TEXT AS GENDER: A STUDY OF SELECTED INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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DECLARATION

I, Lalitha Menon, hereby declare that this thesis entitled *Text as Gender: A Study of selected Indian English Fiction* has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or other similar title or recognition.

Calicut,
29th December, 2008. **Lalitha Menon**

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ABBREVIATIONS

Small Remedies	:	*SR*
The God of Small Things	:	*GOST*
English, August: An Indian Story	:	*EA*
The Shadow Lines	:	*TSL*

INTRODUCTION

The reading and enjoyment of literature has been guided by a humanism based on an empiricist, idealist interpretation of the world. As Catherine Belsey says, commonsense assumes that literary texts that are worth reading speak the truth and that "they express the particular perception, the individual insights of their authors" (Belsey 2). Post-Saussurean or post structuralist thought has called in question the assumption of the authority of commonsense and challenged the whole concept of realism. Expressive realism postulates a theory that literature reflects the reality of experience as it is perceived by one individual. The expression of this perception in a text, it was believed, enabled other individuals to recognize its truth. The post structuralist assault on the belief that mimetic accuracy is the foundation of all art began as early as the 1940s. W.K.Wimsatt and Monroe C.Beardsley in "The Intentional Fallacy" (1946) make a serious attempt to come to terms with the problem of the author's authority over the text. New critics like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren rejected the expressive theory that the text would been seen to posses a single , deterministic meaning and that the authority for the meaning was the author . They held the view that meaning existed within the text and demanded a close and detailed attention

to the formal properties of the text. What is inherent in the text is a range of possibilities of meaning. Texts are plural, open to a number of interpretations and it therefore follows that language gains importance with its infinite possibilities of meaning. Meaning is the result, not of individual intention, but of inter-individual intelligibility. That is to say, meaning is socially constructed and so, related closely to social formation itself. Hence, ideology, it may be seen, is deeply inscribed in language, in discourses, myths and representations. It follows from this that the subject is also linguistically and discursively constructed. In *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966) Pierre Macherey suggests that a text is 'progressively' discovered. The text becomes the raw material to be interpreted by the critic. It is liberated from authorial control and made available for production through the process of reading. One of the central hypotheses of contemporary critical theory is that gender is a crucial determinant in the production, circulation and consumption of literary discourses. Gender, it has also been argued, is a textual effect produced by certain texts when they are placed in certain reading or ideological contexts.

This thesis tries to explore the problems relating to the plurality of identity/gender. The argument is that the presence of the pre-textual or fixed gender identity is untenable when considered against a position that asserts the non-fixity or fluidity of gender positions. Subject/gender identity, thus it may be argued, is a result of textual construction. This study attempts to

make gendered readings of four Indian English novels – Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* (2000), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August : An Indian Story* (1988), Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997) and Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988). It focuses on the construction of masculinity and femininity within specific textual spaces. The objective is to explore how the category of identity, predicated on sexual difference, is inscribed discursively. What such gendered readings hope to expose is the interplay of gender, power and social control. Gendered readings are subversive in that they historicize the gender relations informing the cultural construction of collective identities and thus unmask and challenge the resulting power relations. The thesis attempts to show through a close reading of the texts under consideration, how authorial biases operate unconsciously to produce gendered texts. It also attempts to verify/test this position by placing male and female writers of Indian English Fiction in conjunction and then 'reading' the texts for the effects they produce.

'Gender' is a concept which is much contested today. It is also an intensely problematic word in the contemporary lexicon. In the sixth edition of Dr. Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1785) 'gender' is defined as the grammatical practice of classifying nouns as masculine, feminine or neuter. It could also mean 'a sex'. The verb 'to gender' is also used as a synonym for the sexual act: to beget, to breed or to copulate. In the nineteenth century, sexuality emerged as an object of scientific and

popular knowledge. By the early 1900s to possess a sexuality was to lay claim to a distinct form of subjectivity. Contemporary perceptions of gender have been greatly influenced by researches in biology and psychology. Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905) revealed the working of the sexual instinct to be far more complicated than was generally understood. These essays proved that psychoanalysis could be a useful tool to explore the hitherto unexplored terrain of sexuality. In contemporary times, a discursive explosion may be said to have taken place around the question of gender.

Simone de Beauvoir's ground-breaking work on gender, *The Second Sex* (1949) is a wide ranging and sophisticated study that draws on existential phenomenology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and a Marxist analysis of history to achieve an understanding of what it is to be a woman. *The Second Sex* with its celebrated manifesto, 'One is not born, but rather becomes a woman' is perhaps the first to take a social constructivist view of gender. De Beauvoir maintains that 'male' and 'female' are not fixed ontological essences but are functions of historically specific forms of mediation. They function in a sense as cultural narratives through which we structure the world. The two key concepts de Beauvoir propounds are (1) that woman is the absolute 'Other' (2) that femininity is constructed. De Beauvoir focuses on how femininity has been conceptualized and woman reduced to the position of a relative being in a patriarchal society. The book mainly argues that

throughout history, 'woman' has been constructed as man's Other and denied access to an autonomous existence. Man, according to de Beauvoir, assumes the position of universal subject and woman is positioned as a relative 'Other' or the object of male consciousness. Rejecting as unreliable the historical evidence that explains women's oppression, she follows Hegel's hypothesis on the master-slave dialectic. One can interpret woman's position as absolute 'Other' as the result of a process of 'becoming'. De Beauvoir argues that 'to be' a woman should be interpreted in the dynamic Hegelian sense of 'to have become' (de Beauvoir, 24). There is according to de Beauvoir no 'natural' femininity or maternal 'instinct'. Woman 'becomes' her gender by learning to conform to patriarchal society's requirement that she exist inauthentically - as a passive body for consumption by the male gaze. *The Second Sex* preceded by about twenty years the resurgence of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Robert J Stoller in *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (1968) another landmark publication, speaks of 'gender' as a tremendous area of “behaviour, feelings, thoughts and fantasies that are related to the sexes and yet do not have primarily biological connotations" (ix). He draws attention to the possibility of an inner discord, a kind of non-identity with one's sexual being. Kate Millet's theory of patriarchy expounded in *Sexual Politics* (1977) , one of the major texts of

second wave feminism, was inspired by Stoller's work. Millet emphasised the argument that ‘male’ and ‘female’ are really two cultures.

Michel Foucault can be considered as one of the early constructionists claiming that sexuality and sexual conduct are not natural categories having foundation in reality. They are, instead, predicated upon social construction. Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1979) shows the radical revision that ideas and beliefs about sexuality have undergone. The three-volume series written between 1976 and 1984 shows sex to be an effect rather than the product of discourses which attempt to analyze, describe and regulate the activities of human beings. A novel perspective was thus initiated to study the origins and the hitherto held view of sexuality.

While 'sex' denotes the language through which we come to know our desires, 'gender' denotes the cultural practices through which these desires are played out. In modern parlance, the term 'gender' can be defined in a relatively straightforward way as the social construction of our concepts of masculinity and femininity. It makes meaningless, the 'natural' link between one's identity as 'a man' or 'a woman' and one’s social behaviour. Behaviour can therefore be categorized as 'masculine' or 'feminine', this again varying with cultures and social groups. Behaviour, it would then imply, need not necessarily be related to the biological categories of 'male' or 'female'. In *Gender Trouble, Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith

Butler, an advocate of the theory of 'peformativity', asks very pertinent questions about the construction of gender:

> When feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed, what is the manner or mechanisms of this construction? If gender is constructed, could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation? Does 'construction' suggest that certain laws generate gender difference along universal axes of gender difference? How and when does the construction of gender take place? What sense can we make of a construction that cannot assume a human constructor prior to the construction? (7 - 8)

To Butler's question of how and when the construction of gender takes place, one of the many answers would be 'in writing'. Writing is a rich site for the exploration of political meanings and the imaginative potential of gender, and for testing its boundaries. The restrictive nature of gender definitions becomes apparent once one is made aware of the 'fluid' nature of gender.

David Glover and Cora Kaplan in *Genders* (2000) state that "both (sex and gender) are inescapably cultural categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships, our relationship to ourselves and to others" (Glover and Kaplan xxvi).

Jacques Lacan's theories regarding language, literature and the nature of the human subject and his post-structuralist reading of Freud had far-reaching impact on later theorists. He theorized that the acquisition of language and the entry into its symbolic order occur at the Oedipal phase in which the child accepts his/her gender identity. Lacan's celebrated dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language" is central to his ideas of subject formation. For Lacan, the unconscious is the 'kernel' of being. According to him, language is detached from external reality and is an independent realm. In Lacanian terms one needs to understand the constructedness and instability of the subject, or the subject as a linguistic construct, or language as a self-contained universal discourse. One can then speak of contradictory undercurrents of meaning, which lie like a subconscious beneath the 'conscious' of the text.

Julia Kristeva, the critical theorist and psychoanalyst, who has worked extensively on the concept of subject, uses the phrase "subject in process" to elaborate this fluidity. In "A Question of Subjectivity" she states:

> Anyone who reads Artaud's texts will realize that all identities are unstable: the identity of linguistic signs, the identity of meaning, as a result, the identity of the speaker. And in order to take account of this de-stabilization of meaning and of the subject, I thought the term "subject in process" would be appropriate. 'Process' in the sense of process but also in the sense of a legal proceeding where the subject is committed to trial, because our identities in life are constantly called into question, brought to trial, over-ruled.
>
> (Rice and Waugh 128)

Thus the subject is in flux, 'destabilized' and borders between the unconscious and the social. Taking into account the shifting, fluid nature of gender and subjectivity, one needs to re-contextualize narratives.

A variety of critical positions have developed in feminism since 1970. It is now appropriate to speak of feminist theories rather than of a feminist theory. The variety with feminist literary studies can be accounted for, partly by the facility with which feminism has interacted with other critical discourses, both influencing and being influenced by them. Mary Eagleton has tried to illustrate the effect of Marx on Cora Kaplan, of Michel Foucault on Peggy Kamuf, of Julia Kristeva on Toril Moi, of Jacques Derrida on

Gayatri Spivak and of Sigmund Freud on seemingly everybody - Millet, Kaplan, Mary Jacobus, and the French feminists to mention a few. A suspicion of theory, however is widespread throughout feminism. Many feminists see theory as male-dominated. Hélène Cixous for instance, considers theory to be impersonal, public, objective and male; and experience personal, private, subjective and female.

Contemporary feminisms have placed language on the political agenda of feminist literary studies. Feminist theories of language are diverse and reflect the political differences within feminism and also the great proliferation of 'discourses' - traditions, theoretical frameworks and academic disciplines. The 'exclusion' of woman from naming and representation, that is, from language itself, has opened up the inevitability of a kind of writing that addresses female sexuality and experience. Writers like Dorothy Richardson and Virginia Woolf in their use of language deviated from a linear conception of time and space. The realization of the potential that such a 'different' kind of language has within it for the re-working of power equations has led women writers to challenge the notion of 'rational discourse'. Through their experiments with language women writers try to foreground its less rational aspects. However, this subversive use of language is not the exclusive prerogative of women writers. Deborah Cameron says:

> It should be noted that this 'feminine' sort of writing need not be confined to women writers, and that those women who advocate it often hold up men as models of what they are trying to achieve: Julia Kristeva discusses Mallarme and Lautremont, while Dorothy Richardson admired Proust and Joyce. What most feminists of this type would insist on, however, is that 'feminine' writing done by either sex is progressive because it challenges certain myths (rationality, unity) that are essentially patriarchal. (10)

Feminist theorists in France have advocated ways of writing that embody women's difference - 'difference' pertaining not just to what is written about, but also the language in which it is written. These feminists speak of a kind of writing that addresses female sexuality and experience. This requires a new form of language, a radical remaking of literary style in the image of woman rather than of man. These feminists are convinced that the existing style and grammar are male in form. Inspired by the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, they believe that the order of language is a masculine order dominated metaphorically by the phallic principle. 'Feminine' writing, therefore, obviously lies outside this order. Luce Irigaray speaks of a language in which the masculine structure has broken down.

Julia Kristeva speaks about pre-symbolic features 'disrupting' discourse, producing the strangeness and fragmentation one sees in symbolist poetry.

The notion of 'feminine writing' or *écriture féminine* put forward by the French feminists has, more often than not, evaded definition. Hélène Cixous, who first introduced the term *écriture féminine* finds it "impossible to define a feminine practice of writing". She is however sure that "it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallocentric system", which can be conceived of only by subjects who are “breakers of automatism, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate” (Warhol and Herndl 340). Cixous considers feminine writing to be a spontaneous outpouring. In “Laugh of the Medusa” she outlines the features of this writing:

> A feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there is no other way.
>
> (Warhol and Herndl 344)

In *The Newly Born Woman* Cixous exhorts women:

> Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine Imaginary is going to be deployed. (Simons 126)

Cixous goes on to say that the status of *écriture féminine* is consciously non-prescriptive and in permanent flux. *Ècriture féminine* does not entail a reductive gender specificity but could be written by men or women who are capable of demonstrating an openness to the other in writing. Surprisingly, some practitioners of this kind of writing that Cixous points out are male: Shakespeare, Heinrich von Kleist and Jean Genet. According to Kristeva 'woman' cannot be represented. In her essay “La Femme,” she says, "Woman" is –

> . . . something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies. There are certain 'men' who are familiar with this phenomenon; it is what some modern texts never stop signifying: testing the limits of language and sociality - the law and its transgression, mastery and (sexual) pleasure without reserving one for males and the other for females, on the condition that it is never mentioned. (Moi 162)

Kristeva's “Women's Time” identifies two ways of thinking about time: linear and cyclic. Linear time is associated with the first generation of feminists and their attempt to secure women's rights within existing society, within the symbolic order. Cyclic time is associated with second-generation feminism that stresses the difference between men and women. Kristeva

resists both these approaches to time since they share the tendency to fix female identity. In the essay she proposes a third time-phase or a new space, where the play of difference and deferral is celebrated as the condition of all sexual identity, so that the cultural characteristics of both femininity and masculinity become the basis of subjectivity. In this way sexual identity is released and exposed as unfixed, not timeless, always in process and always incomplete. Thus a space is created where the sexual opposition is undone. (Warhol and Herndl 445-446).

Elaine Showalter in 'Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness' (1981) gives a lengthy presentation of what she takes to be the four main directions of present-day feminist criticism: biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural criticism. She emphasises on the need for gynocritics "to concentrate on women's access to language" since "women have been denied the full resources of language and have been forced into silence, euphemism and cricumlocution" (Lodge 193). Gynocriticism, that deals with woman as writer, opens up new entry points into woman - authored texts.

Alice Jardine sets her theory of *gynesis* which has been influenced by the philosophies of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida against Elaine Showaler's gynocriticism. '*Gynesis*' according to her is

> . . . a reincorporation and reconceptualization of that which has been the master narratives' own non

> knowledge, what has eluded them, what has engulfed them. This other - than - themselves is almost always a 'space' of some kind (over which the narrative has lost control), and this space has been coded as feminine, as woman . . . (15)

Gynesis is “the putting into discourse of 'woman.'” This amounts to a valourization of the feminine which is "intrinsic to new and necessary modes of thinking, writing, speaking" (15). Jardine points out that the French interest converges on 'woman' who is not a person but a writing effect. This is distinctly different from the Anglo-American view that centres on 'women' - as real biological entities who are forging a politics based on shared experience and needs. When the French talk of *écriture féminine* they do not mean the tradition of women's writing that Woolf and Showalter are concerned with, but a certain mode of writing that unsettles fixed meanings.

Whereas gynocriticism foregrounds the sex of the author - her unique voice, *gynesis* challenges authorial identity. *Gynesis* points to a textual freeplay of meaning which cannot be bound by authorial intention or critical analysis. In *gynesis,* belief in the individual as possessing a fully conscious, rational, secure identity gives way to a 'subject' which is unstable and is being constantly re-formed. As mentioned earlier Kristeva's phrase, 'subject in process', expresses how identities in life are in constant flux. That is to say,

gender does not rest solely in the author, it is just as likely to be subverted in the language of the text.

Gynesis contains a potential for antifeminism in that it questions the credibility of the woman's experience. Gayatri Spivak objects to French feminism because of its tendency to disengage from the particularities of the historical and political world. However, modern textual theory fed by semiotics, psychoanalysis and deconstruction has taught us not to confuse the sex of the author with the sexuality inscribed in the text.

As mentioned earlier Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and its sequel, *Bodies That Matter* (1993), raises questions about the formation of gender identity and subjectivity. Butler's 'subject' is not an individual but a linguistic structure in formation. It is involved in an endless process of becoming. Michel Foucault in his historical analyses of the variable constructions of sex and sexuality in different contexts and societies provide Butler with a theoretical framework for her own formulations of gender, sex and sexuality as unfixed and constructed entities. The linguistic theories of Jacques Derrida complement these formulations of the subject. If Butler and Foucault describe subject formation as a process which must be placed within specific historical and discursive contexts in order to be understood, then Derrida similarly describes meaning as an 'event' that takes place on a citational chain with no origin or end, a theory that effectively deprives

individual speakers of control over their utterances (Salih 14). Butler is more concerned with the processes by which the individual comes to assume her/his position as a subject, than with individual experiences. If Foucault's genealogical investigations assume that sex and gender are 'effects', Butler believes that gendered and sexed identities are performative. Butler is extending de Beauvior's famous insight that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman', to suggest that "'woman' is something we 'do' rather than something we 'are'" (de Beauvior 281). Language and discourse 'do' gender. Gender identities are constituted and constructed by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language.

The feminist programme to research the lives and works of individual authors and to uncover the 'secrets' of female experience which lie beneath the surface of the text, was unsettled by Barthes's pronouncement of the death of the author. Barthes's theory challenged the author's gender. Poststructuralist theory provides a new kind of analysis. It sees the text not as an authentic expression of experience but as "a site for the discursive construction of the meaning of gender" (Weedon 138). Poststructuralism argues that meaning is neither fixed nor controlled by individual readers or writers: it is culturally defined, learnt and plural. As against the idea proposed by the liberal humanist ideology that the subject is a unified and free whole, post structuralism posits that human subjectivity is shifting and fragmented. For feminists perhaps the most important point is that subjectivity is seen as

changing and contradictory: gendered identity is not static and natural, but formed within language and open to change. Poststructuralist feminist analyses reject the idea of an authentic female voice or experience, but see the study of women's writing as a means of understanding patriarchy. They map the possible subject position open to women (Frith 108). While Anglo-American feminist criticism lays emphasis on the cohesive nature of female experience, social feminist critics examine how, in complex ways, gender intersects with class, race and the literary text. They focus on the gaps, ambiguities, incoherences and evasions within the text - on the 'not-saids'. The Marxist feminists use Lacanian psychoanalytic theory because it provides a way of theorizing gendered subjectivity as socially constructed, precarious, contradictory and capable of change.

What then, one is inclined to ask, is the place/role of an author. The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'author' as 'the person who originates or gives existence to anything' and 'one who begets; a father, an ancestor'. Against such a definition Barthes's and Foucault's positions may be seen to have liberatory potential in their rejection of 'authorial power'. Roland Barthes in "The Death of the Author" lays emphasis on the short-lived role of the author. He observes,

> Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body of writing.
>
> (Rice and Waugh 114)

According to him, it is language that speaks and performs, not the author. Language, he says, knows 'subject' not a 'person'. In his essay “From Work to Text”, Barthes defines the text as "a methodological field", "a process of demonstration", "held in language" (Rice and Waugh 167). He goes on to say that while ‘work’ closes on the signified, the text "practices the infinite deferment of the signified" (Rice and Waugh 168). Since the 'scriptor' of the text is just an instance of writing, it naturally follows that the text has a life of its own and yields itself to an objective analysis. The text, divorced as it is from its author, shows up certain strategies that are transgressive. Texts can no longer be treated as self-contained verbal structures with definite meanings. The texts themselves are fraught with unconscious movement and their meanings are dependent on the reader's active engagement with textual structures. Pierre Macherey, in *A Theory of Literary Production,* observes how a text is not self-sufficient, but contains within it a silence / absence that must be explored to locate its meaning.

> The speech of the book comes from a certain silence, a matter which it endows with form, a ground on which it

> traces a figure. Thus the book is not self-sufficient; it is necessarily accompanied by a certain absence, without which it could not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence. (463)

These gaps and ellipses which give the work its meaning need to be brought to light. The work often contributes to an exposure of ideology since it is established against an ideology as much as it is from an ideology (Macherey 466).

Michel Foucault in his essay "What is an Author?", examines how the author came to be individualized and valorized. He deals at length with the relationship between text and author. He observes that "writing unfolds like a game (*jeu*) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits" (Rabinow 102). The work, instead of immortalizing the author, becomes his/her murderer. An effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics takes place. Foucault goes on to examine the author-function and its implications on the literary content. Discourses endowed with the author-function possess a plurality of selves because the narrator (first person) refers not to the writer but "to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing the course of the work" (Rabinow 112). Therefore, the author-function can give rise simultaneously to several selves and subject positions. Foucault points out that,

the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work, the author does not precede the works; he is a certain functional principle by which . . . one limits, excludes and, chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition and recomposition of fiction. In fact, if we are accustomed to presenting the author as a genius as a perpetual surging of invention, it is because, in reality, we make him function in exactly the opposite fashion. One can say that the author is an ideological product, since we represent him as the opposite of his historically real function. When a historically given function is represented in a figure that inverts it, one has an ideological production. The author is therefore the ideological figure by which one marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning …

…Although, since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property, still, given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does

> not seem necessary that the author function remain constant in form, complexity and even in existence …. as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear, and in such a manner that fiction and its polysemous texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint – one which will no longer be the author, but which will have to be determined or, perhaps, experienced. …We would no longer hear the questions that have been rehashed for so long: who really spoke? Is it really he and not someone else? With what authenticity or originality? And what part of his deepest self did he express in his discourse? Instead, there would be other questions, like these: what are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used? How can it circulate? And who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking? (Rabinow 119-120)

In “From Work to Text” Roland Barthes differentiates between the terms *work* and *text*. A literary *work* refers to a concept of creativity whereby the author guarantees the meaning or truth of a written piece apprehended by the critic as a lasting stable object. Such a tradition of authority valorizes the concept of authorship. The literary *text*, on the other hand, is the result of an interaction: "it exists only as discourse. In other words, the text is experienced only in an activity, a production" (Rice and Waugh 167)). The *text* is a "methodological field", "a productivity". It is the result of a dialogical process of exchange between reader and writer. Thus one recognises the plural character of textual criticism. Whereas the literary *work* has an author whose viewpoint and intention need be respected, the literary *text* is authorless since it does not privilege the generator or encoder of the message.

Both Barthes and Foucault are strikingly similar in their playing down of the all pervasive presence of the author in a text. An author, according to them would imply a hero with status and privilege, a unique, intuitive individual displaying special insights, sporting a refined sensibility; a source of meaning engaged in regulating and controlling the text, in giving unity to a body of writing and defining its limits. This would imply linking authoring to ownership and appropriation. The erasure of the author would thus become especially enabling in the sense that only then could the reader enter a text in which ever way he/she chooses.

Feminism has worked in tandem with poststructuralist and postmodernist thought. All the three critical perspectives have questioned the authority of the author - they all have had a subversive and undermining impact on canonical views of literary history. Mary Eagleton alludes to "The Death of the Woman Author", which might problematize the feminist agenda of empowering the woman author. But as Nelly Furman in "The Politics of Language: Beyond the Gender Principle?" says:

> Since, for the textual reader, literature is not a representation of experience but something that is experienced, from a feminist viewpoint the question is not whether a literary work has been written by a woman and reflects her experience of life, or how it compares to other works by women, but rather how it lends itself to be read from a feminist position.
>
> (Greene and Kahn 69)

The 1970s saw feminists making a reassessment of ‘motherhood’ and ‘mothering’ in a woman's life. Radical and social feminists considered bearing and rearing of children to be oppressive forms of drudgery that kept women away from the public sphere, and sought for means to liberate women from the practice and ideology of motherhood. Most early writings caricatured the mother as monster and neurotic smotherer. The mother had to

bear the guilt of gender grooming and of her complicity in strengthening patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* provides a thorough survey of the origin and perpetuation of the patriarchal oppression of women. She observes that marriage and motherhood have been artificially promoted as the most important roles for women in society and this has been inscribed in the laws, customs, beliefs and cultures of society. This has confined women to the private sphere of domesticity. According to de Beauvoir there is no 'natural' femininity or masculinity or any natural 'instinct'. Woman 'becomes' her gender by learning to conform to the requirements of patriarchal society that she exists inauthentically as a passive body for consumption by the male gaze, and by abandoning her freedom and devoting herself to the roles of wife and mother. De Beauvoir observes, “From infancy woman is repeatedly told that she is made for child bearing, and the splendours of maternity are forever sung to her" (de Beauvoir 508). Motherhood thus gets institutionalized, validated by society, laws and customs. Ultimately, "the mother is the very incarnation of the Good " (de Beauvoir 204). De Beauvoir rejects the mystification of motherhood, since she sees within it a hidden agenda of trapping women in embodied immanence. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* (1986) denies the existence of a nurturing instinct. She weaves together her individual experience as a mother and the broader societal ideas underpinning the institution of motherhood in Western culture. Rich places motherhood firmly in the context of sexual politics, presenting it as an arena of feminist

struggle. By distinguishing the institution of motherhood as an invention of patriarchal societies, she highlights the control which patriarchy exerts on women's reproductive capacities. Rich observes, ". . . motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a key stone to the domination in every sphere of women by men (Palmer 99).

Nancy Chodorow, feminist sociologist and psychoanalyst, sees gender differences as a compromise formation to the Oedipal complex. Male children typically experience love as a dyadic relationship; daughters are caught in a libidinal triangle where the ego is pulled between love for the father, love of the mother and concern and worry over the relationship of the father to the mother. For Chodorow, the contrast between the dyadic and triadic first love experience explains the social construction of gender roles. Child care arrangements under patriarchy, however, relegate women to the private domain of home. Motherhood thus is reduced to sheer penal servitude.

French theorists also link motherhood to language. Cixous and Kristeva have made connections between writing, femininity and the pre-Oedipal. Cixous describes *écriture féminine* as a form of writing which originates from the mother's voice and gets its inspiration from the body. Though available to both sexes, in a phallocentric culture it most frequently occurs in texts written by women. Kristeva associates motherhood with the

attributes of maternal *jouissance* and the potential for disruption which it possesses. This *jouissance* , she points out, is both feared and devalued by a phallocentric culture which recognizes the threat it constitutes to the status quo (Moi 113-119). 'Femininity' is identified with an experimentally fluid form of writing which subverts the reader's expectations of linear rational discourse, merging identities and ego boundaries in a manner similar to that which occurs in the pre-Oedipal mother-infant bond.

Laurie A Finke, who belongs to the constructivist group of feminists, believes that progressive feminist politics depend on perceiving gender and even reality as social constructs that can be dismantled and reconstructed in new and more egalitarian ways. In *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing* (1992) Finke explores the possibilities of the subversive, demystifying potential of feminist theory and advocates feminism's need for a politics of *complexity*. She uses the term in a technical as well as evaluative sense drawing specifically on the works of cultural critics like Donna Haraway, N.Katherine Hayles, Bruno Latour and Michel Serres – who work in hybrid fields at the intersection of science and culture. According to Finke,

> *Complexity* describes a cultural politics of indeterminacy, informed by contemporary theoretical debates in a variety of fields but without the political paralysis often attributed to poststructuralism. (4)

She turns to the cultural critiques of science to decentre notions of objectivity and totalizing theory which underwrite a host of disciplinary and critical practices that inform feminist theory. Her project is to seek ways of appropriating aspects of dominant discourses to feminist theory - a way out of the maze of dualisms – nature/culture, mind/body, fact/fiction and so on. Finke draws on Donna Haraway's ides of 'complexity.'

According to Haraway, contemporary scientific thinking like nonlinear dynamics, information theory and fluid mechanics – may help feminists to move towards a feminist theory of complexity, away from the universal and totalizing theory. A time has come when disorder is a productive theoretical principle in the sciences. In her book, *Chaos Bound* (1990) Katherine Hayles writes:

> … disorder has become a focal point for contemporary theory because it offers the possibility of escaping from what are increasingly perceived as coercive structures of order. (265)

Order is achieved through the exclusion, neutralization or marginalization of anything that lies outside socially constructed ‘norms’. Order thus becomes coercive. To understand the implication of ‘complexity’ in relation to women’s writing, one needs to see its difference from what physicists call a theory of everything (or TOE). Such a theory (TOE) would be a totalizing,

universalizing theory. Most literary critics, including feminist literary critics, according to Finke,

> consciously or unconsciously, have derived their beliefs about what a theory is from precisely this kind of scientific idealism, itself a remnant of totalizing misinterpretation of eighteenth – century Newtonianism. (7)

Totalizing beliefs about theory are being challenged by scientists in many fields. As Hayles notes, in both the postmodern sciences and in literary theory, the 1970s and the 1980s brought "a break away from universalizing, totalizing perspectives and a move towards local, fractured systems and modes of analysis" (2), in other words, towards theories of complexity. In contrast to a theory of everything, a theory of complexity reveals the messiness behind the illusion of unified narratives about the world by restoring information, or 'noise' that is previously marginalized and excluded by those narratives. It attempts, in short, to expose the fictivity or the constructed nature of facts.

The irregular and unpredictable evolution of time of non-linear systems has been dubbed as 'Chaos'. Chaos theory ushered in a major paradigm shift. One of the insights of Chaos theory is that disorder can be perhaps more productively conceived of as the presence of information.

Feminism can account for more information from those sources that have most often been marginalized by dominant systems of ‘order’. Complexity, as Hayles notes, insists on local application rather than on global laws or principles. To quote Finke:

> An individual assumes a gendered identity, in this regard, only within a set of social practices specific to a historical time, place and culture. There are no universal roles or meanings attached to male or female, no “eternal feminine” or masculine principle, only network of differential relations that construct men and women, masculine and feminine, in culturally and historically specific ways. (9)

Finke believes that a feminist theory of complexity must be dialogic, double-voiced. Since the field of utterance is the space in which feminist theories must be contested, a feminist theory of complexity might usefully begin with a dialogic notion of the utterance to counter the totalizing structuralist concept of sign which dominates contemporary literary theory. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that all discourse is inherently dialogic and double-voiced, that it involves "intense interaction and struggle between one's own and another's word . . . in which [these words] oppose or . . . interanimate one another" (1981 354). The term 'double-voiced' applies to language which

calls into question the fiction of authoritative or monologic discourse. Every utterance is always inhabited by the voice of the 'other' or many 'others', because the interests of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age and any number of other related 'accents' intersect in any utterance. The term *heteroglossia* represents this complex system. Bakhtin's theory of the dialogized word is useful to feminist critics precisely because it refuses to see the oppressed or marginalized as passive victims of their oppression; it returns to them a culturally specific agency and the power to participate in defining their struggles, in turning the oppressor's words against him/her. Feminists can thus appropriate the notion of *heteroglossia,* highlighting the dialogical nature of all discourse, insisting that those contested voices be heard. A theory of complexity therefore will foreground unheard, muted voices, or chaotic disordered voices and gravitate towards a non-linear and non deterministic model of cultural analysis.

An overview of contemporary Indian fiction in English reveals an incredible array of talent. It is rich and vigorous as new writers experiment with different forms. Indian English fiction today reflects the confident, new-found individual voice of the Indian English writer. The voice is no more apologetic about writing in an 'alien' language. English has emerged as a vibrant language capable of internalizing the Indian sensibility. It is used imaginatively and confidently by its practitioners. Indian literature in English

may be considered a kind of literature-in-progress, a protean literature which keeps on finding new voices and new styles.

Makarand Paranjape traces the evolution of the Indian English novel in *Towards a Poetics of the Indian English Novel.* He starts with the 'Colonial Beginings' (1835-1900) when Bankim Chandra Chatopadhyay wrote *Rajmohan's Wife* and Toru Dutt her incomplete *Bianca or The Young Spanish Maiden* (1878). The 'Nationalist Era' (1900-1950) saw the publication of A.Madhavaiah's *Thillai Govindan* (1908). Some of the other major writers during this period were Raja Rao, Romesh Chandra Dutt, Babhani Bhattacharya and G.V. Desani. Desani's *All about H.Hatter* is a landmark in experimental writing. Paranjape's 'Modernist Interlude' (1950-80) featured the Big three- Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K. Narayan, as also the Big three women writers, Kamala Markandeya, Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. Others who enriched the scene were Sudhir N Ghose, Manohar Malgonkar, Arun Joshi, Ruskin Bond, Chaman Nahal, Ruth P.Jhabvala, Santha Rama Rao, Jai Nimbkar, Bharati Mukherjee and Shashi Despande besides several more. The two dominant trends that may be seen in the works of these writers could be broadly termed as 'social realism' and 'psychological realism'. Indian English fiction impacted on an international readership in a big way with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981). *Midnight's Children* changed the way English fiction was written. It heralded a new technique of writing. It contained a certain postmodern playfulness,

magical realism, a new exuberance of language, the reinvention of allegory, layers of interconnected stories and a disarming frankness. Writers like Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Rukun Advani, Mukul Kesavan, Anurag Mathur, Vikram Seth, Vikram Chandra, Amit Chaudhari, Rohinton Mistry and Firdaus Kanga have redefined the contours of Indian English fiction. An equally impressive array of women writers form part of the postmodernist scene: Namita Gokhale, Gita Hariharan, Shama Futehally, Meena Alexander, Gita Mehta, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Kavery Nambissan and others.

This thesis attempts to discover how gender operates in selected works of four Indian English novelists. The novels chosen for study are Shashi Deshapnde's *Small Remedies* (2000), Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things* (1997), Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) and Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* (1988). These authors have been internationally acclaimed and have played a pivotal role in projecting Indian English fiction on to the international arena. The chosen novels are contemporary and in many aspects postmodern. When analysed in the light of modern theories of text and gender these novels throw up interesting insights into how textual process becomes gendered.

Shashi Deshpande holds a prominent place among the contemporary Indian English writers since she has a corpus of work reflective of the Indian

middle class. Her stories locate the individual firmly within a familial and a social context. Deshpande's words are concerned with the women's perspective, but, she is not confined to a feminist position. Her work is located in the question of personhood, of right to body, space for independence, realization of a self and decentring male centrality in society and in a woman's life. She has an amazing literary output of more than twenty books. Her first publication, a collection of short stories, *The Legacy* appeared in 1978. Her first novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* was published two years later. An earlier novel *Roots and Shadows* was published in 1983 five years after its writing. The mid-eighties saw the publication of three collection of short stories: *It was the Nightingale* (1986), *It Was Dark* (1986) and *The Miracle* (1986). After the crime novella *If I Die Today* (1982), Deshpande went on to write novels that found her a prominent place in the forefront of Indian English writing: *Roots and Shadows, That Long Silence*(1989), *The Binding Vine* (1993), *Come Up and Be Dead* (1985), *A Matter of Time* (1996), and *Small Remedies* (2000). Other short story collections include *The Stone Women and Other Stories* and *Intrusion and Other Stories*. Deshpande's latest novel *In the Country of Deceit* was published in August 2008. Her novels wade through generations in families. Families work through relationship and interdependence and become powerful agencies of socialization and transmission of values. The concept of 'space' within families also get problematized in her fiction. Some of

Deshpande's novels also highlight the concerns of the creative woman writer. So her fiction moves from the personal to the social, veers back again to the realization of the self.

Arundhati Roy first came into the lime light with her screen play for a low budget film *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*. Her only novel (to date) *The God of Small Things* (1997) became a huge success with its innovative use of English prose. Roy has deployed a narrative that is meticulously crafted, that shows unparalleled skills in the use of language, that has a complex structure, that conceals at every turn the possibility of discovering some unexpected meaning. It is a book written with immense effort and care, clearly reflecting an architect's eye for details. Roy has, however, channelized her creative energy to espouse social/political issues. She has authored many works of non-fiction that vehemently critique neo-imperialism and globalization. *The End of Imagination, The Cost of Living, The Greater Common Good, The Algebra of Infinite Justice, An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* and *War Talk* are published collections of Roy's essays and speeches on global justice.

Upamanyu Chatterjee, the writer-civil servant made his appearance on the literary scene with the much publicized *English, August: An Indian Story* in 1988. His wry humour and detached observation of the smung, corrupt Indian administration, caught the imagination of modern Indian reader. The

novel that followed *The Last Burden* (1993) portrays the life of the Indian middle class at the turn of the twentieth centaury. *The Mammaries of the Welfare State,* a sequel to *English, August,* picks up some seven or eight years after the time of the first novel. The narrative is a collection of loose episodes, more than a structured novel, but the satire is sharp. Chatterjee's most recent novel is *Weight Loss* (2006), a dark comedy.

Amitav Ghosh is a major writer whose work has over the last two decades brought substance and range to Indian English Fiction. Ghosh's fiction has pushed at the boundaries of the genre, probing its unlit corners and bringing it into powerful dialogue with other places, peoples and times. Without being grounded on one style, he chooses to set new literary challenges for himself, constantly transforming his work down the years. His career began, like many of his contemporaries, in the experimental wake of *Midnight's Children* and the techniques it put into innovative play. His fist novel *The Circle of Reason* (1994) opened up a rich seam of stories and themes that Ghosh explored in his later works. It attempts to recover a continuing tradition of cultural exchange for India westwards across the Indian Ocean to the Gulf states and Egypt. *In an Antique Land* (1992) combines travelogue with a historical reflection in returning to this issue. *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1996) is also concerned with the relationship between science, history and colonialism in a futuristic detective story. *The Glass*

Palace (2000) mediates on large historic and nationalistic issues such as diaspora, migration, refugees, colonial hegemony and the economic and cultural subjugation of populous regions by the west. *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is set in the mangrove swamps and river islands of the Ganga Delta. The constantly shifting terrain of the Sunderbans provides an extended metaphor for the fluid interaction between different languages, faiths and way of thinking. Ghosh excavates the small worlds that are proliferated in the flow. His most recent novel *Sea of Poppies* (2008), the first in a trilogy also speaks of new worlds that are forged aboard a ship bound for the Caribbean sugar plantations, among men and women from diverse countries, races and cultures. Ghosh's second novel *The Shadow Lines* (1988), the best received among his works, experiments with a narrative form that enables the stories of individuals and families to intersect with the larger stories of nation-states. It addresses histories of belonging and common ground that have been lost in a world which stresses difference.

Shashi Deshpande's fictional world delves deep into the familial matrix. In her novels, it is through interiorized journeys into their own psyche that her women protagonists find the strength to reach out to more stable and sustaining relationships. *Small Remedies* which centres around the writing of the biography of a high-profile female singer betrays patriarchal biases. One of the central concerns of the text is motherhood and mothering. An inclination to valorize motherood is evident in the narrative. This even makes

the narratorial voice judgemental in its treatment of the protagonist. The biographer's mission also gets problematized as it becomes an activity fraught with the politics of power. One becomes aware of an authorial appropriation of the subject which is suggestive of a replay/mimicry of androcentric practices. Kumkum Sangari in the *Politics of the Possible* remarks that patriarchies,

> function simultaneously through *coercion* or threat and practice of violence, through making a wide social *consensus* drawn from and dispersed over many areas of social life and through obtaining in various ways, different degrees of *consent* from women. (Sangari 371)

This is played out in Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*. Women seemingly join hands with men and hostile institutions to victimize besides hapless children and outcasts, their own kind. Roy explores the institutions of family, marriage and the law to expose the agenda of violence and oppression. The text becomes a site for 'retaliation', for upsetting the norm through an ingenious use of language. The writings become as transgressive as much as the theme of the novel. Hélène Cixous speaks of two simultaneous movements of *écriture feminine* - flying/ stealing -which she calls the gesture of women, flying in language and stealing from language or "making it fly" (Simons 146). The combination of exhilaration (flying) and subversion (theft)

mark feminine writing. Roy's *The God of Small Things* is an example of such a mode of writing.

Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* is a text steeped in sexist language wherein the woman is transformed from a social being to a carnal prey. She is forced to "remain the inessential" (de Beauvoir 291). There is an all-pervasive 'male gaze' that makes the text guilty of a blatant 'othering'. *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh on the other hand is concerned with 'versions' of history. History here is not presented as a linear, chronological progression as in the traditional sense but in a post modernist manner. As Brenda K. Marshall points out, postmodernism is about histories

> . . . not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, irradicated. It's about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern all set for us to make sense of. It's about chance. It's about power. It's about information. (4)

The narrative grapples with 'versions' that lie outside the received and acknowledged 'fact', that spill over ordered borders into the blurred regions of chaos or noise.

Two texts by female authors and two others by male authors studied in juxtaposition bring to light gender - effects that emerge consequent to certain narrative strategies, deployment of language and perspectives.

IRREDEEMABLE BIASES

Shashi Deshpande : *Small Remedies*

Shashi Deshpande's writings have addressed several social issues, worked through historical and traditional contexts and explored psychological conflicts and inner spaces. She has been acclaimed for her realistic portrayal of the life of the Indian middle class woman. Critics have focused on Deshpande's women protagonists and issues related to feminist concerns and modes of resistance. Mukta Atrey and Viney Kripal in *Shashi Deshpande: A Feminist Study of Her Fiction* (1998), for example, consider her writing to be women-centred. R.S. Pathak's *The Fiction of Shashi Deshpande*(1998) works through a dominantly feminist approach. These and several other edited volumes of critical studies do not take into consideration Deshpande's own stand that the impulse behind her work is more than the 'woman question'. They do not take seriously Deshpande's own observation, that "to apply the tag of feminist, is one way, I've realised, of dismissing the serious concerns of the novels by labeling them" (Pathak 230). In her article "Writing from the Margin", Deshpande points out,

> The way I see the world is coloured by this fact of my being a woman, by the historical and social

> circumstances of women's lives. My themes, therefore, my characters and possibly, to a certain extent, even my language may differ from a man's . . . . Nevertheless when I sit down to write I am just a writer – my gender ceases to matter to me. I am concerned with the same problems of language, narrative, structure and continuity … (144)

The essay critiques the idea of a "woman writer". Deshpande goes on to narrate her personal experience of having her own works treated with condescension. She recalls having tried to overcome the socially biased attitudes towards the woman writer by consciously giving space to male narrators in her works. She adds:

> It was with a short story 'The Intrusion' that I broke out this wall I had built around myself as a woman and wrote in what I recognized only much later was not only a woman's voice, but my own authentic voice. (147)

In her novels, Deshpande has engaged in "pushing back frontiers, letting the light into hitherto dark, ignored areas" (152). She however rejects the idea of being governed in her writing by a solely feminist ideology. She does not consider 'rebellion' "generally understood to mean walking out on a marriage" as a liberating process. She believes that inner awareness is a

positive attribute, ". . . it is always clear that an understanding of oneself is what really liberates, it is this that opens out a number of possibilities. To walk out, or away, is to carry the old self within oneself" (159). She chooses not to comply with the expectations of literary critics who categorize writers on the basis of the 'ism' they are expected to propagate. Her appeal is: "For God's sake, I'm a novelist, I write novels, not feminist tracts. Read my novel as a novel, not as a piece of work that intends to propagate feminism" (159). The essay concludes with Deshpande's own view of 'margins'. She claims to begin her writing after leaving 'a huge margin, a larger, blank space' (165) which quickly gets filled up with corrections. Gradually the margin overflows and creeps or encroaches the centre until, ironically, "the margin takes over, it becomes the real text" (165).

One is thus faced with the question of whether Deshpande really wrote from the margin / about the marginalised, or crossed over centre stage (un)consciously to study women's predicaments as 'human issues'. In her essay "In First Person," which is a self-analysis, she avers, "people were, still are, more important to me than theories and when I wrote I always saw an individual, a human being, a woman – I never saw a class called 'women' (Margin 10). Deshpande rejects outright the feminist label. Her concern is the 'human being' and her fiction may not create female enclaves either. Her women protagonists do not revel in the otherness of women but view themselves as part of the societal whole. Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* (1983)

says 'Women, women, women. I got sick of it. There was nothing else. It was a kind of Narcissism. As if we had locked ourselves and thrown away the key' (78).

In an interview with Ranjana Harish, Deshpande rejects the 'feminist writer' label since this would/might put her writing in danger of being read in a limited kind of way. She adds ". . . when I am writing I am purely a novelist . . ." (Harish 28). She goes onto clarify her position: "My idea of feminism is simple. It means that I see men and women as two halves of a whole. In every way, we have been created to complement each other, and together we can fulfil our roles in life" (28). Nearly all her protagonists go through a period of self-evaluation and emerge enlightened, with a clarity of vision that makes life more meaningful and worth living. Jaya in *That Long Silence* (1989) and Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) come to terms with all those selves they reject resolutely in the beginning. The fragmented selves that defy mutual coexistence subsequently become whole-

> . . . all those selves she had rejected so resolutely first, and so passionately embraced later. The guilty sister, the undutiful daughter, the involving wife . . . all persons spiked with guilts. Yes, she was all of them, she could not deny that now. She had to accept these selves to become whole again. (*Dark* 201)

Deshpande's concern is 'human' in the sense that she delves into interpersonal relationships. Social and cultural norms, nevertheless, govern these relationships. Desired behavioural patterns and expected role-plays are discussed at length. As a perceptive novelist, she zeroes in on individuals and sets about analysing their selfhoods. Her enduring concern is for human relationships. One cannot pigeon-hole her novels as feminist since they are not concerned solely with man versus woman issues.

Deshpande's narratives work through interiorized journeys into the past. Her works deal with interior spaces both literally and figuratively. Her writing can be placed broadly within the framework of realism since it engages with actual life situations. As Jasbir Jain discusses in *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces: The Writings of Shashi Deshpande* (2003), Deshpande's writing

> …works through the medium of characters, who evolve as they go along and evolve through self-reflection, psychological questioning, blame and guilt, who work through memory and reveal ambivalent attitudes and act in ways that they themselves may not understand. It is through these ambiguities and interfacings with subconscious drives that both the idea of romance and the structure of myth are dislocated. (242)

The really strong women in her novels are the ones that cross boundaries, deviate from social codes and work their way to selfhood. They define their selfhood, freedom and personal space in highly individual terms irrespective of the compromises they may have to make. Savitribai and Leela "knew the price they had to pay for it" (*Small Remedies* 224).

Seen from a feminist perspective, Deshpande's narratives open out in multiple ways as they rewrite earlier narratives of womanhood. These narratives explore the way a woman writes and go on to explain the way a woman lives, discovers herself, relates to society and in the end, succeeds in extracting a meaning to confirm her idea of self. Deshpande's novels are densely peopled. Relatives and friends and distant memories vie with one another for attention. Jasbir Jain who critiques Deshpande's novels within the frame work of realism, comments in *Gendered Realities, Human Spaces* that Deshpande

> works through the medium of characters, who evolve as they go along and evolve through self-reflection, psychological questioning, blame and guilt, who work through memory and reveal ambivalent attitudes and act in ways that themselves may not understand. (242)

The 'strong' women cross boundaries, breaking social codes to attain selfhood in highly individualized ways. In the final analysis, the woman is

not victim, but challenger. As Jain points out, the choice is "no longer between either captivity or exile but is guided towards personal transformation and external restructuring" (271). A reworking of both these takes place in order that a new pattern may emerge. In the process of this transformation the responsibility of the individual is given as much importance as her emancipation.

Small Remedies (SR), Deshpande's sixth novel presents a daring break from the pattern of her earlier stories. She handles unwieldy material in a masterly fashion. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her essay, "On Her Own Terms: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies",* lauds the novelist's expertise in narration:

> The author is in no great hurry to get on with the story. The narrative unfolds leisurely like a raga, beginning with aalap, continuing with vistaar, gradually gaining momentum in a quickening spiral of suspense eventually to achieve a cathartic calm. (Bharat 173)

Small Remedies, is concerned like all of Deshpande's previous works, with issues that beset a convention ridden society. But as Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks, none of Deshpande's previous novels gather up as this one does

> in one large sweep, the plurality, diversity and contradictions of contemporary culture. She cuts across cultures and religion, incorporating many social nuances in an introspective novel dealing with abstract questions.
>
> (Bharat 175)

Small Remedies tells the story of three women: Savitribai Indorekar, the doyenne of Hindustani music, Leela, the social activist who spends a life time working with the factory workers of Bombay, and Madhu, the one who is commissioned to write a biography of Savitribai. Madhu the narrator, is emotionally shattered by the death of her only son Adit in a bomb blast, and her estrangement from her husband Som. The assignment to write the biography is meant to be therapeutic for Madhu. The multiple narratives serve as peepholes into the lives of not just these three women, but also of others like Munni, Lata and a host of male characters. Savitribai and Leela are unusual women who have left the beaten track. They have forged radical alliances across cultures and have ventured upon unconventional careers. At the heart of the narrative is Madhu, trying to come to terms with her grief and guilt. The past and present intermingle, fates criss cross, parallels and contrasts emerge, as Madhu embarks upon the writing of the biography. She says: "We see our lives through memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time" (*SR* 165). Writing the

biography in a sense helps Madhu to cope with her bereavement and also to get away from her husband Som. Even as Madhu begins to analyse or sum up Savitri's multidimensional roles: as daughter, daughter-in-law, lover, mother and singer, she becomes aware of the many similarities and contrasts in their lives. If Savitribai rejects her only child Munni, and blots her out of her memory, Madhu is still nursing the deep wound that the death of her son Adit has inflicted on her. Ironically both Munni and Adit die in the same bomb blasts that rock Bombay. Madhu marvels over how Savitribai can turn her back on her own child, while Madhu is herself so absorbed in 'putra moha'. She agonizes over why her "seventeen year old son had to die such a horrible death" (*SR* 5) and struggles to make sense of "this freakish thing (*SR* 5) that had shattered her life with Som.

Memories crowd into her mind and Madhu examines them threadbare. At the upanayanam ceremony that she witnesses at the Bhawanipur temple, when the mother babies her son for the last time, she realizes that she had never let her son go, until he was snatched away by death. All the small remedies that one resorts to in order to make life bearable prove futile; wishing for forgetfulness is just as absurd. Madhu asks:

> How could I have ever longed for amnesia? Memory, capricious and unreliable though it is, ultimately carries its own truth within it. As long as there is memory, there

> is always the possibility of retrieval, as long as there is memory, loss is never total. (*SR* 324)

(*SR* 324)

Madhu also speaks of many couples in her narrative. Savitribai and Ghulamsab, Latha and Hari, Leela and Joe. These analyses in turn help her understand her relationship with Som and give her insights into the crisis in her own marriage. Could she be responsible for the rift? Could she, then be the cause for Adit's leaving home? Should she be accused by Som for something that happened years ago? These are the questions that Madhu tries to grapple with. But at the centre of it is the search for the real Savitri Bai.

Small Remedies is also about the creative process. The protagonist as writer is recurrent in Deshpande's novels. Madhu is a successor to Indu (*The Dark Holds No Terror*) and Jaya (*That Long Silence*) who are confronted by the angst of writing. Madhu also examines her role as a writer. Writing about the life of one who is still living, whose "life is still fluid, inchoate and incomplete' (*SR* 169) becomes a cruel process. As the biography progresses, we see Madhu's journey through childhood, adolescence, marriage and the sorrow that engulfs her. Madhu compares the act of writing to a musical

performance. ". . . plans go awry, rules are scattered, new discoveries lie in wait" (*SR* 280).

The entire narrative of *Small Remedies* is markedly different from the previous novels written by Deshpande. Deshpande gives up the first person narrator and uses, instead the omniscient narrator; here Madhu whose perspective makes the narrative tightly and strongly structured. The lives discussed (Bai's and Leela's) are treated speculatively and objectively. There is no hidden anger, only an acceptance of the unknown. The plot goes beyond a documentation of personal lives to embrace socio-political issues as well. Communal violence and fatal bomb blasts form an integral part of the story. Savitribai's act of rebellion in walking out of a traditional marriage from within a conservative Brahmin household, to her lover a Muslim tabla-player, problematizes the socio-political implications of an inter-community marriage. Besides, Bai defies her traditional Brahmanical upbringing by taking up music as a vocation, parenting an illegitimate child, in short by throwing respectability to the winds.

Leela the other strong women in the novel is the "black sheep of the family. A widow who remarried. And what was worse, infinitely worse, married a Christian man" (*SR* 46). The family keeps these memories alive while Leela's good work as teacher and social worker are conveniently forgotten. "Her years of teaching, her role in the trade unions, her work

among the factory workers - these were blanked out, they did not exist" (*SR* 46). This is a woman who is ahead "not only of her own generation, but the next one as well" (*SR* 94). Leela spends the best part of her life living in the chawls, wearing coarse saris, in very modest circumstances, waging war against oppression of any kind. She courts arrests and imprisonments. Unlike Bai she does not yearn for the limelight.

Leela appears to successfully combine the roles of the public hero for Hari, and the personal hero for Madhu. The passionate, independence- loving Leela is the hope for the women of the future. Her heroism is the fixed symbol at the novel's centre of female potential and human possibility. She is a vibrant public figure. She balances that role superbly well with that of a loving wife and mother. Madhu cannot dream of writing Leela's biography since she claims that one needs to be detached, objective and even ruthless to be able to assess a life. Her intimacy with Leela forecloses the impersonal scrutiny that the writing of a biography entails.

Small Remedies may also be viewed as a novel that has motherhood and mothering as one of its themes. Two strands in the story run counter to one another. On the one hand we see Madhu, the self-sacrificing mother, totally, perhaps even abnormally absorbed in her child's world. She is hopelessly smitten by "putra-moha." On the other hand, the figure of Bai looms large over the narrative as an indifferent mother who is reluctant to

acknowledge her daughter in the course of her meteoric rise into fame. The relations between mother and daughter have been reappraised by several theorists. Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow and Luce Irigaray place emphasis on the pre-Oedipal attachment between mother and daughter. Chodorow points out that the mother, while treating her son as an autonomous individual from a relatively early age, tends to cultivate a symbiotic bond with her daughter since she seeks unconsciously to re-create the intimate bond she enjoyed with her own mother. The consequence is that boys grow up possessing a strong sense of autonomy, whereas girls are likely to feel a greater sense of interdependence and connection with other people (Palmer 114). When viewed from this light, Deshpande's text hardly touches upon any mother - daughter relationship that can claim intimacy at all. For Madhu, her mother is just a picture of a girl with two thick plaits, displaying a trophy, "scarcely a mother figure" (*SR* 101). Munni consciously avoids speaking of her mother and expresses open disdain for her father, Ghulam Saab. Obviously there is no love lost between the mother and child. She chooses to identify the lawyer in Pune as her father. When Madhu unexpectedly meets Munni, a mature woman by then, she (Munni) retorts defiantly "My name is Shailaja - Shailaja Joshi" (*SR* 76) cutting out her past and erasing her link with Savitri Bai. There is no evidence of any kind of maternal protection/attachment/concern whatsoever.

The 'mother' in Deshpande's *Small Remedies* gets a raw deal. Madhu confesses; "I know nothing of Mothers" (*SR* 101). Looking back, the mothers she knew were ever "harried creatures in drab saries, forever in the kitchen, endlessly preoccupied with food and children" (*SR* 33). They were "drab, badly dressed mothers of (her) friends" (*SR* 14). Groomed as she has been in an all-male household, Madhu cannot relate to the boring game of 'house-house' that little girls played. It is the man-servant Babu who initiates her into 'girlhood' with its baggage of dos and don'ts. Lata too has unhappy memories of her mother. She tells Madhu the story of a jack tree that was cut down in the compound of her home at the instance of her superstitious mother. She gets it felled since the bats that occupied the tree disturbed her. Lata remembers that it made her mother happy but in a month's time she killed herself. Strangely though, there is not a single photograph in the house of the woman. Lata's recollections of the incident is coloured with distaste and a deep anger.

However, when motherhood comes to Madhu she undergoes a transformation. She realises mother's love meant "a small centre, a vast exclusion" (*SR* 144). Her new role absorbs her entirely. Covered with the thick haze of motherhood" (*SR* 148), she enters a new world. "As far as I am concerned, there's only Adit and me in this new world I've entered. The others are mere shadows. Som is part of our world, but he is on the periphery" (*SR* 146).

Simone de Beauvoir has written extensively on the mother-child relationship. Of a mother de Beauvoir says "in her son she looks for a god; in her daughter she finds a double" (de Beauvoir 600). The mother seeks for salvation through a son or daughter, but she bases her fondest hopes upon the son. This is how de Beauvoir describes the advent of the son:

> Here he is, come to her at last from the depths of the past, the man for whose glorious advent she once scanned the distant horizon; since the first wail of her new born son she has awaited this day when he would pour out all the treasures which his father had been unable to shower upon her. (596)

The anxiety that Madhu experiences is an expression of the mother's desperate dependence on the son for validating her own existence. There is evidently here an irrational obsession verging on the neurotic. She is overcome with the constant fear that Adit might be orphaned and broods over who will be his guardian in the event of their death. One may attribute this over protectiveness to Madhu's ignorance of 'mothering'. "My mother remained a blank space through childhood" (*SR* 171) she tells us. But she does not hesitate to add:

> 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 are not the women to arouse a sense of deprivation in me. (*SR* 182)

In fact according to Madhu real life mothers are a contrast to the 'reel' life "white-clad, sacrificing, sobbing mothers" (*SR* 183). She lists them: "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 -" (*SR* 183). Ironically when Madhu dons the same role, she finds herself in the centre of a new universe, a stable centre/destination for her child's searching eyes. She begins to believe that "mother love is one of the greatest wonders of this world" (*SR* 184).

De Beauvoir describes the complex relations between mother and daughter:

> . . . the daughter is for the mother at once her double and another person, the mother is at once overweeningly affectionate and hostile toward her daughter; she saddles her child with her own destiny: a way of proudly laying claim to her own femininity and also a way of revenging herself for it. (309)

The relationship between Munni and her mother, Bai, is left unclear in the text. De Beauvior's statement may to some degree resolve the mystery: “She [the mother] projects upon her daughter all the ambiguity of her relation

with herself’ (de Beauvoir 32). The mother detests her own femininity and the hardship that it has entailed, so she plays out her disappointment and even frustration on her daughter. Maternity is often looked upon as saintly and perfectly genuine whereas, "Maternity is usually a strange mixture of narcissism, altruism, idle day-dreaming, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism" (de Beauvoir 529). It can be surmised that Bai's experiences on her road to fame embitter her. De Beauvoir avers that maternal instincts are also socially constructed.

While Deshpande plays down the glory of motherhood on the one hand, she simultaneously attempts to assert the 'unquestionable' superiority of ‘mothering' and 'maternal instincts'. Madhu, the biographer, is determined to give Munni a place in the written life story of her mother. In Bai's journey to success and fame, she had chosen to erase the names of her daughter and her husband. Madhu cannot stop wondering how Bai can sleep turning her back on that part of her life. "Does she not face the stark truth at that time, the truth that confronts me every moment of my life - the futility of life without children?" (*SR* 154) Madhu launches on a sermon of the gift of children, which is obviously a eulogy of motherhood as well. "The desire for a child, the anguish of childlessness - these have been a part of human kind since ancient times". She says the child is "the single most important factor of human life… A child is a beginning, a renewal, a continuation, an assertion of immortality" (*SR* 168).

The whole narrative hinges on Madhu's attempts at coming to terms with the reality of Adit's death. She juxtaposes this process with Bai's story - trying to find answers to her own queries. At one level she sees in Bai a fellow sufferer, having lost her only child on the same day, in the same way that she has been robbed of Adit. In the depths of her quest for a rationale for all that has happened she says,

> . . . my mind has been ceaselessly exercising on the treadmill of this one thought: how does one live with the knowledge of a child's death? It is our children who reconcile us to the passing of time, to our aging, to our irrelevance, our mortality, without them the world makes no sense, without them we have no place in it. How then does one live without them? Can Bai give me the clue to this? Has she found the secret?" (*SR* 155)

In writing Bai's biography, Madhu gets emotionally involved in Munni's absence from Bai's journey down memory lane. The ellipses and fissures that show through are attributed to a yawning 'lack' - Savitri Bai the mother. Without touching upon the mother-daughter relationship, the life story of the singer never seems to attain completion. Madhu says:

> I have to negotiate my way between this woman and the cruel mother of my memory. Between this woman and

> the dazzlingly beautiful singer with her lover, whom she kept purposefully in the background. (*SR* 170)

Madhu's search for the real Bai forms the crux of the narrative. Bai's narration projects an image of herself that is far from satisfying and convincing. Her silence about her personal life is tantalizing. The mystery, and the darkness invite interest and a genuine curiosity. "I know its in this darkness, that the woman I want resides," thinks Madhu (*SR* 177). She sets about probing this darkness. There are moments when Madhu expresses intense dislike for the artist - her arrogant, aggressive behaviour makes her exclaim: "This nasty, tyrannical creature . . . Is this woman going to be part of my book?" (*SR* 61). The dislike evidently springs from Bai's evasion of motherhood and her calculated efforts to keep the Munni question at bay.

In *Small Remedies* one is confronted by the portrayal of two extreme images of motherhood: Madhu's stifling obsession with her son and Bai's cold indifference to her daughter. An attempt is on, apparently, to justify Madhu's stance by critiquing Bai. Deshpande at this point is in danger of being trapped in conservative paradigms of womanhood. One cannot help noticing Madhu's projection of the image of a deviant who does not live up to the image of the culturally stereotyped mother, who in blotting out a child from her memory becomes guilty of an unpardonable crime. In the attempt

to burden Bai with guilt regarding her atypical attitude to mothering, the agenda of patriarchy that the text indirectly promotes stands exposed.

Deshpande's text is also guilty of occasionally stereotyping women. She may have etched the picture of a powerful woman, a careerist who follows her dream with determination. “The entire household is organized around Bai's needs, her imperatives” (*SR* 28) we are told. The power Bai wields at home is amazing. She makes the rules, while the others - be they male or female - follow them unquestioningly. She is pompous as she displays her album to Madhu. Bai has come a long way from that day when her grandmother put an abrupt end to her singing with a discouraging "That's enough, child" (*SR* 28).

Bai's mother encouraged her as a young girl to sing, but she does not mention her mother's death. Ironically she speaks enthusiastically about her father who, in fact, stood in the way of her music lessons. Madhu imagines the rough road Bai must have traversed to reach her present height. The elopement - from an orthodox Brahmin family with a Muslim tabla player may have caused an upheaval in the household. The very fact that her father-in-law had magnanimously arranged music lessons may have enraged other women folk at home. Her attempts to enroll under Pandit Kashinath Bawa becomes a long drawn out painful process of requests, entreaties and unashamed pleadings. In a weak moment Bai confesses ". . . it became a

curse, my being a Brahmin woman. My belonging to a respectable family" (*SR* 130). The best years of her life are spent in arduous travels to learn music at the feet of a master. She may have come into a lot of bitter criticism. It must have taken remarkable courage to survive the hostility, the animal cruelty to the deviant. There is no protest. Bai does not declare war on anyone to break conventions. But she tramples over other lives to gain her ends. She makes use of Ghulam Saab, of whom she says nothing at all, to reach the lime light. Bai's narration of her own story is linear. Her only concern is for the spotlight to be focused upon 'I-me-myself' (*SR* 167). Perhaps Bai is determined to highlight the victor instead of the victim. Bai's designs are however clear to her biographer:

> It occurs to me that like her daughter, Bai too is into denial. There is no Munni in her life, no illegitimate child, abandoned husband, no lover . . . she is presenting me with her own illusion of her life. A life of success and achievement. Nothing lacking; no unreconciled child, no dead daughter. (*SR* 78)

Bai's rise to fame may be deemed a saga of victory, of a woman who defied society. The iron woman's sternness and indifference, her unswerving focus on self advancement is sometimes overplayed. Is Bai attempting to mimic the male, one is inclined to suspect. But the carefully built image is

subverted by the one question upper most in Madhu's mind ". . . what kind of a woman are you, denying your own child? Only the lowest, the meanest kind of creature could do such a thing" (*SR* 78). Madhu, as biographer, is articulating, perhaps unconsciously, the importance of motherhood as a passport to womanhood. Women can attain fulfillment only if they accept and live out their roles as mothers, the narrative seems to suggest.

In an interview with Vanamala Viswanathan, Deshpande says:

> It's necessary for women to live in a relationship. But if the rules are rigidly laid that as a wife or mother you do this and no further, then one becomes unhappy. This is what I have tried to convey in my writing. What I don't agree with is the idealization of motherhood - the false and sentimental notes that accompany it. (13)

Small Remedies, needless to say, gets side-tracked in the attempt to make an anxious reassessment of a woman's life, through relentlessly teasing out the elusive mother in Bai.

Madhu had never known what a proper 'family' is. Even the time spent with Leela, her aunt and Leela's husband Joe did not give her the experience or the sense of being part of a 'proper' family in the conventional sense. Her marriage to Som proves to be the gateway to this much sought-after experience. Her dream family consisted of: "The *dignified* father. The

nurturing mother. The *serious*, *responsible* oldest brother. The eldest sister, a *surrogate mother* to the youngest two" (emphasis added). The family photograph that she etches is complete - gender roles are assigned in the very adjectives used: dignified,' 'serious' and 'responsible' males; 'nurturing' 'surrogate mother' females. Statements such as these which occasionally surface through the unconscious of the text seem to endorse patriarchal formulations and in doing so contradict the professed stance of the author.

Lata, in whose house Madhu stays when she goes to work on the biography on Savithri Bai, is to all appearances a 'liberated' woman. She stays on in her family house at Bhavanipur even after her marriage to Hari. "Hers is a pervasive presence" (*SR* 41) while Hari is like a guest in the house. He takes over household chores - cooking and cleaning, playing the concerned host and devoted husband. On a Sunday, Lata is seen cleaning her scooter with gusto while Hari goes to buy breakfast and later lays the table. It is Hari again who lights the diyas on Diwali eve. This is overtly an instance of gender crossover - a device the author perhaps employs to break stereotyping and culturally inscribed roles. However, Lata is still unhappy about not being free to travel - of the job that stands in the way, a job she cannot afford to give up. It is at this juncture that Madhu makes an observation:

> This naivety seems endearing to me, the naivety that makes her unaware of the fact, or makes her ignore it perhaps, that the burden of earning the money should be Hari's, not hers. That she does not have to take on the responsibility of being the wage earner of the family.
>
> (*SR* 94)

Thus Deshpande seems to unintentionally promote the very essentialist attitudes to gender that she seeks to challenge.

Deshpande explores the whole notion of masculinity which rests on the idea of strength, superiority and power. Her range of male characters is fairly wide encompassing also passive fathers and nearly absent father figures. Some are sensitive, even artistically inclined. "Deshpande projects peripheral men into the central consciousness of the reader and seeks to redefine masculinity and free it from the heroic mould" says Jasbir Jain (105). Even the worst of men in her novels are granted redeeming qualities: they are hardly ever aggressive and dominating.

Ashis Nandy in "Woman versus womanliness in India: An Essay in Social and Political Psychology," observes that the polarity between the masculine and the feminine is not as marked in India as it is in western tradition. He states, "The concept of *adya shakti*, primal or original power, is entirely feminine in India. It is the male principle in the god-head, *purusha*,

that is . . . relatively passive, weak, distant and secondary" (72). In India, unlike as in many western societies, the softer form of creativity and the more intuitive and introspective styles of intellectual and social functions are not strongly identified with femininity. There is masculinity that is closely linked to forceful, potency-driven, 'hard' and 'hard headed' modes of intrusive behaviour. Sex-role specific qualities here are differently distributed. In fact, the concept of potency in Indian high culture has always had a private, introversive quality about it (75).

The men in *Small Remedies* are mild and toned down: Madhu's father, her father-in-law, Chandru, Joe (who loves literature), Ghulam Saab, and Som. Som may be the cause of Madhu's grief, but he is no thug, on the contrary he is a sensitive husband. While the text undercuts several mothers, fathers seem to be more accessible, less stifling and menacing. Savitribai speaks warmly of her father inspite of the fact that he objected vehemently to her pursuing music. Lata also has happy thoughts of her father. Madhu is brought up in an all male household. She appears totally at ease in any company since she is not gender - conscious. She says, "Brought up by a father, I never felt the strangeness, the otherness of men myself, nor did I feel the need to be part of a female group" (*SR* 37). One cannot help noticing the narrator's awe when she speaks of her father. De Beauvoir's comment on the father - daughter bond may be relevant here:

> The life of the father has a mysterious prestige: the hours he spends at home, the room where he works, the objects he has around him, his pursuits, his hobbies, have a sacred character. . he incarnates that immense, difficult and marvelous world of adventure; he personifies, transcends, he is God. (314)

Munni's fondness for the man she claims to be her father also is in a sense, a deification of the male.

Madhu finds women inscrutable. A sense of alienation creeps in as she speaks of her own kind:

> The truth is I'm comfortable with men, I've grown up among men - my father, Babu and the Kakas, my father's friends. I understand men. Its the women I find harder to understand. At times, like when Ketaki's mother speaks to me, I think I need someone to translate the language for me. There seems to be some disjointedness between her words and what she means. (*SR* 88)

She takes the stance of a detached observer as she exclaims in fascination, 'The women were a revelation to me" (*SR* 137) since without men, they explode in gay abandon through their masks of assigned roles. It is the voice of the outsider that comes through Munni is the only female

companion that Madhu seems to have had in her childhood. She admires the beautiful Savitri Bai - but does not miss a mother. Her world is the male world - her haven, where the odour of cigarettes "meant security to [her]" (*SR* 138). Later, when she takes up a job at Hamidbai's office, she is again comfortably placed in a male world.

Traditionally myths and family structures have been fed by accepted notions of masculine strength, superiority and power. Deshpande seeks to redefine masculinity and free it from the heroic mould. Joe, whom Madhu idealizes, is a hero in her eyes for all the 'right' reasons: his love for literature, his gentleness, concern and care. As Madhu claims it is Joe "who led [her] into the magic of language and words" (*SR* 79). Joe appears almost super human, even sublime - "his lovableness radiating outwards, touching everyone" (*SR* 3). Her first job at Hamid's 'City Lights' takes her into the heart of an enjoyable camaraderie with Chandru, Som and Tony. Madhu dotes on her father, while Munni unrelentingly attaches herself to her lawyer father Sadhasiv Rao at Pune. She however detests Ghulam Saab - accuses him of kidnapping and ill treating her, whereas the neighbours know that, it is Bai who scolds her, beats her and its her 'father' Ghulam Saab who keeps a watchful eye on her all the time. Much later, Hasina, the granddaughter of the tabla-playing accompanist, gives a revealing picture of a great human being, an already married Muslim man who fathered Bai's daughter out of wedlock, the one who made Bai what she became, the one who ". . . held his

own art in rein, kept it tethered to the singer's needs, never impinging on the singer's right to lead . . . did not play the game of one upmanship so many tabla players do. . ." (*SR* 273). This artist finally ignored and abandoned by Bai at the height of her fame, and rejected by Munni, is driven to lead the dissipated life of a drunkard. None of these men fit into the image that traditional patriarchy marks out for the man. In fact some of them complement their partners so well that they present a picture of perfection. Hari and Lata, Leela and Joe, even Bai and Ghulam Saab display "the seamless union between the voice and the instrument" (*SR* 276). At the sub textual level one becomes aware of an unconscious valourization of the male.

In the novel, there are two instances that touch upon female sexuality wherein the narrator recounts the male-female encounter on a physical level. When Tony first chances upon Madhu while she is changing into her night dress, he makes an attempt to physically touch her. Madhu strikes him. Tony blames it on his "hormones". The incident is treated as inconsequential, and Tony formally becomes her brother after a 'bhau-buj' ceremony. The second instance, recalled much later in the novel, is when fifteen year old Madhu learns that something serious has happened to her father and she locks herself in a room to pour out her grief in solitude. When she opens the door after persistent call and knocks, a young man - the artist, enters to console her. But as sorrow erupts again and the artist holds Madhu close to him in a bid to "stop the desperate, convulsive movements" of her body, they encroach upon

forbidden territory. "Nothing is unknown, nothing is strange. An ancient memory, waiting to be released all these years, in directing (her) body's responses, making (her) aware of the pleasure . . . "(*SR* 268). The whole episode, treated as an instinctual response to each others' bodies does not disturb Madhu through all her growing years until much later, when Som hears about it. This becomes the starting point of the rift between the husband and wife. The whole question of marriage now hinges on this issue of physical chastity. Madhu does not make much of this premarital sexual encounter and it does not take on the colour of molestation or child abuse. The text seems to underplay the seriousness of the issue. In other contexts, this incident would be a commentary on the patriarchal outlook. However in the eyes of Som, it is a blot on his wife's purity. Madhu carries the burden of a secret guilt of being responsible for the strained atmosphere at home that gets complicated with the 'cause' of Adit's death. The guilt stands in the way of coming to terms with the premature death of her son.

A closer look at *Small Remedies* reveals an intense power struggle at work: the struggle is between Madhu, the biographer and her subject of research, Savitribai. The 'subject' is used to mean the 'individual.' The term carries with it a sense of one who is unified, whole, the source of conscious action. This individual is the subject of much psychological discourse. To be a subject is also to be 'subject to' and as such, is positioned in term of ideology as well as language. The subject position is thus related to this situation of

being 'subjected'. This position may be governed/conditioned by race, gender, ethnicity, amity, region and various other factors. Each of these subject positions is a part of the individual who inhabits them. This is elaborated by Michel Foucault.

Foucault suggests that in order to study power we must look at it relationally: what happens in the process of power being exerted by one individual over another? Power is an exchange, a moment; it exists only in action, in between, in struggle. In between the interviews with Bai and the actual writing of the biography, is an area of uncertainty - a tussle as it were between 'versions': that of Bai's and that of Madhu's.

As Foucault says in “The Subject and Power” (1984):

> In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future.
>
> (Faubion 340)

Foucault's "Subject and Power" is a genealogical study with reference to his archaeological work on man as the object of knowledge and the subject who knows. One of the methods he advocates to understand power relations, is to use forms of resistance taken against different forms of power. Foucault

suggests that a starting point in analysing power relations may be to look at a series of opposition.

For Foucault, knowledge is an integral part of the power/subjectivity nexus. A will to knowledge is a will to power. Madhu as the biographer of Bai seeks for the privilege of knowledge. She bides her time to enter those fissures and incompletions in Bai's account of her own life. Bai however puts up a not too obvious, but palpable resistance to her biographer's hidden agenda. Perhaps Bai is also aware of Madhu's 'knowledge' - partial, if not complete - of her past life and her relationship with Munni, her daughter. While Madhu picks her way through her "subject's" life to arrive at the "truth", Bai attempts to project her own version of the "truth". A struggle surfaces and as Foucault says, the main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much such or such an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class but rather a technique, a form of power.

> This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him out by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word "Subject": subject to someone

> else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to. (Faubion 348)

Now for Bai to refuse the kind of subjectivity imposed on her by Madhu would be not to fit into Madhu's version of the truth.

Madhu is on a quest for truth - the quest for the "real" Savitribai. Savitribai, on her part is determined to draw a picture - that is satisfying to herself. Through selective amnesia, she chooses to blot out certain important/controversial events in her life-memories of her daughter, how she related to Munni, how she took Munni's death, how happy her life was with Ghulam Saab. These are all the unasked, unanswered questions that puzzled Madhu. Madhu muses:

> . . . which is the real Bai? The pampered child? The young girl who discovered what her life was going to be? The young woman who abandoned her child and eloped with her lover? The great musician, the successful Savitribai Indorekar? (*SR* 283)

Madhu is convinced that she has before her ". . . a palimpsest, so many layers, one superimposed on another; none erased, all of them still there" (*SR* 283). She knows that she is under pressure to delineate Bai's life story.

There are three possible versions of this doyenne's life: (1) Bai's book, with the spotlight on her, without any area of darkness. (2) Maya's and Yogi's book which is sensational with a feminist slant - a book that will 'sell' and fetch good returns. (3) Madhu's book - the one she's still looking for - the one that eludes her.

A major issue that the text discusses is how Madhu, the writer, is going to negotiate the process of writing. Savitri Bai's alacrity to get her narration and answers tape recorded 'in style' obviously shows her yearning for the spot light. Her narrative is linear - focused on herself, her Guru, skimming on the surface, never venturing to dive into the depths. "I have to fill in all these blanks myself" (*SR* 129) says Madhu. A linear narrative cannot convincingly capture the essence of a person's life. One sees one's life through "memory and memories are fractured, fragmented, almost always cutting across time" (*SR* 165). But when Bai persists in glossing over the ellipses, Madhu has to chalk out a method of narration that will bridge the gaps. She says, "Invention, creation, is sometimes the greater, possibly the best part of reality. Even to write our own stories, we need to invent. Like fiction writers, like historians, the teller of the story needs to construct a plausible narrative' (*SR* 165).

The biographer in Madhu now decides to take things into her own hands, she realises the power vested in her, the power she can exercise over

her 'subject.' Bai's 'image' or 'representation' is at her mercy. *"I can trap her into an image I create, seal her into an identity I make for her. The power of the writer is the power of the creator"* (*SR* 166 Emphasis added).

The text throws up a struggle - a power struggle between the 'object' of the narration and the narrator. Savitribai plays hide - and seek as it were, like a riddle that teases the seeker. The biographer Madhu, having tired of the game, decides finally to 'frame' her subject. This is a clear case of an unequal power struggle where the biographer/author has the upper hand. And she will exercise her power through words. For artists who express through music and painting words don't matter. "No, words are not important to Bai," observes Madhu, "And I have to work on her life, to sculpt her with words" (*SR* 164). This is in a sense, a forceful intervention: into the private life of a woman. This venture to "seal [Bai] into an identity" of the author/creator's choice is very much akin to a phallogocentric exercise of power.

Madhu's act of writing Bai's biography and Bai's own version of her life at times run counter to one another, causing friction. The biographer, however, will have the last word - and as we have seen the 'blank spaces' will be filled with the issues relating to Munni and the pursuit of Bai as the erring, deviant mother. What one comes to notice is the reaffirmation of the humanist (may be 'male') "subject-who-knows". *Small Remedies* then is the textual search for the woman. What the text does however is to inscribe some

rather traditional representations of woman's femininity, thus pointing to unconscious use of the phallogocentric principles within the discursive space.

In an interesting paper titled "Beyond the Sheltering Tree: The Politics of Silence/Gaze in Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*," P.P. Raveendran argues that "the specific ways of saying and seeing promoted by Deshpande's novel also foreground a particular narrative mode which in effect undermines the feminist agenda sought to be set by the novel" (10). He detects "the presence of a pervasive gaze" reaching into the "nooks and crannies of the society to animate them ideologically with its authoritarian gaze" (12). The centrally controlled voice picks, chooses, sifts and discards as it wills in the course of the narrative. Ultimately, Madhu's story which supposedly is founded upon an ideology that voices the suppression of women, ends up mimicking master narratives.

In an interview with Chandra Holm, Deshpande was asked to comment on what she thought about the literary critics' penchant for reading between the lines. The writer replied:

> . . . a novel is not mine when I have finished it. They have every right to see things in it. It need not necessarily be the way I mean it to be. Nor did I perhaps mean all these things they see. But perhaps there is so

> much going on unconsciously in writing . . . May be the unconscious part is found by the critics . . . (8).

The "unconscious" part that this reading of *Small Remedies* tries to foreground is the unmistakable patriarchal strategy woven into the narrative.

FICTION AS TRANSGRESSION

Arundhati Roy : *The God of Small Things*

The God of Small Things (GOST) enacts the eternal drama of confrontation between the powerful and the powerless. The central crisis is not the woman's powerlessness, but the general victimization that is inherent in a system affecting men and women alike. In an essay titled "Come September" in *An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire* (2005), Arundhati Roy states that, “The theme of much of what I write, fiction as well as non-fiction, is the relationship between power and powerlessness and the endless, circular conflict they're engaged in” (Roy 13). Roy believes that "the accumulation of vast unfettered power" by a state, country, corporation, institution, or even an individual, a spouse, friend or sibling – whatever be the ideology, results in excesses. She also adds, “. . . my writing is not really about nations and histories, it’s about power. About the paranoia and ruthlessness of power. About the physics of power” (Roy 14).

Amina Amin's study, "Text and Counter text: Oppositional Discourse in *The God of Small Things,*" discovers how in the novel several discourses 'inform' the narrative and 'negotiate and compete' with one another as if for supremacy. There is also present an 'oppositional discourse' of independent

existence wherein each discourse is transformed into the counter of the other. Textually, the author builds up a formidable power structure of a caste ridden, stratified, repressive social set up, which is amply represented by the Ayemenem household. Women, children and the deprived are in the clutches of this all-pervasive power structure. Within this overweening power structure, Roy subtly weaves in resistance and dissent. The all-encompassing net of power that traps individuals is palpable in Roy's text. Michel Foucault's theories about the working of power in society are significant here:

> Power must be analysed as something that circulates . . . . It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or a piece of wealth. Power is exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target, they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Gordon 109)

The God of Small Things speaks of the power structures that lie embedded in a patriarchy. Opposition to patriarchy is central to all feminist

struggles. Patriarchy is a term that acquires different meanings in the different discourses in which it plays a part. Psychoanalysts, sociologists and anthropologists use it with subtle degrees of differentiation. Even the feminist use of the term is shifting. Radical feminists like Kate Millet use 'patriarchy' to represent the power relationships by which men dominate women. Marxist feminists give it a narrower and more precise interpretation, using it to denote the relations between women's subordinate position and the organisation of capitalist modes of production. To psychoanalysts like Juliet Mitchell patriarchy signifies a society in which the father enjoys either actual or symbolic power, with women being relegated to the subordinate role of property and object of exchange. Male domination, all theorists agree, pervade sexual, psychological, social and economic areas of life. They inform all the major institutions of society - politics, the law, police, medicine and the universities. The problematic position of the female protagonist trapped in these power structures, and her efforts to struggle free of them is the theme of many woman - centred works of fiction. In some cases, women also collude with men in oppressing and exploiting their own sex.

A feature of Roy's novel which strikes the reader is the focus she places on the all-encompassing nature of male power. Ammu is obviously trapped in the web of male power - structures. Roy moves from describing nets of exploitation and violence perpetrated by individual men in the private domain of the home, to depicting analogous ones in the public by institutions

like the law, the police, the Roman Catholic community and schools (for example, Rahel's school). In the novel emphasis is placed on the way male dominated institutions support individual men in their attempts to subjugate women. It also depicts the sex/caste/class confrontation. The family unit is presented as one of the principal sites of women's oppression and exploitation.

Roy looks at power and truth not from the point of view of those who exercise power and define truth, but from the point of view of those who are subjugated and imposed upon. At the receiving end are Ammu, the twins and Velutha, besides other nameless women and the marginalized. Mammachi and Baby Kochamma may wield power and exercise it to hurt several others, but the fact remains that these victors are victims too.

Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have had unhappy pasts. Mammachi, seventeen years her illustrious husband Benaan John Ipe’s junior, becomes the butt of his ire and jealousy. Mammachi’s husband, the Imperial Entomologist, is by nature and in practice an 'imperialist'. Mammachi's violin classes are abruptly discontinued the moment "Mammachi's teacher, Launsky-Tieffenthal, makes the mistake of telling Pappachi that his wife was exceptionally talented and, in his opinion, potentially concert class" (*GOST* 50). Later, when Mammachi finds a niche for herself through her pickle business, she is in for more victimization. The high-handed entomologist disregards her lowly job but at the same time resents the attention that his

wife begins to get. With Pappachi wife-beating carried out with a brass flower vase, becomes a regular feature, until his son Chacko interferes and ends this cruel exercise.

Baby Kochamma, Pappachi's sister, has been the hapless victim of an unfruitful love affair. The Father Mulligan – Baby Kochamma affair started off with Biblical discussions and culminated in an impossible infatuation.

> Father Mulligan was more than merely flattered by the emotion he aroused in the attractive young girl who stood before him with a trembling, kissable mouth and blazing, coal black eyes. (*GOST* 23)

Baby Kochamma was attractive, and the affinity was mutual, since "the young girl and the intrepid Jesuit, both (quaked) with unchristian passion, using the Bible as a ruse to be with each other" (*GOST* 24). The cleric "had young Baby Kochamma's aching heart on a leash, bumping behind them, lurching over leaves and small stones. Bruised and almost broken" (*GOST* 24). Baby Kochamma's conversion to Roman Catholicism and entry into a convent in a bid to get closer to Mulligan proved futile. By the time she was withdrawn from the convent she did not qualify for marriage since she had gained a 'reputation' (*GOST* 26). Armed with a diploma in ornamental gardening she returned from Rochester only to find the embers of her infatuation still glowing. With a vengeance, as it were, Baby Kochamma

"raised a fierce, bitter garden" (*GOST* 26) and continued to jot down love-slogans to her beau long after he turned to Hinduism and passed away.

Bitterness sinks deep into these women and they take it out on vulnerable persons within the family circle. Mammachi nurses a suppressed hatred for her daughter-in-law, Margaret, while Baby Kochamma grows into a villainous creature of monstrous proportions reeking vengeance on hapless Ammu, Velutha and the children, Estha and Rahel.

Patriarchal control at its worst has a strong presence in the text. It plagues the Syrian Christian community, doling out injustice in large measure to its women and transgressors. Roy's description of Pappachi's photograph subtly touches upon the cold iron streak in the man:

> His light brown eyes were polite, yet Maleficent, as though he was making an effort to be civil to the photographer while plotting to murder his wife . . . . He had an elongated dimple on his chin which only served to underline the threat of a lurking manic violence. A sort of contained cruelty. (*GOST* 51)

The photograph in all its stillness penetrates to unsettle the warmth of the room. Pappachi unleashes a reign of terror in his house over the womenfolk. Just as he physically abuses his wife, he expresses his displeasure towards his daughter, Ammu, by ruthlessly cutting up her prized gum boots.

Ammu is denied education because educating a girl is not specially profitable and gives no promise of returns. Her impulsive marriage to a Bengali Hindu is a desperate attempt to escape "from Ayemenem and the clutches of her ill-tempered father and bitter long-suffering mother" (*GOST* 39). Her father-in-law cleverly takes possession of their new car, all the jewellery and the wedding presents. Her husband proves to be an alcoholic, an outrageous liar and a vile trickster. He is even prepared to save his job by bartering his wife for official advancement at the instance of Mr. Hollick. Ammu ends up back home - an uninvited liability with the twin 'millstones' round her neck only to be subjected to more torture through the prejudices and the indignities that her community perpetuates.

The God of Small Things traces the tragic decline and fall of Ammu. In her own home Ammu is faced with an identity crisis. She is fully conscious of the fact that "choosing between her husband's name and her father's name didn't give a woman much of choice" (*GOST* 37). She has no 'Locus Stand I' anywhere. Disgraced, she lives in the periphery of the Ayemenem house – a divorced, ex-wife of a Hindu, condemned several times over for crossing sacred boundaries. From the frying pan in Calcutta, it is straight into the fire of Ayemenem that Ammu lands in her native village. Chacko, her brother, lords it over her as he is the sole owner of all the property. He is the high-riding bully who, despite being a divorcee himself, is free to satisfy his 'Man's needs' through a private entry to the house, most

understandingly arranged for by his mother. A strange mix of character - "a Marxist mind and a 'feudal libido" (*GOST* 168) keep him afloat on the turbulent waters of the village. Instigated by Baby Kochamma, it is Chacko who asks Ammu to pack her bags and clear off after the Velutha episode. Baby Kochamma also masterminds the 'Return' of Estha to his estranged father in Calcutta. A family is thus fragmented. A poignantly deep relationship between Ammu and her twins is violated and ends in a painful physical separation never to be restored.

On many occasions, Ammu openly strikes out at the male chauvinist Chacko. She sees through the viles of a male-dominated society and revolts against Mammachi's blind approval of her son. In the novel Ammu makes it clear that she is not impressed with the superior image of Chacko that Mammachi tries to foist on everyone. To quote Ammu:

(a) Going to Oxford didn't necessarily make a person clever.

(b) Cleverness didn't necessarily make a good Prime Minister.

(c) If a person couldn't run a pickle factory profitably, how was that person going to run a whole country?

And most important of all:

(d) All Indian mothers are obsessed with their sons and are therefore poor judges of their abilities.

(*GOST* 56)

Later in the novel Ammu snaps at Chacko for his mock-concern for the twins. "Stop posing as the children's Great Saviour!" Ammu said. "When it comes down to brass tacks, you don't give a damn about them. Or me" (*GOST* 85). Ammu's sharp repartees voice the indignation of the oppressed woman. The text is loaded with the protest of an angry young woman struggling to be heard.

In course of time, Ammu's acts of defiance that culminate in her 'illicit' alliance with an untouchable take their toll. People and systems that matter turn against her, ostracize and alienate her. She is thrown out by her sibling Chacko and her closest relatives. The community will have nothing to do with a transgressor who has broken all its age-old rules. The custodians of the law too view her as a prostitute 'available' for batons to tap on. Inspector Thomas Mathew "tapped on Ammu's breast with his baton as though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered" (*GOST* 8). It is suggested in the novel that even the church would be defiled in accepting her mortal remains. And so it is that when Ammu dies her dead body is accorded only a pagan cremation at a place "where nobody except beggars, derelicts and the police-custody dead

were cremated" (*GOST* 162). Thus family, community, law and the church turn their backs on one who had chosen to face life on her own terms. Ammu falls a victim to the powers that be, to the devious designs of an over weening patriarchy.

In *The God of Small Things* it is not the womenfolk alone who are victimized; the children and the outcastes also are preyed upon. Rahel and Estha, like their mother, are unwanted 'guests' in the Ayemenem household always confronted by the threat of 'exile'. The fact that they have a Hindu father is held against them. Baby Kochamma picks on them mercilessly but at the same time shows her undisguised approval of Chacko's daughter, the half English Sophiemol. In Sophiemol's case her hybridity is viewed as an asset. The twins are branded: "They're sly. They're uncouth. Deceitful. They're growing wild" (*GOST* 149). What one notices here is a systematic 'othering' in progress. Those who do not fit into the norm, are considered as aberrations and always have to bear the cross of the negative values ascribed to them.

Baby Kochamma's manipulative plans to 'save' the family's reputation provide an ideal opportunity to execute the secret agenda of wreaking vengeance on Velutha. Baby Kochamma capitalizes on the children's vulnerable point: their mother, Ammu. She blackmails them emotionally. A verbal account of the horrors that Ammu would have to undergo in prison if

she is charged by the police frightens the innocent twins. Faced with a chilling choice, they opt to say "yes" to the policeman's query in the cell where Velutha has been confined. The moment that Estha says "yes" signals his fall from grace, the loss of innocence. As the text poignantly expresses: "Childhood tiptoed out" and soon after, "Silence slid like a bolt". Estha is silenced. He becomes "a quiet quick bubble floating on a sea of noise" (*GOST* 11). The silence that befalls Estha is pervasive in the narrative. Ammu, hemmed in by Chacko, Baby Kochamma and Mammachi, is silenced. Velutha is also silenced. With this, in *The God of Small Things* hierarchies are once again reaffirmed and the law upheld - but the poignancy lies in what happens to Ammu, Estha, Rahel and Velutha.

Another major incident in the novel takes place at Abhilish Talkies where the family has gone to watch 'The Sound of Music'. Estha's loud singing inside the theatre as the film is being shown irritates Ammu who asks him to go outside. It is here that Estha gets talking to the Orangedrink Lemondrink man whose paedophilic overtures towards the boy end up with Estha holding a cold lemon drink in one hand and the Orangedrink Lemondrink man's penis in the other. At the end of a distasteful exercise "Esthappen Yako finished his free bottle of fizzed, lemon-flavoured fear" (*GOST* 105). This fear haunts the boy, goading him to seek refuge in desperate ways. The fatal boat ride across the river to the History House

germinates from this lurking fear and urge to 'hide' from the paedophile. This is another instance of the way power operates to intimidate the defenceless.

A third category that has to face the ire of power structures presented in the novel is the socially marginalized Paravan. In a caste-ridden society where "Paravans are expected to crawl backwards with a broom, sweeping away their foot prints" (*GOST* 73-74) that might otherwise defile the Brahmins and Syrian Christians, conversion held the promise of escape from untouchability. But these Rice-Christians as the Paravan converts were referred to, did not take long to realise that they "had jumped from the frying pan into the fire" (*GOST* 74). They were received into the faith but with separate churches, services, priests, and to top it all, a Pariah Bishop. Vellya Paapen the "Old World Paravan" is servile and totally indebted to Mammachi and her family. But his son Velutha is not as mindful as his father of the old order. His father is aware of this, yet is unable to pinpoint exactly what it is about his son that scares him:

> Perhaps it was first a lack of hesitation. An unwarranted assurance. In the way he walked. The way he held his head. The quiet way he offered suggestions without being asked. Or the quiet way in which he disregarded suggestions without appearing to rebel. (*GOST* 76)

It is perhaps these very same qualities that draw Ammu to him. However when Velutha's act of transgression is brought to light, he too becomes a victim of overbearing power structure. His own father exposes his son's crime and asks for punishment. Velutha is disowned by his family and his employers, and loses the protective support of the Party as well. The law also subdues him. Velutha's fate is not dissimilar to that of Ammu's. Between them lie shredded the lives of the twins. The power structures thus pick on the vulnerable: women, children and outcastes.

The God of Small Things dallies with the past but has also strong roots in the present. It evolves into a protest novel, raising banners (like Velutha and his comrades) against social injustice, upper caste snobbery, exploitation and the sheer ruthlessness of power mongers. It lays bare the enormity of man's innate cruelty – "the sublimal urge to destroy what he could neither subdue nor deify" (*GOST* 308). The twins witness a re-enactment of *Raudra Bhima "crazed, blood thirsty . . . in search of death and vengeance" (*GOST 236). Comrade Pillai tells the bewildered children that Bhima was "searching for the beast that is in him" (*GOST* 236). The implication is clarified in the observation that follows immediately after:

> Search for the man who lives in him was perhaps what he really meant because certainly no beast has essayed the

> boundless, infinitely inventive art of human hatred – no beast can match its range and power. (GOST 236)

Power, translated into ugly violence, lies coiled within the matrix of the text. The chilling description of the policemen's brutality inflicted on Velutha (in the chapter titled "The History House") is menacing. We are introduced to "Mens Needs" of a different sort. Estha and Rahel witness,

> . . . a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions . . . . of human nature's pursuit of ascendancy. Structure Order Complete monopoly. It was human history, masquerading as God's purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience. (GOST 309)

What we see is a violation of childhood innocence, of human dignity, and human life. A violation that is carried out with "economy", "efficiency" and “responsibility”. A sample of "History in live performance" (*GOST* 305). Comrade Pillai and Inspector Thomas Mathew are "men whom childhood had abandoned without trace" (*GOST* 262).

Hélène Cixous in "Sorties" lists a double braid or "dual hierarchical oppositions" wherein the woman is associated with a negative/weak/passive value.

> Where is She?

Activity/Passivity

Sun/Moon

Culture/Nature

Date/Night (Sellers 37)

In *The God of Small Things* it is Velutha, the oppressed, who is identified with nature. He is untouched by the corrupt adult world and even bears a special sign that marks him out from ordinary "men": “An autumn leaf at night. That made the monsoons come on time" (*GOST* 311). Velutha as the Monsoon-bringer, as the hapless victim, as the lover at night clearly makes a crossover to the feminine 'principle'. He ventures out on a moon-lit night for his tryst with Ammu. The description of the lovers’ meeting in the river amply locates Velutha’s domain: nature.

> His feet touched the muddy riverbed. As he rose from the dark river and walked up the stone steps, she saw that the world they stood in was his. That he belonged to it. That it belonged to him. The water. The mud. The trees. The fish. The stars. (*GOST* 334)

Ammu observes a Velutha of infinite beauty and "supple grace". Velutha's indulgence towards the children and his easy involvement in their make-believe world mark him apart from the other overbearing men in the story. He curtsies like the English dairymaid in *The King's Breakfast* obeying

Rahel's strict instructions (*GOST* 175) and readily becomes part of their world of make-believe. Rahel appreciates "the sweetness of that gesture . . . Instinctively colluding in the conspiracy of their fiction, taking care not to decimate it with adult carelessness" (*GOST* 190). Rahel is full of gratitude for Velutha's infinite tenderness in not ruining a dream that needed to be held like "a piece of porcelain". It is Velutha who again figures as the one-armed swimmer in Ammu's "afternoon-mare", the God of Loss – the God of Small Things. Ammu and the children, in their unconditional acceptance of Velutha flout societal norms of "who should be loved, and how. And how much" (*GOST* 33).

A central motif of the novel is the act of transgression. The protagonists are ready to break social laws and even face the eventuality of death for desire and for love. Ammu spends wearisome days confined to "a front verandah and pickle factory" (*GOST* 43) and finds that her "life had been lived" (*GOST* 38) and that she is left with no more chances or choices. A fleeting exchange of glances between her and Velutha a particular morning changes it all, "centuries telescoped into one evanescent moment, History was wrong footed, caught off guard" (*GOST* 176). Walls crumble, boundaries blurr at the shocking realisation that" he was not necessarily the only giver of gifts. That she had gifts to give him too" (*GOST* 177). There is an untamed nature lying dormant in Ammu – the unsafe Edge (*GOST* 44) and an air of unpredictability. Through a battered childhood she had "developed a lofty

sense of injustice and (the) impish, reckless streak that develops in someone small who has been bullied all their lives by someone Big" (*GOST* 182). In the act of giving her body and being to Velutha, Ammu's rebellion is articulated. She finds in him a kindred spirit: “She hoped that under his careful cloak of cheerfulness, he housed a living, breathing anger against the smug, ordered world that she so raged against” (*GOST* 176).

Brinda Bose in her essay “In Desire and in Death: Eroticism as Politics in Arundathi Roy’s *The God of Small Things*” (1998) analyses the "reckless rage" of this woman:

> Her (Ammu's) own politics are embedded in her "rage" against the various circumstances of her life, and it is through this sense of shared raging that she finds it possible to desire the untouchable Velutha. It is not only sexual gratification that she seeks, she seeks also to touch the untouchable. (65)

By asserting her "biological" desire for a man who inhabits a space beyond permissible boundaries, a space of untouchability, it seems that Ammu attempts a subversion of caste/class rules. She also upsets traditional notions of masculinity by being the initiator of the sexual act. Ammu discovers that "she too can be a giver of gifts”. She begins "to love by night the man her children loved by day" (*GOST* 202). On that eventful night when

she goes to Velutha, as she listens to her radio 'something stirs inside her' and a liquid ache spreads under her skin, and she walks out of the world like a witch, to a better, happier place (*GOST* 44). Ammu does not 'submit' herself to a superior masculine passion but gifts Velutha her body. 'Her brownness against his blackness. Her softness against his hardness. Her nut-brown breasts (that wouldn't support a tooth brush') against his smooth ebony chest" (*GOST* 335). Mammachi, when she comes to know of Ammu's transgression, has nightmarish visions of Ammu's sexual act with a coarse Paravan. Roy makes it clear that to be a 'giver of gifts' is a woman's prerogative as well.

Another instance of a subversive oppositional discourse that runs counter to the text's main discourse may be read in the incestuous relationship between Rahel and Estha. The closeness of the twins, "Siamese souls" culminating in a forbidden union may be interpreted as the sexual solace that Rahel offers Estha for his unspeakable pain. This act of incest transcends and violates all biological norms. What becomes obvious here is the subversive power of desire and sexuality operating in an area that is rife with the politics of gender divisions and the social rules governing them. Roy's novel has both pain and pathos at its centre. Here shame and defeat are allied issues. "But the politics of the novel is contained in the subversion of this shame and defeat through the valourization of erotic desire," says Bose (70).

Rukmini Bhaya Nair, in "Twins and Lovers: Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things*" (2004), analyses Roy's fictional style to show that there is "an interesting psychological conflict in her work between residual memories of subjugation and a personal commitment to future political emancipation – the idea of a Utopian tomorrow" (177). Bhaya Nair elaborates on the predicament of the post-colonial woman writer in English who is faced with "an existential dilemma: how to escape the linguistic trap, the gilded cage, of her historical situatedness" (178). The English language, once viewed as an instrument of violation is today being absorbed as an Indian tongue. This has led to experimentation of an extreme sort. Bhaya Nair calls this "contortionist poetics", wherein language is turned inside out. Memory-gnawing into the past comes easy to Roy. It becomes a treasure-trove into which the author plunges and achieves "a feminization of memory" (179). According to Rukmini Bhaya Nair the author works on it delicately as one would on an embroidery of memories in a bid to forget pain and to understand her life better. Roy excels "as a rag-picker of memory . . . separating the relevant detail from its surround of grunge with unerring accuracy" (180). What is disconcerting, however, is the fact that there is a shift in the focalizer. If Rahel's is the consciousness through which the narrative operates, there are sudden fissures that appear as the voice of the omniscient narrator breaks through. Rahel's feminine perspective is undermind. One is left to muse over the "tension between Roy as a 'controlling' author and Roy as the 'vulnerable'

character Rahel . . ." (181). Roy is at her best when she speaks through the consciousness of Rahel. Language takes on a life of its own.

Roy's "commitment to craft, to verbal detail, the intimate care with which the self in the mirror is observed", (Nair, 184) are what make her writing "womanly" according to Rukmini Bhaya Nair. According to Bhaya Nair:

> If a woman's literary domain has come to be identified with the personal, if it consists in the sharp, sensitive observation of detail, then Roy is right there. If romance and sentiment, not to say sentimentality, are women's staples, then Roy is right in there too. (186)

The author's liberal use of stylistic devices are what make the text unique. For instance there are:

(a) Circling repetitions:

> He said there were only black cat shaped holes in the universe. There were squashed Miss Mitten-shaped stains in the universe. Squashed crows that had tried to eat the squashed frog-shaped stains in the universe. Squashed dogs that ate the squashed crow-shaped stains in the universe (*GOST* 82).

(b) Single word sentences:

Feathers. Mangoes. Spite (*GOST* 82).

(c) Sentence-long paragraphs:

It hadn't changed, the June Rain (*GOST* 10).

(d) Stand-up capitals within sentences:

But the middle of a respectable river, or the Other Side, was no place for children to Linger, Loll or Learn Things (*GOST* 204).

(e) Nonsense rhymes:

Fast faster fest

Never let it nest

Until the fast is faster

And the faster's fest (*GOST* 104).

(f) Tricks with morphology:

Inflectional effect as in –

Margaret Kochamma told her to Stoppit.

So she Stoppited (*GOST* 141).

Derivational neologisms –

'Where're going?' Rahel asked

'Feeling vomity', Estha said (*GOST* 107).

Other examples include "co-hecklers", "co-ambassadors", "cementedly", "re-Returned", "out-doorsy" and several more.

(g) Reverse or 'mirror' writing often embellished with caps:

'NAIDNI YUB, NAIDNI EB' (*GOST* 58).

(h) Coinage through word-compounding:

Thimble – drinker

Coffin – Cartwheeler (*GOST* 135).

Satin – lined

Brass handle shined (*GOST* 11).

Roy has been both complimented and condemned for her innovative stylistic experimentation. C.D. Narasimaiah, has vehemently criticized Roy's style calling her a "self-hypnotized word retailer" (ii) and throws back at Roy her own words from the novel. “The careless, reckless lives are mistaken for artistic confidence, though in truth their creator was no artist” (*GOST* 17). Narasimaiah scoffs at the "unwanted details and massing of colours" and accuses Roy of "peddling" words and "manipulating" them. These so-called excesses with words have also been marked out as Roy's strength.

In a review of *The God of Small Things,* Geetha Doctor pays rich encomiums to the cinematic quality of Roy’s narration. According to Doctor it is teasing, tantalizing and even terrifying, in varying degrees of speed, ranging from the dreamy to the shocking. Her lines read like a prose *haiku* that has an incantatory effect and verges on becoming a shorthand for thinking beautiful thoughts. The teasing structure of the text with its non-linear narration and overwhelming word play contributes to a suppleness hitherto unknown to Indian English fiction. Roy differs from almost all of her

contemporaries in writing, even thinking differently. She has herself asserted that her concerns are more biological than historical.

In negotiating between the personal and the political we see the emergence of a 'feminist epistemology' in Roy's text. The child-like inquisitiveness with which the focalizer examines personal histories is a unique feature of Roy's text. The sensibility presented here is essentially feminine and is best displayed in her exquisite portrayal of the child's world. The visual world – nature, people or things – is recorded with immense accuracy and absolute lack of embarrassment. When following events through the consciousness of Rahel we are guided by the authentic voice of childhood. Roy stretches imagination and language to weave the anguished world of Estha's and Rahel's childhood. The vulnerability of the twins is brought out touchingly by the writer:

> To Ammu her twins seemed like a pair of small bewildered frogs engrossed in each other's company, lalloping arm in arm down a highway full of hurtling traffic. Entirely oblivious of what trucks can do to frogs.
>
> (*GOST* 43)

David Myers in "Contemporary Tragedy and Paradise Lost in *The God of Small Things*" says,

> It is Roy's linguistic ability to reconstruct our world through the words and the eyes of the gifted twin children, Estha and Rahel, which makes *The God of Small Things* a masterpiece. (Dhawan 364)

Roy's text constantly breaks away from conventional grammar and syntax, disobeys rules of punctuation and manages to deftly run sense impressions together with synaesthetic richness. Her linguistic techniques make her prose poetic. Words are packed with suggestiveness. A sense of 'defamiliarization' is put in place as experiences are shaped with an intense vocabulary. Colour, texture, sound, taste . . . merge and impregnate sentences, and prepare us for a particular atmosphere that is building up in the story:

> Estha saw how Baby Kochamma's neckmole licked its chops and throbbed with delicious anticipation. *Der-dhoom, Der-dhoom*. It changed colour like a chameleon. Der-green, der-blue black, der-mustard yellow.
>
> Twins for tea
>
> It would bea . . . . (*GOST* 141)

The build-up is amazing. A menacing purposefulness, getting set to pounce on a hapless victim. Roy's 'feel' for the language and her way with

words is unique. Children are vulnerable. So are women and the outcastes. While Ammu and Velutha are social/moral transgressors, Rahel and Estha may be considered to be linguistic transgressors. Their clever games of reading backwards, splitting words and compounding them challenge established structures of language.

Roy has this wonderful trickster's ability to change the contours of the English language 'thiswayandthat'. Snatches of bawdy folk songs, popular film songs, liberal and casual intrusions of Malayalam words (*Oower, Aiyyo Pavam, Sundari, Kunukku*, and so on), conscious subversion of standard syntax (the book is 'For Mary Roy who grew me up'), and use of conversational Malayalam syntax (Pillai says "His daughter's daughter is this") invest the text with an ethnic vibrance.

The appeal of the story, its novelty, lies in its telling. Lakshmi Padmanabhan, in a tribute to Roy, “Salaam to a Sorceress” says,

> . . . Arundhathi's craft is witchcraft – a wily, winsome wizardry with words, metaphors, thoughts and observation with which she surrounds the events and people of her story. (13)

Jason Cowley who was the Booker judge comments in an article “Why We Chose Arundhati”:

> Though the ending is flagged off as early as page four, Roy employs a circuitous narrative so that events emerge elliptically and out of chronological sequence. She cannily uses cinematic techniques – timeshifts, endless fast forwards, and reversals, rapid editing – simultaneously to accelerate and delay the coming disaster. An atmosphere of foreboding, sometimes lapsing into portentousness hangs over the narrative. (5)

Roy's daring postmodernist narrative strategy endows the text with a uniqueness all its own. However, into the structure of an eminently believable child's eye view of the adult world, is a micro-narrative embedded in the macro-narrative, or, vice-versa. The micro-narrative is of the grown-up twins in the present, the divorced Rahel back at Ayemenem to meet "re-returned" Estha, who occupies very little narrative space. The macro-narrative encompasses three major stands of the total plot:

(1) the doomed love between Ammu and Velutha leading to their deaths.

(2) the drowning of Sophie mol.

(3) the traumatized childhood of the twins.

The novel takes off from the present with Rahel returning to Ayemenem twenty three years after the time of the main action. The opening chapter of

thirty three pages gives a gist of all the major events in the story. The rest of the novel is a reworking of these major issues from different perspectives.

Roy makes unconventional use of time in the novel. There is a constant slipping back and forth between several time frames. There is no linear progression of events. The text plays intriguingly with time and space. Boundaries blur. In an interview to *The Week* (October 1997) Roy explains how she structured the narrative. It was written,

> the way an architect designs a building . . . it wasn't as if I started at the beginning and ended at the end. I would start somewhere and I'd colour in a bit and then I would deeply stretch back and then stretch forward. It was like designing an intricately balanced structure. (46)

Anna Sujatha Mathai, in a review of the novel in Indian Literature (1997) celebrates "the magic that runs like quick silver through the veins of this book", and also applauds the explorative techniques of narration:

> Taking one step forward, two steps backward, often referring to the Terror that is to come, Roy examines the human frailties and failings that lend to the central tragedy, with a cool, ruthlessly probing, but always child-like, always human eye. (189)

Roy's innovative play with language may be seen as a subversive device to circumvent power structures.

Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have written at length on how language may be used to counter phallogocentrism. They exhort women to express themselves freely by 'returning to their bodies', and their sexuality which has been repressed all these ages. Kristeva speaks of bodily drives that survive cultural pressures and emerge in "semiotic discourse". This language, also used by male writers such as Joyce, Mallarme and Artaud, is gestural, rhythmic and preferential. These writers re-experience their infantile *jouissances* subconsciously and construct texts that defy the rules of conventional language. For Kristeva this semiotic discourse is a writer's return to the pleasures of her/his pre-verbal identification with the mother. There is a turning away from the logic of paternal discourse. According to Kristeva, women speak and write like "hysterics", as outsiders, to male-dominated discourse. This is so because of their marginal position, as also because of the dominating drives related to anality and childbirth. Hence their semiotic style is different and one that challenges the dominating male discourse. To challenge and resist masculinist thinking, women need to forge a new language, establish a different point of view different from phallogocentric norms.

Luce Irigaray considers man-centred concepts as denying meaningful representation of women. She focusses on women's bodies and sexual pleasure as the starting point for female self-consciousness. She speaks of "plurality in feminine language" and relates it to the morphology of the female sex. Woman experiences pleasure just about everywhere and her pleasure is "more diversified, multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle . . ." (Warhol and Herndl 359). Her language, likewise, "goes off in all directions" escaping "coherence of any meaning" (Warhol and Herndl 359). Irigaray, therefore, advocates the assertion of female *jouissance* in order to subvert *phallocentric-oppression*.

Hélène Cixous, in her manifesto for *écriture féminine*, "The Laugh of the Medusa" finds woman's sexuality superior to phallic single-mindedness. Her libido is cosmic. Cixous links woman's diffuse sexuality to woman's language. She says:

> Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours. She lets the other language speak – the language of thousand tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death . . . . Her language does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back, it makes possible.
>
> (Warhol and Herndl 361)

Cixous exhorts woman to "put herself into the text" as she needs to wake up to the wealth of her imaginative powers. "Women's imaginary is in-exhaustible, like music, painting, writing their stream of phantasms is incredible" (334).

> To write, women have to 'return' "from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond "culture"; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to "eternal rest". The little girls and their "ill-mannered" bodies immersed, well-preserved, intact into themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath. (Warhol and Herndl 335)

The linguistic experiments in the text become an act of transgression. Cixous' questions problemetize 'writing'. She asks : " I wonder: when writing, am I transgressing? . . . Am I transgressing by writing what I am writing? Or by not writing what I am not? Or both?" (Sellers 97).

A feminist text, according to Cixous is "volcanic" because it subverts, sweeping away syntax. It sets about changing "the rules of the old game" *(*Warhol and Herndl 338). Woman can prove her strength if she can dismantle male discourse from "within". She must, says Cixous,

> . . . explode it, turn it around and seize it; . . . make it hers, containing it, taking it in her own mouth, biting that tongue with her very own teeth to invent for herself a language to get inside of. (Warhol and Herndl 344)

Roy's candour in the narrative is one of the ways of confronting the structures of patriarchy. Cixous identifies this hidden project in transgressive writing:

> I think that one transgresses (1) the law of silence that must be observed in the face of everything that is bigger, more real, more living, more complex etc., in the face of almost everything . . . in the face of god-things and god-beings. But precisely, I say to myself, there is also the other law, the law of the echo, according to which one should know when it is allowed and when it is necessary to not demand the law of silence. (Sellers 97)

A reading of Roy's text as a sample of *écriture féminine* throws up exciting discoveries. At the very outset, the child-focalizer – Rahel – presents the adult world rife with prejudices and hypocrisy with a candour that cannot be ignored. Cixous says: "We've been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them, with that stupid sexual

modesty; we've been made victims of the old fool's game" (Warhol and Herndl 342).

Rahel is condemned for moral corruption subsequent to her behaviour in school. She collides against her seniors to see if breasts hurt. She is punished severely for her "depravity", and even faces expulsion. "In that Christian institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren't supposed to exist, and if they didn't could they hurt?" (*GOST* 16). The teachers' verdict is that Rahel "didn't know how to be a girl" (*GOST* 17). Denying one's sexuality, or being oblivious to it is considered a virtue, the norm.

Later in the story, Roy gives a vivid and sensitive description of Ammu seriously studying her own body. She tests the tautness of her breasts with a tooth brush; studies her hair, look critically "at her round, heavy behind" (*GOST* 223) which seemed to belong to a more voluptuous body. She wraps her hair about her face looking like a medieval executioner – "a slender, naked executioner with dark nipples and deep dimples when she smiled" (*GOST* 223). Ammu indulges her body. Cixous says:

> To write an act which will not only "realize" the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs,

> her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal. (Warhol and Herndl 335)

The twins also exult in their familiarity and closeness to their mother's body:

> In the afternoon silence . . . her children curled into the warmth of her. The smell of her. They covered their heads with her hair. (*GOST* 221)

They explore Ammu's midriff and the seven silver stretch marks. Rahel sucks her mother's soft stomach and studies her "shining oval of spit". A significant metaphor used in the text throws up a vivid picture of their physical intimacy. "She (Ammu) shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she's had enough of them" (*GOST* 222).

Roy's unemotional, detached observation of the orangedrink – lemondrink man's act of masturbation is another case in point. She cleverly tones her description with a cool, even sarcastic indifference. An "act" accepted as perfectly normal in the male world is juxtaposed with the bewilderment and shock that takes its toll on an innocent child. Roy successfully verbalizes the unspoken, and in doing so, punctures a major phallocentric, often justified act.

Rahel and Estha, the two-egg twins or "Dizygotic" according to medical books are born from separate but simultaneously fertilized eggs.

Though they are not identical, their similarity lies "in a deeper, more secret place" (*GOST* 2).The mystery of their combined identity deepens as the text explains:

> In those early amorphous years when memory had only just begun, when life was full of Beginnings and no Ends, and Everything was For Ever, Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or us. As though they were a rare breed of Siamese twins, physically separate, but with joint identities. (*GOST* 2)

Rahel wakes up giggling at Estha's funny dream, knows what happened to him at the Abhilash Talkies, can taste Estha's sandwiches that Estha alone ate on the Madras Mail. The twins can read each other's minds, their thoughts spill over and mingle. Twenty three years later, at the age of thirty one, they have evolved into definite sizes and shapes. "Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks and Limits" (*GOST* 3) define them. Nevertheless, the absence of Estha had left a vacuum, a "hollow where Estha's words had been". The emptiness persists even after Rahel's marriage.

> He (McCaslin) couldn't be expected to understand that. That the emptiness in one twin was only a version of the

> quietness in the other. That the two things fitted together. Like stacked spoons. Like familiar lovers' bodies.
>
> (*GOST* 20)

Meeting Estha twenty three years later does not change the intimacy very much. When Estha walks straight past her, into the rain,

> She could feel the rhythm of Estha's rocking, and the wetness of rain on his skin. She could hear the raucous, scrambled world inside his head. (*GOST* 21)

Rahel relentlessly searches for the Estha of her childhood. She watches him in the bathroom, searching in her brother's nakedness signs of herself.

> Rahel watched Estha with the curiosity of a mother watching a wet child. A sister a brother. A woman a man. A twin a twin. (*GOST* 93)

Estha, secure in his silence, also sees that his sister is lovely, "grown into their mother's skin" (*GOST* 300). Her beautiful, hurt mouth reminds him of "Ammu's mouth". Rahel is a mirror image of their mother who Estha had 'lost' at the age of seven.

They sit together in their adulthood "a pair of actors trapped in a recondite with no limit of plot or narrative" (*GOST* 191). Burdened by the memories of the past they see no way out to ease the dead weight of their

grief. There is no counsellor who could assure them: "You're not the sinners. You're the Sinned Against. You were only children. You had no control. You are the *victims* not the perpetrators" (*GOST* 191). In this hour of grief the twins cannot articulate their sorrow / feelings. What follows is an act of consolation – a mutual licking of old wounds. This could be their way of seeking "redress", of exorcizing "the memories that haunted them" (*GOST* 191).

The act of incest may also be viewed as Esthas and Rahel's desire to return to the period of pre-separation from the mother, to a Kristevan pre-Oedipal state of semiotic fusion. The pre-Oedipal mother is "a figure that encompasses both masculinity and femininity" (Moi 164). The twins come together in a physical union. "There is very little that anyone could say to clarify what happened next. Nothing that (in Mammachi's book) would separate sex from Love. Or Needs from Feelings" (*GOST* 328). The Love Laws are broken once again. But Rahel sees in Estha a deeper and more ancient relationship. "He was the one that she had known before Life began. The one who had once led her (swimming) through their lovely mother's cunt" (*GOST* 93). The union becomes a necessity for the survival of the twins- a reassurance of their oneness with their mother. The "Quietness" in one fits perfectly well with the "Emptiness" of the other. The moment marks the cross-over from the symbolic to the semiotic – a recapturing of a pristine state undivided from their mother. But they share "not happiness, but hideous

grief" (*GOST* 328). In a sense, an attempt is made to steal back the cheated years of childhood – an instinctive act that can heal their wounds by binding them together. Like the two-egg twins that swam in their mother's womb, Estha and Rahel once again become "Me" together. The "twin midwives of Ammu's dream" once again throw the Love Laws into total disarray. The 'incest' is a reunificatin with Ammu who had told them (quoting Kipling) "we be of one blood, ye and I" (*GOST* 329).

The sensuousness of the language used, the dizzy heights to which it is stretched in a bid to keep pace with a flighty imagination, the nonchalant use of taboo words and the overall suppleness endow the text with a uniqueness all its own. Roy's narrative seems to be a materialization of Cixous's project:

> Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naptha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – nonassessed values that will change the rules of the old game.
>
> (Warhol and Herndl 338)

As Cixous observes, a definition of a feminine practice of writing is impossible but it "will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate"

(Warhol and Herndl 253). Needles to say that *The God of Small Things* is a text that transgresses received norms in more ways than one.

In searching the depths of the gender – power, caste/ class – power nexus and throwing ample light on their manifestations in societal power structures, the text emerges as a woman – text. It becomes more so for the strategies it adopts to counter the phallogocentric power structures thematically and linguistically.

PATRIARCHY IN COMMAND

Upamanyu Chatterjee: *English, August: An Indian Story*

The success of *Midnight's Children* has undoubtedly played the single most decisive role in ushering in a literary 'glasnost'. Rushdie's novel created the literary environment for the growth of a new, liberated form of story-telling, that marked the beginning of a new phase of writing. It also heralded the arrival of anti-hero figures, a cosmopolitan sensibility and an uninhibited use of English. The adoption of a comic epic mode intertwining the personal and the historical, and the use of an unapologetic, unselfconscious idiom of a hybrid kind found numerous takers. Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August: An Indian Story* (1988) (*EA*) was an instant success and even became a major film released through Twentieth Century Fox, India. The interesting title strikes one by its contradiction – a colonial obsession with the Raj coupled with the Indian reality. It is an account of a thoroughly urban Indian's encounter with provincial Bharat. The novel at a superficial level is a scathing attack on the Indian Administrative Service with its baggage of "interference, ingratitude, insolence, disloyalty, ill will and selfishness" (*EA* 121). At a deeper level it is an interior voyage of self-discovery by a confused young man with an anachronistic sensibility, out of joint with his

contemporary ethos. The narrative charts the protagonist's trying to come to terms with the reality around him.

Agastya Sen, or the anglophile August, and again the Bengali Ogu is an IAS officer posted at Madna, a back water town in central India for a year's training in the wiles of administration. The son of a governor, an elite public school product and a "megalopolitan Indian, who ate hamburger" (*EA* 205), Agastya feels totally lost in the provincial setting of Madna. The offices and officers he encounters are distasteful and revolting. The District Collector, Srivastav, is a typical bureaucrat who misuses the services of the peons, specializes in keeping concerts waiting to make his presence felt and generally indulges in insulting and bossing over and misbehaving with his junior officers. The IAS hierarchy with its class distinctions is exposed. Officers in the Indian Police Service are said to be jealous of their Administrative counterparts. One of the officers Bajaj is "a bloody promotee" and in "Srivastav's vocabulary 'promotee' was a vile curse ranking somewhere between bastard and mother Fucker" (*EA* 58). These men have inflated egos, are corrupt and inefficient. Their wives misuse power to gain admission/get jobs in local institutions. Besides Bajaj and Srivastav, Kumar, the Superintendent of Police, Mishra, the District Judge are all power mongers who do precious little for the public. Stories of corruption and inefficiency, long purposeless meetings and back biting form part of the Indian story.

In a bid to turn his back on such hypocrisy, Agastya chooses the shortest cut to escapism: the private world of his room where, with the help of music, fantasy, marijuana and masturbation, he tries to relive the past. But there are times when he takes stock of the havoc created by the colonial powers and cynically studies the status of English in India. Agastya's musings make him more and more inscrutable, for even as he detests westernized fads and yearns for a resurgence of everything native and ethnic, he recklessly indulges in lying, blaspheming and using sophomoric excesses of word play and scatological grotesqueries. The voice that comes through loud and clear is that of the angry young man, the disillusioned bureaucrat, the sex starved bachelor – in short, that of a chauvinistic male whose world has no space for the other sex except for physical fulfilment. The language is loaded with sexist connotations showing up an agenda to 'other' the women in the story.

The protagonist of the novel belongs to the new generation variously described as the "cola generation" (*EA* 47) "the generation that doesn't oil its hair" (*EA* 47) the "generation of apes" (*E,A* 28) and the generation that would love to "get AIDS because it is rampant in America" (*EA* 76). He may not share all the oddities of his generation but he is a westernized Indian trying to grapple with the discord that results from his interaction with society. Nayanthara Sahgal in her essay, "The Schizophrenic Imagination" speaks of

a new rationalism that emerged in the post 1980s and the product of this new movement:

> … another breed of westernized Indian for whom his plural culture meant a bewildering reckoning with himself, a balancing act, where the priorities were never in doubt, but where, 'who am I ?' remained an on-going search and question. (Rutherford 30-31)

Agastya is also left to ponder over his true self and relate with his surroundings more meaningfully.

Upamanyu Chatterjee writes about a society which has lost almost all its moorings. His protagonist fails to find answers to many questions about life. He experiences a sense of alienation and he inhabits a world that is filled with people who have a strong sense of dislocation.

Agastya Sen is a hybrid hovering in the twilight zone between the east and the west, the colonizer and the colonized. He is, despite his IAS status, rootless and drifting. "You are an absurd combination," says Agastya's uncle, "a boarding school – English – literature education and an obscure name from Hindu myth" (*EA* 129). Posted at Madna, Agastya is a fish out of water, leading someone else's life, "ravaged by mosquitoes with no electricity, with no sleep in a place he disliked, totally alone with a job that did not interest him, in murderous weather, and now feeling madly sexually aroused" (*EA*

92). To escape from his claustrophobic room, he indulges in sexual fantasies, exercising, drinking and smoking. His aunts relate his behaviour to "the original sin, the marriage of a Bengali Hindu to a Goan Catholic" (*EA* 288). The anglophile is precariously positioned between the anglicized August and the very native Agastya. The name is much discussed in the text. To an engineer who is irritated by the name, Agastya explains:

> He is a saint of the forest in the Ramayana, very ascetic. He gives Ram a bow and arrow. He is there in the Mahabharata too. He crosses the Vindhyas and stops them from growing. (*EA* 4)

Dr. Multani's father extracts the meaning of the name through an etymological dissection:

> *Agam* is mountain. Agastya could be *agam* plus *asyati*, one who pushes a mountain. Or *agam* plus *styayati*, one who stops a mountain. We often have this ambiguity, an uncertainity about our names, their origins. It should also be linked to the Latin *augers* which means to advance. That is appropriate since the sage Agastya was also the wanderer who pined for Benares. (*EA* 227)

A name steeped in mythology however irks its owner. Many attempts are made to subvert its sanctity. According to Shankar, the Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation:

> Agastya, a good name, quite rare, means born of a jar. The jar is the womb, and thereby the mother goddess, but the jar could just as easily have contained Vedic whisky. Soma types, good quality scotch, bottled for twelve years. (*EA* 28)

In Agastya's own terms the name assumes weird even repulsive connotations. He gets cynical and sacrilegious when he blatantly says, "Agastya' is Sanskrit ... for one who shits one turd every morning" (*EA* 15). Scatology reigns supreme when he unashamedly tells the collector's wife, "It's Sanskrit for one who turns the flush just before he starts pissing, and then tries to finish pissing before the water disappears" (*EA* 54). In short, he seems to be a vulgar parody of the Agastya of antiquity, for he compares inversely to all the mythical nuances of his name. He is inert, ineffective and totally lost, not a hero by any standards. The author intentionally presents the protagonist Agastya as a kind of anti-hero.

English, August – An Indian Story can be placed in the postmodern metafictional literary tradition. The parodic and self-parodic, mode and intent are embedded in the textual structure of the novel. Besides Agastya, one

other name that is parodied is Mohandas Gandhi. This name when first mentioned "sound (s) familiar". Mohandas Gandhi of the story is the Assistant Conservator of forests. The ironic twist to his tale when his hands are chopped off for raping a tribal woman, deepens the parody. Ahimsa and celibacy, the two principal virtues associated with Mahatma Gandhi are happily flouted. According to Linda Hutcheon:

> Parody is a typical postmodern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the text and conventions of the traditions. It also contests both the authority of the tradition and the claims of art to originality. (123)

A distinct postmodern sensibility is in operation throughout the text. Though postmodernism had its origins in the post second world war Europe, it was only in the eighties that its relevance was tangibly felt in the Indian English literary scene.

Peter Brooker observes:

> From the first, post modernism presented an argument for sensuous response and the languages of the body over intellectual analysis. It declared itself for open randomized and popular forms and looked to an alliance with the counter culture of youth, drugs, rock and roll

> and a new erotics in a deliberate affront to the decorum's and hierarchies of the literary establishment. (2)

Chatterjee's hero creates a secret world as an escape route for his troubled self. Drugs, liquor, sex and fantasy become the props of living. "What'll you do for sex and Marijuana in Madna?" (*EA* 3) asks Dhrubo. But he is certain about one thing "... August, you're going to get hazaar fucked in Madna" (*EA* 1). This perhaps sets the tone of the narrative. A conventional or stereotypical bureaucrat with clean ways and official competence is not the role that Agastya fits into. On the other hand, in Dhrubo's words," (Agastya) look(s) like a porn film actor, thin and kinky, the kind who wears a bra" (*EA* 3).

Obviously, Agastya is no macho hero with either muscle power or ambition. In a school composition he once wrote that "his ambition was to be a domesticated male stray dog because they lived the best life". The reasons are not far to seek. Such a creature was assured food, needed no commitment, and above all enjoyed a lot of freedom to sleep, bark and, more importantly "got a lot of sex" (*EA* 35).

Agastya's obsession with sex is a kind of defence mechanism to ward off his bewildering sense of anchorlessness. He is alienated and misplaced, feeling empty and lonely. At the very beginning of the novel Chatterjee spells out his protagonist's predicament:

> Anchorlessness – that was to be his chaotic concern in that uncertain Mean, battling a sense of waste was to be another. Other fodder too, in the farrago of his mind, self-pity in an uncongenial clime, the incertitude of his reactions to Madna, his job, and his inability to relate to it-other abstractions too, his niche in the world, his future, the elusive mocking nature of happiness, the possibility of its attainment. (*EA* 25)

It is this theme of "anchorlessness", the weariness of an era, the loneliness of an entire generation that the novelist explores along with the satiric portraiture of the entire Indian Administrative Service. What brings him closer to his college mate Bhatia is again this sense of dislocation. Drugs, booze and masturbation are touted as means of getting out of this situation. This is conveyed in existential terms by the author. Meenakshi Raykar in an article "The Intellectual in a State of 'Anomy' analyses Chinua Achebe's *No longer at Ease* and *English, August* to point out that both the protagonists and their respective periods suffer from a state of 'anomy' – reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's *The Season of Anomy*. 'Anomy', a word resurrected by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim from the Greek, denotes the condition of society which results from the disintegration of commonly accepted normative codes. Somewhat akin to the idea of alienation, it refers to a condition when an individual loses his traditional

moorings and is prone to disorientation. Agastya is not unaware of his state of alienation and is consciously at war between his anglicized colonial imaginary self and the deeper native realistic instincts. Either way, the text is reduced to an expression of typical male angst. To this end, the narrative is generously spread over with phrases that describe a disillusioned/confused male youth's predicaments. The protagonist is powerless and struggles to come to terms with his new experiences, to unearth a more coherent self.

Exercising becomes an obsession with Agastya:

> His exercise was something he felt he must hold on to, some anchor of stability, without it the day would slip into anarchy. And only after its completion was he ready for anything, for any act of illogic and unreason. (*EA* 120)

Physical exercise gives him a sense of identity at least temporarily. It is like his good deed for the day. At other times he tries to confront, or circumvent his loneliness by verbalizing his frustration in obscene language and scatology. Taboo language becomes a weapon, as it were, in his hands. One is inclined to understand that this is just one of the ways by which Agastya exercises his power or superiority over the unintelligible world around him.

The text unembarrassingly displays liberal use of four letter words. For example the use of the word 'turd' that is normally avoided in the cultured world. The word is used with reference to food – 'eating Vasanth's turds, (*EA* 49); in swearing 'your mother uses her turds as a dildo' (*EA* 106); and while referring to words – "like turds falling in a commode" (*EA* 21). Arse, semen, shit, balls are other taboo words that are used with absolute ease. Agastya's heightened olfactory sense too contributes to his ability to conjure up disgusting, even repulsive, images. The antibiotic capsule Agastya is given "smelt like a stale sweaty armpit, like a crowded Calcutta bus in summer" (*EA* 92). His own body smelt of "rotting lizards and smegma" (*EA* 93).

Bengalis, says Agastya, would love London because it is like "washed Calcutta" since they are "Anglophiles to their balls" (*EA* 93), as if to imply that all Calcuttans are men! An intimidating superior officer like Collector Srivastav can be challenged only through language. Srivastav's "mercurial profile" becomes an object of Agastya's study. According to Agastya, Srivastav scowled so much that "his eyebrows were like worms in one's shit, real wrigglers" (*EA* 113). Even Agastya's descriptions of people are not immune to vulgar verbal assaults. For example, of Prashant he says, 'When he squats to shit he has to flick his boobs over his shoulder, otherwise his nipples tickle his balls' (*EA 121*). Tamse the artist is described thus:

> He tried to visualize the painter, and couldn't. He thought, Had the painter been brushing his teeth or bending over trying to get his cock in his mouth, or what, when he painted this one? There wasn't a single thought behind a single brushstroke. (*EA* 8)

Such an aggressive use of language is not intended to shock the readers out of their complacency but is also definitely indicative of the phallogocentricism at work in the novel.

To all appearances Agastya is born with a silver spoon in his mouth. His is a "soft success story", "the son of a Governor, Anglicized and megalopolitan, now in the Indian Administrative service, all he has to do is recline and fart to earn you money" (*EA* 224). However, Agastya cannot recline at ease for he suffers from this terrible feeling of "restlessness". In Madna "all that his mind seemed to have learnt was the impotence of restlessness" (*EA* 165). Getting 'stoned' or drunk or even inertia do not help him cope with this restlessness. Agastya struggles to overcome this:

> I want to know in the present he said to himself, I want my reason, and not even my intuition, but my reason, to tell me here, you are now master of your time to come, act accordingly. (*EA* 114)

His options are limited. His occasional recourse to the *Meditation* of *Marcus Aurelius* and *The Gita* do not help him very much. He would have to turn like Shanker to the goddess, Jagadamba or believe in special providence even in the arrival of a frog. Another option would be,

> to slink away from having to think, to wish to be that pair of ragged claws that had so tantalized him in his college years, settling over the flowers of silent seas. (*EA* 114)

The unnumbered chapters of the text can be roughly divided into three sections. The first one hundred and forty one pages present Agastya's depraved, listless life in Madna; the next short section speaks about his Pooja break at Delhi where he meets Dhrub who has given up a plush career abroad to prepare for the IAS exams; the final section contains Agastya's return to Madna. It is in this final phase of the novel that Agastya gets to visit Baba Ramanna's Rehabilitation Home for Lepers. This visit touches Agastya as nothing before had ever done. "Initially, to him, Baba Ramanna had seemed pleasantly mad and completely remote, a do-gooder out of a book of legends for children, a small time Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar or a male Mother Teresa" (*EA* 235). But later "in unsettling flashes" this man seemed more than human as he saw the immensity of the work achieved out of barrenness". For the first time, Agastya is genuinely moved by a human endeavour. He is not only wonderstruck by the immensity of ambition but also by "its nobility

and virtue... the limitlessness of the potential of human endeavour" (*EA* 235-36). This proves to be a turning point for Agastya and he realizes that human beings are not entirely worthless.

When Agastya proceeds as B.D.O. to Jompanna, he fervently hopes that his "restlessness would dissolve in action" (*EA* 253). His attempts at helping the tribals get clean drinking water is a move in this direction. Agastya manages to do some straight talking to the naxalites who pose as spokespersons for the tribals. These morale boosters however are short lived. He finds he has had enough of "the mockery of his restlessness, Sathe's cartoons, Shankaran Karanth dedication, and naxalite fanaticism" (*EA* 274).

Sathe, the cartoonist, has a key role in helping the protagonist to slowly come to term with himself. It is Sathe who accompanies Agastya in the quest for the Sadhu; it is he again who blends the reality with the myth and the legend of the Sadhu, so reminiscent of the Fisherking myth. (*EA* 282-83). The legend of the Sadhu symbolically relates to the protagonist’s own quest for self-realization. Sathe, in a sense, prompts self-recognition in Agastya who remarks: "Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities; or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself - for they were not without but within, they lay in my own outlook" (*EA* 283). The words do not seal Agastya's thoughts or end up as a philosophical solution to his problems, for he is amused by the apparent truth. The novel concludes when Agastya turns his

back on Madna to take a year off, as the Americans do, and goes to meet his father. *English, August* thus traces the progress of a disillusioned young man through a desultory career. Agastya's self examination of sorts, interrupted by brash acts of instinct, project him variously as an absurd/existential/quester hero.

However, a major portion of the text, or maybe the sub text, has to do with Agastya's attitude to women. *English, August* reads like a male fantasy narrated in recklessly chauvinistic language. The entire narrative is coloured, one may say, with the 'male gaze'. Sigmund Freud in his *Three Essays on Sexuality* speaks of *scopophilia* or pleasure that is derived from looking. He associated this with taking other people as objects and subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. It becomes the erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object. He says that at times, it can become fixated into a perversion, producing obsessive voyeurs whose only sexual satisfaction can come from watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other. The pleasure in looking is split between active/male and passive/female. The determining 'male gaze' projects its fantasy on to the female figure. Thus woman is reduced to an erotic object. Laura Mulvey speaks of the 'male gaze' as a feature of power asymmetry in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." 'The gaze' or 'the look' first came to be associated with film theory during the 1970s. Today the 'male gaze' refers to the voyeuristic way in which men look at women. Feminist

theory sees ‘the gaze’ as an instrument that describes power relations between women and men in society. Here the ‘gazer’ is always superior to the ‘object of the gaze’. 'Male gaze' denies women human agency by relegating them to the status of objects. According to Mulvey, sexism can exist not only in the content of a text but also in how the text is presented and in its implications about its expected audience. Going by this, one could say that *English, August* has been written predominantly with male readership in mind.

The novel, it would appear, does more than a little disservice to women in its representation of them. The women characters in the novel who appear at random have little or no role in the development of the plot. Though some of the women characters in the novel are portrayed in a fairly individualistic manner, they do not have an independent existence but are defined only in relation to male desires. In the final analysis, in *English, August,* woman is reduced to being a mere sex symbol, an object of desire. Almost all the relationships between the men and the women in the novel do not go beyond the physical. The officers' wives lack individuality. The adjectives and metaphors used to describe them are sexist and at times even border on the pornographic and the text is replete with such usages. Mrs. Malti, wife of Srivastav may wield power over her husband, but to Agastya she is a mere

sex symbol: "Mrs. Srivastava was fat, friendly and surprisingly sexy; throughout the evening Agastya kept looking at her thighs. He thought he saw her marriage perfectly" (*EA* 53). The arrival of the same lady, in a car, to the club is also described in a similar way. She was given exclusive permission to drive in "as though her arse would break if she walked from the gate" (*EA* 116). When Mrs. Srivastava seriously asks Agastya what his full name is, one is taken aback by the prompt observation – "Mrs. Srivastava was wearing a black bra beneath a yellow blouse" (*EA* 54) as though to belittle the gravity of the query.

Rohini, wife of Mohandas Gandhi, Assistant Conservator of Forests, is described as "a sexy and patient wife – cook" (*EA* 105). The first mention of this woman is made by Bhatia rather casually. Mohan is "a nice guy, simple, from Alwar" but the emphasis is on his spouse. "His wife's really sexy, too rural, though. Wish I could fuck her" (*EA* 101). When Agastya first meets Mohan and thanks him for inviting him to the forest colony, the text becomes coloured with sexist implications:

> Please don't mention it. We should have met earlier, but my wife hasn't been well.' Mohan's voice also dropped a decibel at 'my wife', Agastya was distracted for a moment by a vision of the two writhing in bed. Later Bhatia told him that 'my wife hasn't been well' was

> Mohan's euphemism for the early weeks of pregnancy. 'Gandhi finds it embarrassing, see, to say that his wife is pregnant, because he thinks it's as good as saying, we've been fucking'. (*EA* 105)

'Mrs' becomes a dangerously vulnerable prefix – even suggestive. Voices drop when it is uttered. The reason is not far to seek:

> Agarwal's voice dropped at 'Mrs'. In all those months all references to wives were in hushed, almost embarrassed, tones. Agastya never knew why, perhaps because to have a wife meant that one was fucking, which was a dirty thing. (*EA* 13)

When the rains break over Madna, Agastya watches Vasant's children play in gay abandon. The narrative is on the verge of taking off on a poetic vein about the magic of the monsoon, when the text is again interrupted by references to the female body:

> The rhapsodizers were right, thought Agastya, there was something uplifting about the monsoon, and I don't mean the saris, ha, ha, as Vasant's wife, prematurely haggard with child bearing, came out to discourage her children, she had unexpectedly slim ankles and calves. (*EA* 99)

He however, does not stop there, but sustains the interest, "Some very unexpected women have wonderful ankles and calves, slim and blossoming up towards the knees . . . " (*EA* 101).

Agastya silently shrieks with joy when he comes across "a wonderfully pretty tribal woman . . . tall and rigid" (*EA* 101). He takes a fancy to her "large cracked feet and veined forearms" and finds them more alluring in comparison to women who are "soft-white – thighed and demanding of tenderness after coitus." The references are purposeful because he "smiled wickedly at his adjectival phrases" (*EA* 101).

Teachers and mothers are also not spared. They are projected as objects for 'consumption', for male enjoyment. Agastya recalls an English class during his student days. 'Stoned" he was watching "the new female teacher perform." He remembers a note that was passed to him by his classmate commenting on the teacher's response to a "stupid question". The teacher becomes "my lovely bitch" whom he will give “lust-gnaws between (her) absalom and achitophel” (*EA* 14). Vatsala Rajan the “bossy” wife of the collector of Paal is described variously as 'bitch' and 'hippopotamus' (*EA* 190). The Deputy Superintendent of Police's wife is "Startlingly sexy" (*EA* 183). Dhrubo's mother, we are informed, "had been an adolescent fantasy for almost all of Dhrubo's school friends, and for Dhrubo too, they insisted, only that he couldn't admit it, she had been slim and warm and inaccessible" (*EA* 33).

When Dhrubo invites Agastya home for lunch, the afternoon his mother was leaving for Khartoum, pat comes his reply; "If she's free, may I have a quickie with her?" (*EA* 151). When Dhrubo's mother opens the door she looks "tired and sexy" (*EA* 151). Agastya calls Dhrubo's westernized secretaries "whores". Women are either desirable, craved for or condemned in vulgar terms. Women-mothers-wives whatever be their status, have just one function, which is to satisfy male sexual hunger. Shiv, brother of Shanker, a Deputy Engineer in Minor Irrigation flaunts his 'adjustment' with Shanker: ". . . I cook for him if required, wash his clothes, go out to buy his whisky and paan. When he's away I sleep with his wife . . . " (*EA* 30).

None of these women mentioned are invested with a personality. They have no function in the plot, but only serve to feed the fantasies of the protagonist who sprawls across the narrative spewing vulgarities. Rosalind Coward sums up the relevance of the polarized positions of observer/observed to the relations between the sexes:

> In this society, looking has become a crucial aspect of sexual relations, not because of any natural impulse, but because it is one of the ways in which domination and subordination are expressed. (76)

Chatterjee's text is obviously an exercise in 'othering' women. They are reduced to being mere objects of pleasure. As de Beauvoir says of woman:

> . . . she is simply what man, decrees; thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to men . . . she is the incidental, inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute - she is the Other. (de Beauvoir 16)

Two women characters venture into some degree of a personal relationship with Dhrubo and Agastya are Renu and Neera. But they too get a raw deal. Dhrubo's girl friend, Renu, walks out of the relationship and moves to America for very personal reasons. This important decision that she takes is however trivialized by Dhrubo when he writes to Agastya conveying the news. The letter defines Renu's bold stand as immature and attention-seeking.

> Quite probable that creating a mess made her feel mature and adult. 'Look everybody, please, I'm breaking a relationship, so I'm adult, aren't I, it's not the same thing

> as eating an ice-cream, is it? Her behaviour has made me feel like a child molester. (*EA* 118).

Later in the narrative, Dhrubo insists that Agastya read Renu's long letter from the U.S. His immediate response is, "I don't think I want to read her letter, unless it's full of fond remembrances of your sexual technique". (*EA* 154). The letter however is Renu's mature analysis of the western misconception of India and her disillusionment with it. Reading through the letter Agastya is unimpressed by its contents. His comment is a blatant expression of the typical male propensity to trivialize the female. The letter itself becomes a personification of its writer. "She sounds quite sexy. You should marry her on the condition that she communicates with you only through letters" (*EA* 158). This is as if to say that a woman is bearable as long as she is sexually appealing. One cannot help noticing the element of sexism that pervades the entire text. The male characters also seem to be dissipated vehicles for macho behaviour. Dhrubo's accusation: "Her (Renu's) behaviour has made me feel like a child-molester" (*EA* 118) when stylistically analysed, can throw ample evidence of how grammatical structures become gendered. Renu's firm resolve which should be seen as an act of empowerment is trivialized through the gendered sexist position of Dhrubo. By placing Renu in the subject position she is made the agent and forced to bear the responsibility for the action. All activity centers round male fulfilment at a very basic, elementary and physical level.

Neera's confession to Agastya about the loss of her virginity comes as a triumphant announcement. The letter conveys a sense of relief, of getting rid of a burden, "unlike the sense of loss a lot of girls told me they felt" (*EA* 287). The experience however leaves Neera's life "as dull as ever" as though virginity were no big deal. For once, Agastya seems interested as he chuckles with glee over the gesture of the "darling bitch" (*EA* 287).

When the wives of the I.A.S. officers go on a picnic they offer their prayers at a temple. The ladies' worship of the Shivaling there comes in for much sexual interpretation by Agstya. A ritualistic worship of the ling by the women is viewed as "how women behave in front of a Shivaling" (*EA* 127). The entire process is labelled "a blue film". The I.A.S. wives,

> . . .took turns to gently smear the Shivaling with sandalwood paste, sprinkle water and flowers over it, prostrate and pray before it, suffocate it with incense, kiss their fingers after touching it. Agastya found the scene extraordinarily kinky. (*EA* 128)

For Agastya, these are some of the ways of coping with his boredom. When his occasional dabblings in music, philosophy and scriptures prove in effective to quell his boredom he returns to his mainstay - women and sex.

There is a hint of retribution, of poetic justice when Mohan, subsequently, is punished by the tribals for seducing one of their women. His

hands are ruthlessly cut off. The woman seems to have been avenged by the law for her violation but, Agastya has his own views. He says, "If Gandhi seduced a tribal woman, surely it was equally true that she liked the seduction" (*EA* 126). This is fully in keeping with the generally prevalent male view that for any act of violation the woman too is equally culpable even when she is the victim.

S. Kappeler in *The Pornography Of Representation* (1986) elaborates on the technique of 'fragmentation' used in pornographic literature. Fragmentation robs women of unified personalities by splitting them into anatomical parts. This has two primary effects. First, the body is depersonalized, objectified, reduced to its parts. Secondly, since the female protagonist is not represented as a unified conscious physical being, the scene cannot be focalized from her perspective. A woman's perspective is therefore ruled out. She becomes the passive object of male control. Sara Mills in *Feminist Stylistics* (1995) links fragmentation to male focalisation. According to Sara Mills ". . . effectively, her [woman's]experience is written out of the text. Fragmentation of the female is therefore associated with male focalization – the female represented as an object, for the male gaze" (172). Instances of women being fragmented into anatomical elements occur far more frequently than do such representations of men. The world of advertising, for example, thrives on such an exercise. The camera's lens is pressed into service to explore the sexual "possibilities" of woman, whereas

the representation of the male escapes being specifically sexual. Fragmentation, thus, seems to be a devise which comes into play especially to focus upon female sexuality. This is obviously a strategy which operates at a more primary level than even language. This same technique of fragmentation may seem at work in *English, August.*

When the IAS families set off on a picnic to Gorapak, an announcement is made on the order of the motorcade. “Food, women, children and peons first" (*EA* 122). The juxtaposition of “food" and "women" is an open acknowledgement of the fact that these two items share the same characteristic/fate of being consumed/enjoyed. At Gorapak the picnickers gather round the fire indulging in "frolic and laughter". A moment of uncorrupted joy is broken again by the haunting ‘male gaze’:

> Sweat coursed in rivulets through the make-up of the wives. He (Agastya) was roused by the sweat patches under Rohini's arms. Bitch, he said silently, for being inaccessible. (*EA* 131)

On one of Agastya's nights out with his friends in Madna, he runs into Joshi, the RDC. Joshi is accompanied by a woman, and this generates speculation:

> He was with what looked like his wife, but he didn't introduce her. Be charitable, said Agastya to himself,

> may be she's his mistress, may be he has a harem of tribal women and dances naked with them every evening before dinner. (*EA* 79)

The Englishman and his "outspoken sexy wife" (*EA* 185) meet Agastya at a party. The narratorial voice glosses over the husband with a minimum of description; "light brown moustache and small, rather timid, blue eyes". The lady, on the other hand, is subjected to a more penetrating gaze, ". . . [she] was heavy and full, like the centre of an adolescent wet dream, in a dark blue salwar kameez" (*EA* 184).

In narratology, focalization is a key term which denotes a means of identifying the consciousness through which fictional events are presented in a text. Focalization can be either external or internal to the story. According to Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan external focalization 'is felt to be close to the narrating agent' (74) and is termed 'narrator-focalizer' (Bal 37). The classic position of the narrator - focalizer is the bird's-eye view. There is omniscient access to the activities of all characters. If the narrator-focalizer is male then, naturally the male point of view dictates the course of the narrative. The narrative voice is external and omniscient. This voice is not present in the text as a fictional character but is external, yet can reveal the characters' motivations and thoughts to the reader. Theoretically, therefore, the narrative is reported by a disembodied, impersonal voice, which objectively records the

course of events and the psychology of the characters. In *English, August* the perspective is undoubtedly Agastya's. The women are presented through the consciousness of Agastya. None of the women are shown to possess a unified consciousness. The focalization through the male perspective inevitably represents the female as the object of the male gaze. Though the text seems to be narrated by an external narrator, there are instances where the narrative voice and Agastya's consciousness seem to merge. When this happens, the focalization seems to be at once that of an internal character as well as that of an external narrator. When the points of view of both coalesce, the male perspective gains strength- since it highlights certain power relations embedded in the text. *English, August,* through such a reading, emerges as a convincingly male text.

In *English, August,* Chatterjee's candour may seem disarming especially because of the overtones of humour, but one cannot fail to notice the sexist implications that lie embedded in its sub text. Sara Mills warns us that "sexism may be disguised under the cover of humour, the reader may unwillingly participate in the perpetuation of the sexism embedded in the text when she/he laughs at the wit" (138). Mills continues, ". . . this type of humour is seen as a male domain and humour has often been portrayed as a form of bonding and solidarity display" (139).

An important factor one has to take into account is the gendered positioning of the reader. Judith Fetterley in *The Resisting Reader* (1978) describes the way that most texts in American literature appear to address a general audience, while infact, they are actually addressing the male reader. Fetterley's work is primarily a content analysis, in which, she examines various depictions of female characters. She points out the difficulty posed for females to read easily unless they adopt the position of a male reader.

Fetterley's *The Resisting Reader* conceptualizes the process of a feminist reading. This happens only when informed female readers confront an androcentric or even a misogynist text. A male text offers only the male experience and thus becomes exclusive. Chatterjee's *English, August* easily falls into this slot. The dominant voice is male as also the consciousness through which this voice is filtered.

Chatterjee's novel resists a feminist analysis of the mother-son bonding. Agastya's mother, a Goanese Christian, is mentioned to only to draw attention to the hybridity of Agastya Sen. The combination of a Christian mother and Hindu, Bengali father is used to deepen the ambiguity, of the protagonist. Agastya escapes labelling and resists categorization. He drifts as it were, unanchored to a home and family. There is no denying that he writes to his father regularly, even attempts to fulfil his father's dream for him of joining the Civil Services. The text contains a couple of letters

between the father and son. The father is evidently unhappy about Agastya's dissatisfaction at Madna. Though the son has not openly mentioned it, the father admits "it is palpable in every line of (his) letter" (*EA* 94). The father also takes the blame for having put Agastya in a boarding school. Paltu had pointed out that "a boy should always grow up at home" attributing Agastya's lack of interest and perseverance to that particular deficit in his life. The father however gives his son a long leash despite his advice to Agastya to stick to Madna. The son writes, "I'm wasting my time here, and not enjoying the wasting. That can be a sickening feeling" (*EA* 131). He puts in an earnest request to his father to speak to uncle Tonic about his dissatisfaction with Madna. In a later letter, his father, trying not to be too harsh, reminds Agastya of how he had hoped Madna would be "an immensely enriching experience". He even recalls his own experiences as a youngster when he went to Konkan from Calcutta. What follows is a piece of advice that comes from a concerned father.

> Ogu, do not choose the soft options just because it is the soft option, one cannot fulfil oneself by doing so. Yet it is also true that it is your life, and the decisions will have to be yours. No more homilies. (*EA* 149)

Agastya is given his space. The picture that emerges is of a father son relationship built on mutual understanding and trust. The mother – who has

lived only briefly does not figure much in the narrative. The text does not give any evidence of a mother's positive, ameliorating influence on Agastya and the father too is no role model. We do not find Agastya going down memory lane, returning to his past with nostalgia. A short break that he takes during the Pooja season to go to Delhi is in a sense, a return home. He had spent weekends and his entire last year at his uncle Parthiv Sen or Pultukaka, the bachelor and free-lance journalist's house. Agastya had spent almost six years in that house. He realises that "familiarity had bred a kind of love" (*EA* 147). This is perhaps one of the rare instances in the book that speaks of Agastya's positive emotion.

In the familiarity of his 'home' Agastya reaches the verge of confusion. He says: ". . . I don't want heaven, or any of the other ephemerals, the power or glory, I just want this, this moment, this sunlight, the car in the garage, that music system in my room" (*EA* 148).

He also adds,

> This narrow placid world, here and now is enough, where success means watching the rajnigandhas you planted to bloom . . . I want to sit here in the mild sun and try not to think, try and escape the iniquity of the restlessness of my mind. (*EA* 148)

The language becomes poetic as a kind of peace descends on an otherwise restless mind. The stark contrast to his previous life of dissipation is striking. But it is the ambience that does the trick. Parents or parental home have no role in this transformation.

Chatterjee's prose style is muscular and vibrant. It is free from all inhibitions, self consciousness and is spontaneous. His narrative strategy is sophisticated in its use of irony and farcical comedy. Chatterjee has no qualms about indulging in crass banality and is capable of shocking the finer sensibility of the readers. Analysing postmodernist writing in "Post Modernism and Consumer Society", Frederich Jameson explains that there is "the effacement in it of some key boundaries or separations, most notably the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so called mass or popular culture" (165). In Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August* one finds obscenity and explicit sex placed alongside lofty sentiments. On the one hand, the reader is bombarded as it were, with an overdose of the taboo four letter word, while on the other he/she is treated to philosophical speculations. The hard hitting style suggests a cocksureness and a sense of being fully in control. This façade however begins to slip away when vignettes of homely scenes are juxtaposed, thereby betraying the air of despondency that underlies the chauvinistic text. Occasionally the text brings to light contradiction in its central protagonist's psyche. On the one hand we see a brash, cynical and

male chauvinistic Agastya, on the other, at extremely rare moments the text affords glimpses of a softer Agastya who loves words:

> In his months in Madna, well-written letters would always excite him, disturb him by bringing him other worlds and perspectives. He would get to hate casual letters, those in which not a single line contained a thought.. . He himself would take great care while writing, and preserve good letters, reread old ones smiling at turns of phrase and recollection. (*EA* 95)

This purer emotion glimpsed occasionally in the subconscious of the text is consciously negated by the main narrative. The omniscient narrator, the teller of the story enjoys the privilege of a subject's point of view. He has authorial control over the entire narrative, which inspite of its overtly gendered perspective, gives the outward impression of being an objective account. This indeed is the power of narration that can present an overtly male text as a fictional masterpiece.

CROSS-GENDERED IMAGINATION

Amitav Ghosh: *The Shadow Lines*

The Shadow Lines (1988) (*TSL*) alludes to one of the classical texts of colonialism, Joseph Conrad's novella, *The Shadow - Line* (1917). Conrad's novella is about an invisible line that divides youth from maturity. The protagonist, a young naval officer, in crossing from the Orient to the West metaphorically crosses the shadow line into maturity. This metaphoric crossing also reflects in complex ways the opposition between the Orient and Europe. In *The Shadow Lines,* Amitav Ghosh complicates this 'classical' mapping of the world into East and West by dividing his novel into two parts, 'Going Away' and 'Coming Home'. The novel becomes a fictional critique of classical anthropology's model of discrete cultures and the associated ideology of nationalism.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) is arguably the pioneering Indian English text that challenges entrenched representation of nationalism in politics and literature. Rushdie departs from the convention of celebrating a dominant version of nationalist ideology, even though, the novelist does not touch upon people's experiences of events and other subaltern histories. Amitav Ghosh steps into and modifies the discursive

space opened up by Rushdie. *The Shadow Lines* is a critique of nationalism with a difference. It emerges in the text from the lived experiences of culturally rooted characters. As Nivedita Majumdar says:

> In locating the critique of nationalism in an alternative view of history that itself is derived from the often-silenced voices of the nation, *The Shadow Lines* pitches the nation against Nationalism. (245)

Amitav Ghosh in *The Shadow Lines* challenges the conventional portrayal of the nation as a unique entity. He considers the lines that demarcate nations as "shadowy" and unreal. Shadow lines appear not only between countries, but also between imagination and reality, the past and the present, memory and desire. The story is woven around two families, the Datta- Chaudhuris of Bengal and the Prices of London, spaning three generations. Written against the backdrop of the civil strife in post-Partition East Bengal and riot-hit Calcutta, it probes into private lives and public events that vie for validation.

It is through the recollection of an unnamed narrator that the narrative progresses. The two dominant persons who influence the child-narrator are his grandmother Tha'mma and uncle Tridib. They represent two antithetical principles by approaching reality in totally divergent ways. The grandmother represents a middle class world view deeply entrenched in a patriarchal

respective. Her morality and convictions are shaped by internalizing the rhetoric of the dominant patiarchal, nationalist culture. Her embrace of nationalism grows out of the insecurity she suffers in her life. Widowed at an early age, she has had to struggle through life in a hostile society. Her fiercely independent nature does not let her accept any kind of assistance from her close relatives. The 'status' that she has earned for herself through hard work as a school head-mistress has also to be safeguarded. She disapproves of her nephew Tridib and keeps him at a distance, because he defies most of her cherished principles. The narrator however is fascinated by Tridib's effortless challenge to his dominating, self-opinionated grandmother. The grandmother is overtly cautious about her territory and jealously guards her middle-class self image. Her nationalism gives her protection from imagined enemies across the border. She eulogises violence that supports the nationalist spirit. The grandmother's response to the notion of freedom and nationalism raises questions about the meaning and desirability of nationalism. Her narration of her personal memories of the terrorist movement in Bengal reveal her secret desire to have been part of the militant resistance to colonial power. Her concept of the nation is rendered in terms of baptism through bloodshed. In one of her harangues to the young narrator she even exhorts him to shed blood for his nation. She says:

> It took those people a long time to build that country; hundreds of years, of wars and bloodshed. Everyone

> who lived there has earned his right to be there with blood; with their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood. They know they're a nation because they have drawn their borders with blood... War is their religion. That's what it takes to make a country. Once that happens people forget they were born this or that, Muslim or Hindu, Bengali or Punjabi: they become a family born of the same pool of blood. That is what you have to do for India, don't you see? (TSL 77-78)

Tha'mma's sense of insecurity and fear of being dispossessed is evident in her frenzied espousal of violence for national unity. The view that she takes of nation-building is steeped in convention and symbolizes the dominant discourse. She speaks fervently of "their brother's blood and their father's blood and their son's blood.' Nation-building is clearly a male business. What one finds here is Tha'mma echoing the age-old androcentric perspective – that it takes a man to wage war, shed blood and sink differences. She becomes the carrier of patriarchal views and hands them down, as it were, to progeny. In her capacity as the matriarch (ironically!) and as an intellectual guide to the younger generation in her capacity as teacher, Tha'mma is unconsciously injecting a patriarchal value system into the vulnerable mind of her grandson. The grandmother perceives an unmistakable link between an able physical body and a strong nation. The narrator recalls:

> My cricket game was the one thing for which my grandmother never grudged me time away from my homework: on the contrary, she insisted that I run to the park by the Lake whether I wanted to or not. You can't build a strong country, without building a strong body.
>
> (*TSL* 8)

The grandson narrator however, is more open to the liberal and rather revolutionary ideas of his uncle Tridib. Tridib subverts the illusory nationalism that Tha'mma builds up. He does it gently, with a great deal of tolerance and understanding. Tridib doesn't brand her a "fascist" as Ila her niece does. According to Tridib:

> ... she was only a modern middle-class woman ... All she wanted was a middle-class life in which, like the middle-classes the world over, she would thrive believing in the unity of nationhood and territory, of self-respect and national power: that was all she wanted – a modern middle-class life, a small thing that history had denied her in all fullness and for which she could never forgive it. (*TSL* 78)

Tridib, unlike Ila, accepts Grandmother's worldview, casually, as something native and unassuming. The fact remains that this middle-class

desire for "self-respect and national power" has far-reaching, disastrous results.

Tha'mma also nurses romantic notions about partition/nationalism. She dreamily recalls an instance during her college days, when a young innocuous-looking "terrorist" was arrested and deported to the Cellular Gaol in the Andaman Islands. He had nearly completed all his preparations for his maiden mission of assassinating an English magistrate in Khulna district, when the police tracked him down. Grandmother "used to dream of him" (*TSL* 38). She used to be fascinated by the stories about terrorists and had longed to "work for them in a small way, steal a bit of their glory for herself. She would have been content to run errands for them, to cook their food, wash their clothes, anything" (*TSL* 39). Grandmother fantasized about how she would have worked with him, warned him, saved him and even become his accomplice in the attack years later, "forthright, unwavering". She tells her grandson, "I would have killed him. It was for our freedom: I would have done anything to be free" (*TSL* 39).

Tha'mma's militant nationalism is spectacular towards the end of her life. She donates all her jewels to the war fund. All her strength and energy are focused on assisting the military to wipe out the enemies. Though her seclusion is attributed to the after-shock of Tridib's death, patriotism tinged with violence becomes an obsession. In a frenzy of excitement she mutters:

"For your sake; for your freedom. We have to kill them before they kill us; we have to wipe them out" (*TSL* 237).

She is no pacifist, as one would expect a grandmother to be. On the contrary, she is determined to do her mite against the Pakistanis. In one of her crazed moods she pounds the radio and hurts her hand. The sight of blood goads her to donate it to the war fund again.

Despite grandmother's vociferous espousal of a nationalist ideology, her own situation/identity is on slippery ground. She was born and brought up in East Bengal which became part of Pakistan in 1947. When she hears of her uncle still living in their ancestral home in Dakha, she is fired with a zeal to "rescue" him from an "alien country". Strangely, grandmother's homeland becomes the "alien country". She finds herself in a total mess as she realizes that her Indian passport flaunted an alien city as her place of birth. "...she had not been able to quite understand how her place of birth had come to be so messily at odds with her nationality" (*TSL* 152). Used as she was to order and system in all that she did, she is bewildered at the mess-up in her own life. Matters get worse as she involuntarily says, "...I could come home to Dhaka whenever I wanted" (*TSL* 152). The young narrator is amused: "How could you have 'come' home to Dhaka? You don't know the difference between coming and going!" *(TSL* 152). Grandmother is excited on her trip back "home" and changes her sari twice, feeling as nervous and shy as a bride. But

the moment she sets foot in her uncle, Jethamoshai's house she is fired with a kind of missionary zeal to rescue him from a strange country, infested with enemies and bring him back home, to safety, to India. Uncle Jethamoshai, on the other hand, is cynical about boundaries that politics draw. Sense breaks through his otherwise cloudy memory:

> Once you start moving you never stop. That's what I told my sons when they took the trains. I said: I don't believe in this India-Shindia. It's all very well, you're going away now, but suppose when you get there they decide to draw another line somewhere? What will you do then? Where will you move to? . . . As for me, I was born here and I'll die here. (*TSL* 215)

Three women characters hold sway over the events that unfold in the narrative: Tha'mma, May Price and Ila. They, in one way or the other, defy stereotyping. In fact, they acquire a sense of superiority over their male counterparts. They are strong personalities and influence the nameless narrator. Tha'mma, the matriarch, has come a long way from being an insecure widow who has had to fend for herself. What helps her cope with life are sheer will power, self-respect and undaunted courage. It is a tough, regimental lifestyle that she sets at home and expects each member to follow. She makes her own assessment of persons and places, and is guided by her

unique philosophy of life. Grandma's disapproval of Ila is a fall out of certain pet theories that the former nurses. Ila's cosmopolitan life-style and her westernized, liberal outlook do not fall in line with Tha'mma's ideas of national belonging. She is prejudiced against this freedom – loving, out spoken niece and dreads her narrator grandson's infatuation for her. As she lies weak and sick, grandmother calls Ila "a greedy little slut who had chosen to stay abroad for money". Tha'mma is also prejudiced against Tridib whose unconventional life-style she detests. She lays down the rules and demands unconditional obedience from her family. With the passage of time and changing fortunes, grandmother withdraws from active life, her "placental presence" withdraws, but continues to exert some sort of power over the family. Even after her demise, a letter reaches the narrator's college in Delhi warning the Dean of his wayward student whose movements need to be monitored. The letter just three lines long written in a shaky handwriting "unmistakably" his grandmother's states that the narrator had been visiting prostitutes "in houses of ill-repute" (*TSL* 93) and insists that he be either expelled or sent back to Calcutta. The narrator exclaims, "I was so shaken by the sight of her resurrected hand, reaching out to me after her death, as it had all through my childhood" (*TSL* 93).

May Price, for whose love Tridib yearns, does not fit into the mould of a conventional beauty. In Tridib's own words, ". . . she wasn't sexy, not in the ordinary way-she was thickset with broad shoulders and not very tall. She

wasn't beautiful or even pretty in the usual sense for she had a strong face and a square jaw" (*TSL* 15). Seventeen years later when the narrator meets her at a concert, he sees her "picking her way through the last stragglers, her shoulders rolling, like a boxer's." Even "her voice had a deep, gravelly, almost masculine texture" (*TSL* 15). May looms over the narrative as a superior being idolized by Tridib. Obviously Tridib is hopelessly in love with her. Tridib's confession of love in a letter to May brings her all the way to Calcutta. Standing before the Victoria Memorial they look into each other's eyes. The boy-narrator, seething with envy realizes that he was out of the world that they shared and that he had lost Tridib to May. Her stature grows after the incident during their trip to the Diamond Harbour, when May expertly releases a dying dog from despair. When Tridib watches helplessly dissuading her, she exclaims: "Can't you help a bit?.... All you're good for is words. Can't you ever do anything?" (*TSL* 175). Tridib's passivity, fear and complacency stand in sharp contrast to May's presence of mind and humanitarian actions.

The narrator recalls the incident of the cotton man when May paid him five Rupees for twanging on his single-stringed toy. May's simplicity wins the narrator's heart. He sees in May's curiosity "an innocence which set her apart from all the women (he) knew for it was not the innocence of ignorance but a forthright, unworldly kind of innocence, which (he) had never before

met in a woman" (*TSL* 169). She never displayed that "manipulative worldliness" which he found among the women in his family.

May, we are given to understand, is still coming to terms with Tridib's death and her part in the bloody event. She is also not sure of her feelings for him. During those seventeen years she had been "trying to cope with that guilt" – of having jumped off the car to save Jethamoshai from the attackers, and being the reason directly/indirectly for Tridib following suit and falling a prey to the blood-thirsty mob. But it is May who leads the narrator out of his super imposed imaginary world into the light of reality. The night after Ila's wedding, the narrator makes a pass at May, as though he is still living vicariously through Tridib. May handles the whole episode with remarkable maturity and goes on to describe her actual relationship with Tridib. By linking the dog episode with Tridib's murder, May reveals the necessity of Tridib's death. Tridib's death now is equated to a sacrifice. This knowledge frees the narrator as much as it does May herself. This liberation gives the narrator a new lease of life.

The third woman who influences the narrator's life is his cousin Ila whom he places on a pedestal and adores with his whole being. A globe-trotter, dare-devil and freedom – lover, she is a misfit in her own native soil. She rejects outright the "bloody culture" that is Indian and yearns to be free from it. Even as a little girl she displays extraordinary courage in the

underground room and reprimands the narrator. "Coward...Aren't you meant to be a boy? Look at me: I'm not scared" (*TSL* 47). Ila's power over the narrator is amply revealed through his words of indignance at his mother's act of betrayal. She had,

> made public, then and forever, the inequality of our needs; she had given Ila the knowledge of her power and she had left me defenceless; naked, in the face of that unthinkable, adult truth: that need is not transitive that one may need without oneself being needed. (*TSL* 44)

The narrator, however, is convinced of how they are linked together: "You can never be free of me . . . because I am within you....Just as you are within me" (*TSL* 89).

Ila sports a sense of superiority by pretending to be part of history and belittling India where "nothing really important ever happens" (*TSL* 104). To her famines, riots and disasters "are local things . . . not like revolution or anti-fascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered" (*TSL* 104). She seems far removed from the narrator "in her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like [the narrator's] lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world" (*TSL* 104). The

narrator loses Ila to Nick and his pangs of love for Ila are abruptly muted with her declaration. “You were always the brother I never had”. (*TSL* 111)

These powerful, strong willed women hedge in the narrator who surrenders to their dominating personalities. The nameless narrator lives vicariously, shifting between the others' perspectives. In a sense he achieves a pluralistic identity. Trying desperately to grasp the world of the others around him, he finds his own identity fragmented. His identity is a patch-work of different times and places crowded with ghosts from the past. A kaleidoscopic shifting of patterns takes place from time to time. As Kevin Jonas Lenfest states, “Much of his self-definition unsuccessful as well as successful, comes through the feminine others in the novel: Ila, May and even Tha’mma” (118). What one gets to witness is the construction of subject hood through these vibrant female characters. The centrality of the narration lies in the narrator's developing consciousness- a consciousness that registers, records, participates, represents and recounts. The narrator- hero is a hero more in the structural rather than in the thematic context. His identity takes shape in and through his responses to the characters he engages with and the responses he elicits. Unnamed as he is, the narrator gets defined through his narrative. He is only the central point of reference- an unobtrusive participant and not an agent of influence or change, The narrator eludes description and one is left guessing as to how he looks. On the very first page of the novel he says:

> I have come to believe that I was eight too when Tridib first talked to me about the journey . . . In the end, since I had nothing to go on, I had decided he looked like me.
>
> (*TSL* 3)

The Shadow Lines is a study in gender crossovers. If the women characters dominate and influence the narrator, Tridib is equally vital to the construction of the narrator's subjectivity. Tridib does not fit into any conventional category of a 'male hero'. He is more of a 'recluse'. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan points out in her essay, "The Division of Experience in *The Shadow Lines*", the text 'reverses' the conventional gender characteristics of 'active-passive'. Binary oppositions traditionally upholding the male and enfeebling the female are subverted. Tridib and the narrator are basically dreamers with a fascination for stories and for recreating the past. They break away from space and time through imagination. This enables them to travel freely though countries they have never seen and times in which they have never lived. It is Tridib who helps the narrator recognize the liberating power of the imagination. The narrator says:

> Tridib had given me worlds to travel in and he had given me eyes to see them with: she [Ila] who had been travelling around the world since she was a child, could never understand what those hours in Tridib's room had

> meant to me, a boy who had never been more than a few hundred miles from Calcutta. (*TSL* 20)

May Price is crucial to the text. She 'steals' Tridib from the narrator but finally unites them again. She initiates him into manhood and reveals to him the final redemptive mystery of Tridib's death.

The Shadow Lines is apparently concerned with history. The protagonist speaks of the war, what it did to people, of communal riots and their impact on individuals, of drawing borders and their aftermath. Ghosh's interest in researching into history and anthropology is widely known. The two central characters, the narrator and Trdib are both associated with these discipline. In a conversation with Claire Chambers, Ghosh reiterates his interest in individual lives and the 'stories' they live in:

> . . . when you're writing fiction in terms of history, I think it's important to acknowledge that a historical novel is like any other novel: essentially it's about people. Unless people's stories are interesting the history itself doesn't matter at all, it's only a backdrop. History is interesting to me because it creates specific predicaments, that are particular to that moment in time and nowhere else. So I'm interested in history to the

> point that I can represent that predicament truthfully and accurately. (30)

It arguably follows that Ghosh's area of interest in the novel is not the historical significance of the second Partition or the incident related to Hazartbal nor the air raids in England. His concern is the lives of the Prices and the Datta-Chaudharys. The child narrator believes in the reality of space. He says:

> I believed that distance separates, that it is a corporeal substance; I believed in the reality of nation and borders; I believed that across the border there existed another reality. The only relationship my vocabulary permitted between those separate realities was war or friendship.
>
> (*TSL* 219)

As the boy matures, the realization dawns on him that space and time are shadows. In the light of imagination they flee, leaving behind the essential experience of reality which is continuous and seamless. Despite its careful chronology and topology, *The Shadow Lines* "happens" in all places at once, ruling out possibilities of isolated spots of time or place. Erasure of boundaries is also the essence of the art of fiction. According to Ghosh, the novel affords the writer infinite freedom to explore people and places with a richness and sense of context. "I think what's appealing to me is that it

doesn't have any borders, you can really make it what you want." (Chambers 33). The free flow from one locale to another, from one time slot to another invests the narrative with a suppleness that comes from not being pinned down to restricting agendas and conventional frameworks.

The narrative undercuts history by juxtaposing it with memory - memory that can invent and create and in the process expose history as just another invention and not a given. Claude Levi - Strauss says:

> The historian and the agent of history choose, sever and carve [historical events] up, for a truly total history would confront them with chaos . . . In so far as history aspires to meaning, it is doomed to select regions, periods, groups of men and individual in these groups and make them stand out as discontinuous figures, against the continuity barely good enough to be used as a backdrop. A truly total history would cancel itself out, its products would be naught… History is therefore never history, but history – for. (257)

Ghosh's novel foregrounds a history revealed through personal memory. Such a 'construction' of history is more authentic, at the same time, it exposes the fictive nature of received history. Tridib tells the narrator:

> . . . we could not see without inventing what we saw, so at least we could try to do it properly. We had to try because the alternative wasn't blackness - it only meant that if we didn't try ourselves, we could never be free of other people's inventions. (*TSL* 31)

The narrative is an attempt to free oneself of other people's inventions - from the meta narratives that indoctrinate individuals.

In “The Heteroglossia of Home”, Sharmani Patricia Gabriel, makes an indepth study of Ghosh’s novel by linking Mikhail Bakhtin’s views on the othernesses present within a given linguistic and cultural system with Homi Bhabha’s ideas about the ambivalence of national identities. *The Shadow Lines* according to her, offers a critique of hegemonic construction of otherness and difference in formulations of “the nation” in the subcontinent. Ghosh, thus, is noticed to be committed to the dynamics of hetroglossia that rejects as separatist, inimical and self defeating, the binary logic inherent in the nationalist construction of boundaries during Partition. Gabriel recognizes heteroglossia as the motivating impulse behind Ghosh’s body of works. For Bakhtin, heteroglossia ensures that signs do not have fixed meanings; meaning in the inherently unstable domain of contestation, not the product of a finished or secure language. His view of heteroglossia is built on the concept of dialogue as conflictual foregrounding of the existence of “another

consciousness". The impetus to disturb the stable boundaries of nationalist discourse and the epicentrological conception of cultures as fixed and homogenous systems is a recurrent motif in Ghosh's work. According to Gabriel,

> it is the espousal of heteroglossia and its corollary of "routes", the practices of crossing, exchange, and interaction that enable him to conceive of natural and cultural systems as being in a dynamic state of change, mobility and movement. (42)

The construction and consolidation of difference is central to the idea of the borderline in nationalist discourse. The very idea of 'border' entails separating entities and the notion of binary opposition. *The Shadow Lines* rejects as separatist, inimical and ultimately self-defeating the binary logic in the nationalist construction of boundaries.

Crossings are made in the novel not just physically but also imaginatively across boundaries between Calcutta and London, between Calcutta and Dhaka. In the essay "Interrogating Identity," Homi Bhabha writes that "in the post-colonial text the problem of identity returns as a persistent questioning of the frame, the space of representation, where the image . . . is confronted with its difference, its other" (46). The narrative of *The Shadow Lines* dramatizes what Bhabha in the same essay describes as

"the otherness of the self" (44), where identity and difference exist not in a relationship of binary opposition but in a state of mutual construction. For Bhabha, the very site of national identification becomes a space of multivocality, contradiction and uncertainty, where identity is not a pre-given, stable, or whole, but divided by otherness within itself, always in a state of ambivalence. Ghosh's representation of national identity as heteroglossic problematizes the unambivalent positioning of the other in the construction of natural identity by dominant discourses. One of the key devices used in *The Shadow Lines* is the mirror image, which runs throughout the novel as a sign of those relations that paradoxically connect nations and individuals even as they divide them. The narrator begins to recognize each of the other characters – Tridib, Ila, Robi, Nick, Tha'mma-as his mirror image. Their images – their otherness define his identity. The mirror image foregrounds the idea of mutual contractedness also between the cities of London, Dhaka and Calcutta. The narrator comes to understand that "Muslim Dhaka" and "Hindu Calcutta" are essentially mirror images of each other, separated by a "looking glass border" (*TSL* 233).

The looking-glass metaphor is a particularly evocative one for the tenability of the diasporic imagination, locating the 'other' across the shadow line uncannily familiar and yet potentially antagonistic in its inversion. The narrator, as he sits in an exclusive library begins on his "strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances, a land of

looking - glass events" (*TSL* 224). The cause of the riots that killed Tridib in Dhaka is also responsible for the Calcutta riots in which he was trapped as a child. He says, "I, in Calcutta, only had to look in the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment where each city was the inverted image of the other" (*TSL* 233). One of the chief concerns of Ghosh's novels is interrogating the idealized unities of nationalism and renarrating the nation in its heteroglossic complexity.

The Shadow Lines is also a critique of boundaries. Tha'mma, who puts all her faith in real borders and separate nations is perplexed to see that there is no border line between India and East Pakistan. "Where's the difference then?" she asks, "and if there is no difference both sides will be the same; it will be just like it used to be before . . . What was it all for then-Partition and all the killing and everything-if there isn't something in between?" (*TSL* 15). The loss of her "special enchantment in lines" (*TSL* 233) gradually leads her to mental derangement. Her grandson, however, discovers that borderlines are culturally contingent. This fuels his imaginative understanding of nationalism.

Boundary lines also haunt the Bose family house in Dhaka. After the dividing wall is put up between the brothers' houses, Tha'mma invents stories about her uncles's house on the other side of the wall. The unseen side of the house becomes a daily source of fascination for the girls, gradually becoming known as the "upside-down house" (*TSL* 125). The principle of binary

division is evident here-the other portion of the home represents an inversion of the normality which Tha'mma's house stands for. But years later Tha'mma's visit to Jethamoshai reveals that his house is no different from hers. The futility and even irrationality of "othering" is thus exposed. Tridib can be seen to occupy a space of paradigmatic significance in the novel for his imagination enables him to think beyond the exclusion that officially sanctioned boundaries create. This desire to go beyond the confines of borderlines is crystallized in his yearning to play Tristan, "a man without a country, who fell in love with a woman-across the seas" (*TSL* 186).

The Shadow Lines can be read as destabilizing the fixed, binary logic imposed on notions of otherness, identity, history and memory in the construction of nationalist boundaries. If Ghosh articulates an exclusionary nationalism through the narrative of the grandmother who discovers its limits, through Tridib-as-Tristan by contrast, he exemplifies an other-oriented trajectory of that which goes beyond "the limits of one's mind to other times and other places" (*TSL* 29). In the process he forges an alternative paradigm of connections across and beyond the confining boundaries imposed by nationalistic discourse. Ghosh obviously formulates "a new, more fluid, frame work for national identity formation, one which interrogates the way in which differences are currently being polarized, set off against one another, in order to achieve the false unities of nationalism" (Gabriel 47-48).

The narrator's invective against rigid, polarized notions of nationhood and open embrace of differences, echoes the feminist tirade against patriarchal assumptions. Th'amma ironically supports and is at the same time a victim of conventionally 'handed down' convictions. She is absorbed into the majority that cannot see beyond boundaries. The narrator's consciousness, on the other hand, can transcend, even escape these strictures and look beyond. In subverting patriarchal conceptions the nameless narrator in the text becomes instrumental in offering a feminist perspective.

The Shadow Lines yields to a progressive feminist reading that perceives gender and reality as social construction that can be dismantled and reconstructed in new and more egalitarian ways. Laurie A Finke draws on the works of cultural critic Donna Haraway to elucidate feminism's need for "a politics of complexity." She uses complexity in a technical and evaluative sense. "Complexity" for Finke describes "a cultural poetics of indeterminacy, informed by contemporary theoretical debates in a variety of fields but without the political paralysis often attributed to post structuralism" (Finke 4). She turns to the cultural critiques of science to suggest a critical rhetoric for her argument since she is concerned with de-centering notions of objectivity and totalizing theory. She tries to appropriate aspects of dominant discourse to offer feminist theory a way out of the 'image of duration" – like nature / culture, mind / body, fact / fiction, real / artificial, objectivity / subjectivity, order / disorder. Haraway votes for a 'feminist theory of complexity" that

will help feminists think about how to move away from the production of universal, totalizing theory. She relates this to problems being posed in contemporary scientific thinking like nonlinear dynamics, information theory and fluid mechanics. These fields pose problems that cannot be solved by resorting to any simple principles of order or linear determinism. In Luce Irigaray's terms, they resist "adequate symbolization" signify "the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characteristic features of nature" (106-7). Finke while being aware of the divide between theories of science and literary criticism, sees the emergence of "disorder as a productive theoretical principle in the sciences – in chaos and information theory – as well as in such critical theories as deconstruction" (Finke 6).

Irigaray in "This sex which is not one" (1985) suggests that disorder and chaos constitute a threat to western economies of representation. Order is coercive because it is achieved through the exclusion, neutralization, or marginalization of whatever lies outside of artificially constructed 'norms', whether the norm is constructed as an electron, a human genome, or a ruling class. A theory of complexity is exactly the opposite of what physicists call a theory for everything (or TOE) which is a theory that is totalizing, universalizing. Even feminist literary theory is implicitly or explicitly modelled on the "rigour" and denotative clarity idealistically attributed to deterministic science and mathematics. Katherine Hayles notes, in *Chaos Bound: Orderly Disorder in Contemporary Literature and Science* that in

both the postmodern sciences and in literary theory, the 1970s and 1980s brought "a break away from universalizing, totalizing perspectives and a move towards local, fractured systems and modes of analysis" (2). The move was toward theories of complexity. The theory of Complexity defied unified natures, exposing the "fictivity" or constructed nature of facts. One of the insights of chaos theory is that disorder is perhaps more productively conceived of as the presence of information. Complexity, as Hayles notes, insists on local application rather than global laws or principles. It can create the impetus to challenge hegemonic, totalizing instruction of self and society. Finke arrives at the conclusion that, firstly a feminist theory of complexity must be dialogic, double-voiced, in that its explorations of social and cultural phenomena be "half-ours, half-someone else's (Bakhtin 345). Secondly:

> History conceived of as an irresolvable tension between 'what really happened' and the multiple and dialogic narration about it, provide a means by which feminists might destabilize oppressive representation of gender and locate on the margins of discourse-in the "noise" of history-possibilities for more egalitarian cultural formations not yet even recognizable as representations.
>
> (Finke 11)

Nivedita Bagchi in her essay on *The Shadow Lines* comments:

> to reconstruct and rewrite Indian history is a manifestation of the desire to validate our experience in terms of western discipline. The narrator leaves us with the question of the possibility/impossibility of reconstructing our history along western (shadow) lines. He develops an intricate methodology to establish narrative validity and reconstruct history, only to finally undermine the West's craving for validity, chronology and order by taking recourse in a language that undermines the concept of chronology itself. (195-96)

The narrator's journey to recover the hidden history of the riots becomes significant. The riot that over the years had acquired a distinct place in the narrator's memory finds no significant mention in the newspapers or chronicles of that time. The narrator discovers the absence of a stable and coherent relationship between the documented voice and the mnemonic self that is, between the public chronicles and the personal recollections. He thus sees a connection between "my nightmare bus ride back from school and the events that befell Tridib and the others in Dhaka" (*TSL* 218). The separate stories of May and Robi help the narrative retrieve the hidden history of Tridib's death and the public chronicling of the event. The competing narratives enable the narrator to mediate between 'real' and 'fictional' histories. The child narrator who had believed in the 'reality of nations and borders' has

to relearn the meaning of the invisible ‘shadow lines' that demarcate geographical and cultural space.

Ila's idea of history and her under-valuation of the local is thus contested:

> . . . nothing really important ever happens where you are. . . well of course there are famines and riot and disasters . . . But those are local things after all - not like revolutions or antifascist wars, nothing that sets a political example to the world, nothing that's really remembered. (*TSL* 104)

The narrator feels alienated by "her serene confidence in the centrality and eloquence of her experience, in her quiet pity for the pettiness of lives like mine, lived out in the silence of voiceless events in a backward world" (*TSL* 104). It is the "silence of voiceless events" that finally gets articulated in the text.

In analysing *The Shadow Lines* the concept of Dialogic Feminism can be usefully deployed. A feminist theory of complexity can counter totalizing structuralist concepts. It facilitates a movement towards a non-linear and non deterministic model of cultural analysis leading to an investigation of the specific, local and historical condition that govern discourse and culture. The dialogic insists on the local and particularistic nature of utterance.

The nameless narrator in *The Shadow Lines* transcends factual presentations of time and space. The narrator as child plays a pivotal role in the non-linear, multiperspective narrative. The movements back and forth in time (now the child, now the adult that criss cross) is not merely a structural device, but it serves to image a central theme that the dividing line between the past and present is only a shadow, that past and present are inseparable. Tridib teaches the narrator, when he is a child, to imagine – "to use [his] imagination with precision" (*TSL* 24). The narrator goes on to explain Tridib's view of imagination:

> He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust, a pure painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror.
>
> (*TSL* 24)

These childhood lessons equip the narrator to gain a novel perspective of reality. The narrator reveals how the communal riots that shook parts of Bengal and Dhaka opened up a new vision:

> . . . I in Calcutta had only to look into the mirror to be in Dhaka; a moment when each city was the inverted image of the other, locked into an irreversible symmetry by the line that was to set us free-our looking glass border.
>
> (*TSL* 238)

Tha'mma's rootedness to home and identity is challenged by Tridib, for whom home lacks fixed monoglossic meaning. The adult narrator, inspired by Tridib comes to understand that there is something more complex, and truer than the stable or 'rooted' reality of map points and cartographical symbols. The official discourse of national identity focuses on absolute boundaries, separations and divisions, imposing false notions of otherness and distance. Borderlines on the map are rejected as one-sided, static and distorted. We are thus initiated into a visualization of space that rejects the polarities of a world constructed out of "the tidy ordering of Euclidean space" (*TSL* 232). The re-mapping of the world's spaces can see Chiang Mai in Thailand as being closer to Calcutta than New Delhi, and Cheng du in China as being nearer than Srinagar.

Historiographers admit that history cannot give us any privileged access to "what really happened". They recognize that the historian's task is to divide the present from the past and make order and meaning out of the chaos presented by the past and its discourse. Historians become selective in the midst of contested meaning to make order out of the "chaos" produced by multiple discourses. The entire exercise is a concerted attempt to keep chaos

at bay. But one of the crucial insights of Chaos theory is that chaos is not disorder and meaninglessness, but a form of complex information. The randomness of the information results from the inadequacy of our linear representation of historical narrative to comprehend or to represent, complexity. The conception of history as a set of competing discourses and contested meanings, produces patterns that may be referred to as 'noise'. Michel Serres uses the term in this sense in his book. *Hermes : Literature, Science And Philosophy* (1982). Noise is information that is not in itself meaningful, that resists being coerced into meaning, but against which meaning must emerge. Noise is therefore central to any dialogic conception of history. Alice Jardine has suggested in *Gynesis: Configuration of Women and Modernity* (1985) that 'noise' in western history-that against which the meaning of western history has fashioned itself-has often been troped as the feminine. The space 'outside of' the conscious subject has always connoted the feminine in the history of western thought and every movement in alterity is a movement in to that female space, an attempt to give a place to that alterity within discourse involves a putting into discourse of 'woman' (114-115). Ghosh's text foregrounds that which has been defined as noise and then marginalized or excluded as non-meaningful to problematize that which has traditionally been considered 'true' or 'factual'.

The text also interrogates the imagined unity and coherence of the realist narrative. Time is experienced simultaneously with other times and places in the overlaying of the Calcutta of 1939 with the Calcutta of 1952 and

the England of 1939. The narrative moves from a London pub in 1981, the narrative present and the Calcutta of the 1950s and 1960s, when the narrator was a young school boy to the old house in Raibajar in the 1970s, then to London in 1939, at the outbreak of the second world war. The novel, thus constructs a heteroglossic national dynamic. This technique of overlaying times and spaces interrogates the process of narrativizing national identity through a neatly bounded, homogeneous and linear trajectory. Such a method of narration overtakes or by-passes the epistemology of binaries. *The Shadow Lines* thus moves towards the construction of an aesthetic that is based on a recognition of otherness. An alternative understanding of national identity draws upon the idea of Bhaktinian heteroglossia. Heteroglossia, built into the system of words and signs in complex and dynamic ways, subverts the core binary opposition of self and difference. It questions the attempt by hegemonic discourses to ideologically fixed cultural meaning. Monologic fixity of national boundaries is thus challenged.

Amitav Ghosh's treatment of events – their time and locale, his perspective of political boundaries and division lines , his use of a fluid narratorial voice adequately position themselves in what may be termed 'noise' or 'alterity'. By foregrounding otherwise muted voices and letting the non-linear take an edge over the traditionally constant and accepted, the text plays down andocentric notions and re-inserts woman into the discursive space.

CONCLUSION

Modern critical theories have initiated a move from gender obsession towards a text – centredness, focusing on the work itself. The work is viewed as a combined product of various historical influences and of its producer's location in terms of gender, class, race, region and sexual orientation. The recent shift of interest from authorial intention to reader-reception, favours the active critical reader more than the passive one. With the 'death of the author', the text undergoes a radical reconceptualisation. This is specially enabling in the sense that now the reader can enter a text in whichever way she/he chooses. The author becomes an impersonal agency sans preconception or intention. The text, thus, gets to be internally contexted. This affects the interpretative process leading to an impersonal sense of 'reading'.

French feminists like Hélène Cixous, speak of "a writing said to be feminine" (or masculine) or, more recently, of a "decipherable libidinal femininity which can be read in writing produced by a male or female" (Conley 129). It is not apparently the empirical sex of the author that matters, but the writing itself. Cixous warns against the dangers of confusing the sex

of the author with the sex of the writing he/she produces. She says in "Castration":

> Most women are like this: they do someone else's – man's – writing and in their innocence sustain it and give it voice, and end up producing writing that is in effect masculine … to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not in itself exclude femininity. It's rare, but you can sometimes find femininity in writings signed by men: it does happen. (52)

By enabling feminist criticism to escape from a disabling author-centred empiricism, this linking of sexuality and textuality opens up a whole new field of feminist investigation of the articulation of desire in language, not only in texts written by women but also in those written by men.

This thesis makes an attempt to close-read four Indian English novels: Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, Arundhati Roy's *God of Small Things,* Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August : An Indian Story* and Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines*.

One cannot fail to see similarities in the themes of the four novels: Identity crisis, displacement and alienation. These themes are dealt with in uniquely different ways by the authors. The central motive of "return" is all too obvious. In *Small Remedies,* Madhu's frequent trips down memory lane take her into the pasts of several individuals in the story. As far as Bai's life-story is concerned there can be no progress without a detour into her elusive past. In *The Shadow Lines,* Tha'mma's dramatic return to Dhaka becomes a turning point in her life, and also problematizes notions of patriotism, freedom and boundaries. The child-narrator's return to the England of his imagination deepens the complexity of the text. The 'Re-return' of Estha and the return of Rahel to Ayemenem in *The God of Small Things* become a poignant moment of reunion - an antidote, as it were, for the preceeding saga of intense suffering. Agastya in *English, August, An Indian Story* finally looks forward to some respite from a life of degradation, purposelessness and sheer boredom. All these 'return' journeys are quests for meaning in life, efforts to piece together the myriad complexities that the protagonists encounter.

The texts also probe the deep silence that linger in the selves of some of the protagonists. Estha's impervious, stony silence that takes possession of him as a child, looms over the entire narrative of *The God of Small Things*. Madhu's search for the real Bai hinges around Bai's silent rejection of her daughter in *Small Remedies*. Ghosh's boy-narrator in *The Shadow Lines*

speaks of a silence lying "outside the reach of [his] intelligence, beyond words" (*TSL* 218). The silent search of the narrator which forms the core of the novel throws the notions of secularism, nationalism and freedom into disarray. There is absolute silence "of an absolute, impenetrable banality" (*TSL* 218) in the life and mission of the narrator. In *English, August: An Indian Story,* Agastya's non-communication with himself is a non-verbal patch that breeds mere degeneration. The novel speaks of his efforts to come to grips with himself and seek meaning in life.

The introductory chapter examines theories of 'gender' and the connotations that the tern has gathered over a period of time. Textual constructions of the subject are also explored. At times the subject is seen to be a product of discourses, at others, the subject becomes another 'position' in language, an authorial position constructed by the intersection of the 'discursive plane'. The chapter also examines feminist theories of motherhood and of writing. It then goes on to introduce a feminist theory of complexity that foregrounds disordered, chaotic voices. After a brief assessment of the evolution of Indian English fiction, the lines of argument in the succeeding chapters are touched upon.

The second chapter of this thesis in an analysis of *Small Remedies* brings to light some interesting facts. Shashi Deshpande employs the omniscient narrator. The entire narrative is tightly structured and the

omniscient presence is in total control over the unravelling of the plot. The story line brings into focus 'strong' women who have swum against the tide, but Deshpande remains trapped in conservative paradigms of womanhood. The text plays down mothers while valorizing the fathers. Nevertheless, as the narrative progresses one becomes aware of the narrator's anxiety with motherhood. The obsession takes its toll as the narrator - biographer ultimately 'threatens' to use her authorial power and fill up the ellipses in Bai's life story with her own version.

The third chapter is a close reading of Arundathi Roy's *God of Small Things*. The text highlights subaltern consciousness - it throws ample light on the marginalization/oppression of individuals on the basis of caste, class and gender. Children too do not escape the barbs of the malicious adult world. The text becomes a vociferous protest against all kinds of marginalization. Through the child focalizer, a sort of de-centering takes place. This is strikingly different from the all-knowing, answer-seeking, questioning presence of the dominating authorial voice one confronts in *Small Remedies*. Ammu "sets aside morality of divorcehood and motherhood" (*GOST* 44) to exult in her sexuality. The fluidity and suppleness of the language used, coupled with its daring, unconventional innovations show what Cixous terms *ècriture feminine* at work.

The fourth chapter on Upamanyu Chatterjee's *English, August : An Indian Story* takes stock of the overtly androcentric narrative. The narratorial voice speaks of alienation and dissipation, seeking refuge in sex, drinks and drugs. In the novel there are no female characters worth the name and the few who are featured are treated as carnal prey. The controlling power of the male gaze is all apparent. Laura Mulvey suggests that in distancing the image of woman, fetishizing her, regarding her voyeuristically as a spectacle there is evidently a strong power politics at play. In *English, August* : *An Indian Story,* woman is objectified. She becomes the object of male desire, de Beauvoir's "other" whose existence is validated only through her ability to fulfill male wishes.

The last chapter reads *The Shadow Lines* as a recovery of history through personal memory - a memory which remains buried in the interstices between the domain of public knowledge and private understanding. The focalizer is a boy who internalizes the perspective of Tridib, which is refreshingly different from the conventional. The narrator's picturesque memory of the Prices' London home validates the existence of a history that is reconstituted through the narrator's memory and retrieved through the text. No single character is presented with the omniscience of complete knowledge. Even the narrator's discourse is not privileged over the other narratives. The narration becomes at times disparate and fragmented. The multiplicity of voices posits a partial truth or fragmentary information. But all

finally become a part of the larger narrative and the consciousness of the narrator. The narrator, commenting on the ontological nature of reality realizes that "there are moments in time that are not knowable" (*TSL* 68) as opposed to knowledge created by the "weight of remembered detail" (*TSL* 67). It is upto the narrative to uncover the silence. Received notions of nationalism and history are subverted and a non-patriarchal sensibility is fore grounded.

This thesis may appropriately conclude with the observations made by K.Satchidanandan in *Indian Literature : Positions and Propositions* (1999)

> Every reading is a postponement of the ultimate meaning of the text since texts are open –ended and can be read in a variety of unforeseeable ways and the reader's discoveries are inevitably the products of the tools used for reading. It is not the author who speaks, but language itself which is by nature polysemic as no word is eternally bound up with a particular meaning. This gap between the word and the meaning is the site of the reader's freedom for 'writing' the text. (222)

With the focus on the reader's powers of conjecture and free play of imagination, reading becomes writing. The text becomes a volatile space, simmering with new meanings, and gifting its reader fresh perspectives.

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