

In Search of Self and (M)other: Identity and Feminism in Select Indian Novels

Dr. Bhasha Shukla Sharma

Abstract

Woman is typecast as ‘Mother Nature,’ in Indian scenario, thus reducing her to the role of the perpetual ‘giver’. Religious doctrines aid these representations. Language makes it appear permanent and ‘natural’ through the use of patriarchal terms like Mother Earth and Mother Nature. Indian Writing in English represents a variety of female characters, with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony, searching for self-identity or self liberation. These twenty-first century Indian writers through their characters revolt against considering marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals for an ‘ideal woman.’ Here they stand with the wave of feminism strongly advocating individual liberation. In recent times feminist theories have paid attention to narrative texts based on culturally constructed gender. While analyzing a narrative text, culture, identity, sexuality and power tend to formulate the major part. This article looks closely at select contemporary Indian novels which take a gender centered platform.

Key words: Woman as Mother Nature, ideal woman, revolt against marriage, revolt against motherhood

Dream through the Dream of Men

Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, 1949) explained the sense of self through ‘exis’ philosophy. Existentialism proposes that one exists first, and through one’s acts, one becomes something. ‘One is not born a female, one becomes this.’ She reasoned that an individual has absolute control over his or her fate, and neither society nor organized religion should limit our freedom to live authentically. But since men have claimed the category of self, of subject, for themselves, women are relegated to the status of the Other. Consequently, the category of

women has no substance except as an extension of male fantasy and fears. And since all cultural representations of the world around us have been produced by men, women must ‘dream through the dream of men.’ Thus a woman is required to accept her status of other, ‘make herself object’ and ‘renounce her autonomy.’

One Is Not Born a Woman, Rather Becomes One

Beauvoir’s remark ‘One is not born a woman, rather becomes one’ is loaded with semiotic connotations. ‘Sex, argue feminists, is biological, while gender is socially constructed. Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference suggests that there is ‘only one sex, the masculine, that elaborates itself in and through the production of the “Other”... Women are also a “difference” that cannot be understood as the simple negation or “Other” of the always-already-masculine subject’ (Butler, 1990:25).

Butler quotes Monique Wittig, ‘Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the “masculine” not being a gender. For, the masculine is not the masculine, but the general’ (Butler, 1990: 27).

Butler argues that ‘the masculine’ and the ‘feminine’ are not biologically fixed but culturally presupposed re-invoking Foucault’s claim ‘that sexuality and power are coextensive.’ (Butler 1990: 40) Judith Butler, one of the most influential theorists writing today, in her seminal book *Gender Trouble* further remarks that, ‘Beauvoir’s argument (and Wittig’s) that the female sex is marked, while the male sex is not.

Discourse and Women

For Irigaray, the female sex is not a “lack” or an “Other” that immanently and negatively defines the subject in its masculinity. On the contrary, the female sex eludes the very requirements of representation, for she is neither the “Other” nor the “lack,” those categories remaining relative to the Sartrian subject, immanent to that phallogocentric scheme. Hence, for Irigaray, the feminine could never be the *mark of a subject*, as Beauvoir would suggest. Further, the feminine could not be theorized in terms of a determinate relation between the masculine and

the feminine within any given discourse, for discourse is not a relative notion here. Even in their variety, discourse constitutes so many modalities of phallogocentric language. The female sex is thus also the subject that is not one. The relation between masculine and feminine cannot be represented in a signifying economy in which the masculine constitutes the closed circle of signifier and signified.

Paradoxically enough, Beauvoir prefigured this impossibility in *The Second Sex* when she argued that men could not settle the question of women because they would then be acting as both judge and party to the case.' (Butler, 1990: 14-15)

Two Generations of Feminists

Julia Kristava distinguishes between two generations of feminists: the first wave of egalitarian feminists demanding equal rights with men or, in other words, their right to a place in linear time, and the second generation, emerging after 1968, which emphasized women's radical difference from men and demanded women's right to remain outside the linear time of history and politics. After an examination of the role of socialism and Freudianism in relation to the demands of the women's movement, Kristava focuses on the problems on the second position, perceived as a 'counter-ideology' which risks degenerating into an inverted form of sexism. A new generation of feminists is now emerging, however, a generation which will have to confront the task of reconciling maternal time (motherhood) with linear (political and historical) time. Unless we manage to theorize women's continued desire to have children, Kristava argues, we leave the door open to religion and mysticism. The new generation, or more accurately, the corporeal and designing mental space now available to women is one that advocates the parallel existence or the intermingling of all three approaches to feminism, all three concepts of time within the same historical moment. Presupposing as it does the deconstruction of the concept of 'identity', this demand opens up a space where individual difference is allowed free play'. (Moi, 1986: 187)

Women Typecast as Mother Nature

According to Promod K. Nayer (2008, pp.71), the woman (particularly in Indian scenario), is typecast as 'Mother Nature,' thus reducing her to the role of the perpetual 'giver'. Religious doctrines aid these representations. Language makes it appear permanent and 'natural' through the use of patriarchal terms like Mother Earth and Mother Nature.

Draupadi versus Sita

Indian Writing in English represents a variety of female characters, with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony, searching for self-identity or self liberation. These twenty-first century female writers through their characters revolt against considering marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals of an 'ideal woman.' Here they stand with the third wave of feminism strongly advocating individual liberation. Wendy Doniger calls Sita the 'official role model' for Indian women and laments, 'How different the lives of the actual women in India would have been had Draupadi, instead of Sita, been their official role model! Many Hindus name their daughters Sita, but few name them Draupadi' (1990:298).

According to Doniger 'the women of Mahabharata are extremely prominent, feisty, and individualistic, in part as a result of changes that were taking place in the social structures at the time of the recension of the text.' (1999:292). 'There are some women in Ramayana who behave badly, like Kaikeyi, Manthara, the hunchback women or Ahalya, the archetypal adulteress ... the polarized images of women in the Ramayana led to another major split in Hinduism, for though the Brahmin imaginary made Sita the role model for the Hindu women from this time onward, other Sanskrit texts as well as many vernacular versions of Ramayana picked up on the shadow aspect of Sita, the passionate, sexual Sita, an aspect that is also embedded in this first text, only partially displaced on to other, explicitly demonic women. Yet the later Brahmin imaginary greatly played down Sita's dark, deadly aspect and edited out her weaknesses to make her the perfect wife, totally subservient to her husband. How different the lives of the actual women in India would have been had Sita as she is actually portrayed in Valmiki's Ramayan (and in some other retellings) been their official role model. The Valmiki Ramayan thus sowed the seeds both for the oppression of women in the dharma- shastric tradition and for the resistance against that oppression in other Hindu traditions' (Wendi Doniger, 1990:232).

Culturally Constructed Gender – Ideal Woman

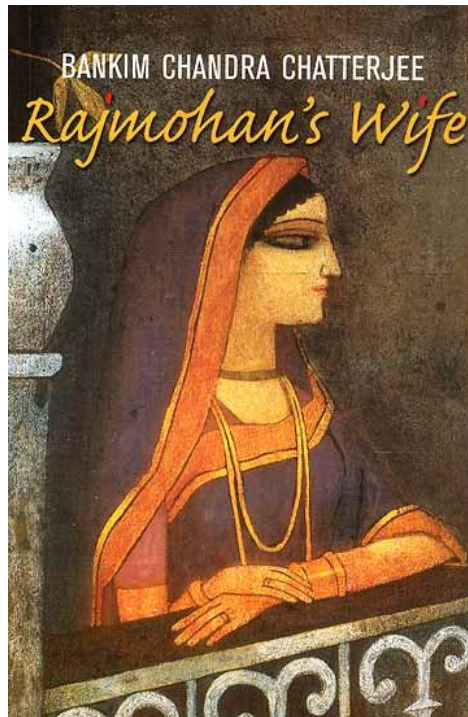
In recent times feminist theories have paid attention to the narrative texts based on culturally constructed gender. While analyzing a narrative text culture, identity, sexuality and power tend to formulate the major part, I look closely at select contemporary novels published by Amitav Ghosh (*The Hungry Tide*, 2004), Gita Mehta (*The River Sutra*, 1992), Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, 1992), Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*, 1997) which take a gender centered platform.

These twenty-first century Indian authors are trying to challenge the traditionally represented identity of woman as the ‘ideal woman’ or the oppressed model of female representation. They represent a conflict between the Ideal woman and the real woman. These are the women who can stand up for themselves. They can support and they can take care. These are the authors who represent women as individuals, as powerful beings, those who are educated, those who can take their own decisions, those who can come out of the traditional patterns and those who are not ready to compromise. The self or the identity of these women is generally constructed by others (in terms of her relationships with men as daughter, lover, wife, mother or widow) are regarded as ‘the other’ prefer to go back to their roots – ‘the mother’.

Deconstructing Binary Oppositions

In the analysis of these authors, I tend to look primarily for ways in which these authors deconstruct binary oppositions underlying mainstream assumptions about identity. These texts are modeled on the ancient Indian text of *Ramayana* which tells the tale of Sita, Rama’s wife, who finds redemption only after she is taken back by her mother, Mother Earth. I would be interested in reading and examining the images of women, of self and the (m)other, portrayed in these novels and how these women tends to return back to their place of origin completing a circle to attain selfhood. I seek to keep the complexities of narrative technologies for endowing a literary character with interiority and a persona on the thematic level.

The First Novel in Indian English



The first novel in Indian English is *Rajmohan's wife* (1864) written by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, “serialized in a short-lived weekly magazine published from Calcutta, but it did not appear as a book in the author’s lifetime.” (Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Rajmohan's Wife*, 1996, pp. vii). The novel, reprinted by Ravi Dayal (1996) and edited by Meenakshi Mukherjee, highlights several important issues for discussion. Although Salman Rushdie calls it a ‘dud’ and ‘a poor melodramatic thing (xvi),’ Meenakshi Mukherjee finds it ‘a potent site for discussing crucial questions of women in the nineteenth century.’ The novel discusses ‘the helplessness and claustrophobia of women in incompatible marriages that was going to be a recurrent concern of Indian fiction for many years to come.’ Mukharjee finds it ‘surprising’ to have a woman protagonist, Matangini, and appreciates the fact ‘that the first Indian novel in a contemporary setting should have focused on a woman of uncommon vitality who refused to be completely subjugated either by her brutal husband or by the expectations of the society’ (1996, pp. viii). However Mukharjee notes, ‘Matangini’s identity, as announced in the title, is irrevocably connected to her marital status. (Mukharjee, 1996, 136)

Macarand R. Paranjape discusses the novel in great detail (refer to his personal website) He comments on the characterization of Matangini as a nineteenth century protagonist and says, ‘The description of Matangini may be typical in some respects, but her actions are not. She is an

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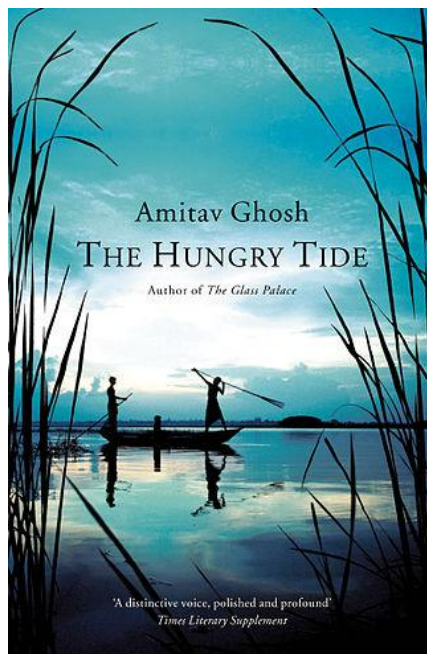
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entirely new kind of a heroine, someone who is not timid and weak, but strong and spirited. She carries the plot forward with her own kinetic energy and though thwarted, does end up entirely defeated. ' Beautiful and young but neither free nor happy Matangani, married to an old and ugly Rajmohan, crosses the threshold, like Sita in Ramayana, and suffers. Matangani is determined and does not compromise or surrender till the end. The novel portrays the female protagonist, Matangani, as a woman of courage. She is bound by her duty but revolts when conditions become unethical. She faces the threats in her life boldly and in the attempt finds herself to be stronger than she expected and finally returns back to her (mother) parents' house. Mukharjee appreciates the 'authorial sympathy' for Matangani but is astounded at the 'abruptness and ambivalence of the ending' which she clarifies 'may be the result of an anxiety such woman of energy generated, by posing a threat to the social order' (1996, PP. ix)

Female Characters in Ghosh's Novels

In recent times Amitav Ghosh is a prominent author. All female characters in Ghosh's novels have a strong personality. Be it Ila, thamma or May Price in *The Shadow Lines*, or Uma in *The Glass Palace* or Mangala, Tara or Urmila of *The Calcutta Chromosome* or Piya, Mayna, Kamala and Nilima in *The Hungry Tide*. In this paper I will discuss *The Hungry Tide* (which received Hutch Crossward Book Award) in detail.



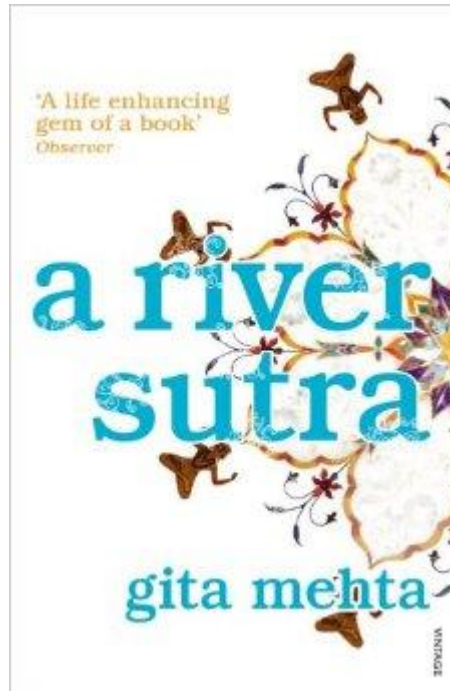
In *The Hungry Tide* life of all four prominent female characters seems to revolve around an historical event which finally leaves a deep impact on their lives. Piyali Roy or Piya, was 'not Indian except by descent,' (*The Hungry Tide*: 03) unable to speak Bengali and was stubbornly American. Piya represents modernity as she is an American by decent. She is more of a cosmopolitan 'she was a foreigner; it was stamped in her posture, in the way she stood, balancing on her heels like a flyweight boxer, with her feet planted apart.' (*The Hungry Tide*: 03) She is a traveler and her work has taught her to be adjusting and self reliant. She uses modern equipments like mobile, the binoculars, the monitor and the GPS. Piya is modern yet very Indian at heart.

In contrast Nilima is a traditional character who is not at all the self-sacrificing ideal Indian woman but is an ambitious, dominating and authoritative personality. She does not support the refugees of Morichjhapi because it would mar her progress even at the cost of her marriage.

The character of Moyna is neither traditional nor completely modern. She is a local nurse who lies somewhere in between the traditional and modern. On one hand she tries to support her family by working and educating her son so that he could have a better future than her husband and on the other she studies to become a professional nurse or may be a doctor.

Kusum is another character whom one cannot define in terms of modern or traditional. But Kusum is a person with a heart and a mind of her own. She is strongly opinionated. She supports the myths and traditions of the fishermen strongly and she also supports the cause of the refugees of Morichjhapi so much so that she becomes a part of them and their struggle which eventually leads her to her death. Kamala tells Nirmal, 'I listened to them talk and hope blossomed in my heart; these were my people, how could I stand apart? We shared the same tongue, we were joined in our bones; the dreams they had dreamt were no different from my own. They too had hankered for our tide country mud; they too had longed to watch the tide rise to full flood' (*The Hungry Tide*: 165) Piya the protagonist finally returns back to Lucibari where she decides to spend rest of her life.

Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra*



Salman Rushdie calls Gita Mehta's *A River Sutra* 'an important attempt by a thoroughly modern Indian to make her reckoning with the Hindu culture from which she emerged (xxi).' In *A River Sutra*, Mehta writes about people committing suicide in the river Narmada so as to end life in the lap of mother - the river goddess being the symbol of a mother - which according to the mythology would provide complete salvation, i.e. freedom from the cycle of life and death. Through the river mythology, river being the role model, women are shown the path to follow as a traditional woman.

In '**The courtesan's story**' Mehta talks of eternal love. It is the story of a bandit Rahul Singh who kidnaps a courtesan's young daughter because he thinks that she has been his wife in so many lives before this present life. As a witness she describes again in 'flash back' the life of bandits in the state of solitude. Even after kidnapping the girl the bandit never forces himself upon her and wins her over by respect. Eventually the young girl falls in love with him (her kidnapper). She says: "So I punished him by inflaming his longing for me. Then I laughed at his misery when I showed him how coarse I found him, how lacking in the refinements I admired" (Mehta, *A River Sutra*: 183). And later she says: "Not until I conceived did my husband truly believe I loved him" (*A River Sutra*: 186). Her husband, Rahul Singh, is shot by the police before he could live a happy life with his love. He dies leaving her alone and pregnant. The girl

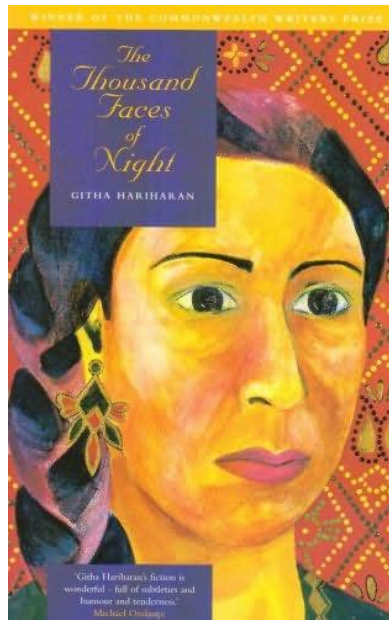
could not bear such shock and the result is miscarriage. She plans to take vengeance on 'the men who killed her husband and unborn child'. Her plans are thwarted when the arms she has prepared for the vengeance are found by the Manager of Narmada guest house. The courtesan's daughter unfolds Rahul Singh's greatness before the nameless narrator, who is the Manager of the Narmada rest house, and tells him how the society forced him to be a murderer. 'Denied justice, Rahul Singh only did what a man of honor would do. He swore vengeance on his family's murderers and killed them all. Of course he has become a hunted man. But he has never harmed anyone who did not deserve it.' (A River Sutra: 182). From the flash back she comes to the present. In the present condition she herself could not return to the society as a murderer's wife. A victim of social ethos she is left with no choice but is forced to commit suicide by jumping into the river Narmada for which her mother is happy because "her daughter had died in Narmada she would be purified of all her sins" (A River Sutra: 190).

Paradoxically the river Narmada is a source of renewal of life (in the previous story of the executive) and in the second story it is a giver of death. Perhaps through the courtesan's story Mehta wants to inform us that irrespective of the caste or creed, high or low class, the (mother) river provides solace to all.

God of Small Things

In Arundhati Roy's *God of small things* Ammu returns back to her mother with twins Estha and Rahel after an unsuccessful marriage. She falls in love with Velutha who is lower in caste/class divide. After their mother's death they are separated from each other. In the words of Brinda Bose, 'Daughter Rahel, after a youth gone awry, returns to her childhood home and her soul-twin Estha to rediscover his pain and to offer him her body as an unnamable balm. Both violate the most basic "love laws" that govern their social existence; the transgressions are the result of conscious decisions by the emotionally overcharged characters' (Bose 1998).

The Thousand Faces of Night



In Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992), the protagonist Devi returns back to her mother in search of her own identity. All women characters in *The Thousand Faces of Night* are unhappy in marriage, unhappy with motherhood, forceful and unwanted. Devi and others including Parvatiamma and Mayamama reject motherhood. Devi has no desire to have children but Mahesh believes that she should have children not out of love but because everyone has them. Mahesh is practical enough to understand that children are the logical outcome of a marriage. He is one of those members of traditional society who consider motherhood as the final goal for attaining womanhood or becoming a complete woman. He pressurizes Devi to visit gynecologists. She visits the hospital regularly so that her ovaries can be 'mended, an efficient receptacle for motherhood.' (*The Thousand Faces of Night*: 89). Mahesh begins to neglect her more when she is unable to conceive despite prolonged efforts. She can sense this alienation. She says 'I feel myself getting blurred in Mahesh's eyes. The focus gets softer and softer, till everything dissolves into nothingness, everything but my stubborn, unrelenting womb' (*The Thousand Faces of Night*: 93). Mayamma suggests other ways out, through pleasing gods - her room is full of gods and goddesses, as she herself had undergone similar circumstances. These women in Hariharan's narrative are perhaps happy to be single, widowed or divorced.

In *The Art of Dying* (1992), Hariharan again narrates a short story 'The Remains of a Feast' with similar implications. It tells us about the explosion of the suppressed desires of a

Brahmin widow. She is unable to control her secret desires beyond a limit. The ninety-years old cancer-struck Brahmin widow, who has practiced austerity since a very young age, suddenly revolts and desires everything that has been prohibited for her - bhel-puri from the fly infested bazaar, perhaps touched by untouchables, cakes with eggs in them, from the Christian shop with a Muslim cook, Coca-cola laced with the delicious delight that it might be alcoholic. Finally when she dies, the granddaughter, a medical student who was her partner in crime, covers her body with a bridal red sari, as her grandmother must have desired. 'The remains of a feast' has greater connotations and gives us a look into Hariharan's point of view. 'Single' in Hariharan's point of view does not mean isolated or lonely but empowered and in control of one's time, space, solitude and freedom.

In *The Thousand Faces of Night* Devi finds liberation in adultery, the only escape from her lifeless confinement. She flees from 'unconcerned' husband Mahesh and elopes with the 'concerned' lover Gopal. She says, 'I will gather together the fragments which pass for my life, however laughably empty and insignificant, and embark on my first real journey. I would like to do better than sneak out, a common little adulteress... so that I can learn to be a woman at last. I will soar high on the crest of Gopal's wave of ragas, and what if I fall with a thud, alone, the morning after? I will walk on, seeking a goddess who is not yet made.' (*The Thousand Faces of Night*: 95). She becomes a muse for Gopal and stays with him for some time but still feels trapped. She finds herself to be a reflection of her partner's self image. One fine day she 'throws her sari over the mirror to blot out her reflection: She stood in front of the ornate, teak-bordered, full-length mirror that she and Gopal shared, ... she looked into the mirror, but it was as if she was still looking at Gopal's sleeping face. It threw back at her myriad reflections of herself. Devi undraped the sari and folded it carefully, lovingly, till it was one long, multi-layered curtain. She covered the mirror with the silk so that the room suddenly became darker, and everything, the beds, the table, the sleeping body of Gopal, were themselves again, no longer reflections.' (*The Thousand Faces of Night*: 138).

In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Sita, protagonist's mother has revitalized her capabilities as a violin player. We assume that Devi will also find herself by going back to her roots. Devi finally realizes her mistake that she was looking at herself from the opposite end. All

she was doing till now was to be ‘an obedient puppet’ (The Thousand Faces of Night: 137) to please others. She says, ‘I was too well-prepared and not prepared at all. America, Jacaranda Road, Mahesh, Gopal. I have run away from my trials, my tail between my legs..., she was, for the first time, no longer on the run’ (The Thousand Faces of Night: 137-38). Devi is at a juncture where she has to decide whether she wants to remain frustrated throughout her life or she wants to be free and liberated. She decides to be bold and face the world with conviction. She recalls that she has never taken her own decisions, ‘I have made very few choices, but once or twice, when a hand wavered, when a string was cut loose, I have stumbled on-stage alone, greedy for a story of my own.’ (The Thousand Faces of Night: 137). She again leaves Gopal finally to return to her mother or her roots to rediscover her true identity. Like the mythological Sita, Devi finally returns back to her mother as, ‘She rehearsed in her mind the words, the unflinching look she had to meet Sita with to offer her love. To stay and fight, to make sense of it all. She would have to start from the very beginning.’ (The Thousand Faces of Night: 139).

Feminist Criticism

Feminist critics like Madhu Kishwar and Chandra Talpade Mohanty keep the Indian social structure in mind when attempting feminist criticism in India. While studying Indian women novelists we have to understand the difference between east and west. The model should not be rigid and we must keep in mind the silent revolution that is being brought about by the women in India. However their silence and speech are designed by their experiences historical or contemporary. These women in India may not have participated in a great feminist movement but silently and strongly are changing their behavior, dressing, distribution of power, values and mindset without any organized appeal. Patti Duncan (2004) argues that silence is not merely a sign of absence of voice or power. Finding a voice may not be a matter. While that might be the case, it is also crucial to recognize the ways silence can signify resistance and the ways of speaking can be used in the service of dominance and subjugation. Deborah M. Mix (2005) quotes Duncan in her analysis of Patti’s book in *Modern Fiction Studies* (volume 51, number 1, spring 2005) and remarks that early in her study of contemporary Asian American women’s writing, Duncan notes that too many critics have read silence as ‘antithetical to the liberation of oppressed groups of people’ and have ‘fail[ed] to recognize . . . the ways in which speech acts,

too, are limited and constrained' (13). Not all silences are equivalent; nor are all speech acts equal in their implications and effects.

In this regard it would be interesting to know what Katherine and Sudhir Kakkar (2007: 132-133) note about Hinduism where coming back to the mother is regarded as death and rebirth. They remark, 'Hinduism does not hold out the consolation of St Paul's promise that at the moment of death we come close to god and that then 'shall we know even as we are known.' Instead, it seeks to mitigate the universal dread of death by viewing it as an interval between lives, not as an end to the often painful, sometimes happy, but always engrossing and, above all, familiar life-in-the-world. In the words of an old Panjabi woman, as reported by the anthropologist Veena Das, death is 'like being shifted from one breast to the other breast of the mother. The child feels lost in that one instant, but not for long.'

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Dr. Bhasha Shukla Sharma
Associate Professor and Head
Department of Humanities
UIT, Rajiv Gandhi Proudhyogiki Vishwavidyalaya
Bhopal 462036
Madhya Pradesh
India
bhasha.shukla@gmail.com