



INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF MARRIAGE AND WOMANHOOD AS DEPICTED IN THE CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH NOVEL BY WOMEN: A FEMINIST APPROACH

ABSTRACT

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Within the parameters of feminist doctrine, one key issue that (Marriage as an institution) has ever been addressed by feminists is the institution of marriage. The pioneers of feminist literary theory, beginning from Virginia Woolf, Simon de Beauvoir, Ann Dally, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow and Alice Walker have all questioned traditional representations of the woman in marriage and focused on the shaping of woman's identity in marriage. Feminist ideals of woman's empowerment and eradication of gender discriminations have become deeply entrenched in India since the recent past. In the field of Indian English fiction, age old patriarchal ethos have been questioned and often defied by women writers. Significantly enough in the Indian English novel by women writers, it is through the representation and (de) scription of the institution of marriage that the discourses of protest find expression. These novels centre round the emergence of the new woman from the margin to the centre, from role to individuality, from woman as a stereotypical category as a woman as an individual capable of authenticity of feeling and belief. The Indian woman is essentially different from her western counterpart. In the Indian context neither the writer nor her character can adopt western modes of protest and defiance. Marriage, in India, is a particularly complex space through which multifaceted force operate. This paper explores the various ways of feminist assertion and protest as projected through the dynamics and problematic of the social institution of marriage in case of Indian women.



Marriage is a vital social institution in the civilized world. The difference that can be strikingly found among the East and the West across the globe is the intensity of the seriousness which it is dealt with. In India, marriage is taken to be a 'one-time' happening in life and is thereby associated with a different kind of view altogether. The institution of marriage brings about the union of not only two physical bodies but also two souls. It is not only a social system by which the bride and the groom start up a new life but also a place where they strive for the fulfillment of their dreams. In India, therefore, it is still believed to be a sacred bond and the most graceful way of sharing a man-woman relationship. In fact 'Hinduism' as a religion also plays a very important role in Indian society as because most people are 'Hindu' by religion. Not only the religion, but also the media plays a very vital role regarding this issue. The 'Hindi movies' have glorified this institution to the zenith. It has depicted marriage as a means of enjoyment, fulfillment, commitment, love, prosperity as well as the only legal platform of heterosexual relationships. Apart from this, one also comes to know about marriage or at least develop an impression about it from the literary texts as well as from non-literary texts like newspapers, magazines and journals. Here one comes to know about the facts and figures associated with this institution along with critiques of the same according to the different norms of society or rather the strictures according to which one has learnt to react in real life from the very childhood.

'Marriage' as an institution comes under the purview of discussion and analysis only when one tries to define 'Womanhood' in the light of this particular institution. Although there is the concept of nuclear families these days, after marriage one finds many of the brides join their in-laws house invariably. In India she has to adapt the systems already prevalent, as marriage is also a union of two families. One should rather be proud that even today it is India which has such a unique concept of marriage. True enough, such a system can really work in a society where people share emotional bonds very strongly. For sticking to such a concept it is also necessary to have a sense of fellow feeling and empathy towards each other. But this is somewhat idealistic. In reality often the situation varies and one finds women in excessive physical and mental turmoil. Although Indian people are found to be more emotional and have a natural proneness towards enjoying these bonds with a proper spirit, one finds a lot of corruption and malpractice actually prevalent within this institution. One finds the roaring problem of dowry destroying so many marriages where the brides



are even compelled to commit suicide under terrible pressure. It is not that the women face this only at the beginning of their lives due to lack of acclimatization but rather it is to be borne throughout their lives. Thus one finds history repeating itself under different masks. If one interacts with one's mothers and grandmothers, one finds this truth as proven facts. Modernity in real sense is yet to be properly understood.

The depiction of 'womanhood' by means of the institution of marriage has been handed down to us by different literary texts, throughout ages. Depending upon the age, culture and practice prevalent in those days the writers used to write on the basis of the norms and rules of the society. They used to stick to it in a stubborn manner in order to gain acceptability and popularity. Thus it is required to question the custom, rather than following it blindly. It has always to be kept in mind that every social custom is related to the backdrop of history and societal requirements keeping the objectives well in view. The suffering of the woman had always been an age old happening which still continues these days in different forms. It is this issue which has been brought to light by different Indian women novelists today by means of their introspective writings. This trend has come in vogue since the explosion of feminist ideas in our social and literary circles. This trend of thought popularly known as 'feminism', particularly deals with the problems of woman's unequal status in society and also focuses on proposed solutions. In the novels of the 19th century one often finds that the heroines used to stay within the house until and unless they were driven to an occupation out of a dire necessity. Generally in these novels the focus of the heroines was on the selection of the marriage partners on the basis of which they gained the ultimate social position. The attainment of happiness and fulfillment in life of a woman or the lacking of it was practically determined by the choice of a proper eligible partner only.

Almost all the pioneers of feminism namely Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Julia Kristeva, Elaine Showalter, Luce Irigaray etc dealt with the question of female identity in the traditional / mainstream / universalist novels. In place of making the female body her destiny these feminist philosophers celebrated the woman's biological attributes as the sources of their superiority over others. They appealed to the special experience of women as the resource of positive female values in both literature and art. According to them, "a woman's experience included a



different perceptual and emotional life than that of men”. However, five main foci are involved in most discussions of sexual difference as ‘biology’, ‘experience’, ‘discourse’, ‘the unconscious’, and ‘social and economic conditions’.

The second half of the 1990s witnessed the publication of a number of novels by Indian women writers, which appear remarkable for the portrayal of the varied facets of Indian womanhood – both traditional and modern – and their assertion of the rights of women in defiance of the traditional socio- cultural approaches to the notion of woman’s identity in India. It is interesting to note that, how in these novels from 1995 onwards this change in trend in the depiction of ‘womanhood’ at the backdrop of ‘marriage’ has been expressed in contemporary Indian women writings. Though these texts are directed against the age – old patriarchal ethos operating through the social environment, the familial social traditions and the myths and lores – the influence of which makes women vulnerable – it is basically through this particular institution that the discourses of protest find expression.

These novels usually dwell upon the emergence of women from marginality to centrality, from role to individuality. But the marital relationship, complex and baffling as it is, seems to provide the basic frame of ‘womanhood’ upon which these themes are made to evolve. The writers have explored from different angles the ambivalences, and paradoxes of this institutional relationships, the ‘difficulties’ it involves, its reconciliation of, or failure to, resolve elements of hostility and amity, and the act of exploration itself becomes a way of feministic protest. In most of the cases the wives accept the socially imposed constructs which make them simultaneously the worst victims. They realize this in the process of their marital lives. In case of the older generations such as mothers and grandmothers, they simply learn to sacrifice. In case of the younger generations such as daughters and grand-daughters, either willingly or unwillingly they have to succumb to the institutional system, but at the end of the day, they deny to sacrifice their individual identities. Further sometimes this generation appears to be curbed but yet they carry out their aggression in a self- sustained manner powerful enough to make the people beside them understand the difference. Today one finds the women continuing their quest for a way out of their socially determined roles of wives and mothers – either through profession or politics, art or other pursuits. It is interesting to note that these novels



clearly point out the fact that Simone de Beauvoir's observation was prophetic indeed: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.....it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature.....Only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as an Other" (Beauvoir 78). It is the system of interpretation in relation to biology, psychology, reproduction, and economics etc. which constitute the (male) presence of that 'someone else'. It is the making of this crucial distinction between 'being female' and being constructed as 'a woman' which can be totally obliterated when women will break out of this objectification, thereby destroying the patriarchy at length and at large. These novels of post- 1995 India, therefore, have been able to sketch truly the portrait of 'womanhood' on the canvas of 'literary texts'.

The position of women in Indian society is unequal to men. But very few women realize this and even fewer are capable of winning over the barriers of being taken for granted or coming out of the comfort zone in this regard. There are many single men in the West who do housework – cooking, cleaning etc. – or single fathers who care for children, but within marriage such a reallocation of gender-specific tasks is extremely difficult to actualize. In order to come out of this present situation where women are thrown into, each has to understand the implication of the limitations put on them and the possibilities they actually do have in gaining their freedom from the present state. One holds to a vision, projects an ideal, because that is what gives a direction to life, but that does not mean it can be achieved right now or in a very near future. It is, therefore, required neither the struggle nor the courage should yield. One needs to ask whether there is anything 'normal' about our world being arranged in this manner of inequality and if there are other ways of arranging it. Our ideas of male and female natures derive less from empirical facts and observations and more from norms and expectations that govern lives. Thus a timid man believes he is less of a man while a bold woman imagines that she is less feminine than other women. In other words, experience is often measured against the norm and found to be inadequate and wanting. If the cost of not abiding by a norm is material deprivation, social disapproval or humiliation, very few women would wish to break the norm. Besides, many women do not possess either the resources or the power to challenge expected patterns of behaviour successfully. Thus norms are no rules; it is our behaviour and actions which actualize norms, embody and fulfill social roles and expectations.



In fact our religions play a vital role in subjecting women to a secondary role in the society. Certain Hindu scriptural texts claim that at the very dawn of creation, women emerged as sinful creatures, fire, snakes and poison all rolled into one. The original Manu, author of Dharmashastra, argues that at the moment of creation itself, women were allotted the habits of lying, sitting around, with an uncontrollable love for ornaments, and were endowed with qualities such as anger, meanness, treachery and bad conduct:

Knowing their disposition, which the Lord of creatures laid on them at creation (i.e. their productive power, their sexuality, and their essential nature), everyman should most strenuously exert him to guard them (Manu IX. 16).

The Hindu faith is predicated on an elaborate caste structure which requires one to act according to one's status at birth in order to be rewarded in a subsequent life. Castes are, at their most basic, occupational and status groups, but in addition Hinduism is pervaded by notions of purity and pollution. Not only members of lower castes polluting higher caste groups, but also women of all castes are seen as inferior in the sense of being more 'unclean' than men. "Hindu women are not allowed to study the Vedas (Holy Scriptures) or to perform any religious sacrifices" (Mukhopadhyay 14). "As elsewhere in the world, commonplace female biological events such as menstruation and child birth are regarded as key sources of pollution and during these times women are strictly segregated" (APHD, 1985; Hayes 32).

The Hindu religion dictates that women should never be allowed to have independent lives and always be under the jurisdiction of a man. "Women are supposed to be so devoted to their husbands that until its formal abolition in the colonial period, 'sati', a custom whereby widows were required to throw themselves upon their husband's funeral pyre, was widely practiced" (APHD, 1985). Although 'sati' has virtually died out, once widowed a woman's life is still severely restricted. "Widows are expected to sacrifice all pleasures and to refrain from adorning themselves" (APHD, 1985). "In India the remarriage of widows is gradually increasing, although religious rites may not be performed at a woman's second marriage; men on the other hand are allowed as many religious ceremonies as the virgins they marry" (Mukhopadhyay 15).



Widowhood is not the only difficulty for Hindu women; however, marriage too is highly problematic. “In recent years, for example, there has been a massive increase in bride deaths in India” (Sharma 13). Bride deaths occur when a girl’s parents cannot or will not meet the dowry payments required by the groom’s family. Dowry is usually negotiated around the period of betrothal, but many authors have noted that there is an upward spiral of demands over time, reflecting the fact that wives are eminently dispensable and easily replaced with, whenever and wherever necessary. “Sometimes brides are murdered by their in-laws, and sometimes they commit suicide in the face of systematic physical violence or verbal abuse” (Kishwar and Vanita 24; Manushi, 1983; Mukhopadhyay 19). “Despite the fact that an Act of 1961 made dowry transactions a criminal offence, official action is rarely taken to protect women in these circumstances and police officers are often found to ignore even blatant incidences of violence” (Kishwar and Vanita, 26; Manushi, 1983).

“The ancient Greeks who worshipped both Gods and Goddesses were convinced that men were the measure of perfection, while women were fundamentally imperfect” (Geetha 14). Buddhist texts argue that woman’s innate nature is evil. “Christianity says that God created man first, and woman next (from man’s rib) and, therefore, man is the exemplary human, whereas woman is a secondary and dependent being” (Genesis 2:21 –23). Islam assigns women a lower status, a trait also found in other religions. Islam too believes that men were created to rule over and manage the lives and affairs of woman. On the other hand for all the devaluing of women, side by side these world religions appear reverential to women’s ability to sustain life in their wombs. Naturally, the question arises that how can there be such a contradiction? The answer is, in the pre-historic era human beings appeared to have been awed and perplexed by the phenomenon of birth. Birth seemed miraculous and it looked like only a woman knew what caused it. But once men learnt to domesticate animals, they realized that they too played a significant role in procreation. By this time they had also established themselves as the superior sex. They were therefore eager to explain motherhood and birth in a way which did not concede too much power to women. So even today this exerts its influence in its own way by means of the institution of ‘marriage’.

Actually, although modern Western science has established itself as a body of knowledge that is rational, objective and supported by proofs, in the matters of masculinity and femininity, this



scientific, objective approach has never been resorted to. The Greek physician Galen (of the 2nd Century) believed that female sex organs represented an imperfect and retarded state of human development. In the eighteenth century, on account of the new ideas of rationality and revolution, it was no longer easy to say that women were lesser versions of men. “The scientists recognized that the male and female bodies were naturally different” (Geetha 16). In the twentieth century, too, scientists debated and researched on sexual difference. “Some scientists argued that woman’s respective sex hormones cause her, to behave differently” (Geetha 17). Others have tried to study distinctive character attributes in an attempt to link character traits to sex-specific hormones. However none of these studies proved to be conclusive. “Rather few scientists were forced to conclude that as far as men and women were concerned, hormonal differences did not matter as much as the differences in the way they were brought up” (Geetha 18). It is here in fact one would like to draw attention to the fact that science is as susceptible to the influence of ideas of masculinity and femininity as any other system of knowledge, though it constantly attempts to distinguish itself from all other knowledges, on the basis of logic and objectivity. In this sense scientific languages too are conditioned by history – of what people have thought and said over centuries. As long as the language in which one speaks, communicates and thinks has these built-in, historical assumptions regarding male-female differences, the metaphors and similies one employs to explain the world around us are bound to reproduce these differences – even if one is doing science.

The ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity (in the democratic times) inspired several women to demand their rights and freedom. If all human beings are equal, then surely men and women are equal. If women had been considered inferior, it was not that Nature made them that way. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that if women appeared stupid and passive, this was not because of some innate lack of intelligence but because women were not told to cultivate their minds. It is the intelligent and revolutionary men of the eighteenth century who rather utilized the idea of sexual difference to deny women equal rights. Rights were thus defined in exclusively male terms. In other words, women were denied these rights because, being sexually and naturally different from men, and therefore unequal, they did not deserve these rights. In colonial India, in the late nineteenth century, male social reformers who actively questioned tradition and custom faltered when it came to re-examining notions of masculinity and femininity. Many of these men were engaged in worthwhile



activities such as campaigns of widow re-marriage and the education of girls. But very few of them were willing to grant women equal rights as men. They were equally convinced as their forefathers that women's nature and talents required them to stay at home, look after the house and rear children. It is, therefore, very clear that men have been able to interpret significant historical changes and developments on their own terms, and to their advantage. So much so, it appears that it is in the very nature of things, that men are active and dynamic. Invariably and expectedly such an engagement is denied to women on the grounds that they are inherently incapable of taking advantage of historical changes. In other terms, such changes are viewed as compromising their innate qualities, thereby interpreting history in the light of biology. In Indian and European history, the feminine category has been invoked to assert and justify women's moral superiority over men. For example, Mahatma Gandhi eulogized the different traits like self-sacrifice, modesty and proclaimed that women were ethically more evolved than men. Later, also the idea of women's moral superiority has acquired a sharper edge. "Some feminists are of the opinion that compared to men a woman is naturally more evolved and has a greater capacity and vocation for nurturing civilized values" (Geetha 27). A few feminists have gone so far to say that men are incapable of nurturing values such as peace and care, whereas women will simply not opt for a violent resolution of conflicting interests. Therefore women are naturally inclined to be better guardians of earth; since they give birth, they will not go for destruction. In most parts of the world that are poor, women are in charge of getting water, finding fodder for animals and gathering fuel. They have direct experience of the fact that resources are dwindling and know only too well their need of conservation. Since men considered women to be innately incapable of reason, they denied them education. Not being able to read and reflect, women were doomed to ignorance. This then became the reason for denying them education, and so women continued to remain ignorant and men continued to devalue them. Thus ideas and action matched each other perfectly. This circular logic remained unbroken until women struggled for a life of mind and began to think and argue matters for themselves. The point is, once one acts on the basis of categories one assumes to be true, and then the actions help to keep these categories alive. Change takes place only when one comes out of these thinking ways and begins to restate and reform concepts.



If categorical thought is carried to its logical conclusion, the sexes become two worlds that are mutually exclusive. Then one needs to agree that as men and women are so dissimilar and possess perfectly opposite qualities, there are only two options available: either both men and women have to learn to see them as a complementary pair; or they have to accept that a war of the sexes is inevitable. The idea of complementarity is an old one – it has been used to justify women’s role in the world outside the home. This notion of complementarity exists in contemporary common sense as well and is often used to counter and discredit arguments for women’s equal rights. The idea of the war of sexes is also old, as one finds from the world’s oldest mythologies. In today’s world this idea has a different resonance. Some feminists say all men are aggressive and desire to possess, control and subdue women. Therefore, women must be eternally vigilant and seek to build a world that is free from and independent of men.

“The typical Indian family is patriarchal and extended, despite the fact that increasing numbers of young couples wish for personal reasons to establish independent households” (Sharma 16). Marriages are usually arranged and brides must be virgins. “The primary goal for Indian women is motherhood and, in Hindu and Muslim society alike, it is consummated in the birth of a male child” (Mukhopadhyay 22). Indian women in general are subject to considerable pressure to conform to the domestic roles of wife and mother, and are subject to religious ideology which places a heavy emphasis on female inferiority. By roles one refers to the manifold activities carried out by women of our country as child-care, housework, subsistence farming, remunerated employment and health care. By status one refers to the value and meaning given to these activities by wider society, which in turn both reflect and influence the general rule of gender relations. This, however, shows that the ‘gender inequality’ is incorporated into development, both ideologically and practically.

Various aspects of women’s life at the level of the household contribute to influencing whether or not they enter the labour force, and, if they do, the kinds of jobs they look for. Key issues include age and position within the family unit, educational levels, and male control. Women’s relative lack of skills and education is another important factor contributing to their subordinate position in the urban labour force, particularly in terms of access to formal sector work. While differentials between the male and female literacy and educational qualifications tend to be narrowing



in the urban areas, they are still significant, and lack of education often debars women from some of the better-paid jobs in the urban labour market.

Resistance of husbands and fathers to women working is a final major house-hold -level constraint on the supply of women in the urban labour market. In India despite the fact that extra income is frequently needed by low-income families, men often prevent their wives and daughters from taking jobs. In India, women have a very limited range of employment opportunities compared to men, and face severe constraints in overcoming their ‘marginalization’ in the labour market. One major reason for this phenomenon is the fact they are forced by the culture, the state and their families into spending the greater amount of their time in reproductive activities such as domestic labour and child-care.

Chronic under-provision of inexpensive, preventive public health care is in part offset by the fact that women, in their capacity as wives, mothers and or caretakers of dependent kin, take on a range of activities which cushion their families from the worst excesses of government neglect. Women not only tend the sick and aged in the absence of alternatives, but also play a major role in keeping illness at bay in the first place, through their struggle to maintain minimum levels of hygiene in the face of inadequate shelter provision and a lack of essential urban services. In this sense women’s labour is a critical, but unacknowledged resource for the state.

The reason for resistance to family planning programmes in India stems from male control over female’s fertility. There are two dimensions to this issue. “The first is that in many states a large family is a proof of male virility. Second, and perhaps more fundamentally, women’s ability to control their own reproductive behavior tastes of self-determination and freedom from male authority – loathing to men in most societies” (Huston 29). Male resistance to contraception stems from fears that it will lead to women being sexually permissive, which in turn lessens guarantees of undisputed paternity. These kinds of views have very serious consequences for women, such as physical weakness arising from successive pregnancies and lactation, which men may not appreciate given their lack of personal experience in the physiological aspects of childbirth.



“Men are not as tied to the domestic sphere as women and may more easily escape their paternal duties, consequently they do not suffer to the same extent from overcrowding in the home, a greater burden of domestic labour and the problems of managing scarce economic resources” (Robertson 34; Rogers 38). “Men are likely to disapprove strongly of their wives practicing birth control, many Indian women resort to injectable contraceptives, which though dangerous, are less traceable than other methods” (Savara 41). Birth-control methods offered to Indian women are generally more limited than those available in the industrialized nations. Sterilization is often promoted as a relatively cheap once-for-all solution to the ‘problems’ of high fertility. “Drugs which are out-of-date or no longer used by the First World Women because of dangerous side-effects are often dumped on Third World markets, or alternatively, new treatments may be ‘tested out’ on poor women” (Savara 43; Sen and Grown 28).

The institution of ‘marriage’ has got to do a lot with the gender specific roles in depicting ‘womanhood’ in the contemporary Indian English novels. In explaining so, the historical explanations of masculinity and femininity cannot at all be neglected. One of the well known historical theories of masculinity and femininity is the Marxist theory of gender. The age old concept of family is very much entangled with it. A child acquires its earliest knowledge of its destined role in the family. Parents dress their boy and girl children in different ways. They buy them different toys and books. They have different codes of behavior for boys and girls. Boys must not cry, girls must never be without underwear. Boys can run, jump, climb trees; girls are asked to be careful. In countries like India, there are further distinctions: girls in poor families get to eat less food than boys. They are less likely to be sent to schools, less favoured when it comes to buying new clothes or toys. By the time a child is six or seven years old, it has a fairly coherent sense of its sexual identity and the expectations that are attached to it. Fredrick Engels, Karl Marx’s comrade and fellow thinker, writes about the origin of family in his famous book, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. It is here where he wrote that there existed a simple and functional division of labour, “a pure and simple outgrowth of nature” (Engels 93), between men and women. Men hunted, fished, provided the raw material for food and made the tools necessary to carry out these tasks. Women cared for house, prepared food, clothing and looked after children. Engels observes in this context:



Each was master in his or her own field of activity: the men in the forest, in the house
.....The household were communistic, comprising several and often many families.
Whatever was produced and used in common was common property (Engels 98).

The woman was at the centre of the communistic household, for often she alone knew who was / were the father / fathers of her children. Sexual relationships within the household were freer than we know them now. Women could choose their men. They, in fact, controlled the household; the men were mere visitors who could be asked to leave when the women did not want them. Things changed when human communities settled in one place for a long time. Once they started living in a stable environment, they learnt to grow crops and began to raise animals. Now food ceased to be a day-to-day problem. They could not only meet their food needs, but could also store and use surplus food. As human beings produced more food, learnt to make and use tools, and began to practice animal husbandry, they had a range of goods at their disposal. Once the production of these goods accelerated, the nature of society changed. Gradually as the different groups accumulated wealth, the relationship between men and women changed, for all wealth was a result of production, essentially a male activity. Domestic work and the household, where women had authority over men and the groups in general lost its significance. In the old communistic household, which embraced numerous couple and their children, the administration of the household entrusted to the women was just as much a public, socially necessary industry as the providing of food by the men (Engels 100). But when production became more valued than the household, “the administration of the household lost its public character..... It became a private service. The wife became the first domestic servant, pushed out of the participation in social production” (Engels 103). Household labour was devalued and women became domestic slaves. Thus the division of labour, once a ‘pure and simple outgrowth of nature’ ceased to be in favour of woman.

Though Engels does not write on the specific features of masculinity and femininity, he is clear that female lives, trapped within the realm of reproduction, were doomed to subjugation and slavery. Engels suggests that for women to reclaim their humanity they would have to necessarily enter in the world of social production. Engels writes:



The emancipation of women and their equality with men are impossible and must remain so as long as women are excluded from socially productive work and restricted to housework which is private. The emancipation of women becomes possible only when women are enabled to take part in production on a large, social scale, and when domestic duties require their attention only to a minor degree (Engels 135).

Engels's description of how society works through 'marriage', and how male and female identities, roles and functions, came to be defined as useful in several respects. Firstly, Engels demonstrates how the basis of male dominance in 'marriage' is male economic power and sexual authority. Secondly, he shows us how the subjugation of women implies not only a devaluing of her as a person, but of her role as mother and as one who creates the human and familial context for relationships. Thirdly, he suggests that male dominance and female subordination, and by implication masculine and feminine norms and ideas, are the products of history, and therefore subject to change through human effort. Fourthly, he outlines the general historical context when such changes may be effected in the context of industrial growth under capitalism.

Men's sexual power over women and the violence with which they sought to exercise it constitute the basis for female subordination. Susan Brownmiller writes about this in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. It is here she says that the rapists are not antisocial but ordinary individuals whose actions express publicly what all men feel and do privately. Andrea Dworkin, in her book *Intercourse* looks at sexual love in specific contexts and argues that for most married women, violence is the context in which intercourse took place, whereas for men, intercourse is the context in which the conjugal relationship assumed significance. Adrienne Rich looks critically at heterosexuality and comments that the practice of men and women turning to each other for sexual pleasure and gratification is neither natural nor inevitable. Men and women assume that they must cohabit and have sexual relationships but this assumption needs to be interrogated. Firstly, sexual strictures with respect to women are so insistently fixed that they beg to question like: What are men afraid of? What do they imagine women would do, if their sexuality were not controlled? Secondly, male power over women – the exploitation of labour, the sexual use of women in marriage and prostitution, the limiting of women's mobility by keeping them tied to a house, the withholding of knowledge and



education from them – expresses itself best through strategies which keep women tied and available to men and men alone; which seek to convince women that marriage and a sexual preference for men are their inevitable lot. Masculinity and femininity are both social ideals developed within the matrix of compulsory heterosexuality. As such they need to be subjected to acute criticism. Once this matrix is challenged, identities become unstable and can be re-imagined. Various descriptions of theories of sexuality and identity explain a crucial and central role for the experience of sexual love – whether as violence, heterosexual passion or repressed homosexual love – in expressions of gender. They have been criticized because; firstly, that they suggest a narrow and singular definition of sexuality and secondly, they use extremely limited and questionable evidence to illustrate their arguments.

The male gaze images women as objects of both pleasure and use. Women's bodies are to yield to men's needs. However, these needs are complex. Men desire women as lovers, wives, mothers of their children, whores, aesthetic objects, ideals. These desires elicit and demand different sorts of female bodies (and beauties). Generally, though, in most cultures, the beauty ideal translates itself into two distinct yet paired types: the wife and the concubine, the lover and the vamp, the good woman and the bad woman. That is female beauty is granted two markets; the licit and the illicit. Licit beauty is lame, regular, passive, illicit beauty, wild, sensuous, seductive and aggressive. The one is meant for domestic conjugal use, pleasure and significance, linked to marriage and motherhood. The other is in fact a public beauty – indicating sexual availability, a dangerous female power and bearing the marks of the forbidden. However romance and marriage are more clearly and transparently linked to issues of social status and economic security, whereas motherhood is experienced as something intensely personal, pertaining to the individual woman's most intimate sense of her own self. Firstly, it is an identifiable female physical condition. A woman bears a child in her womb and it shows. Secondly, motherhood is also an experience that the female body feels in every pore of its corporeal being – so much so that the emotions, feelings and thoughts it evokes are not easily separable from the actual body from which these generate. Women associate their sense of motherhood and their understanding of it with a natural, given state. On the other hand, if a woman cannot be a mother, she feels guilty, as if it is her fault, as if her body has betrayed itself and her. Women also imagine that whatever else they are, their ultimate destiny is linked with motherhood. Thus, successful, professional women, women who have decided to stay single, women who long to



get married and have a child, but who cannot, for whatever reason, at some point in their lives, all of them feel inadequate, unfulfilled and somehow less of a woman. Most women unquestioningly accept that mothering is an exclusive female activity and if they cannot attain that state and do justice to it, though they have attained it, feel they have failed their essential vocation. Working mothers, for instance, experience a sense of utter helplessness when a child falls ill or has failed in her exams – they feel it is their responsibility and these problems could have averted, had they stayed at home and been good caring mothers. With notions of beauty, the experiences of femininity have been thoroughly criticized and re-interpreted by feminists. They have stressed on women's right to physical pleasure, challenged the submissive role assigned to the wife, declared that motherhood ought to be enabling and empowering rather than restricting and limiting.

To lay a theoretical premise for the marital relationships in the institution of marriage in India as depicted in literature, one has to look into the various critical conjectures. This research work delves into the different psychic, social, emotional, linguistic and cultural aspects of marriage and relationships by drawing upon the words of Simon de Beauvoir, Ann Dally, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Nancy Chodorow and Alice Walker among others. Though the critical plots and sub-plots provide a foundation for discussion, one also needs to look into the nuances and peculiarities of Indian society that plays a great role in shaping such relationships. This particular writing, therefore, attempts to look into the position of 'women' in 'marriage', from a sociological – cultural –historical – literary perspective. It thus briefly glimpses over the portrayal of the feminine voice in the writings of the Indian English novelists. An examination of the Western critique on the relationships in 'marriage' tends to focus on the wife's need to rebel against the bonds trapped in circumstances, while the other remains the husband – wife relationship itself. In this regard the Indian scenario is almost akin to the Black culture where also the importance of the family is held supreme. The burden of bringing forth children lies on the wife. The fathers being often distant figures in Indian household, the mother remains accountable for any shortcomings with the children. The mother is especially liable to prepare her daughter for her marital home. She is expected to enforce strict disciplinarian codes, so that the daughter can manage her in-laws home in future. In contrast to the Black community of Afro – America, where the nostalgic women long for the rightful place where their ancestors had once positioned them, the Indian women want to unburden themselves from the legacy.



They want to get rid of binding heritage rather to attain complete freedom. In the novels chosen for discussion in this dissertation, interrogation of the tradition finds expression in the way of the retelling of the myths, changing the focus of the popular classics, breaking the social taboos, rejecting the familial power centers, rewriting the history by emphasizing on the mother figures and also in extreme cases, even rejecting them altogether. A necessary compulsion of the Indian women English novelists is the fact that they need to cater to the middle class who represent a specific layer of culture and taste, sense and sensibilities. Lower class women are hardly depicted in these. Though during the freedom movement in India women came out of their closets, the improvements found were lost during the following decades. Hence today it is only the educated urban, politically aware upper class women who can enjoy the constitutional rights of the country. Feminist movement, particularly in the West, has tried to define the role of a modern wife and mother and has searched for the right alternative between employment and motherhood as the true vocation of the present day woman. The novels within the focus of this paper address this problem. The Indian metros have witnessed a huge growth in the number of working mothers; yet there remains a concept of striking a balance between home and workplace. Even today the women are expected to perfect this and the woman who can successfully strike a proper balance between the two, is considered to be the woman with a 'halo'. The Indian English women novelists have been particularly selected for discussion in this work because the way a woman can feel and express the problems experienced and realized by her can never be accomplished to the same extent by any other person. The authentication of voice has therefore been given the maximum priority while selecting this set of writers.

The present paper proposes to explore the various ways of feministic assertion and protest as projected through the dynamics and problematics of 'Marriage and Womanhood' in the following texts, which have been written by women novelists in India during the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty first. Here we can mention novels like **Shashi Despande's** *'The Dark Holds No Terror'* (1980), *'Roots and Shadows'* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), **Manju Kapur's** *'Difficult Daughters'* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2004), **Arundhati Roy's** *'The God of Small Things'* (1999), **Namita Gokhale's** *'Gods, Graves and Grandmother'* (2001), *'Shakuntala; the play of Memory'* (2005) etc.



The 1980s and '90s have witnessed the opening up of Indian economy, a greater correlation with the world outside and rapid urbanization. Women – at least a cross section – have often been beneficiaries of such a development. They have made use of the opportunity to emerge from tradition – defined roles to ascertain their individuality. Consequently, there had been a great change in narratives by and about Indian women during this period. As these novels depict strong, individualistic women characters passing through varying degrees of different experiences and yet stand on their own, they are also stories of 'women' in 'marriage' and their variety of roles. Indeed the dynamics of the marital relationships seem crucial to the cultural definition of femininity, feminism and the 'female' in the emerging Indian context.

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