# “WOMEN WRITING SELF, GENDER, AND THE POSTCOLONIAL NATION – A BRIEF STUDY OF THE ‘NEW WOMEN’ PHENOMENON IN SOUTH ASIA”

by

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Abstract:

The idea of the ‘women question’ and the ‘new woman’ phenomenon in middlebrow South Asian literature has drastically changed the complexities of womanhood. The Gandhian ‘new woman’ is curated to supplement the South Asian patriarchy and designed to accept the caste hierarchy. The phenomenon successfully presents itself as a postcolonial literary method to uplift women and the perception of women in Indian literature. However, it simultaneously and categorically removes subversive women based on religion, caste, and sexuality.

Progressive women writers have critically reshaped the ‘new woman’ phenomenon to include different types of womanhood by engaging with religion and understanding sexuality through religious dogma. This thesis studies select progressive Muslim woman writers and their struggle to question the modern literary and political praxis and hold these systems accountable. They rebelliously incorporate themselves into the more significant literary phenomena and political canons. However, the progressive writers, perhaps unknowingly, continue to produce literature within the *Savarna* framework (a hierarchy based on the caste system) of conjugality.

The *Savarna* women, or the bourgeoisie, continue to benefit from the status quo established by the Gandhian ‘new woman’ even after decades of literary changes. Subaltern women’s emergence and the political space that allows them to reiterate their lived-experiences jeopardise the benefits enjoyed by the bourgeoise by highlighting the intensity and nuances of South Asian postcolonial patriarchy, a unique structure explored later in this thesis. Subaltern voices, thus, are now the beacon of change in South Asian literature. This thesis explores this historical trajectory and the difficulties subaltern women face in the present to contribute to the literary lacunae.

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Fathima – a transwoman, sex worker and a proud mother of two - asked me about a book I was reading, *Antastina Anweshane* (*Investigating the Status: A Brief Report on the Study of Karnataka's Rural Women, 1997*), on a Bengaluru metro a few years ago. She put a few too many questions in my head about women's agency in literature. An hour-long conversation with her has changed my perception of South Asian literary canons. I hope to run into her whenever I return to Bangalore—a fierce woman who has taught me how to question things.

I extend my profound thanks to my mom and her mom, the other fierce women who have helped me in their unique ways. My dad for his support. Brummies' who have made me feel at home with their kindness – Gugan, Maya, Helen, Umar, Jacob, Dave, Asia, and Paula. Although she is on the other side of the Atlantic, Akanksha has given me endless support through some of the most tumultuous times – I love you, my sister, my homegirl!!

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**Introduction:**

**A Historical Survey of the 'New Woman' Phenomenon in Indian Literature.**

> In this political and discursive setting, many reformers and nationalists in India - the overwhelming majority of them male - sought to challenge and change the condition of their women. Often, their concerns had less to do with flesh-and-blood women than with the perception that becoming modern required a change in the condition of women, including an end to practices now deemed "traditional", "backwards", or "oppressive." The quest for independent nationhood and modernity became intimately tied with the 'woman question'.[1]

The idea of Indian womanhood in twentieth-century South Asian literature is quite peculiar. The above quote by Sanjay Seth in his work regarding the "Woman Question" encapsulates the justification for the changes in the perception of womanhood since the early 1930s, during which a significant portion of South Asia was a British colony with roaring agitations against colonial oppressions. This 'need for sanctification' (of South Asian womanhood), he argues, stems from an anti-imperial sentiment to portray South Asian women as not "oppressed" but as individuals with bodily agency and social mobility. The 'women question' and the 'new woman' phenomenon is the result of many regional South Asian literary spaces reflecting upon themself to reconsider the perception/portrayal of women in canonical literature. Indian

[1] Seth, Sanjay. "Nationalism, Modernity, and the 'Woman Question' in India and China." *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 72, no. 02, 2013. pp 273–97.

womanhood in literature is a collection of an array of literary changes. Explored later in detail, this includes the nationalist reform where literary scholars during the colonial days revisited Hindu Epics and *Puranas* (ancient literary works) and measured the importance of women characters using the metrics of women's rights around the world as an act to reassert the cultural value(s) of South Asia and the rise of progressivism against this revisionism, feminist philosophies imported from around the world, and understanding the lived-experiences of women in contemporary postcolonial South Asia.

Although numerous literary scholars engage with the 'woman question', each definition differs and performs a different function. Partha Chatterjee claims that the woman question in his work is "the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in 'modern' society, and that (the answer to the woman question) was posited not on an identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity."[2] However for Leena Chandorkar, the 'woman question' is indeed presupposed on the identity of South Asian women as she agrees that the 'woman question' should encourage us to make "deliberate attempts to develop new canons of literature to ensure that the woman's voice is heard and not (only the) reverberation".[3] According to her, the woman's voice must 'be the answer' to the 'women question' we pose to (the postcolonial) twentieth-century literature. I consider these two definitions crucial to my study as I propose that the 'new woman' phenomenon, although popularised by high-brow literature produced by men, is challenged by women across the sub-continent during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The 'new womanhood' is the response to the 'woman

[2] Chatterjee, Partha. *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus*. Oxford University Press, 1999. pp 117

[3] Chandorkar, Leena. "The 'Woman Question' in Gauri Deshpande's Fiction." *Indian Literature*, vol. 61, no. 02, 2017. pp 148–55.

question', a discussion about women's nature, domestic and societal roles, and the status of women in the rapidly changing and developing world.

This dissertation attempts to trace the development of the 'new woman' phenomenon in South Asia and identify the forces in control of the literary overview; it also acts as a sociological recovery of literary developments in South Asia. I do this by determining the pinnacle of the changes in the evolution of the 'new woman' phenomenon and identifying the literary force behind these changes during the colonial and postcolonial twentieth and twenty-first centuries. I support my claims in this thesis with inter-disciplinary methods: by understanding the historical reformation in middle-brow literature and the publishing industry, contextualising political and cultural influences on the literary narrative motifs and, most importantly, by closely reading the literary texts produced by women writers from various backgrounds and periods to understand the notion of womanhood in their literary texts, including Ismat Chughtai, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, and Viramma.

These women writers and numerous others highlighted the shortcomings and complexities of womanhood in the 'new woman' literature. Womanhood in colonial India becomes particularly important as the social position of women becomes a critical discussion among important imperial literary figures like James and John Stuart Mill, which is explored later in the introduction; such a responsibility creates a literary culture that produces womanhood on two scales, one to counter these 'Mill' discussions and inspect the credibility of such claims and another to reconstruct the idea as part of the larger reformations. I consider this literary culture as the antecedent to the first phase of the 'new woman' literature and justify this later in the introduction while systematically categorising the phenomenon.

Literary production in South Asia boomed after the Industrial Revolution, as did new forms of literature. The printing press gained significant importance, especially when literature became political and revolutionary, and the social reformers discovered this potential and began to use it against the colonial powers.[4] Umashankar Joshi examines the literary output of a hundred years ago and concludes that prose emerges as a "potent vehicle of expression".[5] The colonial presence in South Asia became a vehicle for upper-class South Asians to avail themselves of education in Europe, especially Britain. According to Joshi, this "Western-type education", along with 'prose' helped locate modern critical inquiry and create space for science-oriented discourses.

The reformist movements reiterate the political space and the need to express sovereignty and rebel against imperial forces. Such a trope is visible in the writing of Iqbalunnisa Hussain and numerous other women writers who incorporated both lived-experiences and scientific proficiency. However, these women writers faced innumerable challenges in literary spaces due to their gender. As Partha Chatterjee proves, women's writing, especially their autobiographies, never attained the same status as their male counterparts during the colonial era and post-independence; instead, it became a distinct literary genre. Men's autobiographies were titled *ātmacarit,* which carried the classic and mediaeval sense of *carita* literature - a narrative of a significant person's life. However, women's autobiographical writings "were described as "memoirs," or more accurately, "stories from memory". This difference in 'gendered genre' is a symptom of the patriarchal systems established within the literary canons.

[4] P., Ravindra. "Nationalism, Colonialism and Indian English Literature." *Indian Literature*, vol. 39, no. 05 (175), 1996. Sahitya Akademi. pp. 153–59

[5] Joshi, Umashankar. "Modernism and Indian Literature." *Indian Literature*, vol. 01, no. 02, 1958. Sahitya Akademi. pp 19–30

It helps enable the power difference and dynamics between the genders to prevent women from having space to articulate their experiences in literary canons.[6]

Between Nationalism and Feminism:

In this section, I will use Partha Chatterjee's 'moment of departure' theory and apply it to understand the causes and consequences of the change in women's writing. One of the major discourses that provided space for women to write and explore through literature was the struggle for independence from the British Raj, which Chatterjee calls a larger cause and a motivation for women to write prolifically and participate. The fight for independence overlooked the conservative requirement of women's restraint in and to the domestic spaces. Let us understand 'the larger cause', the quest for independent nationhood, before analysing its influence on women's literature. Women writing about the desire for independence and post-colonial ideas is one of the indelible precursors to the 'new woman' phenomenon.

On the other hand, patriotic literature about independence and India as an independent post-colonial nation put double standards on women and their agency. I explore this later in the categorisation. However, it is important to note patriotic literature's influence on women writers in South Asia and, naturally, on the 'new woman' phenomenon.

Sisir Kumar Das in his acclaimed work, *A History of Indian Literature. 1911-1956, Struggle for Freedom, Triumph and Tragedy - History of Indian Literature Volume 09*, popularised 'Patriotic Literature', a term with specific nuances to the South Asian milieu during the Indian transition towards a post-colonial nation.[7] 'Patriotic Literature' began to emerge preparatory to

[6] Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. pp 45

the organised national movement in South Asia. Such literature, often in the form of oral narratives, *Bhajans*[8] and theatre educated about the colonial forces looting and draining Indian wealth.

Influenced by Gramsci's framework of 'three movements', Partha Chatterjee attempts to formulate literary changes during Indian nationalist movements. Chatterjee coined the term 'moment of departure' to establish the awareness of the differences among the South Asian communities and concluded that the growth of the literary movement has significantly influenced nationalist movements and vice versa. Early women's literature became part of this 'moment of departure' and tended to overlook women's issues with the patriarchal system. Instead, it joined the more significant nationalist-reformist movements to produce and revive the literary image of a Hindu culture before the foreign invasion of all kinds.[9]

Women writers from languages with prominent anti-western readers began to participate in these nationalist literary movements. Further, this increase in women's writing also began to question the portrayal of women in literature, both before and during the independence movement, which can be considered the foremost reason for the subversion of the 'new woman' phenomenon in South Asian literature. This can be inspected by studying predominant literary works produced by women from South Asia and locating the roots of subversion.[10]

[7] Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature. 1911 – 1956, Struggle for Freedom, Triumph and Tragedy*. 1995. Sahitya Akademi

[8] Devotional songs with a religious theme or spiritual ideas in South Asian religious communities. These bhajans also entered patriotic literature by transforming into prose. The quintessential influencer of the trend is Pandit Radha Vallabh Dikshit (1911), who used patriotic poems in public spaces and gained significant followers during later political movements.

[9] Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. pp 45

[10] Raveendran, P. P. 1996. pp 153–59

Although I offer close readings of texts by the selected authors, the project attempts to delineate the phenomenon of the 'new woman' and its perception among prominent literary figures. Such a survey of the authors has been done historically concerning significant events and literary changes, including substantial shifts in the production and consumption of women's literature. I use the term women's literature here to identify literature produced by women and directed at middle-class, educated women. Although the consumer group changes as the concept of womanhood in English literature changes over the decades, the quintessential category of readers remains very similar.[11]

These close readings offer in-depth intrinsic changes within the literary landscape, and often, these texts are the epitome of revolutionary publications of their period(s). Some of these works became revolutionary even though the authors may not have intended them to be so; however, authors such as Iqbalunnisa Hussain (1897 - ) and Ismat Chughtai (1915 - 1992) have produced works by studying the milieu and providing subversive content, their subversion at numerous instances have even caused them legal trouble. I consider Hussain's non-fiction work(s) a manifesto due to her stylistic devices and content directly persuading her readers and advocating for the changes in religious patriarchal practises such as *purdah*.[12] However, her fiction, on the other hand, is very subtle and stimulating when compared. The imminent revolutionary quality of these texts can be best observed by studying contemporary literary figures and understanding the changes in their approach towards dogmatic feminist themes, such as patriarchal authority over numerous aspects of womanhood, including financial agency, conjugality and bodily autonomy as gender and sexuality.

[11] Gupta, Suman. 2012. pp 46–53

[12] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa, *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household.* D. N. Hosali, 1944

Gender is a critical way to categorise society; it becomes "a site of activity and anxiety in societies seeking to transform themselves." Seth, in his paper, claims that political and social theorists believe that the rapid changes in gender reformations are intrinsically linked with the rise in nationalist discourse in colonial South Asia.[13] I use this to support my earlier argument about the rise of women's writing during the patriotic period. The nationalist discourse, as a wave of philosophical and political thinking, forced the nation as a collective to think about gender within Indian society. This comprised of understanding gender and its politics through a historical perspective from the two great Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* (which are coercively considered by the religious majority as history) until the present. It appears that the anxieties regarding the future of gender politics and the place of women in South Asian society seemed more discernible in literature after Mill's publication evoked colonial intellectuals to defend their culture and women from colonial men such as Mill. This understanding of gender and conjugality through the female characters of *Mahabharata* and Sita from *Ramayana* is the foundation for a Hindu model of 'new womanhood'. This evolves into the Gandhian 'new woman' phenomenon and is established as a dogmatic literary concept.

While Mill was an intellectual influence on gender politics, simultaneously, a different type of influence, a far more detrimental Western apparatus, was being introduced to pre-colonial Indian society in the form of a 'national survey'. Political categorisation introduced by the British in the form of surveys coagulated the concept of gender. Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of early surveys in India on caste.[14] While domestic gender roles were rigid among numerous Hindu and Muslim communities, the introduction of surveys solidified

[13] Seth, Sanjay. 2013. pp 273–97

[14] Edney, Matthew H. *Mapping an Empire the Geographical Construction of British India*. University of Chicago Press, 1997.

these roles in the social and political discourse. The beginning of such gender transformation can be traced early in literature when indigenous writers began to engage with James Mill's claim that the condition of women was the index of civilisation in his influential work on South Asia, *The History of British India* (1806). Therefore, nationalist discourse in order to emphasise the unique role of women in South Asian society began to radically adapt from a romanticised version of religious texts such as *Mahabharat/Ramayana* or *Itihasa*.[15]

Anti-imperial discourses were tasked to prove that the British, mainly Mill, misunderstood the conditions of women in South Asia. According to him, "Hindu society" was "rude and primitive" due to the nature and treatment of women. "A state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for a weaker sex among the Hindus cannot easily be conceived."[16] They decided that if they proved that women in South Asia were in a better domestic, social and political situation, they could, in turn, prove two things to Mill and his intellectual companions. One is that Mill is fundamentally wrong about the conditions of women and thereby proves that South Asia was culturally rich and politically neoteric. Two, colonial intellectuals have altogether could not understand 'foreign' culture, thereby rendering them unqualified to control the Indian polity.

Not only did the reformists want to prove Mill wrong about the 'conditions of women' in India, but they were attempting to compare the conditions of women in these texts to that of the conditions of women in the West to humiliate colonial powers. Mill considered the diverse discourse of gender and sexuality in India as palaver and primitive; thus, all women were Hindu women. Subsequently, the philosophers and theorists at the forefront of this riposte turned

[15] *Itihasa*: History; the collection of written descriptions of essential events in Hinduism. Here *Itihasa* is understood as particular texts that are considered to be the foundation of the Hindu dogma.

[16] Mill, James. *The History Of British India – Vol I*. London. pp 293 – 294

Indian womanhood into a monolithic, prototypical and singular notion based on prime features of the aforementioned religious characters as it appeased most of the population.[17] While these female characters from religious texts intended to represent South Asia culturally, they lost their intersectional identity in linguistic and cultural translation. They became a representation of Indian Intellectuals bestowing legitimacy to upper-caste bourgeoise women at the expense of women from lower-class communities. This rendered the diverse nature of womanhood unimportant and excluded an array of sub-cultures and religions, including Muslim and Dalit models of womanhood. I study this further in Chapter I using the three female paragons Sita, Savitri and Draupadi in Indian literature and the 'new woman' phenomenon. These upper caste, married, virtuous paragons obscure any nonconforming traits in the essentially Hindu model of Indian womanhood.

## Feminising Gandhi and his Politics: Understanding the Gandhian 'New Woman' Phenomenon

> Even Gandhi's critics have acknowledged his contribution to the emancipation of Indian women. It should not, however, be forgotten that the new image of women that he created was drawn from one political, historical and social setting and for one particular political goal, namely to unite the different strata in India against imperialism.[18]

[17] Ball, Terence. "Utilitarianism, Feminism and the Franchise: James Mill and his Critics." *History of Political Thought*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1980, pp. 91–115.

[18] Norvell, Lyn. "Gandhi and the Indian Women's Movement." *The British Library Journal*, vol. 23, no. 01, 1997. pp. 18

In this section, I will explore the relationship between M. K. Gandhi, one of the leading figures in the fight for independence, and the South Asian gender discourse. After establishing his crucial role in gender reformation, I will attempt to understand the motives of Gandhian politics on women, the circumstances, and finally, the repercussions of Gandhian politics on women and its subsequent impact on female characters in literature. As Gandhi became more prominent in the 1920s after his role in Champaran (1917) and Kheda (1918) agitations against the colonial settlers, his opinions became a significant part of the rebellion and later the Indian National Congress. He published the weekly journal *Young India* from 1919 until the early 1930s. This covered a range of topics besides the struggle for independence, including his philosophy on feudalism and his opinions on women and untouchables (a term he coined to refer to the people on the lower end of the caste system).

However, his opinions regarding women, gender practices, caste system, feudalism, taxation and worker rights were all drawn from a political perspective to redefine Indian society. His philosophies and opinions were influenced by Hinduism, Jainism and his education and expeditions around the globe. While the intentions of his opinions were political, the consequences were cultural. His rapid rise in popularity meant a larger platform to express his perception of women, thus making him one of the predominant proponents of the 'new woman'(hood) in South Asia. His idea of Indian womanhood is centralised around his political agenda, to include them in the campaign(s) against the imperialists. Women, according to him, are supposed to be educated, not for their emancipation from patriarchy but for better domestic lives and political gains. Gandhi appealed to women to join the Congress in one of his issues, an unprecedented change in Indian women's political life. He portrayed India as women and the colonial forces as a 'brute masculine British power'. Radha Kumar considers this a

feminisation of his politics, a distinct and effective strategy to mobilise India's working and lower class.

A similar theme in fictional literary works regarding Gandhi and his principles can be traced. Raja Rao's (1908 - 2006) *Kanthapura* (1938) is a story about a family in a village during the 'Quit India' movement, influenced by Gandhian philosophy, which exhibits a change in self-understanding as a society. This self-understanding included involving women in political spaces crucial to the novel's plot. The ascetic Moorty (the novel's protagonist), as explained by Paul Brains in his work *Modern South Asian Literature in English* (2003), changes the position *Kanthapura* has towards women in the 'Quit India' movement. He explains that "women must be included in the leadership of the new organisation (referred to by a familiar term for a village council as a panchayat), for by definition, they represent the "weak and lowly" on whose behalf the struggle is being waged. This is an important moment, for from this point on, the story will gradually shift to become the story of the women's resistance to the authorities."[19] I engage with Kanthapura later to contextualise the early phase of the Gandhian 'new woman' phenomenon and further juxtapose it with the evolved and progressive 'new woman' from Hussain's works.

Three important canonical writers in Indian fiction R.K. Narayan[20] (1906 - 2001), Mulk Raj Anand (1905 - 2004), and Raja Rao have written numerous fictional works about Gandhi.[21]

[19] Brians, Paul. *Modern South Asian Literature in English*. Greenwood Press, 2003. pp 34

[20] Batra, Shakti. "Impact of Gandhi on Indian Writing." *Indian Literature*, vol. 17, no. 03, 1974, pp. 38–51

[21] Bose, Ananya. "Gandhian Influence in Indian English Novels." *International Journal of Art & Higher Education a Refereed Research Journal* , vol. 08, no. 01, 2019. Cosmos, pp. 20 - 22

Anshuman Mondal's close reading of *Kanthapura* concludes that "women in India seem incarcerated by the mechanisms of public discourse which regulate their sexuality and gender and relegate them to the symbolic interests of religiously defined communities."[22] Similar critiques are found about women characters in modern Indian fiction and especially in the works of Narayan's *The Martyr's Corner* and *Malgudi Days* (1942),[23] and Mulk Raj Anand's *Little Plays* and *Untouchables* (1935).[24] Patriotic fiction written around the Indian political struggle against the empire, such as Narayan's works, constructed female characters to match the perception of an ideal Indian womanhood (guided by Gandhi's philosophy). Gandhian political and philosophical influence in patriotic literature shaped the perception of 'new woman' in early modern Indian society. Revivalist nationalism and religious and cultural reformation produced a unique 'new woman' phenomenon in South Asia during the final years of colonial rule, which gained momentum in literature over the next few decades and transformed itself into a vital literary framework.

Women in the novels mentioned above were portrayed as the champions of traditional values. They respect the gender hierarchy in their milieu and simultaneously and sporadically enter the political domain of 'the larger cause'. Along with these 'new woman' characteristics, they also strictly abide and operate by the *ghar/bahir* (home/outside often *ghar* is also substituted by *aangan* or courtyard) and domestic/spiritual distinctions. The most compelling distinction of the 'new woman' character is *āchara/gōdāchara* proposed by Veena Shanteshwar (*āchara* translated as ethical or traditional and *gōdāchara* as prying or inquisitive is proposed by

[22] Mondal, Anshuman. "The Emblematics of Gender and Sexuality in Indian Nationalist Discourse." *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 36, no. 04, Sept. 2002, https://doi.org/10.1017/s0026749x02004055., pp. 913–36

[23] Luthra, Rashmi. "Clearing Sacred Ground: Women-Centred Interpretations of the Indian Epics." *Feminist Formations*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 135–61, https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2014.0021. pp. 135–61.

[24] Jain, Jasbir. "Contradictory Discourses: Fractures in Realism." *Indian Literature*, vol. 56, no. 06 (272), 2012, www.jstor.org/stable/43856667., pp. 194–205. *JSTOR*

Shanteshwar in her 'Introduction' to *Lekhakiyara Katha Sankalana - A Social Novel in Kannada* (A Compilation of Women's Literature, 1983)[25] which according to her was one of the most regressive and patriarchal literary attributes within the 'new woman' phenomenon in modern Indian literature. Literature became an active site to create such distinctions to maintain the traditional hierarchies while 'modernising' family values. An inquisitive woman in such a trend is frowned upon as *gōdāchara* is a revolutionary trait that threatens the (patriarchal) family values.

This idea of the nuclear family moved from political spheres into literary spaces, consequently changing the idea of conjugality and, thereby, virtuousness. The most notable change in conjugality, as noted by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, is the idea of faith in Husbands and in-laws does not remain the same in the "new" woman and the conjugality which he considers to be "the norms of right conduct" is absent in the "new" woman.[26] Partha Chatterjee intricately explores this phenomenon through the changes in nationalist ideology and its influence on literary production and pedagogy. The concept of the nuclear family is recurrent in women's writing in the later phases of the 'new woman' phenomenon. It can be juxtaposed with *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (2003) by Antoinette Burton, a study about women's writings and writings about women from pre-colonial India. This juxtaposition provides a clear contrast between the perception of *aangan* from two different periods and the changes leading up to the differences. In the first

[25] Shanteshwar, Veena. *Lekhakiyara Katha Sankalana - a Social Novel in Kannada (a Compilation of Women's Literature)*. Dharwad University Press, 1983.

[26] Chatterjee, Partha. 1999, pp 145

chapter, I explore the importance of aangan (courtyard) in women's writing while closely reading Hussain's *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944).[27]

*Ghar - Bahir*: The Domestic and the Politic

The perception of *aangan* is one of the numerous vital components of identifying and understanding the phases and changes in the "new woman" phenomenon. The 'new woman' phenomenon responds to the 'woman question' Seth poses in his work. While some women characters embody the spirit of a 'new woman', others rebel against the idea due to its oppressive tendencies. This dissertation will identify major literary works which engage with the 'new woman' idea. Although there is not a single definition for the phrase 'new woman', and different literary canons use different phrases, what remains similar across all of them is the new emergent portrayal of women with bodily agency, solidarity toward lived-experiences of women in the modern political state and above all the shared experiences of womanhood within the new world of middle-class bourgeoise cultural production. The idea of a 'new woman' is intricately linked with the rise of nationalism in the early post-independence decades; it eventually incorporates feminist sentiments during its later phases. The authors and texts are chosen in this work to produce a linear understanding of the phases of the phenomenon.

Virtuousness is tethered to conservative practices, and any progressive changes in gender performance are seen as promiscuous and non-conjugal. Iqbalunnisa Hussain attacks this idea of considering conservative traditions as virtuous. She explains the irony of the affiliation

[27] Allendorf, Keira. "Going Nuclear? Family Structure and Young Women's Health in India, 1992-2006." *Demography, Springer*, vol. 50, no. 03, 2013., pp. 853–80

between virtue and womanhood and the mirage it creates in conjugal relationships. According to her, "Virtue is the outcome of the developed instinct of self-respect, and it cannot be forced upon a person by external measures."[28] A basic pattern within Hindu gender reformation is their attempt to abolish oppressive methods to provide a platform for modern changes. These include the abolition of sati, child marriage and the abolition of restrictions on widows, including education, remarriage, and their presence in domestic and public spaces. On the other hand, Hussain attempts to reconstruct these conventional ideas and practices. Although "virtue and liberty of movement are incompatible," women should be systematically and adequately equipped to develop self-respect.

Thus, she advocates for 'modern purdah', an expedient practice that ultimately relocates the agency and allows women to follow religious rules. She dismantles the idea of virtue in her text while explaining its importance in relationships and its essential role in parenthood. However, such reformation is only possible when virtue is a choice and not an oppressive system to maintain the hegemony within heterosexual relationships.[29] While I argue that Hussain is a gender reformist, it is also clearly visible that she suggested her radical ideas with slow and protracted methods. "Its abolition by drastic measures is neither practicable nor advisable. It should be attempted gradually and indirectly by providing chances of useful education and opportunities for vocational education with an aim to improve their material conditions."[30]

[28] Hussain, 1944, pp. 121

[29] Ibid., pp. 68

[30] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1944. pp 48

Who lies along the margins?

According to Partha Chatterjee, the early phase of the 'new woman' emerges as "the subordination of women in the new forms of patriarchy (and family)."[31] These methods to develop the woman's character also give them the potential to be rebellious and ambiguous towards casteist sentiments. The *ghar/bahir* dichotomy is important in examining these developments. Unless the women are from the lower caste and subaltern subjects, the 'new woman' phenomenon and the women in literature are not fully equipped to converse about the caste. Firstly, they are located within the *ghar*, and caste becomes less prevalent within this space. Furthermore, when they are situated outside *ghar*, like the protagonist of *Kanthapura*, they are ambiguous towards caste interactions, thereby becoming submissive characters while appearing to be subversive of the oppressive systems.

> "The new forms of the conjugal family was being institutionalised within the middle class, and its normative ideals (were) produced discursively in the social reform debates, and imaginatively in the new fictional and poetical literature, a whole set of differentiations of the inside/outside was also being put in place in order to demarcate those aspects of family life which could be spoken of and those which could not."[32]

A recurrent regulation in the traditional women characters in literature, as pointed out by Mondal,[33] is observed in this project to understand the communities that are at a disadvantage

[31] Chatterjee, Partha. 1999. pp 148 – 149

[32] ibid. pp 148 - 149

[33] Mondal, Anshuman. 2002, pp. 913–36

because of ‘new woman’ and the systemic failure to follow the liberal, inclusive approach towards subaltern subjects.[34]

Categorisation:

In this sub-section, I will introduce the works and authors I have used and will justify the categories and the cause for categorisation. Further, I will briefly introduce some of the critical arguments and methods used in this thesis after comprehensively presenting the categories. The ‘new woman’ phenomenon can be broadly divided into three phases: nationalist, feminist, and subaltern. The nationalist phase of the ‘new woman’ phenomenon acts as an early foundation stage in which the discourse of womanhood begins to take shape. Patriotic literature discussed earlier in the introduction falls under this category, and womanhood is mostly engaged for political and social gains. I do not extensively engage and closely read literature from this particular period due to numerous limitations, including inaccessibility to resources and the scope of my research interest; however, I do refer to canonical literary figures and works to contextualise, compare and contrast them with the works I focus on from other phases. The first phase is the pre-partition of South Asia, where womanhood manifested nationhood and the struggle against the imperial powers. Here, the discourse about gender becomes a part of nationalist realism; it is influenced by Gandhian and other nationalist philosophies.

The second phase, or the rise of the feminist phase, is given more attention in this research for similar reasons. I consider this phase the pinnacle of women’s writing, with much attention to understanding womanhood in literature and significant radical changes to the portrayal of

[34] Bentur, Pavankumar. “Review of Shraddha Chatterjee’s Queer Politics in India - towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects (2018).” *Ad Alta: The Birmingham Journal of Literature*, vol. XII, 2021. pp 49 - 52

women. In this phase, the agency becomes crucial for women writers and their characters in the domestic and the outside world. The second phase is actively attempting to question the principles of the former and fill the gaps in the literature to provide an alternative perception of womanhood. The first two chapters are dedicated to this first phase, where I closely read selected works of influential women writers from South Asia.

During the early stages of my research, I decided to focus on understanding gender in South Asian Modernism; while the project and its focus have evolved over the years, the remnants of my attempt to understand post-colonial modernism(s) are visible due to the nature of the literature I have chosen to close read in these chapters. I will introduce the writers and their works over the following few pages and establish my reasons for using those specific works. Understanding the 'new woman' phenomenon through modernism remains a research interest outside this project. The first two chapters explore the changes from the first to the second phase; I use Rashid Jahan and her progressive contemporaries, explored later in Chapter I, to establish the change in literary motifs and methods between the phases and the pace and intensity of the said changes.

I have divided the feminist phase of the 'new woman' phenomenon further into two categories based on the period of publication. I have done this after considering the period in which these writers were actively engaged in the discourse of producing new womanhood through literary practices. It encapsulates the dynamic differences between literature produced before and after independence. Significant factors contributed to this change, including the rise of women's participation in anti-imperial movements, the partition of the sub-continent, and the idea of identity after independence. Therefore, Chapter I can be aptly considered the study of women's writings during the colonial era, while Chapter II on Ismat Chughtai's work is post-colonial.

While a distinct demarcation of the phenomenon, temporally or categorically, within the twentieth century would be impractical, I have managed to adhere to a chronological discussion of the literary works based on the period and their contribution to the literary phenomenon. In some instances, the works have been written pre-independence but published later, or the literature has been published during the time leading to independence, which became canonically significant later in the feminist discourse.[35]

The final stage of contemporary change in the 'new woman' is the present interdisciplinary study of gender through subaltern knowledge. One of the monumental literary works to understand this is the emancipatory memoir by Viramma. This sui generis by Viramma, a subaltern woman, who narrates her life, gendered lived-experiences, and society (with the help of Racine and her husband, two French anthropologists), is an excellent literary work to understand the contemporary climate of women in literature and literature by women in the contemporary climate. Viramma and the Racines worked over two decades to document Viramma's life and published the book in the late 1990s. The third chapter explores the literary works with references to other subaltern developments since the work was published and the remnants or the lack of colonial and nationalist elements in understanding gender as a discipline in present South Asia. A smaller but relevant theory regarding gendered genres and gendered dilemmas is introduced later in this introduction; these become significant to understanding the criticism surrounding Viramma, Racines and their work.

[35] For example, Paniswara Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954)

Exploring the three phases: A comprehensive introduction to the three phases.
Early Stages (The Colonial Era):

> The first half of the twentieth century saw a symbolic use of mothers as a rallying device, from the feminist assertion of women's power as *mothers of the nation* (my italics) to terrorist invocations of the protective and ravening mother goddess to the Gandhian lauding of the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother. Because of his self-feminisation and his feminisation of politics, Gandhi was hailed as the parent of the 'Indian women's movement', and many feminists eagerly received his depiction of women's innate qualities as expanding and detailing many of their self-definition(s).[36]

New(er) literary forms, such as novels and prose, followed quickly after patriotic literature, and there was a plethora of patriotic literature during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Influenced by Gramsci's framework of three movements, Partha Chatterjee attempted to formulate literary changes during Indian nationalist movements. Chatterjee coined the term 'moment of departure' to establish the awareness of the differences among the South Asian communities and concluded that the growth of the literary movement has significantly influenced nationalist movements and vice versa. Early women's literature became part of this 'moment of departure' and tended to overlook women's issues with the patriarchal system. Instead, it joined the more significant nationalist-reformist movements to produce and revive the literary image of a Hindu culture before the foreign invasion of all kinds.

[36] Kumar, Radha. 1997. pp. 02

A substantial part of this introduction examines the early stages of the 'new woman' phenomenon due to the nature of this study. This is to establish a strong foundation for the works studied in the first two chapters, which share numerous characteristics between the first two phases and simultaneously contradict the lived-experiences of women and their reiteration in literature. While a more robust and articulated idea of a 'new woman' emerged between the 1920s and 30s, analysing it without getting too lost in literature's philosophical ideologies and mainstream political dynamics is challenging. Women writers produced literature that incorporated the subtleties of politics, culture, philosophy, and domestic aspects of their lives while simultaneously experimenting with forms and narrative motifs. This helps us understand 'the larger cause', the quest for independent nationhood, before analysing its influence on women's literature. According to the theory proposed by Chatterjee, 'the moment of departure' created a literary space where women's literature failed to bring their lived experiences, usually produced under the genre of memoirs, poems or novels along the political lines of independence and the philosophical creation of post (independent) colony.

In the 1980s, the British Library acquired "a selection of (political and literary) pamphlets on the 'women's question' in India." These pamphlets were occasional papers published by the Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, New Delhi, and the Centre for Women's Development Studies. These papers were studied by Vina Mazumdar. In her paper, *Emergence of Women's Question in India and Role of Women's Studies*, she suggests that "the women's question in the nineteenth century grew out of a sense of an identity crisis of the new educated middle classes, products of the colonial system of education."[37] This crisis

[37] Norvell. Lyn, 1997, pp. 18.

is fundamental to understanding the phenomenon and perhaps one of the few elements that are carried over to the ensuing phases.

Pinnacle of women writing: From the 1940s to the late 1970s

The second 'new woman' phase closely aligns with Joshi's definition of the post-renaissance period (post-1930 - 35), which shows the 'signs of modernism'. According to him, "the nationalistic upsurge assumed a dynamic character under the leadership of Gandhi", and "the mid-thirties witnessed the rise of humanistic and progressive tendencies. The Gandhian humanistic influence yielded lush literary fruits wherever the needs of the age coincided with the emotional needs of the poets, quite a good number of whom were active participants in the national struggle."[38] While the national struggle and the attempt to find indigenous identities continued well into the second phase, it actively avoided the realist sentiments and the escapist tendencies observed in literature before the 1930s.

Further, as Burton points out, although "the rhetoric(s) of conjugality" have not been shaped by one event, "the 1930s intensified the relationship between the "woman question" and the nationalist question, blurring the lines between the two historically new and politically quite specific ways."[39] This is one of the early interactions between a vague study of *zenana* and the "domestic" discourse of nationalism and feminism. *Zenana* is part of a *ghar* for the seclusion of women, usually exercised within Muslim communities with strict Purdah practices. Although there is conceptual slippage between the Zenana and Purdah, they are not equivalent terms. New anxieties such as the necessity for presenting their new (often progressive) ideas regarding their gender and position in society confronted the women writers after 1930s.

[38] Joshi, Umashankar, 1958, pp. 22 – 23

[39] Burton, Antoinette. *Dwelling in the Archive : Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*. New York Oxford University Press, 2003. pp. 10

In nationalist literature, the role of womanhood is merely to entertain the journey of the protagonist man, as noticed in literary works such as Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) and Paniswara Nath Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954); both novels are situated in villages and engage with political participation in rural areas. Nath's work belongs to the second phase in terms of the year it was published (1954/post-independence); however, it acts as a retrospective account of the national struggle.

Joshi uses this example to highlight the changes in Hindi readers/speakers and the shifts in literary languages of the period. While the 'idea of womanhood' remains similar to the first phase, it encapsulates the changes in the language. The form, tone and descriptive words used to understand women's role in social changes are represented in literary works. If Nath's novel is studied along with its Dravidian translations, it provides a compelling juxtaposition for this argument. For example, the Kannada translation of *Maila Anchal* by H S Parvati (1934 – 2015) and *Masida Seragu* (1976) uses a compelling vocabulary to situate womanhood and the lived experience of female characters in the novel. Highlighting the anxieties of Parvati, the woman writer, to supersede the gap left by male writers like Nath.

The second phase of the phenomenon is a compilation of writers with revolutionary and Marxist sentiments. This includes Attia Hosain (1913 - 1998), Ismat Chughtai (1915 - 1991), Sadat Hassan Manto (1912 - 1955) and numerous others. Their works are a progressive feminist reflection of their contemporary literature. While addressing the nation's identity crisis, these writers also consider this crisis integral to the social changes required for a progressive society. These writers also belong to established progressive literary schools and political movements.

Simultaneously, the feminist cultural critique had a convoluted relationship with Nehruvian Socialist politics and its influence on literature.[40] (an excellent example of this argument is the establishment of the Kannada Sahitya Academy and its literary sponsorship, explored later.) The Nehruvian influence in literature diminished in the early 1960s. However, they retained nationalist and anti-colonialist tendencies. South Asian literature then grappled with the ideas of self-hood, agency, and identity. This change was mainly because, while literature could not escape nationalism for numerous reasons, it simultaneously fought against certain nationalist tendencies that sought to erase regional identities. This encouraged a copious regional production of literature reflecting the local identities of India.

In the latter half of the second phase, copious content was published that engaged with contrasting themes such as urban and rural, culture and modernity, and there were numerous attempts to understand the psycho-social paradigm of women.[41] One of the main drives for such changes is the prominence of the Gandhian 'New Woman' phenomenon and the feminist attempts to understand its consequences. Anshuman Mondal argues that Gandhian ideology towards women "enabled a strategic distancing from modernity which allowed for a reformulation of Indian nationhood that could both borrow what was best from the West without compromising India's sense of difference from the colonial power."[42] Reformulation of nationhood before the independence was an active retaliation to the liberal thinkers of the West and continued to be so even after the independence.

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[40] Anjaria, Ulka, editor. *A History of the Indian Novel in English*. Cambridge University Press, 2015., pp 80

[41] Nalini Natarajan, and Emmanuel S. Nelson. *Handbook of Twentieth-Century Literatures of India*. Greenwood Press, 1996. pp 168 -171

[42] Mondal. Anshuman, 2001, pp 419-138

Simultaneously, it is essential to notice the development of caste consciousness in India during the movements leading to independence. Regarding the Indian womanhood discourse, Spivak observes that most of the Indian womanhood in question belongs to the upper-caste woman in Brahminical society and considers high-caste women at its focal point, either glorifying her (and the womanhood) as a role model (to lower castes) or condemning her status as needing reform (according to the Feminist demonstrations around the world). In both these instances, she is established as a point of protection from either the colonial or the nationalist point of view.[43] Much of Indian womanhood considers a heterosexual Hindu woman in default. Further, this excludes childhood and widowhood.

The Rise of Subaltern era: The new protagonist Viramma.

> "Viramma is confronted with a new political identity as Dalit. The narrative ends with her insistence on the Paraiyan identity and on her enjoining the younger, more rebellious generation to obey the caste superiors if they are to continue to survive, as Viramma's generation supposedly has."[44]

The third phase is the late-twentieth-century writing with retrospective subaltern critique where the subaltern studies influenced South Asian literature and astutely grappled with the power dynamics in South Asian society. I explore this phase with the text *Viramma, Life of an*

[43] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. *Outside in the Teaching Machine*. 1993. Routledge, 2015. pp 45-46

[44] Ramanathan, Geetha. *Locating Gender in Modernism - the Outsider Female*. (Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature) Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2012. pp 38 – 39

*Untouchable* (1997), as it embodies the quintessential changes in the literary landscape. Racine, who assisted Viramma in reiterating her Dalit experiences, notes the generational changes in caste sentiments since the early Dalit literary movements. Dalit literature as a genre emerged in the 1960s in Marathi, and eventually, most of the prominent South Asian languages had Dalit literature or a variation of it.[45] Dravidian languages caught up early and produced a plethora of Dalit literature. Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine cautiously edited Viramma's oral Tamil literature over two decades.

Ramanathan describes Viramma as a "Dalit woman from Pondicherry" while introducing Viramma to the readers. Viramma's identity as a Dalit and a woman is integral to her experience in the modern spaces of South Asia. While most of South Asia struggled to reimagine itself as a modern world after the countries achieved independence, one of the significant and impossible tasks was to do away with traditional practices established on caste, religion and gender. Viramma is considered a subaltern individual because of her affiliation with her caste and community. Her experience of modernity is crucial to understanding the complex discourse of subaltern communities and their existence in modern independent South Asia. It also highlights the weakness of the political and socio-economic structure of the Republic of India, which fails to include and protect vulnerable communities. Subalternity and the awareness of self-identity concerning systemic oppression are integral to evaluating the infiltration of modernity within the South-Asian community and its reflection within the literature.

By tracing the changes in the 'new woman' phenomenon, I intend to discern how patriarchy, gendered genre, and conjugality have shaped South Asian womanhood and, in turn, who is

[45] N. Singh, N. *Patterns of Dalit Literature.* Vani Prakashan, 2012

marginalised during this process. Further, this project also attempts to discover if this 'new woman' phenomenon is flexible and inclusive or needs to be modified to allow the contemporary ideas of gender and womanhood and create a condition for their reiteration. Moreover, it remains crucial to understand if the 'new woman(hood)' will structurally continue to favour the lived-experiences of hetero-sexual bourgeoisie Hindu women who adhere to the social principle of conjugality and virtuousness or if it will accommodate the subaltern voices and the changing concepts of family. Contemporary subaltern discourse is trapped between 'representing' others - speaking on behalf of, in political (and in this case literary) conversations and (re)presenting as in art or philosophy. Therefore, it can talk in case of political alliance, and intricate understandings and concomitantly cannot articulate because of "the epistemic violence and mis-(re)presentation inherent in most intellectual and political thought."[46] The subaltern 'new woman' can liberate the discourse from this position to represent womanhood without assimilating into the larger dominant patriarchal and religious structures while carefully deconstructing the gender within the family and conjugality in hetero-normative relationships. Subsequently, it will provide new devices and spaces to liberate womanhood in South Asian literary spaces.

[46] Chatterjee, Shraddha. *Queer Politics in India towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects*. Taylor & Francis, 2018.

Chapter I

## Reconstruction of South Asian New Woman by Modernist Muslim Writers: A Close Reading of Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehully

> The path of any reformer is narrow and surrounded by insurmountable difficulties. They have to struggle hard to overcome the obstacles. The harder he (the reformer) fights, the greater pleasure he derives, as a noble motive is always followed by success.
>
> Iqbalunnisa Hussain[47]

Hussain (1897 - 1954) had always considered herself a reformer. In the early 1940s, at the peak of her writing career, she published her first book, *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks* (1940) and subsequently her second work, *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944). Both her works are rooted in her experience as a Muslim woman in the final decades of the British Raj and the last vestiges of the Muslim autocracies in prominent areas of the south, such as Bengaluru, Mysuru and Hyderabad. Her books and numerous articles highlight the oppression of Muslims in pre-independent India and further the oppression of women in Muslim households. Her works act as a manifesto to reshape the perception of middle-class Muslim women in South Asia and as a pedagogical textbook for her readers. Her writing style is common among her contemporaries, such as R. K. Narayan (1906 - 2001) and Vinoba Narahari Bhave (1895 – 1982), and remains very similar to earlier religious reformers.

[47] "The Star of Islam." *The Star of Islam*, vol. 01, no. 08, 1939, pp. 1–8

Zeenuth Futehully's (1903 - 1992) remarkable novel *Zohra* (1951) bridges the later chapter and the works of Iqbalunnisa Hussain by understanding Gandhian 'new woman' qualities. These qualities prevailed in (protagonist) female characters in literary fiction published during the peak of anti-independence and thereafter in South Asia. Unlike Hussain's, Futehully's writing experience was directly influenced by English modernist writers such as Forster. Futehully utilises numerous themes and traits similar to those in Forster's works and develops her methods to implement them in her works. Forster read numerous unpublished drafts of *Zohra* the year before it was published. One notable theme Futehully borrows from Forster is the class conflict; however, it manifests in her protagonist with multiple layers, including her gender, religion and strong sentiments such as anti-imperialism. These layers of identity are all ultimately the features of a certain class that Futehully and Hussain both write about. According to both, middle-class Muslims in post-colonial India are different from middle-class Hindus. This religious gap further deepens the communal complexities and pushes women into further suppression. I use Zohra as a case study to understand tropes of defiance towards literary characters based on an outline of Gandhian 'new woman' traits. Both writers use these traits to complicate the representation of Muslim women from middle-class India.

It is clear what Hussain means when she titles her book *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks*; 'changing' here is read as both a verb and an adjective. Thus, the title's compelling phrase 'Changing India' serves as an observation and exhortation to her readers. While the book is a glimpse at the changes she has registered with her experience in South Asian educated and uneducated working-class communities and her lived realities in England, it is also a manifesto with clear intentions to emancipate women from traditional religious oppression. She cautiously takes to the Quran to disprove social and cultural practices in Muslim communities in India, which are the products of patriarchal interventions. She includes Quranic

quotes to highlight the actual existence of the status of women in Islam. This can be juxtaposed with the secular writings of Hindu reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy against Sati and widow remarriage. The first few pages of the chapter *Changing India: The Position of Woman in Islam* begin with numerous quotations from the Holy Quran where the position of a woman in Islam, against popular belief, is equal to that of a man. The following chapter, "The Present Conditions of Girls in Islam", explains the contrast with the contemporary status of womanhood in South Asian Muslim communities where she argues that "better home conditions, physical training, and above all in the development of a full and unrestrained personality" is the solution to emancipate woman.

Hussain's reform is rooted in religion and marriage. According to her, the oppression of women begins in their childhood when they are denied the right to education. She traces this denial to marriage; women are repudiated from education systems because "marriage was the only goal of a girl's life in the early days. Now one finds the goal of her life is education. Many unhappy marriages and the suffering of young girls have changed the ideas of both the parents and the girls about marriage."[48] It is important to note that Hussain was writing this at the peak of the independence movement, witnessing a range of self-expression within the Muslim community. While more Muslim women were taking part in the fight against the British, they also did not want to be radical towards the religion or culture. For example, Abadi Bano Begum, who is known to be the first Muslim woman in Purdah to address a public political gathering during the Khilafat Movement (1919 - 1924), was vehemently against religious reformations. However, Hussain is not an exception. At the same time, the concept of reform and change was

[48] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks*. 1940. Oxford University Press, Hind Kitabs, 2015, pp 116

integral to the fight for independence against the imperial power; it was mainly occupied by Hindu reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy and his contemporaries like Toru Dutt (1856 - 1877), who were educated revolutionaries from upper-middle-class families.

Hussain does share a similarity with these reformists; she is also from an upper-class Muslim family with access to public spaces and graduated from Leeds University, an English institution. Due to numerous reasons, the independence movement incorporated Hindu sentiments significantly, and the Hindu reformists saw the opportunity to reshape the fractured Hindu community by addressing caste and gender issues. Amidst this amalgamation, Muslim and lower-caste reformers and their struggle were usually side-lined with few exceptions. One distinguishable example is Maharani Sunita Devi's autobiography (1864 - 1932). According to Eunice de Souza, a literary critic, her case is "of special interest as she was the daughter of Keshub Chunder Sen, and her marriage into the royal family of Cooch Behar split the Brahmo Samaj into two factions, liberal and conservative."[49] Due to its close cooperation with the Independence movement, Brahmo Samaj was at the forefront to educate and liberate women.[50]

In the next chapter, I will highlight a few of the efforts by Progressive writers who actively undo the damages of the Gandhian new woman phenomenon by portraying women in arts and literature by creating unique characters compared to their contemporaries. In this chapter, I will continue to contribute to the previous topic and use the works of Iqbalunnisa Hussain and Zeenuth Futehully to understand the devices they use to deconstruct and reconstruct the

[49] Eunice de Souza. "Recovering a Tradition: Forgotten Women's Voices." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 17, 2006, pp. 1643

[50] Hubel, Teresa. "Charting the Anger of Indian Women through Narayan's Savitri." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1993, pp. 113–30, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1067.

understanding of womanhood in literature. I will study Hussain's non-fiction as the manifesto for reconstructing the (new) womanhood during independence and Futehully's fiction to understand the effects of this (new) womanhood in literature. To further understand the 'gendered dilemma(s)' in twentieth-century South Asian literature produced by women, I will use Iqbalunnisa Hussain's *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks* (1940), a non-fictional manifesto where Hussain develops extensive feminist arguments criticising religious and cultural practices and to understand these challenging positions I will refer to her fictional work *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944). I will also use the fictional novel *Zohra* (1951) by Zeenuth Futehully to understand the shared problems these protagonists face, which exclusively arise from their womanhood.

Most South-Asian reformers during the colonial era shared a similar experience that influenced their comprehension of gender and religion. The opportunity to travel west and learn about the religious and feminist revolution in trans-Atlantic spaces helped them reconstruct their notions and use them in South-Asian politics. From Pandita Ramabai and Toru Dutt to Hussain, these women, as Eunice points out, share a common trait of travelling to Europe and recording their experiences. Perhaps the perception of 'new women' in South Asia is influenced by the perception of women in the West in most cases. As Meera Kosambi, in the introduction to her work *Pandita Ramabai: Life and Landmark Writings* (2016)[51], claims that there is an insufficient examination of the influence of these travels on the creation of the 'new woman'. Of course, these travel experiences and the literature produced on them have quintessentially changed the perspective by providing a platform to juxtapose human subjects and knowledge from the European to the global south by South Asian writers.

[51] Meera Kosambi. *Pandita Ramabai Life and Landmark Writings*. Routledge India, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016.

Eunice De Souza uses the communal and geographical contrast in her work to highlight women writers like Hussain and Zeenuth Futehully, who are from the southern peninsula where the independence movement seemed distant, yet the sentiments were assiduous. Hussain and Futehully are Muslim women writing about their perception of Muslim communities as India is on the verge of gaining independence. However, unlike most progressive writers writing in Hindi-Urdu, these women are from southern India, which significantly affects how they perceive significant events such as partition and the Khilafat movement. Most of the Muslim writers discussed in the next chapter, including Chughtai and Manto, are at the epicentre of these movements, and they are actively writing about these spaces; their literature encompasses cities and provinces directly affected by the communal polity of post-colonial India. Many works of these progressive writers are published in Mumbai and Delhi and are actively consumed and dissipated in these areas. The Progressive Writers Association office was moved from Lucknow to Mumbai (also known as Bombay) after the fourth All India Progressive Writers' Conference in May 1943. All the major 'All India Progressive Writers' Conferences were held in Lucknow, Allahabad, Delhi and Calcutta. Although this geographical drift helped them mobilise the movement's manifesto, it also excluded South Indian writers from actively contributing. This predictable move, ultimately, regardless of the growing Hindi-Urdu community in the southern peninsula, kept progressive writers distant from the larger nationalist literary canon due to language and political barriers.

In Futehully's case, who published her remarkable novel *Zohra* (1951), which she considered romantic fiction, the temporal aspects of the national movement continue to shadow the main plot, which revolves around the protagonist, Zohra, a young upper-class Muslim girl, who is married at an early age. Marriage, family, and religion directly conflict with her interest in

education. Her love for her brother-in-law Hamid, “an exceptional young man who is the face of modern India”, is a depiction of the changing India and the embodiment of the rise of the bourgeoisie and their participation in the national movements that shape the country.[52]

Zohra’s love for Hamid is a metonym for feminine desire. As Zohra explores her position in changing India, she finds herself in an unfulfilling marriage. Although her husband is an educated man from an aristocratic family, and they are dedicated to the fight against the British for an independent India, she soon finds her position in a religious society while she contemplates a divorce. She realises the lack of power women have in marriage.
Meanwhile, Hussain’s character Zuhra from *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* encourages her son Kabeer to remarry and justifies that second marriage would be good for the household because the new wife will be an “extra servant” to help with the chores.[53] By considering women as servants, the novel highlights the patriarchal ideas engrained in domestic spaces of households and women outside the patriarchal institution of marriage, in this case, Zuhra. Although Zuhra herself was once a victim in her marriage, she now encourages her son to enforce a similar value on his wife and control her to meet his needs. Thus, reducing womanhood to the role of servant for the man. Such a trope is common in both Muslim and Hindu portrayal of conjugal womanhood.

This realisation helps women in both novels and the reader understand the position of women's marriage. Although Zohra is an educated woman, she is not relieved from the patriarchal chains

[52] A comparison of these writers from a Hindu, Bengali writer gives us the perception of why these literary pieces should be considered as reformative works. Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* Originally published in 1947 by Hind Kitabs and the consequent work *Goddess Named Gold* (1960) both revolve around the changing power dynamics in heterosexual relationships at the backdrop of the Indian Independence war.

[53] Hussain, Iqbalunissa., 1944, Page 68

that control her desires. Kabir's wife, Nazni, is not as educated or affluent as Zohra but faces domestic dilemmas similar to Zohra's. Nazni is an excellent character case study to learn about the two significant conservative socio-religious practices, "purdah" and "polygamy", among Muslim households in South Asia. Unlike Nazni, Zohra is from a family that neither practices purdah nor polygamy; however, her character indicates the problems women face who are outside these practices but are still subjected to oppression. By observing the problems of the female characters from these two novels, one can establish the complexities of Muslim women in South Asia during the reformation of social and familial norms.[54] Both Futehully and Hussain identify marriage as an oppressive institution which regulates gendered oppression and thus controls women's power, position and desire. According to Hussain, the 'new woman' is emancipated from this patriarchal regulation and controls significant parts of her life. She has power in religious spaces, tools and methods for individual thought and an equal say in domestic decisions.

Futehully admits that South Asians, especially Muslim men in religious spaces with power, despise romance and are infuriated by literary works with female protagonists. This sentiment is in line with Purdah. "Amongst our people, fiction, especially romantic fiction, is deprecated."[55] According to her, her 'romantic fiction' can enable the woman character to contribute equally to the story. Unlike patriotic fiction, which revolves around a man at the forefront of the fight against the British, romantic fiction has a deeper understanding of women's psyche and the politics of '*aangan*'. Hussain and Futehully are adamant about the necessity for reform in Muslim communities. They argue that the emancipation of women and

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[54] Kaul, Subir. *Women, Reform, and Nationalism in Three Novels of Muslim Life*. Cambridge University Press, 2015., pp 133

[55] Eunice de Souza, and Lindsay Pereira. *Women's Voices*. 2002. Oxford University Press, USA, 2004., pp 268

the creation of a new woman is crucial to establishing their presence in the changing world. According to them, this "new woman" is educated, capable of financial autonomy and has the agency to reject Purdah and any religious and cultural practices that control women in domestic and public spaces.

According to her, this emancipated woman is what Hussain considered a new woman, and this new woman's position in the modern world is not hindered by a lack of education and individual rights due to practices such as Purdah. Both Futehully and Hussain approach the concept of Purdah in different ways; Hussain takes the route of advocacy through government schemes and public appeal, while Futehully concentrates on the domestic changes necessary for the creation of new Muslim women through a blossoming forbidden love story between a married woman and her brother-in-law. This provocative romantic *haram* (forbidden or unlawful within Islam) love story becomes a political tool during religious reformation that is subtle yet powerful in its approach.

While this forbidden affair is socially and legally frowned upon and cuts across many social institutions, religious importance is embedded into the story to make the reader aware of its importance over other institutions, including marriage. This could be juxtaposed with the rising literature produced by Hindu reformers who advocated for widow remarriage and against polygamy within Hindu communities. The new edition of Zohra includes a critical and historical foreword by Zeenuth Futehully's daughter, Rummanna Denby, who explains that 'romantic' in this context means a story that breaks taboos.[56] Breaking social and religious

[56] De Souza, Eunice. "Recovering a Tradition: Forgotten Women's Voices, Economic and Political Weekly." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 17, 2006., pp 04

taboos begins when there is public discussion about them, and Futehully's advocacy to "understand the romantic things in women's life using literary platforms such as novels and periodicals without shame" is one of the most critical steps in changing social perception of such concepts.[57]

Hussain published her works between 1940 and 1950, a decade of political, religious and social turmoil for numerous reasons. South-Asian society was dynamically changing the discourse regarding women's rights and problems. Dinkar Yashwant Deshpande's *Women, Family, and Socialism*, first published in 1948, observes these changes in the financial and political position within the domestic and public space in the post-independence Nehruvian era.

This leads us to the question, is there a 'new woman' after independence? If so, who is creating or recreating this 'new woman' in the South Asian literary dogma? Tracing the development of the 'new woman' phenomenon is essential in the context of Indian Literature as we inspect the current trend of academic media engaging with transgender, lesbian and queer women. According to Ratna Kapur, "Normative sexuality was incorporated into the nationalist agenda, where the discourse of purity and chastity produced sexuality that was distinct from the contaminating, corrupting, (imperial) West. It was a thoroughly modern construct. These assumptions about sexuality and culture were products of the 19th-century colonial encounter."[58] Kapur is writing about the phenomenon of new women, intricately woven with the nationalist movement. She further claims that 'Sexual Subalterns' are at the forefront of creating a new woman since the independence by "challenging normative sexuality and in turn

[57] Fatefully, Rumania Denby. "Introduction." *Zohra*, Oxford University Press, 2004.

[58] Kapur, Ratna. *Erotic Justice: Law and The New Politics of Postcolonialism*, The Glass House Press, 2005. pp 56

threatening the purity of the Indian nation." The forceful imposition of a homogeneous Indian culture will only serve to enforce traditional notions of womanhood and family that 'are regressive and have dangerous implications for women and threaten to reinforce notions that have been challenged by the women's movement' since the mid-twentieth century.

The perception of these women and their role in literary scenarios is the product of the creation of the 'new women' during the colonial era. Since the early post-independence period, the phenomenon of 'new woman' has remained relatively stagnant in South Asian literary discourse; according to Gupta, "In its application to literature, a feminist approach has usually meant either, or both, of two things: one, a re-examination through imaginative literature of the role and status of woman in society and a new way of portraying a woman in creative literature which does justice to her identity as an individual; two, a reinterpretation and revaluation of literary texts, old and new, from a woman-centred point of view."[59] He calls the re-examination of the status of South Asian womanhood creative feminism and the revaluation of texts from a 'woman-centred point of view' as critical feminism.

I consider Hussain a creative and critical feminist, and her non-fiction is a manifesto for working-class Muslim women for heuristic purposes. Her fictional character Zuhra and her development into a patriarchal mother-in-law and then her retrospective understanding of the system, as Hussain would argue, are essential for women of her and future generations. Her non-fictional masterpiece, *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks,* is a manifesto for women to empower themselves against domestic prisons and emancipate in the fight for political and financial independence. Although Hussain does not struggle to align herself with

[59] Gupta, R. K. "Feminism And Modern Indian Literature." *Indian Literature*, vol. 36, no. 5 (157), 1993, pp. 157

the independence movement like woman writers in the 1930s,[60] She considers the importance of "Swadeshi cry everywhere" in her manifesto. Gupta makes a note of Ismat Chughtai and Rashid Jahan's effort in the phenomenon of "recreating and portraying of (a new) woman (and a new status for women in literature, domestic, society and more importantly in the political realm) characters shattering the stereotype image of an Indian woman by creating bold, vigorous and unconventional characters (in their literary works)".[61] Gupta reiterates the influence of Rashid Jahan by mentioning her stories '*Angare'* (Embers) and '*Aurat'* (the Woman) in their work "Trends in Modern Indian Fiction." (1994) [62]

Like Jahan and Chughtai, Hussain establishes a new woman in her work. The work became a doctrine for creating her vision of the South Asian 'new woman' and a new world. A social and political apparatus that is more accessible to the 'new woman'. She highlights the task both the global south and the first world countries should pick up to anticipate women in South Asia's oppressed systems (class, caste, and religion) to help pave the way for the 'new woman'. She is perhaps one of the earliest writers to address the persecution complex of men within South Asia to curb feminist sensibilities.

Teresa Hubel, in her extraordinary work about the change in Indian women and the influence of Gandhi, anti-colonial movements and the colonial discourse, notes that "Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's (the secretary of the AIWC or All India Women's Conference in the 1929

[60] Hubel. Teresa, 1993, pp 192

[61] Gupta, 1993, pp 181

[62] Gupta, R. K. "Trends in Modern Indian Fiction." *World Literature Today, Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, vol. 68, no. 02, 1994, pp. 299–307, https://doi.org/10.2307/40150154.

and the editor of the collection *Women in Modern India: Fifteen Papers by Indian Women Writers*) evocation of the three female paragons (Sita, Savitri and Draupadi) at this stage in her career, substantially in accordance with the construction of ideal Indian womanhood.[63] Gandhi called up heroines constantly in his speeches and writing, comparing them to the women of his time to posit an ideal for which they could strive.[64] However, these three female paragons, regardless of their origin, were seeped into Brahminical structures and represented conventionally accepted characteristics along Hindu customs. Unable to explicitly criticise South Asian traditions that emphasise patriarchal policies due to the rise in nationalist sentiments, Chattopadhyay carefully balances the importance of women's emancipation in the fight against imperialism until the early 1930s. Then, Teresa traces a remarkable shift in creating the 'new woman' in pre-independent India. "By the 1930s, Chattopadhyaya and other women activists had found their own voices and their own leadership. And what they had to say was no longer always in keeping with Gandhi's perspective."[65]

By distinguishing themselves from Gandhian and INC (Indian National Congress) at the time, feminist women writers were bravely trying not to move away from the Nationalist movement while still centralising feminist objectives. Throughout his political life, Gandhi was very much opposed to the possibility of Indian women working. He believed that men and women were designed to conduct their lives in separate spheres, the women's sphere being obviously that of the *ghar* (home). This Gandhian philosophy sweeps into prominent political literature. Hussain refuses to address the Gandhian philosophy towards the caste system and gender disparity in South Asian society during the mid-twentieth century. In her chapter "H. H.

[63] Hubel, Teresa. 1993, pp 118

[64] Tarafdar, Radhika Lai. *Womanhood in Hindu Society Ancient and Modern*. Self-Published (Dacca), 1936.

[65] Hubel, Teresa. 1993, pp 118

Maharaja of Mysore.", a piece dedicated to the ruler of the pre-colonial region of Karnataka, Hussain addresses the Gandhian philosophy infiltrating mainstream historiography. According to her, Gandhi's approach to liberating the oppressed is the bare minimum. "What Mahatma Gandhi has been doing for Harijans is not a matter of great wonder to us when we think of what our noble ruler has been doing for them in the whole State."[66] Hussain's frustration towards Gandhian philosophy can be further observed as she refuses to acknowledge Gandhi and his politics while studying feminist influencers from post-colonial areas. However, Hussain carefully refuses to write against the Gandhian 'new woman'.

While Chattopadhyaya, Hussain and Futehully attempted to recreate a 'new (Indian) woman', they would never go against the Gandhian principles explicitly at the risk of being seen as anti-Swadeshi. Feminist historian Uma Chakravorty notes this political atmosphere among the woman writers of South Asia. In an article about the nationalist reconstitution of ancient Hindu history, that this perception of the past as a lost glory is burdensome, particularly for women: "It has led to a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth."[67] Although Futehully's novel is not critical towards her mainstream contemporary thinkers who align themselves with Gandhian 'new woman', the novel's protagonist Zohra and her 'unnatural desire' towards men outside her marriage is considered by Futehully a critical aspect of woman's issues. Zohra is from an aristocratic family from the province of Hyderabad; we

[66]Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1940. pp 130

[67] Chakravarti, Uma. "Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?: Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past." *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Kali for Women, 1989. pp 27-87.

learn early in the novel that she was encouraged by her father to learn English and in English as it is the "gateway to modern thought".[68]

Equipped with this "modern thought", she commits towards Indian Independence while rejecting marriage proposals. She turns towards the cause of independence with a strong inclination to work with Mahatma Gandhi or find herself in Shanti Niketan, an abode of learning South Asian history, culture and literature. It is important to note that most political movements involving Gandhi and Tagore were far from Hyderabad. This distance and her desire to work in these spaces work on multiple levels in the novel. Her need to distance herself from Hyderabad, which Futehully repeatedly uses as part of her identity and marriage, changes constantly, and her character develops and understands politics and religion. Zohra's husband Bashir also considered himself part of the Indian revolution but claimed that the Gandhian methods were too slow. Therefore, he encourages her to defy cultural normalities and accompany him outside the courtyard. Futehully carefully situated this conversation about the 'Gandhian methods' while the broader narrative of the novel is about gender equality and courtyard space.

Here, the Gandhian methods also refer to his concept of a 'new woman', which is slow moving as it conveniently posits significant responsibility of re-doing patriarchy on women and their role in modern South Asia. While learning more about Bashir and his understanding of 'modernisation', Zohra also discovers her voice in politics. She understands the patriarchal roots even in Bashir's modern ideas. Futehully's use of female desire is quintessential to understanding her (the author's) criticism towards her contemporary gender politics. Desire in

[68] Futehully, Zeenuth. *Zohra*. Hind Kitabs, 1951. pp 14

Zohra is not limited to sexual; with an earnest tone, Futehully explores the female desire to indicate Zohra's, who in the novel embodies South Asian feminist politics, desire to find her voice, political affiliation and, most importantly, a sense of self separated from the patriarchal and religious institution(s).

Zohra's identity and interest revolve around the forbidden romance. While one could claim that such a perception is the product of religious interception, it is crucial to note the role these interests play in her religion rather than religion's role in her life. While religion seems to be in power, it is, in fact, Zohra and her agency to engage with these religious beliefs and practices that put her at the forefront of reformation. Futehully and her character are both critical but not pedantic about religious practices. Hussain's work approaches religion in a very similar way. According to Hussain, while it is important to have religion in the life of a Muslim girl, it should not in any way hinder the growth of this girl/woman as an individual in a bourgeoise society; if all that is not the case, then women become nothing but the property of men in a heteronormative relationship. Hussain's protagonist, Zuhra, is an excellent example to understand Futehully's examination of the relationship between oppressive religious and traditional practices and women with agency.

Ramalinga Reddy called Hussain "the Jane Austin of India." Her vivacious yet penitent Muslim woman characters are introduced early in the book by portraying the space they share in the absence of men in domestic areas: the courtyard. This courtyard acts as a safe space for South-Asian women characters throughout her book. Courtyards have been a crucial domestic space across literature produced by women. Geetanjali Singh Chanda explores the concept of courtyards in women's literature in her ground-breaking work *Indian Woman in the House of Fiction* (2014).

Zuhra, the protagonist of Hussain's novel, loses her husband, Umra, early in the story. At the end of chapter one, Umar's death unravels the power dynamics of Purdah and other religious practices in the Muslim courtyard. "What is the life of a woman after the death of her husband? A woman lives for him and him alone. His death should mean the death of all her desires, comfort and happiness."[69]

The text begins to highlight that the widow, who no longer was the property of her husband, was, in fact, without protection. This showed when women in her family who were in conjugal relationships had more power over her because they continued to be part of the patriarchal system through their husbands. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law, whom Hussain portrays as simple women bearing the religious practice of Purdah, have a complicated relationship with these practices. Unbeknownst to them, they become part of patriarchy and oppressive power dynamics in the house courtyard. Even if Zuhra's husband did not follow the practises himself very strictly, they would obey the religion as they perceived it and the same principles applied to the woman who would be their subordinate since she is no longer in a conjugal relationship. Umra's sister, who was more tolerant of her nephew than of his mother (Zuhra), said, "You can allow her (Zuhra) to do things after a long time, but now both of you should be very careful in what you do. So long as there is life in us, we have to care for the opinion of others."[70] Umra's warning to be careful as a widow is logical in a patriarchal society because although the older widow is a respectable elder of the family/community, she remains below the men of the family in the social hierarchy. These men are often the next of kin in the patrilinear

[69] Hussain, Iqbalunissa, 1944, pp 19

[70] Ibid, pp 19

genealogy. Therefore, the consequences of her actions (including heresy or blasphemy) can be charged against the men.

The function of kinship and its authority over a Muslim woman practising Purdah can be understood better when juxtaposed with Phaniyamma. In Phaniyamma's case, although the death of her husband imposed stringent regulations on her life, it also freed her from domestic responsibilities, and the family and community authorised her power over financial and religious responsibilities. Although both the writers and their characters can be located in Karnataka (The Dominion of Mysore before the formation of the Republic), Zuhra's case is much more complicated due to the communal traditions than that of Phaniyamma. As discussed in the earlier chapter, Phaniyamma gains status as she becomes an older widow, but Zuhra is not immune from the practices of Purdah even after her death. Uma Chakravarty[71] approaches such a patriarchal practice by deconstructing the phases of an Indian woman and claims that the four phases only come into existence due to the nature of women's relationship with men in her life. Kinship, therefore, as a patriarchal tool for oppressing women, begins before birth and ends after death. These four phases are childhood – woman as a daughter of her father; adolescent – in preparation for marriage to a man and the duty to provide him with a son; adulthood – as a wife of a man, in service of his household; and finally as an old widow – absence of a man or her husband. This idea of kinship is later used in the last chapter to understand its function in the subaltern communities within the Brahminical society.

Hussain uses the notion of rationality and intuition to understand South Asian kinship and the sexism within the religion backed by 'science'. Another typical pattern in religious reformation

[71] Chakravarti, Uma. "Conceptualising Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 14, 1993, pp. 579–85.

movements is that influential literary works were produced by reformers with British or European education. These reformers and their literary works valued scientific methods significantly. The scientific techniques were used to debunk the taboo around menstruation, childbirth, sex and sexuality in women. Religious conservatism also used a similar methodology, a trend that continues to influence both religion and scientific pedagogy in understanding women's bodies.

Hussain addresses these issues in her work and concludes that such a phenomenon is due to the isolation of scientific pedagogy and the stagnation of numerous discourses in the colonial global south.[72] The religious conservatives choose to accept the 'Western discourses' that helped them maintain the gender and social status quo. Futehully notes that the knowledge, social characteristics, and changes that negotiate with traditional practices are considered forbidden. "I request the West on its side to understand the East in its past history and present aspirations. For a variety of reasons, false ideas of race or cultural superiority have gained ground, but on that score, perhaps no nation, people or country has a right to cast the first stone in the new world. We want to use every agency: political, economic, educational and social to prevent false ideas from dominating the intercourse of the people."[73] Hussain believes that the rise of racial hierarchy oppression of women and gender minorities was rooted in isolated discourses. She proposes a mission to integrate Western scientific discourses with Eastern principles of human agency. She does this by constantly borrowing from scientific discourses to understand sexist beliefs.

[72] Hussain, 1940, pp 177

[73] Ibid, pp 177 - 17

In the chapter "Woman as an Individual" from her non-fiction work, she notes, "Investigations made by the psychologist of today have revealed that there is absolutely no particular intellectual difference between man and woman. Both of them are born with equipment of inborn tendencies and capacities which induce certain responses to certain stimuli."[74] Her notes include her observations of the latest development in European psychological discourses, including Freud and Adler. She uses these real-world developments in her fiction to create characters that compel readers to refer to her non-fiction and further look at the developments of such discourses on a global scientific scale. Another faculty that made it easier for her to access such scientific knowledge was the establishment of the second-oldest psychology department in India at the University of Mysore in 1924. Women writers from these cities used the developments in psychology in their work to make it more credible and for feminist reinterpretations of social hierarchies.

Futehully takes it a step further by using human emotions and embodying them in her works. She uses words such as romantic, love, and individual and provides them with meaning to produce a composite literary world. 'The romantic' aspect in her novel, according to Futehully, is 'the forbidden' acts of desire in her religion, a case very closely linked to all kinds of desire and especially of women in a conjugal relationship, which is under the influence of the West.

Both Futehully and Hussain were actively part of the Swaraj movement (self-governance/Independence movement). A close inspection of both their novels shows the unprecedented changes in the development of individual agencies along with their participation in liberating the country. Religious reformation movements, Hindu and Muslim alike, begin to

[74] Ibid, pp 226

be part of the independence and create a sentiment often indistinctive and an amalgamation of both factions. This is perhaps one of the significant reasons behind the change in women's agency in religious clusters. Religious dialogue regarding women's participation in external affairs, including the Swaraj, was further propelled by the Deoband School and the Ahmadiyya Movement. Hussain's writing follows a similar approach to some of these movements. Like the Ahmadiyya movement, she interprets 'The Holy Quran' and other testaments with 'Western liberal education' to conclude and highlight the potential agency in Muslim women. A recurring phenomenon in her manifesto *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks*.

Hussain advocates against Purdah with subtle revolutionary sentiments against religious practices that, according to her, are oppressive and are part of the tradition that is not truly part of Islam. One of them is the authority of male kinship over women in domestic spaces. While Zuhra's son seems to be understanding of his mother's situation after the death of his father, this begins to change, and Zuhra feels safer with her sister-in-law due to numerous circumstances. By employing complicated kinship relationships and a simple narrative structure, Hussain produces a story that quintessentially points out the effort of both men and women in patriarchal structures to oppress women and their agency. Hussain uses traditional practices as illustrative examples of the position of women in patriarchal structures in the story. During the rituals of Umra's death, "Some of the brave ladies sat down in the courtyard shouted, "Give us a sheet." … Two old women beggars held the corner of the sheets. Thus, it separated men from the women in the corner of the open place." [75] The sheet, here a symbol of Pardah, eventually gains its disposition as a space for the "polygamy nature of a man."

[75] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1944, pp 22

Her use of a third-person narrator at the beginning of the fifth chapter is impressive. Much of the first four chapters are conversations between the main characters involved in the funeral, wedding and estate affairs; however, the fifth chapter begins with a lengthy monologue. At first, it is not very apparent to the reader as they do not understand the flow of the story. Still, the monologue builds up to enlighten the reader about Zuhra's societal position and her family as a widow. The monologue follows Hussain's style, similar to her non-fiction work *Changing India: A Muslim Woman Speaks*, a metacognitive strategy to understand the female protagonist and her evaluation of the governing traditions. "It is a well-known fact that men are superior to women in every aspect."[76] But Zuhra was a woman of emotions (again, a tool used by Hussain to critique the notion that women are emotional beings and not rational; her analysis of such sexist images is exhaustive in her non-fiction) and even though "Emotional character refines one's feeling and widens the personal range by providing worthy appeals and worthy outlets. There is no definite distinction between intellectual and emotional character. Intellect and emotions act and react upon each other."[77]

As the story develops, the narrator begins to instigate the lack of intelligence in the female characters, and simultaneously, the narrator shifts from the domestic and courtyard setting to the public. Hussain achieves a marvellous meta-narrative by interconnecting her works. The development of the narrator traced along her non-fiction social commentary "The Position of Women in India" is a stark contrast compared to Hussain's narrative. "Public opinion has been weighted against the cause of woman's intellectual emancipation and the heritage of communal psychology has been the perpetuation of such inequality. The time has come when India has to acknowledge the tremendous influence woman plays in the formation of character." As the

[76] Ibid, pp 61

[77] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1940, pp 205

narrator moves out of the courtyard to narrate the religious and political monologues, they also embody the public and Hussain's perception of the South Asian community.

The monologue takes a strange turn to sound like a religious text rather than a self-introspection. Moreover, in a heterosexual polygamous relationship, as reiterated by the guests and family members at the funeral, a woman need not have any intelligence, for as long as she serves her husband, she has completed her duty. Zuhra now retrospectively realises the power of such a 'religious' reiteration and the authority it gives to the reiterating person. Now, she fails to recognise her authority as a mother to Kabir and a mother-in-law to Kabir's wife, Nazanin. This retrospective analysis seems to have made her more vulnerable to such practice as she begins to accept the facts and conditions given to her. "A woman who does not show the proper spirit of gulping down ready-made beliefs is condemned by the rest as *douzakhi* (of hell/hellish - a woman who does not belong to the earth or human affairs)."[78] The irony is ever so apparent to the reader and, to a certain extent, to Zuhra herself. Now that her husband is no longer alive, she is no longer participating in human affairs and has little authority in domestic life. Therefore, she is already a *douzakhi* but fails to realise the unfair pursuit of not being one. Her life ended since her husband's life ended.

The narrator shifts from explaining the position of a woman as a wife in a religious household to that of her position as a mother and an in-law - a place Zuhra has transitioned into without much notice. Although "there is a miraculous change between wifehood and motherhood: A wife aspires long to achieve the position (however), a mother is sanctified."[79] Zuhra's transition from being a wife to a mother after the death of her husband is traced by the narrator, and the

[78] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1944, pp 61

[79] Ibid, pp 62

monologue divides her situation to the reader. “Zuhra, (now) an invalid (after the death of her husband) who, being aware of the dreadful ceremony, began to sob early.” Now, she has become a mother who tells her son to “never feel pity or trust a crying woman. They shed crocodile tears.” Such character development is one of Hussain’s tools to emphasise the role of women in the patriarchal apparatus’. This transition is encouraged, as Hussain claims, by the religious practices that compelled the women to become part of the system that oppresses women. To contrast the changes in Zuhra’s behaviour, Hussain also creates a male character who believes and advocates for women’s agency in relationships. “This old woman’s world is quite different from ours. They have neither desires nor strength to take part in life’s enjoyments. You shouldn’t try to mould your wife’s life according to your mother’s,” Kabeer’s brother advises him when he understands the complicated relationship between Kabeer, his wife Nazni and his mother, Zuhra.

The gender dynamics between the characters in Hussain’s work can be considered an attempt to reconstruct the idea of womanhood being formed in national politics during her period. She states in her work “The Position of Women in India” that “the position of woman as a wife and a mother is not easy to describe. Motherhood is greatly venerated as a symbol of faithfulness and devotion.” However, she admits that it requires an “orderly and coherent manner”. Such explicit statements reflect on her characters by direct reference or self-introspection, and as the plot develops, the reader notices that she contradicts herself intentionally to complicate the ideas of womanhood, religion, and science.

Mahadevan calls for an immediate and imperative re-examination of the construction and the process which excludes women from the social and political apparatus. According to her, “The expansion and reconstruction of the modern notion of freedom in the light of the colonial

predicament is an urgent task." She suggests a solution for this concern where the contemporary discourses "critique the violence underlying the exclusion of women and colonial subjects from colonial definitions of legal personhood and the exclusion of saying peasant/tribal women from mainstream definitions of womanhood."[80] Early attempts at such a critique can be traced to Hussain's revolutionary manifesto. Hussain's reformation is founded on deconstructing colonial womanhood and reconstructing womanhood with modern qualities. These qualities rearrange the agency of sexuality and women's role in patriarchy from a communal, national and global perspective.

Hussain's feminist criticism is, in part, a challenge to the political systems and movements, such as the national fight against colonial power and the imperial forces oppressing women. Her manifesto is also a challenge to all the possible systems of knowledge she acknowledges in her works, including the religious, mythological, and scientific ones that continue to inform and construct the ideas of womanhood. Further, as a political reformer and champion for gender equality, she has produced works that also seek to create a project of inquiry and interrogation that will continue to question the hierarchies and the position of women within this apparatus.

While Hussain does this directly with non-fictional works and bases her arguments on scientific knowledge, cultural understanding and considering the class hegemony in South Asian society, Futehully uses her fictional work of Zohra to portray the voice and gendered dilemmas of women. Her protagonist embodies the complexities of female desire within patriarchal and religious institutions such as marriage, family, and local governments. Both these writers

[80] Mahadevan, Kanchana. "Colonial Modernity: A Critique." *Indian Literature*, vol. 46, no. 03 (209), 2002, pp. 193–211.

contribute to my argument of gendered dilemmas with their exhaustive portrayal of women and women's problems in the twenty-first century in South Asia. Futehully's Zohra and Hussain's Zuhra find themselves on the receiving end of power in relationships. Zohra's journey as an educated woman is not that different to Zuhra's life as a woman pushed around inside the courtyard by other women. They are both told to "not expect a bed of roses"[81], which, according to Kaul, "is one of the many maxims articulated by women as they try to come to terms with their difficult lives; for them, suffering is to be expected, even embraced, as the proper moral condition of femininity."

Thus, regardless of their access to education, both protagonists face similar conditions due to their 'moral condition of femininity.' Zuhra and Zohra are from different classes and are located in different provinces of colonial South Asia, separated from their yearning to join the national freedom movement; however, they both find themselves restrained by the gendered moral condition; they are expected to embrace pain and suffering, not to have desires of any kind and to compromise their voice and self to adjust to the normalised womanhood. The dilemma of choosing between their sense of self and the moral conditions expected from them and their journey are excellent literary portrayals of the 'new woman' position in South Asian society.

[81] Hussain, Iqbalunnisa. 1944. pp 63

## Chapter II

## Understanding Narrative Techniques Used by Progressive Urdu Women Writers: A Close Reading of Ismat Chughtai.

> I've told *Papaji* that we don't subscribe to any religion, and now I am telling you the same thing. All religions are gifts from the same *Bhagwan* for all (hu)mankind.[82]

This excerpt from her short story 'Sacred Duty' (*Muqaddas Farz* - 1983)is an excellent example of Ismat Chughtai's approach to tackling the religiously intense aftermath of partition between India and Pakistan. Understanding the context of the statement can be used to recognise an array of features of Chughtai's stories. The above line is from a letter to their parents by a young couple in an inter-religious marriage. Samina Siddiqi, a *Musalman* girl (Muslim), marries Tashar Trivedi, a Hindu boy from Allahabad. When the parents were made aware of this marriage in an earlier letter, they did not take well of the news, as her mother, Begum Siddiqi, "almost fainted". She shared similar sentiments with her husband thinking "Tashar (had) seduced their innocent daughter,"[83] However, this letter, the one Siddiqi Saheb and Begum receive at the end of the story, made her realise the changes in society and culture through her daughter. Although Begum's reaction to the latter letter remains the same – crying, it is a symbolic measure of the growth of both the female characters in the story. This short story is especially compelling to read as a response to the Gandhian 'new woman'. I will further

[82] Chughtai, Ismat. *A Chughtai Collection: The Quilt & Other Stories, The Heart Breaks Free & The Wild One.* Translated by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed and Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004. pp 37

[83] Ibid., pp 23

engage with this paragraph and my statement regarding the growth of Samina Trivedi and her mother, Begum Siddiqi, later in this chapter after introducing Chughtai and a few of her works.

To understand the character of Samina Siddiqi and Chughtai's other female protagonists, studying the literary evolution of the 'new woman' phenomenon in the context of (post)colonial writing is vital. Anti-imperialist South Asian writers such as Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Iqbal Singh and numerous others were adamant about reforming the linguistic and cultural aspects of the region. Such an attitude towards literary change continued until the 1970s across the sub-continent.

This reformation is done in local languages such as Bengali, Kannada, Tamil and Gujarati. Simultaneously, the ideas generated in the local languages were reiterated in more prominent accessible languages such as Hindi and English. For example, the writings of Raja Rammohan Roy and his other contemporaries in English literature, which acted as a manifesto for public reform campaigns, focused on controversial cultural practices issues such as s*ati*, widow remarriage and education for women. These practices questioned women's agency and subjugated any expression of womanhood to scrutiny.

Gender and sexual emancipation became the utmost priority for many writers as they comprehended the extent of patriarchy in modern society. Roy's campaign including programmes encouraging women to be part of the education system and consider physical, matrimonial and financial autonomy. These aspects were "viewed as unconscionable foreign interference in sacred, personal institutions", due to which such a campaign by Roy was "the

most controversial public campaign"[84] and one that had significant importance in creating the image of the 'New India' and the early nationalist discourses in the mid-twentieth century.

> "(Most of these literary products) begin with the forties and early fifties, when the very idea of nationhood underwent a significant alteration, and the means and modes by which ideological unities affected, and dominance was exercised were profoundly transformed … A whole set of deeply embedded historical discourses, including ones that embodied a nation people's vision of freedom and of equality, were resonated as they were translated into schemes of an ascendant nationalism."[85]

Lalita and Tharu consider the 1940s and the 50s crucial to study the composition and circulation of "new repertoires of Indianness" in their introduction to one of the most canonical compilations of critical study and translation of women's literature, *Women Writing in India – Volume I and II* (1993). The visions of equality were a threat to the conservative communities and were the topic of active discussions in religious spaces. Simultaneously, debates about individual rights were becoming part of the domestic spaces.[86]

South-Asian women writers wrote about everyday experiences in the patriarchal South Asian setting to advocate for women's emancipation. Although the middle-brow literary themes broadly included conjugality, sexuality and gender roles, there is also significant literature

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[84] Robertson, Bruce Carlyle. *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature*. Edited by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Permanent Black, 2003, pp 35

[85] Lalitha and Tharu 1993, pp 115

[86] Courtyards, as domestic spaces, have been studied by numerous Urdu writers including Rashida Jahan. Rakshanda Jalil's supplementary literary works highlight the importance of the courtyards and the role they play in domestic affairs and conjugality.

about the perception of womanhood in legal and legislative aspects of the Indian polity and philosophical contemplation regarding motherhood and its importance or lack to working women. P. Radhika, a literary critic who studies middle-brow women's literature, argues that the short story was the most accessible form of writing to women, along with periodicals, advice magazines and romance pocket novels.[87] The popularity of short stories overall other forms is due to the financial aspect of printing and publishing. The literary publishing industry did not consider women's literature intellectual or economically profitable. It was not until paperback publishing that women's novels became best sellers. Despite women working in the public sphere and being politically active during the fight for independence, women had limited opportunities.

Revisiting the Gandhian 'New Woman' Phenomenon:

Cultural translations and producing a secular language became pivotal projects in the making of modern India. Production of such a secular language became active state propaganda since the state acknowledged the new problems it would face, including the continuance of casteist sentiments and gendered oppression among the new citizens. Understanding the cultural significance of the West and creating a new language that could successfully translate and reduce the barriers were the primary missions of progressive writers in Urdu and other regional languages of South Asia. In the footstep of Manto and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the Urdu literary tradition mirrored both a determined social commitment and a strong sense of comic subversion. Pre-partition Urdu was a secular, agnostic language capable of both brutal irony

[87] P., Radhika. *Women's Subjectivity, Modernity and Conjugality: Historicising Popular Women's Writing in Kannada, 1950s – 1980s*. 2007. pp 05

and the highest romanticism. Writers like Chughtai used syncretic linguistic tools to question and criticise patriarchy and sexual subversion.[88]

As discussed earlier in the introduction regarding the use of women characters as political figures during the pinnacle of patriotic literature, it continues to be a pattern for a few decades in fiction. Portraying women as resistors works on two levels in this text. The first is the change in the social consciousness of working-class women in political campaigns, which uplifts them and includes them in broader debates about women's participation in politics. On another level, it also brings in lived experiences of women as political vessels and nothing more further women's domestic spaces were central to the construction of public spaces, and Gupta argues that the construction was under such scrutiny that "it became representative of both traditional culture and national identity." Thus making clothes a tool to regulate women's bodies.[89]

Using women only to portray them as figures with political intentions creates a gap between the woman reader, who is not actively political but does support anti-imperialism and Gandhian values. Here, the woman reader is a particular demographic consisting mainly of upper-class and some educated middle-class women. Women belonging to these parts of society openly renounced imperialism while facing political barriers due to their gender. The dominant theme where literary works engage with the nationalist and Gandhian philosophy is vital to

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[88] Gokhale, Namita, and Malashri Lal. "South Asian Literatures: Beyond Borders, across Boundaries." *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. (3/4), Jan. 2014, pp. 236–248, https://doi.org/10.4135/9789353885960.n19. pp 23

Jaffer, Sadaf. *Ismat Chughtai, Progressive Literature and Formations of the Indo-Muslim Secular, 1911-1991*. Harvard University, 2015. Pp 44

[89] Gupta, Charu. "'Fashioning' Swadeshi: Clothing Women in Colonial North India." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 47, no. 42, 2012., pp. 78

understanding the change in South Asia's literary modes and tendencies. As suggested by P. Radhika, who identifies it as a literary form of 'excess', this is crucial because such a narrative creates a gap between being a citizen and a subject in the nation-state and encourages us to read it as "the psychological form of the narratives, that is manifested in the narrativisation of the obsessive mental conflicts experienced by the women protagonists and in the hysterical excess that the narratives themselves represent."[90] The implication of influence of nationalist and Gandhian philosophy that shapes the 'ideal modern womanhood in postcolonial South Asia' "shows up the limits and failures of the modernist logic of the state."

This Gandhian 'new woman' phenomenon, when juxtaposed with another "so-called 'New Woman' phenomenon" proposed by modernist critic Steven Matthews, "in which intelligent, liberated feminists were seen operating in strong roles in the public world"[91] emerging in the 1890s, appears to be incompatible. According to Matthews, the literary phenomenon he identifies "made women in contemporary novels "no longer the objects of the gaze in work by male authors" and allowed female characters to "explore the world through their own eyes."[92] While Matthew uses words such as 'intelligent' and 'liberated' to describe the change of portraying women in modernist literature, Leela describes the character of Kajoli as 'righteous', a word used by Bhattacharya to convey the very opposite of liberated, as her righteousness was

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[90] Gupta, Charu. "The Icon of Mother in Late Colonial North India: 'Bharat Mata', 'Matri Bhasha' and 'Gau Mata." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 36, no. 45, 2001.

P., Radhika. *Women's Subjectivity, Modernity and Conjugality: Historicising Popular Women's Writing in Kannada*, 1950s – 1980s. 2007., pp 47

[91] Matthews, Steven. *Modernism*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp 92

[92] Ibid., pp 92

bound by her duty as a woman in Bengali society. Stevens 'New Woman' is liberated from this very duty to be righteous and docile to the existing modes of hierarchy.

P. Radhika studies these concepts of 'righteousness' (*dharma*) and conjugality in the South Asian literature of the 1950s and '60s. According to her, women writers "created a new subjectivity of the *grihini* (housewife) which posited her (woman characters in heterosexual relationships) as confronting and restructuring *dharma*. The re-defining of dharma was through then positing of the woman's 'self' drawing on the language of 'equality' that is manifest in the developmental-modern language of the state."[93]

Anshuman Mondal argues that Gandhian ideology towards women "enabled a strategic distancing from modernity which allowed for a reformulation of Indian nationhood that could both borrow what was best from the West without compromising India's sense of difference from the colonial power."[94] Mondal further uses this argument to claim that this was a nationalist tactic to involve women within the political movement while not giving them an essential position within the political apparatus that was shaping colonial India. Further, the amalgamation of these two discourses produced the new political and ideological problematic rhetoric trope of 'woman as renunciator'. This trope portrayed women as "non-aggressive, non-assertive, accommodating and loving feminine principle"; in other words, docile and thereby complicit in maintaining 'the old gendered orders'. The Gandhian 'new woman' idea becomes a road map to understanding the change in women characters in notable South Asian literature. Although there were new methods of liberating woman characters in modernist literature that were identifiable in Urdu writers like Chughtai, which is explored further in the chapter, the

[93] P. Radhika 2018, pp 47

[94] Mondal 2002, pp 419-138

influence of nationalist narratives was the centre of these writings. The readers would be compelled to choose an aberrant woman character with sexual liberation or a character who is on the path of *dharma* and family values. The 'new woman's spaces were limited to the freedom movement against the British Raj or the domestic spaces that highlighted the importance of women in the modern family.

The Progressive Writers Association:

Ismat Chughtai belonged to a canon of Hindi-Urdu writers who considered and called themselves progressives. They produced a plethora of works and initiated a literary movement to capture the "zeitgeist", or as Saadat Hasan Manto, a crucial literary figure in the progressive writers' movement, would call it "*yug ke aatma*" (spirit of the age/movement). Numerous writers began to refer to the changes in women's rights in first-world nations and witnessed the grassroots movements that enabled working-class women to be part of policymaking. An influx of post-war literature from around the world shaped women writers in South Asia to construct indigenous progressive ideas to have a voice within oppressive systems such as patriarchy. I intend to understand how women writers from India helped construct regional modernism and progressive writing and situate women in modern literature produced during the re-imagination of the nation.

The writers discussed in this section, along with a few others who shared similar sentiments towards modern systemic oppression of certain genders, established a new school of thought that broke away from the traditional writing style, forms, and aesthetics. Their content is usually revolutionary and involves a pedantic process regarding self-realisation, systemic

changes, and women's rights. While Urdu writers like Jahan, Chughtai, and Zaheer belonged to a Progressive Writers' Movement called the *Akhil Bharatiya Pragatishila Lekhak Sangh* (All India Progressive Writers Association or PWA), Indira and Gowramma did not affiliate themselves with any writing school. PWA was unconventional and extremely political, and it published innovative literature that grappled with significantly educated communities across South Asia. The movement's origins can be traced to the publication of *Angarey* (Embers or Burning Coals – 1932), which included nine short stories and a one-act play by Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, Mahmud-uz-Zafar, and Ahmed Ali. The controversial collection was banned by the United Provinces of British India government in the same year. Along with the British authorities, it also was detested by religious figures and conservative political campaigners.

Based on an interview with N. M. Rashid, Ahmed Ali talks about the strong themes of the collection in the paper "The Progressive Writers' Movement In its Historical Perspective,"[95] published in the 'Journal of South Asian Literature.' Rashid comments, "If at all, (the collection) should have been banned (it should be due to) its banalities rather than for obscenities." Here, he is referring to the lack of original thought in the collection. At least, according to numerous critics argue that the ideas in the collection were western and foreign. Ali strongly responds to the comment, "From its beginning to the end of this paragraph, one finds a series of false statements, innuendoes, and malicious implications. It invents motives and imputes them to the movement of foreign inspiration and imported origin. It was, in reality, nothing of the kind."[96]

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[95] Ali, Ahmed, and N. M. Rashed. "The Progressive Writers' Movement in Its Historical Perspective." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 13, no. 1/4, 1977. pp 91–97.

[96] Ibid. pp 91

Ali calls it a “Manifesto”, one that ignited the new frames in which short fiction and poetry emerged for the next decade. On April 5, 1933, five months after the publication, the writers issued a statement on the collection and its impacts on the religious groups, the publishing industry, and numerous editorials that were obstinate towards the changing landscape of Urdu literary space. In the statement, they defended “‘the right of launching it and all other vessels like it’ - they stand for the right of free criticism and free expression in all matters of the highest importance to the human race in general and the Indian people in particular.”[97]

The Progressive Writers Association's program eventually incorporated writers from all the major South Asian languages; however, they predominantly produced literature in Hindi-Urdu and English. Regardless, they influenced the literary paradigm in all the major languages of southern India. The APW was clear from the beginning of the direction they were pursuing, understanding and annotating the radical changes in South Asia. Ali considers that the rise of Western imperialism is due to its ‘modern outlook’ and ‘rationalism’. In one of his works, *Twilight In Delhi,* he intricately explores the connection between the global West and East, the implications of the idea of ‘modernity’ in Delhi, and the role of literature in the new dynamic South Asia. Like Ali, most coeval writers from the association shared similar opinions and attitudes towards modern India.

> Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality (idealism). The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind and has adopted

[97] Ibid, pp 93

> a rigid formation and a banal and perverse ideology. Indian writers (should) give expression to the changes taking place in Indian life and to assist the spirit of progress in the country by introducing scientific rationalism in literature. Writers undertake to develop an attitude of literary criticism (that) will discourage the general reactionary and revivalist tendencies on questions like family, religion, sex, war and society and combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial antagonism, sexual libertinism, and exploitation. ...[98]

Developing a progressive attitude of literary criticism towards family, religion, sex, war, and society would also mean producing and circulating content highlighting systems of oppression and giving a platform for the oppressed. Women writers like Jahan and Chughtai were at the forefront of the movement since its beginning, and they prolifically produced thought-provoking literature. They analyse women's duties and rights in modern society and demonstrate their problems in public and domestic/conjugal life. I intend to study these writers because gender and sexuality are paramount in their works. Although they produce literature that emphasises other social conditions and particular situations regarding the economy, politics and social conditions, they situate their characters in patriarchal spaces and encourage the reader to engage with them while their characters provide striking experiences, observations and conclusions while the literature carefully presents the dynamic transformation of the nation.

The editors of the critical anthology *Women Writing in India* argue in their introduction to the second volume, 'The Twentieth Century: Women Writing The Nation', that gender is intrinsic

[98] Ibid, pp 94

to demonstrating the articulations of the social and imaginative life of colonial and post-colonial South Asia in the works produced by women in PWA. They document "a many-faceted and often contradictory phenomenon not easily held down in a single formulation or an inert sense of period". This phenomenon (which I consider part of the 'new woman' phenomenon) is the change in women's literature of the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century breaking away from featuring the "limited set of characters in a predictable scenario." From polemical narratives (of/during) social reform movement.[99] Writers from this phase of the phenomenon and their texts categorically emphasise the perspicacity of selfhood in terms of gender identity and the position of women within the socio-political apparatus of the emerging Indian consciousness.

Samina Siddiqi's 'Sacred Duty': At The Intersection of Love, Religion, Nation and Womanhood.

To understand how these women break away from "the predictable scenario(s)", I would like to return to the quote I used at the start of this chapter and use it as an example. I will also use it to illustrate the genius of Chughtai's works by demonstrating her use of literary tools and techniques. "I've told *Papaji* (dad) we don't subscribe to any religion, and now I am telling you the same thing. All religions are gifts from the same *Bhagwan* for all (hu)mankind."[100] The statement is bold, radical and possesses a progressive element of promoting inter-religious

[99] Tharu, Susie, and Lalitha K. 1991. pp 174

[100] Chughtai, Ismat. *A Chughtai Collection: The Quilt & Other Stories, The Heart Breaks Free & The Wild One.* Translated by Syeda Saiyidain Hameed and Tahira Naqvi. New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004. pp 37

peace. Simultaneously, beyond its immediate performance as champion for unity, it is deeply rebellious against patriarchy and conservative religious values.

Firstly, the form and the structure of the short story. Chughtai chooses a fifteen-page short story to narrate the lives of the handful of characters that feature in the story. The readers are made aware that Samina Siddiqi is the daughter of Siddiqi Saheb and his Begum. She is a Muslim girl from an upper-class family, graduated B. Sc and "is of the age of marriage". She writes a letter to her parents, letting them know that she refuses to marry the boy they have sought. She has married Tashar Trivedi, her Hindu (boy)friend from Allahabad. She signs the letter with her new married name Samina Trivedi. Following a strong introduction packed with emotions in the form of a letter, the story quickly unravels the lives of Siddiqi's and Trivedi's and their reception of the news. "Siddiqi Saheb is progressive; allowing girls to obtain an education;"[101] however, he is also religious and was disappointed at his "innocent" but "strayed" daughter. Her mother, at the news of the "civil ceremony" almost faints and begins to cry. Ultimately, we understand at the end of the story that neither family was ready to accept the newlywed couple and the reader is presented with another letter.

Using letters written by Samina Trivedi at the beginning and the end of the story emphasise the role of the character in the story. There us no dialogue for the first few paragraphs into the story, but only a narrating voice introducing the characters, scenario, and context. The first character to express themself is Samina, through the medium of text, a letter consisting of a few sentences written with conviction. Although the same conviction is carried into the latter letter, the tone of the letter is drastically different. These letters represent Samina's life before and after marrying Tashar. The first letter is written by only Samina, informing her parents of

[101] Ibid., pp 21

the marriage and apologising for hurting their feelings. It is concise, barely displays any emotion except guilt, and rebellious but non-confrontational. Chughtai is illustrating the life of Samina as an educated woman unable to make her choices and fulfil her duty as a daughter simultaneously. In contrast, both Samina and her husband Tashar write, expressing a range of emotions indicating her ability to truly express herself without the burden of her 'sacred duties'.

What makes the use of the letter exceptionally feminist is the use of Begum Siddiqi's emotions and reactions to the letter. For Begum, the letter is an unpleasant physical form which represents the naivety of her daughter. After reading the first letter, Begum is under the impression that her daughter's "innocence" is misused by Tashar, and her perception remains the same. However, unlike her, the reader can recognise and appreciate the growth of Samina's character as they have access to the narrator's voice. Her response, even after reading the latter letter, remains a speechless display of frustration and helplessness. Unlike the growth in Samina's character and her ability to overcome the challenges presented to her, Begum remains in a similar position as she was at the beginning of the story. Her character has a close association with crying throughout the story.[102] Associating women in domestic spaces trapped by marriage, unable to express themselves through words.

One primary reason for such a stark contrast is Chughtai's use of 'generational gap'. The parents of Samina and Tashar, the *Maulvi Saheb*, and the uncles represent an older generation obsessed with social hierarchy, religious presentation and etiquettes designed to silence women. Both sides use the couple to display the power of their religion. Tashar's parents make the couple go around the 'sacred' fire during the wedding to make the couple appeal to the Hindus, While the Siddiqi's threaten to "drown in the Yamuna".[103] However, Tashar and

[102] Ibid., pp 27

[103] Ibid., pp. 29

Samina are profoundly unserious about the religious politics involved in this relationship. Tashar is "ready to be a Muslim", and Samina's attitude displays an indifference to the religion, just like the Yamuna. Samina and Tashar share distinct progressiveness regarding religion that is different to her father's "progressive" ideas and practices. Unlike Tashar and Samina, their parents represent a generation that is engulfed in healing the wounds of partition. Their frustrations regarding the religion between the couple run so deep that the parents are unable to see the pain they are inflicting on Tashar and Samina.

Here, Chughtai curates her protagonist carefully. Beyond communal politics, she locates Samina in gender politics against the patriarchy. While all the characters (including Tashar) are worried about the consequences of an inter-religious marriage, it is only Samina who is indeed affected by it. Tashar's dad "forced her to convert" after the marriage and not Tashar. Although he loved her and was ready to convert to Islam, it was Samina's 'sacred duty' as a wife to change her religion. We understand she would have to convert again if Tashar agreed to be a Hindu. The rest of the characters participated in a farce, and the person who would suffer was Samina. While Tashar has not escaped the bounds of religion, he continues to enjoy his privileges in patriarchy.

Thus, the structure of (a letter in) a short story perfectly portrays Samina's symbolic breaking away from religion and the constraints of being a woman in modern postcolonial India. Samina is the progressive that the canonical writers envisioned for India, not Siddiqi Saheb. Progressive women writers' works illustrate the essence of the changes in narrative structures and literary forms in post-colonial South Asia. Jahan, for example, writes explicitly about domestic abuse, affairs outside the marriage, and marital rape in patriarchal sub-structures such as kinship, heterosexual relationships and prostitution. She establishes that education and financial agency are integral to liberating women characters in oppressive situations. Chughtai,

who has similar themes, has narrative structures that directly address the readers about events based on her life, including political and ideological conflicts and her notorious telling of lesbian sexuality, a derivative experience in her childhood.

Progressive writers like Chughtai made it their mission to relocate the narrative of women's experiences from the outdated Gandhian idealist 'new woman' to the lived reality of subaltern women and other gender minorities in the middle-class and lower-caste. In the above example of Samina Siddiqi, it is vital to understand how the character of Samina is understood through Chatterjee's theory of 'moment of departure'. As discussed early in the introduction to this project, Chatterjee coins the idea of a 'moment of departure' to explain the priority of woman writers - to national politics and anti-imperialism over gender politics and the emancipation of women from patriarchy. However, Chughtai refuses to ignore the 'politics of gender'. Samina's situation acknowledges the national and religious politics of her time, not over her gender and sexuality, but with these other pertaining issues. In fact, the story's title expresses her priorities, and the introduction explains Samina's 'Sacred Duty'. The phrase sacred duty is often used in nationalist politics and the military to consider that serving the country is the most sacred duty and in religious connotations. Here, Samina is neither part of the military, nor is she religious, but her sacred duty is bound to marriage. For her parents representing older generations, her sacred duty is in conjugality and her duty as the daughter. Thus, the reader cannot recognize if Chughtai is ironic or sincere in her use of the phrase.

Chughtai published her early stories like "Quilt" and "Quit India" and her other stories as a paperback anthology in 1941 at the height of anti-imperial sentiments among the South Asian population. The collection had a significant riveting reaction from the critics, religious groups, and the British Government. She successfully defended her case about "freedom of speech and

expression" in the court case, and PWA writers supported her demonstrations with numerous statements and public meetings. Short stories by Chughtai, such as "The Quilt" and "Tiny's Granny", show the sexual conflicts and crusades of homosexual and heterosexual women, respectively. The protagonist of "The Quilt" recollects her experiences from her childhood witnessing lesbian sex between her mother's married step-sister Begum Jaan and Begum Jaan's maid and close confidante Rabbu. Such a narrative is unprecedented and overwhelmingly impressive to the reader, who is experiencing a break from traditional conjugal woman characters in literary canons.

Asaduddin, one of the prolific Urdu translators, highlights Chughtai's approach to contending with the restricted and diminished sexual liberation in literary women characters of her time. The sexuality of young girls, a taboo for most traditional literature, is intricately explored in her stories. Chughtai, influenced by Marxist writers[104] from the West and Soviet Russia, also complicated working-class women and their sexual agency in a patriarchal capitalist setting.

Kamila Shamsie writes the introduction to the compilation of Ismat Chughtai's works *Lifting the Veil*. (2009) According to her, Chughtai "is the first significant writer in Urdu to acknowledge female sexuality and to portray it courageously and convincingly. Many of her stories underline her deep-seated conviction that sex is one of the most important and potent facts of life and the prime pivot of many human actions. In her short stories, she deals with a range of female sexuality - from the arousal of the sexual urge in a child, through adolescence, to adult sexuality."[105] As she informs in one of her interviews, most of her literary content is

[104] Weir, Ann Lowry. "Socialist Realism and South Asian Literature." *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 27, no. 02, 1992. pp 141 – 142

based on ‘real stories’ or ‘conversation with women’; of course, this statement was timed perfectly to juxtapose the allegations by the British Raj[106] that her writings were part of the ideology to push women out of the conjugality and domestic spaces. I explore this later in the chapter to understand Chughtai’s retelling of women’s lived realities.

"I have already mentioned that I was very young and in love with Begum Jaan. She, too, was fond of me."[107] Although young and aggressive to everyone, as she describes herself at the story’s beginning, the protagonist seems to develop an infatuation with Begum Jaan. Eventually, one night, they briefly engage in an intimate physical experience where Begum Jaan coerces the protagonist in the absence of Rabbu. Begum Jaan's "quilt is etched in her memory like a scar left by a blacksmith's brand." While much of the story concentrates on lesbian acts and affairs, sexual or otherwise, between women, it is intriguing that the protagonist informs the reader about "a strange hobby" of the Nawab, Begum Jaan's husband. Nawab "kept open house for students- young, fair, slender-waisted boys whose expenses were borne by him. Having married Begum Jaan, he tucked her away in the house with his possessions and promptly forgot her. The frail, beautiful Begum wasted away in anguished loneliness."[108] It appears to be the defence against Begum's sexual frustration; however, upon further introspection, Chughtai's clever strategy refocuses gender and sexuality narratives with women in the centre.

[105] Chughtai, Ismat. *Lifting the Veil*. 2009. Edited by M Asaduddin, Penguin Books, 2018., pp xvii – xix

[106] Gopal, Priyamvada. *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*. Routledge, 2012. pp. 83–84.

[107] Chughtai, Ismat. *Lifting the Veil*. 2009. Edited by M Asaduddin, Penguin Books, 2018., pp 17

[108] Ibid, pp13

According to M. Asaduddin, "The male characters (in Chughtai's work) remain at the margins of her artistic preoccupations. They come into mainly illuminate aspects of women's lives."[109] The best example of this statement is Chughtai's use of Tashar to 'illuminate' Samina's life from 'Sacred Duty'. Further, As described by the protagonist, Begum's husband is in his "ripe years", and Begum's parents think of him as a virtuous man. "He had performed hajj and helped several others undertake the holy pilgrimage." Abandoned and isolated with little to no work, their sexual and personal needs of Begum are met by her maid instead of her husband. The protagonist describes Rabbu, the maid's son, whom she occasionally visits, as "an irascible young man." Begum helped him as much as she could, "but nothing really pleased him."[110]

None of the women that appear in this short story adhere to Gandhi's idea of a 'new woman'. However, both the men in the story with a brief description appear to contrast the characteristics of the women characters closely associated. While Begum's husband is in the company of slender-waisted boys, Begum herself is desolate as she "began to spend sleepless nights, yearning for a love that had never been". Similarly, while Rabbu's son is never really pleased, Rabbu derives pleasure from a simple life where she rubs and massages Begum's joints, back and breast.

The narrator does not consider or intend anywhere in the story that Begum or Rabbu are sinners in the eyes of Allah. However, she deliberately informs the reader about Nawab's holy pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina before she goes on about his company with the slender-waisted boys. The nameless protagonist narrates and describes the stark contrast of characters from her childhood experience. Although a victim of coercion, she does not make her narration

[109] Ibid, pp xviii

[110] Ibid, pp 18

of that experience indecorous, nor does she affiliate Begum as a concupiscent person. What seems to be the case is that the protagonist, as a woman, understands Begum's and Rabbu's situation intricately within the domestic sphere; albeit traumatised, she perhaps resonates with them to a degree. Begum is intelligent; although not entirely liberated from her domestic sphere, she seems to have gained autonomy over her sexuality, desire and selfhood. There is no mention of the protagonist's father, but she does inform that her mother had to leave her with Begum while she had to visit Agra. This simple ignorance towards the father or such a figure highlights the critical change in the woman narrator's agency in literature.

Chughtai's most prominent literary work, *The Crooked Line*, published two years after 'The Quilt' (*'Lihaaf'*), exhibits similar attributes and recreates a structure to keep women at the front of story-telling.[111] According to Nikhil Govind, "*The Crooked Line* is an astonishing and sui generis novel in the ways in which it confronts notions of self-fashioning, and anyone encountering it for the first time would be joyfully amazed at the novel's playful, candid ease with the bizarre (the bizarre as a sustained and primary effect is still rare in Indian fiction)." Govind further states while studying *The Crooked Line*, novelised autobiography of Chughtai, that the "structure of feeling abandoned is the psychic core of her childhood, though it is written entirely in the idiom of the impish and fantastical, rather than that of self-pity or maturity" perhaps one of the necessary prelude to the growth of the self.[112]

[111] Chughtai, Ismat. *The Crooked Line*. 2006. Translated by Tahira Naqvi, The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2015.

[112] Govind, Nikhil. *Inlays of Subjectivity*. Oxford University Press, 2019. pp 58

Gendered dilemma outside the courtyard:

Chughtai's novel *The Crooked Line*, a bildungsroman, explores various themes through the life of the protagonist Shaman. The story replays ideas that are prevalent in the novel through different characters and situations. As it is centred on one character's life, it maps changes across the country's personal life and political temper during her lifetime. Chughtai uses numerous literary techniques to make the literary piece a fast-paced novel – which makes it a well-written, plot-driven, fast-paced, high-brow literature. Like numerous modernist writers, the inner consciousness of the protagonist, mostly a woman, was of the utmost importance to Chughtai and her contemporaneous writers. This particular trait becomes apparent when we consider the works of women writers across the Indian subcontinent published around the 1950s. M. K. Indira won the Karnataka Sahitya Akademi Award for redefining the inner consciousness of her women protagonists and the gendered dilemmas they face in her stories. In these stories, gendered dilemmas unfold when women face the same problem as men but have complex consequences and struggle with either or all options presented to them. The only variable factor between the women protagonist and the men in such stories is their gender and the privilege/problems that are attached to the expression of gender in social circumstances.

For example, one of Indira's renowned works, *Sadananda* (1965), registers the gendered dilemma on a much larger scale and produces a narrative built on the focal point of female characters. Multiple stories within the narrative are composed of women characters who seek love or reinvent after becoming widows, but the problems these characters face only become gendered when Indira inserts Moorti and Raju in the stories. Although not the first novel in Kannada to break the pattern of using male characters to understand women's problems, *Sadananda* brings this change to a larger audience. The novel follows a handful of individuals who seem intricately related and are the reason for shaping each other. Moorthi, Gowri, Raju,

and Janaki are part of a large extended family. Gowri and Moorthi are arranged to be married to each other, but Moorthi rejects her and gets married to a different woman. However, Gowri, having been rejected, ages gracefully and becomes a very sophisticated woman. While Raju and Janaki share an infatuation during the formative years, Raju falls in love with Gowri, and Janaki finds her calling and is content. Simultaneously, we follow the story of another character in the family,

Kamala is a young widow whose character becomes significant as the story progresses. Kamala finds her comfort in books written by an author, Sadananda. As the story unfolds, we recognise that Sadananda finds his inspiration for his works while he grieves his beloved wife. However, the most compelling part of Kamala's story is that she finds solace at the end of the novel. A recurring pattern in all these stories is that all the men in the novel are characters that Indira uses to build the stories of women. These women, whose gendered dilemmas push them into tumultuous positions, emotionally and socially, emerge convalescent. In fact, Kamala's story took its very own turn, and Indira later published a book, *Madhuvana* (Honey), after a few years. These gendered dilemmas begin to construct a narrative that becomes intrinsically feminist. The matrimonial rejection, which is far too familiar among women, the predicament of widowhood and the desire are some of the main gendered dilemmas Indira addresses in her book.

Although she does this successfully, all these stories within the meta-narrative and the gendered dilemmas she provokes still tend to originate from the patriarchal notion of women and marriage. While Indira's middle-brow literature chooses to posit these women within the realms of marriage and relationships, Chughtai chooses to further locate these gendered dilemmas along the political position of women and cultural changes in society.

Chughtai uses the subcontinent's political landscape to highlight the individual's life and vice versa. This method of using the protagonist to write about the larger polity, according to Govind, "adds to what would otherwise have been a detailed but flat description of a social class in an anonymous Indian town" and "a northern Indian Muslim middle-class family"[113] during the peak of the anti-imperialist movement. The events and effects of the protagonist's story and the independence movement rely solely on memory.

While reading Chughtai's *The Crooked Line,* the reader realises that the writer uses multiple layers of memories in her narration. The first layer is Shaman's; as the protagonist of the story, she recounts events from her memory. The second layer of memory is the writers. As a sui generis novel, Chughtai refuses to distinguish her work thematically and blurs her work among numerous genres. While the work is an autobiography, which she recounts in her thirties, it is also a work of fiction. Although, in the form of a novel, it can be considered a memoir as the reader is forced to rely solely on the nation's political events and the protagonist's events on Shaman's memory. The second layer of memory, or as I consider the meta-memory, is Chughtai's memory, which shapes the novel into a memoir. Govind brings together Chughtai's use of memory along with her contemporaneous writer Sachchidananda Hirananda Vatsyayan, popularly known by his pen name Agyeya (1911 -1987) and his work *Shekar: A Life* (1998), to claim that the use of "the lineage of the developmental novel" used by Chughtai and Agyeya influence post-modernist writers such as Urmila Pawar.[114]

Chughtai employs meta-memory through Shaman's character and her convincing revisits of the events from her (Shaman's) memory. The author delves into the details of Shaman's

[113] ibid, pp 58 - 59

[114] Ibid, 60

childhood and maps how it impacted her thoughts and actions throughout her life. Shaman is a recalcitrant character like Samina Siddiqi. Her childhood is marked by a series of sexual undertones and fleeting attachments to people and her. The root of these traits is a complex background story laced with Freudian ideas – a childhood deprived of a parental figure and marked with mistrust. This is a trope briefly addressed before in the chapter while closely reading "The Quilt". As these relationships are short-lived and help the writer trace her (Shaman's) growth, they create the effect of a constantly transforming exterior world.

Furthermore, as there is no mention of Shaman's age in the novel, these bonds become tools to trace different periods in Shaman's life. The nature of the relationships is another tool that maps her intellectual and emotional growth. For instance, with Manjhu, it manifests itself in the form of small rebellions – playing in the mud right after she has been bathed. With Rai Sahib, it pans out in the form of performing chores for him and a willingness to abandon her faith for him – an exploration of more mature themes, i.e. the idea of religion. With Alma, it manifests itself in the form of advice to show affection to her son. This can be considered as preventing Rolf's childhood from reflecting any aspect of hers. These three relationships can be thought to mark three distinct phases in her life, i.e., childhood, adolescence and adulthood. Ultimately, Shaman becomes a plausible woman character with a ferociously complex childhood and sexual predilections developed on trauma, lived experiences and a temperamental milieu.

The novel has an episodic feature and makes Shaman's characteristics intimate to the reader. This occurs in the novel's latter half when she befriends Alma and Iftikhar. Both reappear in her life, and extreme physical changes in the latter two mark these encounters. What makes it episodic is the faint hint at recurring themes such as belonging, the idea of family, the familiarity with characters, and the changes that they have imbibed from their experiences

during their time apart. This contributes to the fast pace of the novel in the sense that short, spontaneous interactions between the characters reflect changes in the setting – atmosphere, mood, etc.

The novel also seamlessly shifts between the domestic and political realms, a feature in most of Chughtai's work. The first half of the novel is confined to the domestic sphere, and the outside world is almost non-existent. The latter half, however, is marked by a tumultuous exterior realm. Through this atmosphere, Shaman is exposed to the political world and thus marks a sharp contrast between her life and the lives of the women with whom Shaman grew up, highlighting how times have changed throughout Shaman's life. While the latter's expertise is restricted to domestic chores, the former is seen travelling and helping revolutionaries in the movement. The consistent climate of the household heightens the chaos of the exterior world. The former exaggerates the unsteadiness of the latter, particularly when Shaman confronts it. It magnifies her growth as an individual.

The pace of the novel is an important aspect, for it brings to light the various themes Chughtai addresses, such as female desire, and inspects the hierarchy of oppressions with an intersectional perspective. It is also in tune with the transformation that various characters undergo, with particular reference to the setting of the novel.

Further, The author encapsulates a diverse range of movements, creating different levels of fear/curiosity/tension within the narrator and reader based on how the shapes and shadows grow or deflate. The power dynamics are highlighted by size (the dominant one being more extensive and vice versa) as the 'swaying elephant' and 'inflating frog' are used to refer to the Begum and Rabbu, while the young girl is described as being "mouse-like". Themes of the visceral, instinctive and bestial imply binaries such as the prey-predator, hunter-hunted, the one who eats and the one who is eaten, etc. These are well intertwined with the sexual

abuse/violation, which is re-emphasised through such subtext and nuances within the narratives. At the same time, the narrator's voice remains innocent and, at the most, a very creative describer.

Ismat's story-telling paces the momentum of her narrative through emphasised physicality (sensual, sexual or violent), dynamicity and activity of bodies. There is a sensuous description, linguistic usages that reference/hint at bodily senses (visual, taste, touch, aural) and constant use of verbs of motion (violent or otherwise) rooted within the physical. This constantly keeps the narrative within the sentient physical and re-establishes the body as the sole site that is reactive and responsive. The young girl "fought all day" and was "aggressive". She describes the Begum's quilt as "etched" in her memory "like the scar left by a blacksmith's brand". The Nawab was of "ripe years" and was not interested in "breeding pigeons or watching cockfights". The abandoned Begum felt like she was "being raked over burning embers", and her "blood boiled". Rabbu is described as having a "strange, sickening stench" exuding from her body and her hands to be moving "dextrously" over Begum's body. The girl overhears the "sound of someone smacking her lips as though she was savouring a tasty pickle" and the "slurping sound of a cat". The Begum lures the girl by saying, "I'm not going to eat you up". The domestic allusions through the metaphor of food or consumption emphasise the image of the sexual predator. The visceral aspect of food also maintains the narrative within the physical and sensational.

Every encounter of the young girl with the Begum (where they are in dialogue) brings physicality, motion or the body. When they sleep in the same room, and the girl speaks of her fear, the 'elephant' and "grotesque shapes" remain. Another encounter is when the young girl 'massaging' the Begum. The encounter where the Begum physically and sexually abuses the girl is another one. The only other encounter is when the Begum is chastising and persuading

the girl that occurs as “she washed her face and hands” and “wiped her face with a towel” as she “tapped me affectionately on my cheek”. The body and touch are intertwined intricately (sometimes indirectly/subtly) into the narrative, strongly accentuating the physical. The Begum’s body “shone like a ball of dough”, and she was “pressing me as though I were a clay doll”. The latter sentence refers to phrases used during sexual abuse. There is the use of extremely tactile, flesh-like metaphors but ultimately lifeless objects. The absolute loss of autonomy, the sense of numbing and crippling of the body under dominant control (as one is rendered a toy or puppet), is thus effectively represented.

The two main and repeated bodily touch-based activities the text uses effectually are ‘itch’ and ‘massage’. The image of the Begum is firmly established as a body that is being “rubbed” by “roving hands” because of “a persistent itch”. There are powerful linguistic implications within all these words to desire/urges (scratch one’s itch, have an itch, itching to), sensuality, the sexual (rubbed) and violation (roving). The diverse range through which touch is written (rubbing, tapping, massaging, sliding, squeezing, pushing, fluttering, etc.) creates dynamic pacing and momentum as it gradually builds tension (whether sexual, fear or inquisitiveness) within the plot.

While I present select instances, a thorough close reading of the text can present several more tangents into the author’s depictions of the body as a sensuous physical. Ismat innovatively employed the child narrator to present a homoerotic story that references sexual activities and abuse. Through clever linguistic choices, metaphors/symbols, witty subtext and subtle nuance, there is the creation of a parallel between narrative artistry and sexual abuse. The relationship between the servant or the helpers and the upper-middle-class families is another recurring pattern in her works. She uses such a relationship to understand the grey area between work and exploitation. Sexual exploitation, rape, oppression of desire and influence of caste and

class in an intimate relationship are the key elements she uses to capture the imagination of the reader. All these gendered elements are perceived in her stories from the point of view of women, often the protagonist. It would be a disgrace to consider Chughtai's work as merely feminist; Chughtai's work derives its content from a plethora of places and causes. According to Jalil, this makes her work progressive; like numerous other progressive Urdu writers, Chughtai's "strength and real contribution lay in their ability to find common cause with a host of related issues, such as feminism, secularism, anti-imperialism, anti-fascism and, most importantly, nationalism."[115]

[115] Jalil, Rakshanda. "Loving Progress, Liking Modernity, Hating Manto." *Social Scientist*, vol. 40, no. 11/12, 2012. pp. 43–52.

Chapter III

## Subaltern Women Reshaping Contemporary Disciplines to Step Outside Modernity and Matrimony: A Close Reading of Viramma

> Soap does not remove uncleanliness.[116]
>
> \- Viramma

M S S Pandian, in his "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere", argues that "being one step outside modernity alone can guarantee them (the subaltern community) a public where the politics of difference can articulate itself, and caste can emerge as a legitimate category of democratic politics. Being one step outside modernity indeed being one step ahead of modernity."[117]

This argument by Pandian leaves us with two crucial questions. What does modernity mean, according to Pandian? Why does modernity fail to articulate the caste as an individual and political identity? If that is the case, how do Josiane and Jean-Luc Racine assist Viramma in constructing her narrative within the narrative of modernity? Pandian and the Racines are constantly engaging with the changing politics of postcolonial India. Pandian understands this lack of language in modernity to construct caste identity by inspecting R K Narayan's autobiography. Despite going through intense public demonstrations and "acute battles" against casteism in the South Asian political landscape before and after the independence, he

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[116] Viramma. *Viramma : Life of an Untouchable*. Edited by Josiane Racine and Jean-Luc Racine, Translated by Will Hobson, Verso ; Paris, 1997. pp 167

[117] Pandian, M. S. S. "One Step Outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 37, no. 18, 2002. pp 1735

finds that Narayan rarely mentions caste in his autobiography. Further, it is only possible to understand the intricacies of caste in Narayan's autobiography when the reader closely reads events surrounding consuming and procuring meat or finding a place to stay.

Pandian vehemently claims that "The subtle act of transcoding caste and caste relations into something else - as though to talk about caste as caste would incarcerate one into a pre-modern realm - is a regular feature one finds in most upper-caste autobiographies." Caste issue does not belong to them; thereby, they are not bothered to engage with it. However, on the other hand, contrastingly, "most often the very act of writing an autobiography for a person belonging to a lower caste is to talk about and engage with the issue of caste."[118] He acknowledges literature produced by numerous Dalit writers, including Viramma. He concludes that this act of recognising and engaging with caste politics in literature has created "two competing sets of language dealing with the issue of caste." The upper caste writers talk of caste by "other means", and the lower caste, the subaltern, talks of caste on their "own terms".

Here, Pandian reduces subaltern literature and considers it representative of all subaltern groups across regions, political mobility, and generations. However, Ramanathan believes Viramma's autobiography is very different from such generalisations. "The notion of a minority literature, although mooted early enough, has not taken root but could be useful to understand the content and mode of modernity in non-national or non-cosmopolitan (kinds of) literature(s)."[119] As Viramma is from a lower caste, lower class, and rural area, her autobiography does not fit any prior national literature categorisation. In Ramanathan's words,

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[118] Ibid, pp 1735

[119] Ramanathan, Geetha. *Locating Gender in Modernism - the Outsider Female*. (Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature) Routledge, Taylor & Francis, 2012. pp 41

"two of the key features that define minority literature—the sense of using the oppressor's tongue, language, and speaking for the collective—do not precisely match Viramma's discursive context. Viramma indeed seems by the end of the narrative to be speaking only for herself, or at least only for her generation, in upholding, if less strictly, caste laws." Further, "The language, then, is owned, not appropriated."[120]

In the previous two chapters, I have studied women writers from the twentieth century to understand their perception of marriage as a cultural, political and religious institution integral to a patriarchal society. While the women writers I studied were writing during the cusp of Indian independence, they envisioned a reformation of matrimony that would emancipate women and men from patriarchal manacles. From the first chapter we understand, while studying Futehully and Hussain the importance of class and religion in South Asian society in pursuing women's liberation.

I concluded previously that Hussain and Futehully both successfully highlight that women, regardless of their education status and class, are bound by patriarchal norms and practices. Although religious and lower-class women continue to struggle with oppressive practices such as Purdah and Polygamy, women outside these practices continue to be subjected to the aftermath of these practices that do not provide them with power in marriage.

In this chapter, I will study the literary case of Viramma and her community to explain the situation of Subaltern women from tribal communities in South Asia who experience marriage differently from the capital class or the bourgeoisie. We know through the numerous maxims

[120] Ibid. pp 41 – 42

highlighted by Suvir Kaul that women in these capital-class marriages are often at the receiving end of power.[121] This position pertains to the monetary, decision-making and sexual aspects of women's domestic and social lives. Unlike the female characters studied earlier in this project, Viramma's life encapsulates the gender sensibilities in subaltern communities. In fact, Viramma's life is a substantial contribution and, to an extent, a response to Spivak's rhetorical question, "Can The Subaltern Speak?". This is not to claim that Viramma is emancipated from all the oppressive systems of society; however, to understand the methods she and her community have in place to liberate women from certain aspects of patriarchal society. Her narrative is quintessential to studying the feminist subaltern perspective from the last stages of the twentieth century.

One of the essential elements of addressing caste in the modern nation-state of India is to realise that acknowledgement of such a hierarchy would also mean providing compensation for the subaltern groups that have been historically victims of the socio-economic establishment in South Asia. Of course, the democratic nation addressed the issue as numerous anti-caste activists propelled the idea of a ban on discrimination, and political leaders from the lower caste became an integral part of building the new nation. Viramma addresses this change. Unlike her generation, the new generation does not obey the caste laws. The new subaltern generation, mainly from the Dalit community, contested elections, had freedom of speech and actively participated in the democratic system of the new India by voting.

The reason for such a change in the social mobility of the lower class is due the post-colonial modernity in India, according to Pandian, is "on the terms of the nation itself".[122] He quotes

[121] Kaul, Suvir. 2015

[122] Pandian, M. S. S. 2002. pp 1737

Partha Chatterjee, one of the spearheads of the Subaltern Collective, "The modern state embedded as it is within the universal narrative of capital, cannot recognise within its jurisdiction any form of the community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation." Further, Pandian proposes a dilemma along with the quote and argues that the difficulty is essential to contextually understand the emergence of two modes of talking about caste in post-colonial India. The distinction between the state and the capital (or the economy - nationalist narratives that exclude subaltern communities in South Asia are built on the argument that these communities fail to contribute to the nation's economy; thereby, they are less significant) of the state become blurred. The opposition between such a state and the community would make the community indispensable for articulating the nation-state.

Caste has always been a taboo for modern upper-caste bourgeois Indians. Perhaps the current issue at hand is an excellent example for such a claim. Communities and representatives from the ruling party vehemently oppose the 2021 caste consensus. Caste consensus has played an integral role in building the modern nation to understand the struggles of subaltern communities in the contemporary Indian political apparatus. However, numerous communities at the risk of losing privileges continue to fight against caste reservations and object to data collection on caste and communal composition of India.

Further, it highlights the contemporary exclusions of subaltern women's experience from the public discourse. Women writers from lower castes have always played an integral role in shaping the subaltern discourse. This chapter will examine the conflict experienced by subaltern women from lower castes who engage with or produce middle-brow modernist literature. Introspecting such literature is quintessential to modern politics as we witness the political move by institutions to distance themselves from related discourses. In August 2021,

Delhi University announced that the Oversight Committee of its academic board had decided to drop two literary pieces, 'Sangat' by Bama and 'Debt' by Sukirtharini. Additionally, they dropped *Draupadi* by Mahaswetha Devi within a month, taught at the English Department since 1999. Ironically, the Chairperson of the Oversight Committee is Professor M. K. Pandit, an upper caster academic who has issued a statement about 'caste relations' and claims removing numerous Dalit writings from the Academic syllabi is objective and is benevolent for students from all backgrounds.[123]

Although I will be addressing literature produced by a few Dalit women writers, such as *The Prison We Broke* by Babytai Kamble, *Father Maybe an Elephant and Mother Only a Small Basket, But-* by Gogu Shyamala, *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman's Memoirs* by Urmila Pawar, the primary text for the chapter will be *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable by Viramma*, a subaltern subject from Tamil Nadu experiencing a political and ideological shift in Modern post-colonial India. Initially published in 1997, her autobiography is edited by a musical ethnographer, Josiane Racine, who studied the narrative structures, modes, and forms Viramma uses to express her experiences. She further engages thoroughly with the cultural intricacies of Dalit women's self-expression and the linguistic confines of modernity. Viramma's account of her experiences as a subaltern woman grappling with the socio-economic change and its consequences highlight the unperceptiveness of the bourgeoisie legal system towards the working-class and the lower-caste communities.

The book's introduction begins with a significant difference about how caste being a taboo turned into a rhetorical image that resonates utterly opposite of her experiences as a Dalit

[123] Dutta, Sudipta. "Explained | the Context and Import of Mahasweta Devi's 'Draupadi.'" *The Hindu*, 28 Aug. 2021.

woman. “To emancipationists, Viramma is a Dalit, one of the oppressed; to Gandhian(s), she is a Harijan, a daughter of God; in her village, she is still treated as an Untouchable, a Pariah. In this remarkable book, she reveals the world of an extraordinary woman living at the extreme margins of Indian society.” What does it mean to be on the margin? How is the language about such a margin produced in literature? How will the people on the margin move in the hierarchy of social settings and replace them after including the existing subaltern communities within the apparatus? I will return to complicate these questions later in the chapter with the help of Shraddha Chatterjee's text *Queer Politics in India - Towards Sexual Subaltern Subjects* (2018) and Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak’s *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging* (2007).

The text is one of the most riveting autobiographies produced by a lower-caste woman who narrates her experiences to Racine to record it over ten years. Viramma's anecdotes provide a clear glimpse of subaltern women's experiences and their confrontation with numerous power dynamics in domestic settings, *ceri* (colony or the part of the village where Dalits reside) or the *ur* (the village comprising of all the other upper caste communities), workspaces and special events. The text begins with Viramma narrating the circumstances surrounding her birth. “Hey! Here's another little bitch been born!”, She casually includes the perception of her father's disappointment by the people in *ceri*. According to her grandmother, “although (being born in) the month of *Markaji* (January, month of harvest) was ill-fated”, astrologically, her birth was an auspicious event because it overlapped with Perumal's festival, a powerful deity in southern India.

The name for the month of *Markaji* - மகிழ்ச்சி is derived from Proto-Dravidian. The name is divided into the prefix மகிழ் (*makiḻ*, “to be happy, blessed”) and the suffix -ச்சி (- *cci*,

meaning the month). It is also called the *Margazhi Masam*, the ninth month in the traditional Tamil calendar and is usually considered extremely auspicious by all native communities. Agricultural communities celebrate numerous festivals to mark the month as a sign of harvest. Markaji is at the locus of Viramma's community, including their songs, dances and religious performances. Over half of the images included by the editors Josiane and Jean Luc have emphasised the importance and correlation between Viramma's *ceri* and the harvest season. These images include "Viramma singing" at these propitious events, people of the *ceri* "planting out rice", and "the seven *totti* of the *paraimelam*"[124] ready to perform for traditional and religious ceremonies tied to harvest, death and birth, "Viramma crushing paddy", and preparing the rice for winnowing to eliminate husk from the grain, young men from the *ceri* "preparing the oxen for the *Pongal*".[125] It becomes evident that the *ceri* and the *ur* come to life during the month of January. A pregnant woman labouring through childbirth is unable to help manually

in these harvest times, nor is she able to participate in the ceremonies. Therefore, the child born in the weeks leading up to *Margazhi* is considered as a problem or "ill-fated".

Since birth, Viramma has asserted her identity within domestic spaces and in familial power dynamics, which further helps her develop political awareness. She is aware that her birth was "ill-fated" very early in her childhood as she experiences detest from a range of *ceri* members.

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Totti - "The seven *totti* of the *paraimelam"* are members of the Vettiyan sub-caste of Pariahs who make up the *paraimelam* orchestra.

*Paraimelam* – Parai (to speak, to sing or to express oneself) + mēḷam (மேளம் – a musical note, instrument). Racine translates the word as the Paraiahs' ritual orchestra which plays at funerals for all castes, except Brahmins, and at the *ur*'s festivals, where they lead the procession.

[125] Pongal – Harvest festival, usually the local deities are adorned with rice, turmeric and sugarcane which are the staple crops of the Deccan plateau.

This early childhood experience enables her to understand the importance of women's labour in her community.

Viramma has strong feelings towards the changing political landscape and social apparatus. The lack of hierarchy is astonishing and visible at the start of the chapter 'The Seven Virgins.' The changes of *Kaliyugam* are pretty problematic to Viramma as social progress would also mean that the idea of *ceri* shifts dynamically. Viramma disapproves of such a move because, according to her, "Dalit women have more rights under the *ceri* council and have the option of leaving their husbands and going with their lovers. Indeed, she criticises the upper castes for their brutal behaviour toward women, and she feels entitled to do so because of a gender loyalty that she implicitly assumes her interviewer shares."[126] According to her, the amalgamation of different castes in the *ceri* would mean a regressive social change that further oppresses Dalit women. Later in the chapter 'Two Stories', she accompanies cultural proof for this claim with her two stories – "Brother Crocodile" and "The Lovers of Manjakkuppam." In the latter, the protagonist, a married (subaltern) woman, is followed by a man. He pursues a trail of clues that the protagonist leaves unintentionally.

In the end, when they get together, and her husband realises she is having an affair with another man, he takes them to the village (*ur*) council. "After listening to the entire story, the council asked the woman if she wanted to stay with her husband, promising not to carry on this affair, or if she preferred to pack her bags and leave with her lover."[127] The woman in this situation is given the agency to choose for herself, unlike in the case of Raddi, whose systems are defined by the bourgeoisie patriarchal structure, which otherwise would punish women for their non-

[126] Ramanthan, Geetha. 2012. pp 43

[127] Viramma 1997, pp 207

conjugal behaviour. Of course, "By asking her this question, the council made it easier for her to leave, and it collectively took the lover's side more than the husband's."[128] Although rooted in feminist sensibilities, the village council can still abide strictly by casteist sentiments.

Upper-class women are confined to spaces that often silence them; they lack the language and platform to demonstrate their opinions and liberate themselves from systematic oppression. Such behaviour is in contrast to her and her community. "Everything happens in silence with them, unlike the Brahmins ... We Pariahs are a caste who express ourselves by noise." Unlike the high caste (women), according to Viramma, she is from a caste that does not consider women's silence courtly manners. Often, subaltern women's sexual scope is mistranslated as deviancy and is considered disreputable. In *"Beyond Silence" in Telling Lives in India* (2004), Racine acknowledges that, within her own community, Viramma speaks a great deal and without any inhibitions. "She may not normally speak to "certain others", but silence is not characteristic of the Paraiar (alternatively spelt as Paraiyar) among themselves.[129] The voices of women in many contexts described by Viramma—family, work, leisure, storytelling, ceremonies—are loud and expressive. Indeed, Viramma often contrasts the volubility of Paraiyar women with the muted voices of the upper caste Hindu women in her village who rarely leave their houses."[130]

Viramma here is referring to the South Asian bourgeois ideals of a middle-class family. Dalit women are the victims of such ideals as their gender performance, and caste produces an

[128] Ibid. pp 200 – 220

[129] Racine, Josiane 2005.

[130] Diamond, M. Josephine. "Viramma, Life of an Untouchable: The Resistant Traditions of an Untouchable Tamil Community." *Dialectical Anthropology*, vol. 40, no. 2, May 2016, pp. 143–60

otherness to shape the bourgeoise's perfection. Perhaps one could make the case that the nationalist agenda to regulate the ideal modern Indian woman subject through political and literary propaganda has excluded subaltern women from achieving social agency and political freedom by choosing not to acknowledge them while recreating postcolonial India.

It creates a political conflict for Dalit women by jeopardising their agency if they choose social mobility and rural development and convolutes the subaltern perspective of womanhood. The sixteenth and seventeenth chapters of Viramma's book, 'High and low caste in Karani' and 'The Paraiyar', explicitly engage with caste and *Kaliyugam*. Here, Viramma refers to *Kaliyugam* as an epoch that changes social hierarchy and becomes a tool to disable lower caste women's rights and power. Further, a brief but imperative conversation between Viramma and her son about using politically correct terms to describe the caste gives the reader insight into her plight. It also allows Dalit women to articulate the ineffectiveness of modernity to articulate the caste as an individual and political identity.

> "'This morning, I was talking to *Sinnamma* (a respectful way to address another woman, the person being addressed here, Josiane Racine, is often of higher caste or older) about all the castes who live in this village, in the *ur* as well as the *ceri*, from *Reddiar* (the ruling class of *ceri*) to the *Sakkili*, but I forgot to talk about the *Pariahs* (outcast)!'.
>
> 'The Harijans! my son corrected me, coming out of the house.'
>
> 'You can keep quiet, boy; that name will never cross my lips!'
>
> He answered, 'Ah! You are stubborn, *de*! It's people like you that means we'll never get out of the state we're in!'"[131]

[131] Viramma. 1997. pp 165

Both propose their reasons for describing themselves as 'Harijans' and 'Pariahs'. According to her politically active son, Anban, the word Harijans, coined by Mahatma Gandhi, includes them in the modern political discourse. Political correctness can shift perspectives and is the progressive approach to encourage public conversations about caste and oppression. However, Viramma and Grandfather Muniyan argue that the language and politics of *Kaliyugam* have corrupted the word's meaning and function. She confronts that even when they do not use the word 'Pariah', it does not have significant consequences, and their conditions remain the same, unclean.

Further, examining the changes she is witnessing, she exclaims that "Soap does not remove uncleanliness", which works on two levels. The soap does not clean the skin because it does not function as an excellent alternative to traditional methods, and the irony is that uncleanliness is rooted in language and consciousness. By associating the caste with "uncleanliness" and "lack of hygiene", the name 'Pariah becomes blemished'. Even Viramma was not wholly aware of the historical and mythic origins of the term. "I thought that it was because we aren't civilised because we don't have beautiful teeth, because we chew betel, we carry our meals in earthenware dishes because we neglect everything concerning cleanliness and dress."[132]. While industrialisation has replaced older methods, products have become an integral part of everybody's life, and Pariah's have become 'civil' by following the social practices and standards of cleanliness, attire and health like the high castes do not change the casteist perspective of people. "We are (not) going to be allowed into people's houses: and if we touch any utensils in a courtyard or at the well, women still rinse them with loads of water

[132] Ibid, pp 167

before they pick them up!"[133] Grandfather Muniyan also believes that "it's not the people from the political parties who are going to change a lot of the Pariahs and mix them up with other castes.

Gender essentialism is vital while engaging with such a bold argument. Viramma disapproves of such a mix of different castes because the *ceri* respected her individual pecuniary agency as a woman; she could rent a plot without the permission of her husband or father. There is a higher chance for a subaltern woman to be part of the monetary affairs of the household or the *ceri*, unlike a middle-class bourgeois woman, who, despite having platforms for education and jobs, still does not necessarily have the rights over assets. She complains endlessly on behalf of the upper caste women who do not have the means to regulate their oppression, nor do they have the instruments to narrate their experience.

M. Josephine Diamond, in her article and review of the autobiography of Viramma in the Journal of Dialectical Anthropology,[134] inspects Viramma's account with Gayatri Spivak's implied negative answer to her own rhetorical question "Can the Subaltern Speak?". She claims, "The subaltern subject speaks through an alien interlocutor to unknown national and international readers, her voice travelling through zones of contemporary economic and cultural mediations of ethnographers, editors, translators and publishers, no matter how affirmative or sympathetic they may be." While understood through multiple translations, Viramma's terms of expression fail to provide the perplexing tones within and outside Viramma's language. Her terms to transcode her caste experiences become an underlying and

[133] Ibid. pp 167

[134] Diamond, M. Josephine. 2016. pp 143–160

often distinct theme in her autobiography than her conversations about her womanhood with Racine, an upper-class woman.

Here, on the one hand, the act of transcoding the caste is not subtle, as writing an autobiography for a lower caste person is to talk about and engage with the issue of caste. Viramma takes it one step further and contrasts the living condition a woman from the serf community, herself - to those of high-caste women. She brings in instances of female body objectification and sexual freedom. The upper-caste women wear blouses, and they want Viramma to wear one as well. However, that is not the case, as Viramma does not consider the situation where she does not wear a blouse under her saree when covering her breasts. Therefore, modesty, conjugality and sexuality are perceived in different registers based on caste hierarchy.[135] This interaction is essential for the reader to understand the difference of perspective towards women's bodies as experienced by the subaltern communities and the middle-class urban societies. "Her interaction with the higher castes is structured by taboos against pollution, economic dependence and exploitation and conventions of respect such as modest dress and differential forms of speech and body language."[136] These taboos surround bodies, sex, women's agency, and the tools to oppress women's sexuality.

Viramma's breast is similar to allegorical breasts in Mahaswetha Devi's stories. In her short story "Breast-Giver" (translated by Gayathri Chakraborty Spivak, 1997), breasts become an object that symbolises the pain and "cruel ironies of caste, class and patriarchy". While on the other hand, the act of transcoding is, if not subtle, undoubtedly divergent. In fact, one could

[135] Viramma. 1997, pp 187

[136] Diamond M., Josephine. 2016, pp 143–160

argue that Viramma certainly is opposed to the contemporary changes in caste politics and power dynamics. Josiane and Jean Luc Racine are interested in such a voice, even though they support abolishing the caste system and the liberation of the oppressed subaltern Dalit communities because "It is also, up to a point, the silence which persists after attention has been paid to a certain type of Dalit voice, to a certain model of subalterns, for Viramma and her type do not belong to these groups, which are known for voicing their anger or for their public struggle."[137] Pandian's conclusion that the subaltern writers talk about caste, its oppressive hierarchy on their "own terms" is intriguing while studying and unpacking Viramma's experience as a subaltern woman as redirected by Racine and Racine.

**The *Ceri* and the Crossroads:**

To understand Viramma's plea on behalf of the high-caste women, it is integral to study how she situates herself in the *ur* and, as an outsider, how she perceives high-class women. Though not a ménage, ironically, she works close quarters with these women; she participates in conversations in high-class domestic spaces. These conversations shape her discernment. For example, she describes the Kepmari, the caste of thieves she works for, as agricultural labour and the critiques of their gendered practices. "The women don't eat beef" perhaps because "the men steal cheques and rob banks (while) women steal from temples and at festivals and (religious) fairs."[138] Viramma has a keen eye for observing women and their conditions. She understands the situation of women not just in her community and *ur* but also in political parties

[137] Racine, Josiane. "Beyond Silence." *Telling Lives in India : Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, edited by David Arnold and Stuart H. Blackburn, Indian University Press, 2005. pp 252

[138] Viramma. 1997. pp 151

and institutions. She ignores all the political conflicts between the other ruling parties and the central government when recounting the death of Indira Gandhi and reduces the assassination to gender conflict. She contends that the motive for the assassination was that Gandhi was a woman, and the assassins "couldn't accept being governed by a female, and they killed her."[139]

Albeit not well supportive of her rights as a subaltern individual from an untouchable community, Viramma is quite progressive while engaging with gender and sexual agency. She highlights the intricate struggles of women from the *ceri* or the *ur*. She explores her oppression through gender identity rather than caste—a position rooted in the traditional caste hierarchy and not patriarchy. Her analysis of gender intolerance among the castes and sexual reticence among high-class women is undoubtedly due to her search for self-determination.

Early in the book, Viramma admits to *Sinamma* (Josiane Racine) about the unfamiliarity of domestic life after marriage. Viramma is retrospectively understanding the power dynamics between her and her husband, Maniakkam. Her younger self considered Maniakkam to be a stranger who sexually exploited her at night and disappeared during the day to work in the fields. She infracts numerous traditional marital laws by disobeying indirectly because she knows that if she defied her husband explicitly, "she had smacks in store ... definitely not going to be sweet-talked! So I sulked, I scowled, I never laughed, I took my revenge in my own way ... I didn't show him proper respect, and I annoyed him every time."[140] Of course, her actions had consequences; Maniakkam would get angry and hurl all sorts of abuses at her. "You pozed, badly fucked whore! Will you take a look at that cunthead?"; however, Viramma considered it

[139] Ibid. pp 150

[140] Viramma. 1997. pp 45

her victory. “I was humiliated but, at the same time, satisfied with my game.”[141] Since the initial stages of her marriage, she always considered conjugal affairs as a gendered power dynamic between the couple. Eventually, she changes her perspective; matrimonial affairs are about power dynamics. However, Maniakkam was also ‘kind’, ‘handsome’, ‘gentle’ and ‘good-natured’, and he consented for her to be sexually dominant.

Manikkam and Viramma eventually ascertain the social and domestic dynamics of their relationship. Viramma achieves sexual liberation when they realise the importance of intimacy within their relationship and kinship within *ceri*. While being playful during sex and simultaneously ascertaining her power and “to punish him or having been so brutal at the start of our marriage, I made him lick the soles of my feet and my toes! It made me feel very good at the same time. I found out with him that the ears and hollows behind the knees are places that give pleasure.”[142] Viramma continues to describe her sexual recreation conceitedly, their favourite position – ‘peeling the coconut’, and Manikkam’s reproductive parts to Josiane.

Displaying such an intimate relationship with her husband to the family and the *ceri* would come at its own cost. Viramma and her husband understood that kinship put them in a difficult position because Viramma’s in-laws were jealous. As a skilled raconteur, she explains all about her relationships and kinships in detail, translated by Will Hobson and titled “Pariah”.[143] Maniakkam was aware of the injustice but had little power to speak against Viramma's sister-in-law or his mother due to the order of domestic authority. All these events portray the domestic feminist discernment Viramma possesses. Maniakkam is in a similar position as the

[141] Ibid, pp 45

[142] Ibid, pp 48 – 49

[143] Viramma. *Grantha - New Writing*. Edited & translated by Will Hobson, 1997.

male character in Futehully's *Zohra*; regardless of his wishes, he has to be the head of the family and act as a buffer between the women of the family. Viramma is seen as an outsider by her mother-in-law and Manikkam's sisters. Thereby Maniakkam is perpetually in a state of conflict resolution between the two parties. Thus, regardless of the love between the couple, the caste or the community, Manikkam's position explains the degree of patriarchy in all communities of South Asia at large.

The sexual pleasure here not only becomes a tool to fight patriarchy but caste as well. Spivak addresses the suppression of upper-caste women's sexuality while she engages with the "division of gendered labour" in her article 'Moving Devi.'[144] Viramma and her sexually liberated goddesses become a sharp contrast to Sati, a Brahminical deity. "Within this (supernatural division of gendered labour), male gods are allowed elaborate courtship privileges in the high Puranic texts. Brahma is represented as publicly (although transgressively) spilling his semen on earth, lusting after Sati. But the devi celebrated in the Puranic account is the pleasureless mother. Sati punishes herself for pleasuring others."[145] While the tradition of recital remains the same in both cases, Viramma's oral account of her life and the deities of *ceri* and the religious Puranic accounts of Sati, what changes is the account of female pleasure, gaze and the reiteration of emancipation of the self with sexuality.

This gendered authorship provides an excellent example of Spivak's "relative autonomy in cultural specificity." According to Spivak, "There can be no doubt that the general cast of the "authorship" of the Puranas is male." She argues, "Women speak in them, but the frame-

[144] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Moving Devi." *Cultural Critique, University of Minnesota Press*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2001, pp. 120–63, https://doi.org/10.1353/cul.2001.0029.

[145] Ibdi. pp 132

narrator is generally masculine"[146] while emphasising the large body of female-authored collective oral tradition. Viramma and her rendering of the local deities and the more recognisable Hindu gods contradict such a case and the change in female modulation of frame-narrator(ship). She uses this authority to enhance her personal and communal understanding of gender solidarity and caste hegemony, thereby creating her very own formula for a subaltern "new woman" phenomenon. Although her attitude towards caste remains the same, it does provide the intrinsic need for monetary leverage while speculating on the liberation of lower castes in contemporary India.

Besides her in-depth understanding of gender solidarity, Viramma seems to be intellectually advanced regarding socio-economic conditions. Her approach towards systemic change to uplift subaltern lower-class communities is very revolutionary. In the chapter 'This Kaliyugam' (*Kaliyugam* is the current, fourth and last age of the world according to the Hindu mythology), Viramma has a very profound conversation about the economy, the political landscape and the problems with caste integration with Racine,[147] her political opinions align closely with the Marxist approach of redistributing land, cattle, properties, and other assets to provide the poor lower-caste people with a financial safeguard to mitigate the possible hardship or adversity.[148] Although she respects the left-leaning parties' efforts to educate and liberate the lower caste communities, she simultaneously finds their approach incompetent, like other women from her community. Rajsekhar Basu agrees with her claim, and in his paper 'Recapturing the Moments of Dalit History and Politics: A Journey from the Colonial and the Post-Colonial' highlights

[146] Ibid., pp 132

[147] Racine, Josiane. "Viramma's Voice: The Changing Face of Change." *India International Centre Quarterly, India International Centre*, vol. 23, no. 3/4, 1996. pp. 19–30

[148] Viramma. 1997. pp 182

her astute understanding of Dalit economics.[149] Working-class families tend to have more children because children are considered an asset to the family. Children will continue to help or take over the family occupation after a certain age. In Viramma's case, children are also crucial for serfdom and contribute to sustaining the family. However, if these children are disabled or take up education, they become a family liability.

Further, it is not very easy to convince parents and children to go to school. The D. M. K. or Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government and the then head M. G. R. (a left-leaning political party with grass-roots support in Tamil Nadu) have remained in power for a significant period since independence. It introduced numerous incentives for children to attend schools, including the very well-recognised mid-day meal scheme, where food is provided to all the students studying in Government-controlled or aided schools), whom Viramma considers as a 'virtuous' person ready to 'give his life for us' continued to incentivise government schools to ensure more children from the lower-class communities are educated. These incentives include free uniforms, stationery, and neon lights at night in the *ceri* for children to study after school hours. Older children are often burdened with babysitting younger children; however, "M. G. R. has taught of us again, and to help women with young children, he's had a creche built on every village for the little ones. Mothers leave their babies in the creche before going to work in the fields so the older ones don't miss school."[150] Such initiatives have economically pushed the subaltern communities towards modern facilities.

[149] Basu, Rajsekhar. "Sectional President's Address: Recapturing the Moments of Dalit History and Politics: A Journey from the Colonial to the Postcolonial ." *Indian History Congress*, vol. 74, no. 01, 2013, pp. 388–404. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress.

[150] Viramma. 1997. pp 190

While they have made the *ceri* life convenient, they also have highlighted the importance of government and its intervention with traditional systems such as patriarchy and caste hierarchy. Government facilities and aids have blurred specific communities' boundaries and heightened the tension due to progressive schemes. Women like Viramma have witnessed numerous events and are part of the progressive push. Although it seems like Viramma does not support abolishing the caste system, upon a close reading of her numerous political and socio-economic ideas, it is clear that her approach to changes in the caste system and patriarchy is rooted in radicalness rather than progressive methods that are slow and often fail to have substantial outcomes in the long run. Viramma, a serf subaltern woman with no formal education or political background, gives the reader a vivid exposition of her experiences and events that have made her an individual with a stern opinion, a unique voice and a feminist sensibility in her "own terms". She demonstrates an intellectual personality capable of sexual appeasement in an oppressive patriarchal milieu. This act of sexual relation with her husband defines her 'registers of womanhood'.[151]

Thus, Viramma is a quintessential subaltern woman at the cusp of modernity and a step outside because, as Pandian would argue, such a position alone is an advantage that provides a platform for her to articulate herself and her lived-experiences. This advantage becomes an indispensable tool to express her caste and gender struggles and legitimise them categorically. Therefore, being one step outside modernity indeed keeps Viramma and other Dalit women a step ahead of it.

[151] Ramanathan, Geetha. 2012. pp 44

The status of oral literature has long been questioned when documenting contemporary experiences in South Asia. Oral testimony becomes contentious when lived-experience grapples with oppression and systemic injustice. However, Viramma, in this instance, becomes what Renaud Dulong would consider "an essential item to the vigilance apparatus".[152] Therefore, her testimony and her perception of the new nation need not be objective or impartial. Viramma's account of caste hierarchy in public and domestic spaces as a subaltern woman witnessing the social changes in her *ceri* is not just informative to the reader but also produces an intimate and critical analysis of her milieu. This critical analysis is integral to understanding the subaltern realities often silenced in mainstream politics. Oral literature also has genealogical importance to it. Spivak and Diamond approach this issue in different ways. They both analyse caste hierarchy to answer the question: Why is studying the aspect of oral literature essential to learning Dalit lives? However, while Spivak looks at the role of oral literature in upper-caste rituals and religious practices, Diamond contends its roots in the lower caste. Both neglect the role of gender in this analysis, which I will be attempting here, and I will do so using Viramma's (and Racine's) experiences and expositions.[153]

The silenced subaltern realities are nothing but the notions that 'India' and 'Woman' are seen as a monolith in the popular imagination of contemporary middle-class India. While both have become instrumental to current nation-state politics, they also gained a nuanced potency to become a tool for the oppression of subaltern sexualities. What India means to the bourgeois woman is limited to the political understanding of what Chatterjee would consider an "upper-

[152] Dulong, R. *Le Temoin Oculaire*, Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Paris. 1998. pp 16

[153] Chakravarty, Radha. "Other Histories: Gender and Politics in the Fiction of Mahasweta Devi." India International Centre Quarterly, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 2012, pp. 122–33

Diamond M., Josephine. 2016, pp 143–160

caste disdain of their privilege." This privilege is based on the liberal idea of 'inclusive politics', which is the process of inclusion of people into the dominant hierarchy (be it a subaltern woman or a sexually oppressed person) without considering the dismantling of such hierarchies altogether. This inclusion is performed based on the monolith ideas of nationhood and womanhood. When communities find it difficult or impossible to define or understand these notions, they become the adversary of this popular imagination. However, Viramma decodes this process in her narrative on a much smaller scale by carefully speculating the changes in her milieu. Her perception of *ceri* and *ur* become significantly important because she traces the impact of these changes in her limited knowledge of nation-state politics, the domestic spaces that are restricted to women and her vociferous involvement in the politics of the community that are easily accessible to her due to the participation of Manikkam, her communist husband and Anban, her revolutionary son.

Racine's work "Beyond Silence A Dalit Life History in South India" (2004) emphasises that oral traditions helped Viramma reiterate her frame of reference as a witness to systemic oppression. Underscoring Viramma's use of rhythms even in mundane conversations, she concludes the need for a deeper Ethnomusicology of women narrators in lower castes. Racine further argues that such a study encourages the interlocutor/subject - in this case, a subaltern woman- to introspect their lives and make such narratives pertinent to the ongoing discourse about caste oppression within contemporary South Asia's political and social apparatus.

Quintessentially, conjugality is the epicentre for the bourgeois woman who is still restrained by the domestic and traditional spaces. Creating or reproducing a woman subject in literature who escapes connubial characteristic then becomes 'abnormal' and revolutionary. They defy concepts such as honour and depart from the praxis to infiltrate the institution of tradition.

Spivak, in her introduction to the translation, claims that Draupadi, at first instance, is a conjugal wife who abides by the patriarchal notions of family and society. However, more profound illustrations of the character show that she transcends into a powerful character when her experiences as a subaltern (Santhal)[154] women become more efficacious to the reader. When Draupadi "crosses the sexual differential into the field of what could *only happen to a woman* that she emerges a powerful 'subject,' who, still using the language of sexual 'honour,' can derisively call herself 'the object of your search,' whom the author can describe as a terrifying super object - 'an unarmed target'. As a tribal, Dopdi is not romanticised by Mahaswetha."[155] Although she has extensively studied the oral history of women in subaltern communities, Mahaswetha Devi remains an outsider to the communities. Her stories remain a reconstruction of subaltern voices. She encourages a literary reflection on the rise in autobiographies of Dalit women and the case of oral literature in the framework.

Autobiographies have become a tool of empowerment for Dalit women since the 1980s and are critical to understanding the changes in subaltern communities since the independence of India. Josephine Diamond, in another article, "Viramma, Life of an Untouchable: the resistant traditions of an untouchable Tamil community"[156], credits the rise of Dalit women's autobiographies to the convergence of South Asian feminist movements and the rise of acknowledging indigenous rights. She designates them as socially conscious literary texts. Viramma and Racine collaborate here to produce a socially conscious text that emphasises the need for subaltern emancipation of subaltern communities including the Dalits and the tribal

[154] An ethnic tribe in northern India. They experienced the Indian partition severely and since then have been used as a political instrument in the nation-state politics.

[155] Devi, Mahaswetha. *Breast Stories: Mahaswetha Devi*. Edited & translated by Gayathri Chakravorty Spivak, Seagull Books, 1997. pp 11

[156] Diamond, M. Josephine. 2016. pp 143–60

castes. While Viramma does this with proximate experiences, Racine contributes her factual analysis and pedagogical observations to make it a socially conscious text that advocates for further introspection into the literary field and understanding the lack of position of such texts in literary canons. As discussed earlier in the chapter, these canons provide an intimate perspective that is not readily available in texts such as 'Draupadi'. The reason for such comparative analysis is not to disregard 'Draupadi', instead it is to understand the caste privilege the writers have within the contemporary literary scene and the need to provide a platform for other forms of literature, including (oral) narratives from people who have been the systemic victims of the contemporary education system.

Analysing the role of oral literature in texts such as 'Draupadi' and *Viramma: The Life of an Untouchable* leads us to understand its significance in the communities and why it is a recurrent (and preferred method). Spivak and Diamond again have different approaches when they engage with such a study. According to Spivak, ignoring the aspect of oral tradition and other forms of narration while studying subaltern texts is an 'elite' methodology that is inappropriate. She claims, "Resisting 'elite' methodology for 'subaltern' material involves an epistemological/ontological confusion. The confusion is held in an unacknowledged analogy: just as the subaltern *is* not elite (ontology), the historian must not *know* through the elite method (epistemology). The passage of history and (of) self-identity in the subaltern communities is sustained by oral tradition, which is invalidated by the elite methods."[157] Viramma addresses this notion without the knowledge of such a theory. The music and the storytelling are what keeps her and her community alive. This is, of course, literally and figuratively. While singing and drumming, among other things, is the profession of her (Paraiyar) community and thus

[157] Devi, Mahaswetha. 1997. pp 95 – 96

sustains them economically, it is also the repository of rich history and self (and communal) identity. It is also a practice that sustains kinship and communal relations. Therefore, a newer method of analysis is crucial to understand and augment subaltern history and literary pedagogy: one that considers the development of literature through the interstices of time and uses studied essentialism to evaluate such a pedagogy.

> "Viramma was recommended to her (Josiane Racine) by the villagers as the most accomplished and knowledgeable of their singers. Viramma's myths and stories provide fascinating insights into conflicting caste representations of women and female sexuality."[158]

While studying Viramma's auto-biography, Racine's ethnography and Spivak's analysis of 'Devi', it is difficult to ignore their emphasis on oral traditions to reiterate lived experiences in South Asia – on an individual level and, in Viramma's case, that of the *ceri*. Throughout this dissertation, I consistently look at these oral traditions as a 'counter-hegemonic' discourse that intrinsically celebrates the notion of passing knowledge. While I have studied them as an alternative literary apparatus, they have been historically at the centre of literary and cultural paradigms. I will briefly acknowledge the importance of the traditions of oral culture and literature and the pertinence of the genre in the subaltern communities. Although studying the narrative framework through oral traditions is essential to learning alternative forms of literature, I am limited by the scope of my study.

[158] Diamond, M. Josephine. "Viramma, Life of an Untouchable: The Resistant Traditions of an Untouchable Tamil Community." Dialectical Anthropology, vol. 40, no. 2, 2016, pp 146, 154

Unlike written literature, which is only accessible to (formally) educated members of the upper class and upper caste, oral traditions, in the case of South Asia, are historically seen as a communal resource and authored by the collective in practice. Unlike (hegemonic) fiction, which a single person often authors, oral traditions constitute collective authorship rooted in the sense of community and knowledge, and they function on numerous scales in marginal communities. Education in contemporary South Asia exists on the historically principal caste blueprint. For centuries, upper castes employed numerous methods to gaslight and gatekeep education categorically, including an exclusive practice of literature in Sanskrit, a language available only to the Brahmins,[159] and not allowing people outside the caste to learn or study the language nor participate in any discourse. These discourses often happened in temples of the *Ur*, and access to these spaces was denied to people from Viramma's *Ceri*. Therefore, modern Indian education practices have been at the forefront of the anti-caste campaign and can be studied through the exemplary works of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891 – 1956), mainly his notable anthology of essays including 'Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development' (1916).

On a larger scale, oral literature functions like written text to pass the knowledge about the intricacies of society from older generations to younger generations. Like grandfather's songs to express caste identity or men singing irrigation songs.[160] In this instance, Viramma talks about women's sexuality and pregnancies and the role of oral literary traditions in making such intimate affairs public. She explains to Racine that men, during irrigation, sing songs about the importance of a childbearing woman. According to these songs, "the first child", regardless of

[159] A Brahmin is a member of the highest caste socially. Traditionally, Brahmins were priests and teachers and maintained strict rules surrounding caste, untouchability, and education.

[160] Viramma. 1997. pp 82

gender, “brings good luck”, and it is the duty of a married woman to bear “at least one” child. A “sterile woman” will be kept away from the community because she brings “bad luck.” She does not see this through the lens of gender dynamics but instead through *dharma*. The oral traditions help them uphold *dharma* or duty by passing down the role of individuals in the community. Dharma here is the collective morality. Both Brahminical and Subaltern literature express the concept of Dharma in myriad ways.[161] While the Hindu Brahminical doctrine of Dharma seeps outside the hegemony and regains new meanings and ideas, its core tenets on caste and gender, for example, remain the same.

On another level, oral literature in the form of songs is a philosophy of art. Viramma expresses the importance of this ‘philosophy of communal art’ numerous times in her autobiography.

Virappan and Ranga, sing at the festival of Mariamman (a *ceri* diety),

> “and they sing:
> That necklace of glass pearls,
> aren’t you going to buy it?
> If you buy it and wear it,
> it will be very beautiful!
> Ayoyo, ayoyo, o, o, o!”[162]

Their performance is a celebration of Mariamman. It extends as a call of courtesy to support each other in the community. “Give what you should to Mariatta! We are going to make the

[161] As explored earlier, I do not intend to use Brahminical and Subaltern as opposites. Such a usage would reduce the nuance of the study to declare Brahminical system as the norm and Subaltern groups around South Asia as aberrant communities.

[162] Ibid., pp 117

gruel for Mariatta", which in turn will feed the lesser privileged within the community. Viramma explains the importance of rhythm and the *ur*'s dancers. The art form, according to her, is the pulse of Karani. Viramma uses another example: The barbers and their role as temple musicians.[163] The barbers "play at puberty celebrations, engagements and marriages" to mark "auspicious celebrations." In this instance, the tradition of oral performance functions as a celebratory milestone.

Dulong's idea of the "essential(ity)" of the narrator overlaps with a similar theory, "collective moral weight", proposed by Blackburn. Both locate the narrator as a representative of collective experience, not because the narrator is to be trusted all the time but because there is a "collective truth" to these 'lived-realities', "stories about personal lives are imbued with an extra dose of truthfulness, that autobiographies speak directly to us and that biographies are based on "true-life" experience; for this reason, it is thought that these life-historical forms, including diaries, journals, and so on, are somehow imbued with the veracity of the spoken word."[164] Viramma is speaking to Racine, through Racine she is speaking to us. The author of the autobiography, fiction, and middle-brow literature writes with the intent of being published and read. Viramma, at the axis of numerous discourses representing oral traditions and literary narratives, does not locate her lived realities like the 'modern genius of a writer' but continues in the tradition of collective authorship. In doing so, she has started a discourse within the 'new woman' scholarship capable of reiterating sexual and bodily agency in South Asian society.

[163] Ibid., pp 160

[164] Blackburn, Stuart. "Life Histories as Narrative Strategy: Prophecy, Song, and Truth Telling in Tamil Tales and Legends." *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, Indiana University Press, Indianapolis, 2004, 203–226. pp. 203

The Subaltern Methods:

To construct a new method that incorporates all types of women and does not work on monolithic ideas of womanhood, we need first to study all three types of 'New Woman' and see how they fail to provide space for women outside caste and class hierarchies, further how they exclude women who are homosexual or are not confined to domestic spaces thereby are not conjugal. P. Radhika would suggest that such a method should also not be rooted in "Left's perception of tradition as 'backward' and hence something that has to be overcome or left behind largely arises from its modern and scientific framing of 'liberation' and 'progress'.

This articulation finds most vocal expression in the popular science movements promoted by the 'Left organisations' that proposed the 'scientific temper' as against seemingly resistant attitudes to science among the 'masses' in India."[165] Further, she suggests how the 'Subaltern Method (School)' attempts to move out of vanguardist impulses and the necessity for such a rethinking to do so in contemporary South Asia. "This rethinking has often involved the attempt to return to a cultural past that is imagined embodied in the 'mass' today." The cultural past and its inability to reflect in Gandhian 'New Woman' is what Spivak identifies as the 'epistemological dissonance' in the study. This cultural past is exemplary when we study Subaltern women's autobiographies and the role of orality in them.

'South-Asian Modernism' is important to study the conception of the phenomenon of new women in postcolonial India and then the homogenising of the 'New Woman'. This homogenised 'New Woman' of the South becomes a tool "to keep the violence invisible by

[165] P. Radhika. 2007. pp 11

ignorance or design.[166] Spivak's new woman is different from the Gandhian or that of Steven Matthews'. According to Matthews, the new woman phenomenon in contemporary novels "no longer the objects of the gaze in work by male authors" and allowed female characters to "explore the world through their own eyes."[167] I have juxtaposed the Gandhian and Matthew's methods in the earlier chapter and concluded that conjugality essentially becomes a calibre point where the woman characters are contrived and appropriated. However, in the case of subaltern women, conjugality becomes secondary. As we see in Mahaswetha Devi, Viramma and numerous other literary pieces with female protagonists regardless of their genre, conjugality is out of the framework due to the lack of masculine domination in such literature.

Thus, conjugality or in other terms, domestic restraint, is the root cause of oppression of the new Indian woman. While Gandhi's idea originates from a romanticised version of Brahminical or caste hierarchy, Matthews does not resonate with non-white woman writers and impedes women of the global south. Unlike the other two new women, Spivak claims that the new woman is manufactured in the global north and is the site of coercion against the women who do not adhere to these notions. However, what is common in all three New Woman is that the subject is a bourgeois woman of 'New India'. Spivak derives her new woman from a subaltern perspective but speculates her theory with Foucault and another elite approach: Marxist Feminism.

Marxist Feminism fails to critically engage with the subaltern subject outside the heterosexual and gender normative. Although the South Asian Marxist feminists (such as Tithi Bhattacharya, N Menon and others) account for caste and class disparities, the idea of

[166] Ibid., pp xv

[167] Matthews, Steven. 2008. pp 92

womanhood remains very similar. While Labour-power is crucial to understanding the subaltern women's narratives, as most of the subaltern literature produced by women is very closely linked to their traditional and caste-oriented work or their revolutionary break into contemporary society, it is also the main factor while studying economic changes of castes and communities as a whole. However, it disregards sexual reproduction or the reproduction of labour-power, a recurring facet while studying *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable*. Sexuality is not only the instrument of the liberation of the self but also the tool to fight the dominant oppressive paradigms.

Devi, as discussed above, is celebrated in the Puranas because her character is pleasureless. A paramount aspect of being conjugal as she is seen as the exemplary wife whose course of action in Hindu mythology becomes the blueprint for all women to follow. *'Streedharma'* (women's ethics) or ethics of (married) wife is a notion grappled by the modernist feminist woman writers in South Asia that is often rejected by their characters as resistance against patriarchy. However, "though the popular feminist novels question a modernist language of the state that celebrates an Indian tradition that is embodied in a Vedic Hindu culture, the novels do not adequately interrogate a modern language of equality."[168] This interrogation is distinctly visible in Viramma's narratives.

Viramma uses multiple techniques (often unconsciously) to interrogate the modern language of equality. She contrasts her experience with the Reddier (another spelling of Reddiar) wives to engage with class and caste hierarchies. Using subtle stories that focus on subaltern woman characters in her narratives to address the authority of language in gendered repression and

[168] P., Radhika. 2007. pp 50-55

inequality. While her identity as a Dalit woman is already outside the dominating Vedic Hindu culture, her reflection and assertiveness of such an identity against the changing political landscape can be analysed as a critique of (*stree*) *dharma*.

Further, Viramma is also not a *grihini* (housewife); however, she does domestic work, works in the fields and is an active contributor to the cultural affairs of the community. Her presence in *ceri*, a community that is traditionally the victim of caste hierarchy but openly resists or refuses to obey due to contemporary political movements, is vital. The bourgeoise new woman is under threat due to the active participation of women writers in Dalit emancipation in the past few decades. Studying Chatterjee's *Subaltern Sexual Subjects* and *Viramma*, it is clear that subaltern women's (re)production and labour become indignant against oppressive systems, and they reshape contemporary Dalit and women studies. Thus, as Nivedita Menon, a critical thinker who engages with subaltern studies, points out, "Caste, gender and labour thus criss-cross intimately in the realm of production, and Marxist–feminist theory is reshaped by this recognition."[169]

Unlike the protagonist studied in the first two chapters, Viramma is not fictional. However, Chughtai, Hussain, Futehully and Viramma all share a common trope in their narratives - lived-experiences. Ismat Chughtai's novelised autobiography, *The Crooked Line: Tehri Lakir,* is a narrative of 'lived experiences', and the protagonist's problems are entwined with her gender and body. Thus, we understand a Muslim child's life amid the gust of political changes perceived through layers of identity. Among the other identities, her significant identity can be

[169] Menon, Nivedita. "Marxism, Feminism and Caste in Contemporary India." *Racism after Apartheid: Challenges for Marxism and Anti-Racism*, edited by Vishwas Stagra, Wits University Press, 2019, pp. 137–56. pp 142

considered being a girl and later a woman as her 'shame and perverted-ness' is only called to attention by other characters because of her gender. Her struggle to accept her womanhood is part of the narrative that highlights the dilemmas she witnesses as repercussions of her femininity. Her journey of acceptance and defiance of her identity as a woman is an intimation of the patriarchal problems enforced since childhood. Hussain and Futehully create female protagonists bound by socio-religious practices that suffocate them inside and outside their marriages. While Hussain identifies the problems within the system of Purdah, Futehully's protagonist, Zohra, who has become a woman in the shadow of her 'father and (later) husband' continues to find herself at the receiving end of power from men around her. All these women characters find themselves stifled in matrimony; however, Viramma, as a subaltern woman, unaware of the 'feminist laws' in the constitution and unbothered by the casteist practices and the movement to fight the hegemony, has found herself a voice and space in the *Paraiyar* society.

Her case of liberation, as Racine suggests, represents people, often women, who remain silent at the bottom of the social and gender ladder. Her persistence and acceptance, according to Eleanor Zelliot[170] are part of her womanhood. When she compares herself to the Reddy or the bourgeoisie women, it is evident that her culturally rich and vibrant life is a consequence of her sexual liberation. These Reddy women, according to her narrative, as explained earlier, face similar problems to those the other protagonist discusses previously. Thus, Viramma's narrative of her life as a woman is an excellent case for understanding the importance of class and caste while understanding problems that arise due to gender inequality. Her story furthers the field of Subaltern Studies by providing the complexities of womanhood and if the Subaltern

[170] Zelliot, Eleanor. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 58, no. 3, 1999, pp. 885–886.

literature case speaks for the different types of womanhood who experience the modern postcolonial South Asian patriarchy through the multitudes of identities.

**Conclusion and Afterthoughts**:

One of the primary objectives of this study is to understand the direction Indian literature is headed regarding the representation of women in South Asian literature. After historicising and contextualising, it is evident that this framework, which recognises that women and women characters are represented, appears to be part of the pre-colonial formula curated based on the religious and caste attitudes within this postcolonial society. A blatant conclusion is that patriarchy and these conservative sentiments uphold the status quo and protect the bourgeoisie women who are part of the Brahmanical society or the *Savarna* system. I have selected literature and women writers who directly question or engage with the discourse of the status quo to prove this point. However, this is part of the elementary progress toward understanding how patriarchal subterfuge works in South Asian literature by regulating women, their behaviour and social autonomy. Women and the perceptions of women are created by people in literary canons whose incentive is to keep and protect the status quo due to politics, publishing spaces and, most importantly, literary readership. Radical progressive literature to change women and their status in oppressive society thus becomes a volatile, risky and second priority to men in power.

So much incentive to protect the bourgeoise patriarchal system is embedded into the South Asian literary space; positive and progressive change to provide space to lower class and subaltern women and their lived experiences not only becomes hard but impossible. This certainly explains why Viramma's experience, published decades ago, still stands as one of the most important and 'recent' works regarding subaltern women. According to Nawaid Anjum,

publishing houses are now more than ever invested in feeding right-wing political power by printing mainstream literary works that align with anti-feminist sentiments.[171]

The idea of 'women question', and the 'new woman' phenomenon in middle-brow South Asian literature has drastically changed the complexities of womanhood. The Gandhian 'new woman' is curated to supplement the South Asian patriarchy and designed to accept the caste hierarchy. This categorically removes experiences of women who are outside the South Asian social hierarchy, including transwomen, women from lower caste (and class), women outside the *savarna* system and women who refuse to adhere to social partnership and conjugality, including lesbians. Perhaps Shraddha Chatterjee's study of the sexual subaltern subjects is excellent literature to understand this complexity and intersectional womanhood in South Asia, and acknowledging this intersectionality should be understood as a direct conflict against the traditional literary canons. Progressive literature, like that of Chatterjee's, published in recent decades, has been successfully threatening the ideas of monogamy, investigating women's agency in heterosexual relationships and bodily anatomy.

During my research, I realised that one of the most curious aspects of the study of South Asian literature regarding women's agency is that, on the one hand, philosophical and literary schools that are comprised of bourgeoise *savarna* writers want 'all' women to have agency in contemporary society and portray women character to be a model for such progress, on the other hand, they are hesitant to radically threaten the existing social system such as patriarchy and caste. Thus, producing literature to balance between the two. Due to a lack of resources,

[171] Nawaid, Anjum. "Publishing Trends in 2022: Four Indian Trade Publishers Look Back, and Ahead." *The Federal*, 2022.

time and the limitation of the project, I could not explore this idea and study it thoroughly; however, I wish to do so soon. At the core of this balance isn't agency at all – it's the subtle subjugation of women within these systems and creating of a mirage of opportunity to liberate themselves from oppression.

I wanted to incorporate K. R. Meera's (1970 -) works in my third chapter to understand other contemporary progressive writers and the present climate in South Asian society. I interviewed K. R. Meera during my undergrad years and published a translation of the interview in a weekly Kannada magazine called the Sudha. Although Meera's works are an excellent example of understanding the position of progressive middlebrow women's literature in India, I could not include them as they did not complement my study thematically. Meera's work, like numerous other South Asian writers and literary critics such as Sangeetha Sreenivasan (1975 -), Gayathri Prabhu (1974 -), and Madhavi Menon (1971 -), is an example of contemporary literature that critically and with interdisciplinary methods engages with the 'women question' studied in this thesis.

This project adds to this critical introspection of South Asian literature to highlight the historical trajectory in the literary canons, which I believe is essential to fully comprehending the current literary and political trend relating to the representation of women. It inspects these literary canons to question who is ultimately in power. Whom does the patriarchal system protect? Who oversees the literary publishing industry? What forces continue to support the caste system and the status quo, and why do they continue to do that while the class system has overshadowed the last few decades of modern postcolonial Indian society? By raising some essential questions and studying literature that closely captures these micro-movements within

more considerable literary changes, this thesis contributes to the contemporary study of 'Investigating the Status' (of South Asian Women) – as inspired by Fatima.

The focus of this project began with the pressing necessity to understand the literary voice-consciousness of women in South Asia. Therefore, the literature used in this project was carefully selected to understand the changes in these voices through the literary 'new woman' phenomenon. This literature presents evidence to show the 'new woman' development from the early postcolonial thought until the recent subaltern outlook. I have studied women writers from oppressed religious and caste communities through fiction such as novels, short stories, and non-fiction, including autobiographies, memoirs and manifestoes, to understand this development and to necessitate an unconventional and subversive study method in an eager attempt to understand the position of subaltern women in contemporary South Asia.

One of the striking conclusions of this project regards the voice of Viramma and the involvement of Racines in narrating her lived experiences.[172] *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable,* can be simultaneously studied from two perspectives. One, as a work of a subaltern woman narrating her experiences amidst the socio-political changes around her *ceri*. Her narration is crucial to the subaltern historiography of southern South Asia, as she successfully explains her perception of social systems such as serfdom, patriarchy, and the class system. Unlike a top-down approach provided by historiographers and literary critics belonging to established pedagogical canons that study these social structures and their role in postcolonial India, Viramma offers an outstanding and unapologetic bottom-up perspective. Thus, Viramma's voice answers Spivak's question regarding the ability of subaltern women's voices to be heard in praxis. That 'one never encounters the testimony of the women's voice-

[172] Viramma. 1997.

consciousness.'[173] As proven earlier in the chapter by understanding Viramma's narrative motifs, we encounter her voice-consciousness through her lived experiences. However, Spivak's question, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', simultaneously can be used to question the validity of Viramma's lived experiences because of the Racines.

This leads us to the second perspective, to perceive *Viramma, Life of an Untouchable,* not merely as the voice of Viramma but considering her as a subject in a musico-ethnographical study of Racines. As Viramma addresses Josiane Racine as *sinnamma*[174], we understand the caste and class dynamics and their nuances. This compels us to investigate the agency of Viramma's voice-consciousness beyond the scope of Josiane's project and understand the power disparity between the subaltern woman, Viramma and an educated upper-class woman Josiane. Such an investigation requires an inter-disciplinary approach encapsulating (musico) -ethnography, anthropology, socio-political history, and literature. However, amidst this disparity, more than Josiane's ability to provide Viramma with the space and opportunity to reiterate herself, it is crucial to study Viramma as an epitome of the 'new woman' in literature witnessing and contributing to the contemporary social changes and the rise of the Subaltern (Dalit) movement in the present Indian atmosphere.

As discussed in chapter one, kinship becomes a crucial tool for understanding the role of women in Brahminical society. While the Muslim writers studied in this project are not categorically part of the caste dynamics, they continue contributing to it, as highlighted earlier using Uma Chakravorty's works; therefore, to study women's works that are non-conformist

[173] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Die Philosophin*, vol. 14, no. 27, 1988. pp 93

[174] Viramma. 1997. Page 45

to such a Brahminical and, consequently, patriarchal to understand the literary methods used by Viramma and other subaltern women's voices as the 'new woman' of contemporary South Asia. It is integral to study women writers who have worked on the foundations and sometimes against these foundations to provide literary space to articulate women's voice-consciousness that provides a new language to reiterate lived-experiences. This linear, historical investigation of South Asian literature provides new answers to the present-day 'woman question' and, more importantly, examines if the 'new woman' phenomenon allows Muslim and subaltern women to speak.

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