Reimagining Power Relations: A Study of Select Contemporary Indian Narratives

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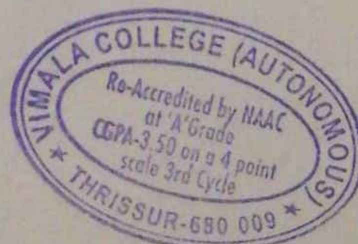

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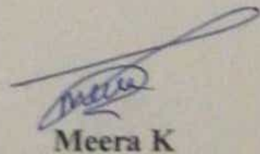
DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis titled "**Reimagining Power Relations: A Study of Select Contemporary Indian Narratives"** submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English is an authentic record of analysis and bonafide research carried out by me under the guidance of Dr. O. J. Joycee as my Research Supervisor, and Dr. Sijo Varghese C. as my Co-Research Supervisor at the PG Department of English and Research Centre, Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur. I hereby certify that no part of this work has been submitted or published elsewhere for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or any such title, or recognition. I also affirm that the originality of the study has been ascertained with the help of University-approved software for plagiarism-check.



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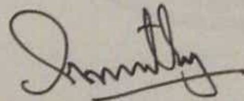
This is to certify that the thesis titled **"Reimagining Power Relations: A Study of Select Contemporary Indian Narratives"** is a bonafide record of studies and research carried out by **Ms. Meera K** under my supervision, and submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English. To the best of my knowledge this research work has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, associateship, or similar such title, or recognition. Its critical evaluation represents independent work on the part of the candidate and its originality has been ascertained with the help of University-approved software for plagiarism check.



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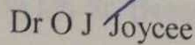

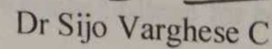

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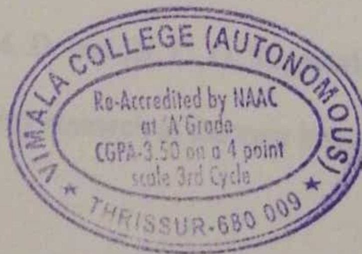

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ABSTRACT

The thesis proposes to explore relations of power in select narratives of Rupa Bajwa and Kavery Nambisan, two contemporary Indian women writers in English. A review of literature pertaining to the select authors reveals how studies have largely focused on the ways in which characters discover their selves, explore their identity, and battle violence and victimisation in a class-based, gender-biased society. The characters have conventionally been perceived as passive objects of power though they are as much active subjects as objects of power. Multiple dimensions of power inherent in everyday practices, therefore, remain largely unexplored. The study proposes to address this gap and probes into facets of power relations wherein the marginalised and the dominated exercise a significant amount of power. Conceptual tools espoused by Michel Foucault facilitate the investigation. Foucauldian notion of power as relational and contextual, treatment of power as an exercise rather than a possession, and the problematisation of the taken-for-granted connotations of power, catalyse the research. A set of connections is forged among characters and entities, linking individual experiences and power in an invented space. These connections are then categorised together on the basis of the nature of relationship existing among them. The analytical chapters of the thesis emerge based on this bracketing of power relations. The central chapters evaluate aspects of "relativity," "reciprocity" and "reflexivity" that characterise relations of power. The "relative" trait of power relations is instantiated by the constantly shifting roles of individuals and entities. The "reciprocal" nature of relationship between individuals is evidenced by the expectation of particular responses from the dominated by the dominant. And the "reflexive" element of power relations, focusing on one's consciousness of power/powerlessness in any given scenario, reveals how the

relationship is largely wrought with ambivalence. Diverse and convoluted power relations are thus broken down, grouping them into simpler and more intelligible forms. While power is often studied in binaries as powerful and powerless, this investigation goes beyond the binaries and examines how seemingly powerless/ powerful characters exist in a dialectical relationship with power. The reading undertaken therefore aims to see power where it was not seen before. And this view proves crucial, for social change can be effected only when the actor(s) involved are aware of their own position in the situation of power. Awareness about agency is required to act as an agent. However, when power is diffuse, the question of recognising one's position in the matted terrain of power guarantees no absolute answers but only offers possibilities. By reimagining the narratives through power the thesis attempts not to resolve but to recognise the processes and complexities latent in structures of power.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Power is often studied in binaries as powerful and powerless. This study seeks to go beyond the binaries and explore how seemingly powerless/ powerful characters exist in a dialectical relationship with power. This is not to deny outright the presence of destructive aspects of power in generic terms, but to be apprised of how power is often exercised by even the most socially, politically or financially disadvantaged segments of the society. Different subject positions are occupied by an individual, sometimes simultaneously with no straight-forward demarcation of their roles. Evaluating these positions will shed light on the precarious nature of power relations in a society at any given point of time. This knowledge may be used to navigate power relations and negotiate one's role within the network of power differently. Novels by writers Rupa Bajwa and Kavery Nambisan exemplify these dimensions of power.

Objectives of the Study

The study proposes to examine how power is expressed and exercised by and on an individual in different contexts in the select narratives. Power operates on different levels – in the mental space of the subject, in familial circles and in social situations. These operations will be scrutinised to gain a deeper understanding about the nature of power. The thesis intends to probe into an individual mind's perception of power and compare this perception with the individual's actual ability/inability to exercise power in real situations. A character at any given point of time is governed by significant societal forces. Power accessible to a character will be analysed in terms of its interrelations with such societal forces/concepts as gender, class, language, knowledge, discourse, body and madness. What role do "responses" and

audience play in determining one's dominant/subservient position in the web of power? Such pertinent questions will be addressed with the aid of the select narratives. The inquiry attempts to shed light on the myriad ways in which one's capacity to exercise power remains enmeshed in the network of influences. These influences will be explored to identify common and recurring patterns of relations. The investigation seeks to break down these complex relations of power into simpler categories for better comprehension. The chapters of the thesis emerge based on this bracketing of power relations discernible in Bajwa and Nambisan's works.

Background of Study

Bajwa and Nambisan, authors of select novels, may be placed under the broad banner of Indian English Women's fiction. It therefore serves well to briefly study the background of this distinct corpus of writing. Contemporary Indian English fiction with a remarkable sense of sophistication and a keen eye for social critique has an overarching presence in the World literary arena (Ashcroft 46). Even a conservative estimate would show that there exists millions of stories in Indian languages and authors writing in Indian English language also make a substantial contribution to this huge corpus (P. Singh 3). Though the select works were produced in the early decades of the twenty-first century, tracing the history of Indian English novels in general and assessing the place of Indian women writers in particular prove productive for the proposed research.

Indian Novels in English

Mapping the origin of Indian novels and pinning it down to a single causal factor, must be done with caution. In this context, works of theorists like Edward Said (*Beginnings: Intention and Method*) and Michel Foucault (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*) that treat "beginnings" not in the sense of a

priori origins but as ruptures in history may be recalled. Lennard Davis echoes Foucault and Said while arguing how modern novel retains a position of ambivalence towards fiction and fact. He interrelates the beginning of novel with journalistic writings (2). The literary trends during British India were said to be heavily influenced by Western philosophy and colonialism (Sinha 6). The advent of printing press and publishing of newspapers in India from eighteenth century widened the scope for the genre of fiction (6). However, critics often counter the argument that the growth of novel in India is a consequence of British handholding. Meenakshi Mukherjee, for instance, argues in *Realism and Reality* that it is a fallacy to treat the Indian novel as an imitation and derivation of the novel from the West. A culture that does not have a fertile ground to sustain growth of a novel will not be viable even after any such superimposition (99). Ideas of realism, novel and prose were not mindlessly parroted but were creatively reimagined and accordingly appropriated (Gopal 20).

Not all genres of Anglophone writings from India have received global currency as the novel. Indian poetry in English is often overshadowed by vibrant verses in regional languages. Indian dramas in English are also much less celebrated when contrasted with their counterparts from say the Carribean or regions of West Africa (3). Short story collections in English from India that have received critical approval are also relatively lesser in number. The Anglophone literary output from India to make a sustaining impact in the international literary tradition is undoubtedly the Indian novel. This is attributed partly to the primacy accorded to this genre in the World literary map since the latter half of the nineteenth century through instituting of awards like the Commonwealth, the Booker, the Guardian Fiction prizes that catalyse the process of canon formations. Commercial factors like wide publication,

networks of distribution, film rights further cement the central position of Anglophone novel in global literary scene (4).

Indian writing in English is likely to have originated with Sake Dean Mahomet's publication of *The Travels of Dean Mahomet, a Native of Patna in Bengal, Through Several Parts of India* (1794) decades before Macaulay's *Minute* introduced English language education in colonial India. This autobiographical narrative, giving an account of the author's journey through India, may be seen as a literary production of first Indian writer in English (P. Singh 1). Though literary historians project different dates for the birth of the first Indian novel, the consensus is that the novel as a genre made its appearance in the latter half of the nineteenth century, almost a generation after Macaulay's famous "Minute" (M. Mukherjee, "Beginnings" 93-94). Indian languages, like Bengali and Marathi are said to have produced novels in India long before English made its entrance (93). Colonial education is believed to have acquainted Indians with the potent medium of prose (Mehrotra 7). Two narratives of imaginary history called "A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945" written by Kylas Chunder Dutt that appeared in *Calcutta Literary Gazette* in 1835 and "The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the Twentieth Century" by Shoshee Chunder Dutt that was published in *Saturday Evening Harakuru* in 1845 are noteworthy. Though lacking in ideological and generic presuppositions of a novel, these two tracts of imaginary history may be seen as earliest attempts at novel-writing in English in India (M. Mukherjee, "Beginnings" 94).

Although a simplistic linear timeline for history of Indian novels in English is not practical, for convenience of study, Mohan Jha charts out five phases that may come in handy for the same. The first phase covers the years 1860 to 1920, the

second from 1920 to 1950, the next spans from 1950 to 1975, the penultimate from 1975 to 2000 and the final phase stretches from 2000 till the present. While this division may be useful and even valid, in reality there does not exist clear-cut demarcations between periods, and spill-overs in the different time intervals are anticipated (36).

In the first phase (1860 to 1920) the novels mostly resembled tales that contained adventures and melodramatic elements. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's (or Chattopadhyaya's) *Rajmohan's Wife* which was serialised in the Calcutta weekly *The Indian Field* from 1864 onwards is one of the earliest attempts made by Indian writers to exploit the English language for creative purposes. Lal Behari Day's *Govinda Samanta: Bengal Peasant Life* (1874), Raj Lakshmi Debi's *The Hindoo Wife*, *The Enchanted Fruit* (1876) and Sir Jogendra Singh's *Nurjahan: Romance of an Indian Queen* (1909) are some of the notable novels from this period (Jha 37). These could well be seen as broken starts for what is to become a significant discipline of writing broadly called as Indian English Literature (P. Singh 1). *Govinda Samanta* outlining the contours of peasant life may be seen as an antecedent to the Indian English novels of the 1930s and 1940s, which taking inspiration from Gandhi, forayed into rural spaces (Gopal 26). The intention to write from experience and to portray realism, manifested itself in the form of novels that ventured into depiction of domestic sphere. *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjjee that relates the tragic trials and tribulations of a woman in an unhappy marriage is a case in point (29). Both direct and indirect influences of classical and popular texts from the West were observable in the novels produced from India (M. Mukherjee, "Beginnings" 98). The Victorian penchant for "closure" in novels with the neat tying up of loose ends may be seen in a sizeable number of Indian novels during its initial

stage of development (99). During this period novels came to be written in Indian languages quite prolifically and were often used as a vehicle to address the burning questions of the times – the idea of nation, national identity and national culture. Though English novels also continued to make their appearance, their readership was limited. At this point, however, it was in non-fiction prose – essays, speeches, journalistic writings, petitions – that the language of English was used most vigorously (Gopal 31).

In the second phase (1920-50), besides others like K. S. Venkataramani, the famous trio of Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao marked their towering presence. Socio-political and ideologically charged climate of the country invariably influenced the fictional landscape (Jha 37-38). A steady flow of novels in the English language from India was well initiated in the 1930s, which soon picked up pace (P. Singh 1). The nationalist zeal and charismatic presence of Gandhi that charged the period between 1905 and India's independence inevitably reflected in the writings from the time. Gandhi's relentless reiteration that freedom must come from within, inspired literary works to delve into the inner recesses of the self. Though Gandhi exhorted Indians to refrain from using the English language as it remained foreign to Indian experiences, interestingly, his very influence led to a major efflorescence of English novels in India in the 1930s and 1940s (Gopal 45). Villages and agrarian backgrounds acted as principal locales of action in a considerable number of Anglophone novels from this period in keeping with Gandhi's avowed interest in the revival of Indian villages (46). Realism, humanism and the theme of East-West encounter punctuated the novels from this phase (Jha 37-38).

The third phase from 1950 to 1975 witnessed a spur of novelists using the English medium to create literary worlds: Bhabhani Bhattacharya, Manohar

Mangolkar, G. V. Desani, Arun Joshi, Chamal Nahal, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Attiah Hosain, to name a few. Meanwhile, the trio from the previous period continued writing well beyond this span of time (38). The subject of East-West encounter gets further entrenched in fictions from this period, finding expression in tropes of alienation and identity crisis. A sustaining interest in psyche of the characters may be discerned in these English novels. Stylistic devices like monologues, first-person accounts, and overall a shift to less complex and more innovative modes of narration may be noted in this interval of time (38-39).

In the next phase between 1975 and 2000, Indian novels in English grabbed international attention. Booker Prize winning novels *Midnight's Children* (1980) by Salman Rushdie and *The God of Small Things* (1997) by Arundhati Roy birthed a new epoch for Indian fiction in English. Rama Mehta, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor are some of the more important names in this phase (41). Mehrotra maintains that while the first birth of the Indian novel in English took place with the publication of Bankim Chandra Chatterjjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* in 1864, its second and third births may be attributed to the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian political scene in 1920s, and the publishing of the ground-breaking *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie and *The Trotter Nama* by I. Allan Sealy in 1980s, respectively (13). *Midnight's Children* that was awarded with the Booker Prize in 1981 also received The Best of the Booker honorific in 2008 (Sen and Roy 15). Readers were more frequently accosted by terms like *exile*, *diaspora*, *immigrants*, *insider-outsider*, *alienation* during this period (Jha 40). The last phase, from 2001, has ushered in a new crop of Indian English novelists, along with some of the prominent names like Amitav Ghosh that continue to write from the previous period. Kiran Desai's *Inheritance of Loss* (2006) and Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) both bagged

Booker Prize in this interval of time. Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Rohinton Mistry, Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Chetan Bhagat, besides others have taken remarkable strides towards furthering the reach of Indian English novels. The various “post” discourses (post-structuralism, post-feminism, post-Freudianism) along with concepts and theories such as New Historicism, Multi-nationalism, Cross-culturalism, Globalisation are being frequently associated with readings from this period (Jha 41). But as Albeena Shakil maintains, an unproblematic categorisation of Indian English novels is always not possible (228). As stated by the title of Meenakshi Mukherjee’s noted work *Elusive Terrain,* the landscape of Indian fiction remains an “elusive terrain.” The chapter simply attempts to place on record some major trends and tendencies observable in Indian fictional outputs in English.

Contemporary Indian English Fiction

Contemporary Indian English writing has matured over the years to offer a uniquely Indian perspective. Krishna Sen and Rituparna Roy observe that the Indian English fiction produced in the twenty-first century “constitutes a metanarrative of reworlding” (14). They assert that contemporary Indian English fiction surges ahead in new realms with a certain amount of assurance so much so that this body of literature can no longer be described as “derivative or dispossessed” (9). Assessing the history of Indian English Literature in the last two centuries, Naik deems the body of writing as a record of heroic struggle against ridicule, neglect and prejudice. The progress is evaluated to be a steady march from mindless imitations to “authentic literary expression” (290). Nambisan maintains that one of the strengths of contemporary Indian fiction lies in its diversity (“New Issues” 44). In the twenty-first century, fresh and confident voices articulate Indian consciousness through English

fiction. The novels range from a reimagination of history, mythology or epics to a re-evaluation of globalised India with a plethora of radical experiments in language, form and content (Sen and Roy 9).

Multiculturalism and globalisation, the modern counterparts to the traditional notion of *vasudhaiva kutumbkam* (the notion that the entire world constitutes a single family), have widened the horizons for Indian novelists. Issues affecting humanity on a larger scale are also addressed by writers in twenty-first century (P. Singh 23). Issues ranging from snobbery and cowardice of the privileged, irresponsible pursuit of wealth, dangerous readiness of people to accept the superficial, to those of religious dogmatism, perils of nuclear arms, one country's thirst for dominance over the world, and globalisation serve as thematic concerns for novels in the contemporary scenario (Nambisan, "New Issues" 42). Postcolonial underpinnings, corporate brutality, anti-elitism, politics of terror, clash of ideals, gender based violence are some of the many concerns of Indian English novelists that often find expression in the form of absurdity, fragmentation, ironic parody, linguistic hybridity and mimic subversion. Muted voices and masked narratives that were once pushed into oblivion gain traction. This literary genre deserves to be examined with great sensitivity and critical precision as the novelists are constantly engaging with contemporary issues in strikingly innovative ways and producing vibrant works of art (P. Singh 26).

With the efflorescence of publishing in Indian English, many from non-literature backgrounds – engineers, doctors, civil servants, housewives and scientists for instance – have started to don the mantle of writer. The new voices, along with the established ones engage in the act of subversion and sustain the ongoing experiment with genres (Sen and Roy 16). Cross-genre fiction enjoys wide

acceptance in the twenty-first century. Historical mysteries (like works of Biman Nath), mythological thrillers derived from the country's vast storehouse of myths and mythologies (like works of Ashwin Sanghi), the multi-modal *anthropo-mythological* thrillers (like novels of Amish Tripathi, Ashok Banker) illustrate this trend. Another impressive feature in the turn-of-the-century literary culture is the emergence of best-sellers, euphemistically called "commercial" Indian English fiction, that have taken the literary world by storm. However, this is not an altogether new development. Novels of Shobha De were chart-busters and registered record sales. In any case, today there is an exponential growth of novels in the commercial Indian English Fiction shelf. Chetan Bhagat may well be designated a doyen in this category (16). He may be considered the leading writer of the campus novel as well – a new age pop fiction that possesses a tone of lightheartedness (P. Singh 11-12). Abhijit Bhaduri, Tushar Raheja, Srividya Natarajan, Amitabha Bagchi, Harshdeep Jolly, Soma Das, Kausik Sircar, Sachin Garg, Karan Bajaj, Siddharth Chowdhury, Satyajith Sarna, Ritesh Sharma and Neeraj Pahlajani are writers with notable campus novels to their credit (12). Commercial writing largely targets Gen X audience and hovers around urban realities. The literary value of some of these commercial novels may well be contested.

Nonetheless the more serious Indian English novel anchors itself firmly in the socio-cultural dynamics of the country, accommodating inflections in text and texture, using the English language sometimes with subversive potency of Rushdie-esque chutnification, sometimes with capricious hybridity of vernacular parlance (17-18). Rushdie could be seen as a pioneer in the use of magic realism in Indian English fiction. This mode of narration was further exploited by writers like Arvind Adiga and Vikas Swarup who were not averse to experimenting in their novels (G. Das 30).

Not unlike *Midnight's Children,* Indian English fiction since the latter half of the twentieth-century often undertakes a disruption of the grand narrative of the nation. Stories rooted in family and community values do find favour in the present century but the theme is treated by the novelists of the present generation quite differently from that of predecessors like Rao and Narayan. Contemporary novels often project a conflict between the Gandhian vision of village/community and the highly globalised view of History and Nation (Ashcroft 34-35). The notion of the Nation along with the concomitant fissures and faultlines continues to inform Anglophone fiction from India in the current century (Gopal 8). In post-Rushdie novels, the larger theme of resistance against Nation manifests in three characteristic minor themes: critique of social class and economic disparity, opposition to bordered Nation-State and a transit from “home” to the outer “world” mirroring both the physical movement of writers from India to foreign shores as well as in the metaphorical sense of an outgrowth of Indian consciousness (Ashcroft 37-38). Fiction is sometimes used as a channel to unmask the country's jaundiced underbelly (Sen and Roy 21).

Though not as evolved as other genres, crime fiction, detective novels and psychological thrillers are also making inroads into the Indian literary space. Vikram Chandra, Vish Puri, Ashok Banker, Aruna Gill, Kalpana Swaminathan, Ashwin Sanghi, Swati Kaushal, Madhumitha Bhattacharya, Anu Kumar, Arvind Nayar, Jeet Thayil, Peggy Mohan, Shashi Warrier, Omai Ahmad are some writers whose works paint disturbing pictures of crime, brutality and the macabre (P. Singh 9-10). Novels that deliberate on the disabled and on the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals, and graphic novels are making foray in to the scene of Indian fiction in English (13-16). Writings against the imposition of subalternity on dalits have been produced by writers as

senior as Mulk Raj Anand (17). This literary movement is in spate since the 1980s (17). Arundhathi Roy, Cyrus Mistry, Githa Hariharan, Amitav Ghosh have also proffered dalit perspectives of lives in some of their novels. English translations of literary works in Indian languages contain several accounts of Dalit writing. However, not all narratives of the impoverished and underprivileged can be bracketed under dalit literature. Some stories are better described with the nomenclature *slumdog narratives* which encompasses all slumdogs, irrespective of dalit/non-dalit status. Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A* which was adapted into the Oscar winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* is an example. Eco-narratives, Children's fiction, works of myth and fantasy, retellings of history, reimaginings of classics and philosophical novels (though relatively fewer in number) also enrich Indian English fiction (20-21). In the Chik-lit genre, Madhuri Banerjee, Ismita Tandon Dhankher, Rajoshree Chakroborti, Swati Kaushal are some of the young generation writers whose works brim with bold sensuality (9).

At the cusp of the new century, regional novels in English rose to prominence. The staggering number of fictional works in English from the northeastern states of India is a case in point. Those like Temsula Ao, Anjum Hasan, Easterine Kire, Mamng Dai, Siddhartha Deb, Dhruba Hazarika to name a few, use the fictional space to verbalise experiences of violence, turmoil and the consequent identity crises rampant in the Northeast, while simultaneously using the medium to also introduce the unique culture of the region to the rest of the world (Sen and Roy 15). A categorisation of literary outputs on the basis of geography is often arbitrary and does not reflect the real picture. Terms like *northeast* or *Mainland India* are loaded with connotations and both in no way can be treated as homogeneous entities. However, many writers from the northeastern states of the country do concede that

the literary worlds they envisage in their writings do largely seem unfamiliar to readers from other regions. This, along with the benefit of ease of classification, may be used to justify the straitjacketing of writings from the northeast of the country under the label of Northeast Literature (Mahanta 107). Similarly, cutting through geographical barriers, diaspora novels also enjoy a place of prominence in the field of Indian English fiction (P. Singh 24; Gopal 177). Talents from the diasporic community – Jhumpa Lahiri, Kunal Basu, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Bharati Mukherjee –innovate with vigour (Sen and Roy 16). Elaborate discussion of substantial contribution made by writers from the northeast of India, authors using Indian languages and those belonging to Indian diaspora will exceed the scope of the undertaken research. Therefore, the study dwells on some of these writers only perfunctorily. It must be placed on record that this is by no means an exhaustive account of Indian novelists in English. Only those significant facets of the evolution of Indian fiction in English that hold relevance for the proposed investigation have been touched upon. Sen and Roy reckon the inadequacy of terms like *postcolonialism* or *postmodernism* and other such derived *isms* in capturing the diverse currents of Indian English fiction. No such single appellation may be used to qualify this behemoth body of literature (14).

Makers of Indian English Literature edited by C. D. Narasimhaiah is an extensive compilation of writings examining significant Indian literary outputs in the English language by prominent names in the field from Mulk Raj Anand up to Salman Rushdie in the last decade of the twentieth century. Ram Singh and Narendra Kumar, editors of *Critical Studies on Indian Fiction in English*, compile scholarly articles on notable fictional works from India. In the introductory chapter to the book they discuss the postcolonial literary terrain in India with particular thrust to Indian

fiction. In the discipline of Indian English criticism, Narasimhaiah and K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar are considered to be pioneers (Khair 148). Multiple volumes of *A History of Indian Literature* compiled by Sisir Kumar Das and published by Sahitya Akademi provide a comprehensive literary history of multitudinous Indian writings in various languages and genres. Iyengar's *Indian Writing in English* (1984) and M. K. Naik's *A History of Indian Literature in English* (1982) are useful resources for grasping the history of Indian literature in English (Mehrotra xv). *Feminism in Contemporary British and Indian English Fiction* (2003) by Miti Pandey, *Indian English Women's Fiction* (2007) by D. Murali Manohar, *Reading New India: Post-Millennial Indian Fiction in English* (2013) by E. Dawson Varughese are some texts that aid research in Indian novels in English in the new millennium (Sen and Roy 12).

Major Themes

Indian writings often hover around aspects of cultural difference including questions of gender, sexual orientation and class which are also defining features of postcolonial literatures (Singh and Kumar 1). The thematic foci of the early novels were as varied as the historical and magical on one hand, and the contemporary realist, domestic and didactic on the other (Shakil 201). Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the most popular among these were generally novels of fantasy. This is because characteristics like individualism and social mobility that were essential for realism to be sustained were not present in the era. Though the novel in England thrived on individualism, in nineteenth-century India with clear-cut hierarchies established within family and social set-ups, individualism was not particularly easy to represent in literature (*Realism* 7). Surveying Indian literary outpourings in the latter half of the twentieth century, Sourit Bhattacharya contends that a fictional output invariably bears imprints of catastrophic events that punctuate a particular

time period. Features of magic realism, metafiction, melodrama, fantasy, quests, critical realism and various experimental modes of writing are essentially a response to historically specific events like Bengal Famine (1943-44), Naxalbari Movement (1967-72), Indian Emergency (1975-77). The vulnerable lives and living situations of postcolonial India are mirrored using various modes of writings that may in turn be characterised as different kinds of catastrophic realism (2-3). Sen and Roy explicate four broad themes recognisable in contemporary Indian English fiction – the 1947 partition of India, the Nation and the inherent delink between language and the Nation, gendered selfhoods caught up within patriarchal walls and dominant effects of globalisation (10-12). Among these, the question of gendered identities is often addressed by women novelists (11). Two major currents may be identified in Indian English Fiction: the "social realist" mode that explores pertinent issues, and the "magic realist" approach where history is alienated (20).

There is a congruence between the rise of a bilingual native middle class and the emergence of prose fiction in nineteenth century India. Bengal, the first region to fall under British authority, first gave birth to this new class of English-educated intelligentsia who were instrumental in the flowering of Indian English fiction (Gopal 17). In different languages, it is through the medium of novel that the growing middle classes comprehended the world and their place in it (Shakil 201). In his book *Fractured Modernity: Making of a Middle Class in Colonial North India* Sanjay Joshi contends that the middle classes in colonial India derived their power from adapting modern ways of living (2). Modernity remained fractured and was perched on contradictory impulses pertaining to tradition and revolutionary change, rationality and sentiment, equality and hierarchy, simultaneously (Shakil 194). This contradiction and conflict reflected in fictional excursions as well. In the 1980s the

middle classes were caught between the aspirations of bourgeoisie and the downtrodden under-classes. They had to choose between taking a stance for the underprivileged and joining the Indian elite in their acceptance of free market capitalism. The urban elite who did not possess land nor wealth in kind, and were often employed as teachers or as low-ranking office holders at East India Company were deemed as *bhadralok* 'respectable people' (Gopal 17). Indian English fiction was patronised largely by the middle class and hence the themes of the novels catered to the bourgeoisie ideology. Those like Anand made concerted efforts to open the literary space for voices of marginalised sections and treated the downtrodden characters in the novel with compassion (R. Nayar 255).

The sustained interest in class is a characteristic feature of the contemporary literary imagination (Ashcroft 40). Along with the middle-class question, the subject of subalternity also became a major preoccupation for Indian English fiction. After the arrival of Rushdie in the literary scene, in the late twentieth century, Indian novelists in English are seen to be engaging in a "subaltern historiography" of sorts dealing variously with the questions of exile, dispossession, growing multiple identities, displacement – issues that interest postcolonial theorists (R. Nayar 40). *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga brought the subject of class to the table of critical discussion. The following view expressed by the character Balram in a letter to another character Wen Jiabao in *The White Tiger* succinctly sums up the class struggle – history of the world is nothing but the history of a ten thousand year war waged between the rich and the poor (254). The widening chasm between the well-to-do and the impoverished manifests in manifold forms. It is in this vein that Harish Trivedi responds to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous contention the subaltern cannot speak, by arguing that the subaltern cannot speak the language of the

metropolitan Centre (English) and therefore seems silent to a hegemonic, predominantly English-speaking listener (qtd. in P. Nayar, *Literary Theory* 207). For literature to be a vehicle of social change, the subaltern must be accorded agency for resistance. This may be achieved by abstaining from glorifying victimhood and by conceptualising the oppressed as subjects rather than objects of inequality (Dutt 52).

Major Debates

The rich legacy of Indian culture, history and the varied realities of life inform the fictional worlds designed by Indian novelists with commendable aesthetic prowess (P. Singh 2). However, one of the most commonly debated topics is also the very subject of Indianness as represented in novels from India. While international boundaries are rigorous, literary boundaries often remain porous and overlapping. Mehrotra contends that the "India" in "Indian Literature in English" is to be read as referring to both India the country with a solid political map and India in the more expansive imaginative sense (xvi). Given the astonishing number of writers who convey a uniquely Indian experience through fiction, the question "What is an Indian writer?" may not fetch an accurate response (Ashcroft 36). Some on account of their place of birth and growth, some on account of their orientation and commitment, some others on account of the chosen subject matter may be tagged as "Indian" novelists (36).

Shashi Tharoor, Jhumpa Lahiri, Githa Hairharan, Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Arvind Adiga, Amit Chaudhuri, Tabish Khair, Manu Joseph, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amitav Ghosh, Tarun Tejpal, Rahul Bhattacharya, Kunal Basu, Hari Kunzru, Cyrus Mistry are some of the many names that exemplify the outstanding growth of the Indian English fiction as a form of writing disencumbered of Western entanglements (P. Singh 2). Writers who have

created ripples in the global literary scene are often condemned for writing with the sole view to impress a largely Western audience. The literary merit of such Indian writings in English, is sometimes overlooked. Changed market conditions, power of publicity and advertising hype are often accorded credit for the success of such writings (Mehrotra 23). This is a flawed perception. Just as how a place from where a recipe originates is exactly the place where the dish is savoured the best, literature born from a particular region is most satisfyingly consumed in the same region too (24). Naik and Narayan also strongly oppose this general contention that regional writers and works lingering on a particular region remain relevant only to the particular locality by quoting the example of Faulkner's genius. "The fact is that Faulkner is universal, precisely because he is so intensely regional. It is only by writing with your own region in your bones that you can be true to the kindred points of home and the universe" (250-51). Genuine literature is that which is deeply rooted in the native soul even when being able to boast of a universal appeal, thus underscoring the significance of Indianness (Jha 42). Argument that an Indian novel cannot transcend regional divides is vociferously refuted by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her work *Realism*. Her contention is that even when rooted in a specific region of the country the novel in India reflects the mosaic of forces in the social, political, philosophical, economic and aesthetic domains of the larger part of the country (viii). While she does not advocate any schematic categorisation due to multiplicity of variables that outweigh commonalities, she asserts that shared commonalities like hierarchies in social set-up, agrarian culture, puranic legacy, colonial influence and many such factors inform the content and form of the novel. These create some basic patterns that help overlook obvious regional variations (viii).

Sheldon Pollock warns how in the process of fighting tenets of Euro-centrism one might end up adopting its mirror-image *third-worldism*, which is equally dangerous. Unproblematic acceptance of the definition of concepts like tradition and spiritual India are consequences of this *third-worldism* (115). In *The Argumentative Indian* Amartya Sen asserts Indianness is that which essentially embraces the pluralistic and "dialogic tradition" with multiple histories and identities coexisting (xiv). The multi-layered presence of dialogic culture is inherent to India. This cultural pluralism enriches contemporary Indian writing in English. Belliappa describes the Indian reality to be a complex entity that defies any attempt to define "*the* Indian novel" (232).

In *The Indian English Novel*, Priyamvada Gopal distinguishes between novels written in English by Indians and the *bhasha novels* written in the Indian languages. "What is 'India(n)'?" becomes a question of interest in Anglophone novels in the country (6). Meenakshi Mukherjee in 1990 wrote about how the second generation of Indian writers exhibited an anxiety of Indianness. She distinguishes between first and second generation of Indian English novelists, and the *bhasha* and Indian English writers. The anxiety of Indianness in yesteryear authors like Rao, Anand and Narayan may be attributed to their own yearning for rootedness. But the anxiety of the next generation of writers who enjoy global accessibility stems from the pressures exerted by the international market place that demands for literary outputs to be national allegories. However, with the passage of time, Gopal notes, contemporary Indian English novel (barring a few exceptions) has successfully extricated itself from the "anxieties of Indian-ness" and is earnestly committed to representing India's ever evolving socio-cultural and political underpinnings (187).

The usage of a foreign tongue – the English language – to record uniquely Indian experiences is another oft-debated topic. In *Indian Writing in English*, Iyengar notes that "even in 1834-35, 32,000 English books sold in India, as against 13,000 in Hindi, Hindustani and Bengali" (28). There is a significant place for fictional outputs in English in the Indian literary tradition. The Indian English novel and Indian novelists occupy a place of prominence in the global literary scene as evidenced by their frequent appearance in the Booker and Common Wealth shortlists, and by their extensive reviews by reputed literary institutions including the Times Literary Supplement and New York Review of Books. Names like Rushdie, Seth and Roy have made it to World Literature syllabi, while those like Desai and Ghosh enjoy access to global publishing houses. The recognition of such iconic writers on international platforms also facilitates the less-established novelists to benefit from the publishing industry for English-language literary works in India. For instance, Penguin India publishes a sizeable number of original English novels annually. However, the genre is not without its challenges. One of the major contentions is that the volume of titles published in the English language is largely disproportionate to the segment of Indian population that can effectively communicate in and comprehend the language (Gopal 1).

Indian literature in English is often critiqued on the ground that the English language caters to a largely metropolitan class of the ruling elite. However, literature is essentially an inclusive space which cannot be reduced to a homogenous category. Also, all writers irrespective of their language of expression may in a way be seen to hail from a privileged segment of the society with access to education (Mehrotra 20). Even when receiving worldwide acceptance, the Indian writers in English vis a vis their *bhasha* counterparts are often labelled as "inauthentic" and "overrated" (Shakil

213). However, irrespective of the language they write in and the region they hail from, authors in India may be grouped together based on certain common influences. The All-India Progressive Writers movement founded in 1930s that bridged together politically aligned writers is an instance of one such literary community. Educational access, social class and privilege may be seen as a shared context (Gopal 4). Aijaz Ahmad, albeit reluctantly, concedes that English needs to be treated as one of the Indian languages for better or for worse (77). Alok Mukherjee recommends studying the growing popularity of English language in Indian literature in the light of alternative hegemonies (71). The middle class aspires to achieve success on international grounds and seeks education that facilitates this dream. English is considered as conducive to such success (44). Though a colonial language, it has been instrumental in fighting global domination. Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru are among those who efficiently used the very language of oppression with remarkable felicity to establish anti-colonial resistance (P. Singh 4). Meenakshi Mukherjee in *Elusive Terrain* (4) and Alok Mukherjee in *This Gift of English* (312) reiterate the empowering features of the English language by noting how some of the vociferous champions of the English language in contemporary times are dalits and not, as conventionally expected, the urban Westernised segment of the society.

The style of writing observable in contemporary Indian English novels is strikingly original. As opposed to an apologetic use of the English language by the nineteenth-century novelists, the postcolonial breed of Indian writers, especially those that emerged after Rushdie's iconic entry in 1980s, use the language with great ease and a sense of proprietary (M. Mukherjee, "Beginnings" 102; Shakil 213). English may be used by a writer to imaginatively mediate one's own uniquely Indian

experience (Belliappa 232). Through centuries of use, the English language has reinvented itself, naturalising to the uniquely Indian sensibilities so much so that it could well be treated as one of the Indian languages with recognisable sonority of Indianness (P. Singh 4).

Literature being a means of self-expression must not be used as a space to limit a writer's creative output on account of the writer's preference for a particular language. Whatever language comes naturally to the author must be encouraged for use (P. Singh 5). Indian English novelists (mostly bi or multi-lingual themselves) are sharply aware of the linguistic fissures involved in the usage of a language that has been bestowed with undue privilege. In the Indian scenario, literacy is an elitist attribute and literacy in English is an even scarcer luxury. This predicament however is less likely to be resolved in the foreseeable future. What can, however, be remarked here is that in their endeavour to read the past and interpret the present, Indian novels are constantly breaking new grounds and vibrantly initiating dialogues across literary spectra (Gopal 187). Women writers from the country also make remarkable contributions to these multitudinous dialogues.

Indian Women Novelists in English

Helene Moglen asserts that it is the novel, more than any other form of literary/artistic expression, that witnesses an extensive exposure and elaborate negotiation of socio-psychological implications of gender difference (4). The novel as a unique genre, with depiction of self-assured female protagonists, facilitates a reimagining of man-woman relationships (Gopal 41). The following is a brief deliberation on Indian women novelists in English. Labelling a writer as a "woman writer" reduces her gamut of life experiences to that of her gender, obliterating the other equally relevant facets of her being. Nonetheless, gender of the writer is

particularly dwelt upon here with a specific intent at hand. While male writers have historically enjoyed fame, female writers have been denied acknowledgement precisely on account of their gender. This is the rationale for exploring the evolution of particularly "women" writers of Indian English fiction here. Fiction produced even in a single language, English, does not constitute a monolithic structure of Indian writing since the vantage points are situated in different parts of the country. With novels churned out in huge numbers in Indian languages as well, the usage *Indian literatures* might come close to an umbrella term of sorts for the branch of writing that includes Indian women's novels in English (Dutta 146).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, with access to education and its attendant social reforms, Indian women soon began to take up writing to communicate their realties (40). Predictably, this trend presented itself in the form of an "extraordinary number" of autobiographical writings and memoirs (Tharu and Lalita 160). With English being a language sanctioned for formal purposes i.e. for affairs outside home, women were often educated in their mother tongue. Also, domestic rather than larger historical and political concerns was the focal point for English writings by women. These two significant factors, among others, colluded in bringing the number of literary excursions in English by Indian women writers in nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to a bare minimum. If produced at all, they were mostly in the form of short stories, sketches or essays rather than novels. Many of these narratives were ethnographic accounts – Cornelia Sorabji's works, for instance. Pandita Ramabai, Rokeya Sakhaway Hossain, Toru Dutt (more popular as a poet) are some names worth mentioning in this regard (Gopal 40).

The only Indian woman writer to have written more than one novel in English in the nineteenth-century is Krupabai Satthianadhan. Her novels *Kamala, A Story of*

Hindu Life (1894) and *Saguna, A Story of Native Christian Life* (posthumous publication in 1895) were reprinted only in 1998 – one of the reasons for her texts to remain obscure to scholars and common readers alike. The themes of gender, caste and cultural identity – hot topics of contemporary debate – were deftly handled by Sathianadhan as early as the nineteenth-century. Both her narratives deliberate on the plight of women who protest against confinement to domesticity – a concern that resonates even in the writings of the twenty-first century (M. Mukherjee, “Beginnings” 100-01). These novels serve more than just archival interests, and deserve praise for the artful handling of the subject matter and the genuine evocation of textual pleasure. Sathianadhan’s works may be studied as precursors to literary expressions of feminist and cultural concerns in Indian English fiction produced by women writers (102).

It is in the years encompassing the period from 1950 to 1975, time span designated by Jha as third phase in the evolution of Indian English fiction, that some of the finest fictional works by Indian women novelists in English began to take form. Names like Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai stand out during this period (Jha 38). These writers, celebrated for their remarkably original literary expression, could well be considered responsible for initiating a steady outpouring of many such strikingly original fictional works by Indian women in the years to come. The figure of a modern Indian woman caught between the restraint of the limiting past and the possibilities of a potentially limitless future frequents the narrative spaces designed by Sahgal and Desai – a trend also furthered by another prominent writer Shashi Deshpande in the ensuing decades (Dutta 150). An aesthetic of everyday may be discerned in fiction of writers like Desai, who offer fresh insights in the domain of domesticity (146). Her novels are often characterised as

Chekhovian. Though subaltern figures are reduced to mere presences in Desai's narratives, elite women with English education are skilfully depicted with a remarkable sense of realism (Gopal 152). The subject of women's desire that found expression in Markandeya's narratives soon became a minor presence in novels that followed until a revival of this topic was initiated by writers like Anita Nair and Githa Hariharan especially in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Dutta 146).

Period from 1975 to 2000 (fourth phase in the development of Indian English fiction according to Jha) is perhaps the most salient in the cartography of Indian women's fiction in English (Gopal 156). After the 1970s Indian English novel gained global recognition and consequently wider market. Roshan Shahani and Shoba Ghosh see this as one of the reasons that encouraged more women writers to set foot in the literary scene in this period of time (3814). Almost two decades after the iconoclastic *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie took the literary world by storm, publication of *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy in 1997, that brought home the prestigious Booker Prize, ushered in a new era for Indian English novels (Jha 41; Gopal 156). Distinctly different from the grand, epic-like stature of Rushdie-esque world strewn with elements of magic realism, Roy's almost terrifyingly realistic world housed small lives wrestling with troubles that subsequently acquired cosmic significance. This mode of writing could well be seen as a coming-of-age for Indian English family novels that pay unwavering attention to intimate, emotional and sensory experiences, braiding the common place and the exotic together (Gopal 156). The 1990s witnessed a spur of Indian women novelists using English as a medium of expression without its colonial implications (156). Deshpande, one of the most prolific Indian women novelists in English also launched her debut novel during

this phase. Her works hover around lives of women, their silences and their strained relationships. The writer and the protagonist, both responding to situations from a particularly middle class background and the ensuing sense of privilege, are often seen to tussle with a piercing fear of failing (152). Desai, Deshpande, Sahgal and Markandaya among others were committed to communicating private experiences of sexuality, motherhood, and trampling of women under the wheels of patriarchy in a strictly middle class family background (E. Jackson 8).

In the period extending from 2001 till present, the realm of Indian English fiction by women is enriched by the likes of Jhumpa Lahiri, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Manju Kapur. Those like Deshpande continue to create consummate fictional worlds (Jha 41). A wide array of responses towards the imposition of tradition may be mapped from novels born in the twenty-first century. Some of these novels treat familial structure and caste system as central markers of patriarchal social structure (Nagarajan 88). Almost at the dawn of the new century, in the year 1999, Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* bagged the Commonwealth Writers' Award for the Best First Book in Eurasia region. Kapur has produced notable works of fiction since then. Filial tensions especially between daughters and parents (mothers in particular), woman's place in the family, her perception of changing realities in the light of new waves of modernity, and her attempts at crystallising her own identity are some of the major preoccupations of Kapur (Gopal 148). Jaisree Mishra explores the matrix of pain and passion with a keen eye for intricacies in human relationships (P. Singh 7-8). Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Sarojini Naidu, Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Suniti Namjoshi, Manju Kapur, Anita Desai, Anita Nair, Kamla Das, Arundhati Roy, Susan Viswanathan, Ismat Chugtai, Neelam Saran Gaur, Gita Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Anjana

Appachana, Shobha De, Jaishree Misra, Mridula Koshy, Shilpi Somaya Gowda, Mether Pestonji, Sunetra Gupta, Manju Bajaj, Namita Devidayal, Kishwar Desai, Simran Singh, Jahnavi Barua, Padma Viswanathan, Indu Sundaresan, K. R. Usha, Kanishka Gupta are some of the many women from the Indian sub-continent who have made substantial contribution to Indian and international literary corpus in the form of English novels.

With regional fiction gaining strong foothold in the spectrum of Indian English fiction in twenty-first century, writings by women from the northeastern states of India also receive wider appraisals. Easterine Kire – the first novelist from Nagaland to write in English – authors novels that linger on chiefly India's northeast past and present (P. Singh 23). Temsula Ao, Anjum Hasan, Mamng Dai, Mitra Phukan are some of the many prominent women authors who carve out distinct fictional worlds, offering vignettes of life unique to the northeast of the country.

Major Themes in Indian Women's Fiction

Women writers use the literary medium to candidly express female consciousness, to explore their gamut of experiences and sometimes to navigate through challenging terrains of their lives (7). While some of them zoom in on the psyche of women characters, others cut across gender concerns to include broader themes. Kapur, Hariharan, Deshpande belong to the former category wherein a feminine consciousness is explicit. Those like Gaur belong to the latter category of authors who also accommodate larger themes within the ambit of their narratives. With the "personal being political" both these categories of writers are to be acknowledged for their nuanced treatment of subjects (R. Nayar 43-44).

The stories' rootedness in family is a familiar feature in Indian fiction (Dutta 146). Historically, world family fiction refers to narratives that unapologetically

indulge in the vicissitudes of domestic life – fragile familial relations, trials of economic shortcomings, aspirations of social mobility and day-to-day struggle for frugal existence (Chatterjee 156). This domestic fiction is a genre that women writers are particularly proficient in. Male authors like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sarat Chandra Chatterjee have also contributed to this mode of writing. The first Indian to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore himself may be seen to have favoured this form of writing. Some of his fictional worlds, albeit in Bengali, seek to encapsulate the changes that affect the family set-up, the issues that plague the domestic space, the complicated relations of gender that reflect in interpersonal interactions under the influence of colonial modernity. Autobiographical writings and memoirs by women laid the ground work for the rise of women's domestic fiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century which were produced predominantly in Indian languages than in English (Gopal 140). Novels that dwell on homelessness and troubled filial relations (Roy and Kapur's works for instance) continue to create ripples in the following centuries as well. This trend illustrates how the culture of broken home is endemic in current times (G. Das 33). Marital discord, violence against women and children, neglect of elders, honour killing are among the many themes explored in the domestic front (33). Viewing family as a narrow, apolitical space in fiction is a fallacy since the familial structure is intricately bound with the larger social world. Literary expression of an intimate experience uncovers deeply embedded fragments of public life (Chatterjee 1).

Dutta cautiously coins an unfashionable binary, distinguishing between Indian men's fiction and women's fiction in English with the former focusing chiefly on typical postcolonial thematic tropes of nation, migration, hybridity, marginality and the latter exposing the "insignificant," invisible spaces of everyday, quite

disengaged from the “big” issues. This departure from postcolonial concerns is detectable in women’s writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Exceptions to this general tendency of women writers may also however be observed in the likes of Sahgal (150). This persistent lingering on the everyday may be seen as instantiating the feminist interpretation of women’s space as necessarily constricted and revolving around women’s lives and work (151). Literary outputs from Indian English male writers (Dutta cites the example of Ghosh) foregrounds the Nation’s grand historical events relegating the everyday routine to a mere backdrop. Contrarily, Indian women writers (Dutta gives the instance of Deshpande here) treat the Nation as an invisible other to the lives of ordinary characters struggling for sustenance (151). She views the exposition of the everyday – the trivial as opposed to the big picture – in the contemporary Indian women’s writings as a powerful graph of personal and cultural space (158-59). The everyday ceases to be a mere backdrop and actively participates in the shaping of identities (147). Multiple articulations of protest against discourses that erroneously intertwine notions of nationalism and feminism, like coinage of phrases like *Mother India* that arbitrarily engender Nation, may also be discerned in women’s literary productions in postcolonial India (Chatterjee 15).

Given the thematic diversity of English novels written by Indian women writers in the twenty-first century, tracing patterns and groups among them is an arduous task. These narratives originate from regions with distinctly different histories of English education, cultural orientation and conception of modernity. The one common strain noticeable among these works is that they remain predominantly a middle-class phenomenon sprouting from diverse locales and standpoints (Dutta 145). Indian English novels are principally works by and about middle-class women

who have historically been disadvantaged on account of the excessive significance accorded to their role in the middle class home. As exemplified by many of the characters in the novels of Indian women writers this huge responsibility of being placed at the centre of all activities at home becomes a burden. The reality that proclaiming independence would in effect destabilise the entire home, acts as a strong deterrent for a woman to break the shackles, and she tries to create tiny individual spaces to resist against towering structures of tradition (152). This often becomes a talking point in English novels by Indian women writers (154).

Even when patriarchal tension is rendered visible among different classes, the image of the subaltern woman in the fictional space often continues to enable nonthreatening portrayals to the elite. In the postcolonial period, this representation of the subaltern woman and the resultant uneasy relationship between conventional understanding of class and gender, has remained largely unquestioned (Guttman 173). Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, meticulous cartographers of women's writings in the Indian context, delineate how in the course of the nineteenth century the figure of Hindu widow has been replaced by the image of a middle class housewife or the *badhramahila* defined in relation to "crude and licentious behaviour of lower-class women" (8). The conceptualisation of the domain of a middle class family as a site of resistance proved to be one-sided as the space did not permit discussions of grass-root issues like female foeticide, child marriage, sex trafficking and the like which were equally topical. Hence in these narratives, the story of a "modern" woman battling sexism essentially remains punctured with unresolved contradictions and paradoxes (5). In fact, this general tendency of Indian women writers in English, hailing from privileged backgrounds, to address issues pertaining to an equally privileged section of society is identified as one of the primary reasons for absence of

a critical framework to study fiction in English by Indian women writers (Shahani and Ghosh 3815). However, in the decades to come, women writers from the country commendably handle this predicament and actively address these concerns in a more direct and deliberate style (Chatterjee 5). Kavery Nambisan and Rupa Bajwa, select writers, may well be noted in this regard.

Geetha Ramanathan identifies a "global feminist realism" at work in women's writings from around the world, most of which interrogate the substrates of modernity that often exclude particular segments of the society on accounts of class, caste and gender (4). Narratives of the marginalised like women, working class and minorities persistently at war with their immediate unjust environment hold a place of prominence in the study of similar such combats against discrimination and exploitation taking place globally (Chatterjee 163). Consistent attention to minute details of everyday life and sincere attempts at telling stories of helpless individuals caught in spirals of political movements, rush of metropolis and such seemingly mundane incidents offer a piercing critique of modern India (Dutta 150). Women authors in peripheries constitute a small group of privileged, educated, and to an extent, financially independent individuals. From this unique location they represent an equally unique world view in their narratives. Women writers especially those engaged in the espousal of everyday life in a familial set up often dwell more on and even foreground conventionally neglected characters like domestic help, unmarried daughters, women belonging to service-sector and dependent family members in their works. This very choice becomes an act of resistance in that the normative story of "man of the family" is foregone and replaced by compelling narratives of lesser recognised figures in a household. These writings that defy traditional privileging of particular class, social pedigree and gender render new configurations of the domestic

visible (Chatterjee 166). By recounting stories of characters excluded from family space and by extension from the National imagination, the persistent attention paid to domestic life by women writers, may be construed as a strategy to resist dominant discourses on Nation that marginalise women from receiving mainstream attention (15).

Chatterjee laments the neglected state of the body of women's writing which in reality is diverse and rich enough to seal a place for itself in world literature (17). Notwithstanding the argument that undue attention paid to domestic affairs by women writers is responsible for the lack of acknowledgment for women authors, it is to be noted that even the sizeable number of women writers who seek to actively address consequences of social injustice, nationalism, colonialism and such "big" crises in their writings, are pushed to the fringes of academic discourses (4). This persistent situating of women writers in fringes of scholarly discourses points to the fact that women authors essentially function from a peripheral space, a position of contestation (8). A considerable number of works experiment with textual content if not with the textual form. These stories become a valuable resource in the study of India (Dutta 146). These creative productions are of substantive quality and invalidate denigrating criticisms of women's writing as ramblings on domestic themes. These are in fact conscious artists in the contemporary world, weaving emotive prose with remarkable ingenuity (P. Singh 9).

It is unfair to expect women's writings to be feminist and as something of interest to only women. Since the women's movement in the 1970s, new paradigms have taken shape in Indian feminist criticism. Pioneering of women's research centres, forums for raising voice against oppression of women and the introduction of feminist journals have given an impetus to the growth of Indian feminism (Shahani

and Ghosh 3813). Works like *Recasting Women, Women Writing in India* were ground-breaking in their approach, combining the theoretical, the experiential and the historical. Seminal critics and theorists like Kumkum Sangari, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Tharu and Lalita have made substantial contribution to the study of Indian writing. Tharu and Lalita observe that “difference” and latent resistance are essentially noticeable in writings by women because “they articulate and respond to ideologies from complexly constituted and decentred positions within them” (35).

Indian novelists often tend to engage in subversion, a characteristic technique employed in postcolonial fiction, and different discourses are impacted differently by the notion (Singh and Kumar 2-3). Women often seek to undermine the patriarchal order through their writings. Sidhwa explicates the link between colonialism and patriarchy. Colonialism exploited and humiliated men and the men in turn, exploited and humiliated women. So whenever the social fabric of a society is weakened, women suffer the consequences the most. Women become merely a vent for the frustrations of men. And that pattern repeats itself with unjust expectations of subordination from women (48-49). The motive of writing is not to simply invert the hierarchical order but to contest the philosophical assumptions that form the basis of the order. The postmodern emphasis on pluralities discrediting any single standpoint deprives feminists of a common ground to protest. The culture that has turned publishing of women’s writing in English, especially fiction, into a glamorous affair is another challenge to overcome. This culture of commodification has replaced issues with events and reduced persons to personalities. In this process, the disruptive potential of serious fiction is likely to get diluted (Shahani and Ghosh 3814).

Treatment meted out to literary works by women often bears an imprint of the rigorous standards set by any given society for the treatment of women. In the

aftermath of colonialism a fine interlink among culture, nationalism and women is perceivable. When women are invariably identified with Nation and its culture, feminism becomes a force that divorces women from “Indian culture.” Therefore women’s studies in India receive great attention within the discipline of cultural studies (Niranjana 211-12, 214). And by extension, literary outputs by women become pertinent in this domain. Even in a circumscribed position, literary studies have not remained entirely peripheral to women’s studies projects in India. The English language offered access to theoretical tools. Feminism and theory exist in a symbiotic medium. The predominant preoccupations of theory pertaining to questions of language, representation, identity, subjectivity, sexuality, power, knowledge, history are all as much relevant to feminist investigation (Rajan, “English” 70). *The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English* by Malashri Lal provides some valuable insights into gynocriticism.

The very title of Rajan’s work on culture and gender, called *Real and Imagined Women*, brings to attention the problematic of representation. In the book, Rajan refuses to polarise the imagined and the real, discourse and materiality, culture and society, language and the world; and contends that representation mediates between the two terms in each of the above set. This view is neither superstructural (holding aloft “culture”) nor foundationalist (holding aloft “reality”). The existence of “real” is neither denied nor essentialised into a pre-given metaphysical category seeking representation (9). Representation may itself be studied as a domain with significant political effects (Rose 12). This question of representation is vital especially for women’s studies (Rajan, “English” 68).

Primary Sources: Select Writers

Some representations garner more academic and commercial attention than some others. The present study deliberately includes literary representations of writers like Bajwa and Nambisan who do not enjoy as much fanfare as authors like Roy, Desai, Deshpande, Nair and other such prominent figures whose novels generally become the focus of researches in Indian Women's fiction in English. This selection is a conscious choice. Bajwa and Nambisan's narratives possess remarkable literary merit and deserve acknowledgement.

Rupa Bajwa

Rupa Bajwa is an Indian writer who hails from Amritsar, Punjab. She has to her credit two novels both of which have been critically acclaimed. She began writing her first novel *The Sari Shop* at the age of twenty-two. Five years later, in 2004, when the narrative was published, it firmly cemented her position in the line of globally appreciated storytellers from India. Her debut novel *Sari* won her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and XXIV Grinzane Cavour Prize for the best first novel in the year 2005. The work also fetched her India's Sahitya Akademi Award (English) in the year 2006. It was long-listed for the *Orange Prize* in 2004. Her second novel *Tell Me a Story* (2013) received flattering reviews for the sensitive portrayal of a lower middle class heroine and her relentless grappling with the society (Tharakan, Sampath).

Bajwa's ability to get under the skin of her characters and document their ordinary lives in unpretentious prose has won her works favourable responses from across the literary community. She writes of a life that she observed in close quarters in the small town of Amritsar. She has also spent a few years of her life in Calcutta and Bangalore. These experiences texture her fictional outpourings. She draws a

quaint picture of urban Indian small towns peopled by middle class families with their idiosyncrasies, petty rivalries and their everyday lives of ennui. This has occasioned her works to be reviewed as earnest chronicles of life in suburban India (Hore, M. Jackson, Austa). Bajwa’s novels tell heart-warming tales of pedestrian protagonists like a salesman and a young girl working at a small-time beauty parlour in Amritsar. These figures and their stories are familiar yet ironically not so familiar in the world of fiction. Bajwa’s darker preoccupations in her narratives hovering around the futility of fighting against an unjust society also pave way for substantial dialogue in that direction (Hussein, Mishan). Subtle ironies and subdued humour characterise her style of story-telling. She generously borrows words from the Hindi language and incorporates lyrics of celebrated Bollywood songs in the narratives. This stylistic choice also contributes to the genuineness and richness of her literary portrayal.

Kavery Nambisan

Kavery Nambisan is a novelist born in the Coorg district of Karnataka, India. An author of seven novels she is also a medical practitioner. With robust medical training from India and England, Nambisan has had an active professional career as a surgeon. Her medical practice bears a strong impression in her fiction. Nambisan’s early literary productions were for women’s and children’s magazines. She has also authored notable children’s books. She started writing under her first married name Kavery Bhatt. Under this name she published her first novel *The Truth (almost) About Bharat* in 1991 which went out of print and was later re-released. Her other works of fiction include: *The Scent of Pepper* (1996), *Mango-Coloured Fish* (1998), *On Wings of Butterflies* (2002), *The Hills of Angheri* (2005), *The Story That Must Not Be Told* (2010) and *A Town Like Ours* (2014). *The Story That Must Not Be Told* was

shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature in 2012 and the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2008.

Serving the rural population in India's lesser known towns spread across the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Maharashtra, Nambisan largely interacted with patients belonging to financially disadvantaged communities. During her stint with the Tata plantations, she served the migrant population who laboured in the tea estates to make a living. Her honest relationship with the patients gave her unique insights into the world of deprivation that the downtrodden endured on a daily basis. These experiences invariably colour her gripping narratives. Bizarre real life surgical cases encountered by the author find fictional representation in her *Hills.* The disarming question of how the economically backward segments of the society view the obvious prosperity of their employers was triggered during Nambisan's time of serving the slums of Maharashtra. This question becomes a major plot point in *Story.* Nambisan vociferously champions the cause of the rural folk and has served as one of governing council members in Association of Rural Surgeons of India. Rural landscapes encroached upon by humankind's mindless rush for materialistic progress and the consequent repercussions of such environmental degradation become predominant concerns for Nambisan in *Town*. These gleanings on Nambisan from various interviews (like "Writing with the Scalpel," "The Doctor is in the House") and articles on the author from media like *The Hindu, The Times of India* (by Choudhury, Bagchi) demonstrate how her contributions to healthcare and literature are both motivated by her social consciousness and her genuine interest in meaningfully engaging with the society. Her narratives are acerbic portrayals of slices of day-to-day living. References to medical conditions, illnesses afflicting the body and the mind, anatomical characteristics of human bodies – an unmistakable

influence of Nambisan's own career as a surgeon – are all seamlessly integrated into the stories. She has a commendable felicity with words and a compelling eye for detail. Representation of remarkably real human emotions through taut prose and precise descriptions set her narratives apart.

Both Bajwa and Nambisan are conscientious literary artists in that they do not fret to raise their voice against social ills and perils through non-fictional modes of writing as well. Nambisan boldly critiques aspects of Indian healthcare system that are obsolete. For instance in a piece published in *The Hindu* titled "Saving lives . . . at what cost?" she exhorts the authorities to be mindful of ground realities in a rural set-up while formulating impractical regulations for establishing authorised blood banks. Her most recent work of non-fiction, a memoir titled *A Luxury Called Health* (2021), while earnestly depicting her own interactions with patients in the past, also doubles up as a sharp social commentary by candidly exposing some abhorrable medical practices in India. Similarly, in the controversial "Dark Things Do Happen in Gurdwaras?" published in *The TelegraphIndia* Bajwa fearlessly critiques the hypocrisy of Sikh clergymen and obstinacy of a segment of believers who refuse to acknowledge sexual crimes committed by priests in Gurdwaras. This candid approach is discernible in the honest story-telling style of both Bajwa and Nambisan in their works of fiction.

Novels by Bajwa

Bajwa's first fictional output *Sari* is a conglomerate of characters from different social backgrounds. Ramchand acts as a link, connecting these lives together. He leads a humble life by working in a sari shop in the crammed streets of Amritsar. Sevak Sari House bustles with customers and buyers from different rungs of the social ladder. With the help of third-person narration, Bajwa effectively

foregrounds the character of Ramchand, one of the six sales assistants at Sevak Sari House. He meets a fairly large number of women who visit the shop for sari-purchase. With limited knowledge on their family background, he interprets their words and actions, forming an opinion about each one of them. Through his thoughts, the readers are also acquainted with his fellow sales assistants and their general attitude towards life. From his position of a worker, he finds his life to be meaningless drudgery. He sets out to ape the sophisticated ways and manners of the upper class that often purchases saris from the shop. He draws inspiration from Rina Kapoor, one of the shop's elite customers and resolves to learn the English language. His story is intermingled with the stories of those around him. Rina chooses Ramchand as a model for her first novel and patronises him. Soon Ramchand is seen to be disillusioned by the unjustness of the world and he gives up his attempts at learning English. Readers are taken through each character's life through his eyes. While at the outset he appears to be the protagonist of the novel, as the story progresses, Kamla and her fate assume greater significance. The narrative becomes the story of one woman's fight against her deplorable living conditions, and the world's response to it. Kamla, a lower class penniless woman, savagely fights rape by policemen and *Sari* documents her struggle in disturbingly realistic details. Ramchand's confrontation with the brutalities of the real world through his encounter with his colleague's wife Kamla, puts the theme of widely prevalent gender discriminatory practices into sharp focus. Overtly, the narrative brings class struggle and gender discrimination to the fore with the familiar unbalanced equation of power that favours the upper class and the male gender. However, on closer examination such neatly defined power roles dissolve. The plot, settings, characterisation and themes of the narrative co-create a complicated maze of power relations.

Tell Me is primarily the story of Rani, a ninth-class drop-out, who works at Eve's Beauty Parlour in Amritsar. She and her brother Mahesh, are the only earning members of the family that comprises of their father Dheeraj, Mahesh's wife Neelam and their son little Bittu. The family struggles to make ends meet. Mahesh is a reluctant worker at a factory, with his dream of being an electrician shelved due to economic hardships. Dheeraj, as a weak, aging man is sharply reminded of being useless to the family by Neelam who manages the household. Bittu and her bua (aunt) Rani share a close bond. The title draws from Bittu's occasional appeals to her for telling him a story. One fateful day their house floods up with water due to clogged drainage and the repairing costs a whopping sum of rupees 18,500. Financial troubles escalate and Dheeraj's revelation that he has lent all his savings to his friend's son results in ugly words of accusation against him from Mahesh and Neelam. The family remains divided – with Mahesh and Neelam assuming the status of victim, painting Rani and Dheeraj as selfish and thoughtless. The relationship among the members get strained beyond repair. Soon Dheeraj breathes his last. Recognising that her own brother and sister-in-law treat her as a headstrong girl exerting a bad influence on her beloved Bittu, Rani leaves Amritsar for Delhi. She works as domestic help for Sadhna, a stalled novelist who struggles to produce a decent work after being celebrated for her remarkable first novel. As Rani tries to adapt to the changed living conditions, the extravagance and pretence of Delhi's elite social groups become an eye-opener for the small-town girl. She is unable to come to terms with the way money is wastefully spent on apparently meaningless parties to impress unknown people. Sadhna's frustration with writer's block and Rani's resentment of her employer's worthless spending, precipitate into a bitter spat between the two. One misfortune after another strikes. While in Delhi, Rani comes to

know of Mahesh's death by suicide. She is not allowed to bid a final goodbye to her brother and is blamed by Neelam for causing this tragedy. Her world comes crumbling down. However, a few days later she picks herself up, joins a beauty parlour in Delhi and returns to the familiar routine of attending to her customers, as if untouched by the troubles of the world. On first impression a simplistic bracketing of characters into powerful and powerless categories may be possible which, on closer look, disintegrates into a more complex pattern of power relations.

Novels by Nambisan

Nambisan's debut novel *Truth* chronicles the life of a young nineteen-year-old medical student Bharat who embarks on a long journey of self-discovery. Idealistic in his views, Bharat gets into trouble while protesting at the college mess. This, and intense feelings of dejection caused by unrequited love, force him to leave the campus. He is confounded by the unjustness of the world as he traverses the lengths and breadths of the country. The narrative ties together various episodes that punctuate Bharat's trip across India and draws attention to his markedly changed approach towards life at the end of the journey.

Scent is a saga of the fierce Kaleyanda family living in Kodagu (Coorg) of South India during British Raj. While recording the story of multiple generations of the family, the narrative ultimately dwells on the remarkable growth and resilience of Nanji, first introduced to the readers as a seventeen-year-old bride of Baleyanna. The land of Coorg and the uniquely distinct lives of its inhabitants, the martial race of Kodavas, are depicted in exceptional detail.

Mango-Coloured Fish traces the evolution of the character Shari who finds herself stifled by her domineering mother. Being forced by the family to accept a marriage proposal from an affluent man, Shari decides to pay a short visit to her

brother in Vrindaban before her wedding. Some bitter truths she discovers during her stay away from home, the people she encounters during the journey, and the realisations that ultimately dawn upon her prove to be liberating. Shari boldly calls off the wedding and takes up a job of her choice.

On Wings straddles together stories of women characters who hail from different backgrounds. Evita, as a girl in her early twenties in Panjim and a daughter of a sex worker, decides to marshal support for an organisation that is exclusively dedicated to champion the cause of women. A widow, a spinster, wife of a powerful politician, wife of a cheating husband, a child sex-abuse survivor are among the many women who join forces with Evita. Together they conduct a world convention, enumerating their demands for an equal and exploitation-free world for women, and sign a treaty towards the same.

Hills narrates the ordeals of Nalli, a young girl who is set on her mission to become a medical practitioner, much against the wishes of her family and society. She boldly leaves her home in the hills of Angheri to Madras and then to London in order to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor. However, on return, she finds herself deeply disillusioned, only to be further motivated to serve the rural folk by setting up her practice in a village. Relationship of the characters with one another and with the multiple worlds they populate, along with the intricacies involved in navigating through these worlds, become Nambisan's sustaining interests in these novels. Therefore, these narratives do open up spaces for relations of power to manifest themselves. Notably, these relations largely inform and appear much more pronounced in the fictional worlds conjured up by Nambisan in *Story* and *Town*.

Alternating between first and third person modes of narration, *Story* primarily deals with two major stories: the story of Simon Jesukumar, a widower in his early

seventies living in the posh Vaibhav Apartments in the Indian metropolitan city of Chennai; and the story of Sitara, a slum that neighbours the apartment complex. Simon lives along with his cat in flat 3C, wishing to lead a meaningful life. His now deceased wife Harini is shown to be a dominating woman whom Simon loved dearly, and wished desperately to make an impression upon. Simon befriends the errand boy Velu from Sitara and through him, gets to know more about the slum and its dwellers. From buying air-cooler for the local school at the slum to fighting in vain against the resolution of the Apartment Owners Association to force the slum-dwellers to relocate, Simon finds himself enmeshed in several systems of power. In the prologue to the novel, readers are introduced to Simon. At the outset as he prepares to narrate the story of Sitara, he confesses, "The thing is, after a certain age you start to live two lives. The cranked-up, ever-lengthening memory life, and the present-day existence. You travel between two worlds – five minutes here, ten minutes there sort of thing – all the time. Inevitably, if you decide to tell stories, the skeins get interlinked" (Nambisan 4). This interlinking of the past and the present can be traced throughout the narrative. Also, there are interlinings of other kinds. The stories interweave wherein the lives of the residents of Vaibhav apartments and the lives of those in Sitara are seen to be influencing one another. The slum-dwellers view Simon with mistrust while Simon desperately attempts to appear charitable. He gallantly tries to fight the evacuation of the slum only to be miserably failing to make an impact. The novel ends with Simon dejected by his failure and those displaced from Sitara making do with available resources. Conventional analyses would focus on the rich/poor divide glaringly evident in the narrative, by anchoring the study on the power of money. The conventional "good poor" and "bad rich" notions are subjected to scrutiny. In a typical categorisation of haves/have-nots, the first group in

the binary set is generally considered to be capable of influencing the other with a capacity to dominate. And the second group, the underprivileged, is dismissed as incapacitated and devoid of power. Deeper reading of *Story* however calls for a rethinking of this stereotypical interpretation.

Rajakumari, a retired sex worker in her forties, becomes the eyes and ears of the fictional town of Pingakshipura – the place of action of the novel *Town*. Pingakshi, a blue eyed Goddess, is the presiding deity of the temple located in the town. Children here are born with white hair and the river is perpetually black in colour. The pesticide factory owned by Sugandha Enterprises pollutes the water bodies with chemicals to the extent of causing such permanent colour changes. Apart from these disturbing present realities of the town, the past lives of many of the townspeople are also unsettling. Kumari recounts her own torturous personal story while also narrating the lives of the townspeople. The novel dwells on the stories of Saroja and Sampathu, Manohar and Kripa, Lectric Mamu, Sugandha boss and a few others who become Kumari's subjects of interest. Kumari is resented as a child and admonished early in life for being attractive. Offended by her father who calls her a *chudayil* (harlot) she leaves her home only to be beguiled and pushed into flesh trade. Saroja, a child bride along with her little son Gundumani, escapes her in-laws' place after killing her man-child husband. Sampathu flees his home with his sister's infant daughter Rukma, saving the baby from being killed by her own father for being born a girl. Saroja and Sampathu meet at Pingakshipura and start a fresh life together, or at least make an attempt to. The couple and children live in a humble taxi which also doubles up as a tea shop during the day. Saroja yearns to have a roof over their head and strays away from being loyal to her husband in order to make money for their home. This becomes a turning point in the novel. Kripa, a painter and Manohar, an

English professor – a childless couple – appear to be progressive in their views of the world. However, behind their calm veneer, discontentment simmers. Manohar, insecure of his wife's creative prowess and with a manic desire to have children, goes on to kidnap others' children – one of whom happens to be Rukma. Lectric Mamu (the local electrician), who charms every woman and gets her to act according to his whims, is brutally turned down by Saroja, much to his chagrin. Mamu sets himself on revenge. These multiple lives intertwine and come distinctly alive through first person narration from Rajakumari's point of view. The study reimagines these multiple relations of power wherein the characters do not neatly fit into two groups of those in absolute power and those deprived of power.

Relevance of the Selection

Balarama Gupta laments the general tendency of the critics to focus on the so-called classics or near-classics and popular works that commercially do well to the extent of neglecting scores of substantial Indian English literary works which are not readily available (263). This is one of the issues the study seeks to address. In an article from *Lokaratna*, journal of the Folklore Foundation, India, *Sari* is recognised as one of the novels representative of the maturity achieved by the constantly evolving genre of Indian English narratives in the postmodern scenario (Mohanty 156). Both Bajwa and Nambisan depict "the 'other' India with authenticity and conviction" (V. Kumar 328).

Subaltern protagonists like Ramchand in *Sari*, Rani in *Tell Me* and Rajakumari in *Town* "occupy the margins of English-language fiction in South Asia, in that they have generally not been seen to constitute worthy literary subjects" (Khanna 104). Khanna further observes how Ramchand is like Bakha of Anand's *Untouchable*. These central characters are normally obscured by genteel middle class

or upper class protagonists of writers like Desai and Rushdie. Novels like *The White Tiger* by Adiga have placed the story in the hands of characters who conventionally existed only in the margins of fiction – shop assistants, minor traders, nurses, servants etc. Instead of resorting to plot-twists by getting an upper-class protagonist to depict the underbelly and not-so-pleasant aspects of urban dwelling, Khanna commends how *Sari* portrays urban settings, lives and minds through the eyes of a humble protagonist, the kinds of which "we have had little occasion to meet in literature" (117). This observation reiterates the significance of the current investigation. It may be noted how in *Town,* the very choice of a retired sex worker as the omniscient narrator of the novel undermines typical literary conventions. The fact that she relates the stories by residing in a small room adjoining the temple of the town, strikes at the base of religion's dominating role in the socio-cultural and sexual lives of people. While conceding to the fact that writers need not always moralise, Nambisan acknowledges the responsibility writers shoulder when they engage with the written word – a powerful medium. Through the process of writing authors find their voice, while also carving out space for unheard voices to find themselves. She goes so far as to pose the question who would speak for the voiceless if the writers didn't ("New Issues" 42).

The novels have been bundled together for the study because of strands of similarity that may be unravelled in them. The select works have not yet been studied in tandem and this thesis would be the first to make an attempt in that direction. The works bring the class divisions of the Indian society into sharp focus. On a superficial level, the plots seem to be anchored on a simplistic powerless poor/powerful rich stereotype. However, a closer scrutiny dismantles this binary and paves way for more complicated relations of power among members belonging to different strata of the

society. The question of gender is also prominent in the stories. Strains of power intersect with forces of class and gender in these fictional worlds. While the brutal rape of Kamla determines the course of the second half of the narrative in the case of *Sari*, the gang rape of a white woman who visits the slum to engage in charity in *Story* determines the course of life for the character Baqua – a major face of power in the slum. In *Town*, given that Rajakumari makes a living out of sex work, her life is largely determined by her gendered subjectivity. Though the gender of the writer ideally does not figure in the study, commonly hailed criticism against women writers that they restrict themselves to looking at life from predominantly female view point, needs to be addressed here. This cliché is busted by both the writers. For instance, protagonists in Bajwa's *Sari* and Nambisan's *Story* are both men, and the readers learn the story through their perspective. Ramchand, a thirtysomething man in *Sari* and Simon Jesukumar, a seventysomething man in *Story* are not macho men nor heroes ready to save the world. They are remarkably ordinary beings living ordinary lives battling extra-ordinary circumstances. Rani, a teenager in the beginning of the novel *Tell Me* growing into a twentysomething woman towards the end and Rajakumari, a fortysomething wise woman with strong opinions in the novel *Town* are not stereotypical damsels in distress waiting to be rescued. Instead they demonstrate exceptional strength by refusing to cower under duress.

As narratives written and set in twenty-first century, the novels sketch contemporary Indian scenarios and raise relevant questions pertaining to the exercise of power in the socio-economic-political axes. The select narratives leave the reader unsettled at the end with no clear resolution of the power conundrum. In *Sari*, the disillusioned employee returns to work under the tyrannical manager in Sevak Sari House. In *Tell Me*, after suffering mishaps after mishaps due to financial constraints

Rani gets no respite and simply persists in her monotonous job at the beauty parlour. In *Story*, notwithstanding any opposition, the slum dwellers are evacuated mercilessly to another location in the outskirts of Chennai wherein the characters are seen to be acclimatising to the new locality. In *Town*, the missing child Rukma remains untraceable till the very end and the parents along with the readers are left groping in the dark. This very technique of denying a cinematic "happily ever after" closure could be seen as a reflection of the stark realities of life.

The select novels narrate poignant human stories and introduce readers to "new, imaginative, innovative ways of being in the world" (Khanna 118). However, the works do not possess the advantage of being labelled best-sellers nor classics. This does not diminish the value of these fictional outputs. Though nominated for and awarded with prestigious National/International honours, these novels remain largely unexplored by the Indian academia. This is one of the major driving forces behind the selection of the narratives. The writers and their works merit consideration and deliberation.

Review of Literature

The fictional works have received notable attention from scholars and critics, and have been viewed through distinct analytical prisms. The material born out of such researches is extensively reviewed to identify common lines of interpretation and patterns of examination.

On Bajwa

Between Bajwa's two novels, it is *Sari* more than *Tell Me* that has created substantial ripples in the academic world and therefore researches on the writer predominantly use the former narrative as primary frame of reference. Studies undertaken on Bajwa's fiction may be pooled together based on their major thematic

focus and broadly categorised into two: those that zoom in on the individual/s and those that zoom out into the location where the individual/s live or act from. The characters' existence in the fringes of the social structure draws attention to both the characters' mental space as well the geographical space from which they operate.

In the zone of mental space, the tortured psyche of the protagonist Ramchand and the traumatised self of Kamla, both victimised by the society and forced to bear witness to injustices, take precedence. The psyche proves resourceful in the analysis of the various ways in which marginalisation affects an individual. Striking symbols and ingenious narrative strategies employed by Bajwa facilitate a deeper understanding of the attitude of characters belonging to the two contrasting worlds of the rich and the poor (Pathak). Engaging the mental scape are also questions of individuality and identity that figure prominently in the narratives. The characters are often plagued by a lack of sense of belonging. They grapple with the question of identity due to their inability to fit into watertight categories prescribed by the society (Krishna, Kaur, Sharma). This is reflective of "a universal malaise" (Krishna 276). In *Sari* and *Tell Me*, mistreatment meted out to the characters on account of various socially defined qualifiers like class, gender, race result in an individual's problematic relationship with one's own self. Invisible social forces of systemic victimisation percolate into their minds. *Sari* has spurred analyses of social norms that normalise victimisation by endorsing violence against those the society deems inferior on account of gender or class (Locatelli). The simple act of buying saris is conditioned by social norms with clear class distinctions just like societal life. The character of Sachdeva who teaches the subject of postcolonialism but unapologetically refuses to stand by the battered underprivileged woman is just one of many examples of how victimisation is normalised in minds of individuals

enjoying social privilege. The works may be seen as a significant tool in the politics of reparation drawing attention to issues that otherwise go unnoticed in the garb of "the norm."

Bajwa's novels steer clear of preaching and adopt a diagnostic tone while dealing with the ill-effects of social injustice and unchallenged privilege. In the interview for *The Tribune,* "I write to preserve my sanity," Bajwa remarks that her intention is not to have Kamla and Ramchand take up cudgels against the system and emerge victorious at the end. Changing a bit of the world or even changing one's own life is a task not easy to accomplish. The goal is to simply understand the characters' lives and circumstances. In a similar vein, Bajwa goes on to explain how Kamla never consciously thinks about the concept of patriarchy, a word that perhaps doesn't even exist in her language. For Bajwa, Kamla is still a brave woman who lived in the best way she knew how, and was broken down when things went beyond control. *Sari* and *Tell Me* delineate raw, human stories that resonate with lives of scores of individuals across the globe.

Both elite and underprivileged women characters populate her narratives. Trials and tribulations faced by a single woman in Indian scenario are touched upon in *Tell Me* (U. Sen). In *Sari* those like Rina Kapoor born into an affluent family may be seen as representative of a new woman, who holds aloft values of education and career over traditional gender roles. Women like Mrs Sandhu and Mrs Bhandari who belong to an older generation and hail from elite background refuse to use their empowered status to help underprivileged young women. On one hand, they exude a sense of sophistication and an urbane outlook by engaging in elaborate shopping and interacting with fellow women. On the other this urbane sensibility simply turns out to be a façade and the women in question turn out to be merely a gossiping bunch

unwilling to render a helping hand to fellow suffering women. Such glaring contradictions and disparities perceivable in the *Sari* have prompted a closer study of women characters' outlook on life and the inherently unjust nature of a society that births such skewed mentalities (Khanna, Mahajan, S. Sebastian). Apart from portraying disturbingly shallow women from well-to-do households, *Sari* also epitomises a deprived Indian woman's trauma (Isa). Poverty since childhood, an abusive husband, a miscarriage, social censure and her consequent resort to alcoholism – all these traumatise Kamla to the extent that she loses her life. Course of events that eventually lead up to her tragic fate expose the hypocrisy of the so-called liberated women who identify themselves as upper class on account of their economical or educational assets. Social perils of internalisation of patriarchy and class discrimination by the very gender and class adversely affected by these systems of domination become evident.

The relevance of the physical space from which characters function and its inevitable influence on the mental space of individuals cannot be overemphasised. The place of action – from particular locales of a sari shop and a beauty parlour, the immediate society that witnesses the eventful life of the characters to the more general city of Amritsar and the larger canvas of the Nation State – becomes intertwined with the fate of the characters.

The world populated by the characters in the stories functions almost as a microcosm of the Indian society. The various scenes of haggling, tropes of broken marriage, domestic violence, strikingly familiar characters, the system of dowry perpetuated in the guise of gift-giving among the elite, images of Indian saris, an almost servile admiration for the English language are all sights and sounds of a typical Indian society in a small town (Bhardwaj). Discrimination on the grounds of

class and the ensuing conflicts appear to be Bajwa's central preoccupation in both her novels. *Sari* and *Tell Me* functioning as scathing commentaries on a class-based society have been subjected to research in precisely those lines (Sharrad, Daftuar). The hierarchical order put in place by social class stratification reflects in spatial differentiation as well, wherein the affluent and the downtrodden live in clearly demarcated spaces, prompting perspectives interlinking class and space (Locatelli). *Tell Me* maps frustrations of individuals caught in a volley of social biases ingrained in a particular space. Apart from delving into the middle class protagonist Rani's agonised mind, the work also dwells on the troubled psyche of the financially well-to-do novelist Sadhna, who is desperate to find a voice of her own in a literary world marked by sham and shallowness. She is an affluent woman helplessly caught in a charade of social pretences. Such intersections between class and gender, privilege and marginality along with its myriad societal implications observable in both of Bajwa's narratives, have initiated discussions on class and/or gender axes, drawing from the tenets of Marxism and feminism (Toor, R. Kumar, Heer, Navita, Black, Daftuar).

Sari, anchored in the city of Amritsar, may be placed alongside such other writings like *Animal's People* by Indra Sinha and *Our Lady of Alice Bhatti* by Mohammed Hanif that map out the experience of having a marginal existence in South Asian cities like Bhopal and Karachi respectively. In *Sari* the city of Amritsar comes to life and seethes with impotent rage and disquietude, almost reflecting the temperament of the disillusioned protagonist (Khanna 104). This has attracted insightful evaluations that view urban small towns in Bajwa's novels as significant social spaces with potential for research (Khanna). Creation of characters who are situated in the fringes of the Nation-State with regard to the nation's politics,

economics, culture and geography warrants an interpretation of the narrative as a nationalist novel (Guttman). In *Sari* and *Tell Me,* transition from the rural to the urban landscape along with a passage into the bourgeois private sphere obstruct communication among the characters. The showing and selling of saris, an activity that Ramchand does routinely, becomes unfamiliar to him in the Kapoor household after he overhears Tina's contempt for the sari seller. Ramchand confining himself to his room for days together may be construed as a sign of his disillusionment with the Nation-State that seeks to dominate. The confinement could also be interpreted as Ramchand's coming to terms with diversity of a Nation through negotiation of public-private spaces.

On Nambisan

Nambisan's novels weave fictional worlds that are remarkably real thereby intensifying their potential for expounding socially relevant themes. From a close scrutiny of researches taken up on Nambisan's narratives so far, patterns emerge and two broad topics may be identified based on the sustaining interests of these studies – self and society. The self-society dichotomy has been conceived here only for ease of understanding and hence a sharp demarcation between the two without overlaps is not envisioned. Studies on self linger on the psyche and personal space of an individual. Studies on all other spaces that accommodate an individual are brought within the ambit of society. This includes first of all the unit of family followed by the immediate society which characters are part of. Analyses on the particular region that functions as locale of action, the larger nation that the place is constituent of, and the significance of this space in the much larger global frame of South Asian representations are also reviewed under the label of society.

Nambisan's penetrating gaze into a character's psyche facilitates a deeper understanding of how "selves" are constituted in a society which by itself is governed by various norms and notions. Her protagonists are an assorted lot – girls (*Mango-Coloured Fish*, *On Wings*), boys (*Truth*), women (*Town*), men (*Story*) – belonging to various age groups and different strata of the society.

The question of identity looms large in Nambisan's novels. The characters and their stories become a means to unearth often ignored aspects of self-construction, social existence and relationships forged between the self and the society. In novels like *Hills, Mango-Coloured Fish* and *On Wings* women's struggle to explore their own self, and their everyday battles to realise ambitions and dreams in a society deeply entrenched in patriarchy are depicted with commendable precision. Cutting across patriarchal webs of domination, women attempt to discover their identity in personal, professional, social and cultural realms, thus eliciting interpretations predicated on the notion of identity explored by the author (Seshu, Padmavathy, Kaliswari). Gender roles conceived by Nambisan act as a strong social comment on such roles thrust upon individuals by the societal structure. The gender component exerts a considerable influence on an individual's perception of oneself and the narratives seek to sensitise a reader in this direction. Women characters like Shari in *Mango Coloured Fish,* Nalli in *Hills,* Nanji in *Scent* and Evita in *On Wings* are confronted with the dilemma of following traditions on one hand and adopting a progressive stance on the other, with regard to individual freedom. The novels document the characters' resolution of this dilemma, by depicting women's evolution into independent and assertive selves at the end of the struggle (Gayathri, Latha, Rajakumar).

Metaphors like long distance journeys are employed by the writer to suggest journeys into inner reaches of the characters' minds. Shari's travels in *Mango-Coloured Fish* is one such instance. At the end of her travels she also ends her mental conflict of whether or not to yield to familial pressures of marrying a stranger. She chooses to call off her impending nuptials. She prioritises her self and prefers independence to everything else. Similarly, Bharat sets out on a road trip in *Truth* that ultimately results in self-discovery. The narratives predominantly map characters' journey towards self-actualisation, prompting analyses by the likes of Sharada, Basha, Murugesan and Nanmozhi. In an interview by S. Jagadeswari and Prasanna Sree, to the question why women more than men seem to have a renewed attitude towards life at the end of her novels, Nambisan explains how Simon in *Story* also learns his lessons as he attempts to help those in Sitara (39). She believes that a marked change in attitude, a re-discovery of one's own self, is possible irrespective of gender. Being a surgeon, Nambisan's scholarship in medical sciences informs her works of fiction and consequently the characters drawn are strikingly real and relatable. This opens doors to new possibilities ensuing from integrating medicine, health and literature in a single frame (Hussain). For instance, mental ailments such as depression receive an honest treatment in the hands of Nambisan in *Scent*, inviting a close comparison with Plath's deft handling of the same subject (Khatun).

Apart from characters' preoccupations with their own selves, their interactions with each other in the context of family, society, a particular region and in the larger national/global frameworks offer fodder for research. *Scent* by delineating the story of Kaleyanda clan – a story sprawling over three generations of family members – may be treated as a species of family fiction. It delves deep into relationship dynamics among individuals in a familial institution (Gopal).

Nambisan has her ear to the ground while portraying lives and livelihoods of characters belonging to different cross-sectional segments of the society. Serving as a surgeon has enabled her to get a close-up look at ailments of both physical and social bodies. These experiences reflect in her literary imaginations. Nambisan's novels like *Story* and *Town* act as a powerful indictment of a society that thrives on class discrimination, gender bias and hypocrisy. Fictional town of Pingakshipura conjured up by Nambisan in *Town* is irrevocably polluted by human intervention and is populated by urban outcasts like Rajakumari, a retired sex worker. This invites a reading of these urban cities as heterotopic spaces persisting in the margins, bearing witness to profound paradoxes (Lacey). *Story* is identified as a truly "slumdog novel" (P. Singh 19; Bhalla 201). The affluent elite insulate themselves from the stark realities and brutalities of life and society around them (P. Singh 20). Bhalla writes how war among classes does not assume vicious forms. An overtly violent revolt of those who are dispossessed does not take place. However, frustrations lead to a subterranean build-up of rage of the "slumdog" which is unmistakably perceptible in the *Story* (201). Wretched lives of the impoverished who subsist in the crammed spaces of the slum, as represented by Nambisan without sentimental gloss, become a central referral point in expositions of the narrative (Dahiya). Unapologetic portrayal of squalor and filth to the point of repulsion has elicited studies on ramifications of representing poverty in Indian English fiction (Mendes).

Marginalisation on the basis of caste as seen in *Scent* and *Hills*, differential treatment on grounds of class, gender and age, and the consequent criminality as exposed by *Story* and *Town* directly reflect the exploitative features of India's socio-economic system of stratification. By telling these stories out loud, the novels attempt to accord "voice to the silent" (Jyothi and Rao). Language used for the narration

along with literary devices employed by the author have also been subjected to analyses (Jenniffer and Lavanya). Nambisan's keen observations on a society marred by inequalities and injustices inform her literary representations wherein characters often march down the path of resistance, prompting inquiries from that angle (Pathan).

While on one hand Nambisan's novels act as a social critique of the ways and manners of a class-based society, on the other they also act as a faithful mirror to life as experienced in a particular locale. Her strong sense of place reflects in her narratives.

For instance, campus life and its attendant themes in *Truth* that embody Nambisan's nuanced understanding of life and culture in a college campus, receive significant share of attention from researchers (Shah). The region of Coorg and its people Kodavas brim to life in Nambisan's *Scent* and *Hills*. Coorg/Kodagu had not received much representation in Indian English fiction until Nambisan's entry into the literary scene (Lau, "Representations" 191). Disaporic writer Mandanna's *Tiger Hills,* another piece of Indian English fiction, which is also set in Coorg came out a decade and half after Nambisan's *Scent.* In this regard Nambisan's contribution to the genre of regional fiction capturing the essence of the picturesque Kodagu is noteworthy (De, Lau, Naik and Narayan). *Scent* may be seen as a work of *ethnopoetics* – an ethnographic account that combines fictional modes of enunciation with anthropological text. The narrative is resourceful in that it proffers unique insights into the ethos and traditions of the Kodava people hailing from Coorg (Lau). This strong current of regionalism in fiction unveils significant facets of Indian social reality through the medium of literature (P. Nayar in "Ethnopoetics," Nambiar, Suba, Indira and Jyothi, B. Sebastian). Culinary treats home to Coorg, unique food habits of

Kodavas and the discourse of cuisine, all smoothly integrated with the plot of *Scent* attest to the author's creative genius in recording the life and culture of the hills of Kodagu. Examining the food and eating practices of the people of Coorg invariably invites an exploration into the historical, geographical and cultural roots of the land (Tom, Balachandran). Unique methods of plantations practised in the terrains of Kodagu and the grammar of the land being constantly modified by the culture of commodification are recurring images in *Scent.* Particular focus on the agricultural habits of the people and the peculiarities of the land in general has generated studies that draw upon principles from the scientific discipline of Botany (De).

Apart from infusing a regional flavour, narratives such as these also accentuate the need to preserve and appreciate the bounties of Nature. Environmental consciousness manifests in *Town* as well. In Pingakshipura, Nature visibly suffers from human intervention resulting in white hair and black river. Such imaginations act as a piercing critique of humankind's disregard for the planet's well-being. These comprehensive representations of human existence in close proximity with Nature pave way for ecocritical and ecofeminist interpretations (Sukumar, Rajeswari, Ragavi).

Right from the explicit play on the word "Bharat" in the title of the novel (which could point to the protagonist or to the country or perhaps both) to the rather implicit socio-political issues (like futility of idealism in politics, threats to secular fabric of the country) alluded to by the novel, Nambisan's *Truth* places the subject of Nation on the table of discussion. The theme of North-South divide in India, with the former often accorded privilege as the dominant space, finds mention in *Mango-Coloured Fish.* This further reinforces the significance of studies on Nambisan's novels in the context of the Nation (Basha). With the culturally rich regions of the

country gaining a strong presence in her novels, Nambisan's narratives prominently figure in discussions on different presentations and representations of South Asia in contemporary fictional works by South Asian Women writers – Lau's "Making the Difference" for instance.

On Power Relations

Review of literature pertaining to the select writers reveal how certain approaches, research methodologies and theoretical frameworks are typically favoured and adopted for analyses on Indian Women's fiction in English. M. S. Kushwaha and Kamal Naseem's *Indian Doctoral Dissertations in English Studies*: *A Reference Guide* also evidences the same. Compiled in the year 2000, it brings together English Language and Literature research projects undertaken by scholars in the major Indian Universities. Though not an exhaustive list, this compilation also points towards some common trends observable in the study of this genre. Themes of victimisation and violence against women in private and/or public spheres receive a large share of attention in research based on such novels. A predominantly feminist lens is often adopted by most of the scholars. Studies have been largely focused on the ways in which characters discover their selves, explore their identity and battle against violence and victimisation in a class-based, gender-biased society.

However, in actuality, sites of victimisation and vulnerabilities often co-exist with sites of empowerment and indomitability. The characters of the select narratives and the manifold stories that brim forth in the novels are not plain artistic creations, but are characterised by complex relations of power that demand to be studied in greater depth. Multiple dimensions of power inherent in everyday practices therefore remain largely unexplored. Power exerted by the victimised is rarely discussed. A woman raped by policemen, a humble sales assistant who stands

helpless in front of the affluent, an ageing widower who miserably fails in his attempt to prevent a slum demolition, a sex worker no longer engaged in the trade, a young school drop-out working in a beauty parlour to financially uplift her family – a cross-section of the characters who populate the select novels – have conventionally been studied as passive objects of power while in reality they are as much active subjects as objects of power. The thesis proposes to address this gap in research and proposes to investigate the facet of power relations wherein the marginalised and the dominated exercise a significant amount of power that threatens status quo. The study seeks to reimagine the narratives through power.

Methodology of Research

Michel Foucault refrains from using the term "theory" with respect to his propositions and prefers to treat them as part of a conceptual toolkit. Like choosing appropriate tools from a toolbox as and when required, Foucault's conceptualisations on power have been adopted as primary research methodology. Foucauldian treatment of power as performance that is relational and contextual may be illustrated in the novels. It may be argued that the narrative focus of each of the select works is itself the subject of power. An elaborate explication of the methodology of research has been constituted as a separate chapter. View of power as an exercise rather than as a possession and the problematisation of the taken-for-granted connotations of power as propounded by Foucault enrich the investigative process. Such dissection of taken-for-granted notions eventually pave way for self-reflexivity. Given this, the thesis resorts to generalisation with caution and is conscious of the pitfalls of stand-point bias, over-totalisations and essentialist/social constructionist theorisations.

Spivak dismisses the theoretical presupposition that only subaltern can know subaltern and that only women can know women by problematising the inherent

assumption that prior knowledge on identity is possible (*Outside* 193). Mario Moussa and Ron Scapp find value in Foucault's emphasis on the need to speak *with* others instead of *for* them (106). An author assuming moral responsibility to explore what is good for *them* must be discouraged (Satpathy 157). The research intends to keep away from such almost arrogant claims to knowledge of others. The study taken up is an endeavour to simply unearth strands of power lurking in everyday interactions and thereby examine possibilities for counter-power. This may be treated as one of the ways to approach the notion of power and understand the intention of characters. This is not the only angle of interpretation and affirming otherwise will be to commit the fallacy of speaking *for* others.

Thesis Structure

The study is structured in the following manner:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Conceptualisations of Power

Chapter 3: Relativity

Chapter 4: Reciprocity

Chapter 5: Reflexivity

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Chapter 7: Recommendations

Works Cited

The Introductory Chapter includes a brief background study, tracing the trajectory of Indian novels in English and the place of women writers therein. And a concise review of literature leads to the identification of epistemic gap. The methodology adopted for the exploration is elucidated and a short summary of the chapters drafted.

Chapter "Conceptualisations of Power" delineates some of the major espousals on the topic of power put forth by theorists and experts in the field. This predominantly lingers on Foucault's propositions and crystallisations on the subject by his successors.

Chapter titled "Relativity" focuses on the relative/dependent characteristic of power relations. In other words, circumstantial/contextual significance in power operations is evaluated. Individual's varying roles in the social set-up is studied in relation to external circumstances, past experiences, spaces occupied, and positions with respect to other individuals. Similarly, shifts in values of entities consequent to circumstantial changes also receive attention.

The following chapter on "Reciprocity" sheds light on the role of reciprocity in power relations i.e. how an individual's power is invariably tied to another's specific kind of response. When a favourable response is denied, those in apparent positions of dominance desperately attempt to reclaim their superior status, and these acts of reassertion become fruitful avenues for exploration. The chapter seeks to investigate: power as a performance in which actors are expected to play their parts, what those parts come to mean in the backdrop of power studies and what the disrupting of such socially mandated parts/ responses imply.

The chapter "Reflexivity" puts under lens an individual's relation to power not with respect to any external entity but to oneself. The word reflexivity is used in the broad sense of awareness. It explores: how an individual sees oneself in relation to the power structure at a particular place or time, what that reflection reveals about the underlying system of power and what factors influence the individual's reflections on power relations. In simpler words, one's view of one's own power or powerlessness is probed from multiple vantage points.

The "Conclusion" summarises the tenets of the previous chapters and explicates the value of the analysis. Scope of the study, relevance of the research and shortcomings of the investigation are also specified. Scope for further study is discussed under a separate head "Recommendations." Finally, a detailed list of works cited in the study is appended at the end.

Conclusion

The creative impulses of the writers are invariably tinged with the concerns and conundrums of everyday reality. Therefore, a closer look at Indian English novels is particularly profitable for the academia as they often become ground for dynamic counter-canonical discourses (P. Singh 26-27). Such counter-discourses are born from a recalibration of conventional lens of reading and interpretion. Every reading act produces new meaning since the position from which the reading takes place and the discourses that accord meaning to it are constantly changing (Weedon 139). The reading undertaken in the proposed study aims to see power where it was not seen before. The study is relevant because of the complexity and the pervasiveness of insidious forms of power in day-to-day life. The protagonists of the select novels inhabiting the peripheries of contentious urban territories are disadvantaged by virtue of gender, caste, class and/or both. A set of connections is forged among the characters across classes, cultures and politics, linking individual experiences and power in an invented space. These connections are then categorised together on the basis of the nature of relationship existing among the individuals participating in the exercise of power. This is, in short, an endeavour to break down diverse and convoluted power relations in order to group them into simpler and more intelligible forms. Foucauldian analytical tools, elaborated upon in the following chapter, facilitate this process.

Chapter 2

Conceptualisations of Power

Identifying and evaluating relations of power in the select narratives form the crux of the research exercise undertaken here. Power is by nature a contested concept and has triggered prolific theorisations. The central objective of the chapter is to provide background for the study and therefore ambitious attempts to consolidate the variegated theorisations of power have been cautiously avoided. The chapter dwells on a few notable definitions and interpretations of power before proceeding to a brief segment underscoring Foucault's contribution to the corpus. This is followed by a section that delineates the theoretical foundations that form the base of the three analytical chapters of the thesis. The segment also includes some compelling observations pertaining to the question of power in the context of the larger thematic foci of the forthcoming analytical pieces. The chapter concludes with a cursory consideration of the notion of resistance and the relevance of investigation into power relations in literary imaginations.

Definitions of Power

Power is a significant aspect of social existence. "Power, seeking it, using it, abusing it, decrying it, coveting it, contesting and overthrowing it is central to the human condition" (Lipman-Bluemen 108). Power, when used in the sense of the French infinitive *pouvoir* translates to mean 'to be able.' It may be seen as a means of enablement or as a sign of exerting control (Silverman 270). Simply put, it is the "ability to get what one wants" (Boulding 15). Marilyn French conceives power in terms of power-to, ability and power-against, domination (15). Instead of conceptualising power as the ability to "take," it may also be considered as the ability to "give" and build (McClelland 96-99). Power may be employed to produce, enable

or maintain specific processes, results or relations in a society (Cooper 452). Peter Bachrach and Morton Baratz contend that even inaction or non-decision-making sometimes constitutes an exercise of power (39).

Kenneth Boulding proposes an interesting classification of power with three metaphors: the stick that represents power of threat, the carrot that indicates economic power and the hug which denotes integrative power. These in turn respectively connote the powers to destroy, to create or exchange and to forge relationships (10). Access to resources may also be deemed as power-giving. Those who can bring or withhold valued/scarce resources exercise a dominant power. The party's resources differ on the basis of the social task at hand thereby enabling a change in the balance of power among the actors. Previously overlooked resources of the less-powerful may be productively re-evaluated in this plane of exploration. For instance, the reproductive capacity of females – which is a unique resource – is often appropriated by men in power to be used against females themselves. Another party's unique capability may be captured and transformed into a liability through strategies employed by those in power (Lipman-Bluemen 110-13).

Lipman-Bluemen explores the existential grounds of power relationships i.e. what aspect of the human condition motivates individuals to enter into and further relations of power (109). Human existence is essentially marked by unpredictability and uncertainty. To assuage this existential anxiety one attempts to live in the illusion that life is under control – if not in one's own control, at least in the hands of another (115-16). Like sacred institutions, secular ones like family, school, workplace, government and the like, through structured arrangements impose a sense of order into daily lives. This gives a semblance of control and orderliness. For instance, in institutions, when roles are differentiated on the grounds of gender, race, age,

educational level, ethnicity and the like, it provides a sense of predictability (122). Human minds' predisposition to exercise power may also be noted in Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of authority. She reiterates the original meaning of authority which derives itself from the verb *augere* 'to augment.' When seen as an interaction among equals, to augment the connectedness among human subjects, authority would then be represented on a horizontal axis in the place of vertical hierarchies (121).

These are but a few notable interpretations of the idea of power, documented here as a prelude to the more in-depth inquiry into the concept. Along with such relatively simple and easy-to-comprehend conceptualisations, the question of power has also been the subject of several complex and much more comprehensive probing. The name of Michel Foucault invariably finds a place of prominence here. Though Foucault has explicitly stated to stray away from totalising theorisations, it must be acknowledged that some of Foucault's interpretations on power greatly aid in offering theoretical support to the proposed study. The following is an assortment of Foucauldian approaches to and conceptions of power that prove pertinent to the research undertaken.

Foucault and Power

Foucault's contribution is invaluable to the study of power relations in any given society. Foucault's polymorphous texts have been subjected to varied interpretations and the heuristic significance of his writings cannot be repudiated. Spivak observes how through his discipleship Foucault has achieved the status of a universal intellectual (*Post-Colonial Critic* 4). The question as to whether he is to be treated as a philosopher, a historian, a genealogist or a theoretician of power often sparks debates. Foucault is sometimes celebrated, caricatured, critically examined

and sometimes castigated (Bové 36-37). Foucault's encapsulations on the subject of power cannot be gleaned from a single source and his key propositions remain scattered across his voluminous critical works. This segment condenses only some of his major postulations on power and in no way claims to fully reflect Foucault's colossal critical assessments on power. The following lines of interpretation espoused by Foucault have been particularly cited here for their theoretical potential in catalysing the undertaken research. "When I think back now, I ask myself what else it was that I was talking about, in *Madness and Civilization* or *The Birth of the Clinic*, if not power? Yet I'm perfectly aware that I scarcely ever used the word and never had such a field of analyses at my disposal then" (Foucault, "Truth" 115).

Power is not to be visualised in a top-down model oppressing individuals from above. "Power is a set of relations" (Foucault, "Power" 2). Foucault offers an interesting example to elucidate his interpretation of exercise of power. Merely banging a tape recorder on to the floor to exert oneself is not an exercise of power. Instead if the act of throwing intimidates another individual, preventing the person from saying something, or shapes the other individual's behaviour in a particular fashion, then that would be an instance of power. In this case, the other person is in fact free to act in any manner and is not subjected to outright repression. Power in this sense cannot be restrictively defined as a "constraining force of violence." It comes into play in the form of relations among subjects who are in some sense free. The imbalance inherent in the relationship results in one individual acting and the other acted upon or allowing to be acted upon. Power is not strictly repressive and is capable of assuming many forms (2). Power is the "multiplicity of force relations" operating and organising themselves in a given space. These relations constantly engage in processes of transformation, reversals and empowerment affirming or

contradicting one another but invariably constituting a chain or a system (Foucault, *History* 92). Power relations are not inevitable or immutable (Faith 45).

Foucault problematises the notion of "repressive hypothesis" – the proposition that power is exerted only in its negative forms of repression like prohibition, censorship and denial (*History* 10). Power relations do not strictly play a prohibitory role and are primarily productive in their operations (94). Repression often leads to a "discursive explosion" of the very topic that is repressed (17). The productiveness of power refers to not the production of repressions but the production of regularities (Massumi 7). The treatment of power as productive is also seen in the works of Gilles Deleuze. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of rhizome indicates multiplicity of relations with no identifiable point or position thereby defying any simplistic untangling of strands (8-9). Multiple roots and shoots proliferate with no primary axis or source or direction of growth constituting a forever expanding, chaotic system of growth (Grosz 199). This system of growth mimics the agonic or agonistic model of power envisaged by Foucault that treats power as always circulatory and never static ("Subject" 221-22).

Conventionally, power is envisioned in the form of a pyramid with a discernible apex. However, this so called apex/peak does not in actuality operate as the fundamental origin of power. The bottom levels of the hierarchy actively participate in the functioning of the pyramid and exist in a relationship of "mutual hold." Foucault notes how "power is constantly being transformed" ("Eye" 159). His "ascending analyses of power" focuses on exercise of power in particular and local points from where it moves towards more general domains (*Power/Knowledge* 99). The term *local* has two implications. Power is local in the sense of its opposition to global and also in the sense of remaining localised – diffuse (Deleuze 26). While

treating power as diffusion, Foucault does not claim it to be of equal distribution. The fact that power is not possessed by anyone does not essentially mean that it is wielded by everyone in equal measure (*Power/Knowledge* 99). Power may be public and intermittent or local and continuous (Bevir 69). Sharon Welch asserts that being grounded in the local bestows the practice with both power and restraint (216). David Hoy, summarising Foucault's observations, writes how change may be effected by not modifying the whole altogether but by countering instances of injustice at local points of action (143).

Power encompasses modes of action exercised on one another. When human beings are governed by other beings, the aspect of freedom invariably underscores the relationship. Power may be exercised only over subjects that are free as illustrated in the previous "tape recorder" example. Free subjects are those individual/s who are confronted with a field of possibilities that allow different kinds of behaviours, reactions and responses. "When the determining factors saturate the whole there is no relationship of power; slavery is not a power relationship when man is in chains" (Foucault, "Subject" 221). Power and freedom is a complex interplay of relations. Freedom becomes the necessary condition and pre-condition for the exercise of power, since without freedom power cannot be asserted and "without the possibility of recalcitrance, power would be equivalent to a physical determination" (221).

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault distinguishes between psychological control in modern discourse and physical punishments in early modern age. An individual in the modern period, according to Foucault, is as much affected by power as one's predecessors with a difference in the mode of exercise of this power (301-02). He discusses modern power as something that cannot be exercised without invading into the psyches and exploring souls of people ("Subject" 214). It is

necessary to disengage analyses of power from the purely "Law-and-Sovereign" model of interpretation (Foucault, *History* 97). Modern disciplinary techniques co-exist with sovereign power. Microsites of power are concealed wherein regulation and surveillance – features of disciplinary power – are made possible (88). Disciplinary mechanisms discreetly put in place a machinery of control that acted as a "microscope of conduct" through techniques like observation, recording and training (Foucault, *Discipline* 173). For Foucault a disciplinary apparatus is a "heterogeneous ensemble" which denotes both the arrangement of social practices of power as well as the mechanisms through which power is exercised (*Power/Knowledge* 194).

Dispositif is the disciplinary apparatus that demonstrates how power and knowledge circulate in order to produce subjects (Moss and Prince 18). Foucault also asserts how through modern practices of punishment a systematic knowledge of individuals emerged which in turn aided in the development of human sciences such as sociology, criminology and the like ("Panopticism" 226-27). "Society of normalisation" is a society that is predominantly regulated by knowledge in the form of these human sciences (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 107). In Foucault's power-knowledge conception, relations of power and knowledge mutually constitute one another. Power and knowledge strongly imply each another (*Discipline* 27). Knowledge attempts to discover or establish an order among things and the order by itself is arbitrary even when it appears to be universal (Foucault, *Order* xx). Famous last lines of his *The Order of Things* that treat human being as a temporary historical product – a face drawn on sand by the seashore erased by the lashing waves – may be recalled here (383). The proposition may as well signify the precarious and forever transforming ground on which human beings are hoisted in terms of knowledge and

power relations. He also calls for an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges." Subjugated knowledges denote on the one hand, historical contents that have been buried to provide a sense of functional coherence and on the other, knowledge that is conventionally deemed low-ranking, marginal or even disqualified (like speech of asylum or prison inmates). Both buried and disqualified knowledges possess critical force and deserve to be unearthed since they constitute "historical knowledge of struggles" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 81-83).

Along with knowledge, Foucault also examines truth as embedded in the overall scheme of power. Truth is essentially a system of organised procedures that produce, distribute, regulate and operate statements. Truth and systems of power exist in a circular relation constructing and sustaining one another thereby constituting a "regime of truth." Attempts to free truth from systems of power would be futile as "truth is already power" ("Truth" 133). Foucault envisages a "new intellectual" who does not claim to know the truth and lead the masses, but instead constructs theories as tools for struggle after interaction with those subjected and subjugated by power (*Language* 207-08). The duty of an intellectual is not to produce truth or correct untruth but to attempt to alter the regime of truth (Foucault, "Truth" 133). Truth is not possible without a politics of truth (Lacombe 338).

Social truths and taken-for-granted common sense knowledge are often packaged and communicated in a society in the form of discourses. Discourse refers to both a body of knowledge and ways of thinking about the constructed knowledge. Who is regarded as qualified to speak the truth, the position from which they speak, the addressee, the topics that are prescribed, the relationship between truthful practice and power are all governed by discourses. Foucault specifies how discourse possesses positive, proliferating roles as well as restrictive, constraining ones. It determines the

conditions in which a particular discourse carries import and allows/denies access to speaking subjects by defining at the outset who is permitted to enter into discourse on particular topics. Not all aspects of discourse are equally accessible to everyone, some are prohibited territory to some individuals but not to others. It controls power, decides appearance and chooses from among speaking subjects ("Discourse" 224-25). Discourse could be both a means and an effect of power. It is a form of power that can be opted for strategies of domination or that of resistance (Foucault, *History* 100-01). Development of a new concept paves way for a struggle among discourses competing for precedence (225-27). The underlying aim of an analysis is then to unmask, identify and explore strategic connections among competing discourses rather than forcibly constitute a unity among them (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 38).

Sexual discourse is one of the enduring thematic concerns of Foucault. Jeffrey Weeks observes how the first volume of the *The History of Sexuality* offers a wide theoretical context through which development of modern sexual discourse and its relation to the conceptualisations of power, as a means of constituting the history of the present, can be studied (190). The book comprises not a theory but an anti-theory, not in the sense of opposition to theory but rather an enterprise to vindicate any theorising of sexuality by de-realising, de-naturalising, de-materialising sexuality in itself (Halperin 111). Foucault maintains that sex is not outside the realm of power and the efficient means to de-sexualise sexuality is to multiply the possibilities of pleasure (*Power/Knowledge* 191). He imagines the forces of power and pleasure in the form of a "spiral" with no indicator of a cause and effect sequence (*History* 45). He asserts bodies and pleasures could become a tactic for reversing various mechanisms of sexuality (155).

The image of a spiral defying a neat cause-and-effect mapping may well be extended to characterise relations of power inherent in experiences other than sexual. Foucault's studies have often been described as an extensive investigation into ideological power, and the constitution and contextualisation of "experiences" – be it madness, the idea of order or the genealogical study of the experience of sexuality (Oksala, "Sexual Experience" 214; Weedon 125). Margaret McLaren reminds how in a Foucauldian scheme it is experience that produces subjects and not vice versa ("Foucault and the Subject" 112). The "essence precedes existence" argument does not find favour in this writing and in fact discourse both produces and describes "existence" (Polan 364-65). Karlene Faith recognises Foucault's methodology of considering the Other – the point of difference – as the starting point of analysis, as a useful technique (61). Foucault's purpose is to study the conditions of existence – i.e. instead of the products, he focuses on the way in which something is produced. His interest is not in meaning but in the history of meaning (Taleb-Khyar 186-87). In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault makes use of the phrase "methodological field of history" denoting how history is to be perceived not an essence but as something that comes into existence only through documents that an historian has managed to explore (11). Understanding history entails understanding the fact that what one finds today was not always so (Foucault, *Foucault Live* 359). Herein lies the liberating recognition that things can be different (Moussa and Scapp102). Foucault treats his own writings of histories as an exercise in fiction – not that they do not reflect reality – but that his works just like works of fiction seek to reimagine the ways of showing and thinking (Rajchman 95).

Discipline and *History* posit individuals as docile bodies subjected to disciplinary measures while later works like *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the*

Self allow for agency by introducing practices and ethics of the self (McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* 3-4). In Foucault's later works he actively engages in "objectivising of the subject" by studying the relation of subject to oneself (Foucault, "Subject" 208). Foucault himself identifies his studies as shifting from tracing the "history of power to the history of self" (*Ethics* 225-26). Ivan Strenski differentiates between "First Foucault," the author of works like *Discipline* and *Madness*, and "Final Foucault" as the writer of the multi-volume *History.* "First Foucault" appears to state that victimisation cannot be ended once and for all (345). Only certain regimes and institutions may be replaced by certain other regimes and institutions (348). Opposed to the views of "First Foucault," "Final Foucault" envisions taking care of oneself not as a political activity as exemplified by his works on governmentality and ethics (351).

Foucault's "governmentality" denotes governing techniques – ways to manage individuals, goods, wealth and the like. Governmentality in its simplest sense may be termed "conduct of conducts" – an ensemble of tactics that governs people's conduct not only in the context of individual-public power but also with respect to interpersonal relationships such as parent-child relation (*Security* 389). Likewise, conduct becomes his lingering interest in *Use*, *Care* and the series of lectures called *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* wherein Foucault examines prescriptive texts of Greek and Roman antiquity for tools of ethical self-improvement (Vintges 39). These texts facilitate individuals to fashion themselves as "ethical subjects" (Foucault, *Use* 12-13). Hellenistic concept of morality is a set of codes/rules prescribing what an individual should or should not do, and Greek notion of ethics refer to ways in which one can conduct oneself in relation to the set of rules (Bevir 75). Here, agency is made possible. Likewise, Foucault's governmentality underscores the fact that

society need not always consist of disciplinary forms of power, and that there can be a space where free individuals merely intend to influence one another socially. There are power practices that comprise of kinds of self-techniques other than those involving coercion (Vintges 39). Lois McNay regards the shift in his approach not as a sign of inconsistency but rather as a result of his process of self-critique that gives way to a conceptualisation of agency (*Foucault and Feminism* 48).

Along with social practices that reflect the complex self-power dynamic in the physical world, representational practices that meditate upon self-power dynamic in the literary world also carry weightage. Role of language and literature has not escaped Foucault's attention. He enumerates three ways in which the positioning of language as merely a method of knowledge is compensated. First of all, knowledge is not possible without the mediation of language. Secondly, there is great critical value associated with the study of language and most important of all, the emergence of literature brings focus back to the importance of language (*Order* 322-27). Speech is not regarded as a spontaneous activity but a calculated manifestation of power. It is governed by authority encompassing "processes of appropriation of discourse." The authority determines who is granted the permission to speak (Foucault, *Archaeology* 68). Literature being a speech act therefore actively participates in the system of power, manifesting and obeying it (Taleb-Khyar 190-91). Literature holds a place of significance in Foucault's writings. As Mohammed Taleb-Khyar further notes, Foucault devoted space for writers like Roussel, Blanchot, Bataille, Verne, Rousseau, Mallarme and Flaubert in his oeuvre (194).

Taleb-Khyar observes how Foucault's "What is an Author?" is not a question but an assertion (193). The author is a consciousness of contradictions and one of the "initiators of discursive practices" responsible for not only what was said

but also for what will/can be said. These discursive practices pave way for future possibilities (Foucault, “What is an Author?” 131). Dana Polan discusses the politics of reading in Foucauldian discourse. The act of reading is essentially to facilitate birthing of knowledge within the confines of a particular scheme work of knowledge (366). Given this, readings undertaken for the research in question are self-aware – in the sense that it is acknowledged that these readings also actively participate in the very system of power that they seek to critique. The goal is to not attempt to get out of the machinery and mechanisms of power, but to identify and uncloak them. A thorough scrutiny of multiple power relations represented in literary imaginations will prove profitable in the attempt to locate and unmask mechanisms of power.

Foucault – Criticism and Defence

Many scholars have appropriated and/or applied Foucault’s critical views on power. Foucault’s observations have evoked multiple responses ranging from sympathetic to apathetic to outright antagonistic. Edward Said in “Travelling Theory” does not discredit Foucault outright but draws attention to the inherent paradox in finding Foucault entrapped in his own theoretical propounding (243-45). Jean Baudrillard speaks of Foucault’s discourse as a mirror of the very power that Foucault critiques (17). Jurgen Habermas vehemently criticises Foucault for putting forth a pessimistic, abstract, totalising theory that produces individuals as standardised products of discourses (293). Shakil even while acknowledging the value of Foucault’s contribution to the reservoir of knowledge, laments how in a Foucauldian world one is left groping in the dark, complex schemata of power relations with no way to battle or escape omnipresent power (121).

Foucault himself addresses some of these concerns. He concedes that if one is deemed to be always inside a power relationship it would appear as if there is no

means of escaping it. But he reasons how this is a mistaken understanding of the relational attribute of power relations. The very existence of power is dependent on the manifold points of resistance that act as points of support, goal, adversary or handle in relations of power. Sites of resistance dot the entire network of power (*History* 96-97). Power operates in multiple fields simultaneously without being confined to a single originating point. Deleuze shows how Foucault's refusal to study power in terms of its origin implies conceiving power not as a property that is institutionalised – State, nor as a category subordinated to any structure – economy (26-27). Also, Foucault's intent was not to find solutions but to interrogate the accepted theoretical ideas with respect to madness, social order, sexuality (*Philosophy* 101). Terry Aladjem (278) and John Rajchman (116-17) also view Foucault's writings as largely a labour of questions rather than an attempt to arrive at answers.

Nancy Fraser states unequivocally that Foucault does not distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable forms of power (33). But as Mark Bevir emphasises if power is identified as something that allows agency for the other, then violence and power become distinguishable. Power in the form of a social influence is acceptable, and can be separated from such things as violence, which is unacceptable (83). Foucault is accused of promoting the social constructionist conceptualisation of repression that refers to a condition where subjects are almost always pictured as victims of dominant social forces, and are always seen to be passive recipients of such ideologies (Sawicki, "Identity" 180-81). Similarly, Suzanne Gearhart condemns by arguing how his treatment of repression as exclusively productive is one-sided, and how the restrictive nature of repression must also be taken into account ("Foucault's Response" 391). But Jana Sawicki defends by

stating how Foucault does not deny the presence of repression but augments it with the discussion of productive power relations that exist within a category ("Identity" 182). Gearhart also concedes that despite such criticisms, Foucault's interpretations in general cannot be considered as any less significant for he himself admits to ambiguity and allows for it ("Foucault's Response" 400-01).

McNay accuses Foucault of being "gender blind" (*Foucault and Feminism* 33). Louisa Muraro laments that when Foucauldian methodology is appropriated to study women's politics, one unwittingly endows Foucault with authority (141). However, Sawicki endorses Foucault by observing how despite the androcentrism in his writings, his politics which is a "politics of difference," offers a creative for resistance since he does not look for bridging these differences in order to force a unity in them ("Foucault and Feminism" 24, 32). Foucault passed away at the age of fifty-seven while compiling the fourth volume of *History* called *The Confessions of the Flesh,* delineating the influence of church priests in social life (Kurzweil 661-62). He sought to explicate his respect for and his understanding of the positive ethics of the various liberation movements for women. This was recorded in 1977, before the onslaught of AIDS that claimed his life in 1984. Foucault at the time of his death was perhaps on the threshold of a more rounded analysis of the construction of gender through his study of female hysteria and the medicalisation of women (Faith 44, 61).

Foucault is often studied for what he *lacks* – the lack of a theory of agency, a normative justification for power-exercise, a concept of freedom and so on (Moussa and Scapp 88). Foucault's reluctance to explicitly mention his political and ethical position is not to be misconstrued as nihilism, relativism or political irresponsibility. Sawicki sees this reluctance as a reflection of his scepticism of basing political programs on a single theory ("Identity" 189). Foucault does not claim to have

produced theoretical works with substantial conceptual unity and in fact openly advocates the unrestrained use or disuse of his ideas according to one's own discretion (qtd. in Macey xx). Didier Eribon reminds how Foucault considered his writings as "little toolboxes." Foucault encourages readers to pick and choose any sentence or idea or a piece of analysis they deem appropriate to discredit or short circuit power systems, even if it eventually destabilises the foundations of his own works (Eribon 237). The following discussions therefore identify and dwell upon pertinent theoretical tools picked or derived from Foucault's "little toolboxes." Both Foucault's primary works as well as Foucauldian scholars' extension of Foucault's propositions constitute the toolkit. A collection of theoretical tools is thus utilised instead of a single, unified theory as a methodology of research.

The framework used to organise the central chapters of the thesis acts as a model, structuring the following section as well. The segment delves deep into those methods, postulations, interpretations or pieces of inquiry by Foucault or Foucauldian scholars that offer theoretical bedrock for the three main analytical chapters of the thesis. Apart from serving as theoretical base, some of the following observations and/or approaches have served as catalysts and functioned as sources of inspiration for the analytical chapters. These sources of inspiration have also been collated with the primary theoretical tenets that act as the basis for the three subsequent chunks of textual analyses. Additionally, propositions that are notable and relevant in the larger context of the study, if not directly contributing to an individual chapter, have also been incorporated for a well-rounded outline of the theoretical bodywork. Therefore, it is to be clarified here, that even when not immediately evident, the assemblage of seemingly disjointed fragments of critical exposition of relations of power does

adhere to a meaningful conceptual pattern, as embodied by the three individual analytical chapters that succeed the given theoretical chapter.

Theoretical Base for Analysis

The first analytical chapter titled "Relativity" sustains interests on the relative character of power relations that assume different forms and operate at different points in the chosen narratives. The aspect of relativity is instantiated by various situations encountered by individuals as well as entities in the select novels, which have been elaborated in the particular chapter dedicated to the study. In the present segment, suffice it to note that the "relative" feature gains theoretical backing from the following espousals by Foucault and other critics.

"In reality, power means relations, a more or less organised, hierarchical, co-ordinated cluster of relations" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 198). Deleuze explains how this means on the one hand that a relation among forces in general constitutes a "power relation" and on the other that force is not singular by nature, and always exists in relation with other forces, thereby entailing the fact that any force by itself is a relation i.e. a species of power (70). Power is not permanently associated with a particular structure or institution nor is it a fixed endowment or strength.

Context is of prime significance and largely determines the nature of power relation at a given point of time. Power simply refers to a "complex strategical situation" in a given social set-up (Foucault, *History* 93). For Deleuze, the question to be addressed is not the "where" and "what" of power but the "how" of it (71). "Power is exercised rather than possessed." It is not an exclusive privilege of the dominant class but a consequence of its strategic positions – a consequence that is best discernible in the position of the dominated (Foucault, *Discipline* 26-27). Foucault re-locates class struggle within a broader framework of power relations.

Notions of class, social groups, communities and the like are not sufficient in themselves to explain the workings of power and its multiple psycho-social implications (*Power/Knowledge* 137-38). Social identity structures like class, gender, caste and race interact and intersect with one another in everyday life of an individual, and manifest in its various interactions as oppression and privilege. The concept of intersectionality is at once interesting and complex (Gopaldas 90).

A simplistic equation between the gender/race/caste/class/religious affiliations and power cannot be sketched. A discourse of alterity is located at intersectional spaces which become sites of transgression and resistance (R. Nayar xxv). *Race, Gender and Class* is a noteworthy work that interprets the world as an intersection between race, class and gender. Some positions in the social structure necessitate the oppression of others. The view that the oppressed are not passive victims, devoid of agency, helps in examining how individuals/groups behave under the forces of oppression. Vasilikie Demos and Anthony Lemelle cite Collins' conception of a "matrix of oppression" in which power of an individual is relative to the situation one finds oneself in. Amidst social constraints asserted by race, class and gender, human beings can exercise contingent agency (5). When power is treated as something that is not possessed but as something constantly negotiated then a contextualised space for action opens up (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 137-38). As Susan Bordo observes, degree of access to control the machinery of power varies and different individuals/groups are positioned differently ("Feminism" 191). Social structures provide varied opportunities for different groups to realise their agency (Bevir 77). These social markers foreground the relative nature of power.

Lipman-Bluemen asserts no individual or a group is permanently totally powerful or completely powerless. Only for semantic clarity, the terms *powerless* and

powerful may be used intead of using *less powerful* and *more powerful* respectively. The most downtrodden and even the disenfranchised are capable of controlling some measure of resources – be it personal, social, political, financial or some combination thereof (113). No one is inherently a victim nor an oppressor (Phelan 429). This helps to avoid the "conspiracy trap" – the notion that power is the property of agents of patriarchy and/or capital (Kerfoot and Knights 81). "Power is both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use" (Radtke 1). When categories of powerful and powerless are dismantled, import of their acts and activities are also subject to contextual variations. When the powerful assert that they act in the best interests of the powerless, the idea of best interests is not problematised (Lipman-Bluemen 124). Steven Lukes in *Power: A Radical View* proposes the construction of a counterfactual and seeks to reveal what people would want in an alternate scenario of less oppressive material conditions. To this Davina Cooper posits the topical question: how can people's wants or interests be treated as a-historical category, unaffected by social forces and as existing outside the social framework? (Cooper 446)

Since power depends on the situations one is embedded in, attempts are made to engineer situations in ways that will secure an individual or a group of individuals' standing in a given configuration of power relations. To this end, several techniques are adopted. In the study of contextual power relations, gender has signifying powers and is often co-opted in strategies used to influence power relations in a social set-up. For social groups to maintain their statuses as political entities, they need to reproduce themselves both in the physical sense and in the terms of social identity. Jill Vickers argues that since women stand in the heart of the reproductive activity, patriarchal gender arrangements strive to control this process

(190). Marilyn French examines how social arrangements have come to be what they are today. She proposes that in the earliest periods of human life on earth men might have felt marginal to human life unaware of their contribution to procreation. A man cannot ascertain a child is born from his body without guarding the child's mother's body and thereby placing the mother of the child under surveillance. To this effect, he must "own" her (19-22). Men soon defined themselves as transcendent in the sense that they are capable of impregnating women without suffering pregnancy, parturition and without the responsibility of nursing. Transcendent power is that which is able to affect the nature of humans without getting affected itself (24). "Power-over is not equal to power-to but can annul it" (26).

Lorraine Radtke contends "gender relations *are* power relations" (13). Foucault's study, however ignores the gender angle in the evaluation of power (Diamond and Quinby xiv). Given that Foucault was androcentric, the increasing relevance of his theoretical outputs for women's studies is quite intriguing. To account for Foucault's popularity among scholars of women's studies, Frances Bartkowski recalls Eve Sedgwick's identification of a close parallel between the struggles of feminist and anti-homophobic projects. Foucault vociferously spoke and wrote in favour of relaxing rigid social norms against homosexual relations. This could be one of the reasons why women's studies benefit from Foucauldian methodology (Bartkowski 51). Robin Morgan points out how patriarchal power needs monopolising of power. Foucault allows for a multiplicity of power relations. When there are multiple powers, patriarchal power becomes less controllable. To acknowledge and identify these multiple qualities of power is then a political act (325).

Exploring the angle of gender logically leads to an exploration of the ways in which bodies figure in the discussion. Body is to be treated as both the product of social power and an individual's own mediated responses to the cultural notions of ideals (Deveaux 244). Mary Douglas draws attention to "double" bodies in all cultures wherein on the one hand physical body of an individual becomes a microcosm of the society, controlling itself based on social norms and on the other, it remains polarised against the social body (76-77). Bordo emphasises how body is not to be regarded as text of culture but as a locus of social control through seemingly trivial routines like table manners, toilet habits and the like ("Body" 13). Bodies and spaces are linked through a relationship of power. A homeless body is the result of a contradiction between the materiality of a body that does occupy space and the refusal of any place for such a body (Kawash 334). The discursive body and material body become subject of analysis in Pamela Moss and Isabel Dyck's study on ill bodies as a resource to understand ways in which power and knowledge operate (34, 37). The following observation by Laura Hengehold is pertinent to the study of complex interplay among power, body and spaces. When women are advised to be wary of going out in public spaces, the subtext is that her body's mobility and ability to traverse the social space are to be restrained. These very activities which could be used as liberatory tools, are deemed to be potentially dangerous ("When Safety" 55-56). Body's spontaneity becomes a threat to "control." The ability to be in total control of one's own body – even an unhealthy obsession with the social norm of having a slender and toned body – provides one with a sense of thrill (Bordo, "Anorexia" 92-93). McLaren finds great value in Foucauldians' treatment of the private as the political, and the body as a text of sociosymbolic codes ("Foucault and

the Subject" 114). Body is one of the entities subjected to a close scrutiny in the analytical chapter for its role in exposing the relative traits of power relations.

Along with deeds of bodies, words too are central to understanding contextual property of power relations. The term *words* is used here loosely to encompass language, knowledge and other such cognitive resources as opposed to deeds and bodies that are bracketed within physical resources. McNay quotes a particular example from Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's study of how in the context of Victorian ideas of chastity, women fervently battled the practice of prostitution to rehabilitate the "fallen daughters" (Smith-Rosenberg 40). On the one hand, women who undertook the fight against urban prostitution may be labelled orthodox for their rigid views on what women should or should not do with their bodies. On the other hand, they may be viewed as challenging tradition and convention. McNay draws attention to the particular words used to refer to the prostitutes. They were called as fallen "daughters" who need to be saved from the clutches of male lust. They usurped the male prerogative of defining and naming a social problem by renaming the prostitutes as "daughters" and sought to rescue the victims from within a system of male exploitation ("Foucauldian Body" 136). In this sense the women were empowered enough to attack the hypocrisies of the particular social arrangement. By exploiting the power of words, a re-defining of the context was effected which in turn led to the unfolding of brand new relations of power.

It is clear that power is not something obtained, seized or shared. It is exercised from multiple points. Power relations do not exist outside other kinds of relationships (economic, sexual and the like) but are inherent in the latter. Binary conceptualisations such as rulers/ruled are not relevant as power defies a purely top-to-down definition. Plurality of force relationships that determine and inform

institutions, families and groups produce far-reaching effects in the larger social body (Foucault, *History* 94). Perpetually shifting roles of individuals in familial and social bodies relative to the contexts they are anchored in, are subjected to analyses. The chapter "Relativity," fundamentally drawing on some of the conceptualisations and interpretations thus enumerated, elaborately reviews how within social and familial arrangements laced with multiple identity structures like class, gender and caste, individuals and entities come to occupy multiple positions in the web of power.

The subsequent chapter of analysis titled "Reciprocity" explores power that operates on the principle of reciprocal relations between two individuals. Those in positions of dominance depend on a particular kind of response from the dominated in order to retain their superior positions. These responses therefore may be favourable in sustaining authority or prove subversive in effect. The chapter devotes attention to this interdependent attribute of power relations. "Reciprocity" is predicated on the following theoretical advancements and conceptualisations.

In his study of the care of the self, Foucault emphasises on reciprocal engagements with others which intensifies social relations (*Care* 53-54). One realises one's sense of self – one's personal autonomy – only in relation to others (Weeks 195). Foucault introduces the notion of agonism to refer to power relationships sustaining on conditions of reciprocal incitation and permanent provocation between two sides, instead of a paralysing eye to eye confrontation ("Subject" 222). One need not be pushed and pressurised to obey someone in authority. Obedience becomes the natural course of action because that is what authority entails (Jones 123). When someone in authority desperately attempts to pressurise someone, it in fact betrays the inherently unstable nature of authority. Power is not to be dichotomised as domination and subordination since there are multiple possibilities for responses

(Cooper 442-43). Counter-stories, counter-possibilities and counter-actions are always possible, for one is always in the midst of an overwhelming conflict of values (Weeks 198).

"Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 98). In this set-up individuals are in constant movement among its threads, occupying multiple positions. They concurrently undergo and exercise power. They are both passive or consenting targets and also tools of its expression. They are both effects and instruments of power. An individual is not to be perceived as an inert and elementary nucleus that simply becomes a recipient of power. "The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (98). Individuals act and react based on the dominant patterns of thinking and these patterns are connected with tradition. For instance, socially conditioned lines of thinking determine the kind of treatment criminals receive in a society at a given point of time. The purpose of analyses then must be to identify the various factors that influence one's thinking. Recognising this can enable one to think differently and thereby respond to a situation differently (Foucault, *Ethics* 14).

Responding to situations differently entails a subversion of sorts. Moussa and Scapp observe how in *Discipline,* Foucault subverts common expectations by enabling prisoners to speak (92). Foucault explains how when the "silenced" speaks what is produced is a counter-discourse which is essentially not a theory but a practical involvement in political struggles (*Language* 209). Also, in a way, the "silenced" is sometimes given space to speak in the practice of confession. The act of confession is a form of discourse in which the subject who speaks is also the subject of the statement. The act is a species of power relationship since a confessor invariably requires a partner (in real or virtually) who does not simply exist as an

interlocutor but also actively doubles up as the source of authority that ultimately decides the fate of the confessor. The partner interprets the words of the speaking subject to judge, console, punish or forgive (61-62). In confession, ironically it is not the individual who knows, speaks and answers that is endowed with agency to dominate. It is the one who listens, questions and is not in the know of things that is unrestrained, and accorded a dominant status. Additionally, the discourse of truth holds most bearing not on the listener but on the one from whom it is usurped (62). However, the act of confession in a sense also provides for the confessor a position to speak from (Lydon 137). Here again, possibilities open up for subversion. In the context of a confession, what was spoken must remain a secret. But this very secret finds acceptance in the privileged space between inquisitor-victim, master-slave, confessor-confessant and the like. So, the secret must not be spoken everywhere. When this norm is reversed, when what is to be spoken within closed doors is mentioned everywhere, then by this adversary position, the speaker gains a position that was not available for him/her before (Bartkowsky 49).

Supplices i.e. public spectacles of punishment that Foucault examines in *Discipline* is purported to make visible the royal authority to incite fear in the common public (33). This carries within itself the potential for reversal and subversion. Foucault shows how these very practices became a carnival, leading to an inversion of power relations. The executed prisoner was often eulogised and made into a hero in diametric opposition to the intention of the royalty. The viewers revolted and often interrupted the execution (61). The roles that opposed the superiors in *supplices* were explained in the form of a ricochet of power relations. Foucault describes *supplices* as the “corps-a-corps.” This, as Gearhart notes, is translated as a ‘hand-to-hand combat,’ with scope for domination for any of the two

parties involved ("Taming" 467). The subjects involved in this combative mode of power are in some sense free. The notion is derived from the Greek word *agon* which means 'combat' both in the sense of struggle and in the sense of an exercise of power (Foucault, "Subject" 221-23). Public execution provided the rare opportunity for the crowd to see the condemned individual openly abuse traditional institutions of power like the government, the judges and the law (Foucault, *Discipline* 60). In scenes of public execution, the crowd plays the lead role as its presence proves integral to the performance. A discreetly held execution loses its value as the primary aim is to set an example by putting up a spectacle of power that stirs up feelings of terror in spectators (57-58). Visibility is central to this relation of power.

The theme of visibility paves way for the study of Foucault's interpretations of power derived from Jeremy Bentham's structure of panopticon. Panopticon comprises of a central tower that houses a guard to supervise those placed in the cells in the peripheral buildings. The principle on which panopticon operates exemplifies a system of control that uses visibility as a permanent trap. The prisoners are under constant surveillance with no means to escape the gaze (Foucault, "Panopticism" 200). In the place of arms and ammunitions, an inspecting gaze succeeds in turning an individual to exercise control over and against oneself. Surveillance is internalised to the point that the person subjected to the gaze becomes one's own overseer (Foucault, "Eye" 155). In modern disciplinary power structure, when defying established social norms, one often allows oneself to be disciplined by others' "gaze" just as how prisoners internalise the guard's rules even if they don't believe in them (Cooper 437-38). Sandra Bartky reiterates how while sovereign power had a face – face of the monarch – modern forms of power remain faceless and centralised ("Foucault" 79-80). Deleuze also stresses on the significance of "seeing" in

Foucault's histories and thoughts. The focus is on what things are made "seeable" (57-58).

Apart from recognising the potential of "seeable" and visible facets of power exertion, Foucault also acknowledges the value of aspects of power exertion that remain hidden from immediate view. Power often operates on the basis that it cloaks a substantial portion of itself (Foucault, *History* 86). Foucault points towards power that masks itself. In *Foucault: A Critical Introduction*, McNay reiterates how this hiding takes place most effectively at the local level, in the most mundane experience (148). Rajchman reminds that Foucault's use of the term *evidence* is to be considered keeping in mind the one particular meaning of the French term *évidence* which implies 'self-evidence' i.e. one that is taken for granted (93-94). The goal then is to "see" – to interrogate taken-for-granted means of power assertion and uncover subterranean forces in seemingly self-evident techniques of power imposition. The act of rape, for instance is conventionally taken for granted as a species of sexual assault. However, this is a lopsided view of the crime. The following is a consolidation of a few theoretical understandings that expose the deeply entrenched relations of power existing between the parties involved in rape.

Within the constellation of power, sexuality and gender, rape has a predominant role for it demonstrates how convergence of knowledge, representation, power, appropriation and objectification constantly inform social/ sexual relations (Silver 90). It is ironical that patriarchy, while asserting power to be of supreme value, also unequivocally demands fear and obedience. It proclaims men are gods but also dictates to kneel (French 32). This need for reciprocation with particular kinds of response problematises the supposed authority of patriarchal power. One of the select narratives represents rape, and the heinous crime is committed when the victim

refuses to respond favourably towards superior power. The complexities underlying these power relations are examined elaborately in the analytical chapter "Reciprocity." While the analytical chapter is more inclined towards probing particularly reciprocal characteristics of power relations that inform rape, the segment here slightly digresses in favour of including a few other angles of interpretation. The strictly specific theoretical foundation utilised in the chapter has already been laid out by expanding on the view of power as dependent on another for its exercise. Additionally, during the course of research some notable elucidations on the rape-power-Foucault equation, that prove relevant in the larger context if not immediately relevant to the study at hand, were chanced upon. Those are also incorporated in the discussions below.

Foucault recounts the experience of a sex offender, Charles Jouy, in the first volume of *History*. Jouy seeks "caresses" from a little girl and Foucault describes this act as simple bucolic pleasure of a farmhand (31-32). Foucault posits the provocative question of how rape is different from a punch on the face. He asserts the need to de-sexualise rape by decriminalising it (*Politics* 200-02). This is to liberate disciplinary discourses that used sexuality to exercise political and social control (Cahill 44). Also, punishing a sex offender is most likely to lead him to recidivism since the offender links sexual violence with his identity and thereby re-offend as an expression of his very existence (Chloe Taylor 9). Holly Henderson argues how Foucault encourages self-reflexivity through the problematisation of naturalised understandings of sexual violence (226). Rape when treated as an assault, leads to a repositioning of the woman's body in the act. Rape becomes a fight between two subjects and this accords the woman's body a certain degree of power. Contrarily, when feminine body is coded with vulnerability, rape becomes a subject-object

power relation with little scope for resistance. This approach must not be mistaken to be an extension of the sexist stereotype wherein the victim is held responsible for the attack (226-29). When women's bodies are produced not as a tool to incite violence but rather as site of counter-attack, social structures supporting rape can be undermined (Cahill 61). Susan Brownmiller also calls for removing sexual component from the legal treatment of rape (378). This is to ensure that the female victim is not made culpable in the crime (Cahill 44).

However, these arguments and justifications are problematic. As Ann Cahill notes, in Brownmiller's analysis, by virtue of anatomy women are represented to be victims and men as aggressors by default (4). This results in establishing male aggression and female subordination as merely natural (Woodhull 170; Hengehold, "An Immodest Proposal" 89-90). Winifred Woodhull insists that to interpret rape, one needs to study how vagina has been codified to be a place of vulnerability, and the penis as a weapon of assault, instead of resorting to basic physiology arguments (171). Christine Helliwell's article "It's Only a Penis" is interesting in that it brings to light how in the Dayak community in Gerai, the idea of rape is unknown (790). Men are identified to be more vulnerable than women due to the presence of the male sex organ outside their body as opposed to the female organ which is safely positioned inside the body (803). This brings attention to how social practices have codified penis as a weapon and vagina as a site of vulnerability. The message of the thus codified woman's body is not that all men are potential rapists but that all women are potential rape victims (Cahill 56). Cahill calls this body as the body of a "pre-victim" (52).

There can be two responses to Foucault's question as to why rape is not like a punch in face. One, genitals are already imbued with social meaning and so rape

must be studied in sexual terms. Two, the trauma of the experience of rape felt by the victim cannot be compared with that of another species of attack, like a punch on the face (Henderson 250).

Complexities inherent in the rape-power interlinkages defy any straightforward and simple resolution. Wendy Hesford notes how a woman sometimes "lets" the man rape in order to save herself from death. This shows a paradox of agency – the victim endures enormous pain to claim her agency. Complicity, a strategic performance here, provides a sense of agency to the survivor (201). Strategies are multiple and are often employed by rapists and victims alike. The rapist often imagines the victim to be an oppressor who threatens the rapist's own social standing. This perspective shifts focus to the victim, who is then to be silenced and shown her place in the society. She is invariably blamed for the violence and the aggression is disguised rhetorically as a form of resistance (Kellet 153, 157-58). Society considers women as holding power in their "desirability to men." Women are believed to exercise this form of power by either arousing or denying this fulfilment to men. The cause of man's attempt to rape a woman is then pinned on to the woman herself. This complicates the question of consent in rape, and in fact, what is designated as power (their "desirability to men") becomes the source of powerlessness for women (Mackinnon 175). This power of "desirability to men" granted by the society can also be strategically exploited by women. Meaghan Morris contends that when reduced to merely a sex symbol, women may use the very tool of oppression – sex – as a means of resistance (38-39).

Manifold strategies come into play in the domain of power relations. The fact that one's exertion of power is contingent on another's response to it, turns power into a performance, with several actors and audience playing their parts. Even

if one of the actors chooses to go off script and adopts new strategies then power relations reconfigure to assume new meanings.

The next analytical chapter titled “Reflexivity” deals with characters’ views of their own position in the network of power relations and the factors that influence individuals’ perception of their relation to power. The assessment takes as its focal point an individual self and draws inspiration from some of the following theoretical expositions pertaining to the triad of self, society and power.

Foucault’s latter works sharpen focus on the ways in which a subject is “objectivised” i.e. the ways in which a subject relates to oneself. McLaren summarises Foucauldian process of “objectification of subject” by enumerating the following three methods that aid the process: scientific methods, dividing practices and subjectification (“Foucault and the Subject” 113). “Dividing practices” delineate how a subject remains divided within oneself or is divided from others. This results in turning of the subject into an object. Differentiating individuals as the sane/insane, the healthy/diseased, the criminal/“good boys” and the like, exemplify this method of objectivising. The way a human being transforms oneself into a subject informs Foucault’s primary interest here (“Subject” 208). Foucault’s pun on the word *subject*, which indicates both selfhood and the condition of being subjected to disciplinary practices, is notable (212). Dany Lacombe clarifies how, as one of the modes of objectivising the self, subjectification refers to the process by which individuals turn themselves into a subject (sexual subject, for instance). Through this process individuals constitute themselves as their own masters and agents (350). Chloe Taylor asserts that Foucault’s critical endeavours primarily focused on laying bare the forces by which an individual self comes to think of oneself (16).

In the various choices that an individual makes every day, there prevails under surface several potent social forces. Foucault insists that he does not deem everything to be bad but avouches that everything is dangerous, and that the latter does not necessary imply everything is bad. When everything is dangerous, one always has something to do about it and the "ethico-political choice" to make each day is to identify the main danger ("On the Genealogy" 232). Through these choices people try to free themselves from themselves (Rajchman 112). Joan Eveline and Carol Bacchi remind how the fact that freedom is possible is attested to by Foucault's idea of governmentality and Deleuze's notion of the rhizomatic growth. The two conceptualisations imply individuals are not simply circumscribed by their subject positions and that there are possibilities for exceeding their discursive constraints (153). Debora Kerfoot and David Knights also explore how one constitutes oneself and how one can be constituted otherwise (68). Weeks reiterates how identity is about becoming and not just being. Identities are extremely personal, yet reveal multiple social belongings (193).

What appears to be a subject's personal identity or individual choice is not strictly personal in that it is not insulated from the normalising processes of the social world the subject inhabits. Normalisation refers to techniques and processes by which society imposes the notion of right and wrong in a social body. Foucault recognises "normalisation" to be a significant instrument of power. The label of normality becomes essential to be inducted in as a member of a social body. In this sense, normalisation enforces homogeneity but also paradoxically engages in individualisation by identifying differences to be immediately subsumed into different categories of homogenisation (*Discipline* 184). In *Foucault: A Critical Introduction,* McNay draws attention to the normalising effects of power employed

insidiously in daily life that cause a particular action or belief to appear obvious and inevitable (148). Foucault's call for caution and reflexivity while studying social norms is valuable for many critical exercises (Diamond and Quinby xiii-xiv). Representational practices also take part in the process of normalisation (Martin 8). Probing literary representations for normalising processes therefore helps problematise social actions and beliefs that on first impression appear to be obvious and inevitable.

The concept of madness falls well within the ambit of normalisation processes. The normal/abnormal distinction that appears to be obvious is often a consequence of the collusion between different forces and power relations in a society. Foucault has written extensively on the topic of madness. Even when confined, madness is always made visible at a distance and put behind bars (*Madness* 70). Through the trap of permanent visibility the child, the patient, the mad men, the delinquent and the like are more individualised than those who subject them to surveillance (Foucault, *Discipline* 193). In this regard, even therapeutic approaches and reforms aim to instil responsibility and guilt in the mad person by prompting the person to internalise one's objectification (Foucault, *Madness* 247). In a psychiatric asylum, the practitioner constantly tells the patient that he or she is ill to the point the patient himself/herself internalises the notion as fact (Moss and Prince 28). In his lectures on abnormality, Foucault debates the differences between normal and abnormal. He insists on the pervasive presence of judges of normality, noting how doctors, educators, social-workers and the like often act as judges (*Discipline* 304). Social norms form the crux of social organisation (Hooke 48). Given this, a crime becomes a breach of this contract that affects all individuals and therefore, everyone seeks to punish the one who commits the crime (Foucault, *Discipline* 89-90).

Foucault cites the example of a vagabond who roams about aimlessly causing no particular harm to anyone but is still arrested. This is to illustrate how when an individual does not act according to social norms, he is punished to show his position within the larger structure of social relations (292). Similarly, when sexual codes and codes of sacred familial responsibilities are violated, those violations are labelled as unreasonable and abnormal (Turkel 174).

Notions of normal and abnormal play an integral role in society's treatment of rape and rape victims. The trial of a rape victim has marked resemblance with the act of confession. The listener is accorded a higher status and the victim's behaviour is put under lens. Her credibility is questioned. Like Bentham's panopticon, where the prisoners become their own police, the rape victim often starts to question her own experience and is made an accomplice in the discourse of hysterisation (Hengehold, "Immodest Proposal" 96-98). The distrust experienced by rape victims is termed as "second rape" (Madigan and Gamble 7). Apart from victims who end up being incoherent during rape trial (and therefore treated as abnormal), those who manage to conduct themselves in a stoic manner during the trial also somehow end up being treated as abnormal for they deflect from exhibiting signs of "rape trauma syndrome" – the generally expected erratic behaviour of "normal" women post rape (Estrich 18). Speech and narrative of the survivor are often discredited by classifying them as madness or signs of hysteria (Alcoff and Gray-Rosendale 205).

However, abnormalities like marital rape often achieve the stamp of social approval to the extent that it even ceases to be treated as an abnormality (Sawicki, "Identity" 182). The experience of a woman raped by her husband, for instance, becomes a disqualified story. This story becomes invisible (Hengehold, "Immodest Proposal" 94-95). Instances of domestic violence including marital rape are often a

manifestation of the complex entanglement between social norms and power relations. When gaining, regaining and retaining power constitute primary motives in a relationship, then fear of losing that power leads to what is called "separation assault," a significant practice in cases of domestic violence (Mahoney 65-66). The battered party is often coerced into continuing the relationship with the abuser due to the influence of various forces including social norms.

The daily lives of individuals are punctuated with several such strong normalising forces. Micro practices of the day-to-day life define and normalise the everyday activities of individuals – right from what to wear to what to eat or not eat (Bordo, "Feminism"186). This power is exercised by everyone and yet no one. This anonymous disciplinary power gives rise to the belief that such norms are either natural or voluntary (Bartky, "Foucault" 74-75). Dividing practices due to effects of power are undertaken by a large segment of the population regularly and voluntarily in order to construct a subjectivity of their own by constantly negating the threat of the Other. For instance, some heterosexuals resort to name calling to belittle homosexuals in order to secure their own identity as a heterosexual individual (Kerfoot and Knights 83). Bartky writes how shame can be an effect of forceful imposition of social codes ("Shame and Body" 97). Sense of shame is a response to the societal norms impinging upon a subject in a position of subordination (Deveaux 234). In similar lines, approval is also a key disciplinary force (Wolosky 501).

Curious instances of social approval and social defiance may be discerned in scenes of public execution. The practice of execution abounds in complexities – ambivalence pertaining to the powerful/powerless status of the condemned individual, for one. As Foucault suggests, the spectacle of punishment – death by torture – in a way liberates the condemned man. With the power of certainty of death,

a criminal facing immediate execution develops a strange kind of immunity by which he could speak out anything and the crowd simply cheered. With nothing to be afraid of, with nothing to lose, the condemned man openly curses the royalty and the judiciary (*Discipline* 60). Crowd that gathers around to witness the spectacle of punishment not only approves but encourages such unabashed defiance of superior power. This is a "super-power." The power of the sovereign and the potential counter-power of the spectating public produced a ritualistic exhibition of super-power (57). James Miller remarks how the scene empowers the latent animalistic and otherwise muted instincts in a human mind to find uninhibited expression (481). hooks recognises the fact that even the most oppressed experience moments of intense rage and resentment so much so that they express their vexation with their own body (*Yearning* 15). Strong emotions like anger also sometimes act as a camouflage for the subject's innate desire to exercise power. Power pursuit can thus assume various forms. It may be expressed positively as desire or negatively as detestation and rage.

Such vehement expressions of discontentment often constitute an exceptional, out-of-the-ordinary experience. Timothy O' Leary identifies two different kinds of experience. The "everyday" or "background" experience is the one that adheres to socio-cultural norms and is permissible in a given historical period. The "transformative" kind of experience is unusual, rare and perhaps paradigm-shifting for the individual. This second kind of experience helps an individual acquire a critical distance from the everyday model of experience and this distance offers one means for resistance (5-7). The transformative kind of experience is analogous to Foucault's conception of acts of transgression that are paradigm-shifting in that they render conventional modes of discursive expression inadequate. An act of

transgression requires a "limit" for it to transgress but the limit itself does not pre-exist. Limit and transgression depend on each other for existence and their relationship is envisioned in the form of a spiral. These limit-experiences may be unintelligible for they lie outside the domain of discourse (*Language* 34-35, 40). Mary Daly describes making of meanings outside the realms of dominant power structures (like patriarchy) as "earthquake phenomenon" – as something that leads to chaos outside the secured frontiers of conventional and "normal" thoughts (409-10).

As Brent Pickett points out, such experiences and voices discounted as marginal carry great import for Foucault since those marginal voices facilitate a struggle against imprisonment by moral and social forces (449). hooks asserts that marginality apart from being a space of deprivation also possesses immense potential to act as a site of resistance (*Yearning* 145, 149). Radtke reinforces Elizabeth Janeway's elucidation of the "powers of the weak." The phrase denotes the ability of the weak to disbelieve, mobilise together as a group and organise action to further their needs. The marginalised are to be conceptualised as actors, who in spite of their disadvantage, are capable of influencing the dominant in however small way. This approach views power as productive, including along with forms of power like coercion and domination, the power to act (Radtke 7). Being made aware of agency is required to act as an agent (Lipman-Bluemen 114). hooks reminds of the need to let the subjugated know that they are not powerless and that in their daily activities there are means to resist domination ("Changing Perspectives" 95). Biddy Martin emphasises the significance of acquiring the capacity to see one's own different positions in the given structures and attempt to respond from elsewhere. She clarifies how what Foucault advocates is not an absolute otherness but an "alterity," a position of internal exclusion that reiterates the possibilities for resistances (Martin 9-10).

Inherent in these conceptualisations of agency is a particular perception of the idea of freedom. One is not born free, but rather becomes free by adopting certain practices (Vintges 47). Freedom refers to practices that undermine the regularity of power (Foucault, *Ethics* 167). Freedom can be conceived in two different ways – negatively as freedom *from* censure or interference and positively as freedom *to* choose from among options to act as an agent (Westlund 1056). In any case, the goal is to acknowledge that freedom is possible only when one studies the ways in which one's own self is constituted in the system of power relations. Sawicki underlines that the purpose of analyses is to not discover who one actually is, but to understand how the individual has come to think of what one is in the way one does. A restructuring of the ways of thinking about oneself is then possible, implying that one is free enough and need not be what one presently is ("Identity" 186). Therefore, key to the chapter "Reflexivity" as well as to the overall study of power relations is the need to recognise the many potent social forces that influence an individual at a given point and to identify one's own potential to act in this scheme of power.

Conclusion

In conclusion, "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (Foucault, *History* 93). Power is omnipresent because it is active at every point and latent in every relation. It does not originate from a central point and functions as a substrate of force relations in constant motion, fostering forms of power that are local and unstable. Effects of power flow through narrow channels, and often through subtle means, they influence individuals, their bodies, their behaviours and their everyday actions (Foucault, "Eye" 151-52).

Pramod Nayar, in a strikingly Foucauldian spirit, writes: "The process of power is complex and individuals are subjected to and constituted as effects and

objects of power. The network of power permeates the society and the individual is the site and instrument of power" (*Literary Theory* 61). At any given moment, a particular action of an individual is one of the many potential actions that is contingent upon the context (Rozmarin 4). An individual acting a certain way is often not doing so on the basis of an innocent, personal choice. Even when there is no visible external coercion the act is governed by dominant social codes. The struggle is not for power but with and within power (Aladjem 280). Power structure is punctuated with faultlines and interstices enabling strategic intervention, if not complete liberation (Shahani and Ghosh 3816; Westlund 1065). Strategic intervention may be effected through multiple means and this includes something as simple as "naming" a thing that is conventionally denied expression.

To be able to define or name the truth is itself a strategy of counter-power (Silver 105). Problems with no name cannot be addressed and it remains invisible. Naming it gives it visibility, bringing it into the domain of power/resistance (Crenshaw 358; Faith 39; Westlund 1057). In articulating one's experience, one is able to "grasp" it and use it to undertake action (Rich 212). By denying experience, truth is refuted since "lying is done with words, and also with silence" (186). Speech is not merely a creative expression but a courageous political act that threatens to topple the attempts of dominant power to annihilate and silence voices of unrest (hooks, *Talking* 8). Literary texts, as products of creative expression, also seek to produce a similar impact. Author of one of the select narratives, Nambisan, identifies as one of the objectives of her writing the need to "change something, somewhere" ("New Issues" 42). The hermeneutic task is the speaking of the unspeakable and thereby envisioning a new world (Weir 212). Through one's work one must look for possibilities – for ways to express oneself and make oneself shown in forms not yet

made possible by the forces of the society (Rajchman 116-17). When something is misrepresented or never represented it becomes not just an unspoken but an *unspeakable* act (Rich 200). In this regard, the act of speech – *talking back* – is a sign of liberation for a muted voice (hooks, *Talking* 9). Talking back amounts to counter-discourse (Moussa and Scapp 104). Counter-force or resistance is accorded primacy in Foucault's conceptualisation of power relations and it serves well to briefly dwell on the subject in the course of summation.

"Where there is power, there is resistance . . ." (Foucault, *History* 95). Foucault contends that without resistance the question of power relations is moot. The subject of power becomes valid only when obedience is not a given. Relations of power come into play in circumstances where one is not able to do what one desires. It is therefore resistance that precedes and supersedes the forces in the scene. In this state of affairs, resistance becomes the operative word (*Ethics* 167). Pamela Moss and Michael Prince recognise indifference, rejection, non-engagement, contestation and revolution as some of the forms that resistance can take (21-22). Power does not produce totalising outcomes, thereby offering leeway for multiple possibilities and resistances (Cooper 450). Like power, resistance is also not monolithic, stable or sequential. Strategic resistances are infinite (Faith 57). Paul de Man in *The Resistance to Theory* describes how theory is in itself an act of resistance and therefore this resistance of theory cannot be overcome. He points to the fact that the only universal theory is that theory is impossible (19). In the context of theoretical espousals of power thus elucidated, this resistance to theory appears to be all the more pronounced. Another challenge in these conceptualisations, as cited by Charles Taylor, is that if there is no outside of power and a particular regime of truth may be overthrown only to be replaced by another regime, then it appears as if no schemata

is acceptable. In this scenario, the only practical mode of discourse to adopt is that which recognises its own distortive quality and enables one to maintain a critical distance from it (378, 383). The investigation adopts a similar stance and cautiously proceeds towards analytical chapters, recognising the limitations of theories, their distortive qualities and acknowledging the generally unstable nature of power relations.

Also as an adjunct, it must be noted here that the terms *power*, *authority* and *domination* are all used interchangeably in the thesis. Theoretical complexities and subtle variations in connotations intrinsic in the application of each of these terms have been overlooked in favour of a simpler interpretation.

Chapter 3

Relativity

The word *relativity* has been loaded with connotations, especially since its increased appearance in scientific parlance post Einstein's celebrated theory of relativity. However, in this chapter the term is used bereft of its theoretical implications. In its rudimentary form, *relativity* refers to the quality of being dependent on something. Foucault's interests lingered on the "dependence and independence" of the self (*Use* 238). This chapter focuses primarily on this dependent/relative characteristic of power. Circumstantial/contextual significance in power relations takes precedence here. Sara Mills observes how assessing contingency, rather than adopting a cause-and-effect stance, is pertinent to the study of power relations, since it empowers a Foucauldian scholar to attend to the various ways in which social relationships, events and activities are suffused with power. Analysing contingent elements facilitates in understanding the means by which power operates (51-52).

For ease of study, the chapter is broadly divided into two segments. In the first segment, the quality of relativity is examined with respect to power exercised by an individual or a group of individuals. This includes varying positions of power the characters occupy in relation to structures like family, society and social markers like class and gender. The second segment probes into the relative nature of power manifest in entities rather than individuals. This encompasses concepts (like body, God), resources (like money, knowledge, language), acts, events and spaces that derive their status of power or powerlessness from context. A solid line of differentiation between the two segments cannot be drawn and therefore some overlaps between the two segments are anticipated.

Shifting Roles of Individuals

Individuals are variously placed in the grid of power. Circumstances determine their ability to assert at a given point of time. A shifting of their roles may be observed when their access to power is scrutinised in the context of different societal structures such as family, and forces like class and gender.

Family

Within a home a mother may be a disciplinary authority with respect to her children. But the father might use his economical and physical power to undermine this. The material source of this development is located in the economic dependence of women on men within a family, and the ideological source is the moral power pertaining to the institution of family which effectively constrains women. This is the "ideology of familialism" that puts forth the idea that "just as the family has been socially constructed, so society has been familialised" (Barrett and McIntosh 31, 129). Family ties act as a mode of control in the lives of the characters in the select novels. Roles and positions of power occupied by the characters constantly shift in familial arrangements. Relationship between children and parents is shown to be strained, and a constant tug of forces is seen to be in place. Opposed to the conventional depiction of parents in an elevated position, one can discern that this position of higher control is not a pure possession. Both parents and children play parts in the power play. A few instances from the chosen narratives seek to establish the same.

In *Story,* with his wife Harini passing away, it is commonplace to assume that Simon – a father and a grandfather – would be at the helm of affairs. But his life is dictated by the words and deeds of younger members of his family. "Ten days into that stay in Delhi, my grandson fell ill with measles and I gained some importance in

the family" (Nambisan 16). Ironically, a disease helps Simon to feel important. The contingent nature of power is apparent here. Simon's food habits seem to be unhealthy and his son and daughter-in-law take it upon themselves to persuade him to control them. "Rashmi and Mitra believed that unless I was 'handled' some way, I would get worse" (17). Rashmi and Mitra trying to handle him becomes a means of establishing their own modes of control here. Neelam in *Tell Me* also exerts power over her father-in-law, Dheeraj. He fears she would admonish him if he used light bulbs during day time to read, as she often begrudges Dheeraj's ways. "He just hoped his daughter-in-law wouldn't notice, and if she did, wouldn't comment on it" (Bajwa 6). Therefore, Neelam engaging in a long conversation with her husband in hushed tones after receiving the monthly electricity bill, alarms the father-in-law. "Dheeraj looked uneasy but continued to read his newspaper" (37). At another time Dheeraj chides his grandson Bittu for eating pickle from a broken jar fearing the child might ingest tiny pieces of glass. This well-intentioned intervention from the grandfather does not go down well with Neelam who then immediately defends her son with "The boy is not all that bad, that he needs to be shouted at so much" (47-48). This is ironic considering the fact that she herself has no qualms about chastising Bittu all day long for his clumsiness. The dangerous act of the boy and the consequent concern from the grandfather become irrelevant for Neelam whose predominant interest lies in imposing power. She aims to rule the familial ground with an iron fist.

Simon catches his daughter, Sandhya, stealing money from his wallet, and is shocked to find her unapologetic. Her refusal to acknowledge her mistake disturbs the equation of power. Similarly, if Harini as a mother found herself in a place of domination, she would not have felt the need to exert herself by refusing to bequeath her land and apartment to her daughter. She does that in order to spite her daughter

(Nambisan, *Story* 92-94). Simon's insecurity becomes further evident when he accuses Sandhya of doing "unspeakable" things only to spite her parents. This is a veiled reference to her bisexuality. Simon firmly believes that her "unconventional" sexuality is her mark of protest against parental control. "Harini wanted to mould the children into some sort of perfection. Discipline, she said, should take the place of religion. . . . Sandhya rebelled" (89). Echoing Foucault's views, Jacques Donzelot in *The Policing of Families,* asserts that untangling from familial structures is possible through subversive methods like the revolt of the woman and bodily resistances against disciplinary mechanisms with the help of "countless invisible or spectacular insurrections" (234). Sandhya revolts by refusing to toe the line drawn by her parents, and thereby becomes a threat to the typical top-down power flow system in a familial structure. She admits that her mother never forgave her daughter for her sexual preference (Nambisan, *Story* 90).

While convention expects a mother to be more in command of a situation at home than her children, there are instances where these positions are reversed. One morning on seeing her son Gundu and Sampathu's daughter Rukma sleeping with their legs entangled inside the taxi, Saroja lashes out at them. The mother is deeply unsettled by the sight. "It leads to increased hostility between her and the girl who is now disobeying her every time. Adolescent vs parent. The latter in depair" (Nambisan, *Town* 119). Being a maternal figure to Rukma, Saroja expects Rukma to obey her. However, the girl remains free-spirited and Saroja laments "Rukma is never easy to control" (103). It is the adult who is now distressed.

Similarly, in *Sari*, Mrs Sandhu's adolescent son, Manu seems to be invested with a form of power that dictates the actions of his mother:

> She [Mrs Sandhu] turned the gas off, and the milk subsided. . . . "Manu, beta, drink this," she said encouragingly. . . . Mrs Sandhu waited, her rolls of fat now still and expectant, her lips slightly parted. "Chheee!" Manu made a face and pushed the glass back into her hands. "Didn't you strain it? You know I hate cream in milk. Take away." He returned to his work without looking at her. (Bajwa 14)

His mother hurries back to the kitchen and silently brings her son milk the way he likes it. Manu is preparing for his medical entrance exam and his parents have pinned their hopes on him. His entry into the profession of doctors is seen as a status symbol for the family. Education, and in this case, knowledge is equated with power. "Mrs Sandhu thought she was as good as anybody now. . . . A beautiful house, status-family, a caring husband and good looks. . . . Now, if only the children would do well . . ." (Bajwa, *Sari* 13). This calls for an analysis of the power-knowledge nexus in social, especially familial structures. Manu, by gathering knowledge, becomes instrumental in fetching the mark of high status for the family. Even before becoming a doctor, just the process of preparing for it, results in a tilt of the balance of power in his favour. When Manu clears his medical entrance examination, his mother heaves a sigh of relief. Mrs Sandhu says, "Finally, I can use the mixer-grinder and the washing machine without worrying about making a noise and disturbing him . . ." (206). The commanding position that he appears to occupy is, in reality, power associated with knowledge.

Discipline according to Foucault may not be associated with any particular institution or with an apparatus, and exists primarily as a modality of power operation. It encompasses a wide range of procedures, instruments, targets and techniques. Discipline may be used as a tool to reinforce machinations of power.

Foucault insists that intra-familial relations have been influenced greatly by the "external schemata" making "family the privileged locus of emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and the abnormal" ("Panopticism" 215-16). The familial structure often employs these tenets of discipline. The kitchen becomes a place for such contesting forces to find expression in a household. "When she turned fourteen, her brother married, and his wife, anxious to secure her position in the house, took over the kitchen, relegating Kamla to the status of an assistant" (Bajwa, *Sari* 144). Generally, any individual who is made to do chores is seen to be in a position of inferiority vis a vis the individual who orders for the work to be completed. This belief is also found to be lopsided. Here, Kamla is forcefully kept away in order to ensure that the sister-in-law takes charge of the family, even if that means more chores for the latter. In *Story*, Dayaratna's wife takes great pride when he orders her, and not the Punjabi woman, to make tea for their guests (Nambisan 188). This act causes her to feel valued. Ironically, being chosen for the task empowers her, as opposed to the conventional notion.

Similarly, the Gupta household in *Sari* witnesses such metaphorical tug off wars to establish supremacy. Shilpa, even before getting married, prepares herself for a potential clash with her mother-in-law. "It all boiled down to her mother-in-law, Mrs Gupta. Would there be the usual problems – the bullying, the power tussle, the kitchen politics" (Bajwa 162). No such conflict can be studied in isolation. This is also linked with the financial foothold of both the families. Shilpa convinces herself that with the huge sum of cash, jewellery, furniture, air-conditioner, car and the like that she intends to take with her when she leaves her home, she has "no reason not to be able to hold up her head in her new family" (164). After marriage, Shilpa and Mrs Gupta are seen to be in a constant state of struggle with "an infinitesimal distribution

of the power relations" (Foucault, "Panopticism" 216). "So the two settled into a fragile relationship in which the equation had to be balanced constantly, with a touch here, a gentle nudge there, a small disagreement here, and a gratified smile there" (Bajwa, *Sari* 164). These instances exemplify McLaren's observation of family as a perennially contested space where varied mechanisms of power sometimes both collide and collude. This politically charged institution is deeply invested in power tussles ("Foucault and Feminism" 215).

Familial/Social Shifts

Sawicki interprets the exercise of power as relational – as a relation of inequality among different social forces (*Disciplining Foucault* 135). These unequal forces lead to individuals relating to other individuals in sometimes diametrically opposite ways based on the influence of these forces at a given point of time. In *Sari,* Chander is seen to be obeying the words of Mahajan without as much as a word of dissent. However, he becomes an overbearing husband at home. He brutally thrashes his wife. Is Chander powerful? Is he powerless? These questions receive different answers in familial and other social contexts. When Ramchand sees Chander lose his temper and admonish his wife, he is shocked. "He had never heard Chander raise his voice before. He was one of the quietest and gentlest men Ramchand had ever known" (Bajwa 105).

Simon's father, a judge in Madras High Court, on first look appears be a dominating presence in *Story*. The family considers itself to be a reputed one. However, this reputation is not stable and is open to influences from within and without. Members acting in unorthodox ways or refusing to act in prescribed ways could mar the reputation of the family. Simon is instructed: "You are the repository of a name, Simon. Your duty is to your parents, sisters, their children and your

children. Do your duty, or watch us perish" (Nambisan 29). Not performing one's duty as ordained by the family or the society in general can lead to ruin. The reputation that the family claims to possess is thus not a possession per se. It hinges on several parts of the system working a certain way. The reputation and the consequent power that the family seem to have do not in fact belong to them. His father reprimands Simon with: "Whatever you do at home, don't disgrace me in public" (22). If the father did indeed possess power, Simon's behaviour would not in anyway disgrace him or mar his reputation. The conduct of the son in public affects the reputation of the family. This prompts the question: is the father really a dominant figure? Simon idolises his father. He considers his father to be unquestionably powerful. This mistaken idea of power and powerlessness that he learns from his father affects every other relationship he ever has with anyone in his life later.

Class

The rich/poor divide, with the rich accorded a substantially more dominant stature, is subjected to critique in *Story*. Baqua's confrontation with Simon, PK and Sandhya on their way back to Vaibhav after their visit to Sitara marks a significant moment in the unveiling of the plot. For the purpose of this study, the encounter is labelled as the "Baqua episode." He has been introduced to the readers as a very powerful leader in Sitara, with several flourishing businesses to his credit, including real estate. On the arrival of Simon and team, Baqua takes it upon himself to offer them a practical experience of what it means to live in Sitara. He assigns duties to the visitors and threatens them of serious consequences if they refuse to comply. Simon is asked to cook, while Sandhya is instructed to carry bricks and clean the house. PK is forced to carry sacks filled with gravel up the stairs and down (Nambisan 132). When objected to, Baqua explains how being poor is not as glamorous as depicted in

films and how the magnitude of the struggle surpasses the meagerness of contributions made to the slum-dwellers by people like them (133). Simon, who belongs to the privileged section of the society, is seen to be helpless in front of someone from the disadvantaged segment of the society. He is not completely free to make his own decisions. In fact, he is intimidated by Chakra's presence. Chakra, a worker boy, is used as a tool to coerce the visitors into performing chores (133). These role reversals exemplify the power of those in Sitara. Foucault acknowledges that power can produce control. As Foucault observes, people are always involved in a struggle, constantly in "situations." This is not a trap for situations can be changed, throwing open fresh possibilities (*Ethics* 167). Freedom refers to practices that undermine the regularity of power (Rozmarin 4). This implies that a reversibility can be strategically effected in power relations and power/knowledge collusions. Strategies can act as both points of resistance and instruments to control (Lacombe 342).

When Simon visits Sitara, he takes up the visit as someone placed on a higher pedestal than those he intends to meet. As someone from the other side of the "wall" he considers the trip to be one that would eventually help the impoverished in the slum. Curiously enough, at the end of the visit, it is Simon and his entourage that go back home with a life-altering experience. Baqua's treatment of his guests humbles Simon. From being in a dominant position, he gets pushed to a subordinate status. He finds himself on the path of resistance. Sandhya appreciates her father for boldly taking a trip to Sitara, "At your age visiting the slum was a brave thing to do" (Nambisan, *Story* 112). All through the narrative, Simon is warned about unpleasant consequences of maintaining close relationship with those from the slum. Velu, the errand boy, is not spared too. Even a young boy is seen to be a potential threat (114).

Baqua discusses a possible time in future wherein the equation slowly changes, wherein those from Sitara would take the reins in their hands (138). The fact that Sitara is approached with a sense of terror, attests to the power the slum is capable of exercising. Simon and Baqua – both do not possess any permanent role in the battle of forces. They adopt multiple roles based on context. This echoes French's anecdote from Turnbull who demonstrates how "natural" superiority is itself a social construct with no existence outside value systems. Colin Turnbull – a white male, tall and British-educated – during his visit to Mbuti was regarded by the tribe as incapable of surviving in the jungle. He was treated like a child, assigned to a motherly figure who taught him how to find food, and discouraged from taking part in hunting since his body smell and size were hindering the activity. Whiteness, male gender, abstract intellect – are all attributes with no inherent superiority on their own. Human superiority can only be seen as natural ability to survive. "Value systems inhere not in nature but culture; all superiority is contingent" (French 28).

On the one hand Baqua is sketched to be one of the most powerful characters in *Story*. Though belonging to Sitara he is seen to be controlling the well-off section of the society residing in Vaibhav apartments as well. Suno Tho explains, "Baqua's cooperative sells illicit liquor brewed by the fishermen. The police know everything, they always do. Baqua keeps them happy. The police respect and fear him. . . . Law-makers tying up with law-breakers" (195). In Baqua episode as well when Simon points out that PK and Sandhya would approach the police and he would be forced to let Simon free, Baqua is confident that police would not dare move against Baqua for lack of evidence (137). Police, who are conventional symbols of power, are shown to be dependent on Baqua, and the latter derives his capacity for dominance from his association with the police force as well. Both the parties are part of a network of

power relations. Inspite of being depicted as a force to reckon with, Baqua is unable to prevent the evacuation of those from Sitara at the end. His power is also contingent on other factors. Another prominent name to reckon with in Sitara, politician Dayaratna, migrated to the slum as a little boy along with his mother who was a ragpicker. Even in this state he learns to make a neat profit by selling discarded bottles and scrap (185). Propelled by this gain, he resolves to make Sitara his home. "Standing before ramshackle hamlets, inhaling the powerful smells of poverty and progress, he decided" (186). Even poverty seems to have had a power over him. The forces of poverty and progress lure him to stay.

Chellam leads the team of visitors from Vaibhav to Sitara. Simon, PK and Sandhya are guided by Chellam towards the inner folds of the township. Chellam's role immediately shifts from one being employed by the affluent to the one being in command of the group. As an insider, Chellam assumes power and shows the way to the entourage. This seemingly simple detail in the narrative establishes the basic tenets of Foucauldian notions of power which Fillingham spells out in the following manner: Power is localised in that it does not adhere to a top-to-bottom hierarchy. It is "everywhere local." A country's president for instance does not stand at the apex of a familial institution and hence is not in a position to impose family values. Instead, configurations of power in families remain in a dialectical tension with configurations of power in the larger social structure (143). Chellam's range of influence and his power in Sitara are circumstantial.

Dayaratna plays multiple roles based on the forces that remain active in a given situation. For those in Sitara, he is a *Nayagan* 'a leader par excellence.' He however treats Periavar, the chief of his political party, as a mentor and dances to his tunes. In the presence of Periavar, he cowers. "Once out of the township, he grabbed

the bag, dismissed Untoni and sprinted towards the bus stop. He boarded a bus that would drop him at the gates of the party office on Poonamallee High Road" (Nambisan, *Story* 188). This image of Daya running to catch the bus that takes him to Periavar's office strips him of the air of superiority. What is interesting here is that Periavar is himself not immune to the pluralistic forces. In order to win the municipal elections, Periavar plots along with Daya and Prince to manufacture a water shortage in Sitara that would trigger massive protests, thereby drawing public attention to the slum. "In the weeks that preceded an election, Dayaratna became important enough for the party leader, the Periavar, to invite him for a private discussion" (188). He is shown to be dependent on Daya. He insists that Baqua be not informed about this. "He quietly left out the fact that he had tried to win that man over many times and failed" (252). They are not certain if the water shortage plan that would unleash brutality in Sitara can be kept away from Baqua for he has spies all around (253). Baqua's power lies in his thorough knowledge of the space and those who populate the space. Had Periavar been completely in command, Baqua would never have been a matter of concern at all. Yet he becomes a subject of discussion and Periavar frantically looks for ways to keep him at bay.

Before the meeting of Daya, Dr Prince and Periavar, Suno Tho apprises Daya of his own strength and persuades him to hold his head high in front of Periavar. Daya follows her advice: "Dayaratna was silent. Gone were the early years of clear-eyed favour and servility. Sitara revered him, but what was Sitara if not a reeking, mosquito-infested swamp that no one was interested in? Suno Tho put everything in perspective" (251). Even when he decides to no longer remain subservient to Periavar, he is not completely independent. Quite unexpectedly Baqua extends support to Daya for the water plan. But Daya remains cautious and declines the offer.

“He was more comfortable with suspicion than trust” (254). Daya’s suspicion is an offshoot of his fear – his fear of Baqua. Daya is a part of the system of power. He takes up different roles based on context. Here, Baqua seems to be in total control of affairs. However, his position is also problematic in the scheme of power. He resorts to extreme measures to teach Simon and his team a lesson or two about the harsh realities of those living in Sitara. This signals his desperation. Also, he still does not manage to keep Simon or his daughter Sandhya away from the slum. He is unable to prevent the evacuation of those in Sitara. Baqua is neither a hero nor a villain on his own. His position is dependent on the others in the scene.

Power is not vested completely in one individual who can then lord it over others. Those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised are all caught in the machinery of power. Not everybody is located in the same position and this allows some positions to preponderate over others, facilitating an effect of supremacy (Foucault, “Eye” 156). The machinery of power runs with the participation and interaction of everyone irrespective of the social, political or financial status of an individual. For instance, security guards, chauffeurs, maid-servants and those generally considered to be devoid of real power are in fact endowed with a voice of their own. The servants employed by Kapoors and Guptas in *Sari* are shown to be in a position of domination in various situations. When Ramchand goes to the Kapoor household on a business assignment, the chauffeur who opens the gate throws a volley of questions at Ramchand. His entry into the building is in the hands of the chauffeur (Bajwa 61). Though this power he wields is derived from that of the owners, the Kapoors, it needs to be acknowledged that the chauffeur also exercises a form of control. Ramchand is evidently intimidated by his display of strength. Similarly, on the day of Rina Kapoor’s wedding, Ramchand impulsively decides to

go to the venue, uninvited. He is stopped by a security guard as he tries to walk into the hall. "Ramchand looked at him with resentment. He knew he wouldn't have been stopped if he had been well dressed and prosperous looking" (126). It is to be noted here that both the security guard and Ramchand identify themselves with the working class. Yet there remains a pattern of power traceable in their mutual relationship.

At the brothel Swargam in *Story*, when Chellam asks for Myna, the expression of the lady at the reception is compared to the "look that natty security men outside exotic shopping malls offer to beggars" (Nambisan 239). Security men belong to the working class – the exploited class. Typically, they are to be sketched as those being patronised and victimised. Instead, in the above scenario they are depicted as viewing beggars with disgust. They are presented as the dominant. Such role reversals are commonly spotted in the narratives. In *Tell Me* Rani joins Vina as house-help at Sadhna's house in Delhi. Though both Rani and Vina occupy the same position in the class hierarchy, Vina assumes greater power. "Vina felt happy, ensconced in the household in the superior position of the insider, and looked at Rani with some pity" (Bajwa 143). With the addition of a new assistant Vina enjoys the privilege of being a senior and makes no attempt to mask her joy.

Gender

Gender factors into the study in more ways than one. Prem Kumar Karthikeyan (PK) writes under the name Prema in order to mislead the newspaper readers into believing that the writer is a woman (Nambisan, *Story* 95). The identity of a woman bestows him with a strange kind of immunity. In the Baqua episode after their hours of toil, Sandhya and PK are allowed to step out and asked to return in exactly fifteen minutes. Simon is asked to stay back. Baqua explains to Simon as to how this is a test to determine if the two of them sent out are cowards or if they are

brave enough to come back to Baqua as asked of them (136-37). Baqua's authority is unmistakable here. So far, PK was sketched as a young, arrogant, successful journalist who treated both Sitara and Simon with condescension. In the present state of affairs, PK is terrified of the might of Baqua. PK's authority is an exercise that depends on various other external factors. Both PK and Sandhya do not return exemplifying their fear. However, as the story progresses, readers learn from Baqua that Sandhya had indeed returned to check on Simon and that she left after Baqua's assurances that Simon was safe (257). This is an inversion of gender roles. The girl bravely returns while PK cowers under duress.

Conventionally, characters like Mrs Sandhu, Mrs Sachdeva and Mrs Gupta in *Sari* are likely to be categorised as those *in control* (either on account of their financial soundness or/and because of their academic achievements) as opposed to those *under control*. However, Foucauldian analysis problematises any such straight forward differentiation. They appear to be both *in* and *under* control at different points of time, and sometimes even simultaneously occupy both these positions. Kamla's rape and her death are acts that throw to the surface several such subterranean forces that remain active in a society at any given time. Brenda Silver emphasises how the power to define or name the truth is also a means of resistance. When a woman speaks of rape, she is naming the unspeakable and this very act becomes an act of resistance (105). The emotional responses of these minor characters towards Kamla's rape offer a gamut of possibilities in the study of such forces. When women like Mrs Sachdeva deride the prosperous upper class for lacking a grasp over knowledge, it is only natural to assume that these women characters are powerful enough to have a clear say in matters concerning the functioning of a society. However, both the educated and the affluent are seen to be

terrified to take a stance in favour of Kamla and are shown to be in full favour of the perpetrators of the crime against Kamla (Bajwa, *Sari* 214). These women are as much *under* control as they appear to be *in* control in certain situations.

When a man follows Sentha soliciting sexual favours from her, she threatens him by saying that she would report this to his wife (Nambisan, *Story* 157). This threat scares him and he quits troubling her. Sentha's insistence on truth-telling evokes Foucault's notion of *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia* is the explicitly critical practice of freedom. It refers to the truth-teller, to the fearless speech of the powerless that involves risk-taking (*Fearless Speech* 16). Also, in the given anecdote, it becomes evident that the man's wife holds a significant place of power in their relationship. Similarly, Ponnu brings up Chellam's wife Valli in conversations. He makes up scenarios wherein Valli would be shedding tears for Chellam who is engaged in fixing other people's toilets (Nambisan, *Story* 160). This enrages Chellam, and Ponnu succeeds in annoying his friend. Valli's reference adds vigour to the taunt. It can be argued that if Valli as Chellam's wife is Chellam's point of weakness, then that is in fact Valli's strength. Even in her absence, she is able to substantially affect the course of events. In similar lines, Suno Tho – the Nayagan's assistant – is able to exercise power by largely remaining unseen in social circles. "The Punjabi woman was rarely seen or heard, but heard of everywhere" (186).

Women are perennially treated as frail and powerless, while also used as powerful motivation in certain instances. For a few characters in *Story*, the ability to impress a woman or attaining eligibility to marry a woman becomes a means of feeling authoritative. Benny convinces Chellam's parents to send their son to the city for work by persuading them with: "Line up the girls! Count up the dowry! Things can only get better!" (46) The prospect of getting a line of girls to marry their son

enamours the parents, and they let Chellam accompany Benny back to Madras. When Prince confides in Swamy about his recurring bouts of depression, Swamy recommends marriage or seeking the company of women as a cure to Prince's despair (199). Though this is conventionally interpreted as women being utilised as tool for men's pleasure, this suggestion from Swamy could also be read in a different light. This is an instance of the range of influence that a woman and her body can exercise.

"You want love free, get married. . . . You get paid by girl's family. Love comes free," asserts Ponnu (53). All through the novel, his approach towards women is no doubt reproachable. He treats them as objects of desire. Marriage becomes a profitable business in his eyes. Marriage permits sex without payment while also fetching the man a fair amount of money in the form of dowry. When offered a job in acting, "Ponnu exulted on the pleasing prospect of raping snow-white heroines on screen" (53). Ponnu imagines himself to be acting in rape scenes with beautiful, fair heroines. His feeling of powerlessness is assuaged when he involves himself with women physically. These views and fantasies clearly demonstrate Ponnu to be a patriarch and a womaniser. Similarly, Lectric Mamu in Pingakshipura, is a man who treats women as mere objects of pleasure. A smile from a woman is all that he requires to launch himself into action and repair her home appliances (Nambisan, *Town* 103). At the risk of trivialising such gravely dangerous tendencies of men, argument from a different perspective can be made. When Ponnu strongly considers attaining a woman to be a sign of victory, when he suggests that his friend marry for free sex and money – all these in fact vouch for the power of femininity. He frequents brothels and gains strength from such visits. Women often make use of this "weakness" of Lectric Mamu and get him to do odd jobs. This prompts the question:

are women left with no power whatsoever? If women were absolutely powerless then how would a pursuit of them and ultimately an "attainment" of them make the pursuer a victor?

Chellam's life is greatly determined by the bond he shares with the women in his life. He has intense feelings of affection for his wife, Egavalli. Under the strong influence of his friend Ponnu, Chellam visits the local brothel called Swargam and engages in physical relationship with a sex worker, Myna. The ecstasy of sexual relation with Myna overwhelms him on the one hand and pushes him into a deep abyss of guilt on the other. He worries, "*I cannot afford this! Ega will kill me. She will*" (Nambisan, *Story* 239). This establishes Valli's power in the relationship. To make up for the guilt, he gives up arrack binges and pleases Valli. When Myna refuses to entertain him anymore, he falls back on his old habits. There is a tussle for power in the recesses of Chellam's mind – between sexual pleasure and inebriation, between a stable marital life and ecstatic sexual encounters with another woman. In both of the above contrasting pairs, one or more women are involved. Bracketing women within the walls of subalternity is erroneous in that women also engage in various forms of oppression and often navigate between states of powerlessness and power (Shahani and Ghosh 3816).

The fact that women could alter the direction of forces is itself testament to the power at their disposal. A woman becomes an object, nonetheless. That can never be justified on any grounds. But within a Foucauldian system of unstable power dynamics, it needs to be acknowledged that her sexuality is one of woman's strengths. This, when manipulated, can help a woman navigate through power channels differently.

Society's view of a woman's sexuality is a subject of deliberation in *Town*. Kumari having been a sex worker for twenty three years, continues to live in the same town after retirement. However, contrary to expectations, she is not depicted as a powerless, feeble woman. She is consulted by almost everyone in town when one needs sagacious advice on life. Also, only she has the power to permit or restrict access to her home: "Saroja is one of the few people who can walk into my chamber, most others must communicate through kerchief-sized window" (Nambisan 99). Keeping aside the ethical and humanitarian concerns regarding the practice of sex work that dehumanises and objectifies women, when strictly the question of power is considered, a complex scheme emerges. On the one hand, the genitals become source of torment while on the other, these very genitals are imbued with power to determine the fate of men and marriage. In Katthale Nadu, the village that Sampathu hails from, customarily the day following the nuptial night of consummation, the wife's prior virginity or the lack thereof decides if marriage holds or dissolves (90-91).

Valli beats up Sentha when Ponnu casually tells her that her daughter is too bold for a girl (Nambisan, *Story* 237). A girl staring at men and being stubborn disturb the conventional pyramid of power (153). Men are no longer on a solid ground of control. Valli becomes their mouthpiece and attempts to make Sentha submit to the socially constructed notion of power and control. Valli becomes the voice of hegemonic femininity. Hegemonic femininity denotes those traits identified as womanly that preserve the authoritative position of men and subservience of women in a societal set-up (Schippers 94). Here, Valli acts as the patriarchal force that seeks to muffle a woman's open expression of her sexuality. Sentha resists this and is being pushed to the status of a pariah. The fact that her boldness triggers

insecurity among men is in itself a proof of the fragility of power relations. The notion of complete dominance of one gender over all others becomes a misnomer here and gender is also seen to be subjected to the operations of power that exist at that specific point of time.

Class/Gender

Shahani and Ghosh argue that studying gender to the exclusion of other categories such as race, class and caste offers a one-dimensional view and insist on examining these categories not as independent but interdependent ones (3815-16). Class and gender are two strong forces which when brought together problematise the power discourse. A simplistic discourse on power confines itself to delineating one class (working class) as inferior to the other (ruling class), and one gender (female) as subordinate to the other (male). However, in practice, there is more to such a straightforward delineation than meets the eye. A few incidents from the select novels draw attention to the complex workings of power in a deeply gendered and class-conscious society.

Foucault famously comments, "power is exercised rather than possessed." It is not a status enjoyed solely by the dominant class but merely a consequence of strategic placements which encompass the roles played by the dominated segment as well (*Discipline* 26-27). The enmeshed network of class, gender and power is brought to surface in the following anecdote from *Story*. Baqua recalls how during his teenage years he joined a gang of boys in the slum who habitually molested girls. "They wanted in some way to avenge their shameful existence. They followed girls from wealthy families and when the opportunity came, assaulted them. A sort of revenge, you understand?" (Nambisan 141) Baqua discusses one particularly tormenting episode. An American girl once visited the slum as part of her research that would

eventually fetch fund for the slum's development. She got brutally raped and killed by the gang of young boys who befriended her in the slum. It is not desire for sex that leads to such atrocities but the desire for power. "None looked in the direction of the ditch in which lay the angel of their dreams who had had to be destroyed to prove the uselessness of her caring" (143).

Feeling of powerlessness drives the underprivileged to engage in acts of violence against women from the affluent class to establish supremacy. What is of significance to the study here is that the young boys belonging to the lower stratum of social relations choose to sexually torture women from well-to-do households. They are not shown to be confronting men from the higher ups of the society nor are they shown to be seeking revenge by any means other than sexually violating women's bodies. The gender of both the parties involved figure prominently in the class struggle here. The boys can no longer be treated as victims of class difference. In the given circumstances, contrary to popular belief, the girl does not enjoy the privileges of belonging to an upper class. This raises the question: Are the workers in the slum absolutely powerless at all times? No one is perpetually powerless. Their in-built feeling of inferiority fuels them to seek power and establish supremacy in ways that are dangerous to the social fabric. Hengehold contends that the likelihood of men committing rape is more when they are in groups, as a means of camaraderie and bonding, than when alone ("When Safety" 59). Gayle Rubin calls "traffic in women" the position of women as objects of exchange, mediation, or protection for men (174-76). Brownmiller views the act of rape as a means for male rivalry and male bonding (187). Even in the context of an "individual" rape, she contends, a rapist attacks not an individual but an individual of a particular class, community etc. She maintains that rape is never an individualistic act but a reflection of a social framework in

which all men hold all women in a perpetual state of fear (15). The socio-political vectors that encourage men to rape fall within this ambit. Gender and class are categories that defy linear mapping.

Alok Mukherjee observes how a group sustains its domination by ensuring that status quo prevails (23). So, those in positions of power constantly seek to keep their status intact. Benny, Ponnu's boss, expresses this insecurity when he warns Ponnu and Chellam with: "I have two daughters. Try any hanky-panky and I'll kick you all the way to your village" (Nambisan, *Story* 49). If his authority were unconditional, this warning would have been unnecessary. The workers would refrain from meddling with the daughters of their boss even without any prior cautioning. These words bring into discussion the intersections of gender and class with power. On the one hand Benny is seen to be ordering the boys around with an iron fist, performing the role of an employer belonging to a "superior" class. On the other hand, the presence of daughters in his family seems to leave him on an unsteady ground. He becomes overtly concerned about their safety. This is an indication that he believes that his workers – people from supposedly "inferior" class – are capable enough to harm his daughters. When gender gets into the picture along with the question of class, then irrespective of the class of the perpetrator, the female gender is treated to be vulnerable.

Shifting Roles of Entities

Along with multiple relations of power accessible to individuals, there prevails multiple positions of power for entities in a given social situation. The value and power of entities like body, God and concepts like knowledge, language and the like, also fluctuate and remain governed by context. The following are some such entities that shift roles in the maze of power relations in the select narratives.

Body

The physical human body and the social body mutually constitute each other (Bourdieu, *In Other Words* 190). Therefore studying individual human body in the context of power relations in a way helps shed light on the functionings of the social body. Kamla's body in *Sari* becomes both a site of domination and resistance. Her bodily presence and her tangible voice become an expression of her potential. She uses her "dishevelled" appearance and her "vulgar" mouth as weapon against those who caused her distress i.e. what is usually denigrated and considered as a sign of weakness, becomes her source of power. Alison Brown places on record how every power has the potential to sprout forth resistance. Some of these acts of resistance however sometimes provide more ammunition to the very power they seek to overthrow, by making power seem harmless or too harmful to play against, or all-pervasive, making it almost irresistible. When the oppressed believe they are entitled to some inalienable rights, they experience a false sense of security and thereby are less likely to battle against exploitative relations of power (49-50). Kamla does not believe she has rights nor does she consider the power of her violators to be permanent and unquestionable. Thus, her resistance becomes strategically significant. The police are involved by the Guptas to reiterate their might. The police, in turn, establish their supremacy by raping her. She narrates the gruesome act to Ramchand in no-nonsense terms: "'You'd think they'd be satisfied just raping me, wouldn't you? But the second one . . . he did this . . . with a lathi because I kicked him in the stomach.' At the last words, a trace of satisfaction appeared on her face, and the beginnings of a twisted smile" (Bajwa, *Sari* 184). She refuses to yield, and as she demonstrates her protest by kicking the policeman, he uses brute force to secure his power.

In *Sari*, Kamla's body becomes both an instrument and an effect of power. The appalling act leaves her body bruised and she continues to bleed. In this context, her body is the site of victimisation. It seems like an effect of power operations that often seem to tilt in favour of the affluent class. However, Kamla refuses to settle for the state of abject powerlessness. The rape does not silence her. In line with Foucauldian thought, Kamla's body performs more than one function here. While being helpless on the one hand, on the other, she embraces the pain and trauma meted out to her, and ventures out in the open to challenge the Kapoors. Realising that her mere presence brings discomfort to the upper class, she boldly barges into the Kapoors' neighbourhood and swears at them profusely. Her caustic tongue embarrasses the Kapoors and her power to influence the course of action becomes conspicuous. She uses her very body, which was once used to stigmatise and victimise her, as an instrument of power. Kamla's body that refuses to be bogged down by inhuman sexual exploitation becomes her medium of expression of strength.

Apart from this angle of interpretation, Kamla's body may also be studied to illustrate how value of body shifts with changed circumstance. A miscarriage and ultimately her inability to carry a child in her womb lead Kamla to despondency (157). She is rendered weak and miserable by this one particular incapacity. It results in deep distress manifesting as constant melancholy, rage and alcoholism. It also leads to caustic words of accusation and physical violations against her by her husband. Contrarily, in the case of Saroja in *Town* it is precisely her pregnancy – her ability to carry a child – that drives her towards one violence after another. Her husband being a man-child does not help matters much. The family, consisting of her husband's parents and his two brothers, engages in frequent taunts of Saroja, a young bride. After the birth of her first child she strives hard to never get pregnant again.

But as fate would have it she conceives another baby. It is while still bearing their second child that she kills her husband. One day her husband Vasu swims into a particularly dangerous zone and while attempting to save him from strong currents, Saroja suddenly decides to end the troubles once and for all. She strangles him and lets the water carry him away (Nambisan 40). She flees her in-laws' home along with her first son Gundumani, and kills the child in her womb en route (42). The ability of the body here becomes a disability for Saroja. While her body's reproductive capacity becomes a source of powerlessness driving Saroja towards crimes, it is the lack of that ability that disempowers Kamla. The shift in value of the reproductive ability is perceptible. Similarly, an attribute generally deemed desirable becomes less desirable for Manohar in *Town* when he blames his height for being a cause of weakness. Listening to him, Saroja who yearns to be taller than her present self is puzzled as "this man is ashamed of his height! Who knows better than Saroja that every inch of tallness is a god-given blessing" (32). Body parts and functions derive power from context.

Rajakumari's body which serves as the cause of concern for Kumari's family in *Town* becomes a commodity of value for Aunty, who takes her in after Kumari escapes her home. This stranger, whom Kumari fondly called Aunty, pushes her into sex work, and Kumari gradually adapts. Her body then becomes a prized possession. Even before attending to the first customer, as a young girl, she is fed nutritious food in copious amounts and administered injections in order to enhance the quality of her body (62). Also, post retirement, Kumari demands pension for sex workers. She wonders if a man who works a salaried job is given pension post his active service "why not a harlot who gives pleasure to the seekers of pleasure?" (120) Acknowledging that this view is problematic, given that women's bodies are treated

as mere tools for pleasure, for the purposes of this study, suffice it to note how body of a woman in this sense becomes a means of power, overturning conventional interpretations.

God

Baqua refuses to believe in the "All-Powerful" stature of God and asserts that in the everyday life, it is man that matters the most (Nambisan, *Story* 139). Between God (a figure of superior and unconditional power) and man (a figure conventionally under the control of superior power), Baqua values the latter. Similarly, in *Sari* Ramchand begins his work by praying to the Ganesha idol installed in his work place. However, when late for work, he saves time by skipping the regular habit of bowing before Ganesha and utilises the time thus saved, to run up the stairs and report for work (Bajwa 6). The traditional hierarchy of power is toppled even in such mundane activities of Ramchand. Even God's power diminishes in comparison with Mahajan. When one misfortune after another strikes Kamla and Chander, their attitude towards worship and God also changes drastically. After discovering his wife's habit of drinking, Chander seeks solace by visiting a temple nearby. Contrarily, after a series of unpleasant events that wreck her life, Kamla, who always treated her deity with immense respect, soon refrains from praying:

> Then he [Chander] went to sit at the Hanuman temple, trying to keep his tears from flowing on to his cheeks. . . . She [Kamla] stopped cleaning the house, she stopped praying to the small clay Shiva idol in the corner – the one to which she had once so lovingly offered flowers every morning, she stopped taking baths. (15)

In a similar vein, being forced to overcome several hardships in life, Kumari also unabashedly declares how the Goddess "has no time for me, I have no time for her" (Nambisan, *Town* 156).

With respect to money, even God becomes of secondary importance for Lectric Mamu. He wonders, "Why do the rich and the powerful need to beg anything from god, they do not need any god" (126). For him money helps one attain a powerful status in society, and God pales in comparison. Even God is not immune to factors that determine the condition of any entity in a given power structure. The "All-Powerful" is in fact powerful only circumstantially.

Money

Michèle Barrett explains how power is incorporated in the practices of everyday life. It cannot be treated as a resource which is possessed by an individual or group and which when possessed by one party, leaves much less for the other (135). Lipman-Bluemen affirms how money, generally a worthy resource is stripped of value when other entities prove more vital for survival at a given point of time. Those in power often elevate the resources they possess (money, physical strength, skills etc.) as the ones that are key to a task at hand. Since value associated with resources is situational, there is scope for re-evaluation of over-looked resources and assert their potential (112).

In *Story,* when Chellam decries the amount of effort he had to put in to earn money which invariably gets spent, Ponnu comments, "Money's useless if you don't buy something with it" (Nambisan 52). Even the power of money is tied to the purpose it serves. Possessing money does not necessarily translate into possessing power. Baqua maintains that money corrupts mind. He mocks Simon and openly states how having money and having the ability to get what one desires make one

stupid. As opposed to convention, financial prowess is ridiculed here. Financial stability need not always retain an upper hand when other entities are also in play in the game of power. In *Story* Senthamarai's eligibility for marriage is interlinked with various other factors. "If she [Senthamarai] had been better-looking, it would not have mattered that her parents were poor. If they had money, her looks would not have mattered" (150). A woman's appearance and her family's financial status are both seen to be playing significant roles in the social system of power. Kumari mocks Sugandha boss, a reputed businessman who runs factories and earns huge sums of money, for lacking a sense of humour. In her eyes "the richest man in our town is also the poorest" (Nambisan, *Town* 58).

When wealth is generally used as a tool to gain dominance within a social circle, curiously enough Simon finds it a burden to have been born rich. After marrying a middle class Hindu girl much to the chagrin of everyone in his circle of friends and family, Simon describes the experience as, "You don't know what it's like – to feel so liberated" (Nambisan, *Story* 32). Not being tied down by riches sets him free. The ideas of power and freedom remain highly fluid and contingent upon various factors. Being deprived of money paradoxically makes Simon feel at ease: "I was attracted to austerity (and therefore to Harini) and felt good about foregoing inherited wealth; I was also infatuated by the indulgences of wealth, which had many things going for it" (35). When working as a maid in a household, Valli comes across ad films in which little boys appear to be poor. Deepa, a young girl in the house, explains, "Ad men are clever. They want to show that rich people also like simple things. It's stylish to be like that" (66). Being simple apparently appeals to prospective buyers. The lives of the poor suddenly become desirable and appealing. This has the power to accelerate the sales of the product.

As a young student, Kumari desired passionately to go to school. However, her dreams shatter. She is pushed into flesh trade in order to sustain herself after running away from her home. But soon she forgoes money in favour of knowledge. In this line of work she encounters men from different professions and from each she demands to be taught. She proudly declares to a doctor, "If you teach me for half an hour, you don't have to pay" (Nambisan, *Town* 107). Doctors, teachers, bankers among others impart her knowledge (107, 155). She enthusiastically fills the pages of her notebook with her learnings. Contrary to conventional expectations, a sex worker values knowledge over money. She exults how "even though I was a whore, I could make such a demand" (107).

Knowledge

The translator's notes in Foucault's *Archaeology* draw attention to the fact that in the French language, the terms *connaissance* and *savoir,* which denote knowledge, carry two meanings – the ways in which subject is related to the object of knowledge and the principles that facilitate knowledge-gaining (15). In the novels under scrutiny, characters' approach towards various branches of knowledge, processes involved in and purposes served by the knowledge-gaining exercise are underscored by power relations. After working at Sahas' clinic for a considerable period of time, Prince decides to practise as a doctor on his own. His mother, Sylvie, in fact takes it a mark of prestige for her son to be able to pronounce a patient dead (Nambisan, *Story* 176). Ironically, informing someone of the death of one's loved one becomes a means of power.

In *Sari*, Bajwa portrays a clash between money and knowledge. Both these act as markers of status, and thereby become symbols of power. Brown reminds how in Foucauldian scheme, traces of discourses may be discerned in every operation of

power. Knowledge of one's own self requires an active disentangling of power strands (77). Both Rina Kapoor and her mother attempt to secure a place for themselves in the system of power. While Rina's mother does not attach much importance to learning, Rina and Mrs Sachdeva find education to be empowering. Sachdeva appreciates Rina for not choosing a life partner from an affuent family by remarking, "So nice for you, and actually, Rina, I am glad you are not marrying into one of those business families" (Bajwa, *Sari* 92). The usage "one of those business families" in the statement quoted above betrays her contempt for the business class families. Interestingly, those with money at their disposal are detested by those with knowledge in their stead, and vice versa. Rina's words succinctly sum up the power struggle: "There are, of course, what we call the 'service class' families. They look down upon us moneyed, uncultured ones, and we look down upon them, for they have no money, no big houses" (93). The roles of knowledge and money keep shifting constantly.

In *Sari*, Mrs Sandhu, Mrs Gupta and Mrs Bhandari are sketched as typical "upper class" ladies whose values appear shallow and self-centred. The following two sets of introduction presented by two characters in the narrative obliquely indicate what each one of them thought to be the source of other's power: "You know Mrs Sandhu? . . . Her husband is Chief Engineer in the Electricity Board" (205). The character is identified by her husband's profession. Nothing is explicitly stated about her own personal or professional life. The position that her husband holds in the society becomes her source of power. Having rightly judged this, Mrs Gupta introduces Mrs Sandhu by referring to the latter's husband. Conversely, Mrs Bhandari presents Mrs Sachdeva by emphasising the latter's post in the professional circle: "And I am sure you know Mrs Sachdeva. Head of English Department . . ."

(205). Her marital status or spouse does not figure anywhere in the conversation. Here, education becomes the tool for domination and hence her identity is forged around predominantly that.

While academic education is placed on a high pedestal here, in the following few anecdotes from *Story,* knowledge of a different kind is valued. Chellam and Ponnu, belonged to a small village called Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu. They were born into families that were not economically sound and the two were not particularly bright students as well. Mr Benny from Madras visits their school in order to recruit students for a job in the city. "Mr Benny interviewed dozens and rejected them all. . . . A fifteen-minute interview and they were through: Paul Ponnuraj and Chellam Sinnasamy. Two perennial backbenchers instead of the best in class?" (Nambisan 46) Until then, Chellam and Ponnu were mocked for being dull in academics. With Benny choosing them over other students, the two are elevated in position. Precisely, their lack of interest in academics earns them an opportunity to earn money.

Bilkis – wife of Gaffur – finds it demeaning for Swamy to give up being a butcher and take up teaching. She insists, "You're a meat seller; you have been trained to be a meat seller. Why lower your status?" (62-63) She challenges conventional hierarchy of knowledge that considers academic education to be superior. She firmly believes that it is needless to provide children with academic knowledge when what they really need is food for their stomachs. Swamy explains how education would ultimately help children feed themselves by earning a job of their own. However, Swamy does not make light of Bilkis' take on education. He does not quit his job and continues to work as a butcher while also being a teacher. Knowledge and power are in a co-dependent relationship, wherein knowledge

requires power for classification and expression, while power depends on useful knowledge for its formation (Foucault, *Discipline* 27-28).

Karupaswamy openly defies laws and employs young boys in his factory. He justifies by claiming how the boys, having been exposed to such rigorous work atmosphere, will be much more capable of tackling the harsh realities of the world than those sent to school (Nambisan, *Story* 124). He considers heavy physical work as empowering. Though this justification is debatable and any behaviour that puts children through torture cannot be encouraged, this pattern of thought can be subjected to a closer study. What the world considers to be disempowering, is in this context reversed and presented as something that strengthens one's position. This calls for a rethinking of the powerful/powerless categories. Here is another instance of how conventionally disregarded forms of knowledge gain significance based on context. When Simon's cat, Thangu, falls sick and refuses to eat, Simon depends on Thatkan to tend to Thangu (207). Thatkan, Velu's friend from Sitara, has a keen understanding of animals' bodies which helps him gain authority over Simon. Though he belongs to the so-called well-educated, upper stratum of society, Simon is here seen to be at the mercy of Thatkan, whose particular breed of knowledge acts in Thatkan's favour in the power grid. In any case, the problematic and highly contextual nature of all forms of power could well be argued to be true of all forms of knowledge as well.

Swamy, in *Story,* is first introduced to the readers when, in an auto-rickshaw ride back to his apartment, Simon meets a teacher carrying bags of raw meat. "I [Simon] turned away. I wanted nothing to do with teachers who carried bags filled with raw meat" (14). Discourses and norms dictate life in a social set-up. Alan Sheridan recapitulates Foucault's delineation of the following techniques by which

certain topics are excluded from mainstream discussions and pushed to the peripheries of discourse: problematising truth or falsity – e.g. madness, placing limits within discourse – e.g. the notion of the author, and restricting access to speak – e.g. disqualifying speakers in terms of formal education, certification and the like (Sheridan 121-28). A butcher's discourse is disqualified and his access to speak is restricted. Swamy, the school teacher in Sitara, also works as a butcher. While the teaching profession wins social approval, butcher's job is usually scorned at. Even those who buy and eat meat do not generally value the work of a butcher. By managing both his jobs skilfully, Swamy already stands outside acceptable discourse. His voice becomes the voice of resistance. He stands at a unique place where forces of class, money and knowledge vie with each other for dominance. As a teacher he is bestowed with a certain amount of authority over those who are not educated. On the one hand, power that comes with knowledge is enjoyed by Swamy. On the other hand, his job as a butcher and his upbringing in a slum push him to the status of an underdog. This dialectical tension between power and powerlessness is conspicuous in the character of Swamy till the end of the novel.

Brown interprets Foucault's insistence on defining knowledge as comprehension of outside world as insistence on the need to look outside of the discourse one is embedded in. It is not merely an exterior space that denotes objects surrounding a subject. This outside is the space opened up by "colliding discourses" (22-23). To gather knowledge regarding anyone or anything in Pingakshipura and/or to receive wise pieces of advice on managing life, people of the town promptly approach Rajakumari. She serves as the "local know-all" (Nambisan, *Town* 147). This skews conventional conceptualisations of who possesses power to impart knowledge and wisdom.

Language

Language plays a predominant role in the discussion of power relations among individuals. When Baqua, a slum-dweller, is introduced to Simon and the group of visitors, Baqua's grasp over English language is specifically described by the writer. He immediately acquires an aura of dominance. Without delving into the postcolonial interpretation of English language as mark of colonial authority, it suffices to place on record how in the given circumstance Baqua shifts from the dominated to the dominant class. Also, the intermingling of Tamil and Hindi in Dayaratna's vocabulary is particularly persuasive. When he utters words of assurance to his followers in both the languages alternatively, it appears more sincere and this works in his favour (Nambisan, *Story* 187). While refined language empowers the speakers here, it is the use of simple, lay-man vernacular in the place of medical jargons that fetches more patients for Dr Prince. Though not a licensed doctor, Prince starts a clinic to treat the downtrodden. He practises ethical standards and does away with jargons. Contents of the board detailing services offered at the clinic is worth mention here – Dr Prince for the Poor, Dr Prem - Stomach, Dr Vaidyanathan - Women, Dr Vajra - Bone (181). Eventually, his clinic gains popularity.

In *Sari* Mrs Gupta's rooms have been described in such vivid detail paying special attention to the presence of highly expensive, branded cosmetic products – L'Oreal, Lakme, Revlon and the like. Mrs Gupta persuades her husband to adopt the methods of Feng Shui in interior decoration with "It is just like our Vaastu Shastra, but more modern. There are books and all in English about it, and Mrs Bhandari has done it too" (Bajwa 15). All throughout the story, English language becomes a focal point for power. The mere fact that a particular style of home-furnishing has been written in English essentially enhances its efficacy.

In *Sari* Ramchand spends a substantial amount of time learning the English language. His father dearly wished to provide his son the best of education in an English medium school. The untimely demise of his father forces Ramchand to drop out of eighth class and get employed as a sales assistant in a Sari House. However, his thirst for knowledge motivates him to learn the English language. An assignment from the Sevak Sari House lands him in the mansion of the Kapoors. The elaborate sari selection that takes place in the Kapoor household for the upcoming grand wedding parallels the elaborate efforts taken up by Ramchand to be English-educated for his grand personal transformation. While Ramchand finds himself helpless in front of educated customers, he chooses to learn the English language to feel in power. "He would read some good books. He had heard that Mahatma Gandhi had written an autobiography. Yes, he would start with that" (36). He comments how detective fiction gets repetitive and starts looking for something more serious to read. Also, as soon as he purchases a tattered old copy of an Oxford English Dictionary, he feels exhilarated and so much in power. "He felt armed to fight now. He hadn't done anything meaningful in such a long time. . . . He returned home feeling rejuvenated" (72). Reading and learning English, rather even taking a step towards it, is deemed meaningful. He feels guilty if he watches movies instead of studying words in English. It's only when he allocates some time for the English-learning exercise "that he could watch the film with a clear conscience" (95). He seems to be articulating a commonly accepted value. But what lies beneath it, is the power that percolates through such "common sense" views.

From one of his books, Ramchand reads, "The importance of English is well accepted. Importance of good English more so. Ability to use and know effective English is the correct and proper prelude to your successful professional career as

well as a dominant, commanding place in society" (174). English language is seen more as a tool of power than as a tool for communication. As a corollary, those who do not use the English language are pushed to an inferior status. When Kamla swears at the passers-by, the language she uses also contributes to her subjugation. Gokul faults Kamla with: "Just roams about. And the language she uses! . . . I can't tell you how I pity Chander" (120). The usage of the vernacular brands the user to be uncultured and thereby the user's words become impotent. Mrs Sachdeva fumes at Ramchand when he narrates the ordeal that Kamla was put through by Sachdeva's friends, the Kapoors and the Guptas. She immediately retorts, "I don't want to listen to all that vulgar rubbish again, *that too in Hindi*. Why are you bothering me about all this? It is no concern of mine.' . . . [And] she walked out on trembling legs" (214; my emphasis). While English language is treated as a reflection of one's sophistication, Hindi becomes the medium of communication for the deprived. However, as Foucault's extensive deliberations reveal, such neat classifications of power and powerlessness are mere constructs. The italicised words in the quote above substantiate this interpretation. Mrs Sachdeva finds descriptions in Hindi to be offensive. She specifically mentions how using Hindi to narrate sexual violence is vulgar. It indicates how Hindi language wields a power of its own. Had it been a language of no significance, words uttered in the language would not carry any particular importance and may be ignored. However, in this case, both the content and the form of expression contribute to the power of a discourse that is generally branded to be unacceptable. As Ramchand encounters more and more such paradoxical aspects of English language, he starts to reconsider his views on the same. "It wouldn't do to be impressed by things just because they were in English, he thought wisely" (116).

Brown clarifies that Foucault does not believe in the possibility of a complete emancipation but reiterates how by acknowledging the contingent quality of any given arrangement of knowledge/power, possibilities to move towards better arrangements emerge (63). When he realises he is incapable of helping Kamla out of her wretched state, the exercise of learning the English language, which he had enthusaisatically engaged in, suddenly appears futile to Ramchand. "*A policeman is a very useful and important public servant*, Ramchand read in the essay book, his heart heavy with pain" (Bajwa, *Sari* 188). Ramchand looks up the dictionary to find the meaning of the word *baton* used in the essay describing the duties of a policeman. "It just meant a lathi, Ramchand thought tiredly. This time there wasn't the usual excitement of chasing a word around the squiggly dictionary till he had found the meaning . . . *He did it with a lathi*, the anguished voice said in his head" (188). The power that seemed vested in a language per se is now understood to be contingent upon other elements surrounding it.

In *Tell Me,* Sadhna who tastes exceptional success with her debut novel soon hits roadblock with her second. The praises heaped on her for her maiden attempt lodge her into a difficult spot. The undue expectations placed on her in the literary circle become an impediment for her. Her previous felicity with words fades and she struggles to conjure up her second fictional world. "The very words that had once liberated her now seemed like adversaries, cunningly designing themselves to lie, conceal and lead astray" (Bajwa 141-42). Circumstantially, language becomes not an instrument but a barrier for self-expression.

Acts

Every act and activity derives strength from context. Swamy's following remark merits attention: "To be hungry is all right when your next meal is assured.

Cold weather is okay when you know you have a blanket" (Nambisan, *Story* 170). It is uncertainty that thrusts one into a state of misery. Hunger is not in itself disempowering, but the circumstances surrounding it carry weight. In *Story* Velu's friend Thatkan and Thatkan's family live in Sitara. Ordinarily the family would be deemed powerless and devoid of any authority. However, this obvious powerlessness is not total. Thatkan's father, Kittan, had for sometime in the past worked in Bombay and finds it a privilege to be working for the rich: "Once you've cleaned the toilets of rich people and seen their shit, you've seen everything,' he [Kittan] said" (42). The sarcasm in the statement above cannot be missed. A job that is demeaning and leaves one susceptible to diseases of all kinds seems to be granting Kittan a unique means of authority. The power of the affluent means nothing to someone who has been exposed to such unhygienic, filthy scenes. For the wealthy to be in power, their power needs to be acknowledged and respected. Here, in the place of respect one can trace a tone of mockery leaving the status of the well-off open to questions. The workers in such a household do not necessarily play by the rules of the rich and this reveals the imbalance of power relations.

Kittan advises his son to quit school and follow the footsteps of his father. He takes great pride in being summoned to remove blockages from drains. One of the most forceful statements in the narrative that calls for a rethinking of stereotypical definitions comes from Kittan when he reminds, "Our food comes from other people's shit, don't forget" (229). Nothing can ever be debased and considered valueless. Likewise, the nephew of Sugandha boss in *Town,* is a much desirable bridegroom, given his affluent status in the society. However, it is scrap and debris that bestow him with this enviable prosperity. "His wealth will soon run into crores, here's another miracle for you, rupee notes coming out of garbage heap" (Nambisan

168-69). As Shahani and Ghosh note, there is pleasure in subversion when expectation is thwarted and gratification not just delayed but "irretrievably problematised" (3816).

Sexual acts and sexuality are also not immune to the web of forces. Ramchand finds Sudha, the wife of his landlord, to be extremely attractive. He refrains from indulging in fantasies involving his female customers and instead chooses to imagine erotic situations with Sudha. "His fantasies made him worry that he was not respecting her as he should. To make himself feel better, he was extra polite whenever he happened to meet her, but continued to fantasise about her when he was alone" (Bajwa, *Sari* 89). But at one point Ramchand is deeply agitated by Kamla's recounting of her brutal sexual assault. This has a telling effect on his ability to engage in sexual acts. He is unable to fantasise and find pleasure by arousing himself as he usually does, as "the only images he could conjure up were the vomit stains on Kamla's blouse and the bloodstains on her sari" (200). What was once comforting now becomes a source of anguish.

In almost similar lines, when the security guard blows his whistle to signal to the residents of the colony that he is on vigil and actively guarding the neighbourhood, instead of experiencing a sense of safety, Rani feels the exact opposite. "She would hear the colony watchman whistle, who intended it to be a reassuring sound, it would make her claustrophobic" (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 153). The act reminds her of how far away she is from her own home and how the new place appears to be strikingly alien to her self. The supposedly empowering act in this case disempowers her.

Events

History is not simply a continuous flow of events but is rather a power struggle (Foucault, "Nietzche" 85). The term *events* is used not in a strictly Foucauldian sense and is used to signify affairs that impact an individual. This refers to past and present occurrences, and to situations and incidents that are part of a character's genealogy. These are capable of significantly influencing a character's access to power. The fate of Kamla in *Sari* cannot be examined without referring to information conveyed about her in the background. The forces that shape her life are invariably associated with these background elements and events which deserve to be foregrounded in this study of power. Chander accuses Kamla, "You killed your mother. You ate up your own father. Your brother lost his job. Now you have eaten up my child. Soon, you will also devour me" (Bajwa, *Sari* 157). While she has wilfully done nothing to bring about any of the above mentioned misfortunes, Chander firmly believes Kamla to be the cause of the family's hardships. This belief has the power to torment her in every stage of life. Even events that would have otherwise been brushed aside as insignificant, start to gain prominence, with Chander's conviction that Kamla is bad omen herself. He blurts out, "I should have known. The first day you stepped into this house, you brought ill luck with you. On the very first day after our marriage, I dropped my mother's photograph while moving it from the shelf to make space for your things. The glass broke . . ." (157). Even when glass breaks as a result of his carelessness, Kamla is made to bear the brunt of it. Kamla, who was once a cheerful young girl, starts to stay aloof when one tragedy after another strikes her. She starts to steal supplies of alcohol strategically and consume them discreetly. "She developed a cunning that she never knew existed, hidden tucked away inside her somewhere" (158). Circumstances act as a medium for

traits to develop. The cunning is described as something that she was capable of unbeknownst to herself. But, in fact, this power to remorselessly steal is gained from the circumstances she is lodged in. The cunning is not possessed by her but is rather a part of her performance as dictated by the operations of power in the particular scene.

Forced to live in a taxi, Saroja finds the crammed spaces increasingly adding to discomfort but observes how "the children have no problem. Having been born to a certain level of hardship they're not aware of it" (Nambisan, *Town* 104-05). Since they have not had an opportunity to live in better situations in the past, their familiarity with adverse circumstances equip them to handle adversity better. The act disempowers the adults but leaves the children unaffected because of varied circumstantial forces. Again, it is familiarity that makes pain a lot more desirable for Saroja than the fear of facing new and unfamiliar changes, even if it were for the betterment of her life. "Inside her canopy of pain with the pegs fastened down, she is beginning to feel sheltered and somewhat safe. As if pain itself is home" (194). She steadfastly holds on to her belief that her husband and children will return sooner or later. Pain empowers her to persist.

The scene of Kamla's rape becomes more brutal when the scene of opulence from Kapoors is placed alongside. These descriptions make the act more gruesome.

> While they [Tarun and Shilpa] were having dinner, Kamla was being raped by the two policemen who had brought her in. Then, one of the policemen, married man, went home to his wife, while the other stayed back, drinking cheap rum and listening to film songs on the radio, hoping to have another go at Kamla in the morning before letting her leave. (Bajwa, *Sari* 170-71)

The paraphernalia surrounding the crime brims with a tone of playfulness. The songs on the radio, the hotel where the young Kapoor couple enjoy their dinner, the

casualness with which the married policeman assaults Kamla and decides to go back home to his wife as a routine – all these seek to underplay the gravity of the inhuman sexual assault perpetrated on Kamla. The matter-of-fact depiction of the act without any explicit condemnation of it also contributes to the power of the narrative. Kamla receives no consolation from anyone. Her husband accuses her of not returning home on time and goes on to inflict more pain on her with his stinging words, "You should just kill yourself, Kamla, if you have any shame left" (171). The unkind words and unsympathetic response of everyone around further add to her distress. While a survivor of rape deserves empathy regardless of the circumstances she is lodged in, in this case, the circumstances she finds herself in also victimise her further. Ironically, these disempowering factors that augment the helplessness of Kamla trigger her vociferous resistance.

Similarly, the role of contingent factors at any given point of time becomes pronounced in Thatkan's tragic death in *Story*. Thatkan's scene of death becomes more poignant when the readers are apprised of his ambitions, desires and most importantly, his utter abhorrence of his father's job, which he was forced to do and which ultimately proved to be fatal. "Thatkan – Thatkan the Brave – drowned in shit, doing the one job he never wanted to do" (Nambisan, *Story* 231). Even the subject of death does not remain unaffected by the shifting nature of power relations. Visiting some one to mourn the death of their close relative is generally a depressing exercise. However, in *Tell Me,* Vaishali encourages Sadhna to attend the prayer meet of their schoolmate's deceased father with the hope of turning it into a profitable exercise in power. She suggests, "We should go. They are a very influential family" (Bajwa 155). Her intention is to not share grief but to benefit from their power of social

influence. Even such morbid events assume varied meanings and their value is determined by the circumstances they are hoisted in.

Spaces

Space remains central to any form of social life and is therefore integral to power performance (Foucault, "Space" 252). Rajchman illustrates how in Foucauldian perception spaces were constructed to make certain aspects visible and certain features invisible – thereby determining what are seeable in a society. The "eye of power" looks down and in turn categorises and thereby creates people with essential characters (103-04).

Saroja is discontent with the temporary arrangement of using taxi as a place of living. Sampathu, her husband, however tries to convince by explaining how a taxi is no different from any other building. It offers privacy and safety. He declares, "Our home, Saru is as secure as a mother's womb (watch your words, Sampathu, mothers' wombs are not always safe). The taxi is our own. When we are inside, the rest of the world is outside" (Nambisan, *Town* 88). Kumari's observation enclosed in the parenthesis above is an instance of how spaces derive power circumstantially. The fact that Sampathu makes this declaration to Saroja who was herself once forced by circumstances to abort a foetus in her womb, only reiterates the highly contextual nature of power.

When the womb is socially viewed as a secure space, the land of cremation is treated as its exact opposite. Conventionally, cremation ground and its premises are observed to be lands with no takers. It remains powerless in the market. This space therefore becomes available for a lower cost. Precisely, because of the reduced financial liability, Chellam purchases land adjoining this ground. "The following week he [Chellam] bought three cents of land adjacent to the fenced-off area where

Sitara cremated the dead" (Nambisan, *Story* 53). Ironically, those who live in such spaces find themselves to be insulated from robbery and transgressions. "Thieves were more afraid of the powers of the dead than of the living" (53). In this respect, the space acquires more force. The invisible has more power than the visible. Where power is not obvious and something appears to be the norm, that is precisely where Foucault insists that one bases one's study on. The topic of "shocking visibility" (Morris 38) finds a prominent place for itself in literature that seeks to "transgress."

Right at the beginning of the novel, Simon claims to be committing a transgression in *Story*. He is seen to be undertaking a train journey from his son's place, Delhi, back to his apartment in Chennai. En route he misses the train when he steps out for tea at Mathura railway station. He befriends a fruit-seller, Bhagwan Devi, at the station. She later turns out to be a petty thief. His inadequate knowledge lands him in embarrassing situations. He ends up speaking in favour of the woman when she is accused of being a pick-pocket by a passenger on the railway platform. Even after she herself confesses to being a petty thief, Simon continues to trust her in the rest of his journey. It is interesting to note here that it is Bhagwan Devi who assists him in boarding the next south-bound train. She takes care of his belongings when he leaves to use the toilet. When left out at a strange place, having lost all his belongings in the original train in which he was travelling from Delhi, Bhagwan Devi's presence becomes comforting to him. Simon – a resident of a posh apartment – is seen to be dependent on a pick-pocket. Simon realises, "The look she gave me implied sympathy for an old man sustained on stale bread" (Nambisan 10). Traveling in the general compartment of the train, Simon observes:

> The seatless multitudes stood, squatted, crouched and curled between the feet of strangers. Bundles, baskets and tins were hurled into the carriage, thrust

> beneath seats, flung on the upper berths. I felt morbidly *triumphant*, like after some achievement. If I said that to my family, it would give them yet another reason to call me an eccentric. (10; my emphasis)

Ironically, being able to travel in a local compartment makes Simon feel triumphant – feel powerful. Being constantly instructed by his family members as to what to do and what not to do in his life, the one time he finds himself travelling in a relatively less comfortable local compartment, it becomes an act of daring. Being surrounded by those who cannot afford a luxurious travel, ironically makes the one who can afford it, feel victorious. In the local compartment here, Bhagwan Devi seems to be more authoritative than Simon. The space itself becomes a forceful agent in deciding the status of an individual in a particular grid of power.

The characters in *Sari* are introduced along with their place of living. The upper/lower class distinction is evidently exhibited by the spaces they occupy as well. Figures like Mrs Sandhu are inextricably linked with their place of stay. "The Sandhus used to live in the *Power* Colony . . ." (Bajwa 12; my emphasis). The very name of the colony is a direct indication of the general attitude of those who reside in the said colony. The residents, who are rich business families and mostly those with white-collared jobs, pride themselves of being in power. However, as further examination of their roles in different social, political and familial set-ups show, this seemingly stable position they appear to enjoy in the system of power is not as stable, and they are as much subject to forms of external coercion. Under these circumstances, the usage "Power Colony" is, if anything, a misnomer.

Mrs Sandhu, while purchasing a gift for Mrs Gupta's daughter-in-law, is perturbed by the fact that the "Guptas were the only business family in their neighbourhood" (19). This signifies that the position the Guptas presently enjoy is

inextricably linked to the neighbourhood they live in. The absence of such equally affluent residents in the said area becomes a pre-requisite for the power of the Guptas. This puts the position of Guptas on an unstable ground. In another residential area, perhaps one that boasts of many such "business class" families, the Guptas cannot retain this stature.

Space embodies nature, social relations and meaning (Sack 329). Benny compares Sitara with Mumbai's Dharavi: "Inspired by the bigger and greater Bambai township, Dha-ra-vi. You've heard of Dharavi? This, you can say, is Dha-ra-vi's thangachi. Little sister . . ." (Nambisan, *Story* 50). Interestingly, a slum like Dharavi in Mumbai that exists in the margins of social stratum, becomes a symbol of grandeur here. The words "inspired by" in the quote above indicates that Benny considers Dharavi to be placed on a higher pedestal so much so that it becomes a model for Sitara to ape. Space that is typically treated with contempt and generally believed to be lacking in any real power is here elevated in position. For Benny, Sitara needs to grow up to the stature of Dharavi.

Conclusion

In conclusion, degree of power accessible to an individual or an entity is circumstantial. Each individual takes up different positions in the power strata and plays each one's role variously in relation to internal and external influences. Familial/social arrangements, factors like class, gender and an intersection of such social markers, are all pertinent to determination of a character's access to power. Entities like money, knowledge, language, body, God and the like, supposedly power-giving are also susceptible to this flux and cannot be studied in isolation from the social conditions they are ensconced in. Therefore, no one and no thing is in a perpetual state of domination nor subservience. As Shahani and Ghosh warn, a critic

must be wary of two opposing, equally fallacious, tendencies – viewing resistance as completely autonomous or viewing dominance as completely indomitable (3816). Here, Bourdieu's advocacy of a middle ground between individual agency and structural determinacy – without yielding to essentialist subjectivism and structuralist objectivism – may be recalled. It is in this plane a social agent navigates practically through constructed objects (*In Other Words* 90). This understanding of power relations as essentially relative in their range of function is thus an acknowledgement of the reassuring fact that there is always scope to effect a change in the social structure of power.

Chapter 4

Reciprocity

The term *reciprocity* has a place of significance in social theories and is often used to refer to the system of offering benefits to an individual in exchange for benefits obtained (Molm 119). Foucault also exploits the term to consolidate his findings on expectations of reciprocation in terms of physical pleasure in homosexual and heterosexual conjugal relations (“On the Geneaolgy” 232-33; *Care* 163). However, in this chapter the term is used bereft of its theoretical underpinnings, sociological implications, and particularly delimiting Foucauldian denotations. Notably, Foucault’s observations in a broader sense, negating the existence of fundamental phenomena in any society and affirming the presence of reciprocal relations with gaps between intentions that sustain such relations, are of relevance here (“Space” 247).

This chapter examines the role of reciprocity in relations of power. It seeks to draw attention to the particular aspect of power relation wherein one’s ability to exert power hinges on another’s particular kind of response. When an individual or a group of individuals conventionally placed in position of subservience do not respond to exertion of power in a manner as expected by the powerful, those trying to dominate find themselves on unsteady ground. This leads to desperate attempts to re-claim power leading to a re-assertion. This act of re-assertion becomes resourceful in establishing the value of reciprocity in any performance of power. The chapter predominantly sets forth to lay bare the intricacies behind such acts. The attempts to re-claim power may be broadly grouped together based on when they are undertaken. Some acts seek to neutralise an immediate damaging response (visible acts) while some others are taken up in anticipation of disruptive responses (invisible acts).

Visible Acts

When an unfavourable response threatens to topple one's dominant standing in the scheme of power relations, overt or covert means are employed to maintain one's dominion. Those seeking to re-establish power sometimes actively impose their superiority through overt acts which is the subject of concern in the first sub-segment. The second sub-segment delineates the covert means employed to passively re-instate one's position of prominence.

Active Engagement

The first sub-segment discusses explicit attempts at reclaiming power i.e. actions that are openly undertaken by those in dominating position against the subordinated when the latter's unexpected response undermines their position of dominance. Following instances from the select narratives may be examined in this light.

In *Sari*, Kamla hails from a family that struggled to make both ends meet and loses her mother early in life. She is soon made to fill up the void of her mother and is entrusted with familial responsibilities. After marriage with Chander, a sales assistant, more challenges and calamities await her. Her husband loses his job in a factory and the family is in dire straits financially. Her miscarriage adds to her woes. Her husband blames her for the misfortunes and yells, "You have been very unlucky for me, Kamla. Ever since I married you, I have been having nothing but bad luck" (Bajwa 156). She gets castigated as a vulgar woman and her presence is denounced. The novel reaches a climax when she takes it upon herself to avenge the wrongs done to her husband by the immensely wealthy Guptas and Kapoors. The two families jointly ran a cloth-processing unit where Chander was previously employed. The business ran into rough weather and employees, including Chander, were dismissed

without payment of three months of wages. This left the family starving for days. Kamla identifies this to be the trigger point for all her familial troubles and decides to openly take to task the affluent Kapoors and Guptas. While even her mere presence is detested by the society, her rain of abuse in front of the Guptas holding them responsible for depriving her of a decent living becomes intolerable for the sophisticated class. The policemen are summoned by the Guptas and she is promptly punished for her "indecent" behaviour. She spends one night in police custody and is mercilessly raped by two policemen. This does not deter her. She continues to protest. This time, she vociferously decries the ways of the Kapoors – yet another family of repute. And this time her life is not spared. Men are sent to her home. She is dragged out and bashed to death, for everyone around to watch.

Echoing the primary tenet of intersectionality that seeks to examine how different social identity markers like class, race, nationality, gender, ability, sexuality and age often coalesce in order to produce marginalised subjects (Okolosie 90), Kamla's gender and her lower class status both collude in bringing her to this state of utter misery. However, the study intends to focus elsewhere – on a peculiar facet of power relation underlying her victimisation. On the face of it, Kamla is seen to be absolutely helpless and victimised by the society. However, on inspecting the character and her actions closely, a curious condition of power flow becomes discernible. Is Kamla inconsequential by all means? If she were powerless, and her words and deeds totally impotent, then the Guptas and the Kapoors would not in the least be bothered by her presence nor her strong language. The following observation of Foucault regarding the discussion of sex in public may be extended to the study of Kamla's strongly worded censure of the affluent in public. When sex is relegated to the background, forbidden and repressed to the point of silence, then the very act of

even broaching the subject of sex becomes an intentional transgression. Anyone who adopts this language would then place oneself external to influence of power, unsettle existent law and set the ground for freedom (*History* 6). By reacting against those in power, Kamla tries to place herself outside the system. The so-called powerful families immediately feeling threatened by Kamla's public censure reveals the vulnerability of those in superior power. Their position in the maze of power operations is determined by the response of those around them, who are also participants in the process of power. This implies that for the Guptas and the Kapoors to be in this state of domination, "Kamlas" also need to play their part in the performance. Her subjugated existence and a corresponding subservient response are indispensable for the seemingly potent groups.

Gokul, a sales assistant in Sevak Sari House reasons to Ramchand as to how Kamla's inappropriate yelling has been a source of great discomfort for the Guptas. He defends, "Those people are respected, you know. They didn't know what to do. Finally, they sent for the police" (Bajwa, *Sari* 197). This incident shows how the Guptas' position is tied to other's response. The fact that they are widely respected, instead of emboldening them, weakens them. They are constrained to pretend to be on stable ground in matters of power, and episodes like that of Kamla's threaten to overturn the illusion of stability. This is also one of the major reasons why the Kapoors and the Guptas remain baffled when she confronts them. They make every attempt to avoid an open clash with her which would be a silent recognition of the fact that their power is questionable. The ultimate killing of Kamla by the Kapoors is a step taken towards muting Kamla's voice. If her voice did not matter, if she were devoid of any influence in the society, why are such extreme steps taken to ensure her silence and wipe out her existence? Also, does the elimination of one such voice of

dissent guarantee an unhindered exercise of power for the Guptas and Kapoors? It is clear then that unhindered and unqualified exercise of power is never possible because for them to maintain their higher position in the power structure, those like Guptas and Kapoors are invariably dependent on appropriate forms of reciprocation from others. If others choose to disrupt the expected pattern, the dominant is unhinged. Paradoxically, death becomes a symbol of Kamla's power, while the act of killing betrays Kapoors' insecurity and their instability in the complex power grid.

An anecdote from the life of Devaraya, a bone specialist who enjoys great fame and respect for his expertise, may be recounted here to show how such fame and name exist on precarious grounds. One morning his seven year old daughter Chandrika takes a terrible fall down a flight of stairs and approaches her father for help. The man dismisses her cries as childish complaint. By evening, however, things get worse and paralysis sets in. He tries in vain to help restore normalcy to her limbs with the assistance of expert doctors. Chandrika, with her cognitive faculties intact, keeps bringing up her father's utter neglect that caused this condition. He recognises the danger in such talks from his daughter which has the potential to mar his reputation in the field. Devaraya withdraws all advanced medical treatment, brings her back home and bandages the girl from top to bottom. "Within days she weakened so much that she could not speak. . . . [He] thus reached the only solution that would save his name from being tarnished . . ." (Nambisan, *Town* 167). Undesirable response from a patient, a child nonetheless, is all that takes for the doctor to lose his say in the web of power operations. The brutal episode avouches that.

Lectric Mamu (also known as Ghulam Bhai) in *Town* gets visibly distraught when Saroja spurns his sexual advances. "A few of Ghulam Bhai's targets are too virtuous to let any man other than their own husbands sleep with them and Mamu

eventually forgives such women. Saroja is different. Hers is an arrogance. . ." that must be promptly reigned in (143). It is evident that Mamu desires not bodily pleasure but power. This becomes more pronounced later when he realises that Saroja has been offering sexual favours to her employer Devaraya in return for money to purchase land. This infuriates Mamu beyond measure. When Saroja frantically looks for her missing daughter at the end of the novel, he once again approaches her with the promise of finding the girl in exchange for sex. Such constant approaches from him illustrate how insecure he is in this scheme of power. A favourable response from Saroja is inevitable for him to cement his social standing.

Saroja's in-laws torture her defenceless little child Gundumani. They derive some cynic sense of pleasure from tormenting him. "The two brothers hate her because, unlike their own wives, she is spirited, she fights back. So they target her little son, Gundumani, they treat him like a plaything" (37). It is evident that it is their inherent hankering after power that leads them to resort to such cruelty. Saroja herself is a child, married off as soon as she attained puberty. Years later she recounts her misery to her son who asks if she had done something wrong to warrant such deplorable behaviour. She answers, "If being strong-willed and a little bold was wrong, yes" (240). Such appalling acts by the brothers-in-law, if anything, demonstrate not their power but their powerlessness. The behaviour shows how their position of dominance is perched on shaky grounds. Saroja must accede in order for them to retain their position of dominance. When denied an appropriate response the shell around the illusion of power comes off and they are forced to reclaim their supreme status.

When Neelam tries to get hold of her son Bittu who cries insconsolably, the child refuses to budge. He instead reaches out to Rani. This exasperates Neelam. She

rues "What is this family coming to? You have made the child forget who his mother is" (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 99). An adverse response from an innocent child appears to invalidate her value. Even when battling a disastrous flooding situation in her house caused by clogged drains, Neelam remains moored on power politics. She rebukes Rani for overstepping her boundaries when she proposes possible solutions to remedy the situation. Neelam vehemently reminds, "You keep quiet. You are not the head of the house" (95). Such a benign response from her sister-in-law is sufficient for Neelam to feel threatened and she immediately swings into action to reassert herself openly.

Some of the following anecdotes demonstrate how evoking appropriate responses also becomes a strategy for employers who attempt to wrest control and retain their position of superior power. Both employer-employee and employee-employee relations are heavily laced with reciprocal power relations. Extrapolating Foucault's views on power, Mills explains how power cannot be considered as a possession, but is rather a performance, a strategy. It may be viewed not as a noun – as something that pre-exists and be utilised to some purpose, but as a verb – as something that actively does something (35). In *Sari*, the relationships among the owner of the Sevak Sari House (Bhimsen Seth), the manager (Mahajan) and the six shop assistants (Ramchand, Gokul, Hari, Chander, Shyam, Ramesh) exemplify Foucauldian performance of power. Each one of them contributes to the network of force relations.

Mahajan, the seemingly domineering figure amongst them all, reveals his insecurity about his unstable position in the hierarchical set up in the shop, when he reprimands Ramchand for being late to work with "You will come and go as you please? Are you a king or something? *Raja Ramchand*?" (Bajwa 6). The machinery

of power draws the human body into it and acts upon it, manipulates and reprogrammes it. Through this mechanics of power a new "political anatomy" takes shape that permits one to control human bodies in order to not only get them to do what one desires but also to get them to perform in the manner, speed and efficiency as one desires (Foucault, *Discipline* 138). Mahajan exercises a hold over his employees' bodies. He fixes a time at which Ramchand is expected to report for work failing which he is reprimanded. His body is indirectly being controlled by the manager. It is worthwhile to note that the manager is not concerned about the amount of work that remains pending with the late-coming. He rebukes Ramchand with the explicit question if he thinks he were a king. Mahajan is distressed by the seeming imbalance of power that this lackadaisical behaviour from employees leads to. Hari, a sales assistant in the sari shop, refuses to toe the line of the dominant discourses. His retorts and his sense of humour infuriate Mahajan (Bajwa, *Sari* 53). Mahajan's visible displeasure is further testament to the power that the seemingly weak assistants can exercise. The boss is dependent on his employees, who also play as significant a part in the operations of power as the head.

Shyam and Rajesh working at Sevak Sari House, being more experienced than the rest, try to dominate the others. However, their domination is also not without resistance. Gokul openly confronts them and declares how it's "high time someone told Shyam and Rajesh that they are not our bosses. They are shop assistants, just like us" (195). Shop assistants are themselves launched in the network of forces. Such oppositions destabilise the position of the seniors inviting strong verbal responses from the latter that simply mask their insecurity. "Let me tell you something, Gokul. We, that is Shyam and I [Rajesh], have been working here for a very long time. Long before any of you came here. If you think you can just talk

rubbish at us and we'll take it, you are wrong" (192). Reminding others of their experience in the shop and reiterating their value may be viewed as their scrambling for power by desperately attempting to evoke a favourable response.

In *Story* the following anecdote involving mother-daughter duo, Valli and Sentha, underscores employer-employee interdependence. Valli subscribes to the straightforward conventional interpretation of power. She emphatically advocates unquestioning submission to the employer. She advises Sentha against hating those who pay her for work (Nambisan 151). The perspective of Sentha, on the contrary, offers scope for Foucauldian study. While interpreting Foucault, Mills notes how relationship between parents and children, employers and employees, and in general all relations between people are fundamentally power relations (49). As an employee, Sentha also has a say in the power dynamic. Having had an unpleasant experience after consuming left-over food given to her by one of her employers, she refuses to take cheese sandwiches offered by the same lady. This infuriates the lady of the household, and Sentha is punished for her arrogance (Nambisan, *Story* 152). Sentha has always been sketched as a headstrong girl who refuses to play by social norms. While working as a maid, she voices her concerns out loud. She does not yield to the unacceptable demands of her employer, Amma. This upsets the power balance in the household and the employer summons Sentha's mother to inform that her daughter's assistance is not required anymore. Valli is enraged and warns Sentha that it is unbecoming of her to have pride and that she better learn to apologise (152). The fact that Sentha has a say in matters becomes unacceptable for the employer since it overturns power relations. Had the lady been in absolute control, she would not have been offended by the "disrespect" shown by Sentha. Sentha, who belongs to the historically subordinated class, refuses to comply with unquestioning subordination.

This leads to problematised power relations that undermine the authority of the affluent class, which is evident from their overt acts of punishment.

Another instance of how a seemingly powerful persona flounders in the face of simple thwarting of expected responses may be cited here. Cruising along in a Lancer, Sugandha boss spares no effort in impressing an agent from Gambia to strike a lucrative business deal pertaining to the sale of pesticides. However, buffaloes obstruct the road and the boy herding them refuses to budge even after Sugandha boss rains abuses on him. While this amuses the Gambian, it deeply distresses Sugandha boss. “Sure enough, the buffaloes were driven off the road next afternoon, the rakish youth was kept in the lock-up for three days and beaten up by the police with customary gentleness” (Nambisan, *Town* 174-75). The boss is so insecure that the indifference of a young boy is sufficient to unhinge him.

Kamla’s unconventional responses – her anger in the form of caustic words and her “questionable” deeds can also be studied along similar lines. “Whenever she sees the pundit of the Hanuman temple close to their home, she calls him a hypocrite and pretends to pick up a stone to throw at him. You know, the way one does to scare away stray dogs” (Bajwa, *Sari* 120). The pundit, who is usually on an elevated pedestal in a socio-religious context, is demeaned by this comparison with stray dogs. He is disconcerted by the irreverent attitude of Kamla. Her rebelliousness strikes at the base of his power. This implies that his respectable position in society is not permanent and he does not hold a position that commands respect from everyone at all times. “Though the pundit always reacted with self-righteous indignation, he was also scared of her wild tongue that uttered such embarrassing things for the whole street to hear . . .” (160). He is scared that this open expression of opposition would leave him vulnerable to the forces around him. Evidently, Kamla’s words are mighty

enough for the priest to acknowledge his vulnerability in the complex maze of forces. Mikhail Bakhtin observes how places like church, palace and even homes function predominantly on principles of hierarchy and etiquette, thereby sanctioning only specific kinds of language. The market place on the other hand is less rigid in that the space admits speech markedly different from institutional language (154). The language of the market place with its scant regard for hierarchy and propriety becomes pronounced in this situation. As evidenced by all the above examples, when reciprocal expectations are thwarted, acts of desperation ensue. These acts betray the insecurity experienced by those in positions of power.

Passive Engagement

Apart from explicit physical or verbal combat, some strategic acts like re-interpreting a negative response, repeatedly reinforcing a particular interpretation and tactical use of positive forces like praise and flattery are all also rooted in the fear of unfavourable response to exertion of power. Such anecdotes of passive engagement that bank on reciprocity may be culled out from the novels under study.

Ramchand in *Sari* spends twelve days in isolation after boldly confronting his manager Mahajan (Bajwa 232). Being deeply unsettled by torture meted out to Kamla and triggered by his colleagues' ridicule of her state, Ramchand finds himself revolting against the unjust world. He yells at his manager in full view of his fellow workers. He locks himself up in his house, shutting off the world outside for twelve days. He slowly grasps the situation that led him to this deplorable state. He decides to reconcile with Mahajan and restore normalcy. When he approaches Mahajan and apologises, Mahajan is enraged by such insolent behaviour from his assistant. Though it could be argued that Mahajan is being in complete control here, with Ramchand bereft of power, a closer look at their conversation paints a slightly

different picture. "After the first angry outburst was over, Mahajan calmed down a little. . . . Finally, Mahajan looked up at him and . . . asked shrewdly, 'Tell me something honestly, Ramchand, Were you drunk?'" (239) Mahajan refuses to acknowledge that Ramchand would rebel in his sober state. He tries to establish that such inappropriate behaviour can only be a consequence of alcoholism.

> Ramchand considered this. He had never tasted alcohol in his life. But if he said he hadn't been drunk, how could he explain his behaviour away? Wouldn't Mahajan be less offended if he thought that it had been under the influence of alcohol that Ramchand had grabbed him by the collar? (239)

Mahajan fears that he would lose his stature in the shop if he allows for such open conflicts to take place between him and his subordinates. If his position were stable, then such feelings of insecurity would have no place. Mahajan is still dependent on everyone in the shop and their acknowledgement of his position of domination in order to retain that position. Therefore, he repackages Ramchand's "inappropriate" response and transmutes it into an acceptable response.

In *Story,* Simon's stay at his son's place in Delhi reveals such unstable power relations within a small family. He assures himself, "Within the parameters of my son Mitra's solicitous care and his wife Rashmi's maternal control, they're kind" (Nambisan 7). Their kindness is not unconditional. Simon is aware that his son and daughter-in-law do not obey as children. On the other hand, he is seen to be plying to their needs. While this is not an open display of power, a subtle form of authority from the younger generation seems to take the place of parental control. Simon qualifies Rashmi's control as maternal only to persuade himself to believe that he does indeed have an authority over the youngsters and that Rashmi is allowed to be in control simply because she is motivated by affection for her father-in-law. He refuses

to accept his fragility. At other times, when he does come to terms with his vulnerability, he compensates for it by raising his voice (110). So, the urge to raise voice is comparable with the urge to re-characterise dominance as maternal approach. Both these tendencies stem from a need to restrain unfavourable response to the exercise of power. He repeatedly sketches the disruptive responses as positive ones to maintain the façade of his dominance in the family. Simon is himself aware of his insecurity. When his wife, Harini, voices her opinions strongly, he confesses, "I felt powerless and angry" (31). The sense of anger, it is to be noted here, follows this feeling of powerlessness. Anger becomes an instrument to re-assert and balance the forces on either side.

Dennis Smith consolidates Foucault's observations on the theme of gaze with the succinct characterisation of "eye as the medium of surveillance, control and appreciation" (96). While surveillance and punishment are acts that actively engage with the system of power, appreciation and praise become passive acts driven by identical motives. In *Sari*, when Rina expressly states she wants Ramchand to attend to her when she visits the shop after her marriage, Mahajan appreciates Ramchand with, "Very good, boy, very good. You must have made a good impression on them when you went to their place. That's the way to keep customers coming back. Very good, very good" (Bajwa 135). His generous praise also shows how he is dependent on his employees to ensure that the customers go back contented. Positive words of encouragement from Mahajan may be construed as a form of control he exercises in order to extract a positive response to his assertion of power. It qualifies as a form of disciplinary power, which according to Foucault, assumes multiple forms, operates on multiple levels, relies on technique instead of rights, and strategically replaces punishment with control to achieve its ends (*History* 89). Likewise, in *Story*, the

house-help, Chinna, pretends to not hear Simon's summons while she enthusiastically responds to his daughter-in-law Rashmi's call. He has to engage in flattery sometimes to get her to cook his favourite snacks (Nambisan 96).

Along with such familial occasions, social situations resembling the above examples may also be spotted. Simon and Madhavan are at loggerheads with respect to Sitara and its impending demolition. Simon is seen to be exerting himself to put forth an argument in favour of Sitara. He shouts "Idiot!" in the presence of Madhavan, leaving the latter uncertain of whether it was meant for Madhavan or the cat in the room. However, he is pleased to see Simon angry (169). Simon's loss of composure, according to Madhavan, reveals that Simon is intimidated by him. But this does not mean that Madhavan is on secure ground either. During a meeting, his body language betrays his emotional frailty. "Although self-assured from the waist up, Madhavan's disquiet shows beneath the table in the repetitive jerking of his left knee resulting in a tremble of water bottles and vases on the table" (216). The fact that Madhavan sees Simon as some sort of a threat empowers Simon (255). Madhavan's disquietude is crucial for Simon to feel in power and vice versa. Even in such seemingly simple descriptions, a hankering after particular responses and a scrounging for power may be discerned.

The interdependence of one and another in the system of power is directly spelled out by Suno Tho when she explains to Prince, "You can be rich only if you ensure that someone else is poor . . ." (195-96). Simon reminds, "The migrant labour came because decent citizens like us need homes. We could not have built them with our decent hands. Of course we paid them. We paid them enough wages so they could eat and have the strength to come back the next day . . ." (221). The relationship between those in Vaibhav and those in Sitara is not a straight-forward

one of giver and taker. The affluent class cannot simply do away with the downtrodden. While the workers are almost always described to be dependent on their employers for their sustenance, what is often overlooked is the employer's reliance on his/her workers. This can be traced in the above words of Simon. He makes it clear as to how it would not have been possible to have the apartment complex built without the work put in by the labourers. Those in Sitara are not to be written off as weak and needy. PK explains how, contrary to one's expectations, one cannot spot a single beggar on the streets of Sitara trying to make a living for free (223). In line with Simon's thought, PK affirms that the poor are not the only group that is needy. The rich are also, in a sense, "needy" – in need of the services of the labourers:

> Let me guess what you're thinking. That you'd rather live without their products and their services if you can avoid their proximity. You can, but you won't. Your existence is linked to theirs. You wouldn't be here in Vaibhav if it weren't for them. If they're relocated to a new place, and if they do agree to go away, would you pay the extra money for transporting them forty kilometers each way, every day? (223)

Voicing similar views, Devaraya emphasises on the role of the poor in the election process. "Uplift of the backward is all very well, it's our duty to help the poor. We can do that only if we ensure that there's poverty. Who to help if every one of the poor gets lifted up" (Nambisan, *Town* 163-64). This interdependence doubles up as dependence on reciprocation in specific ways.

Invisible Acts

When actions are undertaken to offset a resistant response either actively or passively the re-assertion is visible and immediate. However, this need not always be the case. Attempts to cement one's position in the sphere of power operations may be undertaken through acts generally not associated with power. Implicitly such acts are motivated by the intention to prevent unfavourable responses from the dominated in future. Even before an undermining response, efforts may be put in place to establish dominant power. Those in positions of greater power often anticipate retaliation and go to great lengths to influence the response of the ones subjected to power, even before the actual response. Reciprocity becomes crucial in this context as well. This segment by branching out into two sub-segments – "Pre-Emptive Acts" and "Preparative Acts" – sharpens focus on those tactics that are invisible but not inconsequential to the study of reciprocal power relations.

Pre-Emptive Acts

The first sub-segment encompasses acts and elaborate steps that are undertaken with an intent to prevent a possible negative response in future. This anticipatory move, taken up by pre-empting an unfavourable response, constitutes a pre-emptive act of power exertion. The narratives accommodate a few such anecdotes.

Foucault famously borrowed the idea of panopticon to explicate how one can exercise power even when one is physically absent. Foucault recalls Bentham's claim that power in a panopticon set-up derives strength from being fundamentally visible and unverifiable: visible in that the tower constructed for surveillance of inmates will always be well within the sight of inmates, and unverifiable in that at any given point of time there is no way to ascertain if there is someone in the tower keeping watch on the inmates, and therefore, the inmates are placed under the impression that they are

always being spied upon ("Panopticism" 201). An individual subjected to such a monitoring vision soon starts to monitor himself and subjects himself to control. In *Sari,* Mahajan's sway over his employees in the shop, echoes panopticon model of discipline. "In most shops, shop assistants never took the payment, but Mahajan was sure that nobody could cheat in a shop *he* was the manager of, and always said that if any sari went missing he'd be the first to notice. . . . Everyone believed him too, for his sharp eyes missed nothing" (Bajwa 20). The power of Mahajan's vision is seen to be sufficient to control the behaviour of the assistants. "Ramchand often had tea at other little stalls around the market, stalls in the nearby lanes that were out of Mahajan's range of vision and away from the demanding cacophony of Sevak Sari House, stalls where he could relax . . ." (25). Mahajan's range of vision becomes a stand-in for the man, and Ramchand thus chooses to keep himself away from this penetrating surveillance. Even in his absence, Mahajan is able to monitor the activities of his assistants wherein the assistants themselves become both the instrument and effect of disciplinary control.

Disciplinary power itself remains invisible while the subjects on whom such power is imposed are positioned in a state of "compulsory visibility." Their visibility cements the hold of power over them (Foucault, *Discipline* 187). Mahajan's habit of keeping himself thoroughly informed about every staff working under him is another exercise of his power in the panopticon fashion. "He [Ramchand] couldn't even feign illness because Mahajan knew where each of the shop assistants lived, and had a nasty habit of sending someone to check up on them when any of them took the day off claiming to be ill" (Bajwa, *Sari* 57). "Hierarchical observation, normalising judgement" and an integration of the two in the process of "the examination" act as simple instruments to sustain disciplinary power effectively (Foucault, *Discipline*

170). Mahajan's skill at observing his staff, taking note of their activities in minute detail, his occasional rewards to them in appreciation of some of their works that stabilise his postion and condemnation of some of their behaviours that threaten his stability, and his subjection of the employees to thorough examination – all these can be read in the light of Foucault's observations on disciplinary power. These may well be treated as invisible acts to exploit the reciprocal characteristic of power relations. Additionally, this tendency of Mahajan to pre-empt a disobedient stance from the employees and there-by design a panoptic-like set-up is indicative of his own awareness of his precarious position in the system of power.

Such instances can be culled out from the *Story* as well. Muthuvel, who runs a baking unit in Sitara, explains to Simon and other visitors as to how he treats his workers. He prides himself on being strict and kind with them. He ensures that there is no misconduct from his workers by shutting them out from outside world. Rooms are devoid of windows and are provided with just ventilators (Nambisan 126). On first look, such a set-up appears to be reflecting the greater power of the employer. But a deeper analysis reveals the pivotal role played by the workers in this arrangement. Had the workers been absolutely deprived of power, Muthu need not take up such measures to prevent misconduct. Compliance or non-compliance by the employees determines the position of the employer in the power grid. Likewise, there are more examples of those in positions of power taking up measures behind scene to prevent any future revolts. When Benny offers to train Ponnu and Chellam to foray into films, he issues a fair warning. "'Acting is self-taught,' Mr Benny said at the outset, thus shrugging off any future blame" (53). The fact that he feels compelled to warn them betrays his desperation to ensure that his employees do not react against him. The employee, being a significant entity in the equation of power in work space,

cannot be written off as someone upon whom authority is imposed. In the given scheme of relations, power defies linear mapping. Wages paid are insufficient so as to ensure workers' return to the site of job (221). Refraining from discussing the moral and legal repercussions of such treatment meted out to the labourers, this attitude of the well-to-do reveals the inherently powerless position the so-called dominant class occupy in the given social arrangement. The employers are worried to lose their workers and hence resort to inhuman methods to keep them from moving away.

Certain acts of politicians, doctors and businessmen who ideally enjoy the privilege of wielding greater power are also motivated by an intense fear of a possible blemish on their powerful image. Suno Tho ensures that Dayaratna is known as "Nayagan or Boss or more explicitly, as his name proclaimed, the Merciful Diamond" (186). This is an unambiguous cry for power. Daya's power is inextricably linked with the people he interacts with and he meticulously carves a reputation for himself by carefully adopting certain techniques. He makes himself scarce and gives daily audience to his people at pre-ordained times. Such a routine is reminiscent of the royal system of the king meeting his subjects (187). He consistently works towards maintaining for himself a corruption-free image in front of the dwellers of Sitara who approach him for help. Even while accepting gifts in the form of fish, mutton, pork and similar such offerings, he refuses to entertain hard cash as bribe for fear of disrepute.

On first impression doctors called Sahas in *Story* seem to be powerful. They ruthlessly treat patients with the cheapest versions of medicines, impure ones, expired drugs and by using tap water in the place of distilled water (177). However, they are mindful of the fact that their dominance is dependent on the patients who frequent the

clinic. They put in place elaborate methods to ensure that they have a regular supply of patients. "The good doctor kept his patients coming back by stopping just short of a complete cure. He [Dr Saha] continuously changed the brands of the drugs he used, thus pleasing the drug companies and impressing his patients" (177). The Sahas refuse to admit the gravely sick, for death would bring bad reputation (178). These strategies mask Sahas' deep-seated fear and their reliance on patients for their survival.

In *Town,* scientists identify pollution of water sources with effluents from pesticide factory Sugandha Enterprises as the primary cause for children to be born with white hair. This exposes the vulnerability of Sugandha boss who immediately makes arrangements for counter-argument. A new batch of scientists is swiftly brought in to meet the press. They clarify that chemical contamination is only a remote possibility and that such baseless speculations are uncalled for (Nambisan 50-51). The fact that Sugandha boss felt compelled to refute the initial research, betrays his fear of any future consequences, and uncovers his intention to secure responses that affirm his power.

Preparative Acts

While the previous sub-segment lingered on ways to handle future negative response, the following discussion zooms in on the practice of eliciting favourable responses to acts of the dominant. When the dominant calculatedly engage in certain activities to generate positive response to their exercise of power, through these acts they are essentially preparing to solidify their position in the given structure. These acts may be labelled as "preparative acts." These encompass endeavours taken up to manipulate those in subjugated positions into responding favourably to imposition of

power by those in authority. Such preparative acts may also be deemed to be a species of reciprocal power relations.

Preparative acts that often become modes of enforcing discipline and establishing one's state of domination can be discerned in everyday acts. Foucault avouches the significance of small techniques of discipline in the genealogy of modern society. Though devoid of a grandiose appearance, characteristic of great apparatuses and prominent political struggles that find place in the history of power politics, seemingly simple tricks and techniques of discipline also carry considerable weight in the political climate of a society. These minute, mundane "panopticisms" along with class domination that inform such practices may well be seen as a political equivalent of juridical codes that channelise power in a society ("Panopticism" 223). Acts of charity embedded in innocent day-to-day affairs often become tools to demonstrate one's power over another. In this performance of power, the giver derives his/her position of dominance from the receiver. If the receiver exudes confidence or exhibits indifference, it disrupts the flow of forces. So, quite contrary to convention, the beneficiaries and their responses are greatly relevant. This is observable in several circumstances from the select narratives.

After Simon buys an air-cooler for the local school at Sitara in *Story*, he is elated when anyone mentions this as a generous deed. Swamy does not particularly seem impressed by this gesture and this disturbs Simon (Nambisan 85). After the completion of the construction of the apartment, Simon distributes sweets to all the workers in order to appreciate their hard work. But soon enough his excitement wears down. He finds some workers to be sullen and assumes they are angry at the meagreness of his gift. This affects him to the point that he starts to apologise profusely while handing the migrants packets of sweets (109). He is constantly

plagued by self-doubt. Even when he wishes to help, he appears to be uncertain of his position. Instead of being someone in command, he is often seen to be apologetic while expressing his willingness to help (74). He is seen to be repeatedly re-assessing his relationship with those from Sitara and second-guessing his every move. He gives a one-rupee coin each to all the kids that tag along with him when he returns from visiting a local school in Sitara, and then almost instantly questions if that was indeed the right thing to do. He offers Chellam fifty rupees but is immediately embarrassed and adds that the money is for his kids (87). When Simon visits the local school in Sitara with an offer to help them, the head master's attitude thwarts conventional expectations. "He [headmaster] sat with his knees apart, his small protuberant stomach balanced on his flabby thighs, his shrewd eyes blinking supplication" (85). Undermining standard reciprocal relations of power, much to Simon's chagrin, the beneficiary assumes a dominant personality. He is hinted to be manipulative and capable of influencing Simon's decisions.

Simon's charitable activities are openly critiqued by a few characters in the novel. Baqua confronts Simon, "You want the people here to accept kindness on your terms. You do it as a favour, an apology for being rich" (143). Kindness is merely used to establish oneself on a raised level. Simon is equally mortified by PK's accusation that he engages in charity of convenience and that he would help others only if his own lifestyle does not come undone in the process (113). However, on introspection Simon admits, "I want to be generous and compassionate. I want to give, give, give, without any thought for myself. But even while thinking, I know such feelings are momentary. I will never give all of myself to anything. Not even half, or quarter or one-tenth of myself, but less" (117). Simon's confession, read alongside his expectations from the beneficiaries, go onto confirm the primacy of

reciprocity in power relations. Other characters in *Story* also adopt charity with similar intentions. Madhavan takes pride in the fact that the residents of Vaibhav apartments actively engage in charitable activities by visiting old-age homes and orphanages (217).

Similarly, Chellam launches himself into a reverie fantasising how his villagers would receive him if he were a film star: “Filmdom would be nice. He would visit his village in an Ambassador. When loving followers had sunk his neck in fat, scented garlands, he would announce his largesse: two cows to every man, a pair of gold bangles to every woman. How fast the ideas came!” (54) This excursive reveals Chellam’s wish to perform a bigger role in the system of power. Charity becomes a tool to uplift his stature in this social set-up. He imagines himself to be giving away cows and gold to men and women.

Mrs Gupta, in *Sari*, proclaims that she expresses gratitude to God for having blessed her with well-behaved children by helping the less fortunate segment of the society. She prides with, “I also feed some poor unfortunates outside the Shivalaya temple every Monday” (Bajwa 23). Boastful conversations among a few women from well-to-do financial backgrounds in the novel also hover around the same subject. “She called herself a social activist when she introduced herself to people, and often organised charity programmes at the Rotary Club. Everyone said how talented Mrs Bhandari was! Even women who disliked her grudgingly admitted it” (26). Acts of charity become a vehicle to enhance their own social standing. The presence of the underprivileged and their subservience become indispensable for this act of power.

Sugandha boss generously offers contributions and endowments to schools, colleges and temples. He takes every opportunity to remind the people of the town of

his magnanimity. Tactfully, he does not personally engage in such speeches that might come across as boastful and thereby diminish the power of his charitable endeavours. He instead employs one of the scientists to do the same (Nambisan, *Town* 54). The following observation made by Simon's father in *Story* succinctly sums up this discussion of charity as a power play, intrinsically linked to the beneficiaries' response: "You must know what to give whom and how much. . . . For days after our visit to the village the men and the women clutch the veshtis and vessels to their bosoms and sing my praise. If I were to give them anything more expensive, the gratitude would be the same" (Nambisan 24). The act of charity by itself does not endow the giver with greater power. Simon's father expects the recipients to openly express gratitude. Their response is necessary for the act of giving to secure power. Those receiving the gifts of charity, through their indebtedness to the giver, help the latter feel the force of authority.

Along with probing into the intent behind charity, decoding the intent behind desire for compliance and gratitude in general is also pertinent to the study. In *Story,* Simon is mortified when he encounters disobedient workers. His house-help threatens to leave and he is terrified at the prospect. "In the morning Chinna comes as usual and immediately walks out, with loud warnings of not coming back unless the cat goes" (Nambisan 210-11). His interaction with Sridhar, the plumber, is also worth recording here. He is almost humiliated by Sridhar's laxity. With a broken cistern in the guest room, he keeps requesting for Sridhar's help while the latter simply promises to repair but never really turns up. On the other hand, when Simon's daughter-in-law, Rashmi, summons him, he promptly shows up within an hour and fixes the leak for a much lesser wage (92-93). Simon finds this deeply disturbing. He tells Sandhya about the irreverence of the manager at the construction site. Wearied

by the din of construction work, when he approaches him to know when the work would be complete, the manager responds with absolute lack of seriousness. He tells Sandhya "he smiles when I abuse him" (89). The manager's response upsets the conventional power set-up. Simon is also utterly distressed by Ponnu sitting right next to him on the bench in the tea shop. Simon confesses, "His proximity unnerved me for reasons I could not fathom . . . I tried to figure out what it was about Ponnu that disturbed me. I wanted to ascertain the intentions behind his disconcerting smile. 'Do you hate people like me?'" (87) Simon's discomfort is the result of his own expectations of servitude from Ponnu. For Simon, to feel in power, Ponnu must concede. When Ponnu refuses to bow down, Simon is rendered ineffectual.

Something as simple as an invited guest at home not praising the taste of snacks he serves disappoints Simon. He eagerly waits for PK to say something nice about the snack offered to him and gets offended when PK does not (96). Likewise, when PK calls up Simon over phone and apologises for his thoughtless words during his visit to Simon's place earlier that day, he admits that he likes PK better after the apology (97). Had Simon been on a stable position himself, PK's words would not have had an effect on him at all. Instead, only after PK seeks his forgiveness does Simon feel at ease. It is PK's acceptance of his flaw that grants Simon a potent stature. Ramchand's boss, Mahajan, also seeks such occasional validation. He rues, "Thankless job, mine" (Bajwa, *Sari* 53). Likewise, Asha, the owner of the beauty parlour where Rani works, also harbours certain expectations. When one of the girls sighs on being asked to report for a meeting with Asha, the sighing infuriates her. "No sense of respect in that girl," she worries (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 34). Even the slightest oversight from her staff members, like forgetting to turn off the fans and lights in the parlour, causes Asha to spiral out. "I treat you people like family, but you have no

sympathy for me," she launches into a diatribe (36). Notably, it is not the inherent inefficiency of the girls that unsettles Asha but the lack of an appropriate response to her assertion of power that most affects her.

Manohar constantly belittles himself and considers him to be weaker than his wife Kripa. Kripa, with her exceptional creative prowess to paint, believes she possesses an edge over her husband. After a particularly nasty spat between the two, Manohar lives apart for a few days but ultimately decides to reconcile. "Kripa is pleased to see Manohar, secretly triumphant. . . . He has come with apologies and she can afford some magnanimity" (Nambisan, *Town* 69). The fact that she requires an apology to feel victorious only reveals how she does not possess an edge over her husband by default and is dependent on his particular response to exert power. At crucial moments in *Story*, Simon thinks if his wife Harini would approve of his current decisions (Nambisan 140, 223). His wife who is no more, still holds a sway over him. Her favourable response is invariably sought by Simon for his own performance of power. Approval, apology, gratitude are all expected as appropriate responses to particular acts performed by those in positions of dominance, in order for them to maintain status quo in the system of power. And attempts to prompt such reciprocations may be treated as invisible acts of power imposition.

Subversive Counter-Acts

While discussions thus far dwelt on acts that sought to re-assert power, this segment briefly shifts attention to certain responses that undermine conventional line of reciprocation. These responses may be deemed as counter-acts – acts taken in response to counter the exertion of power. The subversive nature of these responses restrains unfettered exercise of power.

Talking behind the back of those who are domineering is one of the potent outlets through which those who are subjugated or humiliated express dissent. Examining this “hidden transcript” i.e. “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” is essential to analyse the total relations of power in any given case (Scott xii). Benny, the employer in *Story,* compares Sitara with Mumbai’s Dharavi and waxes eloquent on the greatness of the slum. Ponnu who works under Benny does not find the comparison to be particularly grand. Irked, he explodes to his fellow worker Chellam with “Sister-fucker. . . . He makes this Dha-ra-vi sound like an upper-class whore” (Nambisan 50). Ponnu resorts to swearing at Benny. His response to his boss when the latter is not present may also be brought within the purview of power politics between Benny and his employees. In *Sari,* Ramchand conjures up scenarios wherein he would engage in excessive cussing to discredit his employer. He imagines confronting Mahajan and mouthing, “It is with considerable pleasure (regret) that I have to point out that you are a horrible, fat-faced, money-minded, selfish pig whose wife must be the most miserable and unlucky woman on this earth” (Bajwa 116).

Hari, the youngest and the most cheerful of the assistants in Sevak Sari House, refuses to adhere to the social mould of a typical manager-assistant relationship. Being the junior at the shop he receives the harshest of censure. But he remains unfazed by his manager Mahajan’s frequent rebuke. He openly ridicules his manager and engages in extensive back-talk. His light-hearted humour, a source of laughter at several points in the plot, may be viewed as a subversion of the existing power structure in any given context. When Mahajan humiliates him by calling him a “shameless monkey,” Hari finds the remark utterly amusing. He taunts Mahajan as soon as he leaves and asks his colleagues if he can tell the difference between a

"shameless monkey and a monkey with proper shame" (21). When his colleague Ramchand is dismayed by Mahajan's admonishment, Hari's rationale for it merits attention: "You did a good deed for our Mahajan. If some people don't get to shout at someone early in the morning, they can't digest their breakfast properly. Now that *raakshas* Mahajan will have very good digestion" (8). This argument of Hari further reinforces the idea that those in positions of dominance rely on others' inferior status for their exercise of power. When the employees gather together for evening meal outside their shop, Hari's mocking of their employers is a major source of fun for the group. "Hari did an excellent imitation of Bhimsen Seth. He lolled in his chair, he peered over imaginary glasses, he called for tea in hoarse voice. . . . Subash laughed so much that he almost fell out of his chair" (34). Hari's unbridled expression of views, irreverent behaviour and laughter are reminiscent of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque responses – unapologetic revelry and indulgence in humour by the lower stratum of society, often with the aid of grotesque realism and exaggeration of bodily images (Bakhtin 63-64).

A typical inversion of power flow manifests in these situations. However, the phrase *inversion of power* is used here guardedly. It merely invokes Bakhtinian characterisation of laughter as a potent means to invert power relations during a carnival by dethroning institutional authority (92-93). It is to be noted that this does not mean that Hari's retorts overturn power relations altogether, wherein Hari becomes the dominating subject and the Manager, the dominated one. Such complete reversals are not implied upon through these examples. What is suggested here is that Hari's response becomes a recognisable counter-force in the context of austere social codes and structures. Foucauldian approach does not validate the possibility of an absolute inversion of power in a given arrangement. But what it does endorse, as

Mills observes, is the envisioning of individuals as active agents rather than passive subjects. This facilitates a more comprehensive understanding of how power permeates all mundane affairs and human relations (34). The characters as active agents simply keep moving from one position to the other, with no escape from the zone of power.

Multiple positions in the grid of power permitting alternative responses, trigger new discourses that threaten to subvert conventional expectations of reciprocation. Moussa and Scapp qualify Foucault’s theorising as an attempt at producing spaces within a discourse that offers a leeway for counter-discourses to take birth (92). This prompts a review of the power of counter-discourses. It may be stressed that power does not exist without resistance. Discourses are not infallible and are often challenged. They are a fertile medium for exploring power relations and serve as centres of knowledge. Like power, discourses also lack unity and stability. Multiple and diverse truths cannot be contained in a single discourse, thereby occasioning the birth of newer discourses (Brown 31). The study of resistive responses that pave way for counter-discourses need not be confined to active and explicit reactions to face-to-face altercation with superior power. Even seemingly passive, non-compliant behaviours, attitudes and views that interrogate conventional interpretations of everyday activities may be brought within the ambit of counter-discourse formation. Such examples may be spotted in the chosen narratives.

While Hari’s counter-discourse encourages a positive circumvention of inherently limiting social norms, Baqua’s tirade against the affluent in *Story,* excavates subterranean counter-responses that are entrenched with negative feelings of distress and disgust. He apprises Simon of the thoughts that mostly run in the minds of those who are treated as mere recipients of kindness:

> Is it any wonder that the beggar who accepts your coin and touches it to his forehead has nothing but hatred for you? Or that shudra woman who cleans your toilet mentally spits in your face every time she says, “Vanakkam Aiyya” and walks past the TV, fridge, sofa and the food on your table to clean your bathroom? (Nambisan 143)

Such thoughts of resistance have potential for translating themselves into disruptive actions. The inherent potential of the conventionally powerless segment of society to exercise power, needs to be recognised. When Ponnu finds Chellam fixing a toilet bowl in a just-constructed home, he calls it a third-rate job. He is annoyed that the owners do not even thank workers like Chellam. Only an appropriate word of gratitude from the rich balances the equation of power between the two parties. In the absence of such a gesture, Ponnu wants Chellam to take things in his hand and do one thing before he completes his job. He encourages Chellam to “shit into that white basin. A handsome crap. Your parting gift for those ghost-people. Do it once” (160). Such an extremely profaning activity is recommended by Ponnu to feel in power. One’s experience of one’s own body and interaction with other bodies are culturally produced at every stage (Woodhull 174). Likewise, when human body functions as a site of political inscriptions and mode of control, body and bodily functions may well be used as means of subversion (Bordo, “Feminism” 188).

Amidst all the cry over her “ugliness” by her parents, Sentha discovers that her body is her greatest strength and starts to flaunt her curves to get attention from those she loved (Nambisan, *Story* 154). “She walked with a deliberate sway of her hips and tossed her head to make her plait swing” (236). Chandran finds her attractive and as the novel closes, they are both happily married to each other. Meanwhile, Ponnu plots to take his revenge against Chellam through Sentha,

Chellam's daughter. He takes the first step towards it by luring her. She overcomes her initial fear and instead of reporting him to her parents she shows up in front of Ponnu, desiring for his touch (157). Before their wedding, Sentha has a sexual encounter with Ponnu. She enjoys physical pleasure and does not feel shameful about it. In the end she also marries the man of her own choice. She goes on to deem Ponnu an ineffectual and recognises, "Ponnu was too much of a coward to reveal the dangerous truth about the incident between them" (237). Power relations between Ponnu and Sentha become markedly influenced by her positive attitude towards her body and sex. Though he imagines to have taken revenge against Chellam through her, her intense longing for him at that moment, and her utter disregard for Ponnu thereafter, indicate that Ponnu is not in complete command. His intention to use her as a mere tool to fan his own ego falters when Sentha subverts conventional reciprocal power relations. As a young fourteen-year old, Rajakumari is subjected to ridicule for inviting attention to her body while working at a provision store. The unsolicited advances made by the son of the store owner result in her family castigating her, and her father going to the extent of calling her a *chudayil* (harlot). This distresses Kumari but also strangely emboldens her. The next day she bravely sees everyone in the eye and goes about her daily life. Kumari observes, "My brothers and sisters who treated me with contempt the previous night were now intimidated by my boldness" (Nambisan, *Town* 28). When Kumari refuses to be meek, she subverts expectations of subservience and thereby her siblings lose control over her.

Chellam, when recounting to his family his interaction with Simon earlier that day, is genuinely concerned about Simon: "The old man wants to help. It's like saying I'm rich. I'll give away some of my riches. I'm worried for him" (Nambisan,

Story 75). There is a marked reversal of roles here. In the place of Simon sympathising with Chellam for the latter's unfortunate socio-economic circumstances, it is Chellam who is vividly distressed by Simon's behaviour. While Chellam finds Simon's enthusiasm to help as worrisome, Swamy and Ponnu find it downright abhorrent. When Velu passes on his father's message about Simon Aiyya wanting to help the school, Swamy is not particularly thrilled. "Tell the old man to shove the hundred rupees up his arse was what he wanted to say" (77). He admonishes Chellam for slobbering at the feet of the rich. When Chellam excitedly informs Ponnu about Simon's interest in helping those in the slum, Ponnu is enraged. He goes on to bad-mouth those who make an attempt to help Sitara (79). From these anecdotes a pattern may be unearthed. Swamy and Chellam's responses, though different on the surface, both topple typical notions of power. Chellam pities the old man while Swamy mocks him. In either case, subversive responses by thwarting favourable reciprocation dethrone Simon from the "powerful rich man" pedestal. Similarly, police, who generally exude power and are approached for assistance, in one instance, are looked down upon as themselves in dire need of assistance. Saroja seeks assistance from police force twice – once to report that Rukma has gone missing and the second time to complain that her husband, Sampathu, is also now missing. When Sampathu's son, Gundu, too leaves home without any warning, she refuses to approach the police. It appears to Saroja as if they were seeking her help in tracing the missing persons, and the job of wielding greater power seems to have exhausted them. She notes, "You look into the eyes of the policemen and they're saying: Help Me" (Nambisan, *Town* 191). The police force normally associated with superior power is here portrayed to be a helpless lot. This is markedly an unconventional response.

Subverting stereotypical depictions, when the well-to-do and the conventionally powerful are here viewed with apathy and sympathy, the underprivileged is sometimes viewed with profound fear. Implicit social understanding is that a sex worker is weaker in comparison with the customer who is served. However, there are instances where the very client becomes fearful of the woman in question. During her prime years, Kumari is reminded, "men are afraid of your deadly charm" (152). She observes how in social gatherings, men who discreetly visit her are the most terrifed and take elaborate steps to pretend they have had no prior encounters with her. She also recognises how "wives who knew that their husbands knew me made it a point to be rude while watching my every movement" (141). Fear and rudeness in this anecdote reveal the desperation with which husbands and wives pursue power which tends to be favourably disposed towards Kumari here.

Even before an actual overthrow is instigated by the oppressed, the very possibility of an imminent subversive response from the subjugated fill those in dominant positions with perceptible sense of dread. This may be observed in some of the following situations as well. In *Story,* Swamy openly expresses his apprehensions regarding the uprising of the downtrodden. He is concerned about hidden feelings of hatred and bitterness nursed by those in Sitara. He sounds almost helpless when he tells Simon, "People set on revenge. What to do? How to stop them once they start?" (Nambisan 171) Likewise, as someone who has personally been on the receiving end of Baqua's wrath in Sitara, PK implores the residents of Vaibhav to be mindful of the fury of the slum-dwellers who feel wronged collectively (223). This is an acknowledgement of the power that those living in the slum are capable of

exercising. Their might may be realised under the right circumstances with the right set of tools.

Acts for Audience

While a major chunk of the chapter dwells upon individual acts and responses, this segment intends to explore acts that depend upon a collective response. The presence of an audience and their collective response have a crucial bearing on power play. The very presence of an audience becomes a statement and thereby a response.

In *Sari,* the Kapoors commission a gang of men to publicly murder Kamla when she defames the family in front of their refined neighbours. Their intentions are evident: "Kamla's fate was sealed at that very moment. Ravinder Kapoor couldn't help it. It was a matter of his prestige in the city. He could not let a common woman go scot-free after that" (Bajwa 216). The power of the Guptas and the Kapoors is entangled with the reputation they hold in the social circle. This reputation is dependent on acknowledgement by others.

The scene of Kamla's death is turned into a public spectacle. Men barge into her humble home, rummage through her belongings, throw them out as a prelude to the killing:

> By this time a crowd had gathered outside and the four men made sure everyone saw what they were doing. . . . Then they dragged her outside and paraded her in the neighbourhood with her hands tied behind her back so everyone could see what happened to those who stepped beyond their limits. (217)

This becomes a performance, staged for viewers, who play a pivotal part in the complex power relations. After this elaborate display of power, she is pushed back

into her home which is then set ablaze. In the context of corporal punishment called *supplices*, Foucault observes "torture is a technique" (*Discipline* 33). The torture meted out to Kamla is also a technique. If this were a mere punishment for Kamla who dared to step out of her preordained role in the social system of power, then her audacity to throw dirt on the Kapoors could have been punished with a single fatal stab on her body. On the contrary, what happens is a punishment that is carried out in full public view as if to set an example and warn anyone who might attempt to outgrow their social boundaries. This technique to re-impose one's dominant power also draws attention to the role of a significant entity – the audience – in power relations. The elaborate killing with spectators to watch attests to the power of the audience's response.

This is comparable with another scene from *Tell Me* that portrays a metaphorical killing of mythological characters in the presence of hordes of spectators. With great excitement Rani and Bittu visit Company Bagh in Amritsar to witness the spectacular burning of the effigies of Ravan – a custom carried out with remarkable pomp and splendour in connection with dussehra festivities. Even as the visual glory captivates every spectator, Rani views this in different light. She realises how the activity in a sense glorifies punishment against wrong-doings committed ages ago. "The hatred was being carefully kept alive. . . . It seemed like the celebration of savagery, of unforgiving cruelty, of harsh judgement" (Bajwa 52). This episode of Ravan-blazing supposed to remind people of "good conquers evil," also exemplifies an important attribute of power relations. The thousands of spectators gathered around to watch are not dispensable. Their presence accentuates the impact of the activity. The anecdote may therefore be quoted here and studied alongside

other such instances wherein presence of an audience, even if not so glaringly visible, becomes inevitable for power play.

Neelam's predisposition towards pleasing her neighbours and eliciting appropriate responses from them may be discerned in many of her interactions in *Tell Me*. When their house gets flooded due to clogged drains to the point that their home almost becomes uninhabitable, Neelam's primary focus is not on reclaiming lost property but on maintaining face in front of her neighbours. She goes to the extent of threatening with suicide if any one of the family members dared to seek refuge in the nearby houses (95). The neighbours' ignorance of their abysmal living conditions will ensure that they look upto Neelam and admire her home-management skills. This response from them is essential for her to feel in power. Physical hardships become preferable to losing control in front of an audience. When Dheeraj becomes too withdrawn from life, she informs Rani that he has been discreetly consuming some pills every night. She believes this has been causing him to appear weaker and more lifeless day by day. But the reason she offers for divulging this piece of information to Rani makes her intent clear: "Can you imagine what the neighbours and relatives must be thinking? It is shocking, the state he has fallen to" (113). Likewise, when Rani makes up her mind to leave home after realising her own brother and sister-in-law view her as a burden and a disgrace to the family, Mahesh and Neelam go to great lengths to dissuade her "mainly because they didn't want to lose face in the community" (127). The neighbours become the perpetual source of power for Neelam to draw from.

In *Story,* when Chellam sends home a letter, Valli insists that Neela, who works in the post office, read it aloud so that their neighbour Tamilarasi could hear (Nambisan 242). The letter informs Valli of Chellam's unfortunate imprisonment on

his trip to Palani, and she immediately regrets the letter being read within the earshot of her neighbours. Her husband's literacy becomes a symbol of prestige only when it is validated by others. Hence, she requests for the letter to be read aloud. However, as soon as the letter is read, contrary to what she expected, it becomes a mark of shame. She is concerned about his neighbours not respecting her family after coming to know of Chellam's arrest by police. In all these instances, one can detect that the characters' feeling of being superior/inferior is possible only when those around them also participate in the system. This invariably ties their power with those around them. Simon's particular observation about an experience he has with his domestic help, Chinna, is also of interest here. After his daughter-in-law, Rashmi's visit to Simon's place, Chinna argues with Simon for a hike in wage. "Delhi Amma promised, she says in her stridulant voice. Dirty trick, to speak so loudly within earshot of neighbours" (114). The fragility of Simon's power is evident here. He is unabashedly concerned about maintaining an image in front of his neighbours. Their eavesdropping on the particular argument around money would lead to an unfavourable impression about him, which he fears would disturb the flow of power. Neighbours are subsumed into a homogenous unit of force having a clear say in relations of power.

Broaching on the power of appropriate reciprocation from the immediate audience – neighbours – logically leads to a discussion on the power wielded by a not-so-immediately visible but an omnipresent audience better known as "the society." Even private and personal acts are sometimes rooted in the principle of power from publicity. Baqua's observation is relevant here: "If you were to go to a small tea shop you would toss a coin into the saucer as a tip, but for a suited-booted waiter in a big hotel, you give big notes. Intimidated by the idea of wealth" (138).

Tips are offered not just to appreciate the service rendered by the waiters. It is also seen as a mark of prestige, a symbol of power to be acknowledged by an invisible, but ever present audience.

Along with such active acts, passive acts like seemingly innocent and instinctive choices made in day-to-day lives are also not devoid of such expectations of reciprocation from an audience. For instance, while saris become a talking point in *Sari*, facial beauty products and beautification techniques employed in beauty parlour become predominant concerns in *Tell Me*. A society that almost subconsciously establishes a clear connection between one's appearance and one's position in the system of power comes under scanner in these narratives. One's individualistic choices pertaining to personal preferences in terms of clothing, physical and verbal manners, and the like are not strictly personal or independent but are rather a product of the social forces surrounding one (A. Mukherjee 78). All the sari-centred opinions in *Sari* and make-up driven conversations in *Tell Me* are laced by the assumption that there is an audience sitting in judgement of the person who has draped a particular kind of sari and put on a specific kind of make-up. Satisfying this imagined gallery of viewers and receiving an acceptable response from them appear to be the major factors that govern the selection. Likewise, Simon's major considerations in *Story* while choosing which books to read during his flight to Delhi is another such instance. "I scanned the bookshelf for reading material and decided on *The Way of All Flesh* (as much for the title to impress others with as for the content), *Silapathikkaram* and a lowbrow Tamil thriller" (Nambisan 110). The parenthetical adjunct in the quote above is an illustration of how reciprocal power relations inform simple choices in everyday life. The choices, words and deeds gain prominence with acknowledgement from others. Hence, those who acknowledge it become

indispensable in the arrangement of power, and cannot be treated as passive onlookers.

Conclusion

The chapter elaborates on how through active means or by passive methods, those seeking to exert power and maintain a superior status invariably attempt to influence the response of those subjected to acts of power. Exploring this reciprocal nature of power relations helps centralise the role played by those located at the end of the power spectrum. Discussions on reciprocity further reinforce the notion of power as a performance in which actors are expected to play their parts, and also instantiate what the disrupting of such socially mandated parts/ responses entails. The potential of subversive responses to derail conventional power play cannot be overlooked. Even seemingly innocent day-to-day affairs are often motivated by a desire to evoke appropriate response from an audience. To be cognizant of the significance of such responses is vital in grasping relations of power. Only then can destabilising of dominant power be achieved by tactfully manoeuvring responses against it. This reinforces the significance of the key considerations of the chapter.

Chapter 5

Reflexivity

The chapter draws inspiration from the phrase *reflexive sociology* used by Pierre Bourdieu to exhort sociologists to be aware of their own placement in the societal arrangement, and acknowledge their own internalised attitudes and beliefs while analysing social practices (Bourdieu and Wacquant 37). The term, much in vogue in the social sciences, has undergone various mutations and is being used in wide variety of contexts. Given this, one particular trajectory of interpretation regarding the benefit of reflexivity as a practice is most relevant here. Epistemic reflexivity effectively aids in debunking myths that mask the exercise of power and extension of domination (49-50). This, as Annette Coburn and Sinéad Gormally observe, facilitates in raising critical consciousness among the practitioners regarding their social relations (117). A rather simplistic understanding of this interpretative angle acts as the foundation of the chapter. The study undertaken here fundamentally seeks to explore a character's consciousness of one's own relation with respect to power structures at a particular place and time, and what that reflection reveals about the underlying system of power. The word *reflexivity* is then used in the broad sense of awareness, devoid of the term's specific sociological implications.

When power is so diffuse that it is inscribed on everyone's lives, how does one know and recognise it is a question that needs to be addressed. This is one of those questions that does not seek answers but possibilities (Radkte 1). The chapter's investigation into individuals' attempts to uncover and acknowledge operations of power in their own lives is a step taken towards furthering such possibilities. Welch reiterates how recognising that one is always enmeshed in the forces of power is not a call for finding methods to avoid the entanglement but rather a call for understanding

the processes (208). Along these lines, the primary intention of the study at hand is not to resolve but to recognise the processes and complexities inherent in individuals' power relations. The complexities are approached systematically by organising the chapter into four major segments. The rationale for the chapter-division is supplied by the chapter's central objectives to explore: character's views of one's own relation with the structures of power and the implications of those views, various vectors that embody their views, various factors that influence their stances, and then finally the entire narratives' preoccupations with the subject of power.

Perception

Sawicky observes how myriad relationships come into play in the formation of an individual's identity which remains dynamic, unstable and fragmented ("Identity" 182-84). These myriad relationships also sprout forth as multiple relations of power. This section is devoted to examining a character's perception of one's own standing in the chequerboard of power. An assessment of the narratives in this direction aids in identifying two notable characteristics that underscore individuals' relations to power. Firstly, there is a striking sense of ambivalence involved in the exercise of power – a constant duality that leaves the characters hazy apropos their powerful/powerless status. Secondly, a curious note of dissonance may be observed – individuals assert their power most vigorously when they appear to be least favourably disposed towards access to power. These two strands of reflexivity are dealt with in detail in the following two sub-segments – "Ambivalence" and "Dissonance."

Ambivalence – Powerful or Powerless?

The question of whether a character views oneself as powerful or powerless is one that defies a straightforward response. From a few anecdotes that form part of the

select narratives, it becomes evident as to how individuals' reflections on their own ability or inability to exert power are often contradictory. Some of these incidents illustrate how characters position themselves variously with respect to power. Sometimes ambivalence pertains to characters' own opposing views of their own powerful and powerless conditions during different instances. Some other times there is a marked discrepancy between the characters' perception of their power and the characters' actual access to power in reality, resulting in an ambivalence.

In *Story,* when Suno Tho exhorts Prince to do something for the betterment of Sitara by entering the political scene, he declares "I don't have what it takes" (Nambisan 194). However, Periavar and Daya recognise his range of influence and rope in Prince for their water-scarcity plan. He is unaware of the power he can exercise. He strongly believes that the prosperous class is not one among them. They appear to him to be species from another planet (193). When prodded on by Suno Tho to take up cudgels to save the poor and to speak up his mind about the wealthy, he says, "Injustice does not belong to the rich. I could try all my life to change things and not make a dent. I prefer not to get involved" (193). This remark is ironical. He concedes that the rich is not in absolute control in the system of injustice, confirming that the poor can, in however small a way, bring about perceptible changes. Despite the belief he insists that he is incapable of initiating any social change. He is sketched as a character that is uncertain and under-confident. He is not convinced of the meaning of his life or his career. He goes on to ponder, "Everywhere, in everything, the world was divided. Black and White, Rich and Poor, Land and Land, God and God. Who could tell if the world would be a better place if divisions did not exist?" (196) It is perhaps because he thinks in such binaries that he identifies himself to be powerless. The complex nature of realities often defy such neatly-contoured

divisions. Finally, when Prince complies with Suno Tho's plans, he decides to help Sitara find a strong footing while also wanting to do something extraordinary in his life to get out of the rut. This idea excites him by giving him a sense of purpose but at the same time also leaves him vacillating, "Am I a revolutionary or am I a traitor" (201). This vacillation may be noted all through the narrative when Prince remains undecided with regard to his power/powerlessness.

Simon's constant belittlement of his own role in the system of power in *Story* may be subjected to closer scrutiny. "Harini was energetic and wanton. I loved and feared her for it and wanted to desperately be like her" (97). He is evidently torn between his intense love for his wife and his deep-seated fear of her domineering ways. He openly accepts himself to be a victim of Harini's authoritative ways. "Control. How well I know it. Harini was a control freak, was she not? Spend less. Eat less. Enjoy less. She recognised my tendency to indulge and tried to reform me . . ." (115). She constantly argues with her husband, frequently mocking him for thinking too small and for having unrefined ideas. Simon recalls those moments with pain and considers himself to be defenceless against such wounds (166). Though he does not acknowledge his potential in the system of forces, Simon's powerful acts of opposition deserve mention. He expresses his dissent through seemingly simple means and finds relief through them. Simon himself mentions this when he recollects, "My victories were trivial and overshadowed by Harini's magnanimity in permitting them" (107). Sometimes he helped himself to food in secret without his wife's knowledge, took an unplanned short trip as a form of rebellion by not returning home straight after work and refused to clean the toilet (106, 115-16). In all the above cases, by refusing to yield to Harini's directions, he undermines her power. Such acts of disobedience attest to Simon's ability to exert. Bartky draws attention to

Foucault's particular conception of power that emphasises the possibilities of playing the social field in multiple ways against its regularities, and envisages an individual as a player positioned in the field of power ("Agency" 41-42). In the given game of power, while Simon explicitly believes himself to be powerless, a few instances such as those cited above illustrate how by choosing to play differently, he manages to subvert Harini's authoritative power.

Harini's overpowering demeanour and Simon's apparent powerlessness are indeed unmistakable. While this reverses the stereotyped man/woman power relations, this does not offer a wholesome picture of power networks. Their roles in the system of power do not remain unaltered at all times. Harini is seen to have devoted a lot of time and effort to the completion of her book. Her manuscript remains unpublished till the end of her life. After her death, Simon tries his best to find someone who might accept her book for publication but in vain. Harini's book does not see the light of the day. Unable to tolerate her overbearing nature he often longs to see his wife dead. When that finally happens and she passes away in reality, he is torn by guilt and tries to make amends by trying to get her book published. He himself admits that he has been taking efforts to see the manuscript take the shape of a book only as a form of atonement (Nambisan, *Story* 99). The book is still not recognised for its content. In any case, not only does he not succeed in finding a publisher, he also ends up losing her manuscript in a train journey. He steps down at a railway station and misses the train. His belongings along with the manuscript remain untraceable. With no back-up copy, her manuscript gets lost once and for all. Though Simon reiterates that he is innocent and that the loss has been inadvertent, one needs to view this from another perspective. Harini's voracious writing is a means of expressing her strong views regarding the lives around her. This

unrestricted expression often puts Simon on the path of resistance. On some unconscious level he perhaps wanted to win this invisible battle with his wife by discrediting her written work. Losing the written words of Harini could then be treated as his means of reclaiming power.

On the one hand Simon considers himself to be weak and insignificant in his family. In his letter to Pari, Rashmi's mother, he explains how he lost his wife's treasured manuscript. He justifies the act and vents out. He expresses his exhaustion with: "You're strong and I'm weak – that's the difference. I've had enough of strong women" (102). On the other hand, he firmly believes that he willed Harini's death: "I made it happen. Sure, it was an accident and I wasn't even there" (98). He believes that his unholy wish to see Harini die instead of her hospitalised mother, caused the auto-rickshaw accident that killed her that very day. He thinks he is weak but also that he is strong enough to will someone's death by sheer power of thoughts.

Apart from such ambivalence that remains intrinsic in Simon's thoughts and actions, there are also instances where Simon explicitly expresses disbelief at this apparent state of conflict between his powerful/powerless streaks. When PK and Dilip's conversation in the presence of Simon gets beyond tolerable for him, he boldly orders, "I WANT THE LOT OF YOU TO GO!" He is himself surprised by the loudness of his voice and his authority (110). He always considered himself powerless and therefore incapable of exerting influence on another individual. He is taken aback by his ability to ruthlessly ask his guests to leave his apartment. On first glance, though Simon appears to be someone who has always lost his battles, it needs to be stressed that his impotence is not enduring. Simon is both powerful and powerless when viewed through different lenses.

In *Tell Me,* Dheeraj is consistently depicted to be a feeble, aging man with no real say in matters pertaining to his own family. However, it gets increasingly clear how his actions do carry weightage. He becomes a subject of contention in the household. When Dheeraj informs Neelam that he would be going to Dharamsala for a ten-day meditation course and therefore wouldn't be able to take part in a *shuddhi havan* organised by her, all hell breaks loose. A *havan* – ceremony in which offerings are made into fire to propitiate the Gods through the mediation of a priest – mandates the presence of the eldest member of the family. His absence would imply Neelam is incapable of marshalling the support of her own father-in-law for an event she hosts. This reflects poorly on her ability to exercise control in her own family. And this realisation disarms Neelam who constantly seeks to command respect in the family and the society. She openly confronts her father-in-law, enumerating the various ways in which Dheeraj has been bringing disrepute to the family by choosing to steer away from convention. She blames, "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be ashamed to go to gatherings, to meet relatives and if it weren't for you, I could save this household from being sucked dry" (Bajwa 65). It is interesting to note here that Dheeraj, a supposedly powerless figure, is powerful enough to produce substantial impact on people and affairs, sometimes even through his absence.

Mahesh sincerely believes that he is an ineffectual, incapable of exercising power in any degree. At one point he compares himself with his employer and other such factory owners, and is fully convinced that he is irredeemably weak. He whines, "I am weaker than them and I will always be" (23). Apart from lamenting his present dismal existence, he also closes all possibilities for any future amelioration. He views life strictly in binaries and deems himself to be powerless at all times. Little does Mahesh know that his actions carry notable import. His mistaken perception of power

structure, strictly in terms of "strong and weak" with no intermediate possibilities, entails grave consequences. When he finds out that his father has lent his own savings to a friend's son only to be squandered off by the boy with no prospects for repayment, Mahesh loses his temper. The razor-sharp words of accusation he hurls at his father prove to be beyond hurtful. His father soon starts to withdraw himself from life, his health deteriorates, and within a few days he dies in his sleep. Also, it is Mahesh's reproach for Rani and his active attempt to wash his hands off her by inviting matrimonial proposals for her, that force her to leave home once and for all. Rani leaves for Delhi in search of an employment and a place to live in. Unable to bear the guilt of being responsible for his sister's departure and in a way his father's death, Mahesh ultimately commits suicide (201). For someone who earnestly believed he was incapable of impacting the course of events even in any small measure, such tragedies triggered by the power of his words and deeds become hard for him to withstand. Ambivalence that informs the power conundrum is pronounced in Mahesh's character.

Power can be studied at precisely those points when it is most "visible" and therefore those who have been most affected by power become the seat of understanding power (Foucault, "Truth" 116). Given this, as an entity that is subjected to forces of oppression, Sitara, becomes a fertile ground for understanding power relations. The slum-dwellers largely view the space to be of no consequence. However, their reflections about the entity's powerlessness do not negate the presence of strong undercurrents of power that remain ingrained in the locale. Unbeknownst to itself, Sitara plays substantial role in the power dynamics of the entire city. Suno Tho states in unequivocal terms, "The Periavar was too mired in the world of politicking to see how powerful Sitara could be. A proper agitation would

shake the government to its bones. Until protest was voiced in the loudest possible way, Sitara would be ignored" (Nambisan, *Story* 189). She is aware of the potency of Sitara and is bent on creating the right circumstances for the slum to realise its potential. The facts that Sitara provides cheap labour and significantly contributes to better the infrastructure of the city exemplify the power of the slum (195). Periavar, the head of the political party Daya belongs to, vies for victory in the upcoming municipal elections. He resorts to antics to win attention from the public and the media alike. He convinces Daya and Prince to create a water shortage in the already water-deprived Sitara. This problem would trigger large-scale protests and acts of resistance from slum-dwellers. This could then be used as a weapon to beat the current political leaders. He encourages looting and burning of shops. Vandalising even a lifeless statue in the slum ironically makes for a strong case for Sitara's power. This would help Sitara make it to the headlines of a newspaper (250-52).

As an entity Sitara can not to be considered as weak and helpless. It is capable of influencing decision-making even in the upper echelons of the social and political circles. In the meeting convened by the residents of Vaibhav to discuss and decide the fate of Sitara, Madhavan passionately makes the case for eviction of the slum-dwellers (219). The township is treated with contempt, no doubt. But its presence cannot be ignored. The filth in a way becomes Sitara's instrument of power. The entire meeting is necessitated by Sitara. Likewise, in the tussle for power between Simon and PK, it their attitude towards the slum-dwellers that becomes the subject of contention (96). Apparently, Sitara holds the power to decide the level of superiority between the two. Had it been a space with no remarkable power, its presence would never have been a subject of debate.

Sitara was originally a swamp with scope for fishing. As unused space, it soon turned into dumping yard for waste from the city. In the scramble for progress and development, workforce was in huge demand and workers with no place to go to made the marshy land their home. Their ability to adapt and make do with frugal resources becomes part of their strength. Migrant workers are seen to be always on the move and are by definition drifters (221). This trait helps them cope up with change. In the epilogue to the novel, after the slum of Sitara has been mercilessly decimated, Simon is confident about the ability of those in Sitara to acclimatise. "When they have eaten, they will begin their new life. Somewhere. Somehow. Their young minds are not weighted by the grimness of the situation. It is not their concern. . . . All of Sitara now lives outside Sitara. All of its blood pulses elsewhere" (267-68). This capacity of those in Sitara to accommodate changes reveals their fortitude in the face of uncertainty and is akin to the predominant characteristics of nomadic subjects as espoused by Braidotti. Moss and Prince note how Braidotti's nomadic subjects do not attach themselves to a particular body and remain fluid, ready to be absorbed into different configuration of power relations (Moss and Prince 24). This readiness to be co-opted in different power relations sets Sitara apart.

Additionally, this positive representation of those who are forced to move out of Sitara may be studied alongside the representation of the mental state of the apartment-dwellers post-demolition. In Simon's epilogue to the narrative, he is shown to be in dire need of kindness. Simon is heart-broken and finds it hard to adapt to the change: "I thought about all those self-help books which offered advice about personality development, leadership and success but nothing on how to fight failure" (Nambisan, *Story* 272). Instead of the slum-dwellers, it is Simon who is inconsolable. Sitara continues to live in different parts of the city without losing its spirit. This calls

for a re-evaluation of the power of Sitara and the power of those in Vaibhav. In the rich/poor divide, the former category cannot be categorically declared to be powerful. The migrants are shown to be living their lives without losing morale. Those in Vaibhav on the other hand are seen to be raising the height of the boundary wall to ensure their own safety in the event of a possible hostile situation in future – a clear manifestation of fear. It becomes amply clear as to how power remains fluid in all these situations. It is not to argue that those in slum are capable of exerting power as much as those in Vaibhav. The intensity and extent of access to power certainly vary. But the ambivalence of relations remains to be acknowledged. Power is eternally unrealisable and can never be total nor ever be fully in control (Dean 291).

The life story of Suno Tho, Nayagan's assistant, is relevant to the current study. As a young girl of seventeen, working in her parents' dhaba located on Delhi-Bombay highway, she was forced into flesh trade by her father. On one of his business trips Nayagan meets the girl, understands her plight and helps her escape from there. Before leaving, she manages to kill her father with an axe, and strikes him five times even after she knew he was dead. She explains how the murder never caused guilt but rather made her feel exhilarated. She reasons how hurting another is sometimes essential to prevent oneself from getting hurt (Nambisan, *Story* 194). Likewise, Saroja in a desperate attempt to escape the clutches of her in-laws, kills her husband (Nambisan, *Town* 40). The act of killing becomes problematised here. While it is completely right to argue that it is against the law of the land to take life, in this context, it can also be seen as a form of retribution. When viewed strictly through the prism of power, the women characters here are stationed in a unique junction of power and powerlessness. They find themselves reeling under the domination of their family so much so that they gather the strength to dominate and do away with their

oppressors. It is extreme powerlessness that prompts this explicit expression of physical aggression, triggering the question – are these women powerful or powerless? The inherent paradox here is unmistakable.

Dissonance – Powerful When Powerless?

For Foucault, power relations represent the condition of being both subject to and subjected by power simultaneously (*Power/Knowledge* 98). This could well be considered the crux of the matter discussed in the previous sub-section. While the sub-segment "Ambivalence" dwelt on the conflicting perspectives of the characters regarding their power/powerlessness, this sub-section titled "Dissonance" seeks to uncover a strand of power relations, wherein an individual appears to gain visible power when the individual is rendered most powerless by circumstances. This strikingly dissonant feature may be traced in some of the following anecdotes from the narratives.

In *Story*, Tansen Chakradar (Chakra), a young boy who works for Sahas, is bullied around mercilessly. He is called names and treated with absolute disregard. Though he hardly registers his dissent, he is certainly not amused. Once at a party the boy is ordered to bring soup and is forced to eat it himself. While he takes the soup he is ruthlessly thrashed by the inebriated guests (Nambisan 184). This humiliating moment of vulnerability ironically empowers Chakra. It is when he feels absolutely powerless that he decides to vociferously resist. Later that day, Chakra, peeping through a ventilator high on the wall, verbally abuses his employer with utter disdain. He finds this to be liberating and quits the job. After a few days when Chakra chances upon Prince, he recounts, "Next day when I looked down from the roof and yelled to the doctor I realised how it is for people like him to look down into the ditch

where we live" (184). In this scene, Chakra positions himself both literally and metaphorically above those who assert power over him.

When Rani experiences abject helplessness at one point during her stay at Sadhna's, she gains an inexplicable strength to unapologetically confront her employer. Sadhna and her friends throw a party for their colleagues from the literary world in order to forge professional relationships with their peers. The event becomes a mere façade, punctuated with shallow talks and insincere words of praise. At the end of the party, while clearing out enormous amounts of food left over as waste, Rani comes to understand that a sum of rupees 18,500 was spent on this act of pretence. This is the exact amount of money that was required to renovate her dilapidated home damaged by flooded drains. Her father was forced to put up with sharp taunts and criticism on account of his inability to arrange for such a large figure. This financial crisis ultimately rings the death knell for the family. In the aftermath of the flood situation, Mahesh and Neelam openly blame Dheeraj for not saving sufficient money for contingencies. Crestfallen, Dheeraj soon passes away in a few days. Presently, seeing Sadhna squander away precious money on such vain exercises, when the same figure could have saved her father's life, Rani is agonised. She painfully recognises the unfairness of her life, over which she seems to have little control. This realisation strangely emboldens her. Rani does not mince words when she takes Sadhna to task for not appreciating the comforts that the latter enjoys on a daily basis: "What's the problem with women like you? . . . You have a comfortable life. And yet you mope around the house, enjoying nothing, as if you were a tragic figure" (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 180). Rani refuses to pay heed to Sadhna's advice to calm down and snaps, "You think you will lecture the poor, uneducated maid. To think that *you*, of all people, have any wisdom to give me. . . . People like you don't even

know anything" (179). Sadhna is taken by surprise at this hitherto unseen posture of Rani. Ironically, it is Rani's piercing realisation that she is defenceless in front of her pitiable living conditions that ultimately propels her to assert herself in front of her employer. In this sense, powerlessness prompts powerful moves and stances.

In like manner, Ramchand too initiates a similar encounter with his boss. The elusiveness of power disillusions Ramchand. At one point in the narrative Hari laughs at the disgraceful death of Kamla. "Hari laughed. Hari *laughed.* Ramchand thought in shocked disbelief. Cheerful, carefree Hari laughed. *His friend,* Hari laughed" (Bajwa, *Sari* 218). This insensitivity becomes frustrating for Ramchand, who is usually a man of composed temper. He loses his cool and starts threatening, "And you, Hari! . . . Don't laugh, don't you ever laugh again. Ever, you understand? If I ever see you laughing, I swear by all the gods I know that I'll break every tooth in that grinning mouth of yours" (230). A careless jibe, a misplaced laughter triggers a major shift in the attitude of Ramchand towards his manager, his fellow beings and even his life as a whole. He starts questioning the meaning of life, becomes verbally and physically abusive and infact goes to the extent of locking himself up in his room for days. He gathers strength to raise his voice against Mahajan. "I dare because I dare," bellows Ramchand. He reminds, "you are not God, you know, after all" (228). Ramchand reiterates that Mahajan is not God. God is the most powerful and indestructible force, as believed by humankind. When Ramchand unequivocally argues that Mahajan is no God, it becomes amply evident that this outburst is an extension of power struggle. The response of the latter is also notable. "Mahajan was about to shout back at him, but he paused. This was very unusual. . . . He'd go up and fetch Gokul, to be on the safe side" (228). Mahajan is depicted to be clearly perturbed by the latest turn of events in the shop. He has always been a stern and domineering

manager who kept his assistants on their toes. However, when Ramchand expresses his angst in strongly worded terms right on his face, Mahajan panics and tries to be on "safe" side. If he had been in unconditional possession of power, then Ramchand's disrespectful words would not have had any impact on Mahajan's conduct towards him. Instead, Mahajan tries his best to calm Ramchand's temper down.

Ramchand's exasperation intensifies when he realises that no one is in a position to help Kamla. Even those characters that he believed to be in possession of power prove to be incapable. Learned women like Sachdeva and Mrs Bhandari who appeared to Ramchand to be mighty enough to bring about perceptible changes in the society, soon reveal their own position of powerlessness in matters concerning the brutal rape of Kamla. Realising that power is elusive and no amount of effort taken towards acquiring it would ensure one's state of domination, Ramchand also abandons his knowledge-seeking endeavours. Strangely this realisation becomes empowering to him. Johanna Oksala in "Anarchic Bodies" makes a fine comparison between Foucault's "limit experiences" that prove unintelligible and what Francoise Dastur describes as a phenomenological event when something unprecedented happens in a frightening or awe-inspiring manner. A traumatic experience, in like manner, eludes the grasp of language and expression (114-15). Ramchand's inability to come to terms with the impenetrability of power relations and the unjustness of the situation that agitate him to the point of frenzy may well be brought within the ambit of traumatic limit-experiences. Overtly, though Ramchand seems infuriated by Hari's mockery of Kamla's plight, it could also be seen as his response to the complicated social system of power that confounds him everywhere. He realises that he has absolutely nothing to lose. This emboldens him. He storms out of the shop, with

chaos ruling his mind. He wanders through the bazaar. "For the first time in his life, he felt like picking a fight with someone. At the same time, he felt tender and protective towards all defenceless things. He felt strong" (Bajwa, *Sari* 219).

Ramchand also yells at his landlord. "'*Shuuut up!'* he screamed against his landlord, and then spat for good measure" (227). This needs to be evaluated alongside the dynamic the two shared until then. When Ramchand once sang loudly in his room, the landlord had furiously forced him to quiet down (57). Ramchand always obliged wordlessly. This equation gets twisted in the present scenario. Also, as someone who could never gather courage to talk to Lakhan about the death of Lakhan's two young sons years before, after this fall-out in the sari shop, Ramchand displays great strength when he barges into Lakhan's food joint to openly pour his emotions out to Lakhan. "Without pausing to ask for anyone for permission, Ramchand bravely walked through the back door of the dhaba that led to Lakhan's living quarters" (220). He does not wait for permission and "bravely" walks in with no fear or fret. This new-found capacity to deal with such distressing moments stems from his coming to grips with the dissonant nature of the power conundrum. Ironically, the fact that he is helpless, empowers him and he recognises his defencelessness as a form of power. This leaves him utterly nonplussed with paradoxical emotions:

> Ramchand knew why he needed to lock himself in. For the first time in his life, he realised that it was only weakness that kept people strong. Strength weakened you. And so, in the first moments of complete strength and clarity he had ever known, he felt debilitated, helpless and defenceless. . . . He didn't know anything. He knew everything. (225)

Foucault recognises how an “acategorical thought” becomes a vehicle of liberation (*Language* 186). The “uncategorised” denotes an unfathomable rebellion that defies normalisation, classification, control or discipline (Faith 43). In the examples above, basic feelings of impotence instigate a rebellion – an “acategorical thought” – that results in exertion of power in unapologetic terms.

Pursuit

Rozmarin observes how Foucault’s idea of power brings to focus the everyday appearances of power and their mode of effects (3). This segment probes into some seemingly innocent everyday words and deeds of characters that turn out to be external appearances of characters’ internal aspirations for power. These thoughts and actions are clustered together broadly into two sub-segments based on the underlying predominant emotion and/or feeling that trigger them: desire and despise. Desire and despise take different forms and manifest in multiple ways. These manifestations are cloaked pursuits of power, and the pursuits themselves possess a telling effect on the characters’ processes of reflexivity pertaining to their power relations.

To Desire

Studying power relations entangled with goals and motivations of an individual is an exercise in understanding how an individual’s aspirations are deeply entrenched in society’s expectations and the invisible societal forces (Bordo, “Anorexia” 109). In this sense, the term desire here is used to convey the intensity of a character’s wish and motivation to accomplish something which, even if only obliquely, will facilitate the characters to make an impact in the power square. The desire translates into a pursuit of power. Strictly sexual connotations that sometimes tag along with the term have been dropped in the given context. The following is a

brief assemblage of situations and incidents from the narratives that demonstrate how individuals' desire for something not immediately associated with performance of power prove to be a cry for power. This in turn reveals a great deal about the individuals' reflections on their role in the system of power.

In *Story*, Sentha subsisting in the slum of Sitara takes great joy in reading Velu's books, spends time learning to do math and rejoices in playing a game or two with herself. "Learning was her weapon. *Learning was her weapon!*" (Nambisan 150). A weapon is almost always used in connection with power struggle and she considers learning to be her weapon. This becomes her tool to assuage her feeling of helplessness, and to balance the disproportion in power between genders. Similarly, Sentha's response to her brother Velu when he mocks her enthusiasm and questions the purpose of her learning, is noteworthy. She reasons, "To show idiots like you that I can – I *can.* I *can*!" (156) This thirst for learning is a reflection of her desire for power. She boldly declares that she studies well to show that she "can" – to have the power *to* if not power *against.* Likewise, in *Sari,* Ramchand is seen to be intimidated and more in awe of educated women like Mrs Sachdeva and Mrs Bhandari. "They were both learned, talented – they were both women who were different from the rest" (Bajwa 27).

Similarly, Ramchand, with an intense desire to reach for that position of power that seems to be guaranteed by the acquiring of knowledge, resolves to start learning the English language. For Foucault, "arts of existence" comprise of deeds that are viewed by people as both rules of conduct and as means to transform themselves in order to convert their lives into an "oeuvre" with aesthetic appeal (*Use* 10-11). With an ardent desire to transform himself, he embarks on a mission to master the English language. Foucault also calls attention to the two divergent

meanings of the word *subject* – being subjected to somebody by control and attached to one’s own identity through self-awareness. Both these denotations are species of power that “subjugates and makes subject to” (“Subject” 212). Here, Ramchand is seen to be subjecting himself to a rigorous process of self-improvement. His thirst for knowledge is in reality his quest for power. However, as discussed in the previous segment, he is vexed to find that those like Sachdeva who are conversant in English language are equally powerless. Once he realises that no amount of learning entails uninhibited power, he abandons all his efforts at gathering knowledge. The books that he once carefully chose and bought are then relegated to the unreachable top shelves of his cupboard and left to remain there, undusted (Bajwa, *Sari* 241).

Likewise, in *Story*, an apparent adulation of medical knowledge for Dr Prince soon transforms into abject disenchantment. After a few years of serving as Dr Prince, he becomes disillusioned and finds his life devoid of meaning. When Suno Tho encourages him to foray into politics, she ignites his desire to be in power. She goes on to belittle what Prince does for his living by saying that treating the sick is ultimately meaningless, for patients are bound to die sooner or later. On the other hand, she points out how joining politics would earn him a position of dignity for he gets to bring about tangible changes in Sitara (Nambisan 191). This cognizance that his patients are eventually doomed to die drives him to feel powerless. To rise above his feeling of depression, he accepts Suno Tho’s suggestion to join Nayagan and try his hand at politics. He proclaims to his mentor Swamy that his intention is to help solve the problems of dirty water, filth and miserable food in the slum by getting into the political world. However, he also reveals his original intention when he confesses that he thinks this would aid him to grow beyond his present meagre position and get out of the rut (200-01). In any case, Dr Prince’s medical career and his participation

in local politics are both offshoots of his desire for power. Chiding his student Prince, Swamy rues, “I don’t know what it is that makes even good people like you do stupid things in the face of power” (260).

Ambitions and dreams often reflect one’s wish to exercise power and assert one’s place in the society. Two close friends Velu and Thatkan, despite the dreariness of their surroundings in Sitara, passionately discuss their lives, families, dreams, beliefs and ambitions with one another. “About his future, Thatkan was serious. He would be a police officer” (43). Living in Sitara, belonging to the lower rung of the social ladder and working for the well-off, Thatkan perhaps finds himself stripped of power. He fantasises to be dying as a hero, after having killed every one in a gang of criminals (234). A police officer, in the eyes of a young boy, is a figure of authority. His dream to be a police officer is his attempt to reclaim his position in the networks of power. Swamy’s assessment of the temperament of those who work in Sitara is another such example. While discussing the fate of young boys employed at the furniture shop in Sitara, Swamy explains to Simon as to how the children employed there are impelled to hone their skills further. For the young “his name is no longer important even to him because ‘Carpenter’ is melded with his heartbeat. He’s God” (171). God is mightiness. The boy’s desire to be a carpenter is in fact a stand-in for his yearning to be in power.

The seeping in of the subject of power is unmistakable in the following circumstances where pride and dignity of the underprivileged in Sitara become subjects of contention. In *Story,* Sylvie is a strong character who greatly influences the choices made by her son, Prince. When her son’s employer sends home used clothes and products as remuneration for Prince, she refuses to accept them and forces his son to ask for salary in the form of cash. She firmly decides that her

daughters would not wear used under-garments whatsoever (179). Similarly, when Dolly Pereira mocks little Prince for not using toilet to relieve himself, Sylvie counsels Prince with "We may be poor but we have dignity. Don't ever forget that. Whatever happens in life, don't lose dignity" (192). She soon arranges for a toilet to be constructed at their home. Conventionally, dwellers of the slum are devalued, and therefore this act of demanding dignity may be viewed as an exteriorisation of the inhabitants' desperate desire for access to power. While these anecdotes that function as pursuits of power are underlined by a profound desire for something productive, the following sub-segment cites incidents that venture into the dark territory of desire for something destructive, compiled together under the umbrella term "to despise."

To Despise

The sub-section dwells on potent forces of hatred, envy, rage and similar such vicious impulses bracketed together under the head "To Despise." These feelings and emotions which when expressed or experienced often betray the individual's implicit intentions to pursue power. Some of the following instances substantiate this.

Suno Tho in *Story* proposes that Prince despise the rich: "At least you can hate them. If you hate them, you will do something about it" (Nambisan 193). Hatred becomes a force to reckon with and that would persuade Prince to pursue political power. In *Tell Me,* Neelam resents her sister-in-law. The resentment stems from Neelam's obsession with the question of power. She judges Rani to be "too strong-willed for a girl" (Bajwa 123). When discussing prospective groom for Rani, Neelam approves a boy not by assessing his character but by evaluating how "in that household, she [Rani] will be able to queen it over everyone" (123). Neelam's indignation on account of Rani reflects Neelam's deep-seated wish to impose her power over everyone else in the family. In another incident, when Sadhna recounts to

Rani the hardships she is forced to endure because of her fractured leg, Rani assures her employer, “Don’t worry. I will take care” (144). Rani’s vote of confidence immediately undermines Vina’s position in the checquerboard of power. “Vina did not look too pleased” (144). Contrary to expectations, Vina, as a house-help herself, does not feel relieved by the fact that the addition of a new assistant will substantially reduce her work load. Instead she is dispirited. Her displeasure betrays her own masked pursuit of superior power. Apart from such explicit instances of hatred, contempt also often transmutes into other strong emotions. Simon finds his daughter-in-law Rashmi to be overbearing: “I wanted a savage fight with someone. Anyone. What was it that displeased me about my daughter-in-law?” (Nambisan, *Story* 15) He is unable to openly voice out his dissent. This repressed rage seeks an outlet in another form. He yearns for a savage fight to assert his strength. “Unable to do anything good myself, I was being judgemental of others” (16). He confesses that his feeling of helplessness forces him to be judgemental of others.

Envy invites closer scrutiny as a strong emotion that exposes an individual’s perspective of one’s own power in a given scheme of affairs. Positing envy as a discursive resource is a profitable exercise in that the emotion often both signals and creates asymmetrical operations of power in a particular social arrangement (Siltaoja and Lähdesmäki 837). Manohar in *Town,* always identifies himself to be occupying a lower pedestal in the structure of power, with Kripa holding an upper hand in their marital relationship. When Manohar starts to freely express his creative impulses by writing stories after stories which in turn leads to his exalted sense of self-assurance, it unhinges Kripa. “The freshly unleashed artistic courage of her husband has eaten up her confidence” (Nambisan 215). She confesses that “there is a tinge of envy, no

more" (184). This intense emotion of envy reveals Kripa's aspiration to wield greater power over her husband.

Chellam and Ponnu harbour strong feelings of envy for one another. "True to himself, Ponnu turned to softer pleasures. Chellam disapproved of his amorality while envying him" (Nambisan, *Story* 52). Ponnu's promiscuity drives Chellam to envy his friend. Though he censures Ponnu for his lack of restraint, he himself confesses to his jealousy. One is jealous of someone who is apparently on a higher station than oneself. Ability to uninhibitedly engage in indiscriminate sex by visiting sex workers makes Ponnu appear to be in a state of dominance. Interestingly, Ponnu's relationship with his friend Chellam is also wrought with uncertainty. He is fond of Chellam but greatly envies him for his professional skills and his devoted wife. At the construction site he watches in awe the remarkable flexibility of Chellam's body and the ease with which he engages in strenuous physical labour (158). The fact that Chellam lives with his beautiful wife Egavalli and their two children, leaves Ponnu yearning for a life of stability. As a man without family, Ponnu feels distressed and weak. This even prompts him to make an inappropriate move on Egavalli which she senses and cleverly turns down. Throughout the narrative Chellam is one or the other to Ponnu: "Chellam his benchmate in the village school. His friend; his enemy" (161). Also, Chellam has all along been aware of Ponnu's wrongful intentions on his wife. During their trip to Palani, Chellam looks murderously at Ponnu s eated right next to him (241). The unstable power politics between Chellam and Ponnu presents itself in the bus scene cited above.

Anger often masks one's feelings of insecurity and dejection in the pursuit of power. In *Town* Saroja and her husband playfully start swimming up a stream. Her swimming skills are superior to his and she openly declares that she is better than

him. Kumari, the omniscient narrator, remarks, "Never tell a man you're better at anything, if you know you are, spare no effort to hide the fact. But Saroja has said it and her husband is angry, and people like Vasu are best not angered" (Nambisan 39). He hysterically moves towards a rather treacherous part of the stream in an effort to demonstrate his own skills. The fury of the husband and the consequent daredevilry are indicative of his sustained interest in pursuing power.

Similar examples may be culled out from *Story* as well. Standing eighty feet above ground, at a site of construction, Ponnu is terrified to move. He admires and envies his friend Chellam moving effortlessly from pole to pole. When Chellam senses Ponnu's fear and offers to help him, Ponnu is enraged (Nambisan 159). His anger is an offshoot of his feeling of powerlessness. It is Chellam's knowledge about Ponnu's fear that makes him feel weak. On almost similar lines, Simon is also angered by his friend Puru's knowledge of Simon's subservient relationship with his domineering wife. Puru takes the liberty to advise him to take the reins of his household by reminding, "You've got to take charge of your life, Simon. You know what I'm saying. What you do, what you don't do. Everything your wife decides" (167). While the sexist overtones in Puru's words are unmistakable, what is of relevance to the study is Simon's response to it. Simon feels humiliated in front of his friend who appears to be aware of his position in his family. This infuriates him and his friendship with Puru is strained. It is Puru's knowledge of Simon's miserable state that makes him feel like an ineffectual, which ultimately culminates in anger. In both these instances, pursuit of power becomes pursuit of cloaking one's powerlessness in front of others, failing which rage comes into play. In the bigger picture, these impassioned emotions and feelings unveil characters' stance regarding their role in

the overall scheme of social power and these anecdotes meaningfully contribute to the repertoire of characters' reflections on their relation to power.

Preconception

Weedon observes how "common sense" is the tool with which "truths" about an individual, a society or even the world are communicated (77). Beliefs, views and attitudes circulated as "common sense" in a social circle are subsumed under the head "Preconception" in the given section. These preconceptions carry remarkable influence on characters' stand-point regarding their ability to exercise power in particular circumstances. The section in its attempt to lay bare the preconceived notions in the narratives branches forth into two: presuppositions that approve certain behaviours/individuals by imposing the label of normalcy and pre-conceptualisations that disapprove certain behaviours/individuals by stamping the label of abnormality. Both these social tendencies hold a strong sway over relations of power.

The Normal

Lacombe ascertains that Foucault's concept of power is inscribed in practices of normalisations (332). A careful examination of views generally deemed common-place and accepted on face-value often aids in the unspooling of such normalisations and uncovering of power structures in a social set-up. Normalisations enforced by a society greatly affect the ability of the individuals to assert themselves in the system of power and persuade them to recalibrate their views regarding the same. The following circumstances in the select narratives prove to be a fertile medium for the discussion.

Foucault asserts how truth is never external to power. Every society possesses a "regime of truth" – elaborate mechanisms in a society that permit certain discourses to function as true while discrediting certain others, and sanction certain individuals

the status to speak truth while denying the same to certain others ("Truth" 131-32). These mechanisms and procedures that dictate the "truths" of a person often result in empowering some individuals while pushing some others to disadvantageous positions. In *Sari* when Chander thrashes Kamla, she appears to have internalised the dominant discourse surrounding physical abuse by a husband in a marital relationship. A woman who believes that men are predisposed to aggression or a woman who considers herself as responsible for triggering such violent tendencies in men, is less likely to perceive domestic violence as intolerable behaviour or even to call it "domestic violence" (Eveline 149). Kamla's take on the matter is a case in point. "This was pretty common, she knew. Men often beat up their wives. It was a matter of routine, nothing personal. It shouldn't have worried her" (Bajwa, *Sari* 152). She does not question her husband's impudence and believes this to be perfectly in line with social morality. Here, the society convinces Kamla that it is normal for a husband to assault his wife while her own personal self finds such acts to be totally insensitive. This leaves her conflicted. In this example, Kamla accepts defeat even before fighting back, as the normalising discourses on domestic violence leave her defenceless, depriving her of an opportunity to exert back.

In *Story,* when strongly objecting to Simon's romantic relationship with a Hindu girl (who Simon eventually marries) his father recollects events that led to his own marriage:

> I had unnatural tendencies in my youth. I became intimate with a boy. With boys. My parents knew what to do. Marriage fixed, everything over in a flash. Can you imagine the fate they rescued me from? Your marrying this low-caste Hindu girl would be as shameful as my being a homosexual. As unspeakable as marrying a prostitute. (Nambisan 29)

His family represses his homosexual desires and forces him to marry like a "normal" man. Interestingly, his father is unaware of the fact that he is himself a victim of normalising forces of the society. He justifies his parents' move, considers himself rescued and compares this with his son's unacceptable interest in a Hindu girl. He deems it a sin to marry a prostitute as well. He is seen to be unconditionally subscribing to social norms. Publically embracing his homosexual identity is likely to undermine his power as a "man" and adversely affect his exercise of power in the familial and social set-ups. On the other hand, following these rules will bestow him with a certain kind of power and authority to command others around him.

Similarly, in *Town*, Manohar accuses his father of being a tyrant who constantly humiliated his son for playing with dolls in his childhood. These seemingly simple norms like those that dictate suitable playthings for children invariably impact power play (Nambisan 32). Likewise, Sampathu recalls how his father never approved his son's distaste for elaborate prayers and rituals. For the father, participation in religious activities was compulsory. When Sampathu argues that it is only habitual not compulsory, the man thrashes him until Sampathu concedes (229-30). In all these examples, the father figure derives his ability to control from tactful appropriation of social preconceptions regarding marriage, sexuality, religion and the like, instead of battling those unrealistic ideals.

Neelam protests against Dheeraj's habit of visiting places of worship other than Hindu temples. Being a follower of Hinduism, Dheeraj offering prayers at mosques, churches or gurdwaras becomes unacceptable and even scandalous for her. She is perturbed by anyone even mentioning having sighted Dheeraj in such places (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 28, 83). She laments to Rani saying how "Savitri's husband, Rakesh, was saying that Papaji must be a strange sort of a Hindu" (28). Curiously, her

concern is not religious fidelity nor God's displeasure but society's disapproval. Such social norms need to be adhered to in order to hold aloft the status of their family. Since the society she is part of frowns upon such acts, she vehemently opposes Dheeraj's behaviour. She desperately hopes to stabilise her position in the societal power plane by conforming to social dictates on religion and worship.

One may choose to effectively exploit normalising discourses to one's own favour or be victimised by them or actively attempt to demystify them. The questioning of norms takes place from one's particular social location, and what ensues is a creation and not a discovery of one's own self through the process (Bevir 77). One's stand vis-a-vis the stereotyping and normalising forces of the society has the potential to shape the constitution of one's own self and also determine one's position in the grid of social power.

The Abnormal

Establishing traits of abnormality is one of the methods by which society imposes power relations and once abnormality with its correlated norm is defined, almost always it is the "normal" individual who gains an upper hand over the "abnormal" (Fillingham 18). By deriding those who do not subscribe to the dominant strain of thought, by labelling them as transgressors, the society decides what/who it considers to be normal and acceptable. The normal is often derived through its difference from the abnormal (17). The abnormal becomes a point of reference to decide what is permissible within a social set-up and what is not. Beliefs, behaviours and/or beings, when characterised as abnormal in a given society, are shorn of power. This complicates their position in the lattice of power relations. The idea of abnormality therefore becomes relevant to the study. In this context, a few instances

from the narratives that hover around this notion of abnormality or madness may be recounted.

In *Sari*, when Kamla holds the Guptas accountable for withholding dues to her husband and for eventually pushing her family into an abyss of debts, she is immediately disempowered by being stamped a "mad" woman. Such brutal honesty from Kamla bruises the fragile ego of the Guptas. Mrs Gupta instantly rings up her son to report the untoward incident. She agrees when her son says "the woman might turn violent. Maybe she is mad" (Bajwa 169). The family refuses to acknowledge the truth and chooses the most convenient method to undermine her narrative by calling in question her sanity. Sarah Hoagland observes why lawyers advise pleading insanity in the court of law. When the victim claims self-defence, she is often convicted. Consequently, judicial system establishes a woman who resists aggressive men as a woman who is insane (45).

Any form of power exertion against "big men" in the society becomes an act of transgression. This becomes a condemnable act and is established to be so by not only the "big men" but sometimes also by those others who themselves occupy the fringes. Gokul, a humble sales assistant himself, finds Kamla's outburst as unjustified. He passes unfavourable judgement over her:

> Mad woman that she is, she holds a grudge against her husband's employers after all these years. Abuses them in anyone's hearing. After all you know, both of them are counted amongst the biggest men in Amritsar. . . . While living in the same water, a small fish cannot afford to make enemies with the crocodile. . . . She is completely mad, I think. (199)

He considers playing by the rules of existent dominant discourse as conducive to a stable position in the power politics, and therefore not doing so becomes an abnormal

behaviour. Faith notes that Foucault's writings illustrate how exclusion of any group of individuals is not an innocent affair. It is achieved through the collusion of discursive and disciplinary techniques, and strategies to classify and control the group (43). Here, Kamla's rebellion needs to be contained and controlled. She is ostracised through the concerted efforts of a large number of members of the society who adopt disciplinary techniques to secure their own position in the social power structures.

Unlike Gokul, Ramchand identifies with Kamla's ordeals. Incoherent thoughts haunt him after he witnesses Hari and his colleagues' mockery of Kamla's humiliating end. Hari's laughter seems utterly insensitive to Ramchand. This leaves him conflicted. He is unable to come to terms with the complicated relations of power that victimise individuals both through direct physical aggression and through indirect means of emotional torture. He soon starts to distrust his own beliefs and wonders if he were in the wrong – if his distress is uncalled for and misplaced. "The familiar people looked malevolent. They would throw their heads back and laugh at anything. He alone was normal. Or was he? Was he who it was mad?" (Bajwa, *Sari* 224) He happens to be the only character that empathises with Kamla, while the wide majority of others point fingers of accusation at her. This problematises the question of who is normal and who is mad. His inability to disentangle the preconceptions of the normal/abnormal from the dominant power structures deeply disturbs his own sense of identity and security. "He had no name, no language. He did not know where and why he lived. He began to tremble in fury. . . . He was *mad*, yes, mad. No other explanation" (226). Welch offers an explanation by commenting how complete identification and empathy with the suffering of everyone will lead to dismantling of all structures of meaning, thereby causing madness. Faith lies in the interstices between absolute commitment and infinite suspicion (226). Streaks of complexity

and ambivalence (recalling the chapter's previous section) in Welch's exhortation to strike a middle path between expressing commitment and exercising suspicion cannot be missed.

Rani also undergoes a similar crisis. After a particularly heated episode at home, with Neelam openly accusing Dheeraj of being the sole reason for the family's dismal state, Rani is distraught. The following day, engaged in the mundane jobs at the beauty parlour, Rani contemplates on the goings-on in her life. The images of Ravan exploding and her father remaining silent in the face of Neelam's sharp accusations alternate in her imagination. At one moment she believes that in her mind "total clarity shimmered through" while at the very next moment she worries "I must be going mad" (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 69-70). On the one hand she recognises unfairness in the treatment of her father, while on the other, she remains tied by social dictates that condone such mistreatment. She struggles to accommodate these contradictory impulses. "Rani looked at herself in the mirror again. Her image seemed ineffectual, someone who had no power over any events and not even on the direction of her own life" (71). The society's insidious influence ultimately forces her to question her own sanity. Similarly, her father also desperately attempts to make sense of the complex world he inhabits. He confesses "I don't know, at times, I feel I might be going insane. At other times, when I am standing in the middle of the tangled lives of people I feel I am the only sane person I know" (87). This continues to be an irresolvable struggle.

Ramchand often slips into an intense mental dialogue with himself. His thoughts remain hooked to the intricacies of life and the meaning of one's existence. Having faced an insult from Mrs Sandhu and Mrs Bhandari early in the day at the sari shop, he engages in a drinking session with his friends in the evening to distract

himself. However, as soon as his friends leave, he begins to get distressed by the day's affairs:

> All the events seemed disjointed, the people were caricatures . . . and he saw himself as an ineffectual, affected, half-baked creature trapped in a particularly bad, pointless movie. Ramchand suddenly told himself that enough was enough. What was all this madness? Where would it lead him, after all? (Bajwa, *Sari* 35)

This is a reflection of a society that refuses to acknowledge failure and chaos as part of life. This has been internalised by the character so much so that he unwittingly becomes the voice of a society that invalidates such musings as madness. When Ramchand becomes deeply agitated and starts posing profound questions concerning the nature of life on earth, it also thwarts another presupposition held aloft by the society. Such grave subjects are often the focus of scholarly discussions of the elite and the erudite. When an uneducated sales assistant like him engages in such philosophical ponderings and suffers an intense identity crisis on seeing the sufferings of a fellow human being, his thoughts get discredited as meaningless outpourings of an unstable mind. When his mind refuses to align with the norms of a society that unapologetically victimises the victim herself, he himself presumes to have gone mad.

Such pre-conditionings may be observed in the following instances as well. Simon strongly believes his family would label him an eccentric for enjoying a particularly difficult train journey (Nambisan, *Story* 10). The family conceives in advance what is normal and what is not. A financially and socially well-placed gentleman appreciating a train journey in a filthy unreserved compartment is deemed to be mentally unstable by the family. Such an act becomes undesirable since it

disturbs the already established class-based segregation of power in the society. In *Tell Me,* after Rani and Sadhna's unrestrained outburst at one another, they both believe to have behaved abnormally. They "felt they had let the other witness the insane side of their souls" (Bajwa 182). Sadhna, the employer – a person in superior position – admits to being weak and vulnerable to Rani, her employee. And Rani, despite her relatively inferior position boldly confronts Sadhna, accusing her of being frivolous and ungrateful (179-80). This unconventional expression of power and powerlessness reverses the socially mandated parts expected to be played by the two people placed in opposite ends of power spectrum. It therefore appears "insane" on retrospection for the characters. Such preconceptions inevitably colour characters' approach towards exercise of power in a given social situation.

Sentha taking an interest in learning, is looked down upon by the society including her own mother. Sentha prides around with "I am Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning." Her mother immediately deems it abnormal, "Di! What is this madness?" (Nambisan, *Story* 156) The fact that a young girl is self-driven and academically-inclined becomes unacceptable to a point where it is immediately tagged as madness. In *Sari,* Ramchand seeking out a high-profile customer to apprise her of Kamla's misery is considered to be wrongfully sidestepping the fixed roles thrust upon him by social norms. When he tells Mrs Sachdeva that he would like to discuss the case of Chander's wife with her, "Mrs Sachdeva looked at him as if he were mad" (Bajwa 213). In the context of customer-seller relations, a salesman's conversations are to strictly remain impersonal and confined to business. Personal approaches, such as soliciting help on humanitarian grounds in this case, destabilise the conventional flow of power. The question of insanity is immediately brought in to restore normalcy. Likewise, Simon's wish to help those in Sitara is frowned upon in

Story. His words of praise for those in the slum earn him a poor reputation in his social circle. His daughter Sandhya finds his generosity to be pathetic. She declares, "I like the kindness behind your attempt, although it's madness" (Nambisan 256).

In all these cases, madness is simply being imposed upon those whose deeds go against the grain of socially acceptable behaviour. This imposition often results in an individual's unfavourable predisposition towards power operations that permeate any given social situation. By examining madness and psychiatry, among other things, Foucault illustrates how individuals implicitly constitute themselves by excluding those like the criminals, the insane and other such socially tagged "deviants" ("Political Technology"146). Practices of normalisations and dichotomisations of normal/abnormal strike at the base of an individual's capacity to challenge the system of power and thereby taint one's power relations.

Projection

C. G. Jung's much researched upon notion of projection, wherein people naively project their own psychological contents onto fellow beings and those thus perceived become qualified as *imagos* 'carriers of symbols,' acts as the basic premise for the discussions in the given section (343). However, complex psychological denotations and connotations that punctuate the term have been dropped and only the fundamental idea behind the conceptualisation has been used in the given scenario. In this diluted sense, the word projection here refers to various means by which the select texts project the larger subject of power relations on situations, characters, snatches of dialogue and the like, either overtly or covertly through images, metaphors, symbols, motifs, literary devices and such textual features. The preoccupation of the novels with the question of power may be discerned by focusing

on these *imagos*. So, in this sense the segment sheds light on the reflexivity exercised by the narratives as a whole.

Sari opens with the description of a petty street quarrel in the early morning hours on one of the busy lanes of Amritsar. This scene of a seemingly insignificant fight between a milkman and a pedestrian, positioned right at the beginning of the novel, may not be disregarded as a mere anecdote. It draws attention to the tussle for power that permeates the whole narrative. The petty fight does not go unnoticed. The brawl infact jolts Ramchand out of his sleep. Ramchand remarks, "It was just a ritual; people in street fights thought they lost face if they stopped before spectators intervened. The two finally went on their way" (Bajwa 3). The altercation has the power to arrest the attention of the onlookers and unbeknownst to them they become party to the struggle. As a student, Rani suffers humiliation at the hands of her math teacher in ninth standard which traumatises her to the point that she drops school that very year. During one such scene of punishment the teacher yells, "What do you think you are – a queen with all your subjects around you?" (Bajwa, *Tell Me* 19) The image of a queen imposing power over her subjects is borrowed to merely admonish a young student. The subject of power seeps through such seemingly simple anecdotes.

Asymmetrical forces of money and power that govern individuals also layer the spaces the individuals inhabit (Clewer et al. 1). The following descriptions of spaces in the narratives carry overtones of fundamental characteristics of power relations. In *Sari* realistic description of the crammed spaces and the image of a maze that challenges smooth navigation, mirror the equally hard-to-navigate structure of power with no defining walls. "Crumbling buildings ran into each other . . . Their terraces overlapped, there were no boundary walls – you couldn't tell where one

finished and the next began. . . . It could take years to become familiar with the maze-like network of lanes and alleys and short cuts in the old city" (Bajwa 4-5). Curiously enough, the hassles of getting enmeshed in labyrinth and maze-like structures find mention in *Story* as well. As Simon and his team find their way through Sitara, they find themselves lost in a maze. "We came to see the place but now we're lost, and hopping round in circles," laments PK (Nambisan 130). Foucault notes how people are always involved in a struggle, being constantly in "situations" (*Ethics* 167). PK's lament mimics one's conventional response to the struggle involved in navigating through the complex "situations" of power in a social set-up. "They walked the length and breadth of Sitara, a labyrinth where migrants made their homes" (Nambisan, *Story* 50). The labyrinth-like appearance of Sitara can be interpreted as the labyrinth of power relations – an intricate system of forces that act in multiple channels in multiple directions.

In *Sari,* anarchy in external space mirrors the psyche of Ramchand. "Anarchy reigned in more places than one in Ramchand's room" (Bajwa 189). It may be argued that one of those places is the mindscape of Ramchand. Subversion of hierarchy, lack of unitary control and presence of utter disorderliness, these hallmarks of anarchic state may well be extended to his mental state. As he tries in vain to fathom the meandering patterns of power that often defy any straight-forward comprehension, anarchy sets in his mental faculty. "Small, prickly, invisible things crawled out of the white mattresses and crawled up his body. They didn't bite or hurt him, but they were there, nestled against his body, snugly. And he didn't know who or what they were" (226). These "invisible things" may be interpreted as forces that always act upon an individual. They are often undefined and even unrecognisable. But these force

relations will always remain nestled against one's mind and body, often without one's own conscious knowledge of it.

Likewise, the sights and sounds witnessed by Simon, PK, Sandhya and Chellam during their trip to Sitara in *Story* brim with similar motifs. For instance, in Muthuvel's baking unit, the basic principle of any business is described as the process of making something out of nothing (Nambisan 126). This is a veiled reference to how power lurks behind even what appears to be nothing. At Veerapandian's tannery and leather works, the employees are said to have gotten used to the foul smells of the slaughtered animals (122). They are oblivious to its presence. The same could be said of the pluralistic forces that surround an individual who often gets used to its effect so much so that he/she does not recognise its existence. This focus on metaphors that accentuate the invisible and inescapable features of power relations echoes one of Foucault's famous propositions that "power is everywhere" – not in the sense that power encompasses everything but in that it emanates from everywhere (*History* 93). Sampathu interprets life to be a wheel "that turns all the time, sometimes slow, other times fast" (Nambisan, *Town* 95). The wheel of power keeps turning too, alternately permitting and denying access.

Harini's unpublished book has a substantial presence in *Story*. Simon recollects, "In the first year of our marriage which was one of her most productive years, she wrote seventy-two pages and several chapter headings: CHANGING THE MINDSET OF YOUTH. HOW THE RICH PERCEIVE THE POOR. THE DIVIDING LINE" (Nambisan 34). The loss of Harini's book may be studied as an implication on the book's content itself. When Harini in her book distinguishes the two categories in black/white colours leaving no room for any commonalities, her book also perpetuates the stereotypical rich/poor binary with the former gaining an

upperhand over the latter. In reality, such straightforward binaries cannot be formulated since power is an eternal presence that does not leave any individual or group untouched. Presenting one category to be in full possession of power while depriving the other of it is not a faithful representation of reality. Thus loss of a text that unabashedly engages in such a representation is figuratively a call for embracing the complex nature of non-binary relations of power.

This absence of clear-cut lines of distinction calls for envisioning a middle path in approaching relations of power. Ponnu's practical views with respect to life in *Story* may be recounted here. "His [Ponnu's] dreams were more real. He understood the in-between world where people lived a sort of glamorous poverty, picking up scraps of wealth that accidentally came their way. It was that type of in-between world where he, Paul Ponnuraj, would ultimately survive" (Nambisan 50). The "in-between world" could be interpreted as the in-between world of power relations wherein multiple forces act upon one another resisting binary conceptualisations, reminiscent of Foucault's genealogical studies. Lacombe observes how Foucault's genealogy opposes the conception of society in binary terms, and how in the place of structure/agency dichotomy, relational and productive approach to the social world is adopted (349).

Rukma leaves home without warning in *Town* and is located at a house managed by Manohar. The young girl is in fact one of the many kids abducted by Manohar. She, being the eldest one there, takes care of all the other children in the house. When Gundu requests her to return to their home and proposes that they marry in a few years, Rukma refuses. She explains the reason for running away by stating that "I like to be in charge. I like responsibility" (Nambisan 236). To be in charge is to be able to access power. This could be dubbed as Rukma's quest for power. The

fact that the narrative ends with Rukma running away from Manohar's house as well to some decript place, with ultimately no final knowledge of where she is, may well be interpreted to be the ultimate outcome of any quest for absolute power. Power forever eludes grasp.

This lack of closure may be discerned in various instances from *Tell Me* as well. Rani creatively spins new stories to relate to her nephew Bittu but often miserably fails in giving them a proper closure. "This always left Rani feeling confused and a little baffled" (Bajwa 7). This foreclosing of any possibility of complete resolution is characteristic of power relations in general. Dheeraj painfully admits to Rani that he is exhausted by the demands of the society. He explains, "I am never able to understand what people are thinking, why they say one thing and do another; it is tiring for me to interpret them" (114). The complexities of the world with multiple strands of interrelations of power confound him. Rani's befuddlement in the face of the opacity of life may be noted throughout the narrative. She firmly believes that everything is "repetitive and non-sensical" (169). Her inability to grasp the full meaning of life is no different from the difficulty inherent in grasping the ultimate meaning of multiple relations of power. At the fag end of the story, Rani concludes that "the world was made up of stories, hers and other people's, real ones and imaginary ones. And that her father had died of exhaustion, trying to interpret these stories. But there was no point. They never could make sense" (197).

Literary devices like parallelisms, choice of narrator and selection of names for protaginists, among others may also be examined for the ways in which these devices also contribute towards comprehension of power relations. Interestingly, one of the qualifiers used for describing the slum Sitara in *Story* is *Nachchatiram,* which in Tamil language means a star (Nambisan 41). Sitara in Hindi also means a star.

While it might appear ironic to find a slum (space that is conventionally pushed to the fringes in a social arrangement) being called a star, it serves well to remember how Sitara's potential to wield substantial amount of power has already been established in the previous segments. In the Hindi language, Rani (name of Bajwa's protagonist in *Tell Me*) means queen and Rajakumari (name of Nambisan's protagonist in *Town*) means princess. Connotations of power that emanate from such references to royal positions cannot be missed. This curious naming choice of the two writers may well be interpreted within larger consideration of relations of power in the study. Additionally, Rajakumari confesses, "I picture everything I hear and a lot of that I might not hear. You can rely on most of what I tell" (Nambisan, *Town* 129). The narrator herself admits to being unreliable. This unreliability and instability may well be extended to relations of power in general.

Along with narrative voices, narrative techniques like parallelisms may also be reviewed in this regard. The story of Sitara and the story of Simon seem to possess clear parallels. In terms of their position in social or familial hierarchy, they are both forced to occupy the lower levels. Their lack of awareness of their own power is evident in various parts of the narrative. Simon is represented to be overtly controlled by his wife and later by his children. Sitara appears to be at the mercy of the rich and the politically powerful. However, as the narrative progresses it becomes immensely clear that in both the cases, power remains problematised. Simon, unbeknownst to himself, is indispensable in the power play and so is Sitara. This perhaps explains why Simon identifies himself closely with the story of the slum and tries his best to improve the physical conditions of Sitara. He clarifies, "We think that slums are all filth and misery. That the people who live there are pathetic. It's not like that" (Nambisan, *Story* 105). He fights for the cause of Sitara and makes small

contributions to better the lives of those in the slum. Sitara's significant improvement will apparently empower Simon. His attempts at helping Sitara find its own footing can be interpreted as his attempt to assert his own individuality. Sitara losing its battle becomes Simon's own personal defeat. Simon argues against Madhavan and finds the usage of the word slum to refer to the township of Sitara as derogatory. He insists, "It is no more a slum than Vaibhav is a circus" (220). This is Simon's way of implying that Sitara is not very different from Vaibhav. They are both spaces with interlinked arteries of power.

When the stories of Simon and Sitara possesss parallels in *Story*, in *Sari,* the journeys of Ramchand and Kamla may be placed on parallel planes. Kamla's battle against the harshness of the world becomes Ramchand's own. After undergoing several ordeals in the process of trying to fight against the injustices meted out to Kamla, Ramchand reveals that he did not even know the name of the woman he has been standing up for (Bajwa 219). The individual becomes irrelevant. It is the position that the subject occupies that is pertinent. And this position that Ramchand closely identifies with prompts him to raise his voice for her. bell hooks asserts how the struggle to defy dominating power is something that individuals can easily identify with, since even the most oppressed experience moments of intense rage so much so that they vehemently react. Even if momentary, an emotional eruption that eventually paves way for rebellion takes place. Responses against dominating agents gain traction when the responder is able to recognise how structures of authority work in one's life, and is able to critically reflect and formulate alternative means of existence (hooks, *Yearning* 15). Therefore, to be mindful of one's location in the scheme of power networks is vital. Both the parallelisms employed here (Sitara/Simon, Ramchand/Kamla) enable the characters to reflect on their role in the

grid of power, and also exemplify the potential of the textual features to catalyse the process of reflexivity. The line of investigation adopted in this segment aids in discovering the narratives' consistent engagement with relations of power through ingenious means and mechanisms of projection.

Conclusion

One always remains enmeshed in situations of power operating in different configurations. However, this is not a trap for these configurations may be modified and situations changed, throwing open fresh possibilities (Foucault, *Ethics* 167). This change can be brought about only when the actor(s) involved are able to introspect and discover their position in the situation of power. Awareness about agency is required to act as an agent. This knowledge paves way for strategically undermining the dominance of the powerful and relatively liberating the less powerful to act on their own accord (Lipman- Bluemen 114). It is pursuit of this knowledge that has prompted the discussions constituting the chapter titled "Reflexivity." This further reiterates the value and relevance of the current study. The chapter has encapsulated the standpoint of the characters regarding their own role in the network of power relations. The perception of individuals is often wrought with ambivalence, leaving them undecided about their own powerful/powerless stature. Counter-intuitive conditions wherein an actor feels most powerful when confronting the most powerless moment in life instantiate the inherently contradictory nature of power relations. Desire, dreams, ambitions on the one hand and intense feelings of envy, rage, despise on the other, become vehicles of power pursuit. Social forces of normalisation, implanting preconceptions in the minds of the characters regarding the normal/abnormal beliefs and behaviours in the society, interfere with characters' perception of power relations. Apart from particular actor's reflections, in a more

general sense, the novels also partake in reflexivity as evidenced by multiple examples of metaphors, symbols, images, motifs predicated on the subject of power. The process of reflecting upon and recognising one's position in the matted, wobbly terrain of power is not a straight-forward one that guarantees absolute answers. Therefore, in line with the avowed aims mentioned in the introductory comments, the chapter does not make pretence of offering infallible answers but merely explores some of the characters' reflections and their implications.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

Power relations are myriad and often matted. The study has been largely a labour at identifying particular patterns that may be discerned when the multiple offshoots of power are collated. A finalised and unquestionable grasp of the full implications of the problematic of power cannot be achieved. Only the process of comprehension may be slightly simplified through this systematic grouping of forces that govern individuals and incidents in the select novels. Foucault’s call for examination of circuits of power at their root informs the first step in the process of investigation. An entire spectrum of forces that remain active at a given time has been studied closely. After a thorough probing, relations of power have been assorted and assigned to three broad categories that have been dealt with in detail in three different chapters of analysis.

Summary of the Analysis

The introductory chapter serves to place the select novels and novelists in the larger background of Indian literary scene. A critical survey of Indian English Literature with particular thrust on the genre of fiction reveals that substantial corpus of writing has been produced from the country. Illustrious writers from the Indian literary terrain have used the English language to create remarkable fictional worlds. Today, Indian novels in English enjoy global readership and continue to be studied for their rich and imaginative hues. The novel is rooted in the native soil even if the association with the West offered an impetus to it. Exploring fictional outputs from the earliest known records to the most contemporary ones, critics and scholars often propose division of Indian literary strains on the basis of time period, thematic engagements of the works, notable figures who influenced the culture of writing and

other such significant factors. These divisions help provide a solid framework for the vast and diverse literary productions from the country. Within this framework women writers hold a position of prominence. There is a recognisable legacy of Indian women who have established themselves as writers to reckon with. With divergent female voices populating the literary world, fiction becomes a potent medium for representation of self and society. The two authors of select novels – Rupa Bajwa and Kavery Nambisan – carry forward this legacy through their perceptive handling of ordinary subjects caught up in extraordinary circumstances. They articulate contemporary social realities and negotiate multifarious identities in strikingly original terms. Bajwa and Nambisan's characters are familiar in that we meet them ever so often in daily lives, yet unfamiliar in that we hardly get to meet the likes of them in literary worlds. The select narratives act as a solid base on which relations of power manifest themselves.

A chapter is dedicated to delineating key conceptualisations of power that constitute the methodology of investigation. Notable strands from Foucault's espousal on power, central to reimagining power relations in the proposed study, have been recorded here. While power is usually studied based on its effects on a vertical axis by adopting a top-down model, Foucault seeks to trace power in a horizontal axis. His various understandings of the concept of power – as an exercise and not a possession, as a necessary condition of being, as invariably pervasive, as something that induces behaviour and yields to subversion – are some of the many interpretations that prove invaluable to the study. Foucault's avowed distaste for treating his arguments as "theory" and his alternate proposal to view his elucidations as merely tools for further study, prompt the adoption of a similar approach for the examination of select narratives. Foucault's explications act as tools with which the

three ensuing analytical chapters are conceived. These Foucauldian assessments primarily compose this part of the study.

A comprehensive scrutiny of multiple forces immanent in a given sphere reveals how operations of power are equally multiple. There is more to a power relation than what meets the eye. An elementary power function with one individual in a position of unqualified dominance and the corresponding individual in full subservience does not exist in reality. Powerful and powerless are not mutually exclusive categories that can be demarcated with a solid line of separation. On close examination, it becomes clear that some relations of power may be studied in tandem with some others based on how individuals participating in the power play, attain access to power. Probing into factors that permit this access reveals some underlying qualities of power relations. The three analytical chapters are thus born from this facet of inquiry.

The prime interest of the chapter "Relativity" has been on comprehending how exercise of power is dependent on external factors, thereby exposing the relative/dependent quality of power relations. Dependence on external elements may be further extended to include interdependence between individuals in a power situation wherein one's ability to exert power is predicated upon another's appropriate response to it. This draws attention to the reciprocal nature of power relations that becomes the subject of investigation in the chapter titled "Reciprocity." While the hitherto chapters dwelt upon relations of power between individuals and entities, the chapter labelled "Reflexivity" sharpens focus on how characters relate themselves to the idea of power. The variegated power relations are thus aligned into three groups and evaluated from three distinct vantage points.

The salient points broached upon in these three different chapters are recalled in the process of summation. From the analysis titled “Relativity” it becomes amply clear as to how individuals and entities shift in their position with respect to power. Power functions are susceptible to variation in accordance with variation in situations. Therefore power relations of an individual have been examined by placing them in different frameworks – family, society and familial/social set-ups. A character imposing authority at one point in a familial or social arrangement loses the ability to make an impact at another point, even within one framework. Relationships between elders and children, husband and wife, employers and employees are all fraught with tension. When two different scenarios are brought into consideration, then the polarities in power relations become all the more pronounced. An overpowering husband in the domestic space turns out to be a meek employee in the work space. Apart from such obvious examples that centralise the significance of relativity in power functions, there are also anecdotes that help unearth ingrained dependency of power on extraneous elements for effect. This further reinforces the value of this gradient of research. Social definers such as class and gender influence characters’ actions in unanticipated ways. Conventional class and gender hierarchies can both be seen to be inverted here. The rich/poor divide does not immediately translate into a corresponding powerful/powerless binary. Individuals perform more than one role and defy categorisation. Along with characters, even entities like knowledge, language, money, God, body, spaces, acts and events cannot claim to possess unfettered stability. The range of influence of these seemingly fixed entities is also determined by context which then enhances or restrains an entity’s power circumstantially. Contingent factors figure everywhere in the maze of power and

context plays pivotal role in determining one's authority in a given point of time. Therefore individuals and entities resist powerful and powerless appellations.

Elucidations labelled as "Reciprocity" lay bare the markedly interdependent characteristic of power relations. Those supposedly situated in positions of dominance are tied irrevocably to those who are dominated by them in order for the former to maintain their elevated status. When those subjected to imposition of power refuse to respond to the assertion in ways expected by the individuals in authority, such unanticipated responses immediately result in desperate moves to re-assert. These reassertions become the predominant concern of the chapter in question. Such redeeming acts essentially imply that the response of the seemingly powerless does carry force and their "wrong" response is feared. Anecdotes from the select novels instantiate how questionable strategies are employed by the so-called dominant segments of the society to stabilise their position in the plane of power relations. Subversive responses are sometimes tackled actively using tactics like physical aggression or passively by refusing to acknowledge subversion in the first place. Apart from such open attempts to reclaim power, the investigation further reveals that those enjoying the privilege of a higher status in the society consistently engage in certain acts to prevent any future destabilisation of their position. Unfavourable responses are sometimes curtailed off even before the actual response. Establishing a panopticon-like mode of control over those in underprivileged positions is one such example. These pre-emptive acts taken up to prevent or counter possible negative response in future is comparable with preparative acts – steps taken in order to ensure a positive response in future. In this regard, participation of the individuals in charitable activities has been discussed in detail. When the beneficiary refuses to appreciate it as a gesture of kindness, the apparent authority that the giver exudes,

falls on precarious grounds. Quotient of power latent in such demands of gratitude, apology, approval and the like are uncovered in the process. Additionally, collective response from an audience becomes inevitable to certain species of power relations. Power operations inherent in decisions as simple as one's choice of an outfit to the more serious decisions like executing punishments in public, are anchored on the presence of spectators. When acts are staged for those around to witness the might of the so-called powerful, it leads one to a logical question: If one indeed possessed power, why go to such lengths to prove one's own power? If one had access to unqualified power, then urgency to block unfavourable responses and desperation to evoke favourable responses are inessential. Acts of re-assertion therefore stress the significance of responses of seemingly passive characters in the active exercise of power by the high and mighty. Subversion is possible when the individual subjected to abuse is mindful of the individual's own role in the scheme of power. This knowledge may then be utilised to thwart expected responses and thereby derail authoritative intentions. In the performance of power everybody needs to play one's own parts and nobody is dispensable. Power dynamics between individuals inheres an element of reciprocity.

Evaluations compiled together under "Reflexivity" assess how characters relate themselves to or rather view themselves in the larger consideration of power relations. Their perception often remains one sided and they often appear oblivious to their own capabilities to impose. Ambivalence in their positioning in the scheme of power is observable in various incidents wherein the individuals are torn between their powerful/powerless statures. This reveals a clash of opposing forces. One remains unaware of one's own range of influence leading to a power tussle even within one's own psyche. In some cases, the point at which characters associate

themselves with abject helplessness also strangely becomes the point at which they manage to establish their power most vociferously. This dissonance – appearing powerful when experiencing powerlessness – is a striking facet of perception of power relation. Being victimised on various fronts accords a unique kind of strength to the subjugated. With nothing much to lose, the dominated experiences a strange sense of liberation. This leads to a flow of power in directions not generally acknowledged, and paradoxically, leaves an individual both powerless and powerful simultaneously. Pursuit of power by individuals need not always be explicit. Desire, ambitions and dreams often become masked means to implicitly gain control. A deep-seated desire to be able to exercise authority sometimes assumes unconventional forms. Despise, envy, anger and other such strong emotions are sometimes triggered when one is incapacitated to exert superior power. These fervent feelings therefore aid in unwrapping concealed power pursuits. Certain unquestioningly accepted beliefs sometimes unconsciously dictate the course of one's thoughts and actions. These preconceptions have been examined by reviewing social mandates on what constitutes normal and abnormal behaviour. Processes of normalisation active at all points in a given social arrangement significantly tilt functions of power based on individuals' conformation or non-conformation to social standards. While what is ordinary is itself an arbitrary standard set by a society, anything out of the ordinary is immediately treated as abnormal. The study of what/who is considered abnormal therefore by extension becomes a study of what/who is denied power on account of preconceptions. Apart from individuals' preoccupation with the question of power, select novels as a whole may be treated as entities that remain enamoured by power relations. Several symbols, metaphors, literary devices, dialogues, scenes among others from the chosen works suggest how

texts themselves linger on the subject of power. While some of these narrative elements are only tangentially suggestive of characteristics of power relations, some of them appear to be definitively anchored on the theme of power. The novelistic features are interpreted as denoting the various facets of complex power structures. The psychological notion of projection, wherein a person empties one's own mental content on others, is borrowed to encapsulate these understandings. The line of inquiry toed in this chapter brings to the surface underlying currents and forces that influence the ability of individuals to access power. Being aware of these influences is likely to encourage a character to exercise power and modify the course of events.

It is clear then that every minute detail becomes party to the network of power and a cause-effect relationship cannot be traced between the different elements at any point. One is a product of several modes of control that exist in a society. Mechanisms of power shape relationships. Aggregate interpersonal relations are moderated by power. Tracing the underlying mesh of power in a society illustrates how one is always surrounded by forces and is forever entrapped in operations of power. Even if not explicitly so, one is always situated in a web of power. Power is never to be found exclusively at one's disposal but is rather diffuse and hence elusive. Being mindful of this is the key to navigate through the maze of power. Fluidity of power relations ensures that power does not produce a totalising outcome. No one individual is eternally powerful or irredeemably powerless. Ironically, this very attribute contributes to both the relevance and limitation of the undertaken research.

Relevance of the Study

With power permeating all aspects of living, the research taken up is productive in that it uncovers relations of power in places not previously envisioned.

If obedience to dominance is a given, then taking elaborate steps to ensure obedience, only reveals the vulnerabilities involved in the acts of dominance. This inference is pertinent in order to recognise one's own capacity in the maze of power. Multiple sites of disempowerment and empowerment emerge from the exploration instead of a straightforward dichotomising of the forces merely as powerful and powerless. This implies that subversion may be enacted from multiple locations and a reversal of one's given position in the power grid is possible in multiple ways. The knowledge that assertion of power is invariably dependent on and correlated with the respondent's reciprocation may be fruitfully exploited to engage in acts of resistance. Additionally, the particular selection of the narratives adopted for the examination also amplifies the relevance of the investigation. With the select novels published in the early decades of twenty-first century, the narratives represent contemporary times. The situations encountered by the characters in these fictional worlds therefore bear semblance with similar such real life scenarios. Probing into innate power operations in such anecdotes has practical implications. The analysis facilitates a deeper understanding of the workings of power latent in apparently innocent day-to-day encounters. When power masks its own effects by giving a false sense of complete domination or full liberation so much so that individuals do not even recognise the need to exercise their agency, analyses such as these – those that expose instability of power relations – gain relevance.

Scope of the Study

The thesis has brought within its frame of analysis select narratives of two contemporary Indian women writers. The study therefore largely probes into typical Indian familial and social situations. The phrase *Indian experience* by itself cannot be fully encapsulated at any point. Though parts of southern and northen India find

expression in the select novels, these very regions are marked by pluralistic socio-cultural strains that defy complete representation. Secondly, other regions of the country like the northeast that uniquely stand apart have not found place in the selection. Comprehensive evaluation of power relations in the pluralistic socio-cultural realm of the country is beyond the ambit of the investigation at hand. The thesis therefore confines itself to the examination of Indian exeperiences outlined in the select narratives. Also, the gender of the select authors, though not accorded much weightage here, may be factored in to view power relations through a gendered lens. Considering novels penned by male writers in the context of the select women's fiction will offer newer persepctives. Also, cutting across geographical boundaries, the select works may well be studied alongside fictional productions by writers hailing from different nationalities and backgrounds in order to gain insight into power relations that punctuate such distinctly different scenarios. Such larger considerations extend beyond the scope of this study, consequenting this focused analysis.

Limitations of the Study

The study, like any other, is not without limitations. As already noted, given the scope of the thesis, the analysis remains largely anchored on a particular line of interpretation. Therefore the particular framework of the three analytical chapters that segregate power functions based on one predominant trait of power relations has been adopted for easier comprehension. It does not encompass the pluralistic features of power relations in general. Even when the variegated relations of power including resistive elements have been evaluated, the idea of resistance with its own theoretical force has not been sufficiently explored. Acts of power sometimes double up as acts of counter-power and vice versa. Relations of power remain volatile and are

constantly changing. This inherent instability and unreliability of the ways in which power operates in a society also pose a serious challenge to the process of research. Full and final answers to multiple questions regarding the functioning of power therefore become unrealisable. The tools of investigation supplied by Western critical scholarship have indeed proved beneficial for the study, as the ideas espoused therein possess timeless value and shed light on the complex condition of power relations discernible everywhere. But even when conceding that there is merit in appropriating Foucauldian conceptualisations it may be argued that Western theoretical frameworks sometimes remain inadequate for theorising and appreciating novels from India. Therefore, typical Indian modes of aesthetic appreciation may also be adopted as conceptual tools for analysis. Some of these shortcomings of the investigation eventually open up platforms for further research in the domain.

Platforms for Futher Study

Power relations are myriad and therefore may be examined in multiple contexts. Theories of spatiality, intersectionality, trauma among others may be utilised to assess situations of power. The novels may be explored from vantage points other than those of power too. Some such avenues the narratives throw open for future study are briefly discussed in the following chapter titled "Recommendations."

Conclusion

The complexities built into the multiple expressions of power are confounding and therefore the study has been an attempt to disentangle certain strands of power. The investigation concludes with a call to not avoid but understand the complexities, and to not resolve but recognise the inherently paradoxical nature of power relations. The exploration culminates not in answers but in possibilities.

Chapter 7

Recommendations

The select narratives offer scope for studies from theoretical perspectives other than those adopted in the current investigation. Associated with the broader theme of power, is the concept of resistance. Critical understandings of the same may be applied in order to obtain a closer view of power relations from the angle of the subjugated. Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw, to examine how multiple social definers like class, gender, race, among others intersect with one another in oppressing individuals in a society, is resourceful in furthering the frontiers of power studies. Trauma and its multiple expressions may be discerned in the novels chosen. Individuals experience vicarious trauma on witnessing tortures inflicted on others, and by empathising with their tragedies. Theories of trauma may be borrowed to assess these characters. This draws attention to the potential of psychoanalytical frames of reference. Anger and aggression invariably associated with expressions of power may be approached through a psychoanalytical lens. Likewise, crimes and criminality that punctuate the stories may also be appropriately approached. Apart from interpersonal power relations, human-Nature relationships may be evaluated in similar lines.

Spatiality in the select narratives, especially with regard to living in urban spaces, may be explored with the aid of spatial theories. Elements of commercialisation, a significant facet of urban living, conspicuous in the chosen works of fiction prompt attention to this aspect. Commercialisation eventually leads to the question of money. The plots of the narratives are predominantly driven by characters suffering from acute financial constraints, inviting an application of sociological theories founded on the financial principle. Class-based analyses

focusing on middle class existence in contemporary Indian cities are also pertinent. The narratives may be situated in strictly gender-based theoretical contours. Tenets of various feminisms and theoretical studies on the concept of masculinity may be appropriated, either independently or in combination with one another, in order to account for gender-based violence in the chosen works. Agnoiology, theory of ignorance or non-knowledge propounded by James Frederick Ferrier, carries import. Characters located in different social positions (on account of class, gender, caste differences) lack knowledge of lives of those situated in the opposite ends of the social spectrum. Hence, agnoiology, though not as popular as its counterpart epistemology, may provide suitable foundation for exploration in this direction.

Steadfast focus on the ordinariness of the day-to-day existence of the characters, warrants an inquiry in this regard. Theories on practices of the everyday by critics like Michel de Certeau may be drawn on. This centralises the value of certain branches of cultural studies that carry implication for the literary works at hand. Also, while realistic depiction of vicissitudes of domestic life justifies the treatment of these works as domestic fiction on the one hand, on the other, the narratives may also be treated as sharp social commentaries. Domestic and social lives of characters are accommodated thereby favouring genre-based studies. These novels may also be considered from the point of view of genre conventions based on "post" discourses. Contemporary paradigms of post-truth, post-feminism, post-humanism and the like may be profitably utilised in this regard. In particular, postcolonial thematic undertones are aplenty in Bajwa and Nambisan's literary productions – servility to English language, crisis of identity, fragmented consciousness, influence of Western beauty ideals, to name a few. Accordingly, befitting postcolonial frameworks may be superimposed. In line with this critical

strain, the stories also prove invaluable in the context of subaltern historiography. While these angles of interpretation are hoisted on the literary content of the novels, the language aspect i.e. the form of these narratives may also be subjected to evaluation. Techniques like discourse analysis, and analyses of the use of colloquialisms, multilingual interpolations, unique narratorial voices and similar such formal textual features may be adopted. A purely text-centred approach will therefore prove productive.

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