burdens of womanhood' (1991, p. 228). However, a more equitable distribution of power, privilege, economic resources and domestic responsibility would require revolutionary changes in both the family and the workplace.

Kamala Markandaya

Significantly, Markandaya's first novel *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) takes its title from Coleridge's quotation which appears as its epigraph: 'Work without hope draws nectar in a sieve, / And hope without an object cannot live.' While Rukmani, the protagonist, never does lose hope, the reference is an apt description of the Sisyphus-like condition of her life, which emerges as a constant effort to care for those she loves in extremely difficult circumstances. Satnam Kaur discusses the implications of the title, pointing out that nectar in its mythological associations means 'life giving and resurrecting' (2002, p. 91). This too is apt because for Rukmani, work is synonymous with nurturing: she grows crops in order to feed her family. Nectar can also represent temporary and fleeting happiness, which for Rukmani comes in the form of the birth of children and the reaping of good harvests, all of which is soon 'drained … through the sieve of misfortune' (p. 92).

In order to keep her hope alive – that 'hope' which 'without an object cannot live' – she adopts the leprous orphan Puli after the death of her husband. From the beginning of the novel, she is presented as an archetypal mother figure, taking pleasure in nurturing all living things, including the vegetables she grows for food:

> And their growth to me was a constant wonder – from the time the seed split and the first green shoots broke through, to the time when

> the young buds and fruit began to form. … There have been many sowings and harvestings, but the wonder has not departed.
>
> (*NS*, pp. 17–18)

Everything Rukmani does is connected with nurturing, including her (limited) reading and writing before the birth of her first child, which is viewed somewhat suspiciously in her husband's village. When her friend Kali questions the wisdom of spending time on it, Rukmani justifies it by linking it with maternal duties: 'As for my children, it is for them that I practice reading and writing, so that I can teach them when the time is ripe' (*NS*, p. 17).

This conventional idealisation of the endlessly nurturing mother figure is accompanied by a series of ironies which implicitly criticise the devaluation of daughters in India, as seen for example in Rukmani's reaction to the birth of Ira: 'I turned away and, despite myself, the tears came, tears of weakness and disappointment; for what woman wants a girl for her first-born?' (*NS*, p. 19). But ironically, Rukmani begets one son after another when the family's limited means are declining and she can scarcely afford to feed her cherished and long-awaited male offspring. A further irony is that despite Nathan's wish for 'a son to continue his line and walk beside him on the land' (*NS*, p. 20), one son dies in the tannery labour strike, another goes away to Ceylon as an indentured labourer, a third vanishes into the city and the youngest dies of malnutrition in childhood. It is only Ira who remains with her parents (having been abandoned by her husband), helping them through difficulties in a way that calls into question conventional views about the superior worth of sons in India.

A number of critics have commented on the moral superiority of women in Markandaya's fiction:

> Rukmani, in her resilience, in her powers of endurance, prudence and diligence, is head and shoulders above Nathan.
>
> (Krishnaswamy 1984, p. 174)

> Kamala Markandaya's women … are all nobler, wiser, stronger and better than their male counterparts.
>
> (Prasad 1984, p. 102)

> Markandaya has no heroes but only heroines.
>
> (Geetha 1993, p. 12)

It is important to note, however, that Markandaya's earlier 'heroines' are heroic mainly because of their nurturing qualities. In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), this applies not only to Rukmani and her daughter Ira (who ironically gives birth to a son after being rejected by her husband for her 'barrenness'), but also to the lady doctor who gives help and a meal to Rukmani and Nathan as they search for their lost son.

This same type of (minor) character reappears in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) in the form of a lady doctor who stands out in a busy urban hospital for her caring attitude: 'More humane than any doctors they had ever known, she even found time despite her busy round to treat them like human beings' (*HR*, p. 236). In this novel the gentle Nalini suffers equally with her husband Ravi from poverty and anxiety, but unlike him she never takes it out on the children. Even the young Saroja in *Two Virgins* (1973), who is characterised as more sensible than her wayward sister Lalitha, expresses the desire to have 'lots of lovely cuddly babies' when she grows up, which Lalitha dismisses as 'a peasant's ambition' (*TV*, pp. 57–8). But Lalitha herself comes to appreciate the value of human life through the devastating ordeal of her abortion, which she describes unflinchingly to Saroja: 'If I hadn't wanted him it might have been different, she said, an unwanted child is better off unborn. But I did want him, I wanted him most when he was going, those last ten minutes of his life' (*TV*, p. 232).

Markandaya's emphasis on the value of motherhood has a different angle in *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). Here she highlights its potential power by showing the subversive influence of the rebellious and independent Mohini over her son Rabindranath, the young prince in the fictional state of Devapur under the British Raj. Refusing to bow to imperialism, Mohini insists that Rabi be educated by a pundit of her choice instead of an English tutor. According to Arthur Pollard, he is led by his mother, Mohini, into 'an understanding of the plight of the people under the oppression of the princely government, the result of Court luxury and British "protection"' (1980, p. 22). Mohini instils in him a spirit of nationalism:

> Rabi's history is a progress to understanding and then to action in a movement that takes him from admiration of his father with unquestioning acceptance of the status quo, through the influence of his mother and his Pandit, to a rejection of his princely role and the assumption of the leadership of popular protest.
>
> (p. 24)

Thus Mohini, as a mother, is shown to have far more power and influence than the young prince's father, the Maharajah Bawajiraj, who, for all his wealth and status, is nothing more than a puppet in the hands of the British Raj. This presentation of maternal power is in line with feminist arguments about the value of 'maternal thinking' which – when not curtailed by patriarchal power – has the potential to make the world a better place.

Nayantara Sahgal

While most of Sahgal's female protagonists have children, she seems to avoid writing about the maternal relationship in her fiction. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) can arguably be seen as an exception to this, but even here the isolated passages about Saroj's 'maternal feelings' seem designed more to present her as a virtuous maternal 'type' (who does not deserve her husband's condemnation) than to explore the maternal relationship as such. Saroj's children are never developed as characters but rather appear to function as vague repositories for her maternal feelings: As she puts them to bed she feels 'their sleepy warmth filling her with a bursting tenderness' (*SC*, p. 127). Pregnant with her third child, she tells Dubey that she is fascinated with babies and loves 'everything about them even before they're born' (p. 190). Though the narrative tells us that the 'joys and sorrows [of Saroj's children] were so bound up with her own' (p. 200), her consciousness throughout the novel is actually centred on herself and her relationships with Inder and Dubey. Similarly, the thoughts and feelings of Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) seem to focus on everything *except* her four children, though Raj calls them 'the litter' because 'That's how it hits me sometimes, all of them tugging and pulling at you. What does it leave of you?' (*DS*, p. 157).

If Sahgal avoids centralising the maternal relationship, it may be because she wants to move away from the dominant Hindu inscription of 'woman as mother'. Her view that motherhood should be a choice is revealed in *Rich Like Us* (1985), where Nishi gives birth to two children without wanting them. She feels under pressure not only to have them but to pretend that she wants them, so that the day after the birth of her younger son she forces herself to 'smile and nod at telegrams, gifts and flowers. … Grappling with her selves was simple if she kept her inner and outer selves apart' (*RLU*, p. 234). Sahgal is suggesting here that the glorification of motherhood in India is so powerful that some women feel unable to choose *not* to be mothers, or even to express negative

feelings about motherhood; any private negative feelings must never become public.

Sahgal herself is perhaps more honest than many women in expressing ambivalent feelings about motherhood. On the one hand, she has 'always felt that one's children are one's achievements as much as any thing else one might do' (Varalakshmi interview 1993, p. 10). On the other hand, children can become powerful shackles which bind women to the status quo: 'Very often the children act as a chain to keep them where they are. They have no option but to stay' (p. 10). It is all the more ironic, then, that while several of Sahgal's Indian characters seek divorce, her English Rose in *Rich Like Us* (1985) is presented as the faithful long-suffering wife, despite the fact that she is childless and therefore has less reason than the other wives to 'adhere to family'. Moreover, she understands that a son (even a wayward son like Mona's Dev) confers status on his mother, and reflects that having a child of her own would make her more 'acceptable, since a woman is a vehicle for the next generation. … Without a child of her own, Rose would never be mistress of the house, not even her half of it' (*RLU*, pp. 70–1).

While the *idea* of motherhood has traditionally been revered in India, the reality is that many Indian mothers are oppressed and exploited, and the self-sacrifice of the mothers seems to be precisely what patriarchal society has admired. In *Rich Like Us* (1985) Sonali's doctor says to her:

> When I was a child, I remember my mother getting up at 4 a.m. to walk with the other women to the well to fetch water. Then she got down to housework, grinding spices and the rest. She had seven children, unassisted. Three of them died before they were a year old. I remember her after one of her pregnancies leaning out of her bed to stir the dal on the stove. The kind of life that makes for courage.
>
> (*RLU*, p. 34)

Even a more privileged woman like Sonali's great-grandmother was still expected to be self-sacrificing. Her son wrote about her: 'She worked so tirelessly. There was never a moment when I saw her doing nothing. And each of her acts was an essential act that meant food, clothing, succour for us all, family, servants and animals' (p. 143).

While those women from earlier generations lacked the opportunity to be anything other than self-sacrificing, Sahgal's novels do show that some Indian women today can escape subordination by working outside the home and being economically independent. Mara, the nursery

head-teacher in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) had 'an air of independence and forthrightness about her, as if she were used to speaking for herself' (*SC*, p. 64). The problems of a working woman, however, are not directly addressed in Sahgal's novels. There is no suggestion of any job discrimination, nor of the pressures of having to 'juggle' domestic and career responsibilities. Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) is the only working mother in these novels who is recognised as such, though her writing is portrayed as more of a hobby than a career. The servicing of her children is so all-absorbing that it extends to packing for her 16-year-old son when he chooses to leave her for his father.

In contrast to motherhood, which is presented as a full-time occupation in these novels, the non-involvement of Indian fathers in their children's upbringing is directly criticised in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969). When Inder comes to see Mara about the nursery school, she guesses correctly that 'he had never spent that many minutes on a matter concerning his children', so she challenges him:

> 'You're the first father who has come,' she said.
> 'My wife isn't well or she would have come herself.'
> 'Oh? I took it as a sign of your interest. Child-rearing seems so one-sided here.'
> 'It's a woman's job,' he said flatly.
> 'That's just what it isn't, you know.'
>
> (*SC*, p. 64)

Fathers in Sahgal's novels do, however, become interested in their sons when they approach maturity – as we see with Som and Brij in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), Ram and Dev in *Rich Like Us* (1985) and the Raja and Bhushan in *Mistaken Identity* (1988). There is also a reversal of the power relationship between mothers and sons as they mature, so that Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and Mona in *Rich Like Us* (1985) are completely powerless over their teenage sons.

Another important aspect of Sahgal's fictional representation of the gendered power politics that operate within Indian families is women's exclusion from owning the means of production, as theorised by Delphy and Leonard (1992). In *Rich Like Us* (1985) neither Nishi nor Rose are given any stake in the family business, nor any recognition for their input, although they work harder than the men do at keeping the business afloat. When this business (which originally sold imported luxuries) grinds to a halt because of war blocking the seaways, it is Rose who seeks her father-in-law's help and advice in turning it into a

successful Indian clothing business. Later it is Ram's feckless son Dev rather than the hard-working Rose who inherits the business, which is then run by Dev's wife Nishi: 'It wasn't even as if he had any of the work to do. She bought the materials and supervised the tailors' (*RLU*, p. 21). Nishi also does the accounts, but it is Dev who makes the (bad) decisions about the business. Significantly, it is the family itself which excludes women from power while exploiting their labour, thus supporting the radical feminist view that women's prime source of oppression is the patriarchal family.

Liddle and Joshi argue that 'Women's work is defined as domestic, private and unpaid. Such work is often not even considered to be real work' (1986, p. 92). Sahgal's female characters, being wealthy and able to afford domestic servants, are not overburdened with housework, so their confinement to the domestic sphere tends to create malaise and boredom rather than the drudgery and overwork of less privileged women. Uma in *This Time of Morning* (1965) has no children, no career and literally nothing to do so that her empty life is increasingly filled with heavy drinking and affairs until Neil Berenson encourages her to pursue her interest in art. The young Nita, too, has nothing to do except wait for her arranged marriage (which she dreads) – though Uma's predicament illustrates that being a wife is not really an occupation. Nita would like to have a job but recognises that she is 'not trained for anything' (*TTM*, p. 31) and even understands why: 'A job was never enough. That was why parents did not want daughters to work. A job led to money and freedom, and freedom demanded a flat of one's own, away from the prying eyes and inquisitive voices' (*TTM*, p. 154). Thus economic dependence is explicitly identified as an important device for the control of wives and daughters, and it is the patriarchal family (rather than just men) who exert this control; those 'prying eyes and inquisitive voices' are likely to be female.

Anita Desai

One of the most striking features of the lives of Desai's married protagonists is their lack of occupation. Financially supported by their husbands, they do not work outside the home, and their role within the home appears to consist of 'managing' the household and supervising servants. This can have a range of results – from the loneliness and emptiness of the childless Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) to the lack of time, space and privacy of Nanda Kaul in her husband's busy household in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), Maya's lack of occupation is shown to result in neurosis and self-absorption. Having no work of her own, she takes no interest in her husband's work either, seeing it only as something that diverts his time and attention from herself. Her petulant reflection that 'he knew nothing that concerned me' subtly draws attention to her lack of knowledge of anything that concerns him as well (*CP*, p. 9). A similar self-absorption is evident in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*'s Sita, who, like Maya, is nevertheless sympathetically portrayed. Something of a misfit, she had not enjoyed living in a joint family household, though her husband's relatives had been tolerant of her. Her dislike of domesticity is evident in her appalled reaction to the women 'chopping, slicing, chopping, slicing the incredible quantities of vegetables they daily devoured. … If meals were not being eaten, then they were being cooked, or cleaned up after, or planned' (*WSWG*, pp. 48–9). Even after moving with her husband to a flat of their own and having four children of their own, Sita remains bored and unhappy: 'She spent almost all her time on the balcony, smoking, looking out at the sea' (*WSWG*, p. 50). Like Maya, Sita becomes increasingly alienated, but unlike Maya, she does, in the end, pull back from the brink of despair, and there seem to be a number of interrelated reasons for her recovery. Firstly, unlike Maya, she is able to escape (albeit temporarily) the confines of her domestic world. Her journey to the island of Manori during her fifth pregnancy is not a holiday but literally a process of 'running away' from her husband, from her home in Bombay, from the bourgeois existence which bores her so, even from the reality that she is soon to give birth.

Ironically, one of her other reasons for wanting to escape to Manori is a desire to protect her unborn child from all the violence and destructiveness she sees in the world around her. Hypersensitive as she is, she reacts with equal horror to trivial incidents in her everyday life as to more disturbing events in the 'wider world':

> They all hammered at her with cruel fists – the fallen blocks, the torn watercolours, the headlines about the war in Viet Nam, the photograph of a woman weeping over a small grave, another of a crowd outside a Rhodesian jail; articles about the perfidy of Pakistan, the virtuousness of our own India. … They were hand-grenades all, hurled at her frail goldfish-bowl belly and instinctively she laid her hands over it.
>
> (*WSWG*, p. 55)

So, paradoxically, her maternal protectiveness is expressed in a reluctance to give birth. She asks herself whether 'by giving birth to the child now so safely contained, would she be performing an act of creation, or, by releasing it in a violent, pain-wracked blood-bath, would she only be destroying what was, at the moment, safely contained and perfect?' (*WSWG*, p. 56). In her distraught state, she somehow imagines that the 'magic' of the island of Manori will enable her to achieve the 'miracle' of not giving birth, of keeping the child unborn within her womb indefinitely – again, a clear sign of impending insanity.

It is, in my view, highly significant (and, oddly, overlooked in the critical literature) that Sita brings two of her children with her to Manori. They embody and represent her grounding in reality, in social responsibility, in connectedness to other people, which she is not prepared to completely relinquish. Instead of succumbing to the kind of solipsistic despair that overcomes Maya, Sita must look after and feed her children – and hence, herself. On a practical level, it is her daughter Menaka who finally sends a message to her husband Raman asking him to come to the island and bring them all home. Related to this is Sita's psychological salvation, which comes when she begins to see the situation from Raman's point of view:

> It struck her then that he had suffered during the weeks that she had been away – had suffered from worry and anxiety about her, the unborn child, Menaka and Karan, living alone on the island in this wild season. His boys at home must have worried him too, while he was at work in the factory which was not without its problems either – he never told her of them and she never gave much thought to it but the possibility struck her now. … There was courage, she admitted to herself in shame, in getting on with such matters from which she herself squirmed, dodged and ran.
>
> (*WSWG*, pp. 138–9)

Ironically, then, the very thing which Sita is trying to escape – her connectedness to other people, specifically, her maternal role – turns out to be her salvation. Far from idealising motherhood, however, Desai draws attention in almost all of her novels to the enslaving aspects of family relationships, particularly for women: '*Only connect*, they say. So she had spent twenty years connecting, link by link, this chain. And what is one to do with a chain? It can only throttle, choke, and enslave' (*WSWG*, p. 87). If Sita's reflections on the relentless demands of family life on an Indian

woman are sympathetically portrayed, so too are those of Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977):

> There had been too many guests coming and going … so that there was a shortage of privacy that vexed her. Too many trays of tea would have to be made and carried to her husband's study, to her mother-in-law's bedroom, to the veranda that was the gathering place for all, at all times of the day. Too many meals, too many dishes on the table, too much to wash up after. They had had so many children, they had gone to so many different schools and colleges at different times of the day, and had so many tutors.
>
> (*FOM*, pp. 29–30)

A great-grandmother during the course of the narrative, Nanda Kaul remembers only the drudgery associated with caring for and nurturing too many offspring and the laborious and unrewarding aspects of social involvement which her role as wife and mother had brought. Having suffered from 'the nimiety, the disorder, the fluctuating and unpredictable excess' (*FOM*, p. 30), Nanda Kaul had been glad when all this nurturing and socialising was over, though we may argue that the isolation she now chooses is a kind of excess as well. Having retired to a secluded house in a hill station, she wishes to be left alone in her old age with no further demands on her, and indeed, no further human contact.

This rejection of the nurturing/maternal role is a recurrent trope in Desai's fiction, which features numerous absent, negligent or detached mothers. Maya's mother in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) had died when she was young, and Sita's mother in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) had run away to Benares. Mrs Das in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and 'Mama' in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) are both shown to be non-nurturing mothers, preoccupied with their husbands at the expense of their children. Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), having brought up her children out of duty rather than love, now isolates herself from children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren alike. These abdications of the nurturing role suggest negative attitudes which challenge the reified image of maternity in India. According to Usha Bande, 'the mother is highly respected in Indian culture and her image is buttressed by myth, legend, religion and tradition' (1994, p. 1). Desai, however, seems to want to debunk the myth of the self-sacrificing, self-denying and endlessly giving mother which has such a powerful hold on the public imagination in India, arguing that this myth keeps the Indian woman 'bemused, bound hand and foot', often 'a beast of burden bearing an

endless string of children, putting up with any brutality or disloyalty or failing of her husband's' (*TLS* 1990, p. 972). The Indian mother can also, she suggests, exploit her self-sacrifice to manipulate her children, as exemplified by Mrs Biswas, the mother of Bim's hapless suitor in *Clear Light of Day* (1980): '"Eat a little, Shona," she coaxed in a discontented mutter like a pigeon's. He did not and she took the plate away from him with a sigh, limped to the table and put it down. Earlier she had not limped: it was his not eating that brought on the limp' (*CLD*, p. 91). Complaining variously about her dead husband, her painful arthritis and the servant boy who has run away, Mrs Biswas summons attention to her perpetual martyrdom. Renu Juneja suggests that 'her gift for loading her self-sacrifices onto others that Bim finds so distasteful functions as a manipulative device and as a means of ratifying her identity as a long-suffering woman and mother' (1987, p. 83).

Especially in her later novels, Desai challenges cultural stereotypes of motherhood in India by portraying not only non-nurturing mothers but also childless women in nurturing roles. This is most noticeable in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), where the real nurturers are Aunt Mira and then Bim. Mira masi, a poor relation brought into the Das household to 'help', quickly becomes a surrogate mother to the four children while their parents occupy themselves with socialising and card games. It is suggested that Mira masi falls easily into the role of mother/nurturer because as a child widow she had learned to subdue her own desires. Married at the age of 12 and widowed at 15, her husband's family blamed her for his death:

> It was her unfortunate horoscope that had brought it about, they said. She should be made to pay for her guilt. Guiltily, she scrubbed and washed and cooked for them. At night she massaged her mother-in-law's legs and nursed wakeful babies and stitched trousseaux for her sisters-in-law. Of course she aged. Not only was her hair white but she was nearly bald. At least that saved her from being used by her brothers-in-law who would have put the widow to a different use had she been more appetising. Since she was not, they eyed her unpleasing person sullenly and made jokes loudly enough for her to overhear. There was laughter, till they grew bored. She stayed with them so long that she became boring. They suspected her of being a parasite. It was time she was turned out. She was turned out. Another household could find a use for her: cracked pot, torn rag, picked bone.
>
> (*CLD*, p. 108)

After such grotesque exploitation, she is pathetically grateful to be in the Das household and genuinely revels in her nurturing role, cooking, knitting, making toys for the children, telling them stories, inventing games for them, and giving them the warmth and affection they never had from their parents. Accustomed to servility, Mira masi functions capably enough when she is needed in this way, but her life is rendered meaningless by the combination of the parents' deaths and the children's coming of age, after which she rapidly succumbs to alcoholism.

Bim, who subsequently takes over the nurturing role in the family, is shown to be maternally affectionate towards her disabled brother Baba, towards her students and even towards her dog and cat. However, she is in an entirely different position to Mira masi, not least because of the strengths rooted in her working life as a teacher: 'the keeping to a schedule, the following of a time-table, the application of the mind to facts, figures, rules and analyses' (*CLD*, p. 169). She needs this structure so much that towards the end of the vacation she finds herself 'pining for college to re-open and her ordinary working life to be resumed' (ibid.). Mira masi, we are compelled to conclude, never discovered what her own needs were because her life was one long sacrifice. Bim makes sacrifices but also choices: not to marry Dr Biswas, not to be a slave to the appearance of the house, to pursue an academic career and eventually to forgive her siblings for leaving her with so much responsibility.

Bim has such choices because she is effectively head of the household, not being subjected to the authority of a husband and/or elders. Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), by contrast, emerges as almost a caricature of a woman denied any choices at all. After two failed attempts to 'marry her off' (without consulting her), her over-controlling parents insist on her living with them even in middle age, keep her constantly occupied with frivolous tasks, refuse to let her work outside the home and are even reluctant for her to go to a coffee party. The link between domestic exploitation, denial of financial independence and exercise of power is unambiguously illustrated by the reaction of Uma's parents when Dr Dutt offers her a job in the hospital. To their insistence that there is 'no need' for Uma to work, Dr Dutt accurately points out (to no avail) that 'she works all the time … at home' (*FF*, p. 143). Later Papa is incensed upon discovering that Uma has used the phone: '"Costs money! Costs money!" he kept shouting long after. "Never earned anything in her life, made me spend and spend, on her dowry and her wedding"' (*FF*, p. 146). Thus it is emphasised that Uma's financial dependence is not only enforced, but also used against her.

Uma's exploitation had begun after the birth of her baby brother when she was not sent back to school, being required to stay home to help look after him. She was surprised to find Mother Agnes agreeing with her parents that she had to learn the mechanics of looking after her baby brother, having always associated her convent school with that idealised maternal figure, the Virgin Mary, who (she accurately perceives) is merely an icon:

> Now Mother Agnes was talking about the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus – but surely she did not think the Virgin Mary was a mother like Mama was a mother? Surely she did not think baby Jesus ever lay squalling in his crib … that he had to have his nappies changed and that they smelt?
>
> (*FF*, p. 28)

Evidently Mother Agnes is not in touch with the actualities of looking after a baby, and Uma is. Worshipping a maternal image like the Mother Goddess or the Virgin Mary, Desai suggests, is not the same thing as confronting the realities of childcare, more familiar to Uma than to the detached Mother Agnes, the autocratic Papa or even the complicit Mama who seems to spend all her time giving orders on behalf of Papa. This complicity is examined in more detail in the next chapter.

Shashi Deshpande

Like Desai, Deshpande has written about the idealisation of motherhood in India and the pressure it puts on women to have children and to devote their entire lives to them in a self-sacrificing, self-effacing manner. Arguing against the idea of the maternal role as an exclusive, lifelong occupation for women, she herself believes that 'motherhood does not bar everything else, but is a bonus, an extra that women are privileged to have' (2003, 83). All of her female protagonists are married, and all except Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) have children. Nevertheless, all of them have outside occupations as well: Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) as a doctor, Urmi in *The Binding Vine* (1993) as a lecturer and the others as writers – though Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) sees herself as primarily a housewife, while Madhu in *Small Remedies* (2000) has viewed her maternal role as primary until the death of her only child.

Contesting the reified image of motherhood in India, Deshpande presents different views and experiences of motherhood in her

novels – none of which idealise this relationship. In an apparently deliberate attempt to counteract the traditional Hindu stereotype of the sacrificing, loving mother, she portrays Saru's mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) as cold, harsh and unforgiving. Determined to be a better mother to her own children, Saru is nevertheless daunted and somewhat disillusioned by her maternal experience. She had been 'outraged at the indignity' of the childbirth process and afterwards felt 'not love, but an immense feeling of fear, a terrible inadequacy. Could she measure up to all that this being, so wholly dependent on her, would expect of her? Would she not fail as her own mother had failed her?' (*DHNT*, p. 162).

Jaya's disillusionment in *That Long Silence* (1988) comes later, when her two children are teenagers. Reflecting on her life of sacrifice for them, she realises that 'Everything we did, or didn't, was for the children. No wonder, it occurs to me now, that they grow up to be such sullen monsters, burdened with all this unselfishness of ours' (*LS*, p. 20). She suddenly feels herself to be a failed mother when her son Rahul, who is away on holiday with another family during the course of the narrative, runs away to his uncle's house:

> It seemed amazing to me that I knew so little, almost nothing, about my son. Whatever had given me the damn fool idea that once I became a mother I would know my children through and through, instinctively? Yes, this is what they had told me: you become a mother, and everything follows naturally and inevitably – love, wisdom, understanding and nobility. But now I felt as helpless to deal with this despairing boy as I had with the floppy-headed, vulnerable infant I had brought back from hospital. I had the same fearful sense of being unable to cope, the same certainty of being a failure.
>
> (*LS*, p. 173)

Here Deshpande seems to be suggesting that the expectations of motherhood in India are so high that feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment are almost inevitable. Indu in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is shown to recognise this when she admits to postponing motherhood 'for fear of being disillusioned' (*RS*, p. 38).

Madhu in *Small Remedies* (2000) is portrayed as having had a similarly objective approach until the birth of her son, which changes her forever:

> Motherless child that I am, motherhood is an unknown world to me. The mothers I see in my childhood are drab creatures,

> forever working, forever scolding their children; certainly they're not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me. … I get some images of motherhood in the movies I see myself, through the songs that speak of '*ma ka pyar*'. But real life shows me something entirely different. Munni's mother who ignored her daughter; Ketaki's mother, stern, dictatorial and so partial to her sons; Sunanda, sweetly devious and manipulating; Som's mother, so demanding – none of them conform to the white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mother of the movies. Which is why I am wholly unprepared for what happens to me when I become a mother. Motherhood takes over my life, it makes me over into an entirely different person. The in-control-of-herself Madhu is lost, gone forever.
>
> (*SR*, p. 183)

Her ensuing description of her overwhelming love and total absorption in her son, Adit, is given extra poignancy by our knowledge, from the beginning of the narrative, that he is to be killed at the age of 17 in a terrorist bomb attack on a bus. Her tormented memories of his teenage rebellion against her obsession with him contrast with her fond recollections of his babyhood: 'His whimpers, his cries, die down the moment I pick him up, my touch is enough to soothe him, to make him happy. His dependence fills me with delight, my power over him awes me. I indulge him, enjoying my power to transform his tears into smiles' (*SR*, pp. 183–4). Here, mixed with the feeling of genuine love and delight in her baby son, is Madhu's awareness of her enjoyment of power. If, as Radha Chakravarty argues, 'motherhood is the only uncontested site of power for women in India' (1998, p. 77), Madhu is shown to be unable to relinquish that power as Adit grows up and wants more autonomy. In his adolescence, 'things change, he becomes evasive, he doesn't bring his friends home any more. … As he grows up, he learns to slip away more unobtrusively, so that often I know he's gone out only when he returns. … The door to his room is closed against us' (*SR*, pp. 186–7). Later, after his tragic death, Madhu goes into his room and sees that 'Adit had had nothing to hide. It was his own self he had been protecting from my possessive, grasping hands' (*SR*, p. 188). In Madhu's self-critique is the author's critique of the cultural fixation on motherhood as the *raison d'être* of women's existence.

The mother-daughter relationship is portrayed in Deshpande's novels as even more fraught. Atrey and Kirpal explain that a major source of

mother-daughter conflict in India is the mother's position as an instrument of patriarchal control:

> The daughter in a traditional family is considered the responsibility of the mother who imposes restrictions on her to prepare her for a harsher future as part of the process of socialization. Fathers are perceived as lenient by the daughters who feel oppressed by their mothers' strictures. The patriarchy of the fathers remains hidden as the women act on their behalf to condition the daughters. Since theirs (the fathers') is a remote control, the conflict between mother and daughter becomes direct. This is reflected in almost all the mother-daughter relationships in her work. In the course of their self-exploration, however, the protagonists analyze their relationships with their mothers with retrospective maturity and realize that their mothers too have been victims of patriarchal socialization and gender-based oppression.
>
> (1998, p. 78)

Adrienne Rich has argued that it is 'easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her' (1976, p. 235). Thus Saru's adolescent resentment of her mother in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is more than just personal. 'If you're a woman, I don't want to be one' (*DHNT*, p. 62) can be taken literally, in the sense that she resents not just her mother but the prospect of becoming like her: bitter and defeated because she leads a life of unrelenting drudgery and subservience. Adele King suggests that Saru's mother represents 'the "mother-villain", the woman whom the daughter fears she will resemble, the woman whose life is without the power and worldly success the daughter seeks, the woman who represents an adherence to customs the daughter wishes to overthrow' (1990, p. 164).

However, *The Binding Vine* (1993) suggests that even mothers who lead more 'emancipated' lives are subject to criticism and resentment by their daughters, as we see in Mandira's efforts to induce guilt in her mother Vanaa for going out to work. Here too, Kalpana blames her mother for her father's desertion: '"You drove him away," she said, "You're always angry, always quarrelling, that's why he's gone"' (*BV*, p. 93). If we are tempted to conclude that in Deshpande's fictional world, mothers are invariably blamed by their offspring no matter what they do, further evidence is provided by Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) who, in her early married life, 'had begun to think with contempt of Ai's slapdash ways, and of how she could not even hem properly. It was all

her fault, I had thought; she had prepared me for none of the duties of a woman's life' (*LS*, p. 83).

If the young Jaya perceived 'the duties of a woman's life' as exclusively domestic – and domestic duties as exclusively female activities – her mature perspective is different, as we see in her reaction to her old diaries: 'One could, it occurs to me now, give a composite title to the diaries – "The Diaries of a Sane Housewife." … And yet, as I looked through them, the life spent on such trivialities scared me' (*LS*, pp. 69–70). If 'housewifery' is presented in *That Long Silence* as a life spent on 'trivialities', its potential for devaluing women is also exposed in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) with Saru's description of a housewife who is essentially a domestic servant:

> We had been invited to tea. The man sat and talked to us. The woman came in later with trays of food, cups of tea and glasses of water. She came in silently, unobtrusively, like a shadow and went out in the same way, her husband's conversation not interrupted even by a fraction of a second by her presence. He did not introduce us, and so strong was the man's disregard of her presence that we ignored her too.
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 158)

Interestingly, it is precisely to escape a life of domestic servility that Saru had decided, while young, to become a doctor. She had met a lady doctor whose air of self-confidence and 'superiority' had impressed and inspired her. She achieves her ambition but later comes to believe that economic power cannot bring a woman the power or the privileges of being a man. Moreover she sees a direct link between her professional success and Manu's insecurity, which causes him to dominate her in the only way he can – through sexual sadism. In despair, Saru expresses to Manu her desire to give up her career in order to look after the home and children full-time, but he reminds her of their dependence on her income, as he himself is an underpaid teacher. And like Mohan in *That Long Silence* (1988) who sees his wife's writing career as 'something to be proud of, a respectable hobby' that adds to his own status (*LS*, p. 119), Manu enjoys being able to say that his wife is a doctor.

It is only in *Small Remedies* (2000) that none of the male characters appear to view their wives as extensions of themselves, domestic servants, threats to their masculine status or indeed, anything other than individuals in their own right. Here the young Hari and Lata, in particular, are shown to have a relationship of love and mutual

respect in which both are equal 'breadwinners' and the domestic chores are shared.

Interestingly, none of Deshpande's novels deal with gender discrimination in the workplace or the professional realm. There are Savitribai's disadvantages in learning music from her Guruji in *Small Remedies* (2000), but these are presented as the outdated restrictions of a bygone era, which surprise the younger generation. If there is a proverbial 'glass ceiling' in Deshpande's fictional world, it is located not in the workplace but at home, among communities of women, and often within the individual female psyche, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Conclusion

As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, Western feminists theorising about motherhood have tended not only to emphasise its value to society but also to challenge the traditional assumption that women should continue to carry the major responsibility for childcare and other domestic work, especially in view of the fact that most mothers are also in paid employment outside the home. They argue that shouldering so much more domestic responsibility than men puts women at a relative disadvantage career-wise because of the compromises they often have to make: career breaks, part-time jobs, shorter hours, lower-paying jobs requiring less time and energy or simply giving up their careers altogether. Even those feminists who affirm the value of motherhood point out that the world of work is still geared towards men with wives at home, that women are trying to fit into it as best they can and that most men have not taken up domestic responsibilities to the same extent that most women have taken up career responsibilities. Indian feminists, too, have argued that 'the sexual division of labour has changed for women, in that women contribute significantly to the family finances, but it has not changed for men, since few men contribute significantly to the domestic labour' (Liddle and Joshi 1986, p. 150).

These formulations, I would suggest, have three important limitations, which are also evident in the novels under consideration. The first is their narrow focus on the situation of middle-class women for whom the 'juggling' of domestic and career responsibilities has been a relatively recent phenomenon. Poorer women have always had to contribute to the family finances by working outside the home, and many of them have been primary or sole providers. The second limitation is the lack of attention to the role of domestic 'help' – referred to as

servants in India, or as cleaners, nannies and au pairs in the West. Because privileged women can delegate domestic tasks to these household employees, they have less impetus to challenge the notion of domestic work as women's responsibility. Shashi Deshpande is the only novelist among the four to tacitly recognise these realities. The third, overarching issue occasionally alluded to in feminist theory but never really resolved, is the question of *how* to reorganise the world of work so that children can be properly looked after while men and women of all social classes have equal access to career opportunities. These questions concern the economic basis of women's subordination, which is not really recognised in any of the novels, though Nayantara Sahgal does draw attention to the uneven (gender-based) distribution of economic resources within families.

Feminist responses to ideologies of motherhood appear to have a different emphasis in Indian and Western contexts. In particular, many Western feminists have tended to emphasise the economic aspects, arguing that traditional ideologies of motherhood have justified women's homebound existence and kept them outside 'the real centres of power' (Firestone 1970, Rich 1976). Indian feminists, by contrast, have focused primarily on the cultural idealisation of mothers' self-sacrifice, and the four novelists have responded to it in various ways. Kamala Markandaya, in her earlier novels, participates in this idealisation – for example, in her portrayal of the heroic nurturing qualities of Rukmani in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954). Her later novel *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) continues to present maternal power as essentially benevolent but also suggests that it can be used subversively against social injustice. Nayantara Sahgal, in most of her novels, has tended to de-emphasise the maternal relationship except when making specific points – for example, about the non-involvement of Indian fathers in their children's upbringing (*SC*), about the cultural expectation that mothers be self-sacrificing (*RLU*), about the constant relentless demands of motherhood (*DS*), about the cultural impermissibility of negative or ambivalent feelings about motherhood (*RLU*), about the denigration of childless women in India (*RLU*) and about mothers' lack of influence over their children despite cultural beliefs about maternal power (*DS*, *RLU*).

Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande use a variety of strategies to undertake a more thoroughgoing critique of Indian ideologies of motherhood in their fictional writing. All of Desai's and most of Deshpande's novels challenge the idealised image of maternity in India by featuring numerous absent, negligent or 'bad' mothers. In addition, Desai attempts to separate the activity of nurturing from the biological function of

maternity by depicting a number of childless women in nurturing roles – but no men, unless we include Nanda Kaul's (male) servant Ram Lal who develops an easy friendship with Raka in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). Here the novel points to the untapped potential of men as nurturers by suggesting that Raka would have benefited from the presence of someone like Ram Lal in her own home life. Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) is full of nurturing men: Madhu's father, her great-uncle Joe who later adopts her, followed by her stepbrother Tony who is there for her throughout her adult life. Here too, Munni's father is shown to be more nurturing than her mother.

More than the other three novelists, Deshpande portrays in detail the thoughts, feelings and inner conflicts of the mothers themselves – their feelings of doubt, inadequacy, resentment and loss, but also at times empowerment and overwhelming love for their children. If she does not quite idealise motherhood in the manner of traditional Hindu ideologies which applaud women's self-sacrifice, she does nevertheless portray the maternal relationship as the most powerful force in a woman's life, thus centralising it in a way that few Western feminist writers have done. As Chilla Bulbeck reminds us, 'feminism is influenced by the culture which nourishes (and opposes) it, so the preoccupations of women will not be everywhere the same' (1998, p. 199). Because motherhood is such an important part of Indian culture, it is likely to continue to be a prominent theme for Indian feminist writers, and their treatment of it will continue to be shaped to a large extent by both traditional ideologies and ongoing social changes in India.

4
Women's Role in Maintaining and/or Resisting Patriarchy

Introduction

In considering the portrayal of the fictional characters' responses to patriarchy, it would be helpful to examine what Deniz Kandiyoti has described as the particular 'patriarchal bargains' within which they operate (1988). If, as Kumkum Sangari argues, patriarchies function through both coercion and consent (1993), the mechanisms for obtaining such consent from women in India are worth examining. These include social structures and ideologies which vary considerably according to class, religion, caste and region, with the idea of female subservience being strongest among the orthodox elite in the north. Because of this variation – and indeed, because of ongoing social change – it is difficult to make generalisations about Indian gender ideology and family structure. It is, however, possible to identify some of the structural and ideological *obstacles* to gender equality in India and to describe some of the ways in which Indian women have either supported or resisted these obstacles, in order to establish a framework for analysis of these issues in the novels themselves. This introductory section begins by considering the general nature of 'patriarchal bargains' (which shape female resistance and consent) before going on to discuss their specific manifestations in the Indian cultural contexts within which the novels are set.

According to Deniz Kandiyoti, 'the term patriarchal bargain … is intended to indicate the existence of set rules and scripts regulating gender relations, to which both genders accommodate and acquiesce, yet which may nonetheless be contested, redefined, and renegotiated. … However, women as a rule bargain from a weaker position' (1988, p. 286). She argues that different forms of patriarchy present women with distinct

'rules of the game' and call for different strategies with varying potential for active and passive resistance in the face of oppression. For example, the traditional Hindu joint family is a form of 'classic patriarchy' in which 'girls are given away in marriage at a very young age into households headed by their husband's father. There, they are subordinate not only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law' (p. 278). She argues that while the breakdown of classic patriarchy implies that women escape the control of mothers-in-law and head their own households at a much younger age,

> it also means that they themselves can no longer look forward to a future surrounded by subservient daughters-in-law. For the generation of women caught in between, this transformation may represent genuine personal tragedy, since they have paid the heavy price of an earlier patriarchal bargain, but are not able to cash in on its promised benefits.
>
> (p. 282)

The class or caste impact on classic patriarchy creates additional complications: 'Among the wealthier strata, the withdrawal of women from nondomestic work is frequently a marker of social status institutionalized in various seclusion and exclusion practices, such as the purdah system and veiling' (p. 280). The observance of these restrictive practices is so crucial to the reproduction of family status that women tend to 'resist breaking the rules', even if observing them produces economic or personal hardship: 'They forego economically advantageous options … for alternatives that are perceived as in keeping with their respectable and protected domestic roles, and so they become more exploitable' (p. 280).

So, whether particular patriarchal bargains involve, for instance, protection in exchange for varying degrees of seclusion, social status in exchange for submissiveness and propriety, or financial maintenance in exchange for domestic service, 'women often resist the process of transition because they see the old normative order slipping away from them without any empowering alternatives' (p. 282). Parallels may be found in very different contexts, such as Europe and North America. Barbara Ehrenreich provides an analysis of the breakdown of the white middle-class patriarchal bargain in the US. She traces the progressive opting out of men from the breadwinner role starting in the 1950s and suggests that 'women's demands for greater autonomy came at a time when men's conjugal responsibility was already much diminished and

alternatives for men outside the conjugal union had gained considerable cultural legitimacy' (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 283). Against this background, Ehrenreich evaluates the feminist and anti-feminist movements concluding that, 'facing the age-old insecurity of the family wage system, women chose opposite strategies: either to get out (figuratively speaking) and fight for equality of income and opportunity, or to stay home and bind men more tightly to them' (1983, p. 151). The 'family values' of the anti-feminist movements could therefore be interpreted as an attempt to reinstate an older patriarchal bargain, with some women calling for increased responsibility and control by men. Thus women sometimes actively participate in the reproduction of their own subordination, even though the disadvantages of patriarchy may far outweigh any actual economic or emotional security (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 282).

Delphy and Leonard's analysis, by contrast, does not present women as victims or colluders in their own oppression. While conceding that 'women certainly contribute to the making of their own worlds', they insist that 'they do so in conditions not of their own choosing' (1992, p. 261). Although women 'make certain decisions in households … and often stand up for themselves vigorously' they still 'suffer from their situation as subordinates, though how they interpret and react to this varies' (p. 261). Jane Lewis has suggested, for example, that in twentieth-century Britain some housewives have been happy with their lot and have elaborated a women's domestic culture. They have wanted men to continue as breadwinners and have sought only to reduce the risks of divorce. Other women have gone along with their wifely role less wholeheartedly, but have justified it as being necessary for various reasons, including 'for the children's sake'. Still others have been quite antagonistic to their husbands, but they have reached a compromise and done their domestic duty because of their (real or perceived) lack of attractive alternatives (1984).

Missing from all of these accounts, I would suggest, are two important considerations. The first is that the majority of women (in India, in Europe, in North America) are *not* housewives, and the second is that domestic work (especially childcare) cannot simply be ignored. When women take full or primary responsibility for it, they may be reproducing their own subordination, but they do so in many cases because they know that otherwise it will simply not be done. This is not just because of male intransigence but also because (as noted in the previous chapter) paid employment is still structured in such a way that it is not easily combined with childcare and domestic work – for women *or* men. So when the family income allows it, some women – and a small

but growing number of men – choose a predominantly domestic role. Carolyn Dryden has suggested that for many women, this 'choice' has been made in the recognition that full-time work outside the home would entail a double burden for themselves because of their husbands' refusal to participate in domestic work (1999). There is also a reluctance, even among some feminists, to entrust the care of their children to paid 'help' for the number of hours that full-time employment still requires. In India the availability of cheap labour in the form of domestic servants can enhance the attractiveness of the housewife role for middle-class women. As Evelyn Glenn has argued in another context:

> Because they gain these privileges, … middle-class women have less impetus to challenge an arrangement that ultimately oppresses them. Middle-class men can keep the illusion (or reality?) of the home as a private haven, while enjoying the services of their wives or their wives' substitutes in maintaining that haven. Thus, the notion of mothering as women's responsibility is left unchallenged.
>
> (1994, p. 7)

Therefore, as Kumkum Sangari has pointed out, when women consent to patriarchal values, practices and arrangements, it need not be construed as consent to these alone since 'the patriarchies they are subjected to are simultaneously located in specific modes of production, in class structures and in particular forms of caste-class inequality' (1993, p. 869). She argues that

> [t]he consensual, contractual elements combine agential power with subjection for women and produce a mixture of consent and resentment. … Nor is there anything straightforward about the element of consent since it may rest on a series of factors ranging from wide social consensualities, economic dependence, social pressures congealed into structural necessities or dispersed as moral systems, the pull of affective relationships and the perceived legitimacy of the offer to protect women from the patriarchal violence of other individuals or groups.
>
> (p. 869)

She agrees with Myra Ferrée (1990) in seeing the family as a locus of struggle, not of uncontested male power. But while Ferrée emphasises the multi-dimensional nature of family power, Sangari argues that the politics of the household seem to be structured according to the degree

of access women have to patriarchal power, or 'delegated or surrogate patriarchal roles' (1993, p. 871). These may include control over the redivision of household labour among women (daughters, daughters-in-law, unmarried female relatives), over marriage alliances, over sons, over the behaviour of other women. In this context, abuses of power are not uncommon; indeed, Suma Chitnis has pointed out that 'most women in India experience family violence as the cruelty of the mother-in-law or the husband's sisters' (1988, p. 92). Even in the absence of outright abuse, Ashis Nandy has explained the widespread 'maternal neglect' of daughters in India (which results in a much higher survival rate for boys than for girls) as 'a weird expression of woman's hostility toward womanhood' and a 'psychological defense of turning against self by identifying with the aggressive male' (1990, p. 34). The more careful nurturing of boys is also a function of the fact that an Indian woman's major source of status, self-respect and authority has traditionally been her son. Moreover, many Indian women's economic security in old age depends on their sons, so that 'ensuring their lifetime loyalty is often an enduring preoccupation' (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 279).

On a more general level, it must be remembered that Indian society has always been highly hierarchical and that in India patriarchy is only one from among the several hierarchies that oppress women – and men as well. Suma Chitnis has identified the several hierarchies within the family as 'age, sex, ordinal position, affinal and consanguinal kinship relationships' and those within the community as 'particularly caste, but also lineage, learning, wealth, occupation and relationship with the ruling power' (1988, p. 83). It is also notable that because Indian society continues to emphasise kin and family affiliation, individualism tends to be curtailed by existing societal and family situations. Scholars in the past have tended to focus on Indians' sociocentric cultural understanding of volition because it explains distinctive features of Indian social organisation. Kakar, for instance, has emphasised the strong psychological identification with the family group, as well as economic and social considerations which reinforce the family tie (1981). More recent scholarship, however, has suggested that Indian women do not embrace the sociocentric orientation or give priority to extended-family ties to the same extent that men do: 'Because she must shift her allegiance from one group to another, a woman may be more likely to develop a sense of independence from any particular group' (Derné 2003, p. 106).

Regardless of the depth of Indian women's family affiliations, Liddle and Joshi have argued that 'in a male-dominated society, women are submissive to men's needs, restrained about their own desires, dependent

on, and deferent to, men' (1986, p. 180). Delphy and Leonard, in their 'materialist analysis' of women's oppression, contend that 'the low value set on women, the self-denial and masochism' they are encouraged to develop, exist because their labour is appropriated by men. That is, 'ideas and values are the effect of, and not the reason why, we do the work we do, though they are part of the means by which the exploitation is continued' (1992, p. 17). The particular ideologies that have been developed to reinforce male supremacy in India have tended to revolve around romanticised notions of female self-sacrifice, conveyed through films, songs, rituals and various forms of religious indoctrination. While self-sacrifice does bring religious merit and social approbation, Liddle and Joshi insist that it is also 'a learned response to, and a subsequent justification for, an enforced set of circumstances' (1986, p. 203).

While there is still widespread poverty and social injustice in India, the most recent literature has noted significant progress towards gender equality among the growing middle class, which, according to Dinesh Sharma, now comprises 'well more than one-third of the Indian population' (2003, p. 4). This progress appears to be associated with recent economic growth, thus supporting Liddle and Joshi's contention that 'economic independence provides the material basis for changing the conditions of women's lives' (p. 161). Although economic independence can enable a woman to negotiate more democratic relationships within the family, it does little to address what Anuradha Roy has described as the 'psychic turmoil' of the middle-class Indian woman:

> Educated, enlightened, demanding more from herself and life than her predecessors, conscious of an identity apart from that which links her to a male, she is yet faced by numerous age-old assumptions about the temperament she is expected to possess, the attitudes to be displayed, and the role to be played.
>
> (1999, p. 70)

This conflicting situation of the educated Indian woman tends to generate complex and at times inconsistent responses to patriarchy, which all four novelists have explored extensively in their fiction.

Kamala Markandaya

In Kamala Markandaya's fiction, we see a progressive development not only in her feminist consciousness but also in the propensity of her

heroines to resist oppression rather than to passively accept it. The female characters in her earlier novels never protest against any form of social injustice. Rukmani, Nalini and even the strident Jayamma, all unquestioningly accept the world as it is and their place in it. Their only aspiration is sufficient food for themselves and their families; they don't long for other material comforts. They enjoy simple pleasures when they can, and the question of gender equality never seems to be part of their consciousness.

In *Nectar in a* Sieve (1954) we have seen Rukmani's disappointment at the birth of a daughter as evidence of her sharing in the traditional Indian preference for sons. Indeed, the function of a wife in her society is shown to be the production of (male) offspring, as evidenced by her acceptance of Ira's 'barrenness' as sufficient justification for her husband's desertion and remarriage. Rukmani herself has been desperate to produce sons despite her family's dwindling ability to support them. She secretly decides to turn to an English doctor for fertility treatment after years of waiting for another baby, and Rao and Menon make an interesting argument about the implications of this decision:

> Considering that in her community the white man is looked upon either with dread or with suspicion, it is, in fact, non-conformist on Rukmani's part to go to Kenny for medical treatment. … It also implies a silent defiance of her husband.
>
> (1997, p. 20)

It may indeed be unusual, even courageous, for a woman of Rukmani's background to seek modern reproductive intervention from a European man behind her husband's back. However her motive for doing so is entirely in keeping with the traditional patriarchal values of her society, which views the production of male offspring as a woman's supreme achievement. While Nalini in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is not as fully characterised as Rukmani, she appears as a conventionally submissive young woman who never complains, even when her husband Ravi beats her. She does, at one point, seek refuge in her sister's flat but obediently goes back home with Ravi when he comes looking for her. She has left home out of fear, but it can also be seen as a silent, mild form of protest.

Sometimes in Markandaya's fiction it is the men who are more supportive of their daughters' empowerment, and this is in keeping with arguments about women being the sternest perpetrators of patriarchal

values in India (Nandy 1990, Roy 1999). In *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), for example, it is Rukmani's father who taught all six of his children to read and write and her mother who questioned its relevance for girls: '"What use," my mother said, "that a girl should be learned! Much good will it do her, when she has lusty sons and a husband to look after"' (*NS*, p. 16). In *Two Virgins* (1973) as well, we have seen that Appa is characterised as much more liberal than his female relatives, though his advocacy of 'freedom' for his daughters turns out to be tragically misguided in such a male-dominated society where vulnerable young women can be exploited with impunity. Lalitha, it is clearly suggested, has been seduced not just by Mr Gupta, but also by the cultural emphasis on female beauty and desirability, which is not specific to India and which is constructed at least as much by women as by men. Lalitha's faith in her beauty and sexual power has been instilled in her from an early age by her parents, teachers and family friends who favour her over her plainer sister, Saroja. The novel as a whole highlights the cultural ambivalence around feminine desirability in India. On the one hand women are rewarded for being attractive, but on the other hand any exercise of female sexual power is frowned upon, with women depicted as the harshest judges of other women's reputations. One example of this is the scandal resulting from the false rumour that a widow in the village is pregnant:

> Aunt Alamelu went very solemn and said that it was a terrible thing to happen to a woman. A woman's good name is her most precious possession, she told Saroja and Lalitha … but Appa said Aunt Alamelu was talking nonsense since in nine months at the utmost Nalini's mother's good name would be restored to her. Aunt Alamelu put on her worldly-wise face and said, True, Brother, true, but when mud is slung a little always sticks.
>
> (*TV*, p. 53)

Female reputations are shown to be so fragile (at least within the community of women) that Lachu, who preys upon schoolgirls, cannot be brought to justice because of the unwillingness of mothers for their daughters to be identified as victims of molestation: 'Secretly the mothers were glad the girls would not testify, they did not want it shouted in the courts what had been done to their daughters' (*TV*, p. 20). The women in *Two Virgins* (1973) are shown to disapprove not just of sexual immorality but of any deviation from their experience of conventional female behaviour. While Appa

respects Miss Mendoza (the schoolteacher), Amma and Aunt Alamelu disapprove of her single status.

On the subject of gender disadvantage, the young Saroja emerges as the most intelligent and honest character in the novel. While she will not accept the fatalistic idea that women are 'born to suffer', she does see very clearly the precise nature of gender disadvantages in her society that her elders have come to take for granted or overlook:

> Aunt Alamelu had nowhere to slink to. She said it was the state her feet were in that foiled her. Saroja mulled it over, saw it wasn't true at all, it was her sex. Appa and Anand could strike off to the coffee shop, Manikkam had his bhang hideout, Bundi's liquor store was always crammed with men. Women had no bolt-holes. There was no escape for them, they had to stand where they were and take it.
>
> (*TV*, p. 123)

> [Saroja reflects that] all the rules and restrictions against which you had chafed since you were a little girl, all were designed, it was amply confirmed as you grew older, to stop you becoming pregnant until the marriage knot had been tied.
>
> (*TV*, p. 201)

If female sexuality is represented as a source of oppression in *Two Virgins* (1973), it is represented as a source of power in *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). There we have seen the hold that the Maharaja's mistress Mohini has over him and her exercise of the power this gives her over the affairs of state. It is, however, a manipulative type of power not available to all women – notably not to the hapless wife, Shanta Devi who, it is suggested, would have more power if she had even one son instead of four daughters. Mohini has extra power being the mother of the heir apparent, and she uses it not to subvert patriarchy but to subvert imperialism. Later, however, the young Usha's desire to join in the struggle against imperialism is her justification for flouting the restrictions traditionally imposed upon Indian girls. This is historically accurate, in the sense that a large number of Indian women did come out of the cloisters of their homes to join in the freedom struggle against the British – and gained some personal freedom for themselves in the process. But it was not until much later that a widespread and sustained struggle against patriarchy itself began in India – during the 1970s when *Two Virgins* and *The Golden Honeycomb* were published.

Nayantara Sahgal

In her novels, Sahgal evidently prefers to focus on women's resistance to patriarchy rather than their role in maintaining it. It is through the struggle with patriarchal society that her protagonists develop and mature. Although the difficulties of challenging patriarchy and reappraising social roles are always apparent, Julie Scott finds that 'Sahgal's fiction nevertheless gives a positive message to women, of the potential each one of them possesses' (1998, p. 126). Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) gradually move towards an awareness of their emotional needs and eventually find the courage to constructively change their lives. The portrait of Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985), according to Viney Kirpal, 'spells hope for the upliftment and emancipation of Indian women through education, economic freedom and self-determination' (1996, p. 177). Finally, in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) women like Mother and Razia who refuse to be tied down emerge triumphant. Julie Scott points out that 'all the major women characters in *Mistaken Identity* take it upon themselves to act out their own desires as opposed to being objects of desire, thereby subverting conventional mores of Indian women' (1998, p. 126).

While many of Sahgal's protagonists refuse to be suffering and self-sacrificing, the fight against an established order and the shattering experience of divorce cause hardship and suffering in themselves, which she realistically portrays in her fiction. In *This Time of Morning* (1965), the cause of Rashmi's divorce is identified as incompatibility, but in each of Sahgal's later novels divorce seems to be the protagonist's 'solution' to the problem of patriarchal domination. As we have seen, Sonali in *Rich Like Us* (1985) explicitly rejects the 'manacles' of marriage rather than opting for an egalitarian one, and the protagonists of *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) end their relationships rather than trying to change them. This would seem to imply that egalitarian marriages do not or cannot exist in India, in which case the enemy is 'tradition' rather than individual males. According to Makarand Paranjape, Sahgal 'does tell us quite emphatically that she sees tradition as being the main cause of the enslavement of women' (1998, p. 164). However it is both men *and* women who maintain tradition, and of course tradition can be changed. We see none of Sahgal's heroines trying to transform their marriages; instead we see some who passively submit to male domination (Rose, Mona, Nishi) and others who end their marriages or

reject marriage altogether (Saroj, Simrit, Sonali, Bhushan's mother). This all-or-nothing approach may solve the immediate problems of the individual 'victims', but it does little to transform marriage into a more egalitarian institution and neither does contribute much towards solving the wider problem of women's oppression within the family.

Patriarchal oppression, moreover, is not always a matter of men oppressing women; rather, it is often women who impose and enforce gender-based restrictions upon themselves and other women within the family. This is recognised more in *This Time of Morning* (1965) than in Sahgal's later novels. Nita's mother, in pushing her into an early, arranged marriage, is ensuring the same type of life for her daughter that she herself has had to endure:

> 'I can't understand what you want out of life,' her mother fretted. 'After all you never really know a man till you marry him.' Nita recoiled from the defeat in her mother's eyes, the terrible acknowledgment of a lifetime's denial.
>
> (*TTM*, p. 155)

Even a happily married woman like Mira recognises that the give-and-take of her marriage consists mainly of her giving and his taking:

> There were people who needed looking after, Mira told herself, and others who looked after them. She had learned early in her marriage that she belonged among the latter, that sisterhood of the capable on whom others depended. Kailas was singularly helpless in his home, delighting her with his dependence.
>
> (*TTM*, pp. 46–7)

This is fine for Mira, though she also believes that *all* women should share her attitudes and values. Indeed, she is more dismayed by the concept of divorce than by her daughter's extreme unhappiness which led to such a drastic decision:

> What reason under heaven could sever the marriage bond? Women stayed married, had since time immemorial stayed married, under every conceivable circumstance, to brutal insensitive husbands, to lunatics and lepers. And Dalip, God forbid, was none of these things. Fulfilment had lain in service and sacrifice. If there was suffering, too, it was part of life.
>
> (*TTM*, pp. 152–3)

We see fewer examples of mothers with patriarchal attitudes in Sahgal's later fiction – only the vague impression that Sonali's mother in *Rich Like Us* (1985) would like for her to marry and that she had 'set up a howl' when Sonali got her hair cut (*RLU*, p. 112). There is also no acknowledgement that the preference for sons over daughters is prevalent among women as well as men in India. In *Mistaken Identity* (1988) the sinister practice of female infanticide, which was 'left to the women' (*MI*, p. 63) is presented as a case of women carrying out men's orders rather than sharing in the general belief that a boy is a blessing and a girl is a burden.

While she seems to regard 'tradition' as the most formidable obstacle to women's emancipation, Sahgal believes that there are limits to anyone's tolerance of oppression: 'The most traditional, the most passive, the most conventional creature at some point will dig in her toes and say, thus far and no farther' (Varalakshmi interview 1993, p. 9). This may be true, but in her novels it seems to be opportunity rather than reaching the limits of tolerance which inspires her protagonists to rebel. Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) is literally rescued from an unhappy marriage by Dubey in the same way that Mother in *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is rescued from purdah by Yusuf. We have to wonder, then, whether Rose, Mona and Nishi in *Rich Like Us* (1985) would leave their domineering, insensitive husbands too if they had similar knights-in-shining-armour to rescue them. Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971), rather than deciding to leave, is literally thrown out by her husband and later 'rescued' by Raj. As Makarand Paranjape rightly points out, her leaving Som is neither an assertion of equality nor a quest for freedom:

> She is not a feminist to begin with. Moreover, Simrit has no quarrel with men or even with the apparent domination of men; what she rejects is a certain kind of man who embodies certain kinds of attitudes and values. Under the circumstances Raj comes across as a miraculous example of the male sex, so different from the other shallow and oppressive men in her life.
>
> (1998, p. 180)

Moreover, Raj quickly assumes a dominating rather than a supporting role in Simrit's life. According to Pankaj Singh:

> Despite some feminist sentiments expressed by him now and then, his total behaviour merely reinforces the patriarchal myth of

> man's superiority over woman. … He almost bullies Simrit with his intellectual superiority. … Raj either 'explains' something to Simrit or says 'severely' that she must know more about this or that, or he simply 'orders'. Simrit on her part accepts her inferiority: she 'confesses' about her ignorance.
>
> (1991, pp. 137–8)

Simrit is accustomed to taking orders; only this time the one to give orders may not be so directly opposed to her tastes and values as her first husband was.

Because Sahgal's protagonists remain dependent upon men for agency and direction even after they leave their husbands, it can be argued that in her novels malevolent male domination is simply replaced by benevolent male domination. Sahgal had perhaps come to recognise this by the mid-1980s when she wrote *Mistaken Identity* (1988), which seems to redress the balance. Here, the life of the male protagonist Bhushan is directed by women except when he is in prison. His incarceration in prison corresponds to his mother's incarceration in purdah, so that domestic imprisonment is juxtaposed with political imprisonment and the personal is once again equated with the political.

Anita Desai

In contrast to Sahgal's heroines who transform their lives, Desai's protagonists tend to remain trapped in unsatisfactory domestic situations. While each of their situations is unique, they all desire love and respect for their individuality in an environment which often denies them both. Constrained by repressive family structures, the protagonists of her earlier novels attempt to retain autonomy by retreating into a subjective world (Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* and, to some extent, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*) or by cultivating coldness and indifference, refusing to give in to demands made on them (Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain*).

In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) Maya's retreat takes the form of an inexorable slide into a psychotic state. Haunted by a childhood prophecy of a death four years after her marriage, induced by her father into a dangerous fatalism, unable to communicate her fears to a husband who neither respects nor understands her, Maya lets herself be destroyed by her overactive imagination. Anuradha Roy argues that

> Maya finds a way to compensate for the casual contempt with which she is treated by Gautama in her own acute response to life. Her mind

> develops a dangerous fixation on the idea as she is slowly filled with an illusory sense of superiority on at least this one count. Her sick mind, looking for a reason why his death is preferable to hers, finds it in his indifference to the vibrant beauty of life … [She attempts to] latch on to that one quality which makes her feel superior to others, and thus compensate for the lack of self-esteem instilled by a society which valorizes male rationality.
>
> (1999, pp. 15–16)

We may question whether rationality is necessarily male, but in any case, Maya rebels against Gautama's way of thinking – in itself an act of resistance in a culture in which the ideal wife unquestioningly accepts her husband's authority. This rebellion, slow and muted at first, ends ultimately in her cathartic killing of her husband. Afzal-Khan argues that 'when, on a moonlit night, Maya pushes her husband over the edge of the roof, she has, in fact, achieved victory over fate, over all the traditional myths of acceptance and resignation that the men in her life had tried to force on her' (1993, p. 66). I would point out, however, that in murdering her husband, she *is* fatalistically accepting the notion that one of them 'has' to die as the astrologer had foretold. Moreover, it is difficult to concur with Afzal-Khan's view of the conclusion as a 'liberation' (except on the most nihilistic level), consisting as it does of Maya's loss of her husband, her sanity and her life.

Much more affirmative, in my view, is the conclusion to *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), though some critics view Sita's decision to return to her husband and children in Bombay as a defeat, a failure to achieve selfhood and autonomy.[1] If it is true, as Afzal-Khan argues, that Sita's retreat to Manori is a retreat from 'a world of the masculine values of competitiveness and aggression' (1993, p. 75), the refuge to which she retreats turns out to be even more unsatisfactory. The island of Manori, which had been her childhood home, is not as she remembers it. The old house is dirty and dilapidated, no food is available and the islanders do not warmly welcome her because, as Jasbir Jain points out, 'in herself she has no importance, she is tolerated because of her father, and later her husband gets a welcome in his own right as a man. To her dismay, she is as much an outsider here as she was on the mainland. The daily disappointments are many' (1982, p. 28). Although Sita had disdained her middle-class existence in Bombay, she now finds that she and her children miss the material comforts that came with it – like running water. Slowly, as she relives her past, Sita realises that the past was not all she had made it out to be; the 'pastoral haven' her father had supposedly

created was literally a myth. Thus her journey to Manori becomes a journey of self-discovery and a recognition of 'reality' which results in her decision to return to the world of social responsibility which she cannot, in any case, escape. In an interview, Desai herself explains this as neither a victory nor a defeat but a compromise:

> Of course if one is alive, in this world, one cannot survive without compromise – drawing the line means certain death, and in the end, Sita opts for life – with compromise. … It is for heroes and martyrs to say 'the great Yes' or 'the great No' – most of us have not the courage to say either Yes or No. We say, as the ordinary Sita says at the end, 'All right then, if I must …'.
>
> (Ram interview 1983, p. 27)

The conflict between the need to withdraw for self-preservation and the need to be involved in the painful process of life continues in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). Here, Nanda Kaul, unlike Sita, has already fulfilled her duties as wife and mother. She chooses to 'escape' only after the death of her husband and after all her children and even grandchildren are grown and married. Having thus spent most of her adult life looking after the needs of others, she feels she is entitled to some privacy and solitude towards the end of her life. Any sympathy the reader might feel for Nanda Kaul's desire to be left alone after a life of onerous duties within a patriarchal culture, however, is effectively undercut by the insensitivity she demonstrates towards her traumatised great-granddaughter Raka, who is sent to stay with her for the summer. Unable to look beyond her own selfish needs, Nanda cannot see that Raka is a child desperately in need of love and care, despite having been told in a letter that Raka has been ill and that her mother has suffered 'another' nervous breakdown as a result of her husband's drunken brutality (*FOM*, p. 14). Instead of being concerned, Nanda is annoyed that her solitude is to be disturbed and that she will again have to attend to a child's needs. So she is pleased to discover Raka to be a quiet child with a penchant for isolation, thinking that she can now leave the girl to her own devices and not have to bother with her. Similarly, she fails to help her old friend Ila Das who is in dire financial straits and being threatened by several men in the village where she lives and works as a social worker. At this point Nanda Kaul realises that she could considerably ease Ila's burdens by offering her a room in her house, but she cannot bring herself to do so. Consequently, Ila Das is raped and murdered on her way home from Nanda Kaul's house, and

at the same time Raka has started a forest fire which is evidently her revenge against the adult world.

Most of the critical literature interprets this tragic ending as a demonstration of Desai's view that 'one cannot with impunity reject the duties that real life thrusts upon one, no matter how onerous the burden' (Afzal-Khan 1993, p. 80). There are several surprisingly judgmental views of the 'failure' of mothers in this novel, including the 'failure' of Raka's battered mother. According to Jasbir Jain:

> [Nanda] forces herself to think of the needs of the child, … [but] her performance is inadequate. Raka goes hungry and is uncomfortable in her presence. She disappears for hours on the lonely mountainside and keeps herself busy in her own world. Raka's own mother and grandmother have also failed her.
>
> (1994, p. 54)

It is surprising that no mention is made here of Raka's culpable father whose drunken violence has led to his wife's nervous breakdown and their daughter's traumatised withdrawal from social interaction. Again, Ujwala Patil appears to blame Ila's death on Nanda's failure to protect her and help her: 'Nanda had ignored this responsibility, and had placed her self interest higher than this moral demand … Nanda had become a party to this oppression of woman, by abdicating her moral understanding, and by her attitude of irresponsible indifference' (1987, p. 67).

My own view is that Desai shows Nanda Kaul to be *partly* responsible for the failure of nurturance and care that compelled Raka to resort to setting the forest on fire, and that Ila's tragedy is another stark illustration of the consequences of Nanda's failure to involve herself in others' lives. However, what is conspicuously absent from the critical literature is a sympathetic analysis of the conditions which have led to Nanda's extreme stance. In different ways, the world has been a hostile place for both Nanda and Raka, so the easiest course for both has been to withdraw from it. Jasbir Jain sees Nanda as one of Desai's characters for whom 'wholeness' means 'holding onto their privacy, not surrendering their innermost beings to the roles they are called upon to play' (1987, p. 112). I would argue, however, that instead of an abstract resistance to 'surrender of the self' there are concrete reasons for Nanda Kaul's attitude: she has been trapped for too many years in the nurturing role without choices and without being nurtured herself. We discover this at the end of the novel

when the shock of Ila's brutal murder forces Nanda to confront the truth about herself:

> Nor had her husband loved her and cherished her and kept her like a queen – he had only done enough to keep her quiet while he carried on a lifelong affair with Miss David, the mathematics mistress, whom he had not married because she was a Christian, but whom he had loved, all his life loved. And her children – the children were all alien to her nature. She neither understood nor loved them. She did not live here alone by choice – she lived here alone because that was what she was forced to do, reduced to doing.
>
> (*FOM*, p. 145)

There is also a hint earlier in the novel that Nanda had once genuinely embraced her nurturing role: 'The care of others was a habit Nanda Kaul had mislaid. It had been a religious calling she had believed in till she found it fake' (*FOM*, p. 30). She 'found it fake', of course, upon realising that her love and care were not reciprocated by her husband and children. To protect herself, she retreated into a façade of pride and aloofness, quietly engaging herself in the discharge of her family duties until she was no longer obliged to do so. Thus while the narrative does reveal why Nanda Kaul has grown increasingly resentful, bitter and reluctant to involve herself with other people at all, it does not condone her attitude; on the contrary, it shows the consequences to be disastrous.

It is difficult to escape this bleak novel's insistent suggestion that men are the core problem – that women should protect one another from men. To some extent, this suggestion is offset by the characterisation of Nanda's (male) servant Ram Lal, who befriends Raka in an easy, natural way, but without exception the other males in the novel emerge as nothing more than agents of oppression. Ila Das's family money, we learn, was squandered away by 'three drunken, dissolute sons … and not a penny of it to either of the two clever, thrifty, hard-working daughters' (*FOM*, p. 123). We see a group of cruel schoolboys mercilessly taunting and teasing Ila Das, Nanda Kaul's faithless husband, Raka's father who brutalises her mother and of course the shadowy Preet Singh who rapes and murders Ila Das for daring to try to prevent him from virtually selling his seven-year old daughter. On the other hand, we also see examples of female complicity in male oppression: Tara's mother encouraging her to stay with her abusive husband, as well as Nanda's apparent failure to protest against her own husband's treatment of her.

There was no heroism, the novel suggests, in Nanda Kaul staying in a loveless marriage, carrying on her 'duties and obligations' with increasing bitterness borne of self-pity.

Of all Desai's characters, Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) probably comes closest to heroism because she is shown to care for others out of choice and out of genuine love rather than duty. She loves her disabled brother Baba but hates the role of the dutiful, self-sacrificing Indian woman and is horrified when Dr Biswas sees her in that light:

> 'Now I understand why you do not wish to marry. You have dedicated your life to others – to your sick brother and your aged aunt and your little brother who will be dependent on you all his life. You have sacrificed your own life for them.'
>
> Bim's mouth fell open with astonishment at this horrendous speech. … She even hissed slightly in her rage and frustration – at being so misunderstood, so totally misread, then gulped a little with laughter at such grotesque misunderstanding.
>
> (*CLD*, p. 97)

While Dr Biswas may have been wrong about Bim's reason for not marrying him, he was right about the life Bim would lead. When Tara visits her, she is an unmarried middle-aged college lecturer still looking after Baba in the decaying home in Old Delhi. She is shown to have mixed feelings, including resentment towards her siblings who have left her in this position. At the end of the novel, when Bim decides to let go of her anger, she experiences a profound feeling of peace and calm which Desai explains thus in an interview: 'I wanted her to experience for a moment the calm, the peace of mind following an acceptance of what has happened and what is inevitable and what she must live with and deal with' (Ball and Kanagayakam interview 1992, p. 33).

Narenda Kumar argues that Bim's acceptance of her situation 'is not a sign of defeatism; it is an indication of her conquest of self' (1995, p. 88). It is not clear to me how this 'conquest of self' differs from self-sacrifice or self-effacement. Neither can I agree with Chakravarty's argument that 'what gives Bim the resilience to evade the fate of Mira masi is an intuitive apprehension of her connectedness to others' (1998, p. 84). After all, Mira masi had nothing *but* this sense of connectedness. My own view is that the other things in Bim's life which fulfil her (a career she enjoys, an appreciation of music and literature and nature, as well as a genuine love for Baba) are shown to enable her to let go of her anger and forgive the people who have hurt her. Then too, her conversations

with Tara have enabled her to re-examine her past and evaluate her present in the perspective of time so that she comes to understand and accept the choices she has made. She comes to recognise the destructive effects of her anger and bitterness – upon herself as well as upon the people she loves. She also comes to recognise and appreciate what she does have – a fulfilling career, freedom from a demanding husband like Tara's Bakul, and importantly, a shared past with siblings she loves.

Clear Light of Day (1980), then, seems to advocate a balance between self and social responsibility. As we have seen, the dangers of living entirely for other people are effectively illustrated in Mira masi's tragic demise and in Mrs Biswas's unattractive display of self-sacrifice and embarrassing worship of her son. At the other extreme, we have the Das parents' harmful withdrawal from domestic affiliations, signalled by their preoccupation with playing cards. Bim, in the end, embraces the nurturing role – but on her own terms. She decides to participate in her own way rather than to 'submit' like Mira masi – and indeed, the early Nanda Kaul. Renu Juneja points out that the novel is

> very careful to separate Bim's nurturing from any predilection for self-denial associated with Indian women. … Through Bim, Desai is able to affirm nurturing as an essentially feminine attribute while simultaneously freeing the feminine role from stereotypical associations of dependence, weakness, and passivity.
>
> (1987, p. 85)

The kind of self-actualisation that Bim achieves in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), Desai suggests, is impossible in a repressive family structure like the one we see in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). Here she emphasises women's role in maintaining patriarchy, supporting her view that 'women are as responsible as men are for all those orthodoxies and traditions having been kept alive through the generations' (Jussawalla and Dasenbrook interview 1992, p. 165). In this novel, the hierarchy of power within the household (from father down to mother down to child down to servant) is neatly illustrated by Mama telling Uma to 'tell cook to bring Papa his lemonade' (*FF*, p. 9). Papa is treated as king of the household, having his orange peeled and segmented for him with all the pips and threads carefully removed. He is 'the only one in the family who is given a napkin and a finger bowl; they are emblems of his status' (*FF*, p. 24). He doesn't even have to ask for anything; Mama does it for him: 'Uma, pass your father the fruit', and when it is not peeled for him, he pretends not to see it (*FF*, p. 23).

The hierarchy of power in the Indian family (and women's complicity in it) is shown to extend to child-rearing practices, with sons being favoured over daughters to such an extent that I wonder whether Desai exaggerates the situation to make a point. As has often been noted, the birth of a son confers upon an Indian mother much more status than does the birth of a daughter, and Desai is scornful of women's collusion in this:

> More than ever now, she was Papa's helpmeet, his consort. He had not only made her his wife, he had made her the mother of his son. What honour, what status. Mama's chin lifted a little in the air, she looked around to make sure everyone saw and noticed. She might have been wearing a medal.
>
> (*FF*, p. 31)

Moreover, while daughters can be looked after by servants, sons need 'proper attention':

> 'But ayah can do this, ayah can do that' – Uma tried to protest when the orders began to come thick and fast. This made Mama look stern again. 'You know we can't leave the baby to the servant,' she said severely. 'He needs proper attention.' When Uma pointed out that ayah had looked after her and Aruna as babies, Mama's expression made it clear that it was quite a different matter now, and she repeated threateningly: 'Proper attention.'
>
> (*FF*, p. 30)

As this passage suggests, rational explanations, when there aren't any, are supplanted by recourse to an authoritarian 'don't-question-this' posture, suppressing any challenge to the rigid patriarchal hierarchy in which mothers often collude. Oddly enough, the *appearance* of favouring sons over daughters seems to be at least as important as the substance, as evidenced by Mama's remark that

> [i]n my day, girls in the family were not given sweets, nuts, good things to eat. If something special had been bought in the market, like sweets or nuts, it was given to the boys in the family. But ours was not such an orthodox household that our mother and aunts did not slip us something on the sly.
>
> (*FF*, p. 6)

The idea that the patriarchal family imposes stifling 'roles' on its members is a recurring theme throughout the novel, and these roles are

shown to oppress sons as well as daughters. Although Arun is portrayed as diffident and not particularly bright, his upbringing is dominated by his father's pursuit of 'education for his son: the best, the most, the highest' (*FF*, p. 118). Hours upon hours of school followed by after-school tutoring in every subject leave him exhausted and drained every day. Mama wonders why Arun can't go to the local college, but 'Papa did not even bother to counter Mama's arguments; he did not expect her to understand the importance of sending Arun abroad to study, the value of a foreign degree, the openings this would create later in life, the opportunities' (*FF*, p. 120). If Mama is without a role during the university application process ('Papa's busiest time'), she regains one when the letter of acceptance finally arrives:

> After the first congratulatory embrace and the making of traditional sweets to be sent around to friends and neighbours, Mama too huddled up on the swing, sniffing delicately into her handkerchief, now and then dabbing at her eyes. Uma sat by her, even patted her arm now and then, but was uncertain if Mama was sorrowing at the thought of Arun going away, or if this were a role mothers had to play – in which case she must be allowed to continue.
>
> (*FF*, p. 121)

Arun himself has no reaction: 'This blank face now stared at the letter and faced another phase of his existence arranged for him by Papa' (*FF*, p. 121).

If *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is critical of the traditional Indian family structure, it is no less so of its counterpart in the West, where roles are different but equally neglectful of individual needs. Mrs Patton is shown to be so wrapped up in her role as the cheerful, supermarket-going suburban housewife that she fails to notice obvious signs of bulimia in her daughter. If Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) manages to transcend rigid constructions of Indian womanhood, Arun seems, at the end of *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), to be trying to free himself from the burdens of living up to the false notions of masculinity held by his family. In contrast to the other men in the novel, who are invariably depicted as aloof and self-centred, Arun tentatively reaches out to Melanie and to Mrs Patton with sympathy and concern. His final gesture – placing the shawl sent to him by his family on Mrs Patton's shoulders before departing – suggests not only a wish to comfort and share, but also a rejection of male 'privilege', which he has experienced as a burden.

Shashi Deshpande

Deshpande's belief in the strength of women comes through in all of her novels, and she has also articulated this belief in essays and interviews:

> I do believe that women have a great strength. All humans do. Actually we have reserves we are often unaware of. But for women the situation is made more complex by the fact that they have been told they are weak, they are made to believe in their weakness. And often they learn to hide their own strength, because a woman's strength seems to weaken a man. … Often they are the main supports of the family, though the male is the titular head.
>
> (Holm interview, 2000)

Her novels suggest that in India women's strength in coping with patriarchy has at times had destructive effects; she shows examples of women upholding patriarchal values, accepting subordination, insisting on maintaining a monopoly of domestic work, working out their resentment on other women and on themselves, retreating into silence and even blaming female victims for their own oppression. Her novels also contain examples of women resisting patriarchy with admirable strength and determination, though most of these 'strong' women are older, minor characters who are never idealised. The protagonists themselves tend to be middle-aged women with more freedom and more choice, and yet they often lead surprisingly passive lives – as they are well aware. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) remembers 'having read somewhere, in a magazine maybe, of Betty Friedan saying that it was easier for her to start the women's lib movement than to change her own personal life' (*DHNT*, p. 107). By the end of each of Deshpande's novels, the protagonist has decided to try to change her life, though she understands the difficulty of doing so. As Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) concludes: 'We don't change overnight. It's possible that we may not change even over long periods of time. But we can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible' (*LS*, p. 193).

This emphasis on individual change implies a view that patriarchal conditioning in India has been so effective that it is now located within communities of women and often within the individual

female psyche. Certainly the fathers of the protagonists are shown to be more liberal than the mothers in Deshpande's fictional world. For instance, Saru's father in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is portrayed as a quiet, traditional man who had left the upbringing of his children to his wife. However, while her mother had vehemently opposed Saru's ambition of becoming a doctor, since it would be difficult to marry off an 'overqualified' girl, her father had stood by her firmly. Later, when Saru finally tells him about Manu's nightly sexual abuse, he listens carefully and patiently to her outpourings. Despite his traditional orientation, he urges her to talk to Manu about the problem. Indu's and Jaya's fathers in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence* (1988), respectively, are modern, broad-minded and remarkably free of the dominant sexist, patriarchal ideology. However, as Atrey and Kirpal rightly point out, Deshpande 'does not bring out in detail the relationship of these men with their wives which would have helped determine their overall attitude' (1998, p. 64).

As we have seen, Deshpande's novels emphasise the maternal role in maintaining patriarchy. Without exception, the mothers of the older generations openly favour their sons over their daughters and work hard to prepare their daughters for lives just like their own. This is made explicit in Mira's diary in *The Binding Vine* (1993): '"Mother," I always wanted to ask, "Why do you want me to repeat your history when you so despair of your own?"' (*BV*, p. 126). Other examples of women's harshness towards other women include Shakutai's belief that Kalpana was raped 'because she flaunted herself' (*BV*, p. 149), as well as Saru's mother's belief that a local woman who was hideously tortured by her husband and in-laws may have 'deserved what she got' (*DHNT*, p. 87).

Despite these instances of overt cruelty involving minor characters, none of the protagonists' husbands (with the exception of the 'dark' side of Manu's split personality in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*) are shown to be particularly domineering towards their wives. Rather, it seems to be the general culture of wifely subservience in India which shapes the marital relationships in Deshpande's fiction. In *Roots and Shadows* (1983) we see male involvement in childcare regarded by traditional women as evidence of the wife's inadequacy. The more 'emancipated' Indu is critical of such blind acceptance of rigid norms and values: 'I had often wondered … have they been born without wills, or have their wills atrophied through a lifetime of disuse?' (*RS*, p. 6). But she also has to admit to herself the extent to which marriage – not her

husband, but marriage itself – threatens to turn her into a submissive, self-effacing woman:

> I had found in myself an immense capacity for deception. I had learnt to reveal to Jayant nothing but what he wanted to see, to say to him nothing but what he wanted to hear.
>
> (*RS*, p. 38)

> When I look in the mirror I think of Jayant. … Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him. And I can't blame him. It's not he who has pressurised me into this. It's the way I want it to be. And one day I thought … isn't there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? … Am I on my way to becoming an ideal woman? A woman who sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's?
>
> (*RS*, p. 49)

Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) has been even less resistant to the influence of patriarchal ideology in India. Admiring the domestic expertise and diligence of the women in Mohan's family, she decided during the early years of her marriage to pattern herself after them: 'They had been a revelation to me, the women in his family, so definite about their roles, so well trained in their duties, so skilful in the right areas, so indifferent to everything else. I had never seen so clear, so precise a pattern before, and I had been entranced by it' (*LS*, p. 83). When she later becomes disgusted by her own servility, her (male) friend Kamat suggests to her that she has only herself to blame, observing that 'making others dependent on you … increases your sense of power' (*LS*, p. 84).

Ruthless in her self-examination, she also admits to herself that it is her own fear of failure rather than her husband's discomfort, which has curtailed her writing career. Her narrative, however, suggests a more complicated explanation in which fear of displeasing her husband inhibits her creativity, leading to her subsequent work being rejected so that she eventually settles for light domestic journalism. After she had won a prize for a story about 'a man who could not reach out to his wife except through her body', Mohan had been worried that 'people might think the couple was us, that the man was him' (*LS*, p. 144). So she had turned to writing 'light humorous pieces about the travails of a middle-class housewife. … I didn't have to come out of the safe hole I'd crawled into to write about Seeta' (*LS*, p. 149).

Jaya is shown to go from one extreme to the other, from blaming Mohan for inducing her to compromise her creativity to blaming herself for her own failings, so that the reader is encouraged to see this as an example of the multiple inter-related causes which underlie human actions and attitudes. As Deshpande herself reminds us in an essay, 'Our motives are often incomprehensible, even to ourselves; we don't always know why we do things' (2003, p. 108). Thus the workings of patriarchy are placed in a larger framework of complex interconnected motivations for human behaviour, not all of which are easily identifiable. In this case, patriarchy is not just an oppressive force which dictates to Jaya that she must defer to her husband on the appropriateness of her writing; it is also shown to be a 'safe hole' and a source of convenient excuses for failing to develop her potential, as her friend Kamat points out to her: 'It's so much easier to be the martyr who'd have done so much … "if only I had the time. But I'm a wife and mother first, my home and children come first to me … blah blah blah"' (*LS*, p. 148).

If *That Long Silence* (1988) is a novel about Jaya's groping towards self-awareness, Urmi in *The Binding Vine* (1993) is shown to have a fuller understanding of herself and her motivations from the beginning of the narrative. Aware of women's role in maintaining male hegemony, she critically analyses the power relationships in other people's marriages:

> It irritated me terribly at first, her constant refrain of 'Harish says.' She says it less now, but her submissiveness, her willingness to go along with him in whatever he wants, makes me angry.
>
> (*BV*, p. 80)

Having strong feelings of love for her own husband and fearing his rejection, she is nevertheless wary of the trap of submissiveness: 'Now there is … the fear of Kishore turning away from me, a distant look on his face, the fear of his not wanting to come back to me. … And I can understand them only too well, Vanaa and Inni; I want to submit too. But I know that if I walk the way of submission once, I will walk that way forever' (*BV*, p. 82). Thus Urmi's fearful awareness of the power of patriarchy appears to exceed her fear of 'losing' her husband.

Like Urmi, all of Deshpande's other protagonists are shown to have conflicting feelings about their husbands, their marriages, themselves and the patriarchal culture into which they have been socialised and with which they are struggling. Saru in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) even sees the advantages of an earlier era when she imagines that women's lives were simpler if not easier: 'If only she had belonged to another

time, where a woman had no choice but to go on! … It was so much easier for women in those days to accept, not to struggle, because they believed, they knew, there was nothing else for them. And they called that Fate' (*DHNT*, p. 70).

Quiet acceptance of oppression and suffering, however, is shown in all of Deshpande's novels to have devastating effects. As we have already seen, Saru's 'terrified silence' has shrouded Manu's abuse in secrecy, enabling him to continue. Ironically, she herself is scathingly critical of the village women's silence about *their* suffering, unaware of its perfect applicability to her own predicament:

> [There were women in her native village] to whom she was not Saru but a 'lady doctor.' Artlessly they would turn the talk to some complaint of theirs. In a few days she knew the whole range of them. The myriad complaints, the varying symptoms, she thought, if put together would provide a world of data for a treatise on the condition of women. Backache, headache, leucorrhea, menorrhagea, dysmenorrhea, loss of appetite, burning feet, an itch 'there' … all the indignities of a woman's life, borne silently and as long as possible, because 'how do you tell anyone about these things?' Everything kept secret, their very womanhood a source of deep shame to them. … It made her angry. 'Why didn't you do something about it earlier?' she often asked. But they had schooled themselves to silence.
>
> (*DHNT*, p. 107)

Mohan's mother in *That Long Silence* (1988), too, had 'schooled herself to silence' about her husband's ill-treatment of her. Jaya writes that Mohan saw strength in his mother, 'but I saw despair. I saw a despair so great that it would not voice itself. I saw a struggle so bitter that silence was the only weapon. Silence and surrender' (*LS*, p. 36). But Jaya too is shown to have harboured silence for much of her married life, often because 'it was so much simpler to say nothing' (*LS*, p. 99). She decides, however, at the end of the novel to 'erase the silence' that exists between herself and Mohan.

Silence can at times be a weapon against the oppressor, as exemplified in *Small Remedies* (2000) when the young Madhu simply ignored a colleague's chronic sexual harassment at work. She knew, however, that she was able to do this because she was in a position of strength, being good at her job and having the support of the boss, who was a friend of her stepfather. Later, in writing Savitribai's biography, she reflects on the much greater difficulties faced by women who struggled to establish

and develop professional careers just a generation earlier. Through sheer persistence over a long period of time, Savitiribai had finally overcome her Guruji's reluctance to teach her music, but Madhu is even more impressed with her courage in resisting 'peer pressure' from the other women in the traditional household:

> Bai had her father-in-law's support and his encouragement [in learning music]. But a man is not much use to a woman. After all, she lives her life among women and with women. Anger, derision, contempt, ridicule – I can imagine that Bai had to face all these when she came out of the shadowy room back to her life among the women. … There's always the temptation to succumb, to go back to the normal path and be accepted. To resist this temptation speaks of great courage.
>
> (*SR*, pp. 220–1)

The courageous and determined Savitribai, however, is also portrayed as extremely demanding, controlling and not always honest. There are no idealised characters in Deshpande's novels, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Identifying the distinctive features of Indian feminism requires an analysis of Indian women's responses to the particular patriarchal arrangements with which they are confronted, and the novels portray a wide range of such responses from stoic acceptance to outright rejection. However, the most interesting responses can be complex and conflicted, because their very inconsistency helps reveal the nature of the conflicting ideologies at stake. As we saw in the chapter introduction, Delphy and Leonard argue that ideologies are the *effect* rather than the *cause* of particular economic arrangements, so that 'the low value set on women' results from the fact that their labour is appropriated by men (1992, p. 17). However, an examination of the Indian context as portrayed in these novels suggests that while Delphy and Leonard's theory may convincingly explain female subordination on a *general* level, it cannot fully account for the situation of women who are subordinated but not necessarily exploited. Nor does it account for hierarchies of female power within patriarchal systems, as well as the many reasons for female consent to patriarchal arrangements, all of which these novels can help to illuminate.

A more flexible theoretical approach is that of variable 'patriarchal bargains', as explained by Deniz Kandiyoti and discussed in the introductory section. All of the novels under consideration were written during the latter half of the twentieth century – a time when patriarchal bargains in India were in rapid transition, particularly among the urban elite and middle classes whose lives are the focus of Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande. Markandaya includes a broader social range in her fiction, but she too highlights the tensions and changes in gender ideology during this period of time. None of the protagonists inhabits a traditional joint family (which Kandiyoti associates with 'classic patriarchy'), though the narrative of Deshpande's *Roots and Shadows* (1983) takes place in such a setting as Indu revisits her childhood home. There she confronts patriarchal ideologies and practices which she has rejected, but all of the novels suggest that attitudes and customs rooted in the joint family system continue to permeate Indian society and culture, including 'nuclear' families. Indeed, there are striking examples in many of the novels of older women continuing to exercise what Sangari has described as the 'delegated or surrogate patriarchal roles' granted to them in the joint family system (1993, p. 871). In particular, they endeavour – often unsuccessfully – to prepare their daughters for lives within a strict patriarchal setup. For example, it is mothers who uphold patriarchal values and fathers who advocate more equality of opportunity for their daughters in Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973), Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985) and Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980). While a number of 'liberal' fathers appear in Deshpande's novels, Desai seems to make a special point of emphasising mothers' complicity in patriarchal oppression. In some cases this goes beyond the favouring of sons over daughters (which is ubiquitous throughout these novels), and extends to the active exploitation of daughters (as in *Fasting, Feasting*) or to turning a blind eye to domestic violence (as in *Fire on the Mountain*). Deshpande, like Desai, highlights women's collusion in the patriarchal oppression of *other* women, but she also explores women's role in maintaining their *own* subordination. Perhaps this is best exemplified by Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1988) who comes to recognise the extent to which she has embraced domestic servility and curtailed her writing career in order to enjoy the dubious power of her family's dependence on her.

Women's complicity in patriarchal oppression points to the element of consent, which Sangari identifies as crucial to the maintenance of patriarchy. An examination of the novels suggests that women's *reasons* for consenting to patriarchal arrangements have a different emphasis in India than in the West, and that they also vary according to social class.

In particular, working-class women in India tend to view marriage as a means of protection from 'other men' – as we see particularly in Deshpande's *That Long Silence* (1988) and *The Binding Vine* (1993). Middle-class and elite Indian women, on the other hand, tend to consent to patriarchal arrangements partly because of their class-based benefits. For instance, the greater availability and affordability of domestic servants in India than in the West can enhance the attractiveness of a purely domestic role for affluent Indian women. However, all of the novels emphasise the long-term disadvantages of housewifery, particularly economic dependence which reinforces women's subordination within the family. The novels also suggest that economic dependence, which Sangari identifies as an important determinant of women's consent to patriarchal arrangements, has tended to be a stronger factor in India than in the West. For example, Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) draws attention to the family discrimination between sons and daughters with regard to educational opportunities, which perpetuates female economic dependence. Another factor which may be stronger in India than in the West is what Sangari describes as 'the pull of affective relationships' (1993, p. 869). That is, family loyalty can be an important determinant of women's willingness to accept patriarchal structures. Interestingly, however, while all of the novels depict strong family ties, the majority of their female protagonists are at odds with their families precisely because of their gender-based disadvantages.

In terms of women's *resistance* to patriarchy, each of the four novelists has a distinctive approach. We see a progressive development in Markandaya's fiction from the stoic acceptance of her earlier female characters to the questioning of gender norms by the young Saroja in *Two Virgins* (1973), to the dramatisation of the potential for female sexuality to be a source of power rather than oppression for women in *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). This 'postfeminist' idea – familiar enough in the West – is not evident in the fiction of the other three novelists, and it was actually rather progressive at the time *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977) was published. But even there, it was imperialism rather than patriarchy which was being subverted.

To confront the patriarchal conditioning among communities of women and within the individual female psyche, Deshpande emphasises the need for individual change and for resistance to female peer pressure. Her novels portray the conflicting feelings and responses of her protagonists to patriarchal attitudes within the wider society and within themselves. This suggests that the contemporary educated Indian woman may be confronted with more contentious, competing gender

ideologies than her counterpart in the West because of historical and cultural factors discussed in the Introduction and the first chapter of this book.

Whereas Sahgal's protagonists resist patriarchy by either ending their marriages or opting out of marriage altogether, Desai's female characters tend to employ psychological defences, such as withdrawing into a subjective world or cultivating indifference. *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) emphasises, however, that individual self-preservation is not only incompatible with social responsibility but also self-defeating. In *Clear Light of Day* (1980) Desai seems to be advocating a balance between self and social responsibility which, as all of her novels suggest, is never easy (and sometimes impossible) to achieve. However it may be the most appropriate and realistic feminist strategy not only in places like India where family and community ties are strong, but also, I would contend, in the West, where individual rights and social responsibility for men *and* women need to be more equitably distributed.

5
Form and Narrative Strategy

Introduction

Feminist literary theory has been controversial, not least because there have been a number of scholars (most notably Rita Felski) who have argued that there is no apparent link between feminist politics and the formal aspects of women's writing, and that it is content alone which determines the 'feminist' quality of any particular text. Whether or not this contention is true, meaning is of course created *through* form, so any examination of the expression of feminist concerns in literary texts has to include an analysis of narrative technique. This chapter provides such an analysis, and the introductory section briefly surveys the relevant debates in feminist literary theory, with special attention to the question of their applicability to the novels of Indian women writing in English.

While literary production has historically been dominated by men, the novel has been the genre in which women have, for various reasons, been most prolifically engaged as authors and made the most significant contributions to the literary canon. Thinking of nineteenth-century British writers, Virginia Woolf suggested in *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that the form of the novel suited a woman better than that of, say, the epic or the poetic play because 'all the older forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands' (p. 67). Woolf also pointed to the practical implications of most women's domestic situations: 'If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting-room. And … she was always interrupted. Still it would be easier to write prose and fiction there than to write poetry or a play. Less concentration is required' (p. 67).

This, I would suggest, has parallels with the Indian context during the latter half of the twentieth century. While few Indian women were actually secluded during this time, we have seen that ideologies of female domesticity continued to operate among the middle class, who constituted the vast majority of writers – and readers – of novels in English.

In its content, also, the novel was often considered, and still is, a genre particularly fitting for women. As Mary Eagleton has observed, 'Tolstoy may have written novels that range over half of Europe, but it was equally possible, as Jane Austen proves, to write novels that go no further than Bath' (1996, p. 138). What happens in the family and in the local area has been 'the staple diet of the novel, and it is the very world that women know so well' (p. 138). Virginia Woolf believed that observing the nuances of interpersonal relations constitutes women's distinctive contribution to literature because the 'training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion' becomes an education in novel writing. Like the Indian female novelist, the sensibility of her British counterpart 'had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room. People's feelings were impressed on her; personal relations were always before her eyes' (1928, pp. 67–8). Rita Felski has suggested further that

> [i]t is precisely because present-day feminism has emphasized those realms of experience which are traditionally considered to lie outside the 'political' (that is, public) domain, that the novel, as a medium historically suited to exploring the complexities of interpersonal relations, has been so prominent in the development of feminist culture.
>
> (1989, p. 14)

All of this, I would suggest, applies equally to the twentieth-century Indian context where, according to Meenakshi Mukherjee, 'the realistic novel was able to come into existence because the tension between individual and society had acquired a certain intensity' (1985, p. 99). She, too, relates the form of women's writing to the social conditions in which they write:

> Social realism at its best conveys in concrete and specific terms the complex relationships between individuals and their society. This relationship can be studied in sharper focus when the individual's life is hedged in by an enclosed space which permits very few

> options, and when the odds are against her, in other words, when she is a woman.
>
> (p. 99)

In her book *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* (1999), Anuradha Roy is ambivalent about the implications of the continued use of 'the realistic narrative mode' by most Indian women novelists. She notes that 'their close approximation to reality can easily create the impression of social documentaries deficient in imaginative reach and artistic sophistication' but suggests that there is a sexist 'prejudice' behind such an evaluation:

> Patriarchal assumptions of the superior worth of male experience have contributed to a systematic devaluation of their work, in common with women writers all over the world. Since most of them write about the enclosed domestic space and a woman's perception of experience through her position in it, it is assumed that their work will automatically rank below the works of male writers who deal with weightier themes. *The prejudice becomes particularly strong with women writers using the realistic narrative mode, as most of them continue to do*. [my emphasis]
>
> (1999, pp. 9–10)

But by the end of the book, she is complaining that

> [w]hile courageously dealing with sensitive areas of women's existence, Indian women writers in English have not shown equal courage in the use of different narrative modes to challenge patriarchal ideology. In the last two decades, women writers of the West … have found alternatives to the traditional realistic pattern of women's writing in lyrical poetic narratives, in fantasy, in parody, in satire. On the other hand, their Indian counterparts have shown an aversion towards experimentation. … The lacuna becomes even more prominent if compared with the vibrant technical experimentation of Indian male authors after Rushdie.
>
> (pp. 144–5)

It is worth exploring *why* Indian women novelists have tended to be relatively conservative in their use of narrative techniques, but first it is necessary to refine the generalisation about their use of the 'realist' narrative mode because, as Rita Felski reminds us, 'the general usage

of the term "realism" to designate any text which is not obviously experimental in form and language has tended to blur the distinction between different kinds of realism' (1989, p. 80). Indeed, Damian Grant points to the 'chronic instability' of the word realism as evidenced by 'its uncontrollable tendency to attract another qualifying word, or words, to provide some kind of semantic support' (1970, p. 1) – hence the distinctions between 'naïve' realism, social realism, critical realism and so on. Felski identifies narrative omniscience as a defining element of the nineteenth-century European and American realist novel, with the narrator setting out to 'survey an entire social world and to give authoritative insight into characters and events' (1989, p. 81). Sahgal does this, too, to some extent, particularly in *This Time of Morning* (1965), but even this is closer to what Damian Grant identifies as critical realism: 'a depiction of contemporary reality which is not aloof and neutral, like Flaubert's, but informed by some moral belief' (1970, p. 76). Indeed, by the end of the nineteenth century, recognising that different writers subscribe to different criteria of truth, many were questioning the existence of an objective 'reality', with Maupassant saying, for example: 'Every one of us simply creates his own illusion of the world' (quoted in Grant, p. 51). It is the more plausible illusion, then, that earns the description of reality, so that Grant defines realism as 'the achievement of reality, the creation of belief, however this may be arrived at' (p. 72). He distinguishes this 'theoretical' definition from the one he associates with 'general usage', which 'still intends by realism the close rendering of ordinary experience' (p. 72). While these two definitions are not mutually exclusive, I consider the latter to be more precise and useful in describing the type of realism presented in the novels of Markandaya, Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande.

Relating realism to feminist writing in the Anglo-American context, Felski noted at the end of the 1980s that

> [m]any examples of feminist writing can be described as embracing a form of realism. It is, however, a 'subjective' autobiographical realism which possesses few features of the nineteenth-century novel. The omniscient narrator is typically replaced by a personalized narrator whose perspective is either identical with or sympathetic to that of the protagonist; there is a consequent shrinking of focus from the general survey of the social world to the feelings and responses of the experiencing subject. … This 'subjective' form of realism, centred upon the experiencing consciousness, can thus incorporate the

> depiction of dreams, fantasies, flights of the imagination as part of the conception of the real.
>
> (1989, p. 82)

This is not far from Henry James's conception of his narrative as 'not … my own impersonal account of the affair in hand, but … my account of somebody's impression of it' (quoted in Grant 1970, p. 53). It is also, I would posit, an apt description of the type of 'subjective' realism which characterises the writing of Desai and Deshpande, who tend to go further than Markandaya and Sahgal in exploring individual female consciousness and individual female desires.

However, in a chapter revealingly entitled 'Realism and the Fear of Desire', Leo Bersani argues that 'the formal and psychological reticence of most realistic fiction' tends to support the status quo rather than promote social change:

> Realistic fiction seems to give an enormous importance to disruptive desires by embodying them in its heroes. Indeed, the most frequent confrontation in the realist novel is between society and a hero who refuses to accept the definitions which society proposes of his duties and satisfactions. … As desire becomes more radically disruptive of established orders, the novel tends to become less realistic, more allegorical.
>
> (1978, pp. 66–7)

So, according to this line of argument, the feminist criticism of Markandaya, Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande is limited by their use of a literary form which 'depends, for its very existence, on the annihilation or, at the very least, the immobilizing containment of anarchic impulses' (p. 67). Felski suggests, however, that the realistic autobiographical novel remains a major form for oppressed groups precisely because so many of them still experience difficulty in 'defining an independent identity beyond that shaped by the needs and desires of those around them' (1989, p. 78).

Defining the self is, of course, complicated, contentious and – many would argue – ultimately impossible. As Felski herself admits in a later book, 'clearly, attitudes to personhood fluctuate wildly across cultures: the modern yearning for self-actualisation is a historical novelty, not a universal norm' (2003, p. 60). It has, however, structured the narratives of many novels by Indian women writers since the 1970s, as Seshadri has noted: 'The narrative device which involves the protagonist's

expedition to self-realization, be it a successful journey or not, is a common attribute of all the central characters within this tradition' (1995, p. 59). There are, of course, important cultural differences, as Jasbir Jain rightly points out: 'The Indian *bildungsroman* raises different issues. Marriage, caste, joint family structures and relationships all play an important role, as do myths and legends. Women in the process of becoming need to confront and negotiate these' (2002, p. 54). While these differences in conceptions of the self and approaches to the self can be explained partly by cultural factors (such as stronger family ties in India), Western feminist approaches to the self are far from uniform, and many feminists (in India as well as the West) emphasise that 'identity' is in any case unresolved and inconsistent. Others, such as Jasbir Jain, have insisted that for the Indian woman:

> Selfhood is not imagined as an abstract concept, but the struggle for space begins with the physical existence and the right to ownership [of one's own body]. The body is controlled by patriarchal morality, and by the roles of wifehood and motherhood. … Thus any attempt to seek selfhood or project a subjectivity, or to work towards self-expression and freedom, has to work through the body.
>
> (2002, p. 119)

This relationship between the female self and the body is a complicated one, and Western feminist writers have taken a diversity of approaches. To take a simple example, in her discussion of popular feminist novels of the 1970s, Rosalind Coward identified 'the confession of sexual experience [as] one of the most characteristic features' (1996, p. 222), whereas Felski has argued the exact opposite: 'This emphasis [in feminist texts] upon autonomy as women's most pressing need means that sexuality rarely plays a dominant role in the self-discovery process' (1989, p. 131). To some extent, this divergence of views can be explained by different conceptions of what constitutes 'self-discovery'. In the Indian context, the female self-discovery narrative tends to centre around a married woman, usually a mother, re-assessing her life and her relationships. Sexuality is, of course, part of this, but here the coming-of-age process is *not* 'almost synonymous with sexual experience', as in Coward's description of the Western feminist 'confessional' novel.

On a more fundamental level, there is a controversial body of feminist theory, which posits a direct relationship between the (sexed) body and language itself. This has become known as 'French feminism' because it was developed by several feminist scholars working in France during

the 1970s – most prominently Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray. According to Kari Weil, 'for French feminists, women's desire is what is most oppressed and repressed by patriarchy, and what most needs to find expression – an all but impossible task since, according to them, language is itself patriarchal' (2006, p. 153). They see language (or 'symbolic discourse', as they call it) as a means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else – including women. Ann Rosalind Jones explains that 'conventional narrative techniques, as well as grammar and syntax, imply the unified viewpoint and mastery of outer reality that men have claimed for themselves' (1997, p. 379). However, 'to the extent that the female body is seen as a direct source of female writing, a powerful alternative discourse [which they call *écriture feminine*] seems possible' (p. 374).

Irigaray has argued that women, because they have been caught in a world structured by man-centred concepts, 'have no way of knowing or representing themselves. But she offers as a starting point the fact of women's bodies and women's sexual pleasure, precisely because they have been so absent or so misrepresented in male discourse' (Jones 1981, p. 372). Cixous, too, links women's diffuse sexuality to women's language. Despite denouncing theory, she does not hesitate to describe and theorise a writing of and through the body, urging women to 'write their bodies, write their desires and so unleash their power' (Weil 2006, p. 162). Women's libido, they insist, is not only repressed, but essentially different from men's, and that difference gives rise to a different language. This promotion of feminine difference leads to 'experiments with prose that break normal syntax, effacing the borders between subject/verb [sic] and active/passive: "Text: my body … the rhythm that laughs you"' (quoted in Weil 2006, p. 165). Not surprisingly, 'French feminism' has been charged with being essentialist and with denying the infinitely different, lived experiences of women. Moreover, the claims of *écriture feminine* remain troubling to those feminists who dispute the idea that language is patriarchal, as well as to those who have resisted a sense of being tied to the biological.

In addition to language, feminist literary theory has considered the potential links between women's writing style, narrative strategies and feminist consciousness. Ellen Moers, looking at the use of bird metaphors in women's writing, concluded that there is something distinctive about the way women writers have used certain images (1977). She posited a link between particular metaphors and the social and historical position of women writers and characters – for example,

the caged bird representing the restricted lifestyle of the middle-class British woman in *Jane Eyre*. Such an interpretation could also be applied to the recurring images of caged animals in Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). Moers's method of textual analysis – searching for distinctive imagery, tones or stylistic devices – was much favoured in Anglo-American feminist criticism of the 1970s. But subsequent scholars have found difficulty in discerning a definitive female style because, as Mary Eagleton has observed, 'the differences between women writers always seem to outnumber the similarities' (1986, p. 285). Rita Felski has also pointed out that 'it is impossible to distinguish reliably between the writing styles of male and female authors when judging work "blind", without knowing the sex of the author' (1989, p. 26).

If there is substantial consensus on the difficulty of discerning clear links between gender and writing style, the question of whether particular narrative techniques express a feminist consciousness is more controversial. Some feminists have argued that plot is 'phallocentric', that it perpetuates a male-defined view of the world. The linear sequence of storytelling, they insist, cannot come to grips with women's experience. According to Ellen Friedman and Miriam Fuchs, 'traditional narrative is a sign of patriarchal mastery, an attempt to impose a single, fixed order of meaning' and women who write in such a way are being co-opted into masculine ways of thinking (1989, p. 7). It is true that stories of adventure, discovery and achievement have traditionally been the provenance of men. Yet I would argue that as women's lives change, this link between being an active protagonist and being a man begins to loosen. It's an idea to be investigated in the Indian context, as part of the more general investigation of the potential links between feminism and literary form in the novels of Indian women writing in English.

Kamala Markandaya

Kamala Markandaya's novels can broadly be termed 'realist' in the sense that they aim to create the impression of authenticity and objectivity in their portrayal of particular social environments. However, 'realist', as we have seen, is a notoriously elastic term, and we shall examine the variety of narrative techniques used by Markandaya to create various fictional worlds, all of which are rendered with the aim of exposing social injustice in India. Whether or not her novels can be characterised as 'feminist', she does have a particular interest in analysing the lives and experiences of women in India. A number of critics apply the term 'social realism' to her fiction, which Rao and Menon define as 'the acute

awareness of the social forces that surround the individual, their power to influence the lives of men and women for better or for worse – and the overall interaction of the individual and society' (1997, p. 125). As Prasad points out, Markandaya's emphasis is on the external world of social values rather than on individuals per se: 'Even though her characters are not meticulously probed into in terms of their individual psychology, they emerge as living characters, as reflectors of social change or as symbols of a particular phase of Indian life' (1984, p. 102).

Location and time are not specified in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), though Margaret Joseph suggests that the choice of proper nouns indicates that the setting could be anywhere in South India (1980, p. 21). Rukmani, then, is presented as an Indian peasant 'everywoman' whose story expresses the author's social concerns about economic hardship in India and the impact of industrialisation on the lives of the rural peasantry. If the setting of *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) could be any rural location in South India, the location of *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is even more unspecified; it could be any city anywhere in India during the twentieth century. Here the omniscient third-person narrator tells a story about urban economics through the medium of a 'common man', Ravi, who has migrated there from the countryside looking for work. While *Two Virgins* (1973) focuses on gender ideology rather than economic inequality as such, its unspecified village setting is endowed with a similarly 'representative' effect. *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977), by contrast, is set in a definite time frame, being an historical novel about a fictional royal family from the end of the nineteenth century to the 1920s. The fictional state of Devapur can represent perhaps any princely state in India with the usual Raj paraphernalia. The opulence and affluence of the British rulers and their Indian royal puppets are contrasted with the grinding poverty of ordinary people, including palace servants. Margaret Joseph notes that 'references to historical happenings are intended merely as underpinning to the general framework of the story' (1980, p. 90). These include King Edward's Coronation Durbar in 1903, as well as the Great War (in which the Maharajah fights for the British). The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919 is mentioned, and the agitation in Devapur is presented as part of the Gandhian movement. The novel's historical framework is further established by a prologue that quotes from Warren Hastings, Governor-General of India, and an epilogue that refers to the accession of princely states to the Indian union after Independence.

In terms of narrative structure, Markandaya's novels tend to move along smoothly in a linear chronological narrative without secondary

plots or digressions. There is, however, a noticeable variation in other aspects of style among her novels. As Uma Parameswaran observes:

> Each novel has a different voice, for the main character in each is very different from all her other protagonists. Markandaya's prose style is well synchronized with each protagonist's sensibility. … She succeeds in bringing out the texture of speech of the social classes by varying the degree of simplicity and articulation.
>
> (2000, p. 36)

Her first novel, *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), is narrated in the first person by an elderly peasant woman, Rukmani, as she reminisces about her life experiences.

The mood of quiet nostalgia is effectively set in the first paragraph:

> Sometimes at night I think that my husband is with me again, coming gently through the mists, and we are tranquil together. Then morning comes, the wavering grey turns to gold, there is a stirring within me as the sleepers awake, and he softly departs.
>
> (*NS*, p. 7)

In the fifth paragraph we are taken back in time to her childhood, and from then on the story moves forward in a straight chronological narration of her life events, ending at the point where it began. There are no subplots, no digressions and no point of view other than that of Rukmani. N. K. Jain argues, however, that

> [t]hough the novel is written from Rukmani's point of view we are not asked to identify ourselves with it. In fact her attitude of passive acceptance is thrown into high relief by being constantly called into question. The most persistent questioning comes from Kenny who speaks for the author's own attitude: he is sympathetic yet is highly critical.
>
> (1985, p. 77)

My own view is that the author's attitude is represented by neither Rukmani nor Kenny. Kenny appears as the uncomprehending outsider who, in his 'Western' belief in the ability of individuals to shape their own lives, criticises the peasants themselves for not 'demanding' better living conditions. Because the story is told from Rukmani's perspective, his attitude seems absurd: the peasants have no control

over the drought which spoils their crops, the new tannery driving up prices in the village or anything else which threatens their livelihood. In such conditions, the author presents an attitude of stoic acceptance as an almost heroic response.

Critics are divided on the question of whether the narrative voice of *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) credibly expresses the consciousness of an Indian peasant woman. Sunaina Kumar argues that 'in the main, the vocabulary and area of experience revealed through Rukmani's mediacy is in keeping with her character as a semi-literate village woman' (1993, p. 54). N. K. Jain agrees: '*Nectar* is written in a simple, unadorned prose which well accords with the simple, unassuming nature of the narrator-protagonist' (1985, p. 84). Margaret Joseph finds, however, that

> [t]he language Rukmani uses is impressive in vocabulary and effective in metaphor: in short a fine literary style which sits strangely on an unsophisticated village woman. ... She tells Kenny for example: 'There is a rare gentleness in you, the sweeter for its brief appearances'
>
> (1980, p. 22)

My own view is that Markandaya is not even attempting to capture the style of Rukmani's language, as evidenced by her choice of 'standard' English over a dialect that would give a flavour of the vernacular. As Meera Bai reminds us, 'giving vernacular colour to the English language may serve little purpose, for there are many languages and dialects in India and people of one region are not familiar with the subtleties of languages of other regions' (1996, p. 142).

The rest of Markandaya's novels are narrated in the third person, though the perspective varies. For instance, Margaret Joseph notices that in telling the story of Ravi in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), the author as narrator 'maintains just sufficient distance from him to analyse his motives and conduct, keeping at the same time close enough to identify herself with him in the flow of thought and event' (1980, p. 126). The omniscient narrator reveals Ravi's thoughts and feelings but also points out his errors in judgment. For example, on deciding to give up his life of petty crime and become a tailor's apprentice:

> Ravi sighed, deeply, secretly, with a profound sense of sacrifice. Ah Nalini, he thought, Nalini. She was worth it, worth anything, even worth giving up the sweet life for. He put it all on her, forgetting the trinity of hunger, drink and misery that had been remittent

> companion to his sweet life, and which had forced his entry into Apu's ménage in the first place.
>
> (*HR*, p. 45)

The minor characters in the novel exist largely in relation to Ravi's development. Very occasionally we get a glimpse of the perspective of Nalini or Jayamma, but most of the time we are invited to see Ravi's life through his eyes and to sympathise with his predicament, though not necessarily to condone his behaviour.

Like *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966) is told as a straight narrative in chronological order, though occasionally Ravi's thoughts bring him back to his impoverished childhood in a rural village. This past life is suggested rather than narrated, the central focus being the interaction between his character and his harsh urban environment. According to Venkata Reddy:

> As the story is about the basic facts of earning a living, simplicity, solidity and precision of language is called for. … Ravi's courting of Nalini, the cramped living conditions in the tailor's house, the common tap, the partition bed-room – all are realistically described.
>
> (1984, p. 160)

Two Virgins (1973) presents a more subjective narrative, told in the third person through the consciousness of the young Saroja, whom Sunaina Kumar identifies as a 'peripheral experiencing character' because events are presented from her point of view, though she does not occupy centre-stage in the story (1993, p. 62). Roberta Rubenstein describes the style as 'impressionistic and associative, moving fluidly from one observation of Saroja's reflective mind to another' (1974, p. 227). Though narrated in the third person, the language is that of an observant, thoughtful adolescent girl trying to learn about the adult world and the taboo subjects of childbirth, sex, her own changing body and the mysterious interactions between men and women:

> Manikkam's wife … was a wet nurse. She could not have other women's babies for them, but she suckled them at the same time as her own. When the women in the big houses had babies they sent for Manikkam's wife, if she happened to have one too. … The women, she told Saroja, used her because they did not want to spoil the shape of their breasts, which suckling did. They wanted to keep them firm and round for their husbands. Saroja wondered, if she

> had a husband, if she would put him or the baby first. She was certain she would never give away milk to another woman's baby. Sell it, Manikkam's wife corrected her, and her eyes became narrow: I *sell* it, dear.
>
> (*TV*, p. 6)

The impression of an internal monologue is enhanced by the absence of quotation marks in the narrative.

Although the tone of narration is never didactic (as it is at times in *A Handful of Rice*, for instance), Geetha points out that

> [t]he portrayal of contrasting sister heroines is very much in the moralistic tradition of female writing. The scheme used in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* – that of contrasted heroines, one representing female good sense and prudence, the other led into error and difficulty by impulsiveness and excesses of feeling and conduct – is to be found in *Two Virgins* too.
>
> (1993, p. 18)

The novel effectively contrasts the two sisters' developing views of reality, and Rubenstein points to the cinema as a suggestive symbol for the world of appearances which seduces Lalitha (1974, p. 225). This use of symbolism is rare in Markandaya's fiction, but *Two Virgins* (1973) also contains another obvious symbol in the form of a colam pattern:

> When Mr Gupta visits their house, Lalitha draws a colam pattern [on the ground outside] to welcome him. The pattern of a dove on a trellis in the garden reflects her own ambitious imaginings about her rosy future. But Gupta unconsciously reflects the hard fate she is going to suffer at his hands. 'When Mr Gupta shuffled his feet the dove got blurred'. One single unintentional step by Gupta destroys the beautiful pattern and he hardly notices what he has done. Similarly, a single move from Gupta destroys the whole life of Lalitha.
>
> (Srivastava 1998, p. 34)

It is worth noting, however, that whereas Rukmani's troubles in *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) are presented as a result of external fate, Ravi's in *A Handful of Rice* (1966) and Lalitha's in *Two Virgins* (1973) are shown to be partly due to their own characters.

The Golden Honeycomb (1977), like Markandaya's previous novels, is narrated in a linear chronological fashion, but unlike the others we

have examined, the narrative perspective shifts throughout the novel. Initially, the author 'tells' the story so as to lay the groundwork:

> The British have chosen the Maharajah. In fact they have had two stabs at it, choosing a merchant first, a victualling *bania*. The man is worthy. He supplies the oxen that haul the gun-carriages of the British armies that have been scrapping lucratively from end to end of the sub-continent.
>
> (*GH*, p. 3)

Beginning with this authorial narrative situation, the author tells a story peopled by many characters, each of whom by a combination of 'telling' and 'showing' she has particularised. Gradually the authorial voice retreats and the narration takes on the tint of the consciousness of the characters themselves:

> It was very tempting. It was no fun at all, being cooped up like this. All right for a woman, bangles and things, but a man got restless. However, it could not be done. However badly one longed to be a father to one's own people.
>
> (*GH*, p. 457)

> Lady Copeland might have been relieved, except that one did not even remotely expect anything else. She had drifted to the window, where the view continued to distract her. That extraordinary clumping of urns, not to mention the jumble inside them! – which made one fear for the rest of the garden, if not for the Residency itself. But she, superb choreographer, would put it right, garden and residence and that special retreat within it in which they could pursue their lives unmolested by India.
>
> (*GH*, p. 399)

As the latter quotation suggests, the author makes extensive use of irony throughout the novel.

While all of Markandaya's novels highlight the gendered disadvantages faced by Indian women, it is interesting to note that her most experimental novel in terms of formal technique – *Two Virgins* (1973) – is also the one which focuses most explicitly on gender ideology. I would suggest, however, that this has more to do with the subjective nature of the narrative than with any inherent connection between experimental prose and a female or feminist consciousness.

True, a more 'fluid' writing style does lend itself well to subjective narratives, but male-centred narratives can be highly subjective as well. This style, I would argue, would have been equally effective in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), which centres on the thoughts, feelings and experiences of an angry young man. Nor is Markandaya's consistent message in her earlier novels – that poverty in India oppresses women more than men – diminished by her use of conventional narrative techniques.

Nayantara Sahgal

The fiction of Nayantara Sahgal is a prime example of what Damian Grant has termed 'critical realism', in the sense that it is not aloof and neutral but 'informed by some moral belief' (1970, p. 76). Adhering to Gandhian values, Sahgal emphasises in all of her novels the need for personal integrity, which involves the rejection of greed, violence, corruption and abuses of power on all levels, from the domestic to the global. Her narratives consistently draw parallels between the public events of the outside world and the private events of the characters' lives, so that the personal and the political are deliberately interwoven. In *This Time of Morning* (1965), the politicians and civil servants are characterised as private individuals whose personal lives shape their approach to public issues. There is no separation, for instance, between Kalyan's private and public persona – both being characterised by a ruthless drive for power borne of a deprived upbringing. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), too, concerns the public and domestic misuse of power, culminating in violence in both spheres, with the former leading to the break-up of a state and the latter leading to the break-up of a family. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) and *Rich Like Us* (1985) show how corruption and greed on all levels lead to victimisation and exploitation. Finally, *Mistaken Identity* (1988), as Sahgal herself explains, is 'as much about India's identity as the plight of its counter-hero Bhushan Singh' (1997, p. 49). Wrongly suspected of being a conspirator, the hapless Bhushan is imprisoned for three years, his sudden liberation coinciding with his mother's sudden liberation from purdah. Thus the various liberations in the novel – Bhushan from prison, his mother from purdah and India from colonial rule – are deliberately juxtaposed together in order to emphasise that all are political.

Sahgal's novels, then, are at odds with Vijayalakshmi Seshadri's finding that since the 1970s Indian women writing in English have shifted their focus from global issues to the private world of the individual, 'from the collective to the personal, from the communal to the

individual' (1995, p. 50). Sahgal, who is hardly mentioned in Seshadri's book, has always focused, even in her later novels, on public issues and their impact on individual lives, on the use and abuse of power at all levels (including the domestic) and on the way in which individuals can influence public policy and vice versa. Seshadri has described the 'new women's fiction' as having 'an almost autobiographical character' because of its refusal to idealise and its reliance on the 'real woman' and her 'new image' instead (pp. 59–60). Sahgal's novels, while they engage explicitly with 'women's issues' cannot be said to have that autobiographical quality because all except *Mistaken Identity* (and parts of *Rich Like Us*) are narrated in the third person through the consciousness of several characters (both male and female), so that we are presented with a multiplicity of perspectives.

While Sahgal's novels differ in a number of ways from the 'realistic domestic novels' identified by Seshadri as the 'new' women's fiction in Indo-English literature, they do have some similarities too, including the female protagonist's journey to selfhood and freedom as a central motif. The 'new' woman's freedom is defined in terms of the 'space' in which she moves and the 'voice' she is given to speak for herself, both of which are deliberately being expanded by Indian women writers, including Sahgal. 'Space' involves not only material space and mobility but also 'the emotional space or freedom that the female figure tries to acquire in the course of the novel' (p. 62). Although Indian feminist writers are consciously rejecting the image of the confined woman and replacing it with 'that of a woman trying to expand her space, both literally and symbolically' (p. 72), a frequent criticism of Sahgal's earlier novels is the lack of 'voice' she gives to her female characters. For example, Joya Uraizee argues that Sahgal's female voices 'seem constantly displaced by male discourse' and that Saroj in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and Simrit in *The Day in Shadow* (1971) rely entirely on male directives and commands:

> Raj helps Simrit free herself from Som's stranglehold, but simultaneously obliterates her presence almost as effectively as does Som … [*The Day in Shadow*] fails to make any of the subalterns speak. Simrit can only make herself heard partially, while the servants and laborers cannot be heard at all.
>
> (2000, pp. 49, 61)

In Sahgal's later novels, more voice is given to the female protagonists but not to the servants and labourers.

Rich Like Us (1985) is narrated mainly through the perspectives of Rose and Sonali, with the male characters remaining relatively peripheral throughout. *Mistaken Identity* (1988) is narrated in the first person by the male character Bhushan, but it revolves around women who are stronger and more fully characterised than Bhushan himself, who is presented as likeable but rather aimless and dependent. Thus *Mistaken Identity* reverses traditional gender characterisations, illustrating Jasbir Jain's argument that some writers, like Desai and Sahgal, 'when they use male protagonists do so to decentralise their world' (1994, p. 36). Jain also points out that contrasted with Desai's early novels, which end in 'madness, death, suicide or surrender', Sahgal's heroines survive: 'The way a novel ends is a statement on the self – on its ability or inability to survive, specially when the "self" is a woman cornered in a world which does not provide for her self-expression' (p. 35).

Contrary to Anuradha Roy's observation that most Indian women writers have shown 'an aversion towards [formal] experimentation', Makarand Paranjape argues that with *Rich Like Us* (1985), 'Sahgal properly enters the fictional domain of post-modernism. From the more or less straight narratives of the past in which the fictional mode might be termed mimetic, Sahgal uses symbolism and allegory extensively in *Rich Like Us*' (1998, p. 178). She also points out that the narrative technique in this novel is polyphonic, alternating between a limited third person narration and Sonali's first person narrative: 'Out of the twenty-one chapters, Rose and Sonali each have eight, Nishi and Kishori Lal two each; the opening chapter is from a broader, though not omniscient point of view' (p. 181). In addition to this multi-layered quality of narration, there is a frequent motion back and forth in time through the thoughts and memories of the characters, as well as through the writings of Sonali's grandfather. Dennis Walder concludes that although the Emergency frames the action in *Rich Like Us*:

> The narrative imagines it as a moment within an immense and varied history. … The circling, digressive structure, within which stories are enfolded within stories, suggests indigenous narrative traditions; although Sahgal's skilful deployment of free indirect speech and stream of consciousness techniques may derive from modernist Western traditions too – exemplifying on the formal level the cultural 'sharing' she wishes to promote.
>
> (1998, p. 105)

While *Rich Like Us* (1985) is arguably Sahgal's most feminist novel in terms of *content*, it seems to me that its narrative techniques are not such a radical departure from those of her earlier novels. *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) and *The Day in Shadow* (1971) are all narrated in the third person through the consciousness of a number of characters: 17 in *This Time of Morning*, seven in *Storm in Chandigarh* and five in *The Day in Shadow*. Not only are we given access to their thoughts and feelings, but flashbacks to the past through their memories form a substantial part of the narrative of each novel. This pattern continues in *Mistaken Identity* (1988), which, although narrated entirely in the first person by Bhushan, also manipulates anachrony through his memories, reflections and tales to his prison mates about his past. The chapters tend to begin during the time of Bhushan's imprisonment (1929–32) and then quickly telescope to the past through his reminiscences. Again, the timescale rapidly accelerates towards the end of the novel after his release from prison.

Thus while Sahgal's prose is generally accessible, her narratives are neither linear nor lacking in formal complexity. All of her novels can broadly be termed 'realist' in the sense that language and literary conventions are not foregrounded or defamiliarised. However, none of them corresponds to Felski's description of the modern feminist realist novel, which focuses on the thoughts, feelings and experiences of a central female protagonist (1989, p. 82). As we have seen, all except *Mistaken Identity* (1988) are narrated through the perspectives of a number of characters instead of just one, as in Felski's description. Moreover, while the 'feelings and responses of the experiencing subject[s]' are examined in some detail in each of Sahgal's narratives, there is no 'shrinking of focus from the general survey of the social world' (1989, p. 82). Indeed, as Manmohan Bhatnagar points out, 'the narrative is frequently interspersed with objective and factual accounts of the political developments of the period wherein her novels are set' (1996, p. 63). In this way, too, Sahgal's novels emphasise the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres.

Anita Desai

All of Desai's novels focus on individual subjective experience. Family roles and relationships are examined through the consciousness of one or more characters, though (with the exception of the middle section

of *Cry, the Peacock*) a third person narration is always adopted. But nowhere can the narrative technique be said to have an 'objective' method of reporting. The point of view shifts, perspectives change, counterviews are projected, but always in an intensely subjective mode with the authorial presence remaining unobtrusive.

Structurally, each of Desai's novels is divided into two or three – sometimes four – equal parts. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is divided into three unequal sections, the first and last being told by an impersonal third person narrator who observes Maya's state of mind at the beginning and end of her gradual breakdown. The large middle section which is rendered in the first person presents Maya's tragedy from her own point of view. Here, as Anuradha Roy observes:

> The disjointed sentences, the sudden transitions, the silences and gaps which are integral to the method are particularly suited to convey a fractured sensitivity. … The feverish quality of the prose, the gush of images, powerfully convey Maya's mental disintegration. In her over-wrought imagination, everything is intenser, larger than life.
>
> (1999, pp. 112, 115)

We see a progression in her consciousness towards increasingly distorted perceptions of reality, as exemplified by her surreal experience of the dust storm: 'For all the while the heat was oozing into the room, pouring in like thick, warm oil, swelling and expanding till it became physical, a presence that pressed against one's body, strangled one in great, virulent arms' (*CP*, p. 182). We also see her fears expressed in hallucinatory images of snakes, reptiles and the albino astrologer who predicted her early death. The final section, which serves as a sort of epilogue, quietly evokes sympathy for Maya in her state of complete derangement.

Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) is also presented sympathetically but not uncritically. The remarks of the islanders at the beginning and end of the novel provide the frame within which the main narrative is placed. To them she appears plain, dishevelled, undignified and – they conclude at the end – both 'mad' and 'angry': 'Angry with me, angry with Miriam, angry because it rained, angry because there was no food – *always* angry. Mad people are like that' (*WSWG*, p. 157). The novel itself is divided into three roughly equal parts: Monsoon '67, Winter '47, Monsoon '67. The first and third sections take place in the present time of Sita's life and the second in her past.

A more complex version of this structural technique is presented in *Clear Light of Day* (1980), as explained by Desai herself:

> [*Clear Light of Day*] is divided into four chapters. The first deals with a family reunion. Like all family reunions, it is only partially successful. There are many sour notes among the happy ones. The second chapter carries us back in time to my four chief characters' eventful and emotional youth. The third chapter takes us still further back, or deeper down, shall I say, into their childhood and infancy. In the fourth, I bring them all back to the family re-union which I described in the first chapter but I hope with a deeper resonance and clearer significance. My technique has been to pick out just a few episodes and images from their four separate but linked lives and repeat them over and over, seen from different angles at different times of their lives so that each twist of the prism casts a new light and nothing, not even the most familiar, is ever fully known. There is always the further possibility of discovery and exploration.
>
> (Srivastava interview 1984, p. 225)

Desai is also aware of the gendered dimension of her artistic vision, having explained her views of the differences between male and female writers in an interview:

> [Women] live mostly in such confined spaces and therefore their field of observation is at the same time more restricted and more intense. This leads to their placing their emphases differently from men, on having a very different set of values. Whereas a man is more concerned with action, experience and achievement, a woman writer is more concerned with thought, emotion and sensation. At least, so one would think, but this is by no means always so.
>
> (Ram interview 1983, p. 32)

This concurs with Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* (1928), and it is also interesting to note that the field of vision in Desai's novels has progressively widened over time. *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) is intensely focused on the troubled psyche of its protagonist Maya whose spatial world is limited to her home, her garden and the homes of a few friends. Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) ventures away from her home in Bombay to an island which may be nearby geographically but is vastly far away in terms of her experience. There is an

expansive sense of space in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), set as it is on a hill station with panoramic views and large areas over which Raka wanders. The narrative, however, is focused on the thoughts, perceptions and conversations of the main characters Nanda Kaul, Raka and Ila Das. There is no authorial comment, no contextualisation, no description except through the perspectives of the experiencing characters. The same is true of *Clear Light of Day* (1980), which is set in a particular neighbourhood in Old Delhi while ranging far afield in terms of feelings and memories. The perspectives of the two Das sisters, Bim and Tara, are presented and compared in such a way that we are left with a feeling of having traversed long distances – not in space, but in time through their memories, conversations and emotional experiences. Desai's next three novels – *In Custody* (1984), *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) and *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) – feature progressively wider geographical settings, but again the perspective is insistently subjective. Finally, *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) is narrated in the third person through the consciousness of Uma in India and then, more briefly, her brother Arun in America.

It will now be evident that character rather than story is Desai's central concern, as she herself affirms: 'Story, action and drama mean little to me except insofar as they emanate directly from the characters I am writing about, born of their dreams, wills and actions' (quoted in Dash 1996, p. 10). She often creates binary oppositions between her characters in terms of attitudes, temperaments and outlook on life. For instance, we have seen the contrast between the imaginative Maya's response to the world through her senses and the detached Gautama's response through his intellect in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963). A similar tension is set up between the claims of intuition and the processes of reason in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975). Here Raman represents sanity, rationality and an acceptance of conventional norms and values, in contrast to his wife Sita's extreme emotionality which renders her unable to cope with her domestic life – which, unfortunately, is all she has. Interestingly, their daughter Menaka is drawn as another foil to Sita. Portrayed as calm, methodical and self-possessed, Menaka deplores her mother's 'emotional excesses' and 'acts of drama'. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), too, establishes a number of pairings of characters in order to explore contrasting ideas. For example, the Das sisters, Tara and Bim, are two very different characters with different experiences and perspectives of the childhood they spent together. Having been timid, dependent and passive as a child, Tara has spent her adult life as a diplomat's wife – an active, outgoing, social role. Bim, the more spirited of the two, the more confident and ambitious, has ironically

been trapped in Old Delhi looking after the family home and the ever-dependent Baba. We have also seen the contrast between the giving Mira masi and the withdrawn parents. The pairing of characters continues in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) – for example, the clumsy and unattractive Uma contrasted with her beautiful and graceful sister Aruna, the frail and timid Arun contrasted with the athletic Rod, Melanie's pursuit of 'sickness' contrasted with Rod's pursuit of 'health' and so on. In every case, the narrative 'tells' us nothing about these characters, but instead 'shows' us through their thoughts, perceptions, actions and conversations.

One of Desai's purposes in presenting contrasting characters seems to be to explore feelings and experiences from different angles. In *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) the emotional incompatibility between Maya and Gautama is revealed in their reactions to their surroundings but more particularly in their attitudes towards death. While the dog Toto's death shakes Maya to the core and reactivates childhood fears, Gautama remains coolly matter-of-fact about it. In *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Sita's actions and feelings are seen through the eyes of the islanders, her relationships with her children, and Raman's actions and responses. *Clear Light of Day* (1980), too, presents a multiple reality as Tara and Bim approach a shared past from different perspectives, revealing different angles on the nature of family ties and the process of growing up. The emphasis is not on the events themselves but on what they mean to each of the sisters, who grow and develop in the course of the narrative through this process of remembrance.

In Desai's other novels, too, memories of the past are an important part of the narrative for various reasons. Meena Belliappa argues that in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) the technique of flashback is used as much more than just a device for recapitulation of the past to explain certain matters in the present while keeping the two realms separate; on the contrary:

> The albino astrologer is an active presence in her consciousness. His prophecy that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of her marriage shapes the course of her life. Her pampered childhood and life with her father are present not merely as reminiscences, but affect her response to the present frustrations of her married life. The father, who doted on her and shut out evil from her fairy world, becomes the point of reference by which Gautama's failure to perform a similar office is judged.
>
> (1971, pp. 7–8)

Sita's journey to Manori in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) is, of course, an actual grappling with her world of fantasy and memory. Finally, Nanda Kaul and Ila Das in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) view the past from entirely different perspectives: Nanda resents the claims it had made on her and the deceptions it had held, while Ila romanticises her memories in order to make her present life tolerable. So, in Desai's novels, memories of the past are healing or destructive but always illuminating for the characters themselves.

Because Desai's novels deal with the interior selves of her characters, she makes much use of images and symbols to express their perceptions and feelings. In particular, the psychic state of the protagonists is often reflected in their responses to the landscape and to incidents in the natural world. For instance, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) exults in the wild frenzy of the battering Delhi dust storm because it is a means of externalising her emotional unrest:

> I ran to the window and breathed deeply when I saw the rush and whirl outside continuing with tireless spirits, for it gave me a sensation of flying, of being lifted off the earth and into the sunset, released from bondage, released from fate, from death and dreariness and unwanted dreams.
>
> (*CP*, pp. 189–90)

Her helplessness is repeatedly presented in terms of a bird encaged or an animal deprived of its freedom. The 'magnificent' bear in chains and the caged monkeys on the railway platform are significant images suggesting the lack of freedom in her life. Her agonising sense of aloneness is powerfully conveyed through an image of the night sky. The sky is glittering with countless stars, and yet there are vast gaps of darkness in between: 'Death lurked in those spaces, the darkness spoke of distance, separation, loneliness – loneliness of such proportion that it broke the bounds of that single word and all its associations' (*CP*, p. 22). The central image of the novel – the frenzied dance of the peacocks who fight before they mate and then die – concentrates within it Maya's longing for love and premonition of early death. She begins to view her married life with Gautama as a deadly struggle (like the dance of the peacocks) in which one is destined to kill the other. Gautama's final act of interposing himself between Maya and the full moon is symbolic too; he seems to stand between her and the light, her vision, her response to beauty. Afzal-Khan sees the moon here as a symbol of the female imagination which increasingly dominates Maya's life (1993). Although it is viewed

by Maya as ominous at several points, in the end she comes to perceive it as desirable (and explicitly female), 'casting a light that was holy in its purity, a soft, suffusing glow of its chastity, casting its reflection upon the night with a vast, tender mother love' (*CP*, p. 208). Finally, Meera Bai reminds us of the moon's traditional associations with both love and lunacy (1996, p. 145) – an apt metaphor in *Cry, the Peacock* for Maya's desires and fears, as well as her tragic demise.

In *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), too, landscape and nature are used symbolically to evoke the feelings of the characters. For example, Raka's alienation is expressed in her wanderings among the most desolate and ravaged places in Kasauli because they 'somehow drew her, inspired her' (*FOM*, p. 90). Feeling unhappiness to be the only reality of life, she seeks out scenes of ugliness and devastation. Her great-grandmother Nanda Kaul, in a symbolic rejection of her assigned roles as care-giver and nurturer, turns away from a scene of a hoopoe feeding its young: 'She did not stay to watch the nestlings fed. It was a sight that did not fill her with delight' (*FOM*, p. 4). Ram and Bande note the use of contrasting responses to similar phenomena for the delineation of character and state of mind:

> Nanda's urge for freedom, represented by the imagery of an eagle swooping down the valley, is counteracted by the clear 'domestic tones' of the cuckoo singing in the garden. On the other hand, Raka's abnormal psychology interprets the cuckoo's call not as 'domestic'. For her it is the call of the 'wild, mad birds from nowhere'. These are 'demented birds that raved and beckoned Raka to a land where there was no sound, only silence, no light, only shade'. By using the cuckoo imagery and letting the characters interpret it, the novelist reveals two different psychologies – the attitude of Nanda Kaul, who strives to be alone but cannot deny her duty, and Raka's intrinsic urge for isolation.
>
> (1984, p. 425)

Asked in an interview if her use of symbol is deliberate, Desai replied that she does not use symbols consciously, but 'I find that certain things of themselves gain such significance that, after having employed them – perhaps repeatedly, I find that they have indeed turned into symbols' (quoted in Ram and Bande 1984, p. 422). They are used to express not only the state of mind of her characters, but also other ideas that she wishes to convey. For instance, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), when the middle-aged Sita arrives in Manori in a mood

of desperation and doubt, the island house, deserted for over 20 years, soon becomes an apt metaphor for her condition. So is the jellyfish she encounters on the beach, as Narenda Kumar points out:

> She identifies with the hapless creature stranded on the sandbar, unable to recede into the ocean and unable to survive on the sands and thus condemned to slow death. She cannot cope with the present, full of violence, suffering and destruction. Nor can she go into the past and live in a world of illusions.
>
> (1995, p. 40)

The island itself symbolises escapism (or alienation?) whereas her home in Bombay represents the world of social responsibility (or conformity?) to which she returns.

The imagery in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) deftly highlights Nanda's longing for seclusion and stillness; she desires to be 'a charred tree trunk in the forest, a broken pillar of marble in the desert, a lizard on a stone wall' (*FOM*, p. 23). Her house, Carignano, is both an escape and an exposure, situated as it is on the knoll. There are no trees to protect it from the wind; it is bare and stark and vulnerable. Premila Paul and Padmanabhan Nair suggest a symbolic connection between Nanda and Carignano itself, both being remote, isolated, past their prime and no longer desirable: 'Carignano was no longer a sought-after place but a deserted house after Independence. Both the place and Nanda had become irrelevant for people. Carignano thus stands for irrelevance, rejection, escape, put-on withdrawal, loneliness' (1991, p. 224).

While the imagery and symbolism is not as dense in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) as in Desai's other novels, Subhadra Bhaskaran sees hunger in this novel as 'the feminist metaphor for focussing on the alienated female consciousness', arguing that 'the hunger projected here is hunger for attention and recognition' (2002, p. 174). Certainly the title indicates the central theme of eating and food within the family, and the novel is replete with images of cooking and eating, with a focus on the chains of command around the preparation of food in India in the first part, and then eating disorders (which seem to be a modern epidemic among Western families) in the second. In *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) the failure of the Patton family to congregate at mealtimes is a symptom of familial alienation, as is the frequency of chains of command in Uma's family, indicating detachment between the (original) giver and the (final) receiver.

Food has an important role in Desai's other novels as well. Like nurturing (which *includes* feeding), the preparation of food is a low-status, time-consuming but very necessary activity, done mostly by women. We have seen in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) Sita's dismay that the only occupation of her female in-laws is the purchasing, preparation, consumption and clean-up of food. Feeding and nurturing is associated with parasitism in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) – first in a positive way by Mira masi who thinks of herself as a tree surrounded by vines (the children) which feed on her as they grow (*CLD*, p. 111), and later in a negative way by Bim who imagines her houseguests as mosquitoes who have come 'only to torment her and mosquito-like, sip her blood' (*CLD*, p. 153). This contrast is offset by Mira masi's alcoholic hallucinations towards the end of her life which suggest that she, like Bim, resents her exploitation – albeit at a more subconscious level. Her unacknowledged anger is expressed in her hallucinations of herself as a drudge, a weary worker bee, that satisfies the unremitting demands of the larvae that 'swelled on the nourishment she brought them' (*CLD*, p. 89).

Because Desai makes much use of dreams, symbols, memories, fantasies and subjective – sometimes even distorted – perceptions, I would argue that her novels are less 'realist' than those of Markandaya, Sahgal and Deshpande. Moreover, the insistently subjective quality of each of her narratives implies at least a sceptical view – if not an outright denial – of the existence of an objective 'reality'. Most of her novels are woman-centred, but when she does focus on the perspective of a male character – for example, that of Arun in the latter part of *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) – his consciousness is not perceptibly different from that of a female character. The social expectations of him are gendered, but his essential consciousness is not. Thus while Desai's novels express feminist concerns about the family structures which oppress women – and men too, in different ways – her narrative techniques do not suggest that she shares the beliefs of those feminists who insist on the essential 'difference' of the female consciousness.

Shashi Deshpande

Commenting on her writing process, Shashi Deshpande has explained, 'When I begin a novel, I never start with a plot. There are only people. … The events unfold in accordance with people's natures' (2003, pp. 106–7). Thus character occupies a pivotal position in her fiction, which generally centres around family relationships. She declares herself averse to

idealising her characters, who 'are all human beings one sees in the world around. … I've heard people saying we should have strong women characters. But my writing has to do with women as they are' (quoted in Pathak 1998, p. 16).

Several critics have commented on the overwhelming presence of women and relative scarcity of men in Deshpande's novels, notably *The Binding Vine* (1993). Husbands, in particular, tend to be either absent or barely seen, and as Atrey and Kirpal point out, 'almost all the male characters are underdeveloped and can be studied only in the context of the role they play in the evolution of the protagonists or as details of their family life' (1998, p. 65). In *That Long Silence* (1988), for instance, we do not know much about Jaya's husband Mohan, her father, her brothers or her friend Kamat except in relation to Jaya herself. Kamat, with his ability to appreciate Jaya's writing and become her confidant, is drawn in direct contrast to Mohan, as Deshpande confirms: 'I did bring in Kamat to serve a purpose: to show Jaya the kind of relationship she could achieve with a man. She gets a kind of companionship with Kamat that she never gets from her husband' (Holmstrom interview 1993, p. 247). Similarly, Naren in *Roots and Shadows* (1983) is created as a foil to Indu's husband Jayant, in the sense that she feels she can be fully 'herself' with Naren because of his genuine interest in her writing and in her growth as a human being. According to Atrey and Kirpal, 'the male friends are instrumental in leading the women to redefine their lives within marriage. They are the men who stand on the fringes of society, challenging and undermining its patriarchal values' (1998, p. 56).

As we have noted, Deshpande's novels are crowded with female characters, and Rajeswari Rajan argues that in *That Long Silence* (1988):

> The force of Deshpande's indictment of women's lives lies in the way she is able to *universalize* their condition, chiefly by drawing similarities among Jaya and a variety of other female figures, including characters from Indian history and myth; and among three generations of women in her family (Jaya, her mother, her grandmother); among different classes of women (Jaya, her maid Jeeja); among different *kinds* of women of the same class and generation (Jaya, her cousin Kusum, her widowed neighbor Mukta).
>
> (1993, p. 78)

My own view is that Deshpande makes a point of *not* universalising the condition of women in *That Long Silence* or any of her other novels.

For example, while Jaya's mother-in-law is shown to have been oppressed by a harsh, demanding husband, Jaya concludes that she herself has been oppressed more by her own unquestioning acceptance of traditional ideas about what the 'ideal wife' should be.

Rajan has further argued that Deshpande's exclusive focus on familial and domestic concerns limits her feminist critique and supports the patriarchal view of the domestic sphere as the natural domain of women (p. 79). Reacting sharply to the charge that her canvas is limited because she focuses on these aspects, Deshpande declares that nothing could be more universal than the family unit and no relationships more fundamental than those between the members of a family. Person to person and 'person to society relationships', as she calls them, are all prefigured in the domestic arena 'where everything begins' (Gangadharan interview 1994, p. 252).

A Deshpande novel typically begins with a crisis which leads to an intense period of introspection on the part of the protagonist, who then decides to change her way of life. As we have seen, the crisis in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) is Saru's experience of abuse at the hands of her husband which she can no longer tolerate, and in *That Long Silence* (1988) it is Jaya's husband's involvement in a corruption scandal which threatens to destroy their lives. In both *The Binding Vine* (1993) and *Small Remedies* (2000) it is the death of the protagonist's child which generates her examination of herself and her life. Deshpande explains her use of the cathartic crisis as a narrative strategy:

> My novels always begin in a moment of crisis. Most of us go on unquestioningly until we are shaken out of the rut by something catastrophic or disastrous. Suddenly all that you have taken for granted becomes doubtful, everything falls apart. You begin then to question everything. And it is through this questioning, through this thinking that you move on, pick up your life once again. But you are never the same after this. This is true of all human beings, not just women.
>
> (quoted in Joshi 2003, p. 174)

The emphasis in her novels is therefore not so much on episodes and happenings as on thinking, analysis and observation. Jasbir Jain compares them with the traditional *Bildungsroman*, arguing that 'Deshpande's novels are all about growing up – not through an adolescent period, but growing up into selfhood – once the characters are able to outgrow the traditional training imparted to a girl child and the socialisation which renders her docile and obedient' (2003, p. 264).

Rita Felski, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989) has identified the female *Bildungsroman* as different from that of the male. While the latter is a narrative of growing up through adventure during the teen years, for women it takes place at a later stage and is located more in the individual psyche as it confronts and challenges socially prescribed codes of behaviour. I would argue, however, that the growth of Deshpande's protagonists is more complicated than this simple linear progression from social conformity to mature selfhood. In the first place, they have all repudiated gender-based restrictions in their youth, and Madhu in *Small Remedies* (2000) has had a distinctly unconventional upbringing. It is only during their young adulthood that they have succumbed to patriarchal ideology, and this process – as well as their struggle against it – is represented as more subtle than an overt battle between conformity and rebellion. Each set of circumstances is unique, and as Deshpande herself affirms, 'I am asking many questions through the novel and its characters, but I do not provide any answers' (2003, pp. 159–60). Her protagonists do develop, but they are all portrayed from the beginning as intelligent, analytical and intensely critical of themselves and their relationships. They are constantly aware, for instance, of the conflict between their own needs and those of others, and constantly wondering where the ideal balance should lie and how to achieve it.

In terms of narrative point of view, Jasbir Jain points out that the 'observer-narrator status' of Deshpande's protagonists 'allows both comment and introspection, both criticism and confession' (2003, p. 130). *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) alternates smoothly between first person and third person narration, past and present. Deshpande explains that 'the present is in the third person and the past is in the first. … I really needed to distance myself from the narration in the present, otherwise it was going to be far too intense.' (Holmstrom interview 1993, p. 245). The third person narration is mainly through Saru's consciousness but very occasionally, we get brief impressions of her from an outside perspective: 'The boy wondered at the quality of her smile. It was, though he did not know that, like a crack in her air of deliberate composure, her poise, both of which seemed brittle. As if they would shatter at any moment' (*DHNT*, p. 49). This contrasts with *Small Remedies* (2000), all of which is narrated in the third person exclusively through Madhu's consciousness, including her version of Savitribai's life story, which forms a subnarrative. In both *Roots and Shadows* (1983) and *That Long Silence* (1988) the first person narration of the protagonist is similarly interwoven with subnarratives by other characters – for example, the narration of Akka's life story by Atya.

According to Jasbir Jain, 'as each subnarrator adds a new perception, a different view of a character, or comments on the relationship between people, the picture of the past continues to shift and rearrange itself' (2003, p. 200). She describes the narrators of these two novels as 'participant-observers' who interweave their personal histories with their observations of the lives of others. I would suggest that this also applies to *The Binding Vine* (1993) and *Small Remedies* (2000), in which the protagonist moves from being more of an observer to more of a participant as she works through her bereavement and gradually emerges from her withdrawal to re-involve herself with others. Interestingly, the protagonists 'observe' themselves with the same analytical approach that they apply to others – even at times writing about themselves in the third person, as in Jaya's 'othering' herself through the use of diaries in *That Long Silence* (1988).

Several of Deshpande's protagonists are writers, and the novels themselves offer the readers a view of the complex process by which they try to come to terms with the crises in their lives. The writing process frequently calls attention to itself, not only through comments on the art of recording reality and the process of writing, but also through constant self-questioning; for example:

> You can never be the heroine of your own story. Self-revelation is a cruel process. The real picture, the real 'you' never emerges. Looking for it is as bewildering as trying to know how you really look. Ten different mirrors show you ten different faces.
>
> (*LS*, p. 1)

In addition to the impossibility of really 'seeing' oneself, the difficulties of writing about someone else are foregrounded in *Small Remedies* (2000) through Madhu's attempts to construct Savitribai's biography:

> When she tells me all this, I am aware of the gaps in her story, I know that she is following the one straight line of her pursuit of her Guruji, bypassing everything else. I have to fill in these blanks myself.
>
> (*SR*, p. 129)

> What is the truth about Bai? Why did she leave her home, and that, with a Muslim lover? … Was it truly love? Or a way out of a situation she could no longer endure? Did she use the man for her own ends? Or was she seduced by him?
>
> (*SR*, p. 166)

Madhu's questions about Bai are never really answered, and in fact all of Deshpande's novels have indeterminate endings, which leave no clear 'solutions' to the crises.

In terms of narrative structure, Deshpande's novels have digressive patterns, with the present juxtaposed with flashbacks from the past. Actions are interspersed with thoughts, reflections and memories which form the bulk of the narrative in each novel. Deshpande herself describes *That Long Silence* (1988) as 'really a chaotic mass of memories which emerged in an order that only memory recognizes. There is no chronological order. All my novels are like this: there is no plot, I only have the characters' (2003, pp. 18–19). *The Binding Vine* (1993) works through parallel narratives and subtexts which support one another. These include Shakutai's loss of Kalpana which parallels Urmi's loss of her own daughter, as well as Urmi's translations of Mira's poems and diaries which profoundly affect her own perceptions and reflections. The narrative itself is interspersed with fragments of Mira's poems which connect with Urmi's thoughts; for example:

> 'I wanted Kalpana to have all that I didn't,' Shakutai told me. But Kalpana wanted none of her mother's dreams. She had her own. Mira too:
> *To make myself in your image*
> *was never the goal I sought.*
>
> Do we always turn our backs on our mother's hopes? I have often had twinges of guilt for thwarting Papa when I foreswore ambition and turned away from anything that meant competing. But now I realise Inni had her dreams for me too.
>
> (*BV*, p. 124)

Adele King suggests that these digressive narrative patterns 'express the position of the woman in a patriarchal society – someone without a clear sense of purpose (as her ability to choose is normally limited by the will of others) and without a firm sense of her own identity' (1990, p. 165).

Despite their digressive narrative and chronological structures, it is widely agreed that Deshpande's novels can be described as 'realist', in the sense that she presents plausible stories of plausible characters, with close attention to their daily lives and physical surroundings. According to Atrey and Kirpal, 'Deshpande's art lies in her starkly naked realistic description of the minutiae that are part of

middle-class existence. … Similarly, she unravels the tedium of a middle class woman's existence through small details' (1998, pp. 117–18). She herself affirms that 'it was through what was considered trivial that I had to approach the reality of women's lives; and the reality is never trivial' (2003, p. 163). However, her presentation of reality also grapples with what she describes as 'the hidden truths, the complexities of human existence that are under the surface of our life' (2003, p. 108). Jasbir Jain compares her type of realism with that of Jane Austen, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot and Margaret Drabble, 'writers who alike reject the polarities of the unidimensional portrayals, who deconstruct both romantic and heroic images of women' (2003, p. 17). I would add that because of Deshpande's emphasis on memory, questioning and reflection, the 'real' that emerges in her novels is not a singular, cohesive whole, but rather a complex and unstable entity.

While the *content* of Deshpande's novels positions her as the most overtly and self-consciously 'feminist' of the four authors, it is difficult to evaluate the extent to which her narrative techniques convey a feminist consciousness. Certainly their emphasis on the subjective nature of all experience challenges any authoritative (or authoritarian) ideas about 'objectivity' which have historically been associated with patriarchy. Related to this is her frequent foregrounding of the processes of writing and the position of the woman writer – indeed, all of her protagonists are women, and most of them are writers. They are analysing their lives and relationships from a subject position, placing themselves at the centre, thus refusing the traditional female position of 'other'. In writing their lives, they are endeavouring to 'own' their lives. Yet I would argue that the most powerfully 'feminist' aspect of Deshpande's formal technique is her consistent focus on the lives and perspectives of women, along with her decentring of men's lives, men's experiences, men's perspectives. She does this using language and narrative strategies that are equally available to both men and women, thus supporting my own view that *écriture feminine* would have little to add to the expression of feminist concerns in her fiction.

Conclusion

On the whole, the narrative techniques of my chosen Indian women novelists seem to defy any easy generalisations about connections between feminist consciousness and literary form as such. As we have seen, Desai's extensive use of fantasy, dreams and symbols is somewhat at odds with Anuradha Roy's observation about the technical

conservatism of Indian women writers (1999), and even Sahgal and Deshpande are more formally experimental than her argument suggests. She rightly points out that they tend to adhere to a 'realist' narrative mode, but the term 'realism' can be applied to a range of texts from Markandaya's early novels which aim to create the impression of authenticity and objectivity in their portrayal of particular social environments, to Sahgal's novels which depict multiple perspectives of the interaction between political events and individual lives, to the highly subjective fictional narratives of Desai and Deshpande.

In general, the term 'critical realism' can be applied to Sahgal's and most of Markandaya's novels, while Desai's and Deshpande's are examples of 'subjective realism' – as is Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973). But even this generalisation needs unpacking, particularly in its relation to feminism. While Markandaya and Sahgal both use realism to expose social injustice in India, their methods are somewhat different. In particular, Sahgal's narratives are rather more complex than Markandaya's, being non-linear and featuring multiple perspectives on various forms of oppression and abuses of power, all of which she shows to be interconnected. In contrast to Markandaya's and Sahgal's broader surveys of the social world, Desai and Deshpande focus on individual subjective experience, but always within family situations, thereby suggesting that in India women's oppression is located primarily within the family. Like Sahgal's later novels, they decentre male perspectives and male experience, but unlike Markandaya and Sahgal, their emphasis is not so much on events as on thinking, analysis and observation. As we have seen, Desai presents contrasting characters to explore feelings and experiences from different angles, and she also makes significant use of images and symbols to express perceptions and feelings, as well as other ideas she wishes to convey. Deshpande consciously uses realism in an explicitly feminist spirit, declaring herself committed to portraying women 'as they are' (Pathak 1998, p. 16), in order to counter traditional – and modern – romanticised, idealised and demonised images of women. All of her novels are woman-centred, often featuring protagonists who are writers, thus suggesting the need for women to 'write' their own lives from their own perspectives, placing themselves at the centre rather than at the margins. It is notable, however, that this woman-centred writing and thinking which she implicitly promotes involves feminist perspectives but *not* the type of experimental 'female language' endorsed by the advocates of *écriture feminine* – a position in keeping with her commitment to uncovering the 'realities' of women's lives.

This diversity of literary approaches among the four novelists transcends both Indian and Western descriptions of the 'typical' feminist realist novel. For example, Felski in the Anglo-American context (1989) and Seshadri in the Indian context (1995) have identified a 'typical' feminist plot in which the protagonist journeys during the course of the narrative towards autonomy and selfhood, and a few of the novels we have examined do indeed fit this pattern to some extent. Many of Sahgal's female characters end up leaving their husbands in the course of their search for individual identity and freedom, but in each case this individual search is just one strand of a larger and more complex narrative involving numerous characters, relationships, ideas and subnarratives. Deshpande's protagonists, by contrast, remain married during the course of their self-examination and self-development, which is never the simple progression to self-knowledge and 'liberation' that such an analysis suggests. On the contrary, they are portrayed as self-questioning by nature, and their questions and problems are never really resolved – though these characters do mature and develop during the course of the narrative. In Desai's case, the journeys of the protagonists – with the exception of perhaps Bim in *Clear Light of Day* (1980) – tend *not* to be towards self-actualisation. On the contrary, Maya in *Cry, the Peacock* (1963) progresses towards madness and suicide, Sita in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) towards conformity or social responsibility (depending on our interpretation), Nanda Kaul in *Fire on the Mountain* (1977) towards honesty with herself but also breakdown or death (the ending is ambivalent) and finally poor Uma in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) remains exactly where she is throughout the narrative with no freedom and no choices. So only particular strands of Sahgal's novels fit Felski's description of the 'fully developed feminist realist novel' which traces a process of separation from male-defined values, often culminating in a heroine leaving her husband or lover. However, the feminist criticism implicit in the narratives of Desai and Deshpande is arguably stronger, precisely because it suggests that there are no such easy 'solutions' to the complex problems posed by patriarchal ideologies.

Although Bersani (1978) has written about the limitations of realist fiction in challenging dominant ideologies, one of the distinctive features of Indian feminist literature in English, it seems, is its use of *various forms* of realist writing. These implicitly reject utopian ideas to challenge masculine ways of thinking. The view expressed by some Western feminists (e.g., Friedman and Fuchs, 1989) that linear narratives are 'phallocentric' is also countered, for example, by Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) – a novel with a linear chronological narrative,

but also the strongly feminist perspective of a thoughtful and observant adolescent girl who questions the gender ideology of her society and draws her own conclusions about it. Moreover, the writing of Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande supports Felski's argument that 'nowadays, in particular, the long stories that we call novels are often more messy, aleatory, desultory, multiclimactic, hesitant, and circuitous' than the complaint about plot being 'masculine' would indicate (2003, p. 106). I would take this argument further and suggest that the (mostly male) modernist writing of the 1920s and 1930s expressed the non-linearity of *men's* lives and the fragmented nature of *men's* consciousness as well, and that there was nothing feminist about this. The novels of Markandaya, Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande all express feminist concerns, but in doing so they use a variety of narrative techniques, thus defying any categorical association between feminism and the formal aspects of literary texts.

Conclusion

The fictional writing of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande suggests that in many ways the concerns of Indian feminists are similar to those of their counterparts in the West. In particular, they tend to concur with radical feminists in emphasising sexuality as a central basis of women's subordination. They are also aware of the extent to which marriage has historically functioned as an institutional form of male domination, as well as women's complicity in maintaining patriarchy. Like their Western counterparts, they critique ideologies of female domesticity and protest against many of the same forms of gender oppression: rape, sexual harassment, the double standard of sexual morality, domestic violence. There are, however, significant differences between Indian and Western versions of feminism, and my purpose in identifying them is *not* to over-generalise or to draw categorical distinctions between 'east and west', but rather to facilitate a critical comparison which highlights the limits of both approaches, identifies particular challenges and suggests future directions for feminism in general.

The challenges for Indian women in working towards gender equality remain substantial. We have seen that gender ideologies tend to be even more varied, more complex and more contentious in India than in the West because of the colonial legacy, ongoing communitarian divisions, religious beliefs and continuing concerns about Western cultural imperialism. Rapid social and economic change is bound to generate tension, upheaval and a certain amount of cultural anxiety, and India during the period of time covered in these novels (the latter half of the twentieth century) is no exception. Because of women's role in cultural reproduction, changes in gender roles tend to be perceived by social conservatives as especially threatening, and such changes are

often automatically labelled 'Western' even when they are responses to the needs and concerns of *Indian* women. On the other hand, the novels demonstrate the ways in which the uncritical importation of Western-style feminist 'solutions' can create further problems for Indian women. This is partly because a culture of individualism is not as well established in India, and while strong family and community ties have historically been associated with female subordination, Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000) suggests that this need not always be so – that gender equality is not *necessarily* incompatible with strong family relationships. In my view, this highlights one of the weaknesses of feminism as it has often been perceived and played out in the West: its excessively individualistic orientation. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out, 'the women's movement [in the west] has primarily focused on enlarging opportunities for individual women' (1991, p. 32). That is, it has enabled some women to enjoy the opportunities and privileges which have historically been reserved for middle- and upper-class men, but to a large extent the underlying structural inequalities have persisted. However, I have been suggesting throughout this book that in order for the majority of women – and the majority of men – to benefit from feminism, rights, privileges, opportunities and responsibilities would need to be more equitably distributed within families and within the wider society. Revolutionary changes would be needed within the home and within the workplace in order to achieve the sort of balance between individual rights and social responsibility which Anita Desai seems to be advocating. In this sense, the goals of Indian feminists may be more radical than those of some of their Western counterparts.

We have seen the ways in which Indian feminist approaches to marriage, sexuality and motherhood have distinctive emphases. In particular, there appears to be relatively *less* concern about sexual freedom for women in India and relatively *more* concern about women's victimisation through sexual aggression in various forms, including violence, coercion and harassment. In addition, Indian women have had to confront culture-specific attitudes and practices, such as ideologies of inherent female 'impurity', romanticised notions of the *pativrata* whose life is devoted to serving her husband no matter how he behaves, various forms of female seclusion and the well-known institutions of dowry and arranged marriage. While ideologies of female domesticity have become rather outdated in the West, Indian women still appear to be grappling with cultural notions of what it means to be a 'good' wife and mother. In particular, we have seen the ways in which Indian

women novelists have been challenging the cultural idealisation of maternal self-sacrifice, which tends to be less evident in the West.

If Indian gender ideologies have historically encouraged female self-sacrifice, women in the West have been subjected to different pressures, including the modern expectation that they should 'juggle' domestic responsibility with workplace norms which have been framed for men whose homes and children are looked after by their wives. (The reality is that poorer women everywhere have always had to 'juggle' outside employment with domestic responsibility, and it's interesting that this had little effect on dominant gender ideologies until large numbers of *middle-class* women began to do this as well.) Indian feminists, too, have complained of the double burden of employment and domestic responsibility, but we have seen that for the elite this is softened somewhat by domestic 'help' in the West and to a greater extent in India. Thus class privilege perpetuates gender inequality because elite women everywhere have less impetus to advocate social change. Promoting a more equitable sharing of domestic responsibility and outside work between men and women is, I would argue, one of the most important tasks for feminism in the future. In this sense, the Indian feminist emphasis on motherhood is not misplaced because most women do have children, but if the maternal role renders them economically dependent, they remain in an inferior power position vis-à-vis men. True, the maternal role does confer its own form of power on women, particularly in India where motherhood is so revered, but the novels emphasise that this dubious power is paradoxically predicated on maternal self-sacrifice, so that women collude in their own oppression.

Finally, there appears to be a logical connection between the feminist concerns of these novelists and the ways in which they are expressed in their fiction. Their use of various forms of realist writing implies a commitment to portraying women 'as they are', counteracting cultural stereotypes which idealise women and encourage them to be self-sacrificing. Their realist narrative techniques also emphasise the concrete nature – the *reality* – of women's oppression in India, implicitly rejecting escapist fantasies and utopian concepts to challenge masculine ways of thinking. There is strong feminist criticism in this idea that patriarchal ideologies are not easy to transcend or escape, but their fictional depiction over a 50-year period shows the remarkable changes in the lives of educated middle-class women in India. It remains to be seen to what extent this movement towards gender equality in India will continue and how it will affect the lives of poorer Indian women whose oppression is still on a completely different scale.

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Notes

Introduction

1. *Times of India*, 10 April 2008.
2. See, for example, Vijayalakshmi Seshadri (1995) on Markandaya, Anuradha Roy (1999) on Sahgal, and Meera Bai (1996) on both.

1 Women, Cultural Identity and Social Class

1. See Liddle and Joshi's *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (1986) for an insightful discussion of the relevant connections.
2. In the Indian context, see Chatterjee (1989) on nationalist constructions of 'Indian womanhood'; Hasan (1994) and Roy (1995) on communalist constructions of Muslim and Hindu womanhood within India.
3. *Two Virgins* (1973) uses unconventional punctuation, no quotation marks and at times unconventional grammar. My quotes from the novel are as they appear in the text.
4. See, for example, Jayawardena 1986; Nabar 1995; Narayan 1997.

2 Marriage and Sexuality

1. The controversial Bollywood film *Fire* (1998) is an interesting dramatisation of a lesbian relationship as a response to patriarchal oppression in a Hindu family.

3 Motherhood and Other Work

1. According to the 2001 census, just over 6% of women aged 40 to 44 in India were childless (http://www.censusindia.net/). This compares with the 2002 statistics for the US, in which 17.9% of women were childless by the age of 44 (http://factfinder.census.gov). Comparable data for the UK were not readily accessible.

4 Women's Role in Maintaining and/or Resisting Patriarchy

1. See, for example, Charmazel Dudt (1984) and Vimala Rao (1991).

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