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## Living in translation': postcolonial feminism(s) in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Prabha Ganorkar

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**'LIVING IN TRANSLATION':  
POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM(S) IN THE  
WORKS OF SHASHI DESHPANDE AND  
PRABHA GANORKAR**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements

for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

The University of Wollongong

by

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B.A (University of Bombay),

M.A (Honours) (University of Wollongong)

English Studies Program

2001

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to find under-mapped territories in the discursive formations of postcolonial cultural productions, especially within the framework of Indian women's writing and feminism. These spaces can be the source of aporia because they seek to establish and contribute to a dialogue that is situated beyond debilitating models of Nationalism and even hybridity. As a means of pointing to these spaces, the poetry of a Marathi poet – Prabha Ganorkar – has been translated and analysed in order to discuss how her work falls outside West-defined models of 'acceptable' postcolonial literatures, and therefore, meets with difficult to see barriers in its inclusion in the canon of Indian Literature.

Closely linked to this, is the issue of translation and its place in contemporary literature in India and postcolonial studies. It is argued that translation theory and practice is important today more than ever, as it is the basis of comparative literary study. Postcolonial studies are fundamentally comparative, and they inject a needed awareness of cultural politics into translation studies.

Translation, on the other hand, shows up some of the weaknesses of postcolonial studies, especially regarding the issue of referentiality versus mediation.

Postcolonial theory is a field of dispute, especially when it comes to questions of its empowerment of disadvantaged groups such as women/ women of colour. This dissertation considers Shashi Deshpande and Prabha Ganorkar in the context of debates about the intersection of feminist and postcolonial discourses and their applicability to the Indian situation. It argues that the search for a female selfhood through a painful negotiation amongst assigned and circumstantial subjectivities, despite the impositions of culture and history, marks the central concern of both writers' attempts to undo existing stereotypes of Indian womanhood and politicise the specificities of female experience within the boundaries set up by (in the context of this thesis, Hindu) Indian patriarchal discourses.

Rather than attempting to craft an overarching theory of postcolonial feminism or to articulate a 'definitive' postcolonial feminist enterprise, this project seeks to delineate

the specifics of these two middle-class writers in relation to their particular social contexts. Thus, the need for new interpretive models of postcolonial literary/cultural productions is asserted.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

"Saarya havethach mulgi mhanoon jagnyaacha aagrah/

Mulgi mhanoon disne. Hasne. Vaagne." –

Prabha Ganorkar

"[A woman in India] at once, lives in different ages:

pre-historic, historic, medieval, colonial and post

colonial." – Daleep Kaur Tiwana



My objective is to examine the diversity and complexity of female experience represented in the novels of Shashi Deshpande and the poetry of Prabha Ganorkar. I also wish to foreground the strategies of resistance the authors lend their female protagonists to subvert, or at least confront, the primary structures of power inherent in the Indian social milieu. I will also examine strategies, of textual resistance on the writers' parts. I will, furthermore, consider the two in the context of debates about the intersection of feminist and postcolonial discourses and their applicability to the Indian situation. These are waged particularly by Indian scholars and are inflected by Indian debates over Third World status, nation and Hindu tradition, as I will argue further in this chapter.

The issues that most interest me are the internal contestations of postcolonial feminisms, and the consequences of the positionality, location, and audience of the feminist theorist / critic. By locating women authors at the centre of my work and analysing their representations regional,

linguistic and gendered identities, I want to explore identity as an ideological construct and as a material effect; I also want to assess the critical response to these works (or lack of it) within constructions of Indian writing as seen from practices in postcolonial literary studies. My argument is that these works suggest how gender and language accentuate continuing limitations in the academic definition and management of these fields.

But rather than attempting to craft an overarching theory of postcolonial feminism or to articulate a 'definitive' postcolonial feminist enterprise, I seek to delineate the specifics of these two middle-class writers in relation to their particular social contexts. Thus these two writers — contemporaries who operate out of similar backgrounds and explore similar concerns, but who write in different languages and inhabit different locations vis-a-vis the international literary scene — have been selected to demonstrate the variety of Indian positions/

representations in the intersection of gender and postcolonial readings even within the limited range of middle-class, Maharashtrian women writers.

For both authors, the cultural norms of Hindu femininity are patriarchal constructs that operate in opposition to women's needs. Consequently, their heroines constantly struggle to give expression to their selves, which are significantly opposed to socially prescribed gender roles. Particularly in Shashi Deshpande's case, this search for a female selfhood through a painful negotiation amongst assigned and situational subjectivities, despite the prescriptions of culture and history, marks the central concern of this writer's attempts to dismantle existing stereotypes of Indian womanhood and politicise female experience within the enclosures set up by (in the context of the thesis, Hindu) Indian patriarchy.

These concerns are not entirely new in

Indian women's writing in English. We see these painful negotiations in the national celebration of Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu followed by neglect for being too 'limited and shallow'.<sup>1</sup> Critical responses to women's writing were imbued with token liberalism and patriarchal condescension, as in Anita Desai's case. Desai points out that in the early stages of her career, '...we had a lot of problems in finding publishers, there were very few readers, and no one seemed very interested at all in our work.'<sup>1 2</sup> This hostility even led to Kamala Das designating herself a 'freak'.<sup>3</sup> Attention to the writers mentioned above arose primarily from overseas championing, coloured with nationalist suspicion.

I have refrained from considering Shashi

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<sup>1</sup> See Amalendu Bose, 'Evaluation of Toru Dutt: A Starting Point', in *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 3.12 (1979), pp. 4-17; A. N. Dwivedi, 'Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu: A Comparative Approach', in *Commonwealth Quarterly*, 3.9 (1978), pp. 82-94; S. Nagarajan, 'Sarojini Naidu and the Dilemma of English in India', in *Kavya Bharati*, 1 (1988), pp. 32-43.

<sup>2</sup> Anita Desai, 'Interview with Anita Desai' [with Magda Costa], (January 30, 2001). [Online]. Available: [http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/desai\\_interview.html](http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/desai_interview.html).

<sup>3</sup> S. C. Harrex and Vincent O'Sullivan (eds), *Kamala Das*, CRLNE Writer's Series No. 1, (Adelaide: Flinders-University, 1986), p. 11.

Deshpande's novels and Prabha Ganorkar's poetry in terms of a specific postcolonial theory. This is because postcolonial theory is a field of dispute, especially when it comes to questions of its empowerment of disadvantaged groups such as women / women of colour. Writers and critics operate out of particular positions and agendas with postcolonial critical frameworks favouring Anglophone, middle-class or diasporic writing in discussions of gender, and 'Nativist' frameworks obscuring issues of gender and class. I have also refrained from doing so because I think of India's colonial history, despite its far-reaching effects into the present, as only one factor among others that have complicated or problematised the hegemonic, male-dominant ideologies and structures of power affecting women. This view is endorsed in the writings of both Deshpande and Ganorkar, which are notable for their attack on traditional inequities that, combined with a neo-liberal, capitalist economy, continue to oppress

many Hindu-Indian women.<sup>4</sup>

Though a capitalist economy in some cases empowers women to escape or subvert traditional roles by opening up opportunities and/or the job market, it can continue to oppress them in covert ways. For example, in India many middle-class, urban women now work to supplement their husbands' incomes<sup>5</sup>, which means that in their roles as wives, they cannot be confined only to the house and household duties any more. But often their jobs are seen only as jobs rather than careers and, therefore, still secondary to the husband's and family's needs. Secondly, they are still expected to single-handedly fulfil all their other 'wifely duties' such as cooking, child care, cleaning and so on, which means that traditional roles in terms of division of labour are not really subverted, or even questioned. 'Modernity or liberation is a matter of convenience, and only

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<sup>4</sup> Abha Prakash Leard, 'The many-armed woman: representations of the female in the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai', PhD Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, (1994), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Poor urban and rural women have always worked.

skin-deep'.<sup>6</sup> Thus generally speaking, 'modernity' and the nation have called forth a professional woman and an upwardly mobile middle-class without supplying the social or cultural freedoms to go with such 'advancement'. As V. Kannabiran and K. Kannabiran point out:

With the penetration of capital, women have been drawn into a monetary system that, while retaining its feudal character, has deprived them of the traditional supports and rights that eased their burden slightly.<sup>4 7</sup>

Thus we see the ambivalence of 'Third World nationalism to the advent of 'modernity' itself.<sup>8</sup> In countries where 'modernisation or reform follows the nation's emergence from Western colonial subjection, or where a resurgent

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<sup>6</sup>Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Vasanth Kannabiran and Kalpana Kannabiran, 'Looking at Ourselves: The Women's Movement in Hyderabad', in M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (eds). *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), p. 264.

<sup>8</sup> Geraldine Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. 33.

religious traditionalism is the dominant mode of nationalist culture', as in contemporary India, the Nationalist antipathy to modernity's social impact may be expressed 'as antipathy to the West and to Western cultural modalities'.<sup>9</sup> 'The ease with which the "modern" and the "Western" have been conflated and offered as synonymous, interchangeable counters in both nationalist and Orientalist discourse'<sup>10</sup> has meant that a nationalist accusation of modern and/or foreign — that is to say Western— origin or influence, when directed at a 'socio-political movement such as grass-roots feminism, has been sufficient for the movement's de-legitimation',<sup>11</sup>

We see these and related concerns explored explicitly and implicitly in Deshpande and Ganorkar's work. In order to consider these problems, and to map out the fraught relationship between nation and womanhood in

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<sup>9</sup> Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism' p. 33.

<sup>11</sup> Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', p. 33.



the Indian context, I draw extensively upon Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's analysis of the 'new woman' in her text *Real and Imagined Women*. Deshpande's work, especially, analyses the emergence of a 'new Indian woman' in media and official discourse in India today, a construction which serves not only to reconcile in her subjectivity the conflicts between tradition and modernity in Indian society, 'but works also to deny the actual conflict that women existentially register as an aspect of their lives'.<sup>7 12</sup>

In the contemporary discourse of women in India a significant 'mode of interpellation and projection' can be perceived in the construction of a 'new' 'Indian' woman.<sup>13</sup> She is 'new'. Sunder Rajan contends, in the senses of both having 'evolved and arrived in response to the times'<sup>14</sup>, as well as of being inherently

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<sup>12</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 129

<sup>13</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 130.

'modern' and 'liberated'. Ipshta Chanda points out that the adjectives new / liberated / modern are taken to be 'metonymous— saying one is to imply all the others by the logic of this sign-system that groups itself around the figure of woman'. She is 'Indian' in the sense of possessing a pan-Indian identity that transcends regional communal, cultural or linguistic specificities, but does not thereby become 'Westernised'.<sup>15 16</sup>

This 'new woman can be seen in most advertisements on Indian television today, as Sunder Rajan points out. The woman portrayed in these advertisements is attractive, educated, from the middle-class, and socially aware. All these attributes are demonstrated by her having a family of the 'right size and composition' (two children, almost always one boy and one girl, as Sunder Rajan acerbically points out), 'providing the right nutrition for her family,

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<sup>15</sup> Ipshta Chanda, "Birthing Terrible Beauties: Feminisms and 'Women's Magazines'", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (26 October 1991), Review of Women's Studies, pp. 67.

<sup>16</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 130.

being excessively hygienic, and most importantly, exercising conscious and deliberate choice as a consumer'.<sup>17</sup>

In interpellating the users of these products as 'new' women, the advertisements not only provide an attractive and desired self-image for women in general, but also provide a normative model of citizenship that is, significantly, now gendered female.<sup>18</sup>

It is more productive to 'discern the ideological manoeuvres'<sup>19</sup>, subtle and strong, that underlie the explicit and strategic uses of the image to sell products, as Sunder Rajan, Ipshita Chanda and other feminist cultural theorists have done. One purpose of such agenda, as Chanda has noted, is 'to obliterate the political project of feminisms and appropriate certain aspects of the women's movement agenda into the construction of a new sign system which revolves round the subject position 'woman'.<sup>20</sup> The liberation of women is separated from the contemporary

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<sup>17</sup> Tarla Shah, ' "We're More Than Just Bahu and Betis" — The Successful Businesswomen of Today', in *Femina*, (March 1986).

<sup>18</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 132.

<sup>20</sup> Chanda, 'Birthing Terrible Beauties', p. 67.

women's movement, by making liberation a matter of individual achievement and choice. Thus 'the development of the new woman is made to appear as a "natural" outcome of 'benevolent' capitalist socio-economic forces'.<sup>21</sup>

The 'modernisation' of the Indian woman can then be valorised as a painless, non-conflictual, even harmonious, process, in contrast to the discomforts produced by political feminism.<sup>22</sup>

Shashi Deshpande's analysis of her female characters falls partly in this category, and I will discuss whether it is posited by the author as 'painless' or 'natural' in Chapter Four.

In these discourses of the 'new' Indian woman and 'modernisation-without-Westernisation',<sup>23</sup> one sees sharp divisions between representations of younger and older women. Teenagers or young women are allowed, up to a certain point, to enact actual

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<sup>21</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* p. 132.

<sup>22</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 131.

<sup>23</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Cinema, Femininity and the Economy of Consumption', in *Economic and Political Weekly*, (26 October 1991), Review of Women's Studies, p. 85.

rebellion, or even project sexual desire;<sup>24</sup> whereas older women, invariably married, are trained to express their autonomy, 'through [their] education and [their] earnings on behalf of the family's well-being (or at a pinch, conjugal sex)'.<sup>25</sup> Both rebellion and the expression of sexuality on one hand, and financial independence on the other, are 'controlled and made acceptable by a certain "femininity" that is encoded as physical charm'.<sup>26</sup> The 'new woman' does not, in either case, jeopardise the notion of a tradition which is preserved intact in the 'idealised conjugal and domestic sphere'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Partha Chatterjee argues convincingly that modernity can be made 'consistent with the nationalist project' also through the institution of a principle of selection that separates the 'domain of culture into two spheres': a 'material' sphere, or public life, where

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<sup>24</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* p. 131.

<sup>25</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* p. 131.

<sup>26</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women* p. 131.

<sup>27</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, pp. 131-132.

Westernisation may be tolerated, and a 'spiritual sphere, constituted mainly . as the private, domestic space inhabited and figured by women, where the encroachments of modernity must be warded off', to preserve a traditional 'national culture'.<sup>28</sup>

In this context it is the Indian *woman* who is the bearer of 'real' Indian values, which eternal wife, mother and private homemaker, who saves the project of 'modernisation-without-westernisation'.<sup>25</sup> 'Good' modernity, as Niranjana calls it, must only be skin deep.<sup>26</sup> It is only the female subject 'who, through tactics of representation, can be shown as successfully achieving the balance between (deep / timeless) tradition and (surface / new) modernity.

Thus we can see that contemporary Third World feminism is often forced to enter a fraught, complex and sometimes dangerous

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<sup>28</sup> Partha Chatterjee, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds). *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), p. 159.

oppositional relationship to the contemporary Third World state.<sup>27</sup> But feminism, as Mary John reminds us, is a 'politics before it is an epistemology', and is therefore not simply a question of 'what is being said', but also of 'who speaks for whom'.<sup>29</sup> I offer my chosen texts as consciously female-led and base', but problematically feminist works that register the voices of women thus marking a contemporary feminism in India.<sup>30</sup> We see through them that there is an active creation of selfhood and negotiations of identity created. Therefore the insights that these problematically feminist texts perform are worth noting. It is extremely significant that they do not operate with a utopian bias, and it is just as important that they do not create utopian contexts that ignore the tensions of reality. While they mark what may be described as the brief truces that women seemingly wrest out of history, they do not offer

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<sup>29</sup> Mary E. John, 'Postcolonial Feminists in the Western Intellectual Field', in *Inscriptions* 5, (1989), p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Niranjana, p. 32.

them in the form of a resolution of the conflict between tradition and modernity. As Rachel Blau Du Plessis points out: 'They do reproduce the dialectic of struggle, but not by representing women as unrelentingly external to the social process'.<sup>31</sup>

Deshpande and Ganorkar both belong to this (slightly older) generation of 'new women'<sup>32</sup> with professions and supposed autonomy. Their literary personae also tend to reflect such a social positioning. However, the middle-class stability of Deshpande and Ganorkar's protagonists does not shield them from gender oppression. On the contrary, the authors offer readers glimpses of the many cultural prescriptions typically burdening the urban, bourgeois woman. Nonetheless, their implied critique of gender-based social restriction cannot readily be interpreted solely in terms of Western feminism. Given the weight of religious authority behind Hindu patriarchy, their attempts to break the

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<sup>31</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 143.

<sup>32</sup> Deshpande was born in 1938 and Ganorkar in 1942.



hold of tradition must be read in a slightly different framework than the attempts of their white, Western, middle-class counterparts.

Whether the term 'feminist' can be applied to Deshpande and Ganorkar's writing in an unqualified way is not a question with an obvious or easy answer. As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out, we can construct a subversive gender counter-discourse in our critical reading of texts, whether it is inherent in them or not. But even then, it is not necessary to co-opt them into a 'feminism' defined by the white middle-class:

is the subversion of women's writing to be located within the work/the act of writing, or in the critical reading that disengages it for us?<sup>33</sup>

Yet, as I will argue further, if their work is read as falling within a postcolonial-feminist framework, this is not a strand of feminism untouched by White, western feminism. We can use certain terms and concepts of the Western

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<sup>33</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 131.

feminist project without co-opting, wholesale, the Indian woman writer onto its platform in an unqualified manner.

For example, Adrienne Rich contends that men and women are all essentially 'products of culture' but that unlike men, women are also victims of culture as they are successfully kept in a state of subjugation by means of the 'myths and images of women' created by a male-dominated culture.<sup>34</sup> In a patriarchy, Rich posits, it is women who are haunted by 'the spectre of... male judgement'<sup>35</sup>, not vice-versa.

Discussing in particular the problems that women writers face in a culture 'controlled by men'. Rich is hopeful that women are awakening from a 'dead or sleeping consciousness' and in their creative 're-vision', are choosing 'not to pass on a tradition [that is, patriarchal myth-making] but to break its hold over us'.<sup>36 37</sup> Even

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<sup>34</sup> Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *College English* 34.1 (October 1972), p. 21.

<sup>35</sup> Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', pp. 18-19.

though Rich falls into the category of white, Western middle-class feminists mentioned above, and the politics of applying the Western Rich to the Eastern 'poor' could justifiably be questioned. Rich's concept of 're-vision' is useful in forwarding an analysis of Deshpande and Ganorkar. This 're-vision' is clearly seen in the writings of Deshpande and Ganorkar, as their female protagonists strive to redefine their identity, as well as attempt to withstand an oppressive reality of sociocultural traditions and taboos.

In diasporic 'global India', it is no longer possible to clearly distinguish between 'Eastern' and 'Western' women. Meena Alexander, writing about the positionality of the colonial Indian woman writer, maps out this issue in terms of 'the unbearable tension between a culturally sanctioned femininity' and the 'creative female imagination of the Indian woman writing in English'<sup>35</sup>. Similarly, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni says:

Had I lived in India, I would have been

expected to get married, raise children and pursue a career – if at all – that was not very demanding. Of course, women writers have succeeded in India but the struggle there is far bigger than the one here.<sup>38</sup>

Alexander and Divakaruni's comments raise valid issues, but are problematic in that they can be read as diasporic woman writers speaking for all Indian women writers, taking no account of the differences that are often seen in specific families, and the inflections in the writing emerging from these sites / categories. For example, whereas diasporic Indian women writers such as Suniti Namjoshi foreground 'difference' and minoritisation through a focus on discourses of 'race', sexuality and gender, to show how they intersect to produce stereotypes of the Third World Woman, and how minorities negotiate and subvert these stereotypes,<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Meena Alexander, 'Outcaste Power: Ritual Displacement and Virile Maternity in Indian Women Writers', in *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 24.1 (1989), p. 12.

<sup>36</sup> A P Kamath, 'Women Writers of Indian Diaspora Create a Big Impact'. [Online]. Available: <http://www.rediff.com/news/1999/aug/23usl.htm>.

<sup>39</sup> Shalmalee Palekar, 'Ways of belonging: "I belong with the lame ducks" (and lesbian cows); Suniti Namjoshi's *The Conversations of Cow*', MA (Honours) Thesis, University of Wollongong, 1997. For example, see *The Conversations of*

Deshpande and Ganorkar explore the situation 'within', as it were, and focus on the 'womanising' of women in a very specific context, namely, middle-class urban Maharashtra (and sometimes in Deshpande's novels, Karnataka). It can be said that Ganorkar and Deshpande 'place' themselves so as to name their own 'worlding', rather than being seen as 'native informants whose sole purpose is to enlighten an Other'.<sup>40</sup>

But up to a point, Alexander's statement can be applied appropriately to Deshpande and Ganorkar, although they belong to the post-independence generation, and although both have overtly distanced themselves from identifying as feminist writers, possibly because of this very tension that Alexander describes. This tension is voiced by another 'international' but (originally) Indian-resident writer, Anita Desai. In an interview with Corinne Bliss, she

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*Cow*, (London: The Women's Press, 1985); and *Feminist Fables*, (Loxodon: The Women's Press, 1988).

<sup>40</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three', in Henry Louis Gates,

categorically rejects 'feminism' on the grounds that she has little 'patience with the theory that it's women who suffer. As far as [she] can see, men suffer equally'.<sup>41 42</sup> The contrast of her novels with ambiguous and shifting statements such as the above make one wonder to what extent Indian women writers like Desai and Deshpande bear the burden of a patriarchal culture that forces them to internalise the struggle between their creative imagination and their outward 'public' participation within the still existing patriarchal norms of reality.

Their writings convey the tormented mental state of women who have awakened to and are able to analyse their oppression, but who are ultimately unable to fully express their complex and shifting subjectivities and desires within patriarchal, middle-class, Brahminical strictures. Especially in Ganorkar's poetry, self-knowledge brings, not liberation, but despair.

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Jr. (ed), *'Race', Writing, and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 264.

<sup>42</sup> Anita Desai, 'Against the Current: A Conversation with Anita Desai' [With Corinne Demas Bliss], in *The Massachusetts Review*, 29.3 (1988), p. 524.

We can see this from the following prose poem:

By the Window

As I stand by the window and plait my hair loosened the night before, my eyes suddenly fill with tears. Nilgiri trees stand before me. They are calm, and won't even flutter a tiny leaf in sympathy. The tears keep welling. Regret, because I threw my life to the crows, or sorrow, because I cannot start anew? The trees do not move, the tears will not stop. Are you standing behind me? I can't see you in the mirror.<sup>43</sup>

Both Ganorkar and Deshpande evoke forceful pictures of female desire for freedom, sexual fulfillment, and—to a point— a femininity compatible with a 'feminist' assertion of women's rights and/or needs. Cultural notions of femininity as inscribed in Indian society are critically assessed in the work of Deshpande and Ganorkar. Both writers offer their individual responses to the position of Hindu women in Indian society through the exploration and exposition of various dimensions of women's lives in their writing. Their works are concerned

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<sup>43</sup> Prabhā Ganorkar, 'Khidkishi' [By the Window], in *Vyatheeth*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974), p. 42. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

with the materialities of women's lives, the realities of India and the oppressive gendered morality and patriarchal violence that binds Indian women despite the efforts made by Indian male and female social reformers before and after India's independence.

In positing women as a product of culture, Deshpande and Ganorkar attempt to focus their critical gaze on the socialisation process responsible for the construct of womanhood, and women's condition. Consequently, neither of the two writers attempts to define an essential female identity, or one that is 'naturally' self-sufficient or self-reliant. Their writing operates on multiple levels to portray various facets of patriarchal/Brahminical oppression, and it politicises strategies of female resistance (though, I will argue, it falls short of a radical subversion). This resistance and interrogation of ascribed roles, is shown ultimately to be a necessary and often painful step in the articulation of female selfhood(s).



In spite of various legal measures to safeguard and strengthen women's rights, many Hindu women continue to exist in a state of subordination to men. Although the number of Indian women (from the middle and upper classes) in important positions in politics, education, and administration compares favourably to the number in Western societies, their careers are often still considered deviant and secondary to their role as wife and mother. That these women 'never frontally attack the official ideology of women/— an ideology derived from the 'pativrata' ideal (literally meaning the woman who worships her husband as a God)— and are able to combine their private and public roles without overt conflict is regarded by Maria Mies, a Marxist feminist, as a form of manipulation'.<sup>44</sup>

Blumberg and Dwaraki explore this question further by examining the rewards to be

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<sup>44</sup> Maria Mies, 'Indian Women and Leadership' in *Bulletin of Concerned .Scholars* [Special Issue on Asian Women] 7.1 (January-March 1975), p. 58. Also see Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1978).

found in the unquestioning acceptance of patriarchal norms, and a willingness to embrace traditional roles. This acceptance, according to the authors, is a 'deliberate strategy by which the 'good' person who accepts inferior status achieves some form of control or functional power'.<sup>45</sup>

Thus it is possible to agree with Ashis Nandy's insightful analysis of 'womanliness' in the traditional Indian context, but only up to a point. He contends that quite often, Indian women themselves unconsciously internalise patriarchal hierarchies and perpetuate their own victimisation. By subscribing to the ideal of the 'pativrata' in their overt submission to male-biased/phallocentric norms, these women place themselves at the command of the husband, and pride themselves on sacrificing their own interests and desires.<sup>46</sup> I would not, however,

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<sup>45</sup> Rhoda Blumberg and Leela Dwaraki, *India's Educated Women: Options and Constraints*, (Delhi: Hindustan Publications Corp., 1985), p. 2.

<sup>46</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Woman Versus Womanliness in India: An Essay in Social and Political Psychology', in *At the Edge of Psychology: An Essay in Cultural and Political Psychology*. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 32-46.

agree with Nandy's contention that women's abuse of women (for example, the role the mother-in-law traditionally plays in the Indian context in relation to the daughter-in-law, especially in the contemporary debates surrounding 'dowry deaths') is far greater than male abuse. I discuss this at greater length in the Deshpande chapter.

Among conservative Hindus, women as well as men give preference to the male sex over the female. This is evident not only in the continuation of ancient Hindu funeral rites, where the presence of male offspring is considered absolutely essential for the performance of religious sacraments, but also in the economic infrastructure whereby land and other immovable property, generally speaking, can only pass down through patrilineage. The economic and religious devaluing of women is evident in the neglect female children suffer among the low-income/lower caste rural population. This can also be seen in the urban

middle class context as these families use amniocentesis<sup>47</sup> which is used in order to identify and abort unwanted female foetuses. The low sex ratio (930 females : 1000 males) all over India, with the exception of Kerala<sup>48</sup>, 'bears further testimony to the continued victimisation of women in postcolonial India'.<sup>49</sup>

While many upper-class women remain fettered on account of the systemic subordination of the female sex, lower-class women are weighed down by both, gender inequalities and socio-economic inequalities. The struggle for survival forces many of these women to seek employment as domestic servants, but this rarely leads to an independent income as husbands often drink or gamble away the money.<sup>50</sup> Low-income and rural women also suffer under traditional customs, such as the one

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<sup>47</sup> Now banned by the Government

<sup>48</sup> Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi. *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste, and Class in India*, (New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986), p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> Nandini Sardesai, 'Women and Poverty', unpublished paper given at the St. Xavier's College Honours Program Lecture Series, (Bombay 1992).

<sup>50</sup> Sardesai, 'Women and Poverty', 1992.

that prescribes that women shall eat only after the men in the family have been served. This custom often results in women's malnutrition, poor health, and shorter life spans.<sup>51</sup>

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The position of Hindu women within the orthodox patriarchal hierarchies of contemporary India is ambivalent, and this ambivalence is partly derived from the dualistic construction of Hindu goddesses. The mere presence of goddess symbolism in the cultural Imaginary is not enough, Barbara Walker argues, for legitimising and affirming female power and resistance.<sup>52</sup> In the Hindu pantheon, the complexity surrounding goddesses lies in their being perceived as 'both benevolent and destructive, and in the subtle differentiation of their power'. The gentle goddesses like Lakshmi and Parvati are typically seen as 'good wives' who maintain social and domestic harmony. But

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<sup>51</sup> Lakshmi Karmalkar, 'Does Woman Enjoy New Status?' in *The Tribune*, Hyderabad, India (July 1990), p. 3.

in the 'negative' aspect of the binary equation, they are seen as symbols of Maya (illusion) due to their involvement with worldly and material pursuits, and hence are considered to be obstacles to spiritual salvation.<sup>53</sup>

The 'dangerous' goddesses like Durga and Kali, however, are feared for their uncontrollable rage, domineering sexuality and resistance to patriarchal control. It is these fearful aspects, inscribed simultaneously with the nurturing qualities of the former two Goddesses referred to, that form the basis of their veneration. 'In patriarchal Brahminism, Kali is not held up as a feminine ideal; she is feared (and worshipped) as the aggressive, primal destructive force'.<sup>54</sup>

While the married goddesses, especially in the presence of their husbands, are represented with two arms, 'unmarried goddesses are usually depicted with four or more arms,

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<sup>53</sup> Bharatan Kumarappa, *The Hindu Conception of the Deity*, (Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1979), p. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Leard, 'The Many-Armed Woman', p. 57.

symbolising, perhaps, excess or monstrosity'. While matrimony makes no difference to a male deity's power, a female deity is considered<sup>55</sup> more powerful, even dominant over a male god, in her unmarried state.<sup>56</sup> Some feminist cultural historians posit that Kali and other mother goddesses belong to the indigenous matriarchal cultural practices of the Indus Valley civilisation around 2500 BC, and these same goddesses were incorporated and their radical potential contained by the Aryans within the Brahminical tradition through the process of marriage.<sup>57</sup> Parvati can therefore be interpreted as the Brahminised and domesticated version of Kali.<sup>58</sup>

In striking contrast to the married goddesses in Hindu tradition, the childless and single goddesses such as Kali, are commonly

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<sup>55</sup> Barbara Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1983), pp. 214-219.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see P. Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality: A Psychoanalytical Study*, (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1966); and W. J. Wilkins, *Hindu Mythology: Vedic and Puranic*, (Calcutta, New Delhi, Allahabad, Bombay: Rupa & Co., 2nd edition, 1986)

<sup>57</sup> Liddle and Joshi, *Daughters of Independence*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>58</sup> Leard, 'The Many-Armed Woman', p. 58.

worshipped as mother. Wadley argues that:

According to Hindu cosmology, if a female controls her own sexuality, she is changeable; she represents both death and fertility; she is both malevolent and benevolent. If, however, she loses control of her sexuality (Power/ Nature) by transferring it to a man, she is portrayed as consistently benevolent. There are two images, then, of the woman in Hinduism, linked by the basic conceptions of the nature of femaleness: the fact that the female is both *sakti* (Power/Energy), and *prakriti* (Nature). As Power and Nature, and controlling her own sexuality, the female is potentially destructive and malevolent.<sup>59</sup>

According to Wadley, the distinction between the powers ascribed to the wife in contrast to the mother in Hindu tradition, may have had an impact on, and been influenced by divine role models. In contrast to the wifely role of passive devotion, the role of the mother is active and changeable in a sense: she must be loving as well as controlling and domineering.<sup>60</sup> Though the ideology of motherhood cannot be read as unproblematically empowering, as Nandy points out, motherhood in Indian society

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<sup>59</sup> Wadley, 'Women in the Hindu Tradition', p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> Wadley, 'Women in the Hindu Tradition', p. 33.



is valued significantly more than wifehood or daughterhood, which are 'devalued and debased'.<sup>54</sup> This concept becomes crucial in reading Deshpande's and Ganorkar's work in its cultural context; that is, work that has both, moments of confrontation, and moments of complicity in its exploration of female identities.

The delineation of female experience and female identity in the novels of Deshpande does not necessarily exclude men or entail the breakdown of family structures. She values the private realm and a mutually rewarding physical, emotional, and intellectual companionship between men and women. She does, however, foreground the workings of a patriarchal heterosexuality, the overt and covert sexism perpetuated by both men and women and silently passed down from one generation to the next. This is where Deshpande's work diverges from Ganorkar's, in that the latter's female voices are both

physically and emotionally distant from men, and isolated from society, having been betrayed and used too often. Deshpande's women struggle to achieve an identity and marriage acceptable to themselves; <sup>61</sup> Ganorkar's voices embrace the pain of isolation and 'not belonging', finding that male-female relationships exact too high a price.

On one hand, their characters follow a path leading to a self-defined identity where the self can be fragmented and yet enriched. In these instances, fragmentation is synonymous with fluidity of identity, so that no preconceived barriers limit the possibilities for a self-defined subjectivity. When it lives under the sign of fluidity, fragmentation connotes self-empowerment and successful resistance to oppression. As Brown and Gooze point out, fluid identity permits 'multiple facets of the self to emerge and multiple oppressions to be contested. It is then possible to live with and

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<sup>61</sup> Nandy, "Woman Vs Womanliness", p. 74.

within contradictions'.<sup>62</sup>

The common themes and concerns running through both their bodies of work highlight 'the need to redefine and rediscover the sources of strength available to women in a cultural environment that, ciespite increasing modernisation and material comfort, has refused to let go of a gender-biased value system'.<sup>63</sup>

Whether these texts can be classified as feminist and whether one can use feminist approaches (Western or 'Third World') to analyse Indian women writers, when the authors themselves do not overtly subscribe to a feminist ideology, are questions that allow no easy or indisputable answers. There is as yet a very small amount of scholarly evaluation of a feminist tradition of Indian women's writing in English. Can Tharu and Lalita's *Women Writing in Indin* be considered a feminist project? It is, in that it

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<sup>62</sup> Anne E. Brown and Marjanne Gooze (eds). *International Women's Writing: New Landscapes of Identity*,( Westport: Conn, and London, Greenwood Press, 1995), p. xxiv.

<sup>63</sup> Abha Prakash Leard, 'The many-armed woman, p. 52.

resurrects women writers effaced by a patriarchal canon, and allows marginalised voices to be heard. But are the writings themselves 'feminist'?— only if one conflates 'women' and 'feminist'. Moreover, given the presence of a Western-type feminist movement in India, it is difficult to isolate the features that may conceivably belong to the category of Indian feminism.

Abha Prakash Leard proposes a framework for feminist interpretations of Indian women writers. She contends that the works of Indian women writers which centre unambiguously upon the social and historical complexities relevant to the lives of Indian women, articulate alternative perceptions of womanhood (thereby rejecting the oppressive cultural stereotypes that seek to contain women's individuality) should be read as feminist. They also convey the limitations and possibilities inherent in a woman's search for a meaningful identity and personhood, and can, with a few reservations, claim to be read within the compass of Indian feminism even when the authors

themselves are not particularly sympathetic to the feminist cause.<sup>64</sup>

This analysis is problematic, because Leard does not interrogate what she posits as 'Western' feminism, nor does she question the use of oppositional binaries like 'Indian feminism' versus 'Western Feminism'. Many literary reviews and reflections by Indian journalists and reviewers seem to take a similar stance on the issue.

For instance, Seetha Srinivasan perceives the 'literature of the Indian landscape' to be 'woman-centred' rather than overtly 'feminist'—women, in her view, being central to Indian narrative practice irrespective of the artist's gender. She is optimistic about reading Indian texts in the light of Western feminist criticism despite the fact that 'no single text illustrates consistently any particular stance'. She further contends that the institutions of marriage and the family will have to be part of the feminist interpretive exercise. There can be no space, she

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<sup>64</sup> Leard, 'The many-armed woman', p. 57.

insists, for either a 'separatist feminism' or a 'radical outcry against marriage' to operate in a cultural context where both men and women 'believe so strongly in the security and stability of marriage'.<sup>65</sup> One finds this ironic, when marriage is itself posited as the primary site of gender oppression and sexual violence in both Indian life and much of Indian women's fiction and/or poetry.

Deshpande's female characters are usually married, usually urban and middle/upper middle-class, and usually 'outsiders'—alienated from their social and cultural ethos, preferring passivity, isolation and silence to engaging in a material world devoid of meaning and fulfilment. Silence is, however, shown to be an involuntary state of being as well. Her female protagonists call into question the traditional silencing of their views and desires within a culture that regards women as objects rather than as subjects. Simultaneously, the author

subverts such a silencing tradition by making her heroines <sup>66</sup> deliberately choose to be outwardly silent but in possession of an intensely subjective and articulate imagination and consciousness. Silence, in Deshpande's novels, therefore, becomes a form of protest, 'a different kind of speech'.\* <sup>67</sup> Deshpande explicitly discusses her preoccupation with different kinds of speech— specifically the unsaid (in words) and expression through music— in a recent interview, where she says:

Then there is the language of music, which in a way is more fascinating than the language of writing because it is such an emotional, rather than cerebral, experience. Actually, *Small Remedies* is more about words than music. It is a novel that is trying to understand language and words, and what escapes both.<sup>68</sup>

While feminist writers have a certain freedom to shape and articulate their individual

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<sup>66</sup> Seetha Srinivasan, 'In Search of an Identity', in *The Hindu*,

<sup>67</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Philomela's Retold Story: Silence, Music, and the Post-Colonial Text', in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 25.1 (1990), p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> Shashi Deshpande, 'An Interview with Shashi Deshpande' [with T. Vijay Kumar], 2000, p. 1. [Online]. Available: <http://ch.Sm.corn/shashi.htm>.

visions, feminist critics cannot lose sight of the material context in which a creative work is written, or of the text written into a literary creation. Both the form and content of a work have to be taken into consideration, together with an awareness of the specific historical and cultural context within which a writer situates his or her creative text. Carol Boyce Davies, in defining an African feminist critical approach, has emphasised this aspect when she talks of feminist criticism being both 'contextual and textual'.<sup>69</sup> Due to the blending of literary traditions in Indian writing in English, and the complex historical and social forces that have shaped Indian cultures, the Indian critic has to be doubly careful in responding to the 'particular situational context' of Indian works.<sup>70</sup>

Postcolonial critics dealing with Indian literature, have to bear in mind that it is possible

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<sup>69</sup> Carol Boyce Davies, Introduction, in Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves (eds), *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*, (Trenton: New Jersey, African World Press, 1986), pp. 12-15.

<sup>70</sup> Feroza Jussawalla, *Family Quarrels: Towards A Criticism of Indian Literature in English*, (New York: P. Lang, 1985).



for literature to be 'created in response to [the author's] own cultural needs and desires'.<sup>71</sup> Indian women writers, for instance, could be more interested in interrogating specific gendered ideologies perpetuated by contemporary Indian culture and society, than in India's experience of colonialism (in the sense of employing over-arching frameworks of the 'colonial encounter' and the 'resistant native') – though these ideologies have roots in Aryan-Vedic Brahminism, the Mughal era, as well as British colonisation.

One cannot ignore the role of English when discussing the 'particular situational context' of Indian (postcolonial) writing. The ways in which English Studies dominate the social Imaginary cannot be explained only through neo-colonialism. The collusion of the Indigenous bourgeoisie in perpetuating this instrument of socio-political control is staged in

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<sup>71</sup> Arun Prabha Mukherjee 'The Exclusions of Postcolonial Theory and Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable: A Case Study*', *Ariel* 22.3 (July 1991), p. 33.

interesting ways in postcolonial literature. However, to consider English as the 'weapon only of 'deracination' and linguistic-cultural 'denationalisation' is reductive'.<sup>72</sup> As A. and V. Dharwadker point out, a language imposed merely from the outside cannot survive, and a literary culture cannot flourish without the active 'complicity' of 'native' authors.<sup>73</sup> This produces ambivalent relationships to the nation as a constituency. These contradictions ensure that Indian literature in English is a particularly complicated referent in the discourse of nationhood, national identity and cultural self-definition in the contemporary postcolonial period. Similarly, in analysing the politics of gender in the writing by postcolonial Indian women, one sees a struggle with the articulation of feminist moments, sometimes in conjunction

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<sup>72</sup> Debjani Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities: moments of confrontation and complicity in post-colonial fiction and film', PhD thesis. State University of New York at Stony Brook, (1995), p. 79.

<sup>73</sup> Aparna Dharwadker and Vinay Dharwadker, 'Language, Identity, and Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature', in Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan (eds), *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from Around the World*, (Westport: Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 89.

with, and sometimes in opposition to nationalist/patriarchal ideologies.<sup>74</sup>

As mentioned earlier, historically, almost without exception, feminism has arisen in the Third Worlds in tandem with nationalist movements — whether in the form of anticolonial/ anti-imperialist struggles, national modernisation and reform movements, or religious-nationalist/ cultural- nationalist revivalisms. Feminism has in fact coexisted with these movements in a complicated relationship of compassion and encouragement, mutual use and mutual cooperation, as well as unacknowledged tension. As Kumari Jayawardena argues in her ground breaking study, feminist movements in the Third World have almost always grown out of the same historical soil, and at a similar historical moment, as nationalism.<sup>75</sup> However, the ‘contestatory nature of the relationship between feminism and nationalism remains under-

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<sup>74</sup> Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities', p. 413.

<sup>75</sup> Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, New Delhi, Kali for Women, 1986.

emphasised in scholarship on the subject, both at the historical origin of feminism and nationalism and today'.<sup>76</sup> Thus ironically, many academic studies on women and the Third World, anti-imperialist struggles, or reform movements also also function as confirmations of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains and wins at the expense of a subordinated feminism, as Heng expands on in her analysis.<sup>77</sup>

The category of 'woman' itself is reproduced and restrained by the discourse of nationalism. This is especially true in the Indian context where nationalism and 'the woman's question' have had a fraught relationship since their emergence into the discursive realm of colonial and postcolonial India. As a meaningful narrative, nationalism attains much of its affect — and considerable oppositional force in independence struggles — by that specific appeal of imagined (and imaginary) relations between

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<sup>76</sup> Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly" Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly" Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', p. 31.

geography, language, and history.

This would-be nation is represented, perhaps, as a cherished 'motherland' to be protected and renewed; an essential 'mother tongue' is recovered and promulgated in the nationalist cause; or a selective configuration of womanhood, or traditional 'mother culture', is posited, then defended by those who eventually become the 'founding fathers' of the nation (which is subsequently 'born'). Inevitably, the nationalist invocation of discriminate figures produces a disposition of use, and of power, that is gendered and sexualised — with the female and the feminine being positioned as a crucial foundational term and a resource to be fought over for possession, definition, control and protection.<sup>78</sup>

Larger processes of globalisation make it both difficult and necessary to talk about the Nation, to talk specifically about nationalism and the problematical relationship of Third World Women to it. 'Anticolonial nationalism has always mobilized women's labour in order to help consolidate popular nationalism. It is not accidental, therefore, that feminism often emerged within anticolonial movements'. But the state mobilisation of women is contradictorily inflected. On the one hand, as Heng argues,

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<sup>78</sup>Heng, ' "A Great Way to Fly" Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism', p. 359.

'women, the feminine, and figures of gender have traditionally anchored the nationalist imaginary'. But on the other, certain sorts of 'undesirable' women, such as prostitutes and lesbians have generally been written out of the script of nation-building. Thus Ella Shohat's argument is a useful launching pad to analyse these exclusions. If, as Shohat argues, 'affiliation with the nation-state becomes partial and contingent',<sup>79</sup> in the postcolonial context, women's relationships to it are even more so. In very specific ways, the processes of recolonisation draw material and ideological force from women and women's collectivities in order to re-anchor patriarchal and heteronormative imperatives.<sup>80</sup>

In this context, it is important that the terms 'woman' and 'feminism' are not conflated. The differences are tangential and implicate one another in the exploration of their relationship in

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<sup>79</sup> Ella Shohat, 'Notes on the Post-Colonial', in *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), p. 107.

<sup>80</sup> J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty, 'Introduction: Genealogies, Legacies, Movements', in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, pp. xxiv-xxv.

the context of the representation of postcolonial identity. I focus on Indian women writers writing in English and in a regional language, Marathi, in order to draw attention to the voices that are being elided in the formation of postcolonial canons. Criticism on postcolonial literature confirms the consistent canonisation of male authors such as Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Amitav Ghosh and recently, Vikram Chandra. For example, Viney Kirpal's *The New Indian Novel in English* celebrates the publication of *Midnight's Children* as an epochal moment in the history of Indian literature. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has pointed out, in terms of the reception of literary products from India, that:

To write fiction in English in India today is to write in the shadow of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*<sup>81</sup>.

The brilliance of Rushdie's work notwithstanding, one watches with increasing concern as histories of supremacy reiterate themselves and the canon of postcolonial

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<sup>81</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 72.

literature from India gets defined as being written primarily by male writers. The reception of postcolonial writing is often based on its radical potential, therefore it is important that postcolonial literatures continue to function as resistant, challenging dominant narratives and ideologies. If, however, this literature is implicated in perpetuating patriarchal ideologies and exclusive practices, its critique of dominant culture would be seriously compromised.

At this point, it is necessary to map the epistemological field that is referred to as 'postcolonial' studies. The multiple readings of the term postcolonial are associated with a wide range of practices and identities. The debates generated are concerned with the applicability of the term, which requires interrogation and unpacking on a multiplicity of levels. One set of questions is connected with the range of territories, people and histories that the term encompasses. The authors of *The Empire Writes*



*Back* read postcoloniality as a condition that describes both settler and non-settler colonies. Stephen Slemon in his essay 'Modernism's Last Post' makes similar arguments that mark postcolonial discourse as a counter-discursive practice in the Canadian context.<sup>70 82</sup> Many critics have objected to this homogenising trend that erases at least the racial differences between the white settler colonies of Canada and Australia and that of the colonies in Africa, India and the Caribbean. Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge contest the project of *The Empire Writes Back* and call for a focus on the 'radical differences in the "colonial" relationship between the imperial centre and the colonized in the various parts of the former Empires.' They trace a path towards the postcolonial (without the hyphen), that:

would take us beyond the oppositional postcolonialism of non-settler colonies that pivots around the moment of independence... It is precisely if we acknowledge the pervasiveness but not universality of complicit forms of the postcolonial that we can trace the

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<sup>82</sup> Stephen Slemon, 'Modernism's Last Post', in *Ariel*, 20.4 (October 1989), pp. 3-17.

connections that go back to the settler experience and beyond, and forward to the new postcolonialism.<sup>83</sup>

What this debate makes clear is that 'postcolonial' must be seen as flexible and heterogeneous, and for this very reason, needs to be rigorously contextualised.

Even when used in the context of India, 'postcolonial' does not connote a unified field. Some of the things it does signify are associated with the temporal and spatial points mapped after the moment of Independence in 1947. The end of territorial colonisation and independence from Britain is the point of India's initiation into nationhood. Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenburg have suggested that in the context of India, 'postcolonial' also implies:

inauguration of a path of economic development characterized by the growth of indigenous capitalism; a neo-colonial relationship to the capitalist world.<sup>84</sup>

Perhaps the most sustained opposition to

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<sup>83</sup> Vijay Mishra and Bob Hodge. 'What is Post (-) Colonialism', in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (eds). *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 289.

<sup>84</sup> Lata Mani and Ruth Frankenburg, 'Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, "Postcoloniality" and the Politics of Location', in *Cultural Studies*, 7.2 (1993), p. 292.

the term 'postcolonial' comes from a literal reading, where the prefix 'post' signifies the end of colonial effects, whereas in most decolonised nations imperial echoes linger and continue to influence social, political and cultural ideologies. When used in conjunction with the term 'neo-colonial', however, 'postcolonial' can indicate 'spaces of ongoing contestation enabled by decolonization struggles both globally and locally'.<sup>85</sup>

For newly independent countries, there is a need to indicate a temporal and political break from territorial colonisation, and 'postcolonial' does exactly that. Although imperial structures continue and newer ones are put in place, the changes in these nations after decolonisation cannot be conflated with the effects of territorial colonialism. In this context, it is also significant that 'postcolonial' criticism has, in its reworking of histories of Western domination, sought to 'undo the Eurocentrism produced by the West's

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<sup>85</sup> Marti and Frankenburg, 'Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, "Postcoloniality" and the Politics of Location', p. 294.

trajectory, its appropriation of the other as History.'<sup>86</sup>

Since in the Indian context, history and colonialism were more or less contiguous, the rewriting of these histories must articulate the 'subsequence' that only the term 'postcolonial' can emphasise. As Gyan Prakash points out— 'the postcolonial exists as an aftermath, as an after— after being worked over by colonialism.'<sup>87</sup>

By thus interrogating the components of the term 'postcolonial', we are confronted with temporal and spatial fulcra that relate to a historical moment which invokes the phenomena of colonialism, but which also signifies a point in time that is beyond at least one dimension of that colonialism. In her essay 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism"', Anne McClintock explores many of the problems that the term conceals. She points out that an

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<sup>86</sup> Gyan Prakash,, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', in *Social Text*, 10.2-3 (1992), p. 8.

<sup>87</sup> Prakash, 'Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography', p. 5.

uninformed use of the label often does not distinguish between different kinds of colonialism that have dissonant effects after decolonisation. McClintock questions the efficacy of the term in the very different contexts of native Americans in the United States, the Arab inhabitants of the Gaza strip, Northern Ireland, and 'break-away settler colonies' including South Africa and Australia.<sup>88</sup> Her analysis of different global political situations provides a helpful insight into the limitations of the postcolonial.

McClintock's point that the postcolonial foregrounds a linear paradigm of history is a valuable one.<sup>89</sup> In the Indian context, 'postcolonial' does valorise colonialism over several centuries of history prior to British colonialism, which are then lumped together as pre-colonial. However, of the other available terms, 'Third World' too, in perhaps more overt ways, hinges on economic

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<sup>88</sup> Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism"', in *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), pp. 291-304.

<sup>89</sup> McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term "Post-colonialism"', p. 293.

development. 'Commonwealth', one of the predecessors of postcolonialism that lingers in places, is even less satisfactory because of its obvious associations with Empire. It abrogates itself by retaining Britain at the centre of the model, and by blurring the distinctions between settler colonies and non-settler colonies.

One obvious difference that separates the countries within the Commonwealth is the use of English. The ways in which the intervention of English modulates the histories of India and for instance, Australia, are 'completely different. For the purposes of this dissertation which is rooted in English literature and is shaped by the disciplinary effects of the same, it is useful to emphasise the linear history of colonialism.

Studying English literature and writing in English are value-laden practices that foreground debates about canonised literatures. Gauri Viswanathan maps out these areas of contestation involving English literature and language in *Masks of Conquest*:<sup>78</sup>

What I am suggesting, however, is that we can no longer afford to regard the uses to which literary works were put- in the service of British imperialism as extraneous to the way these texts are to be read. The involvement of colonialism with literary culture is too deep, too pervasive for the disciplinary development of literary pedagogy to be studied with Britain as its only or primary focus.<sup>90</sup>

To study English literature under the rubric of 'postcolonial literature in the Indian context, is to both confront the implication of colonialism in literature, and to engage with the politics of canon formation. Thus one can focus on the specific history of the discipline and the power play that underpin English literature in the postcolonial nation state. In so far as the discussion of English literature is an important component of cultural studies and feminist historiographies, 'postcolonial is a politically valuable term when used carefully as a complex term that deconstructs the location of the speaker and his/her audience; in this context 'postcolonial connotes diverse histories, identities and cultural practices in

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<sup>90</sup> Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, (New York: Columbia University Press, p. 69.

addition to invoking the debates around the canonisation of English literatures'.<sup>91</sup>

In focusing exclusively on women's writing, one is perhaps exposed to the charge of essentialism. This (strategic) essentialism,<sup>80</sup> is a necessary ploy to produce counter narratives of a blossoming canon that is getting solidified as male, as well as to highlight women's voices that are in danger of being re-silenced. As long as women are being acted upon by patriarchal institutions such as the law and the state as monolithically and essentially women, one cannot ignore women as a category of analysis. It is important that women speak and write 'as' women to effectively dismantle patriarchal ideologies.<sup>92</sup>

In order to explore feminist articulations and cultural practices in the Indian context, I will

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<sup>91</sup> Gauri Vishwanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, p. 69.

<sup>92</sup> 1989), p. 169.

See Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in Ranajit Guha (ed), *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1985, pp. 330-363.



constantly advantage women's identities, women's movements and women's writings. It is necessary to use this approach in order to articulate women's histories that can be easily elided when made part of a universalist approach that seeks to conceal its own patriarchal bias.<sup>93</sup> For example, Linda Hutcheon comments:

The current post-structuralist / postmodern challenges to the coherent, autonomous subject have to be put on hold in feminist and post-colonial discourses, for both must work first to assert and affirm a denied or alienated subjectivity: those radical postmodern challenges are in many ways the luxury of the dominant order which can afford to challenge that which it securely possesses.<sup>94</sup>

What can be contested is this notion of feminist politics as a non-important part of the ostensibly 'wider' politics of nationalism, which then relegates feminist concerns to the background. It is important to focus on a feminist politics and regard women writers as *women* writers while perceiving the category of 'woman'

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<sup>93</sup> Leard. 'The Many Armed Woman'. p. 99.

<sup>94</sup> Linda Hutcheon. 'Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-colonialism and Postmodernism', in *Ariel* 20.4 (1989), p. 151.

as always already problematized, as theorists point out.

I will, of course, contest any notion of woman as a stable, uniform subject, completely rational and utterly transparent to herself; such an immovable notion of Woman is adverse to feminist aims. More interesting are the multiple, changing and specific positions that come under the category 'woman', and the shifting relationship between female subjectivity and systems of domination, as we see through my choice of writers. In studying these two women writers of my choice, I will regard identity as an ensemble of plotted positions which is simultaneously involved in relations of domination and subordination, producing ambivalent power relations and resisting or succumbing to oppression.

The site of production I am highlighting is a specific one, locally focused but multiply engaged with issues of class, sexuality, and religion. These are not equivalent axes of

oppression, but are 'imbricated with gender to produce shifting subject positions'.<sup>95</sup> In other words, non-Anglo women experience a sexualised racism as non-white *and* women, which is not the same kind of racism that non-Anglo men may be subject to.<sup>96</sup>

By locating women authors at the centre of my work and by analysing their representation of gendered female identities, I seek to examine identity as an ideological construct and as a material effect; I also want to politicise the representation and the reading and interpretation of these works within knotty postcolonial-feminist frameworks.

The postcolonial feminist critique in my writing cannot be uninterpellated by Western/ First World/ Anglo-American/ French feminisms. Indeed, it is constantly in dialogue with global Feminisms, while challenging the colonising tendencies within existing power relations of the

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Linda Hutcheon 'Circling the Downspout of Empire: Post-colonialism and Postmodernism', in *Ariel* 20.4 (1989), p. 151.

<sup>96</sup> Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities: moments of confrontation and complicity in post-colonial fiction and film', p. 415.

West and the 'other'. It is also important to contest notions of 'indigenous' Feminism in the Indian context which rely on (Brahminical) tropes from Hindu religion and mythology, and valorise the figure of the goddess Kali and motherhood as unproblematically empowering. If a postcolonial-feminist critique 'exposes the inadequacies of the critical apparatus of Western feminism and regards as counter-productive its own crystallisation into a segregated discourse, how do we demarcate a space within which it can operate and produce effective critiques of itself?'<sup>97</sup>

The consequence of these normative roles that the woman is expected -to perform, is the production of a subject who has no material body outside of the rhetoric/ideology that delineates her position. Her subjectivity is perceived as ahistorical, the traditional is portrayed as 'universal' and 'timeless' and the fact that she is

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<sup>97</sup> Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities: moments of confrontation and complicity in post-colonial fiction and film', p. 416.

constructed through specific discourses of Nationhood is not visible. The ideal of Indian womanhood that is continually circulated and reinscribed in the culture, ultimately, constructs the figure of the woman as 'lack'.<sup>98</sup>

As noted earlier, the production of the subjectivity of the Indian middle-class woman is based on a powerful ideology derived from the ostensibly essential differences between the sexes. The woman is conditioned, even determined by the fact that as a wife she is expected to identify completely with the private sphere of the home. The traditions that underpin the family implicate individuals in gender hierarchies and naturalise these inequities through stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Moreover, analysing the nexus of state, capital, and patriarchy in the consolidation of religious fundamentalism in India, Amrita Chhachhi shows that 'state-supported fundamentalism reinforces the shift of control over

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<sup>98</sup> Banerjee, *Nationalist and feminist identities*, p. 413.

women from kinsmen to any man of the 'religious' community— thus the public is profoundly patriarchal'.<sup>99</sup> Within religious fundamentalist discourses and state practices, women's bodies and minds, as well as the domestic and public spaces they occupy, become the primary ground for the regulation of morality and inscriptions of patriarchal control. This sexual and social division has passed into the framework of 'common sense'. 'In colonial India, the ideology appeared to have only tenuous connections with political relations.'<sup>100</sup>

Because their relationship with political discourses was apparently distant, the colonial elements that shaped the ideal of 'love marriage' (where people marry for love), as it is referred to in India, on the matrix of arranged marriage (a traditional practice where the families select a 'suitable' person), were not singled out for critique.

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<sup>99</sup> Cited in J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty, in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. xxv.

<sup>100</sup> Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 93.

Moreover, the ways in which the rhetoric of Nationhood deployed this model of 'true companionship' to consolidate its traditional heritage while demonstrating its ability to familiarise values of Western Enlightenment were not made transparent. In other words, the ideological work – and indeed the same old patriarchy in new garb – done by the image of the Indian woman within the love marriage was concealed. One sees this most clearly in Shashi Deshpande's body of work, which has as its recurring theme, explorations of the power differentials and 'taken for grantedness' of women's roles in middle-class, urban love marriages.

Is there actually an essential 'postcolonial female subject', prior to its construction at the interface of numerous, conflicting discourses? To argue for an essential female identity would mean to re-inscribe the figure of the Woman as the colonial and Nativist, Nationalist dominant discourses have done. On the other hand, it is not

possible to relinquish the identity of women *as* women. After all, 'the politics of identity is located at this interface of material history and the paradigm of construction'.<sup>101</sup> The female figures/voices to which I point, demonstrate to the ways in which 'postcolonial female subjectivity' is defined by resistance. This opposition is provisional, re-enunciated according to the specific forces of oppression. The identities too are therefore dynamic, and always poised for re-voicing.

One issue that assumes significance is the (often troubled) relationship between postcolonial feminism and other kinds of feminisms variously labelled 'Western' feminism, feminism of 'women of colour', and 'white, Western' feminism. It is vital that this relationship is interrogated in terms of the power of representation we start to examine postcolonial feminism in terms of a global feminism.

Without the alliances within the umbrella of global feminism, postcolonial feminism would

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<sup>101</sup> Banerjee, *Nationalist and feminist identities'*, p. 414.



remain an isolated and probably separatist discourse denying the complex relationships between women and movements in different parts of the world. It would merely celebrate an 'authentic' identity based on either race (a biologically problematic category to begin with) or colonised representations of the other. In previously colonised countries, women's quest for liberation, self-identity and fulfilment is often seen as transgressive and treacherous;<sup>102</sup> a betrayal of the postcolonial nation that will inevitably lead to the break-down of traditional (pre-colonial) codes of practice and belief, as well as make a negative impact on the wider struggle for liberation. Affiliation with global feminism, on the other hand, would offer postcolonial feminism a larger platform of resistance. It would also resist being swallowed by a non-gender-specific discourse of postcoloniality, where the attempt to speak to other women across national, religious or other divides would

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<sup>102</sup> Susheila Nasta, *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing From Africa, The Caribbean and South Africa*, Introduction, (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. xv.

automatically be construed as acts of disloyalty to the nation, religion, or 'morals'.

As we know, the relation between postcolonial feminism and 'white, Western feminism' has been extremely fraught, specially on the issue of the homogenisation of the oppression of all non-white women by an Orientalising white feminist gaze. Critics such as Susheila Nasta and Chandra Mohanty have discussed the colonising potential of some feminist discourses which collapse different histories of women in the name of global feminism. E.g., Mohanty contends that:

One of the tasks of feminist analysis is uncovering alternative, non-identical histories which challenge and disrupt the spatial and temporal location of a hegemonic history. However, sometimes attempts to uncover and locate alternative histories [are] either totally dependent on and determined by a dominant narrative, or [are] isolated and autonomous narratives, untouched in their essence by the dominant figurations.<sup>103</sup>

Patriarchal oppression is not one monolithic structure operating globally, but as Sangari and

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<sup>103</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience' in *Copyright*, 1 (1987), p. 38.

Vaid have demonstrated, it is re-constituted within different socio-cultural, legal and economic histories.<sup>104</sup> For the purposes of global feminism, therefore, it is important to first situate local histories of women's resistance, and then reconnect them with global narratives of history and oppression. As feminist studies become increasingly globalised, it is imperative that we examine postcolonial women's experiences within their 'specific historical and material contexts' rather than as 'variants on Western ontologies, or as minor illustrations of Western feminist theories'.<sup>105</sup> Moreover, we must keep in mind that constructions of / responses to writers like Deshpande and Ganorkar are also governed by issues of language choice such as whether they write in English or regional languages, whether they are considered 'good enough' to warrant

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<sup>104</sup> Kurnkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (eds). *Recasting Women*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

<sup>105</sup> Harveen Sachdeva Mann, 'Women's Rights versus Feminism? Postcolonial Perspectives', in Gita Rajan and Radhika Mohanram (eds), *Postcolonini Discourse and Changing Cultural Contexts: Theory and Criticism*, (Westport: Conn., Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 70.

translation into English and the ensuing international attention.

In her essay, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', Chandra Talpade Mohanty has addressed the 'process of discursive homogenisation and systematisation of the oppression of women in the third world.'<sup>106</sup> In fact myriad Postcolonial feminists have also expressed anxiety about the imposition of a particular Western feminism on non-Western societies.

Gayatri Spivak, for instance, speaks in an interview of the dangers of producing normative models of identity:

We shall see that soon U.S. style feminism will be able to infiltrate into Saudi Arabia. Already in representation much has been made of this. Lilah Abu-Logodh and I have talked about the fact that much has been made of the fact that forty upper class Saudi Arabian women drove cars. Soon there will be a discourse which will say that the people of Saudi Arabia are like us. So we must help them to become more like us... one of the strongest functioning of

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<sup>106</sup> Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), p. 54.

unwitting neo-colonialism is the production of models of identity from supposedly the history of other places where the epistemic transformation is rights talk among a certain class.<sup>107</sup>

Spivak and Mohanty map out the problems that have to be dealt with in the encounter between 'Western' feminism and the postcolonial world. By doing so<sup>89</sup> they emphasise the need for staging such discursive encounters, which can then be analysed in order to develop a stronger presence within global contexts. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan approaches the relationship between representation and the 'real', by pointing out that feminism has challenged the boundaries between the two. 'Our understanding of the problems of "real" women cannot lie outside the "imagined" constructs in and through which 'women' emerge as subjects', as she contends.<sup>108</sup>

In combating the oppressions of local patriarchies, postcolonial feminist critics could seek new paradigms for global feminism by vindicating

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<sup>107</sup> Spivak, 'Neocolonialism and the Secret Agent of Knowledge', [with Robert Young], in *The Oxford Literary Review*, (13.1-2, 1991), p. 221.

<sup>108</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 3.

the efforts of those white, 'Western' feminists. The latter's engagement with the issues of postcolonial feminism can overcome the homogenous perceptions of 'other' women as victimised, confront the complexities of ethnicity, race, class, religion and nation, and thus help to build a coalition between women across the world.<sup>90</sup>

Sara Suleri occupies perhaps one of the most productive positions in the postcolonialism/feminism divide. Critical of what she sees as the the insularity and framework of such a debate, she asks— 'What comes first, race gender, or profession?'<sup>109</sup> Suleri attempts to mediate what she regards as the 'ultimately obsolescent' dichotomy of margin and centre, of 'decolonising and metropolitan feminisms'.<sup>110</sup> Arguing for plurality and anti mono-culturalism, she recommends that we all transcend regressive, Nationalistic and historically decontextualised gender politics to

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<sup>109</sup> Sara Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition', in *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992), p. 762.

<sup>110</sup> Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition', p. 768.

actively unearth and fight 'realisms' which severely curtail women's rights to even be human.<sup>111</sup>

Through an extended analysis of the terms 'postcolonial', 'woman' and 'feminist', and their connection to— and formation in— discourses of nationhood in the Indian context, I have tried to argue that our 'understandings of the material histories of women are imbricated in the processes by which images of women are embedded in the cultural Imaginary'.<sup>112</sup> Strategic interpretations of literature by and about women can affect and change, conceptual realities that ground cultural frameworks.<sup>113</sup> As Rajeswari Sunder Rajan points out:

The discovery of resistance in women's writing also requires the investments of our desires and the acknowledgement of our politics as women/feminists reading.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Suleri, 'Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition', pp. 766-769.

<sup>112</sup> Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities', p. 413.

<sup>113</sup> Banerjee, 'Nationalist and feminist identities', p. 413.

<sup>114</sup> Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*, p. 3.

## CHAPTER TWO

### TRANSLATION AND POSTCOLONIALITY

**"Translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history." — Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi.**

**"Poetry is what gets lost in translation" — Robert Frost.**

**"Translation as transfusion. Of blood. Ironically, we could talk of vampirization, thinking now of the translator's nourishment." — Haroldo de Campos.**



Constructions of and responses to writers like Deshpande and Ganorkar are partly governed by questions of language choice. These are, in turn, closely linked to my analysis of the terms 'postcolonial', 'woman' and 'feminist', and their connection to— and construction in— discourses of nationhood in the Indian context. In this chapter I explore the issue of translation, and its place in contemporary literature in India and postcolonial studies. I will argue that translation theory and practice is important today more than ever, as it is the basis not only for general comparative literary study, but for intra-national and international cultural understanding as it pertains to India's representation to itself and the outside world. Postcolonial studies are fundamentally comparative, and they inject a needed awareness of cultural politics into translation studies. Translation, on the other hand, shows up some of the weaknesses of postcolonial studies, especially regarding the issue of referentiality versus mediation, and the concentration in the field of postcolonial literary studies on

Anglophone writing to the exclusion of writing in other languages.

In the debates surrounding Indian writing in English, it is often argued that local experience is translated into a 'foreign' language for Western consumption. This position is seen in the translation theory of Sujit Mukherjee. Speaking of work that uses English as a bridge between two different regional languages, he contends that:

If it is accepted that any act of translation means the naturalisation by transfer of an alien quality, the Indian translator is involved in transferring an Indian (native) text through a non-Indian language such as English (alien) into the Indian culture (native), whereas [a Western speaker of English] is transferring an Indian text (alien) through his native language into his native culture.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I will argue, rather, for the decolonising project of postcolonial literature being advanced by the consideration of work in 'native'

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<sup>1</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, 'Translation as New Writing', in *Translation as Discovery*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994), p. 82.

languages, but in contexts that avoid, as far as possible, a reductive 'nativism'. I wish to argue for the validity of Anglophone writing doing radical work *within* the nation while also asserting the need to consider work in 'native' languages within wider postcolonial literary studies, both to oppose westernising globalism and to resist reductive nationalist or regionalist claims.

In this chapter I will attempt to trace three distinct threads of analysis within the framework of Nation and postcolonial politics— the Colonialist / Assimilationist aspect of translation, the Nativist opposition to that, and translation as a mediating 'third space'<sup>2</sup>. As A. K. Ramanujan has put it: 'A translation should be true to the translator no less than to the originals...'<sup>3</sup>

The issue of translation is a fraught one within the Indian / postcolonial literature contexts. Just as

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<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 38-39.

<sup>3</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, 'The Making of Indo-English Literature', in *Translation as Discovery*, p. 24.

'feminism' has to be translated across and into national, cultural and class contexts to be meaningful in specific social locations (I have discussed how Shashi Deshpande attempts to 'translate' the meaning of feminism into and back from the Indian context in a separate chapter), so, in literature, translation is an integral part of cultural politics with connections to postcolonial debates. For instance, there are constructions of the postcolonial that keep out non-English texts. This is why I have chosen to translate and critically examine Prabha Ganorkar's poetry in this thesis. As A. and V. Dharwadker remind us:

English has become a language to write *in*, to translate *from* and *into*, generating powerful and durable new strategies of appropriation, amplification, assimilation, and synthesis which cannot be contained now by a simple narration of domination and control.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Aparna Dharwadker and Vinay Dharwadker, 'Language, Identity, and Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature', in Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan (eds), *English Postcoloniality: Literatures from Around the World*, (Westport: Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996), p. 89.

Following Homi Bhabha's lead, Tejaswini Niranjana analyses the task of the postcolonial translator in the unsettling terms of poststructuralism. She posits that the 'problematic' of translation exists uneasily on the interface between the postcolonial context and poststructuralist theory. For some critics, to use 'Western' theory in deconstructing colonial texts is to reproduce and perpetuate the conditions of neocolonialism. This attitude can be seen to be part of a nativism, Tejaswini Niranjana argues, and seems to 'deny history in the following ways: firstly, in arguing for a return, to a lost purity, it not only employs a discredited realist epistemology'<sup>5</sup>, but also ignores the pervasiveness of a postcolonial violence that renders impossible even the positing of a mythical uncontaminated space; secondly, it denounces post-structuralism as 'Western', and 'does not realise the extent to which anti-colonial struggles have intervened in changing the trajectory of "Western" thought by demanding a non-exploitative

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<sup>5</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 170-171.

recognition of difference'.<sup>6</sup> Accepting the need for 'theory' in the postcolonial arena does not mean unthinkingly accepting the 'totalising narrative of global capitalism', as Niranjana further points out. It is important to search for the best ways available for deconstructing colonialist and oppressive narratives, and to engage ethically with the subject matter at hand, to show the 'infinitely varied inflections of the postcolonial situation'.<sup>7</sup>

Since postcolonials already exist 'in translation'<sup>8</sup>, as Niranjana has pointed out, our search should not be for origins or essences but for a richer complexity, 'a complication of the notions of our notions of the "self", a more densely textured understanding of who "we" are'.<sup>9</sup> And it is precisely here that translators can step in / mediate to disrupt homogeneity, to warn against myths of purity, to show origins as always already fissured. In this way,

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<sup>6</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>7</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>8</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>9</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, pp. 170-171.

translation, from being a 'containing' force, can be transformed into a radical, disruptive, disseminating one. The deconstruction initiated by re-translation / 'new writing'<sup>10</sup> / 'transcreation'<sup>11</sup> / 'reimagination'<sup>12</sup> opens up a postcolonial space as it brings ' "history" to legibility'.<sup>13</sup>

Bilingualism and/or multilingualism, or at least biculturalism or straddling cultures is one of the most striking features of postcolonial writing. 'This linguistic and cultural hybridity can help replace the imperial, and also demands a non-essentialist position in which to contextualise a postcolonial critique'.<sup>14</sup> While translation can devour texts from subjugated cultures, it can also function as a powerful strategy of resistance, as

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<sup>10</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, 'Translation as New Writing', in *Translation as Discovery*, pp. 77-85.

<sup>11</sup> P. Lal, *Transcreations: Seven Essays on the Art of Transcreation*, (Calcutta: Writers' Workshop, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Haroldo de Campos' terms, quoted by Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, 'Liberating Calibans: Readings of *Antropofagia* and Haroldo de Campos' Poetics of Transcreation', in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (eds). *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 186.

<sup>14</sup> Saeed Ur Rehman, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', MA Diss., University of Wollongong, 1997.

discussed above, opening up a 'third space'<sup>15</sup> in R. Radhakrishnan's terms, a space that does not posit an artificial disjunction between 'authenticity' and 'invention', because of its potential for resistance. As

Sujit Mukherjee points out:

*Rupantar* (meaning 'change in form') and *anuvad* ('speaking after' or 'following') are the commonly understood senses of translation in India, and neither term demands fidelity to the original.<sup>16</sup>

In the light of the above argument, I would like to foreground my positionality as a writer and translator from a postcolonising society, whose work does not place imperial discourse at its heart, nor does it attempt to construct a fetishised and homogenised version of pre-colonial or contemporary 'Indianness'. Rather, I would like my praxis to suggest the possibility of ambiguity and hybridity through cultural translation.<sup>17</sup> Hybridity, as as Homi Bhabha has put forward, is the sign of

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<sup>15</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity', in *Callaloo*, 16.4 (Fall 1993), p. 755.

<sup>16</sup> Mukherjee, 'Translation as New Writing', in *Translation as Discovery*, p. 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 228.



the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; 'it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the "pure" and original identity of authority)'.<sup>18</sup> Hybridity is the 'reevaluation of the assumption of colonial identity... it displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination'.<sup>19</sup>

'The sign of translation continually tells, or "tolls"' against canonising by conferring international status through translation, that is, 'the times and spaces between cultural authority and transformative practices'<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, though couched in different language, Bassnett and Lefevre call for 'the study of culture [that] always involves an examination of the processes of encoding and decoding that comprise translation'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.159

<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders', p. 154.

<sup>20</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.159

<sup>21</sup> Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevre, *Constructing Cultures: Essays on Literary Translation*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1998, pp. 138-139.

The 'time' of translation consists in that movement of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication that in the words of de Man: puts the original in motion [...] giving it [...] a fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile.<sup>22</sup>

But first, it is important to acknowledge the relationship between colonialism and translation. I will therefore discuss at length, the role historically played by translation in facilitating colonisation.

'The term "translation", in its etymology, contains the idea of crossing a boundary, and 'this boundary may exist between two cultures, two languages, two territories, between life and death, health and disease, or the knowable and the unknowable'.<sup>23</sup> Saeed's analogy, just cited, is useful when one considers that translation theorists and translators repeatedly use the terms 'crossing boundaries', 'domesticating', and 'bringing home'. For example, we see this in Mangesh Kulkarni and Ranjit Hoskote's translators' preface to *Yogabhrashta / A Terrorist of the Spirit*, where they explicitly say:

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 228.

<sup>23</sup> Saeed Ur Rehman, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

We wished, primarily, to evoke a dimension of *occupancy*— to *domicile* the text in its new linguistic-cultural setting'. (Emphasis added)<sup>24</sup>

Thus one can see common threads in numerous formulations of translation praxis: those of border-crossing, domiciling or, indeed, taking control. In the context of traditional approaches to translation, we see that border crossing in order to tame or 'civilise' the foreign has always been an effective colonial-imperialist tool.

Translation deals with polarities and binarisms and the spaces between them; it is the grey bridge between white and black. I suggest that in the context of colonialism, translation is the 'grey bridge between the white and the brown, yellow and/or black'<sup>25</sup>.

In colonialist and assimilationist practices it not only serves to deprive the 'other' of its 'uncanniness'<sup>26</sup>,

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<sup>24</sup> Vasant Dahake, *Yogabrashta / A Terrorist of the Spirit*, Mangesh Kulkarni and Ranjit Hoskote (trans), Vilas Sarang (introduction and foreword), (New Delhi: Indus), 1992, pp. 18-19.

<sup>25</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>26</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man', in *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge), 1994. Cited in Saeed.

it operates to re-inscribe its texts with what is not-other. In a colonial encounter, translation functions in two ways: firstly, it writes the colonial culture into legibility for the colonised by formulating it in the terms of a recognisable cultural matrix and, secondly, it appropriates the texts of the colonised by formally etching in them, the signs familiar to the colonisers. Niranjana maps out this very process by broadening the use of the word translation itself to mean a site: the colonial relationship between rulers and subjects.<sup>27</sup> Yet, there are ruptures in this power play as well as yearning to possess and decipher the 'other' – and the meaning of the signs that are well known to the colonising subject, remains shifting, continually changing and unexpected as a result of the 'foreignness' of the original texts.<sup>28</sup> But the sense of incompleteness and mistrust that is generated from the foreignness that erupts from the 'other' ends up stifled, functioning to deny the 'other' cultures their very otherness.

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<sup>27</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 48.

<sup>28</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

Notwithstanding the flow of the translation process, translation praxis (like any other mode of knowledge) is enmeshed in the power / knowledge framework, and the colonising culture utilises it as a method for deploying its belief systems.<sup>29</sup>

Thus translation has been a vital instrument of the colonial project, as Niranjana and other scholars have pointed out.<sup>30</sup> One could even say that translation has been the scalpel that has dissected the 'other' textual body for the panoptic, colonising gaze, and consequently through its ability to appropriate and domesticate this 'other', has helped the colonizing Self to feel secure in the terrifyingly unreadable heart of darkness.

For the representation of the 'other', translation has obscured and perpetuated the difference between the 'knowable corpus and the unknowable corpus of the "other"'.<sup>31</sup> In this process of cutting off/separating the knowable from the unknowable, 'the colonising Self

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<sup>29</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>30</sup> Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 186.

<sup>31</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

ended up conflating the translatable with the knowable— the part of the corpus that could be carried home, borne across<sup>32</sup>, tamed, occupied — for example, the Orientalist translations of non-European works.

As Edward Said has pointed out, the Orient was ‘revealed to Europe in the materiality of its texts, languages and civilisations’<sup>33</sup>— and, as clearly demonstrated by many colonial translations, helped to tame, to make readable the Orient as a site of European knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Thus translation functioned as the wellspring of colonial assurance that the ‘other’ could in fact be represented only by the Self.

However for this dynamic to work, the ‘other’ first had to be fixed in its hierarchised difference. Hegel, for instance, strongly insists on the absolute alienness (and inferiority) of non-European (Asian) thought and philosophy, in his claims that:

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<sup>32</sup> Saeed, ‘On the Margins of Postcoloniality’, 1997.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 77.

<sup>34</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 78.

The extensive tract of Eastern Asia is severed from the process of general historical development, and has no share in it.<sup>35</sup>

Hegel further contends that 'China and India remain stationary and perpetuate a *natural vegetative* existence even to the present time.'<sup>36</sup> (Emphasis added).

Thus we see that the East equals a fascinating yet repulsive and inaccessible otherness, tellingly revealing far more about the colonial Self than the 'vegetative' Orient. Of course, this sort of homogenising attribution of lack of development to the Orient, then operates to justify the colonising project. A typical example of this logic is seen in the writings of Joseph-Ernest Renan, where he says:

The regeneration of the inferior or degenerate races, by the superior races is part of the providential order of things for humanity... Pour forth this all-consuming activity onto countries, which, like China, are crying aloud for foreign conquest... and all will be as it should; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race...<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree (trans), (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991), p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, p. 173.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Edward Said, "Nationalism, Human Rights, and

This colonial mapping of the colonised 'other', as it were, made the 'other' an entirely intelligible and frozen body with no room for change or growth. In this way, the colonial Self contained, disciplined and normalised the colonised corpus – in effect creating a 'mirror self' that reflected, copied and amplified the spatial limits of the 'real', human self. This colonial 'encounter' only touched upon socio-cultural, linguistic or geographical alterity in order to lead back to European value systems. In other words, 'the only signs of the "other" [that remain] are those that can be translated [...] domesticated'.<sup>38</sup>

Colonisation does not only engrave bodies of land and cultural bodies, it also marks language and bodies of knowledge in significant ways as numerous scholars have argued. The panoptic gaze 'reorders'<sup>39</sup> or violently restructures the linguistic world of the colonised into

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Interpretation", *Reflections on Exile, and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 418.

<sup>38</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>39</sup> Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995).



familiar signs. This power to rename and represent acquires an increasingly mobile and oppressive trajectory, translating not just words or images but the colonised self into the colonial object: 'an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood', in Fanon's words.<sup>40</sup> This translatability of the 'other' validates the colonial desire to devour through translation. In the event of the body of the 'other' hinting at any contestation, it could be re-disciplined as the object that 'asks' for, even demands civilisation as the only proper response. As Said argues:

Oriental movements of thought and culture... were perceived [by Western Scholars] either as silent shadows to be animated by the Orientalist, brought into reality by them, or as a kind of cultural and international proletariat useful for the Orientalist's grander interpretive activity.<sup>41</sup>

Thus in the colonial context, translation has traditionally functioned as expurgation,

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<sup>40</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Charles Lam (trans.), (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p.109.

<sup>41</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 208.

operating to fortify hegemonic, colonial images of the colonised.

The colonial drive to know the 'other' is only ever monological and always enmeshed in relations of domination and subservience. After all, if the 'other' could speak for itself, the boundaries between the enlightened Self and the primitive 'other' would blur, which would undermine the entire colonial project.<sup>42</sup>

Thus the repression of the voice of the 'other' is also the site of constant unease and suspicion. Niranjana, for example, focuses on this disquiet that comes from the prospect of dynamism in the uncivilised/untrustworthy 'other'.<sup>43</sup> If colonised peoples translated their own texts into English, the mastery of the coloniser, the ability to define the terms of reality itself, would be put in jeopardy. This would mean that the colonial object could ever not be completely

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<sup>42</sup> Cited in Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

defined, and therefore, could subvert the colonising mission. This paranoia can also be seen in the the 'uncanny' of translation: the lurking knowledge that not all of a text can be 'captured', and that for every translation there are thousands of texts that are untouched.

We can see in the work of colonial scholars like Sir William Jones, that colonial translation practices have served 'to domesticate the Orient and thereby turn it into a province of European learning.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Jones has been named as being responsible for the most influential introduction of a 'textualised' India to Europe.

The most significant nodes of Jones' work are (a) the need for translations by the European, since the natives are unreliable interpreters of their own laws and culture; (b) the desire to be a lawgiver, to give Indians their 'own' laws; and (c) the desire to 'purify' Indian culture and speak on its behalf.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 78.

<sup>45</sup>Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, pp. 12-13.

Jones' mistrust of the native translator and call for Western translators betrays the very fear of the potential loss of control caused by the self-representation of the colonised, as discussed previously.

We can see clear links to Orientalists like Renan, cited earlier, in Jones' statement that Hindus are 'incapable of civil liberty'<sup>46</sup>, with both men informed by similar colonial ideologies (albeit in different contexts) and the the desire to rule 'other' sociocultural, geographical and textual bodies.

Another eloquent example of the colonial agenda to create a mirror self, is the translation of the Bible into the many languages of the colonised world. While the Bible was translated as part of an evangelical expansionism, its imposition entailed the secondary project of 'knowing the other'. The missionary enthusiasm for translation came from the directive to go out into the world, spread the word of the Lord (and in

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<sup>46</sup> Sir William Jones, *The Letters of Sir William Jones*, Garland Cannon (ed), (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 712.

the colonial context, to civilise the heathen savage) through preaching the gospel.

This decree was informed by the Biblical account of the creation of the universe— for 'In the beginning was the word' (John 1:1). 'Then God, the eternal translator, translated the divine sound of his word into the cosmos and the earth'.<sup>47</sup>

Regardless of whether the colonial administrators pursued a policy of 'aggressive assimilation', or one of 'indirect rule',<sup>48</sup> the spreading of Christianity through translation had a long-lasting impact on other cultures and bodies of knowledge, thus evangelism and translation studies historically go hand in hand in colonial Western thought.

This interlink is most evident in Eugene Nida's translation work. Nida has worked diligently with the American Bible Society in order to translate the Bible into myriad African languages<sup>49</sup> and claims that it is important for an effective translation to build a

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<sup>47</sup> Willis Barnstone, cited in Saeed.

<sup>48</sup> Mona Baker (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 298.

<sup>49</sup> Baker (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, p. 299.

connection between the receiver and God.<sup>50</sup> However Nida obscures this ideological basis and desire to convert, by claiming to take a 'scientific' approach to translation, where he puts forward his theory of a 'neutral point of observation on which to base his concept of dynamic equivalence'.<sup>51</sup>

Thus we see common strands in these colonial or colonially inflected translation theories, which are deployed from the logocentric (Christian) assumption that meaning is ahistorical, universal, and pre-exists language. We also see how translation, in this sort of 'translate to convert and civilise' approach, validates the reinscription of domination. Consequently, it is evident that translation was used to enact colonial rule and ways of seeing; a 'direct, unmediated access to reality'<sup>52</sup> as defined by the colonisers – resulting in translations of the Bible and other religious/law texts into Indian languages other than English, and of the

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<sup>50</sup> Edwin Gentzler, cited in Saeed.

<sup>51</sup> Baker (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, p. 299.

<sup>52</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 2.

Vedas into European languages.<sup>53</sup>

However, Nation-building/ Nativist language programs equally rely on monolithic conceptions of culture, language and meaning as scholars point out; that is, these essentialist Nationalist/ regionalist/ linguistic formulations focus literally and metaphorically on rejecting anything 'Western' and seek to substitute it with a 'correct' way of being postcolonised.

But Niranjana argues that there is a more complex flow and manipulation of native texts in the translation process. She posits colonial translation as ultimately being 'paradoxical, because the native texts enter the master narrative of Western history through translation'.<sup>54</sup> The 'master narrative' becomes an imperfect monolith, precisely because the presence of the arrogated pollutes it with the potential for self-

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<sup>53</sup> We see here the difference of translating to convert, and translating in order to be able to refute the claims of the Vedas.

<sup>54</sup> Niranjana, cited in Saeed.

representation and resistance.<sup>55</sup>

Also, if translation is interpreted as it has been within Indian languages as the Sanskrit word 'anuvad', literally meaning 'following' or 'repeating after', as Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi point out,<sup>56</sup> then there is the potential to break away from the debilitating colonial binaries of Western Self / Oriental Other, Original / Derivative, or Indian Writing in English / Regional Writing:

India [has a) ... long history of oral composition and transmission, and [in] the dominant early phase of bhakti or devotional poetry in all its modern languages in which the poet surrendered to and sought to merge his individual identity with his divine subject, the distinction... between an original writer and a translator was never half as wide as it has been in the West.<sup>57</sup>

It is this capacity to break away from colonial binaries, that gives translation its importance in the postcolonial enterprise. As bell hooks says: 'the oppressed struggle

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<sup>55</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 186.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Introduction, in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (eds). *Post-colonial Translation*, p. 9. Also see Sujit Mukherjee, 'Translation as New Writing', in *Translation as Discovery*, p. 80.

<sup>57</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 8.



in language to recover ourselves...They are an action— a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.’<sup>58</sup> However, this language-based struggle can be a double-edged sword. E.g., in *The Empire Writes Back*, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin locate a particular resistance in untranslated words in postcolonial texts, admiring them as a strategy for ‘conveying the sense of cultural distinctiveness’.<sup>59</sup> This is an important move to push back against essentialist equations of cultures and languages. But on the other hand, this emphasis on untranslated words suggests a different kind of essentialism, couching the struggle/ resistance as a ‘mutually exclusive “unspeakable” difference’.<sup>60</sup> Ironically, the insistence on a completely separate national/ cultural/ linguistic postcolonising narrative as signified by untranslated words, retards the decolonising enterprise itself by continuously situating colonial discourse at the centre and fixing it there. Therefore colonial discourse is only ever able to be

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<sup>58</sup> bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*, (Boston: South End Press, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 64-66.

<sup>60</sup> Saeed, ‘On the Margins of Postcoloniality’, 1997.

partially replaced, at best, and the emphasis of the colonial continues to flourish in the postcolonial context – in other words, what Harish Trivedi wryly posits as ‘translation being thoroughly colonised *by* the postcolonial’.<sup>61</sup> Indeed another Indian scholar, Makarand Paranjape, similarly points out that ‘real post-coloniality...[may not even be] contained in the discourse of post-colonialism’.<sup>62</sup>

Translation praxis ‘shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism’, as Niranjana contends in her complex discussion of translation, colonial history and poststructuralist theory.<sup>63</sup> What is emphasised, she argues, is the representation of the colonised, who needed to be produced ‘in such a manner as to “justify” colonial domination’.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Email correspondence, 2000.

<sup>62</sup> Makarand Paranjape, ‘Coping with Post-colonialism’ in Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (eds). *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996), p. 37.

<sup>63</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 2.

<sup>64</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 2.

Insofar as it creates seamless and legible texts and subjects, 'translation participates—across a range of discourses—in the fixing of colonised cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed', as is discussed earlier in the chapter with regard to the Hegelian conception of Indian and Chinese cultures as 'vegetative'. Translation functions as a 'transparent presentation of something that already exists',<sup>65</sup> although the 'original' is actually being re-visioned / re-written / transfused through translation, because translation always entails more than just aesthetics or language. 'Translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems, and in history.'<sup>66</sup> Thus one agrees with Niranjana's assertion that the Hegelian formulation of history that translation helps 'bring into being', sanctions a 'teleological, hierarchical model of civilisations' based on the 'coming to consciousness' of 'Spirit', an outcome for which the non-Western cultures are 'unsuited or unprepared'.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 3.

Translation comes into being overdetermined by religious, racial, sexual, and economic discourses. It is overdetermined not only because multiple forces act on it, but because it gives rise to multiple practices. The strategies of containment initiated by translation are therefore deployed across a range of discourses, allowing us to name translation as a significant technology of colonial domination.<sup>68</sup>

Colonial societies present us with good examples of the ways in which a hegemonic culture operates, particularly in terms of the close relationship between colonisation and translation. In a colonial society, the 'discourses and practices of 'literary translation, theology, philosophy, education, and historiography, amongst others, 'constitute the apparatuses that support the cultural hegemony of colonial rule'.<sup>69</sup> Niranjana draws upon Gramsci's work for a conception of ideology that breaks away from the traditional notion of 'false consciousness'.<sup>70</sup> Ideology, which for Gramsci is practices-based, produces 'subjects' and has therefore a

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<sup>68</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 21.

<sup>69</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>70</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33. She makes the further clarification— that ideology as false consciousness suggests a distorted representation of 'reality'. Niranjana states that Gramsci's conception, which stresses the 'material nature' of ideology, is more useful in examining the 'persistence of colonial discourse'.

certain materiality.<sup>71</sup> As mentioned earlier, influential translations (from the colonised world of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian into English, for example) 'interpellated colonial subjects, legitimising or authorising certain versions of the Oriental',<sup>72</sup> versions that then came to acquire the status of 'truths' even in the countries in which the 'original' works were produced.<sup>73</sup> For example, Edward Lane, the translator of *The Thousand and One Nights*, wrote that 'gullible' Arabs, unlike civilised and educated European readers, did not make distinctions between 'the rational and the fictitious'.<sup>74</sup> Edward Fitzgerald, the author/translator of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, stated that the Persians were artistically incompetent, and that their poetry was worthy of being called 'art' only when translated into English.<sup>75</sup> Though making a different point, it is, in part, Fitzgerald's iconic status that Rushdie refers to, when he writes about 'Fitzgerald-Khayyam'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>72</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>73</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>74</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Susan Bassnett, cited by Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, (London: Picador, 1984), p. 29.

We can relate the above issues to practices in the Indian context and their effects in studies in Commonwealth Literature, which led to a conflation of Indian writing and Indian writing in English. Thus Indian writing was 'placed' and 'defined' in the international scene as Indian writing in English. We can see how this formulation affects writers like Prabha Ganorkar and Shashi Deshpande- contemporaries who operate out of similar backgrounds and explore similar concerns, but who write in different languages and therefore inhabit different locations vis-a-vis the international literary scene. In this context, the reception of Deshpande's work is symptomatic of an inbuilt bias in the study of 'Indian writing' and 'postcolonial literatures' that continues to privilege the narrow spectrum of Anglophone expression as representing nation and/or Third World women. On the other hand, Ganorkar's oeuvre falls outside West-defined models of 'acceptable' postcolonial literatures, and, therefore, meets with difficult to see barriers in its inclusion in the canon of Indian Literature.

Furthermore, it is scanty translation or poor quality translations which allows Rushdie his ignorant and arrogant assertion that only Indian stories in English count as worthy Indian literature:

this large and various survey turns out to be making, fundamentally, just one perhaps rather surprising point. This is it: the prose writing — both fiction and non-fiction — created in this period by Indian writers working in English, is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work than most of what has been produced in the 16 'official languages' of India...<sup>77</sup>

In Rushdie and West's anthology, only Saadat Hasan Manto gets one mention as a 'vernacular' writer, and this exclusion of other 'vernacular' writers is partly attributed to 'what has long been a genuine problem of translation in India'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Salman Rushdie, Introduction, in Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (eds). *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing, 1947-1997*, (London:: Vintage, 1997), p. x.

<sup>78</sup> Rushdie, Introduction, p. x.

The aggressive drive to penetrate and 'know' the mystery of the Orient is based in the 'classical notions of representation and reality criticised by poststructuralists like Derrida and de Man. Niranjana draws upon their work in order to emphasise that their investigation is of 'great relevance in a postcolonial context, [because] the critique of historicism may help us formulate a complex notion of historicity, which would include the 'effective history' of the text; this phrase encompasses questions such as: 'Who translates / interprets the text? How is it used, and for what?'<sup>79</sup> Both the interrogation of representation and the critique of traditional historicism 'empower the postcolonial theorist to undertake an analysis of what Homi Bhabha (following Foucault) has called "technologies of colonial power"<sup>80</sup>.

Niranjana's analysis of these critiques also enables the re-examining of the problematic site of translation. The deconstruction of colonial texts and their 'white mythologies'<sup>81</sup> helps us to see clearly see

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<sup>79</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 33.

<sup>80</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority Under a Tree Outside Delhi, May



that 'translation is a highly manipulative activity', that it is not 'innocent' or 'transparent', and how 'it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems'.<sup>82</sup> In this context, translation perpetuates assumptions of representation and culture that 'sanction the basis of Western philosophy, as well as the discourse of canonicity and literary criticism'.<sup>83</sup>

For the purposes of this thesis, it is useful to draw upon Niranjana's reading of the term 'historicity' to mean 'effective history (Nietzsche's *wirliche Historie* or Gadamer's *Wirkungsgeschichte*), or that part of the past that is still alive and working in the present'.<sup>84</sup> Niranjana points out that the notion of effective history can help us to read translations with colonialist agenda (such as Jones' Sanskrit translations) against the grain. Most importantly when translating in a postcolonial context, it also suggests the kind of questions one could ask

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1817', *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn 1985), p. 154.

<sup>82</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 48.

<sup>83</sup> Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, (London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>65</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 2.

oneself when engaging with a text. As mentioned earlier, 'the term historicity thus incorporates questions about how the translation / re-translation worked / works, why the text was / is translated, and who did / does the translating'.<sup>85</sup>

Theorists like Barbara Johnson and others point out that for purists, translation 'has always been the translation of *meaning*'.<sup>86</sup> There has also been a more extreme view, that a translated text was merely a 'copy' in another language, of the original text. The aesthetic and linguistic aspects of translation have been, in the past, emphasised at the cost of ideological problems. In fact Derrida has long asserted that 'translatability as transfer of meaning is the very basis of Western philosophy'.<sup>87</sup> The notion of the 'Transcendental Signified that for him is a founding concept of Western metaphysics [takes] shape within the horizon of an absolutely pure, transparent, and unequivocal

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<sup>85</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 37.

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 37.

<sup>65</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 37.

translatability.'<sup>88</sup>, as Niranjana points out. Niranjana also maps out that the concept of translation that 'grounds Western metaphysics is the same one that presides over the beginnings of the discourse of Orientalism. Neither is prepared to acknowledge, in its 'Humanism and universalism, the heterogeneity that contaminates "pure meaning" from the start',<sup>89</sup> impeding the smoothness of colonial translation as well. If, as Walter Benjamin points out — 'the language of truth is concealed in translations, its elucidation may be all that philosophy can hope to undertake'.<sup>90</sup> Besides, as discussed earlier, translated, native texts function ambivalently in the colonial narrative. Far from being a monolith, the 'master narrative' shows itself as full of fractures, precisely because the presence of the arrogated pollutes it with the potential for wresting back control, for resistance.

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<sup>88</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, Alan Bass (trans), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 20.

<sup>89</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 186.

<sup>90</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' in Hannah Arendt (ed). *Illuminations*, Harry Zohn (trans), (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 55-56.

The relationship between translation and colonialism, the 'shameful history of translation',<sup>91</sup> as Bassnett and Trivedi put it, has led to some extreme responses. This is seen especially in the nativist discourses of nationalism that circulate in the colonial and postcolonial contexts, and 'that participate in what Edward Said calls a "politics of blame" ', a yearning for a lost, golden, pre-colonial past combined with a denunciation of the colonisers.<sup>92</sup> Because the discourse of nationalism seeks to construct a monolithic national identity that will challenge colonial hegemony, it suppresses marginalised people's voices and struggles. This can have dangerous consequences, as Niranjana points out, in that claiming to counteract Western corruption, nationalistic jingoism can take the forms

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<sup>91</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> Cited in Niranjana, p. 186.'

of religious revivalism and fundamentalism, as is seen today with the BJP and Shiv Sena. These two political parties advocate a return to mythical monocultural (Hindu/ Maharashtrian) origins 'that gloss over the violent impact of the colonial encounter'.<sup>93</sup> The discourse of nationalism also completely obscures the internal violences prior to and through colonial and postcolonial times. In the binaries of precolonial / colonial and colonial / national, 'national' is not a purity recovered from an unsullied precolonial origin. 'Nation' is a translation to local experience of a European concept and 'native' a reconstruction of identity translated from the old days. Fanon points out that:

the passionate search for a national culture which existed before the colonial era finds its legitimate reason in that anxiety shared by native intellectuals to shrink away from that Western culture in which they all risk being swamped.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 166.

<sup>94</sup> Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Constance Farrington (trans), (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 168.

The 'rethinking / revisoning of translation becomes all the more important in a context where it has been used for centuries to endorse colonial practices of subjectification.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, Bassnett and Trivedi point to the use of the metaphor of 'colony as a translation, a copy of an original located elsewhere on the map'.<sup>96</sup> Thus a rethinking/ revisoning, Niranjana contends, is 'a task of great urgency for a postcolonial theory attempting to make sense of "subjects" already living "in translation" ',<sup>97</sup> 'framed' by colonial ways of being/ seeing. A rethinking / revisoning can reclaim translation, and swing literary / cultural / postcolonial / translation studies from heavily policed Western narratives to the rich, changing, discourse of other transfusions.

Thus, it is useful to utilise the word 'translation' in the way that theorists such as Bassnett, Trivedi, Niranjana and Sujit Mukherjee

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<sup>95</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 6.

<sup>96</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Post-colonial Translation*, Introduction, p. 4.

<sup>97</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 6.

theorise it— not just to indicate an ‘interlingual process but to name an entire ideological site’:

*Translatio* (Latin) and *metapherein* (Greek) at once suggest movement, disruption, displacement. So does *iibersetzung* (German). The French *traducteur* exists between *interprete* and *truchement*, an indication that we might fashion a translative practice between interpretation and reading, carrying a disruptive force much greater than the other two.<sup>98</sup>

Today, more than ever, when the myths of nationalism such as secularism, tradition, unity, purity and nationhood— are invoked to suppress diversity on a number of levels in India, whether linguistic-ethnic, religious or sexual, ‘the postcolonial translator must be wary of essentialist anti-colonial narratives; in fact s/he must attempt to deconstruct them, to expose their coercive power, and show their complicity with the master-narrative of imperialism’.<sup>99</sup> The translator must participate in what Fanon spoke of as "a complete calling in question of the colonial situation"'.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, Introduction, p. 8.

<sup>99</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 167.

<sup>100</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 167.

This 'calling in question' must include the strict re-examination of liberal nationalism as well as the interrogation of nostalgia for origins.<sup>101</sup> Only then can we begin to generate models of ethical praxis or "'grounds" for ideological production' that challenges colonialist / hegemonic interpretations of history.<sup>102</sup>

Thus, theorists like Niranjana emphasise the need to examine the political and ideological aspects of translative representation along with the linguistic. Links between the centre and margin in terms of intellectual/ literary transfers have to be examined carefully, as do power differentials among Indian languages, and among various Indian regional languages and English. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak takes the position that one cannot afford to overlook the 'double meaning of representation if the "micrological texture" of the political, geographical

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<sup>101</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 167.

<sup>102</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 167.



and economic dimensions of neocolonial domination' is to be accounted for<sup>103</sup>:

[We] must note how the staging of the world in representation— its scene of writing, its *Darstellung*— dissimulates the choice and need for 'heroes', paternal proxies, agents of power — *Vertretung*'<sup>104</sup>

Spivak argues against a nationalist discourse that takes over the position of 'proxy (representative and speaking for) after constructing itself as portrait (representative and speaking as)', thereby effacing the heterogeneity of the postcolonial subject.<sup>105</sup> The call for vigilance can also be applied to the practice of translation from a regional Indian language to English, because, as Tharu and Lalitha point out:

We have been very aware that in India, when we translate a regional language— Tamil or Oriya, for instance— into English, we are representing a regional culture for a more powerful national or 'Indian'

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<sup>103</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 169.

<sup>104</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 279.

<sup>105</sup> Niranjana, *Siting Translation*, p. 169.

one, and when this translation is made available to a readership outside India, we are also representing a national culture for a still more powerful international culture— which is today, in effect, a Western one.<sup>106</sup>

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Saeed points out that historically, the publishing industry has taken the approach that translation is not 'original', and that therefore translations are perceived as less compelling to the reader, when compared to 'original' writing.<sup>107</sup> He harnesses Vanderauwera and Venuti to bolster his analysis, pointing to these scholars' assertions that 'translations have a potential of not selling well at the target pole',<sup>108</sup> and that translation is seen as an 'offence against the prevailing concept of authorship', because authorship is marked by 'originality, self-expression in a unique text'.<sup>109</sup> Further analysis of the texts might reveal what Venuti has called 'domestication', that is, a translation that

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<sup>106</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, preface, p. xx.

<sup>107</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>108</sup> Ria Vanderauwera, 'The Response to Translated Literature' in Theo Hermans (ed). *The Manipulation of Literature*, (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p. 202. Cited in Saeed.

<sup>109</sup> Lawrence Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate' in Christina Schaffner and Helen Kelly-Holmes (eds). *Cultural Functions of Translation*, (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1995). p. 26. Cited in Saeed.

identifies the foreign within a text, but only as a means of 'confirming and developing a sameness'.<sup>110</sup>

Venuti calls such rewriting 'fluency', by which it is understood that the translation has been standardised and domesticated for a certain group within the target language audience.<sup>111</sup> Reading the original and its translation side by side, one immediately notices an effect, a sort of translation-induced displacement, which Venuti would describe either as 'submission' or 'resistance'. Resistance is the effect of a translation that challenges the dominant canons of the (literary) system. Submission, in contrast, is the effect of a translation that reinforces these dominant canonical values.<sup>112</sup> Although in my opinion the whole translation project in a contemporary, postcolonial setting can be read as an example of Venutian resistance, one finds many examples of the former phenomenon (submission)

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<sup>110</sup> Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate', p. 110.

<sup>111</sup> Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate', p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate', p. 308.

within colonial texts<sup>113</sup> – which conveniently ignores them, preferring to make assessments based on so called abstract sociological and linguistic observations – and political and cultural theories of translation, such as Venuti's. In my research I have been forced abandon any supposed objectivity, for even to choose a text for translation and analysis is to make a subjective and explicitly political decision. As Venuti notes:

Research into translation can never be simply descriptive; merely to formulate translation as a topic in cultural history or criticism assumes an opposition to its marginal position in the current hierarchy of cultural practices. [...] Yet even if research into translation cannot be viewed as descriptive, devoid of cultural and political interests, it should not aim to be simply prescriptive, approving or rejecting translation theories and practices without carefully examining their relationships to their own moments and to that of the researcher.<sup>114</sup>

It is in this context that institutions like the Sahitya Akademi are important today, more than

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<sup>113</sup> Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate', p. 308.

<sup>114</sup> Venuti, 'Preliminary Remarks to the Debate', pp. 312-313.

ever. The Sahitya Akademi was set up by the Government of India to foster and coordinate literary activities in all the Indian languages and to promote through them the cultural unity of India. 'The main objective of the Sahitya Akademi is to meet the challenge posed by a multi-lingual society',<sup>115</sup> as the official website says. By financing and supporting translations from various Indian languages into English and into other Indian languages, the Sahitya Akademi endeavours to develop a 'serious literary culture through the publication of journals, monographs, individual creative works of every genre, anthologies, encyclopaedias, dictionaries, bibliographies, Who's Who and histories of literature'.<sup>116</sup>

In this dissertation, I attempt a broader translation project than translating Ganorkar's poetry

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<sup>115</sup> The Sahitya Akademi Website, 2000. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.org/sahitya-akademi/orgl.htm>

<sup>116</sup> The Sahitya Akademi Website, 2000. [Online]. Available: <http://www.sahitya-akademi.org/sahitya-akademi/orgl.htm>

into English, and therefore arguing for rethinking the notion of what constitutes 'Indian' writing, or postcolonial writing in the Indian context. I also aim to foreground the other sorts and sites of translations that both the writers are engaging in. We can see with Deshpande and Ganorkar, that they both 'translate' across gender / tradition / modernity. In writing about middle-class women who are very specifically situated in particular regional and linguistic milieus, rather than 'pan-Indian' women, and in writing in English as an Indian language, Deshpande translates across region and nation and cultural specificity as well. In fact the invention of the Indian novel in English itself has been read as a translative undertaking by Meenakshi Mukherjee, resulting from the dialogue with Western forms, and involving both imitation and resistance.<sup>117</sup> Ganorkar, especially, 'translates' herself / her literary personae across the rural / urban divide.

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<sup>117</sup> Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

### CHAPTER THREE

#### **SELF-KNOWLEDGE BRINGS NOT LIBERATION BUT DESPAIR? THE POETRY OF PRABHA GANORKAR**

"Gele dyaayache raahun/  
Tuzhe nakshatranche dene./  
Majhyaa paas aatha kalya,/  
Aani thodi oli paane" – Aarti Prabhu.

In the context of literary studies in India, there has been a longstanding plea for translations between regional languages (including English). For example, this can be seen from projects such as *Katha* and the various *Katha Prize Stories Volumes* published to date. As Rimli Bhattacharya and Geeta Dharmarajan say:

The linguistic map of India is exciting territory in which many areas refuse to be contained within lines and with many other areas where the lines overlap, intersect and even shift... We wanted above all, the movement from one language to another, sometimes from one context to another to be smooth but not seamless... we have deliberately chosen not to italicise Indian words since we believe these belong and should belong to the English language as spoken and used in different parts of India.<sup>1</sup>

Now publishers and some University courses are beginning to accept texts in translation. This does not in itself ensure a mainstream public voice for a poet like Prabha Ganorkar. For example, in the

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<sup>1</sup> Rimli Bhattacharya and Geeta Dharmarajan (eds), Introduction, in *Katha Prize Stories Volume 1*, (New Delhi: Katha/Rupa and Co., 1991). No page numbers are indicated in the text.



poetry from andaround Bombay, several writers such as Arun Kolatkar, Dilip Chitre and Vilas Sarang have placed themselves as both regional and inter/national by writing both in Marathi and English and cross-translating their own work. Nonetheless, postcolonial critique has tended to focus on purely Anglophone writers like Nissim Ezekiel and the translated or English-composed work of others. An academic/writer who chooses to write only in Marathi (as does Ganorkar) can only hope for a readership in her own region unless some other link to international taste prompts visibility and translation.

In cases where translation succeeds, it does so under sponsorship, because the content works in the receiving culture, because the translation works in local artistic practice, and because the originating culture is politically significant or culturally exotic for the receiving culture. As discussed earlier, the publishing industry has taken the approach that translation is not 'original', and

that therefore translations are perceived as less compelling to the reader, when compared to 'original' writing.<sup>2</sup>

In Ganorkar's case, we might expect that her expression of female discontent would gain her some attention as, say, in the case of Eunice de Souza or elsewhere, Kamala Das. However, as I shall make clear, the particular quality of voice in Ganorkar's work is not necessarily the kind readily coopted to 'feminist' or 'protest' writing favoured amongst international/national scholarly tastes

In this chapter I will focus on poetry in general and do a close reading of one poet's— that is, Prabha Ganorkar's— work in particular. I will begin with a brief historical overview of the development of Marathi poetry and show common links to, as well as changing themes and trends in, what is known as the Modern(ist) era of Marathi poetry. I will touch upon a few of the most

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<sup>2</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

influential male and female writers/poets from the 1940s onwards, followed by a short discussion of the 'New' writing movement of the 1960s. In this way I will try to contextualise Ganorkar's work and map out how she works, both, outside established Marathi poetic traditions and within them. I have sometimes used unusual sources such as private discussions, audio tapes, videos of theatre performances and textbooks on Marathi Literature to support my assertions and launch my arguments, because of the lack of text-related commentary and critical material available.

The mid-1940s are considered to be a watershed for Marathi literature. A rapidly changing economic social, political, religious and educational climate was brought about by a series of historical events. The end of World War Two, followed closely by Indian Independence, the partition of the country into India and Pakistan and the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi had a long-lasting and dramatic impact on literary trends and

movements.<sup>3 4</sup> The Ravikiran Mandal— a group of poets who, through public recitations, made poetry popular in middle-class circles— had already reached its peak of popularity before the second World War.<sup>5</sup> The post-War period saw bold experimentation with form and content and concerted efforts at breaking away from the conventional codes and strictures of 'kavya' (poetry), 'katha' (the short story) and 'kadambari' (the novel), with a view to producing new art forms.

Pre-1960, the changing trends in Marathi poetry, the re-writings, re-visions, new directions and new ideological imperatives are seen most clearly in the stylistic, modernistic, and imagist

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1995), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Vasant Abbaji Dahake, 'Badallele Jeevansandharbha aani Vaangmayeen Pravaha' [The Changing Socio-cultural Ethos and New Literary Movements], in *Contemporary Literature*, (Nasik: Yashwantrao Chavan Maharashtra Open University, 1993), p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, 'introduction', in Vrinda Nabar and Nissim Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, (Bombay: Nirmala Sadanand Publishers, 1975), p. 11.

poetic experiments of B. S. Mardhekar.

Mardhekar started his writing career around 1935 by publishing essays on aesthetics and the theory of writing. His essays such as 'What is the Beauty of Writing' and 'Criticism and Aesthetics' were widely influential and had a direct or indirect impact on writers, critics and intellectuals of the time.<sup>6</sup> Critics such as G. N. Devy call him 'Marathi's first "modernist"... one of the most significant critics of the modernistic period'.<sup>7</sup> But it was his two collections of poetry, *Kahi Knvitn* [Some Poems] and *Anklii Knhi Knvitn* [Some More Poems]<sup>8</sup> that revolutionised the very concept of modern Marathi poetry. The rage, despair and angst of the content, combined with wordplay, a coolly ironic distance and a radical reworking of traditional forms, evoked strong reactions amongst Marathi critics. For example, V. L. Kulkarni says:

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<sup>6</sup> Dahake, 'Badallele Jeevansandharbha aani Vaangmayeen Pravaha' [The Changing Socio-cultural Ethos and New Literary Movements], p. 34.

<sup>7</sup> G. N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1992), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Published in 1947 and 1951 respectively.

Mardhekar's poetry expresses very powerfully... the self and the individual voice, much more so than other poetry today. The thoughts, feelings, words and ideas in every poem are stamped with an unmistakable "Mardhekarness".<sup>9</sup>

Kulkarni goes on to say that this is in sharp contrast with 'Marathi poets who had started writing about "the people's" feelings, "the people's" sorrows, "the people's" desires and hopes, all in the same, rather unimaginative way'.<sup>10 11</sup> Mardhekar was one of the first poets to introduce a 'post-Romantic vitality, an awareness of language, diction and metres that the Romantic period had blunted.'<sup>11</sup> The imagery and sensibility of the poems were confrontingly different for most readers of the time. Mardhekar's poetry, though grounded in modern themes, draws strongly on the Bhakti tradition, and is therefore 'suffused with the spirit of rebellion... which is the

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<sup>9</sup> From Satyakatha, February 1947 Issue. Quoted by Dahake, 'Badallele Jeevansandharbha aani Vaangmayeen Pravaha' [The

Changing Socio-cultural Ethos and New Literary Movements], p. 35. Original source unavailable.

<sup>10</sup> From Satyakatha, February 1947 Issue. Quoted by Dahake, 'Badallele Jeevansandharbha aani Vaangmayeen Pravaha' [The Changing Socio-cultural Ethos and New Literary Movements], p. 35. Original source unavailable.

<sup>11</sup> Devy, After Amnesia, p. 119.

essence of Bhakti poetry'.<sup>12</sup> For example, in his collection *Kahi Anklii Kavita*, Mardhekar uses oral/literary forms<sup>13</sup> such as the 'abhang'. This was a form with short rhyming lines and a strongly metrical, but flexible rhythm used in the Bhakti tradition by medieval saint-poets such as Tukaram, Dnyandev, Eknath and so on. Though traditionally spiritual in focus, 'the gamut of Bhakti poetry has amazing depth, width and range', as Dilip Chitre points out:

It is hermitic [sic], esoteric, cryptic, mystical; it is sensuous, lyrical, deeply emotional, devotional; it is it is vivid, graphic, frank, direct; it is ironic, sarcastic, critical; it is colloquial, comic, absurd; it is imaginative, inventive, experimental; it is intense, angry, assertive and full of protest.<sup>14</sup>

This is seen in the following extract from a poem by Tukaram:

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<sup>12</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, p. 119.

<sup>13</sup> This has been a tradition from the time of Dnyandev, the founder of Marathi poetry (1275-1296), and Namdev (1270-1350). They broke away from the highly Sanskritised 'classicist' writing of the time and wrote poetry that was both written and sung; a 'democratic literary transaction', as Dilip

Chitre calls it, that encouraged audience participation and was accessible to lower castes and women.

<sup>14</sup> Dilip Chitre, 'Introduction', in *Says Tnkn*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991), p. xvii.

Lord You are A lizard A toad And a tiger  
 Too  
 And at times  
 You are A coward Frantically Covering  
 Your own arse When you face A stronger-  
 willed '  
 Assault You just Turn tail You attack Only  
 the weak Who  
 Try to run away Says Tuka  
 Get Out of my way  
 You are Neither man  
  
 Nor woman You aren't even  
  
 A thing.<sup>15</sup>

Mardhekar is equally dismissive of polite  
 abstraction

Shall I search For outpourings Of Love and  
 Beauty?  
 All around me I see  
 corpses piled mountain-high<sup>16</sup>

Though some of the sentiments are the same, we see  
 a disillusionment in Mardhekar's work that is quite  
 different from the feelings of Tukaram towards  
 Vithoba, his deity, or towards the world. In  
 Mardhekar's world, there is no God, only people

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<sup>13</sup> Dilip Chitre (trans), from *Says Tuka*, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Mardhekar, 'Yuddhakaleen Abhang', [Abhang in the Time of War], in *Some Poems*, p. 5. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar.



struggling to survive in a hostile, meaningless universe, like 'rats drowning in a rain-filled barrel'.<sup>17</sup>

Dilip Chitre sees Mardhekar as having combined the old tradition of saint poetry and modern(ist) European trends:

Like the surrealists, [Mardhekar] plumbed images out of a Freudian underworld, and strung them together... one gets the feeling that one is trapped and enclosed in a death chamber from which there is no escape... The trap is absolute and eternal.<sup>18</sup>

We see a similar shift in English Literature, from Tennyson to T. S. Eliot. In Indian writing in English, we also see a similar move away from the Romanticism of Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, to the wry irony, self-deprecation and linguistic hybridity of Dom Moraes and Nissim Ezekiel.

After Mardhekar, the poets who made a

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<sup>17</sup> Mardhekar, 'Yuddhakaleen Abhang', [Abhang in the Time of War]. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Bruce King, in *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 173.

significant impact on Marathi poetry, through their reworking of forms and content are Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar and Aarti Prabhu (the pseudonym of C. T. Khanolkar). Contemporary cultural, social and political situations, changes, progress (or lack thereof), disgust and despair at the state of society can be seen very clearly in the above-mentioned poets, along with an existential ennui, as can be seen in the following extract from Prabhu / Khanolkar's collection, *Diwelnagan [The Lighting of Lamps]*<sup>19</sup>:

Let us not spoil  
 The petty clerk's toil  
 Trim the moustache every dawn.  
 Go to work all shaved and shorn Then pick  
 up files blood-red so red.  
 Fuck the wife, two minutes in bed.  
 Watch for weals on tender breasts  
 Salaam your bosses without rest...<sup>20</sup>

One interesting feature that can be noted is the difference between the metaphors of poets like

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<sup>19</sup> This is a literal translation of the Marathi phrase 'Diwelaagan', which is difficult to translate. It has connotations of all of the following: dusk, the days before electricity when city lamps used to be lit, a pensive melancholy, death.

<sup>20</sup> Aarti Prabhu / C. T. Khanolkar, 'Sevekari Mudra' [The Bureaucrat's Graces], in *The Lighting of Lamps*, (Bombay: Nirmala Sadanand Publishers, 1962), p. 22. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar. A literal translation of the last line would read- 'hands that salaam should always be soft'.

Mardhekar and Chitre. What was in Mardhekar a controlled search for metaphors, becomes, in Chitre, a veritable explosion. In Mardhekar, usually a poem elaborates one, or two, sometimes three metaphors:

Listen to the breaking of these branches  
 the white wounds of my intellect  
 witness the gigantic hoax of my senses  
 smell my forehead breaking open  
 taste the withering of life  
 touch the scales of experience<sup>21</sup>

It is the profusion of metaphors which gives the impression, perhaps, that the poet-persona is struggling to express some impossibly tangled feeling, because the profusion does give the impression that all these metaphors are meant not only to express, 'but to conceal something intractable'<sup>22</sup>, as Jaaware points out.

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Aniket Jaaware, 'Vexing Modernity', in R. Narendra Prasad (ed), Haritliam: Journal of School of Letters, 7 (1996), p. 92.

<sup>22</sup> Jaaware, 'Vexing Modernity', p. 92.

By the time one comes to Chitre, one sees a powerfully bleak rendering of lower/middle-class urban experience:

I came in the middle of my life to a  
Furnished apartment. By now my pubic hair  
Was already graying. And I could see the  
dirty  
Old man under my own skin ... The air  
Smelt of dead rats and I was reaching the  
age of forty.<sup>23</sup>

Chitre has evoked conflicting critical comment. He has been both, criticised for being 'elitist' and 'negative', as well as been praised for his conscious struggle 'not to succumb to the charms of moral nihilism...'<sup>24</sup>

In Arun Kolatkar's case, the exploration of the malaise of 'modern times' is scalpel-sharp, more savagely ironic. The strength of Kolatkar's poetry is that irony does not necessarily lead to despair, but

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<sup>23</sup> Dilip Chitre, from 'Travelling in a Cage', in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed). *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, (Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 106.

<sup>24</sup> Jaaware, 'Vexing Modernity', p. 93.

drives home the poet's political/personal commentary through the laughter it provokes:

Giving me the boot, my boss said,

I can't help it Mr. Nene, I just can't.

Grabbing my cock, my wife said.

I'll chop it off one-day, just chop it off ...

Stepping on my toes, a guy said

Sorry man. I'm sorry

Sticking an umbrella in my eye, another said,

I hope you aren't hurt.

Bearing down on me, full tilt, a trucker said.

Can't you see where you are going you  
motherfucker?<sup>25</sup>

It is interesting to note that as bilingual poets, both Chitre and Kolatkar cross-feed from at least two, and sometimes three traditions, but get attention in each

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<sup>25</sup> Arun Kolatkar, 'Biograph', in Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (ed). *Twelve Modern Indian Poets*, p. 60. Mehrotra points out (p. 53) that though poems such as 'Woman' and 'Suicide of Rama', say 'English version by the poet', their Marathi originals do not actually exist. 'Biograph' is a bilingual poem that has appeared in its Marathi form in Arun Kolatkar's/a Kavita, 'smuggled into the language through the unmanned checkpoint of verse'.

'camp' only for one aspect of their work.

Chitre and Kolatkar's writing can be read in terms of Sherry Simon's concept of the 'contact zone'.

As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi point out:

Sherry Simon argues that bilingualism leads to the dissolution of the binary opposition between original and translation. Following Mary Louise Pratt, she uses the notion of the 'contact zone' the place where previously separated cultures come together. Traditionally a space where cultures meet on unequal terms, the contact zone is now a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities <sup>26</sup>

We see these qualities in Chitre and Kolatkar's voices, which are deliberately and self-consciously provocative, blurring boundaries of cultural and linguistic identity.

We can see similar preoccupations expressed in strongly individual voices in the experimentation of

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<sup>26</sup> Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, introduction, in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (eds), *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 14.

'Grace' and Vasant Abbaji Dahake, amongst others, in the next generation of poets who were born in the mid to late 1940s. They were part of a movement of writers, poets, playwrights and actors who began to experiment with multidisciplinary art forms, blending physical theatre, dialogue, poetry, prose, song and performance. Their aim was to take 'literature' out of classrooms and universities and theatre beyond the proscenium arch, to explore and blend various forms and philosophies, such as ancient folk-theatre and poetic forms<sup>27</sup>, physical theatre, Surrealism, Existentialism, 'Method' with a topical, highly politicised sensibility.<sup>28</sup> This has been collectively called the 'New Literature/Theatre Movement'.

Broadly speaking, most of the male poets of the post-World War Two and later generation wrote highly politicised, socially relevant, committed poetry. They wrote existential poetry exploring the

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<sup>27</sup> For example, Achyut Vaze's *Clml Re Bhopleya Tiinnk Tunuk*, and Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* and *Hayavaiiau*.

<sup>28</sup> Private conversations with Amol Palekar, Chitra Palekar, Satyadev Dube, Vasant Abbaji Dahake, Prabha Ganorkar, Vijay Shirke and Dilip Kulkarnr amongst others, all of whom were part of the 'New' Movement.

meaninglessness of lower / middle-class urban life, of petty, often weak men leading monotonous, mundane, small lives, of the loss of religious tolerance, of riots and violence. This 'tradition' filters into Ganorkar up to a point, but there are crucial differences in her poetic concerns, as I will demonstrate further in the chapter.

The tradition of women writing poetry in Maharashtra also goes back to the age of the saint-poets.<sup>29</sup> Dnyandev's sister Muktabai, Janabai and others sang of and to God in subtle, simple and moving verse. But women writers, however, seem to have taken a different path, and explore different concerns. In the twentieth century, we have the tradition continuing in the songs and poetry of Bahinabai Choudhari, a barely literate woman whose writing is deeply moving and imbued with a humane philosophy.<sup>30</sup>

Like the male saint-poets, women's bhakti

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<sup>29</sup> Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, 'Introduction' (written in English), in Vrinda Nabar and Nissim Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Nadkarni, 'Introduction', p. 12.



verse is connected to the everyday and the secular. A common theme in traditional (rural) women's songs and poems is the daily work of women in tradition-bound Maharashtrian society. It is written in an everyday colloquial language, rhythmic, sometimes repetitive, mirroring the tasks done by women in this milieu, such as grinding grain or cooking. As Bahinabai says in one of her most famous songs:

Ah, this world, this life  
Like a hot pan on the cooking fire, first  
burns your hand.  
And only then gives you your heart's  
desire.<sup>29 31</sup>

This inserts a difference into the spiritual poetry insofar as the address to the divine is not a rude rebuff stressing harsh human reality, but a yearning for release into a purified realm of ideal love.

Indira Sant's first book of verse was a collaborative effort with N. M. Sant, published in 1940. Her second (and first solo collection) of verse,

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted by Nadkarni in *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

*Shdln*, was published in 1950, which is why she is placed as Mardhekar's contemporary. The saint-poets and the 'cult of madhura-bhakti'<sup>32</sup>, or writing to or addressing God as a lover has great relevance to Sant's work. The two recurring themes in her poetry are nature, and the yearning for a lover, on a symbolic and literal level, as can be seen in the following examples:

The field is restless today.  
 The broad, barren field. A single  
 pathway  
 Rarely walked on.  
 Dry grass occasionally grazed on.  
 Perpetual silence. Uselessness.<sup>33</sup>

Once you supported my joys, griefs,  
 hopes, ambitions.  
 I never thought of your soul  
 As separate from mine.  
 Shadow-like, you merged with me. And  
 were absorbed in me.  
 To me, our divided existence is  
 impossible.  
 My ingratitude is the curse on me.

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<sup>32</sup> Nadkarni, 'Introduction', in Vrinda Nabar and Nissim Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 12.

<sup>33</sup> Nabar and Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 29.

And to follow me with slow dragging  
 steps  
 Is the curse on you.<sup>33</sup>

This lover is generally interpreted as being her  
 dead husband, as she was widowed very young,  
 but, as Nadkarni points out:

...those, who have learnt to  
 decipher love poetry need not  
 be told that the Ultimate Lover  
 to whom all such emotion-  
 filled lines are addressed has  
 an ostensibly symbolic  
 existence... [Sant's poetry]... is  
 a continuous search for an  
 identity, and this symbol is a  
 focal point of her search.<sup>34</sup>

Many younger women poets tried to imitate  
 Sant's philosophical lyricism, but unfortunately  
 only ended up sounding banal and uncontrolled.  
 One sees that in contemporary Marathi of 1990s,  
 women writers from this period are often  
 characterised as writing melodramatic, sentimental  
 outpourings that do not rank very high in terms of

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<sup>34</sup> Nabar and Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 65.  
 Nadkarni, 'Introduction', in Vrinda Nabar and Nissim Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 13.

literary or poetic merit.<sup>35</sup> The same charge is often made against Indian women poets writing in English. Another criticism seems to be that the women writers of this period write 'only' confessional poetry. The women writers of this generation have thus been described as being:

aloof, almost indifferent to larger concerns and socio-cultural trends, and focusing too much on the self.<sup>36</sup>

Established women poets like Indira Sant and Shanta Shelke who continued to write into the nineteen sixties stopped trying to experiment with content and form, and produced nothing very exciting or different to their earlier poetry.<sup>37</sup> While Sant's earlier work expressed a graceful lyricism combined with

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<sup>35</sup> Vasant Abbaji Dahake, 'Vyatheeth', in *Kavita: Sankalpana, Ninniti, aani Samceksha* [Poetry: Thought, Form and Creation], (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974), p. 152.

<sup>36</sup> Dahake, 'Vyatheeth', in *Kavita: Sankalpana, Ninniti, aani Samceksha* [Poetry: Thought, Form and Creation], p. 153. While Dahake criticises women's writing of this period as being sentimental and melodramatic, he emphasises that this viewpoint does not apply to all women writers and goes on to discuss the literary merit of 'confessional' poetry as seen in Vyatheeth. (Excerpt translated by Shalmalee Palekar. All Marathi criticism cited in this chapter has been translated by Palekar, unless otherwise indicated.)

<sup>37</sup> Private conversation with Prabha Ganorkar and Vasant Abbaji Dahake, Bombay, 1997.

deep thought, only a few poems, such as 'Snake-Skin' catch the eye in her later work:

Here I am, silent, still,  
And so is my reflection;  
Clearly defined in the mirror,  
I show myself to 'me'.  
I do not dare  
To outstare that image;  
Its tremulous lines Freeze darkly in the  
glass ... Here I am, silent, still.  
With no one in front of me;  
Like a cast-off snake-skin.  
The snake out of sight.<sup>38</sup>

Post-1960s women poets who tried to break away from middle-class and gender boundaries in their writing ended up sounding overly sentimental, sometimes melodramatic, thus minimising the impact of their voices and search for meaning. Their confessional voices were 'not convincing', and their socio-political analysis 'not deep enough'.<sup>39</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> Indira Sant, 'Snake-Skin', in Vrinda Nabar and Nissim Ezekiel (ed and trans), *Snake-Skin and Other Poems of Indira Sant*, p. 21.

<sup>39</sup> Dahake, 'Vyatheeth', in *Knvitr: Saiikalpana, Niriuiti, anni Sameeksha* [Poetry: Thought, Form and Creation], p. 154. *Private conversation with Prabha Ganorkar and Vasant Abbaji*

collections of poetry they produced became middle-of-the-ground works, achieving some popularity and little critical acclaim. It is against this backdrop that Prabha Ganorkar's voice in *Vyatheeth* stands out as different, striking in its originality, depth of feeling and control over the language.

Ganorkar attempts to cross the boundaries of gender and class imposed upon her by society. She writes about feelings and experiences that middle-class Indian women were not even supposed to feel, let alone express in the 1960s and 1970s. She does not gloss over the unsightly and the unpleasant. She writes almost dispassionately about being alienated, about not belonging, about being the outsider, about the loneliness of being different, about being punished by society for daring to break with tradition:

Since yesterday, this rain has poured down  
endlessly.  
But everything ends, and so will the rain.  
Spring and summer will come and go too.

Who knows when new shoots will sprout  
 from this mud?  
 The sky will remain distant as always And  
 trees will flower, yet again ...Our joys and  
 sorrows are only ours.  
 Who else  
 Will take on their meaningless burdens?  
 We belong only to ourselves and are alien  
 Only to ourselves.<sup>40</sup>

The I in the poems is not content with token gestures. She wants to be free, not just within the framework of acceptable behaviour imposed on a middle-class woman. On the other hand, the poetic persona is always aware, even as she struggles, that a higher, autonomous Freedom or Truth is ultimately mythical, always ideal, never attainable.

The experience generated by an encounter with *Vyntheeth* cannot be categorised neatly and

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<sup>40</sup> Prabha Ganorkar, 'Kaalpasun Paoos' [Since Yesterday, This Rain Has Poured Down Endlessly], in *Vyntheeth*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974), p. 10. All further quotes from Ganorkar are from poems in the collection *Vyntheeth*, unless otherwise indicated. All of Ganorkar's poems have been translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

easily. It is difficult to read the poems as coming from a clearly and unambiguously feminist consciousness even within the Indian context, because of the layering of meaning, and various nuances encountered. For instance, the poet explores how a patriarchal society constructs its women as less than human and offers them up as metaphorical or literal sacrifices, thus often explicitly taking a pro-women's rights stance. This is graphically depicted in 'Sacrificial Goat', where the poet uses vivid imagery evoking Sati and animal sacrifice to explore betrayal:

Listen, that hair-raising noise That  
 ceaselessly battered drum Someone smears  
 me with kumkum Perhaps blesses me with  
 the sacred flame It is hard to see in this  
 lurid light.  
 Someone clutches my arms My rubbery  
 legs stumble forward The crowd throngs  
 behind me Screaming joyfully for blood I  
 know where they are taking me....

And you?  
 Are you among them?<sup>41</sup>



But Ganorkar simultaneously expresses a quiet self-loathing and sometimes seems to implicate herself in her own victimisation, by taking complete responsibility for her poor judgement or choices. This position is most clearly seen in 'Trickery':

It's a lie that life drags us along kicking  
and screaming.  
Often, w'e're the ones that take its hand  
And drop it off, god knows where.  
At those particular moments, those  
particular decisions

Seem absolutely fool proof. So much so  
That we can't even see other doors. At  
those times, sombre colours automatically  
look

Peaceful. And thorn trees so attractive.  
It's a lie to say that it is life that has tricked  
us.  
It is we who have laughed and  
deliberately  
Offered our hand.<sup>41</sup>

This is not a surprising position for a woman who has been victimised, repeatedly punished for her difference. The following lines could perhaps be

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<sup>41</sup> Ganorkar, 'Bali' [Sacrificial Goat], in Vyntheeth, p. 50.  
Ganorkar, 'Chakva' [Trickery], in Vyntheeth, p. 20.

seen as an expression of internalised hatred —

Do not cast your eye on this exquisite  
branch.

It springs from a poison tree.

It will suck the venom right out of the  
ground

And spread it in your veins

And you will blossom

With glittering poison flowers.

But bear no fruit<sup>42</sup>

This could also be seen as a poem about writing itself, where the poet's gift is a double-edged sword— on one hand her positionality allows her to formulate and express her oblique worldview from the margins, while on the other, it extracts a terrible price by isolating and alienating her from her world. Being barren of fruit (the lack of fulfillment, happiness, belonging) is the price she pays for blooming with 'glittering, poison flowers', that is, her vision and poetic voice.

Again— and this is characteristic of the

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<sup>42</sup> Ganorkar, 'Vishakth' [Poison Tree], in Vyntheeth, p. 23.

paradoxical quality of her poetry – ambiguity, when used as a discursive strategy works for, rather than against it. There is not a great deal of self-pity in her confessional voice, and this serves to strengthen its impact.

Ganorkar's poetry can be read as a poetry of ambiguity, subtlety and paradox. Her poems straddle the urban-rural divide. They are not strident, yet are filled with rage. They are not nihilistic, yet are full of despair. There is a strongly passionate undercurrent even in her most quietly resigned poem. This can be seen in 'Evening', where the poet uses her usual strategy of asking questions – 'Do your eyes brim with tears, I wonder?/ That sea, those colours, the sky – / Do they suddenly burden you?'<sup>43</sup> – in a quiet tone. The reader cannot tell what is coming next, which creates poetic tension. This is maintained as the questions continue: 'Do you struggle against memories/ That threaten to weigh you down/ And drown you?/ This has happened to

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<sup>43</sup> Ganorkar, 'Sandhyakaal' [Evening], in Vyatheetli, p. 12.

me...'<sup>44</sup> But instead of working up to a melodramatic climax, the poet now distances herself, and watches her own grief / nostalgic sorrow with a self-reflexive irony- 'And made me unbearable to myself.' The last two lines, therefore, come as a surprise, successfully driving home the discomfort of the feeling through their wry understatement, while maintaining tight control over the structure till the very end: 'This evening, at least this sky, these colours, this sea — / Bear them for me.'<sup>45</sup>

Even at the most poignant moments, the poet watches herself, and how the world sees her, from a distance. As discussed above, many poems are imbued with irony and a self-reflexivity so that they stop short of being melodramatic. Ganorkar's is a self-analytical rather than a solipsistic voice. This is seen very clearly in the poem 'By the Window':

As I stand by the window and plait my hair  
loosened the night before, my eyes suddenly  
fill with tears. Nilgiri trees stand before me.  
They are calm, and won't even flutter a tiny  
leaf in sympathy. The tears keep welling.  
Regret, because I threw my stale life to the

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<sup>44</sup> Ganorkar, 'Sandhyakaal' [Evening], in Vyatheetli, p. 12.

<sup>45</sup> Ganorkar, 'Sandhyakaal' [Evening], in Vyathccth, p. 13.

crows, or sorrow, because I cannot start  
 anew? The trees don't move, the tears won't  
 stop. Are you standing behind me? I don't see  
 you in the j  
 mirror.<sup>46</sup>

The title of the collection, *Vynthccth*, is significant, with connotations of both 'Spent' and 'Wasted'. The poems are about wasted time, wasted years, spent emotions and a wasted and spent life, which still has rare moments of beauty and meaning. They could be seen as a slice in the journey from birth to death, from rebirth to multiple deaths.<sup>47</sup>

Time is an overriding concern for Ganorkar, as is space. She is always aware that there is never enough time, or conversely, that there is too much time. Similarly, some poems express the poet's emotional claustrophobia and need for freedom, whereas others talk of the loneliness of alienation, of being alone. Ganorkar's position is that loneliness is inevitable, and that one must endure it from

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<sup>46</sup> Ganorkar, 'Khidkishi' [By the Window], in *Vyntlicctli*, p. 42.

<sup>45</sup> *Dahake*, 'Vyatheeth', in *Kavita: Snnknlpann, Nirniiti, nnni Sameeksha* [Poetry: Thought, Form and Creation], p. 154.

milestone to milestone in various journeys one undertakes:

Splitting the horizon higher and higher The  
 saagwan trees carefully cradle their  
 golden tops  
 And are briskly left behind  
 ...New trees, vines, mountain tops, new  
 lakes...  
 Shyly folding on themselves.  
 Lotus smile slightly and welcome you,  
 Bow, take their places and are left behind.  
 You cannot see them or even vaguely  
 familiar things  
 anymore.  
 Stars wink and fill only the sky.  
 Milestones fall by the way  
 With a monotonous regularity, hiding  
 Themselves in the cupped hands of  
 darkness.<sup>48</sup>

It is all right not to know where one is going, but the important thing is to keep travelling. Relationships may be formed during the journey, security and love can be liberating in the short term, but ultimately don't provide answers. It is the journey, the search itself, that matters. While this concept does not seem new or different now, the position she takes is

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<sup>48</sup> Ganorkar, 'Pravas' [Journey], in Vyathccth, pp. 1-2.

unconventional to say the least, even radical for a woman, given the orthodoxy of middle-class Maharashtra and its constructs of a woman's place in the family and society.<sup>49</sup>

The poems in *Vyntheeth* span a period of ten years from 1964 to 1974, and are arranged both thematically and chronologically. The poet begins by expressing the knowledge that she has begun on a journey. She does not know where exactly this journey has begun, or where it will end. Sometimes, not only the foreknowledge of destination/ but the purpose of the journey itself, escapes her:

Even now the people I meet Suggest I turn  
back.  
And I do meet them— people, trees, birds.  
But they only ever remain— people trees  
birds.  
I gave up believing long ago  
That someone would show me the right  
path.  
Besides, how would they know Where I want  
to go?

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<sup>30</sup> Dahake, 'Badallele Jeevansandharbha aani Vaangmayeen Pravaha' [The Changing Socio-cultural Ethos and New Literary Movements], p. 38.

I don't know this,  
Myself.<sup>50</sup>

She feels rootless, alienated and empty. For example, we can see this in the following extract:

All around me,  
this crushing crowd, gaudy,  
lurid voices, explosions of colour.  
A pensive, quiet-coloured rust spreads on  
the horizon.  
Unknown silhouettes of unknown trees,  
A grieving, sinking evening and I wander  
through purposeless pathways —  
Now stumbling like an Arab picking his way  
through a desert night.  
My feet sink into cold, cold sand.  
Come up, sink again. There is no warmth in  
this touch of soft sand,  
I do not feel any warmth.  
But the real question is— am I cold and  
aloof  
or is it this never-ending desert?<sup>51</sup>

Self-doubt begins to creep into her consciousness. Is she alienated from her loved ones and familiar surroundings, or do they seem alien because she does not know who she is any more? Form and content are

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<sup>50</sup> Ganorkar, 'Kalath Nahi' [I Don't Understand], in Vyathccth, p. 19.

<sup>51</sup> Ganorkar, 'Bhowthali Prachanda Gardi' [All Around Me, This Crushing Crowd], in Vyatheeth, p. 4.



skillfully intertwined in these poems, with bleakness in content often mirrored in and enhanced by the pared down, 'bare bones' quality of the words:

Some new, blue, alien sky  
 Slowly flickers in the corner of your eye.  
 Evening is oozing everywhere And a forlorn  
 piece of sunlight Tries to outrun the  
 darkening sky.<sup>52</sup>

We see here an extension of the theme of alienation that Ganorkar introduces in 'Journey': 'Where will I have come from?/ Where have I gone?/ At midnight the train reveals only/ An unknown town.'<sup>53</sup> There is a play on the known and the unknown right through this collection. The questions that Ganorkar asks repeatedly, almost obsessively, along with the existential 'who am I', 'why am I', are— what is ours, what is alien? What is 'self', what is 'other'? She explores what it is to be a woman who does not belong on a multiplicity of levels. This search for a female selfhood through a painful negotiation amongst assigned and situational subjectivities, despite the prescriptions of culture and history,

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<sup>52</sup> Ganorkar, 'Journey', in Vyatheeth, p. 1.

<sup>53</sup> Ganorkar, 'Journey', in Vyatheeth, p. 2.

marks the central concern of this writer's attempts to dismantle existing stereotypes of Indian (Maharashtrian) womanhood and politicise female experience within the enclosures set up by Hindu-Indian patriarchy.

There is a recurring use of pathetic fallacy, but also an ironic awareness of this usage. The speaking voice in these poems is painfully aware of its 'difference', and somehow resigned to the loneliness that goes hand in hand with this difference. This is a recurring motif right through her work. Self-doubt and loneliness are emphasised by the poet's choice of words and structure. The words are sparse, bleak and to the point. There is very little ornamentation in terms of imagery or conventional Marathi poetic 'beauty'. In fact, Ganorkar's nature imagery is often deliberately cruel, even ugly, in keeping with her anti-Romantic stance. This is where her poetic voice diverges noticeably from many of her contemporaries such as Rajni Parulekar.<sup>54</sup> As we see in the following:

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<sup>54</sup> The scope of this thesis does not allow for an analysis of the protest poetry of female Dalit poets such as Mallika Amarshaikh, who express different concerns to their

Excuse me, but this is not a sapling that you can just uproot and plant elsewhere! As if the mere promise of rain is enough! These roots go very deep indeed, all the way to the core of the earth itself. Shake them this roughly and they hurt, you know! They break, too, deep inside. Not that you'd see the fractures. But you could see how the leaves are dying. If you looked very carefully.<sup>55</sup>

The speaking voice is usually that of an 'outsider' — alienated from her social and cultural ethos, preferring passivity, resignation, isolation and silence to engaging in a material world devoid of meaning and fulfillment. Silence is, however, shown to be an involuntary state of being as well. The poetic voice(s) call into question the traditional silencing of their views and desires within a culture that regards women as objects rather than as subjects.

Simultaneously, the poet subverts such a silencing tradition by choosing / making her poetic persona deliberately choose to be outwardly silent but in possession of an intensely subjective and articulate imagination and consciousness; that is, she tends to think or brood rather than address a person / persons, or soliloquise. The poet seems to posit that

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middle- class/urban counterparts.

<sup>55</sup> Ganorkar, 'Mule' [Roots], in Vynthech, p. 32.

speech can hide or mask what is really being said, or alternatively, make her vulnerable by revealing too much. The deliberate irony of suggesting this in poetic words is not lost on the careful reader. Silence on the other hand, can become (and often does, in Ganorkar's poetry) much more eloquent— a form of protest, 'a different kind of speech'.<sup>56</sup> This paradox can be seen in 'The End':

We talked far too much.  
 Frankly speaking, much more than was  
 wise.  
 It was ok to go on about the present,  
 I suppose. Or even the past.  
 But to keep coming back to the future?  
 Not really good in the long run.  
 And we just kept talking.  
 Kept nothing to ourselves No secrets,  
 nothing private.  
 We forgot  
 That one should stop at some point.  
 Now the inevitable end of our dialogue  
 can only be  
 Silence.<sup>57</sup>

The writing is restrained and taut, with rare dramatic moments erupting, as we see in the

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<sup>56</sup> Graham Huggan, 'Philomela's Retold Story: Silence, Music, and the Post-Colonial Text', in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 25.1 (1990), p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> Ganorkar, 'Shevat' [The End], in *Vyatheeth*, p. 30.

following poem:

Where do these birds go?  
 Where do they live?  
 What brings them home everyday After their  
 soaring flight?  
 motherfatherchildrensisterbrotherwife?  
 Just one more question:  
 Are they too allowed to die Only after their  
 lives have ended?<sup>58</sup>

The structure of the poem sets us up perfectly for the twist in the last two lines. The seemingly harmless, even banal questions leave us unprepared for the end, which is disturbing in its casual, yet powerful articulation of intense despair. We also see here, perhaps, what the poet posits as the meaninglessness of the conventional dichotomy of life and death. Women are wounded and killed many times over in a patriarchy, Ganorkar seems to say throughout *Vyntheeth*.

Another one of her overriding concerns is also broached in this poem— the futility of blood ties and

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<sup>58</sup> Ganorkar, 'Prashna' [Question(s)], in *Vyntheeth*, p. 18.

the harm and irreparable damage caused by relationships, especially within the framework of patriarchal heterosexuality and the institution of marriage. The poem 'Touch' explicitly broaches what I interpret as the issue of forcible sex in marriage, or marital rape:

That my body would be numb to touch.  
 Strangled sobs in the silent night That  
 dissolve before they emerge.  
 Breaths. Hot as the midday sun At the height  
 of summer.  
 Spreading like a wildfire  
 Scorching breaths  
 With invisible scorching shadows.  
 My body is a burnt, smoking cinder...  
 Touch.  
 That my body would disintegrate Like a  
 leper's limbs.<sup>59</sup>

This poem could also be read as an expression of pain and disgust for a middle-class woman's conjugal 'duties' regardless of her sexual desire, and for the female body as property for male use. We also see hate

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<sup>59</sup>Ganorkar, 'Sparsh' [Touch], in Vyntheeth, p. 7.

for a body— 'That my body would disintegrate/ Like a leper's limbs'— that makes her vulnerable to unwanted touch / violation. This is where Ganorkar's work diverges from Deshpande's, in that the former's female voices are both, physically and emotionally distant from men, and isolated from society, having been betrayed and used too often. Deshpande's women struggle to achieve an identity and marriage acceptable to themselves; Ganorkar's voices embrace the pain of isolation and 'not belonging', finding that male-female relationships exact too high a price. We see this explored in 'Gaze', where the woman is framed and ultimately violated by the male gaze. That the man blinds himself, only serves to underscore the bitterness:

He could look at her only as long as her  
eyes  
Sparkled with life, like the blue of  
sapphires.  
Then her eyes turned into burnt-out coal.  
Her storm-tasting lips dulled to a dirty  
foam-white,  
Her body grew numb as a block of wood.  
And still his gaze crept over her fungus-  
like.

And so, he plucked out his own eyes.<sup>60</sup>

Again, characteristically, the twist in the last line points to a deliberate ambiguity. One is unsure as to whether the man has blinded himself out of guilt, horror at what he has done, or whether the woman has ceased to be beautiful any more, and because he cannot tolerate looking at an aesthetically displeasing object. The other most striking difference in Deshpande and Ganorkar's work is that Deshpande's women are usually rejected or denigrated by their mothers and older female relatives for being female, and they usually reject their mothers as role models. Ganorkar's persona in 'For My Mother', on the other hand, writes with love and tenderness about her mother, explores her mother's past through the mother's poetry, and expresses regret at not trying to know her mother as a woman:

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<sup>60</sup> Ganorkar, 'Drushti' [Gaze], in Vynthech, p. 31.



Your book of poems sits here on the table. A strange exhaustion has come over me while wandering through your words, while travelling through your lines. As if I had undertaken your life's journey, encountering gigantic trees with monstrous, grasping roots... I have wrung your experiences out of every word on the page and they sit humming and heavy in my bones, like the air just before a storm... I want to learn you. The woman hidden inside you, the one I didn't know. I want to have known you.<sup>61</sup>

This technique provides a deliberate counterpoint to the subdued tone of most of the poems, revealing the undercurrent of passionately felt emotions. Thus Ganorkar is able to foreground the emotionally charged poetic persona behind the seeming transparency and coolly ironic distance of the poems. This is very clearly seen in 'Funeral Pyre':

You smell it, don't you? The stench of  
burning flesh?

I can tell by the way your nostrils flare.

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<sup>61</sup> Ganorkar, 'Priya Aai' [For my Mother], *Pratishlitian*, (July October), 1994, pp. 5-7. Translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

You've guessed correctly, it is the smell of a  
burning corpse.

Quite surprising, I suppose —

This stench pervading an affluent suburb —

Or is it?

... I light quite a few funeral pyres when I  
can, you know/

...For myself, killed in some forgotten past.

This pyre is for a dead woman. See, it's like  
this.

Her body lay unattended in the street

For three days and finally the smell...

What's that? You're in a hurry?

Oh well, hold on just a minute, will you.

I'll join you as soon as her skull shatters.<sup>63</sup>

There are two motifs that stand out most clearly within the journey in *Vyatheeth*. One is the heightened awareness of the isolated and fragmented self of the poet. Simultaneously there is an exploration, through Ganorkar's sensibility, of the 'double standards and limits Indian society imposes on women, even though

they may be from the middle-class and highly educated'.<sup>61</sup>

The loneliness and isolation that arises from breaking away from these limitations, or at least confronting these constructs, is never romanticised. Rather, the poet's emphasis shows how this erodes her sense of worth and adds to her fragmentation —

Since yesterday, this rain has poured down  
endlessly.

...The life that sprouts in our veins Must be  
uprooted so it withers and dies.

Since yesterday, this rain has poured down  
endlessly.

So be it.

Who cares, when shoots will be destroyed  
Even before they peep from the mud.<sup>62</sup>

She sometimes sees herself as prey being hunted by  
'them'— patriarchal, violent beings wishing to  
uphold <sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Ganorkar, 'Kaalpasun Pacos' [Since Yesterday, This Rain Has

<sup>63</sup> Abha Prakash Leard, 'The many-armed woman:

the status quo, to efface any signs of a strong female self. We see this in 'Search', one of her most direct, starkly simple and effective poems:

They killed me  
 But did not let me bleed.  
 They hacked at me  
 But smothered my screams  
 Then smeared their bodies  
 With my ashes  
 And bellowed their grief —  
 Now that I am reborn.  
 My eyes search for them Unceasingly.<sup>65 64</sup>

Again, we see here a questioning of the birth / death binary. In this poem, 'killed' and 'wounded' could be the literal or symbolic / systemic violence inflicted upon women in patriarchal cultures, as mentioned earlier. But Ganorkar's- deliberate ambiguity comes through here once more. The last two lines could be interpreted as the woman now seeks revenge on those

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representations of the female in the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai', PhD Thesis, University of Saskatchewan, (1994), p. 55.  
 Poured Down Endlessly], in Vyatl-.ccth, p. 10.

who inflicted pain and suffering on her in the past. Or it could be that after rebirth as an emergent feminist consciousness 'They' have run away. But the lines could also be seen as a masochistic longing to be hurt again. An almost masochistic relish, but one that is self-reflexively so, emerges in 'Dutiful Blood'. The blatantly sarcastic, even flippant tone is unusual. What comes through strongly is contempt for herself for being a victim. Her attitude also implicates all the other women encouraged to be masochistic, because assuming martyrdom allows them a modicum of power in what is otherwise a powerless life. This disgust / contempt is seen repeatedly. What is interesting, and part of the ambiguity I have mentioned earlier, is that she flagellates herself even as she expresses disgust at her self-flagellation:

I will not say that you betrayed me.

What for?

I have nursed my wounds fastidiously.

Why bother?

This blood leaks continuously

A congealed moment is illusory...

It has forgotten how to stop, this blood.

Its duty is to flow and flood.<sup>67</sup>

But these lines could be read, too, as expressing an assertive revolutionary vision— one that sees femaleness after oppression impersonally 'flooding' the world and changing it. This interpretation works especially if the you / I form is read as drawing on the bhakti tradition.

In reading her work as a whole, I would posit that she/the poetic persona seems to be saying that it is possible to suffer tremendously, even to be destroyed, but that it is possible to reinvent oneself, to actively inscribe one's resistance to essentialist constructs and traditions; in other words, to empower oneself through self-analysis

and political acts of agency. This is suggested by the reiteration of the metaphor of rebirth and Ganorkar's use of the phoenix image, which quite striking throughout the collection. When her work is read in this way, it does not matter how much of the poetic persona is personal / autobiographical and how much a poetic construct. Whether or not the work is 'genuinely' confessional, the poetic voice that comes through is convincing.

The poems discussed above are a direct contrast to Ganorkar's love poems, which, typically, seem to be simple and straightforward, but which are hardly ever unqualified, and reveal an unexpected layer on careful reading. It is here that the poet reveals that she can work just as successfully within the literary tradition of women's love poetry, especially in the poem 'Dawn':

Dawn is here.  
Move over a little  
Loosen your embrace a little  
My eyelashes grow heavy  
Let me open my eyes a little.

Dawn is here, my love.  
 Let me learn to function  
 Away from you a little.<sup>65</sup>

But while the poem works on one level as a simple love poem, it is not unqualified, as mentioned above— the 'I' in the poem seeks to wake from the induced drowsiness of romance to a self-determined distance.

'Restlessness' is another ambiguous love poem in which we see the poet gradually willing to 'see' with different eyes. It is interesting that this is also one of Ganorkar's longer and more prose-like (though certainly not prosaic) pieces. I have translated it as a prose poem in keeping with its rhythm and tone:

The house starts to suffocate me. I can  
 bear it no longer, am driven outside. I sit  
 in the garden on the swing, lean on its  
 links and look up. Such an enormous

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<sup>65</sup> Ganorkar, 'Pahat' [Dawn], in Vyathceth, p. 46.



sky. Yet all around, the people, the  
houses are closing in on me.

And I think perhaps it is true that I never  
found anyone who could give me  
courage

as expansive as the sky, and I think  
everything is inside-out, and I think  
everyone is so petty and small minded,  
and I think...

Chaos, noise, dust continue to fly around  
me. The sky is huge and so... real.  
Suddenly I cannot bear to remain  
outside either.

I go back into the house, only to find that  
you have been there all along...<sup>66</sup>

Again, this poem is more complex than an initial

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<sup>66</sup> Ganorkar, 'Thagmag' [Restlessness], in Vyatheeth,  
p. 47.

reading suggests. It can be read as coming from within the bhakti tradition. If read in this manner, it is a conventional piece done up in modern, urban garb. But if read differently, that is, not linked to the bhakti tradition, then it is not a love poem at all, becoming, in effect, an 'anti' love poem. The 'you' can in fact be read as the cause of the suffocation that drives her outside.

Significantly, both the above-mentioned poems are positioned sequentially and are among the last few poems in the collection, perhaps pointing to the poet starting to come to terms with belonging / not belonging, or finding her own ways of belonging and articulating various selves towards an inner coherence.

The journey in *Vyatheeth* has an elliptical, somewhat elusive quality, as the last poem, 'Palas Tree' also depicts a journey, one that is

both, radically different to all the others, and yet the same. There, for the first time, we see two people walking together. Each is too tired and thirsty to pay attention to the other's presence. They are both momentarily trapped inside their own misery, each thinking:

I can walk no more. I need somewhere  
cool and wet and green I can walk no  
more in this heat I need at least the  
promise of rest.<sup>69</sup> <sup>67</sup>

The speaking voice goes on to say that she has been travelling so long, that she cannot even hear 'the thud-thud of [her] own footsteps anymore'.<sup>68</sup> At this point the tone of the poem shifts quite unexpectedly, and goes on to say:

Yet when we turn around and walk  
back silently along that very road,

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<sup>67</sup> Ganorkar, 'Paias' [Palas Tree], in Vyatheeth, p. 51.

<sup>68</sup> Ganorkar, 'Palas' [Palas Tree], in Vyntheeth, p. 51.

there is a Palas tree, red blossoms  
dancing in a miniature  
explosion on  
every luscious, velvet-green stem.<sup>69</sup>

The delight of the last poem lies in the fact that it demonstrates clearly the movement of the poetic persona and the various insights she has experienced along the way. The following is from an early poem, one that figures in the first half of the collection:

We know each other  
Like we know our own bodies.  
  
We are familiar with the parts  
That give us pleasure.  
And know too well the places too  
painful  
to touch, or so I thought.

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<sup>69</sup>Ganorkar, 'Palas' [Palas Tree], in Vyntheeth, p. 51.

And suddenly one day I realised  
 How misguided I had been.  
 How I had fooled myself all along.  
 Like a cancerous growth spreading  
 under the skin.

Seeds of sorrow had been taking root In  
 my mind.

Completely hidden, entirely alien.<sup>70</sup>

We see quite clearly the move from  
 'misguided'— I don't understand./ Where,  
 exactly, did I take a wrong turn?'<sup>71</sup>— to someone  
 able to see the beauty of the Palas tree in bloom.  
 The hint of hope expressed in the latter adds a  
 depth and roundedness to the poetic persona,  
 one who is able to actively mobilise each  
 encounter as a site of contestation and reflection.  
 This process is often a fraught one, filled with  
 clash, contradiction and reversal rather than a

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<sup>70</sup> Ganorkar, 'Phasgath' [Fooled], in Vyatheeth, p. 29.

<sup>71</sup> Ganorkar, 'Kalath Nahi' [I Don't Understand], in Vyatheeth, p. 19.

smooth continuity. Despite the threat of real and metaphorical violence, she cannot backslide into an unthinking acceptance of the position ascribed to her because she has become sharply aware of her positionality.

these are complexities in the cultural fabric that must be recognised if we are to approach the elusive nature of an identity that emerges at the margin, or understand the peculiar tension between public and private realities that underwrites women's writing.<sup>72</sup>

Ganorkar's use of language is intractable, even at its most coolly polite, and brimming with deconstructive potential because it points at 'aporia and the absurdity of essentialist categorisation.'<sup>73</sup> Ganorkar's writing style often means that there are issues crowding the margins, which are then left to the readers to

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<sup>72</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds). *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Volume II: The 20th Century*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), preface, p. xvii.

<sup>73</sup> Saeed Ur Rehman, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', MA Diss., University of Wollongong, 1997.

unravel themselves. This foregrounds the process of reading and creating meaning, the role of reader-positionality in this process and acknowledges that alternate discourses and perceptions exist. With an unsettling syntax (for example— long, meandering lines followed by short, staccato ones, unexpected line breaks, long pauses, blank spaces, words fragmented and bunched together)<sup>74</sup> and a focus on the breakdown of relationships and spaces, her poems work both as written and spoken pieces.

For example, Dilip and Nina Kulkarni, two well-known theatre actors, successfully performed some of her poems at an art exhibition called "Beyond Proscenium", using the artist's (Shakuntala Kulkarni's) installations as backdrops and sets.<sup>75</sup> Thus the poems subvert not only entrenched Western notions of representation and existence, but also overturn

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<sup>74</sup> I have not always been able to translate keeping the poem's original form, as the lines, breaks, spaces and so on do not work in the same way in English.

<sup>75</sup> Hosted by the Jehangir Art Gallery (Bombay), 1994.

constructs of a monolithic, middle-class, 'non-Westernised', female, pan-Indian identity.

Ganorkar's work is encountered in spaces — and creates spaces — not occupied by typical postcolonial theory, because most of these postcolonial theorists are preoccupied with theorising and writing back to the colonial centre or to pre-colonial origins through equally essentialist Nativist ideas of Nationalism. Ganorkar's work focuses on a specific cultural-linguistic region, not the Nation; the solitary person (woman), not the collective of 'the people'; it is informed by a mixture of a rural and urban but highly academic and literary sensibility; it is existentialist rather than forcefully feminist. But at the same time the writing is 'placed' for an Indian readership as being unambiguously Indian and by a woman.

Postcolonial theory, in the process of



constantly debating a hybridised 'writing back' or the recuperation of a sovereign postcolonised identity, focuses on large-scale events and encounters. On the other hand, we can see how Deleuze's contention that there are writers who 'are big by virtue of minorisation', because of how they cause language to 'flee, [bewitch it], they place it endlessly in a state of disequilibrium' can be applied productively to Ganorkar's writing.<sup>79</sup>

In the postcolonial context, self-expression is important, as is identity assertion in terms of group politics, whether class, ethnic or gender. Translation can work sometimes to essentialise and consolidate particular group representations identities at the cost of others, but we could also see translation as a sign that opens closed literary systems to both destabilisation and renewal, as per Andre Lefevere.

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<sup>79</sup> Deleuze quoted in Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

To a bilingual writer and theorist (Marathi/English) like Dilip Chitre, a bilingual writer and theorist, nativist discourses are couched in crudely dichotomous and insular terms because they see the world in an 'Indian-versus-Western' worldview and leave "no scope for the writer's individuality and originality" that is transgressive of both Indian and Western reality'.<sup>80</sup> This analysis can be extended to Ganorkar's work, which does not fall into tidy category boxes. She is unknown in the West – to the best of my knowledge, this is the first attempt at translating her work into English – and is rarely anthologised, even in India.

Indeed, as transgressive a writer as Ganorkar is, the merits of her work seem to have less cultural/literary 'value' than the practices of Indian writers who address the metropolis and/or

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<sup>80</sup> Cited in Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

the Nation, who agonise over or critique 'Indianness' and who employ the same literary/theoretical/interpretive grammar as the prevailing Western and/or Marathi literary discourses.

Ganorkar articulates her desolate, sometimes blackly tragi-comic position from risky edges. Irrespective of her position of some privilege as a published writer and academic, she is a marginalised writer who does not find any succour in postcolonial identity boxes. She is not canonised because she does not have:

Any abstract universal in the form of a single national language, a single ethnic affiliation, a single pre-fabricated cultural identity'.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Reda Bensmaia, quoted in Saeed.

She could, of course, be canonised within Marathi literature, but Ganorkar fractures monolithic Indian norms and systems of representation (and in fact, the postcolonial notion of Indian writing itself) in her writing. Through her deeply moving writing which is rooted in her everyday reality, and in which she translates herself across a number of binary borders, she provides readers with an alternative voice to patriarchally sanctioned Hindu-Brahminical/middle class narratives (and indeed, Dalit writing by male writers) which largely dominate Marathi literature. She could in fact even be read as producing inaudible screams that mimic the 'voice' of the subaltern. (Could she be 'canonised' by giving her theoretical authority through such a reading?)

I hope that I have been able to convey my enthusiasm for Ganorkar's work, and the need to

redress the lack of critical attention paid to her by postcolonial theorists interested in Indian/women's writing. I am aware that there is the ironic possibility of a project such as this thesis propelling her into a more central position in Indian writing by giving her theoretical authority as a surrogate subaltern voice.

But the problematic nature of that voice's positionality and address, and the equivocal status of the translated text within a national or postcolonial framework will continue to work against this.

Some Reflections on Translating:

My encounter with Vyatheeth meant, simultaneously, an experience of the poems, and a traversing of their aesthetic-historical specificities. At a direct and immediate level, I found myself exploring the interplay of interfaces/Ganorkar's voices with the page, as well as with the textures and the codes of the 'kavya' and confessional poetry. Beneath this level of writing, there lay the archives of personal history and myth, as well as the 'allusions to visionary traditions'<sup>77</sup> that are within Marathi language and literature.

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<sup>77</sup> Ranjit Hoskote and Mangesh Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogablrnshta*, p. 18

I relied on conjecture in this 'subsurface probing'<sup>78</sup> as Hoskote and Kulkarni call it, stepping softly among personae, images and themes, 'sifting through ambiguous signs, as with a forked divining rod'.<sup>79</sup> As I tried to write myself into my version of the text, I

sketched, not so much a theory, as a strategy of translation— a series of entry- points and eventual rites of passage, by which [the] original could be rendered over, gradually re-imagined into English.<sup>80</sup>

Ultimately, I had to make Ganorkar's poetry feel as much at home in English as possible, but without 'domesticating' it and taking away its bite, without polishing away its distinctive intonation. The seeming simplicity and transparency of her words was what I found the

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<sup>78</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogablrnshta*, p. 18.

<sup>79</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogablrnshta*, p. 18.

<sup>80</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogablrnshta*, pp. 18-19.

most difficult; finding 'A pattern of equivalences', which is the term used by Hoskote and Kulkarni to describe their attempts at finding viable counterparts in Marathi, in relation to the features of the original.

For example, translating 'parkarya pori' as 'long-skirted little girls', which not only has the alliterative feel of the former, but also conveys the prepubescent nature of the girls. 'The abruptly variable diction, the chains of meaning released by the open-ended syntax in some poems, the subtle genealogies offered by particular motifs— all these called for delicate manoeuvres of adjustment'.<sup>81</sup>

Inevitably, there was an area of 'in-betweenness' in the source and target languages, and sometimes yawning chasms opened up at the borders between the two. I was forced to invent, to juggle with an eclectic array of choices of

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<sup>81</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yognblirslita*, p. 19.



nuance and phrase. These improvisations, perhaps, constituted the precise moment of translation, when the elements of the original became 'transfused' with my voice – sometimes, no doubt, to their (and my) surprise. 'Translation as transfusion'.<sup>82</sup>

In the transfusion of / from *Vyntheeth* to *Spent*, for instance, sometimes an unseen layer of meaning, a rhythm, a play on words, a performative moment in the poem itself, jumped out at me, bringing to mind another poet's lines:

Paanyaath onzalichyaa/ If meaning should

flash

Yaava chukoon meen/ Into my song

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<sup>82</sup> Else Ribeiro Pires Vieira, 'Liberating Calibans: Readings of An tropofagia and Haroldo de Campos' Poetics of Transcreation', in *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, p. 95. Vieira quotes Haroldo de Campos.

Chamkoonhi tasaach/ Like an iridescent

fish

GaanyaaTh arth yaava.../ Into my hands

casually

dipped/ In a

river...<sup>83</sup>

There were a number of translations and reimaginings that had to happen. I had to translate myself into Ganorkar's poetry, I had to translate memories, the language of dreams, I had to acknowledge that my desires imbued the text I read. The connections were never simple, because I have taken it as self-evident that every

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<sup>83</sup> C. T. Khanolkar / Arati Prabhu, *Nakshtraanche Dene*, [The Giving of Stars], Audio tape, performed by the 'Aniket' Theatre Group and set to music by Bhaskar Chandavarkar, 1975. Chitra Palekar and Amol Palekar's collection, translated by Shalmalee Palekar.

translation is first and foremost an active reading; that it is neither a neutral or straightforward transference of data. 'While undercutting the plenitude of any origin as the only source of strength, it makes an incision and a conjoining to unite the blood and marrow of the one with the other'.<sup>84</sup> The process was as much about building layer upon layer, as much as it was about peeling away other .skins.

'The philosopher Gadamer, in a lyric phrase, speaks of a fusion of horizons';<sup>85</sup> this seems the apposite trope to invoke, in treating of the relations between writer and reader-translator, as mediated through the space of translation. The attempt, at all events, has been to communicate these poems 'as a transitive form of life, rather than as museum artefacts'.<sup>86</sup> In place of the sound patterns of the Marathi

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<sup>84</sup> Vieira, 'Liberating Calibans', p. 96.

<sup>85</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogabhrashta*, , pp. 19-20.

<sup>86</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogabrushta*, p. 20.

utterance, I tried to suggest resonances in English: patterns of alliteration, the occasional off-rhythm, the play on words wherever it slipped in, as demonstrated above.

Keeping in mind Hoskote and Kulkarni's strategy of translating involving the substituting of music, or efforts in that direction, I tried to write musically as well as poetically, aiming to convey particular moods to the reader. For example, instead of thinking primarily of words, I asked myself which raag came to mind when reading a particular poem, and then set about 'writing'— or at least attempted to write— that raag. To me Raag Hansadhwani, with its movement between a powerfully dramatic aaroḥa (ascending scale that frames the boundaries of each raag) and a quiet, pensive, almost melancholic and reflective avroḥa (descending scale as above) began to embody much of Ganorkar's poetry.

At the same time, the language of the translation retains the forms and' patterns of Marathi where possible, in the long, alliterative line, the dramatically loaded succession of clauses, the orality of Ganorkar's poetry, especially in the frequent sprung-rhythm-like sequence of hard consonantal sounds. My version has also tried to be faithful to Ganorkar's sudden syntactical swerves— such as when, without warning, meandering constructions give way to a sequence of sharp, stiletto-like lines, or when matter-of-fact, spare, descriptive narrative lines suddenly change to highly charged and emotive ones.<sup>87</sup> As Geeta Dharmarajan and Rimli Bhattacharya point out:

There is besides the  
inevitable question of dialect,  
always more challenging than

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<sup>87</sup> Hoskote and Kulkarni, translators' preface, *Yogabraslita*, pp. 20- 21.

the translation of standard speech. We have found that the rhythms of colloquial speech are easier to translate from one regional language to another than to English.<sup>88</sup>

Like Dharmarajan and Bhattacharya, I wanted the movement from one language to another, from one cultural context to another to be 'smooth but not seamless. The seams should show, even be felt, but they should not jar and leave the reader in limbo land'.<sup>89</sup>

I have made a conscious attempt to avoid using Indian words as 'local colour'<sup>90</sup> but to use them unobtrusively, as they actually are used by most of us. Thus I have deliberately chosen not to italicise Indian words since these belong and should belong to the English language as spoken and used everyday in multilingual India.

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<sup>88</sup> Ririnli Bhattacharya and Ceeta Dharmarajan, intro: *Translating Differences*, Kntlm Prize Stories: Volume /, (New Delhi: Katha, 1991), no page numbers are given.

<sup>89</sup> Bhattacharya and Dharmarajan, intro: *Translating Differences*.

<sup>90</sup> Bhattacharya and Dharmarajan, intro: *Translating Differences*.

Thus it is seen that in Chapters Two and Three, I have explored issues of translation, mediation, referentiality and reception. The argument is not that Ganorkar is a postcolonial *writer*, so much as that, despite being informed by questions of modernity and the kind of alienated existentialism found in other writers (Vilas Sarang, Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, for instance— another academic), she is left out of consideration in a postcolonial *approach* to Indian writing because of language and, arguably, a Western view of activist feminism carried with the postcolonial outlook and a framework that attends primarily to the national space rather than the regional one. Keeping this in mind, I will analyse the work of Shashi Deshpande in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### NEGOTIATING TEXTUAL / SEXUAL DESIRE AND DOMESTICITY: A READING OF SHASHI DESHPANDE'S WORK

"a woman may collect cats read thrillers/  
her insomnia may seep through the great walls of  
history/...

judiciously distilling her whimper the city lights/  
may declare it null and void" — Arun Kolatkar



Shashi Deshpande is a writer who enjoys a good deal more attention than Prabha Ganorkar. Obviously, she has published a lot more, but her work is also more suited to international conceptions of feminist writing as well as Indian writing, precisely because it is more accessible for being written in English. While I argue in this chapter that Deshpande is nonetheless 'translating' aspects of feminism into a particular Indian context, her work is also symptomatic of an inbuilt bias in the study of 'Indian writing' and 'postcolonial literatures' that continues to privilege the narrow spectrum of Anglophone expression as representing Nation and/or Third World women.

Ganorkar and Deshpande are contemporaries who operate out of similar backgrounds and explore similar concerns, but who write in different languages and inhabit different locations vis-a-vis the international literary scene. Thus I have selected Deshpande as my second writer to demonstrate the variety of Indian positions/

representations in the intersection of gender and postcolonial readings even within the limited range of middle-class, Maharashtrian women writers.

There are many different positions and identities across the group labelled 'Indian writer in English'. Shashi Deshpande is a contemporary Indian novelist writing in English. Her upbringing and education are totally Indian. English, according to her, is used by her like any other Indian language. In fact, she does not want any special quality of Indianness to be recognised as a separate aspect in any way contrasting with her medium. There are two (now dated) assumptions that lead to her claim— firstly, the idea that 'Indian' and 'English' are contraries, and secondly, the demand for 'Indianness' in writers in English in overseas markets equals *exotica*, as well as by Indian nationals for 'proof' of authentic identity. It is to counter such demands that she says:

'How can I point out the Indianness? — it would be absurd. No one thinks of Indianness in a Marathi novel— why should it appear in mine? It's

written by an Indian— that's all'.<sup>1</sup>

This statement reflects the confident, new-found individual voice of the Indian English writer— a voice which is no more imitative of British models, apologetic about writing in English<sup>1</sup> or fixated on 'writing back' to the centre. For example, Gurcharan Das speaks of this new variety of Indian English as a vibrant language 'born under the Indian sun, a language used, like a native tongue, by the newly emergent Indian middle class'.<sup>2</sup> Indian literature written in English is now generally considered a legitimate part of Indian literature. It is rarely considered exotic any more; 'it has firmly staked its claim to being one of the Indian literatures.'<sup>3</sup> This is similar to Salman Rushdie's contention that

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<sup>1</sup> Nilufer E. Bharucha and Vilas Sarang, Preface, *Indian-English Fiction, 1980-1990: An Assessment*, (New Delhi, B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1994), p. v.

<sup>2</sup> Deshpande's letter to Usha Tambe, quoted by Tambe in 'Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist and a Novelist', in Vilas Sarang and Nilufer Bharucha (eds), *Indian-English Fiction, 1980-1990: An Assessment*, (New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1994), p. 117.

<sup>3</sup> Bharucha and Sarang, Preface, *Indian-English Fiction*, p. v.

The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have to hand.<sup>4</sup>

But for those who might view it as a sort of intellectual Non-resident Indian (NRI) product, Deshpande passionately puts forth her arguments (and implicit defence) as to why she has chosen English as her medium:

To those of us who write in English, it is neither a foreign language, nor the language of the coloniser, but the language of our creativity. Whether the writing is rootless, alienated or elitist, should be judged from the writing, not the language. My writing comes out myself, the society I live in; it is shaped as I am, by my family, my ancestry, the place I was born in, the place I live in, the culture I am steeped in. The fact that the writing is in English changes none of these things.<sup>5</sup>

Deshpande writes a variety of Indian English that is rooted in the ambience of regional

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<sup>4</sup> Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, (New Delhi: Penguin and Granta, 1991), p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Shashi Deshpande, 'Language No Bar', in *The Sunday Times of India*, (April 23), 1995, p. 10.

cultures, that is, those of the States of Maharashtra and Karnataka. For example, her characters have names and pet-names that immediately 'place' them for Indian readers as being Maharashtrian or Kannadiga— Saru, Indu, Jaya, Chandu, Kamat. She also uses Marathi or Kannada words to describe various characters and their relationships to each other, such as Kaka (rather than paternal Uncle), and Ajji (rather than Grandmother). The culturally specific words and sentence constructions sit easily and naturally in her body of work, so that the work reflects a contemporary, middle-class, Indian-English.<sup>6</sup> Deshpande avoids foregrounding the Indianness of the writing through the self-conscious use of 'local colour', but writes in an English with which her readers would be familiar and comfortable. In light of this, one agrees with Bharucha and Sarang's contention that:

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<sup>6</sup> Mrinalini Sebastian, *The Enterprise of Reading Differently: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande in Postcolonial Arguments*, (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2000), p. 58.

recent Indian English fiction displays a sense of social consciousness, is concerned with Indian socio-political realities and is authentically Indian. Also, it is no more a literature which is aimed deliberately at a Western audience. The rising middle class in India has assured it of an indigenous readership.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore Deshpande's preferred positionality of regional writer writing in English, can be seen as being a valid one.<sup>8</sup> The above quote applies to Deshpande's work, in the way she positions it, and the way it has been received by her readers. Her female protagonists, like their author, hail from middle-class families. Deshpande's women are cultural hybrids, in the sense that they struggle with the cultural conflict of home-grown traditions mixed with an English education (referring to the language of instruction, not the country) and all the resultant baggage this clash produces. Deshpande does not

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<sup>7</sup>Bharucha and Sarang, preface, *Indian-English Fiction*, p. viii.

<sup>8</sup> Sarala Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', in Viney Kirpal (ed). *The Postmodern Indian English Novel*, (Bombay: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1996), p. 166.

attempt to cover or conceal her class identity or her gender identity. She herself has said that her writing is very strongly gendered in the sense that her novels could have only been written by a woman. This can be seen from the following statement:

As writing is born out of personal experience, the fact that I am a woman is bound to surface. Besides, only a woman could write my books—they are written from the inside, as it were.<sup>9</sup>

Deshpande has been positioned as a feminist by many critics such as Usha Tambe, Adele King, and P. Ramamoorthi. For instance King posits that Deshpande's works are regarded as having made a significant contribution to modern feminist Indian writing:

She is well versed in Hindu and Buddhist thought... Her feminism combines an awareness of classical Indian values derived from Sanskrit and Pali works with contemporary women's needs.<sup>10</sup>

This, as mentioned earlier, raises problems

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<sup>9</sup> Deshpande, 'Demythifying Womanhood', p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> Adele King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman', in Viney Kirpal (ed and intro). *The New Indian Novel in English: A Study of the 1980s*, (New Delhi: Allied Publishers Ltd., 1990), p. 159.

of interpretation, because of the contradiction between Deshpande's own aversion to the feminist label, and her creation of female protagonists who can be read as feminist.<sup>11</sup> Though her writing is gender-specific and explores the politics of negotiating stereotypes of gender and gendered morality, Deshpande would like to be recognised simply as a writer without the qualifier 'woman' or 'feminist'. Deshpande has made it especially clear that she dislikes the label 'feminist'. P. Ramamoorthi points out that:

Shashi Deshpande feels embarrassed to be called a woman writer and she is not very enthusiastic about the label feminist. However much she may deny the influence of feminism in her novels, it is the core of her novels. Her heroines speak of Virginia Woolf's 'A Room Of One's Own' and Betty Friedan and it becomes quite obvious that the women she has created are feminists, [even] if she is not one.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Though only up to a certain point. To a reader of my positionality, Deshpande's ideological position means that the feminism in her work is always already compromised, even if one rejects 'Western' feminist constructs and parameters of analysis. I discuss this in greater length further on.

<sup>12</sup> P. Ramamoorthi, 'My Life Is My Own: A Study Of Shashi Deshpande's Women', in' Sushila Singh (ed). *Feminism and Recent Fiction In English*, (New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991),



Ramamoorthi refers to Western feminist icons in his analysis, and assumes that these are the only icons available to a woman who wants to express her feminist sensibility; this is in keeping with the popular misconceptions regarding feminism, even among the cognoscente. But it is not clear in Deshpande's statements, whether she rejects white, Western, liberal feminism, or whether she rejects all feminism(s). If she rejects the white, Western liberal strand of feminism, why do her characters speak of Virginia Woolf and Betty Friedan?<sup>13</sup> If, on the other hand, she is trying to formulate in her writing, a new, culturally specific working definition of feminism applicable to Indian/Third World women, why does she go to such great lengths to disown the label 'feminist'? There is no satisfactory analysis of the term itself, either by

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p. 115.

<sup>13</sup> *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, (Ghaziabad: Vikas, 1980) and *Come Up and Be Dead*, (Ghaziabad: Vikas, 1982).

Deshpande, or by critics who read her work as feminist. This confusion or reluctance surrounding the term deserves more attention than it has been given.

Most urban English-speaking Indians are familiar with the word 'feminism', but their understanding of it remains vague, as Nabar contends – there is a general rejection of its relevance to the Indian context. Patriarchal-religious traditions and overt or covert conservative super-structures have kept it from becoming a widely apprehended phenomenon.<sup>14</sup> There is still a tendency to perceive it as the result of 'moral corruption' of women aping 'foreign' or 'Western' trends, arising from their unrestrained freedom and leading to wanton sexual behaviour, as Vrinda Nabar further points out:

It is a fad which has something to do with not wearing a bra and unrestrained promiscuity. For most urban Indian males, feminism has continued to mean a bad

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<sup>14</sup> Vrinda Nabar, *Caste ns Woman*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1995), p. 7.

word, which, however, has tremendous comic-smutty potential. Since the Indian female has always been a considerably more conditioned product, usually coerced into a mindless acceptance of the male *diktat*, the possibility of a reasoned, open-minded approach to the concept of feminism has been at best sporadic.<sup>15</sup>

Deshpande, in her rejection of the term feminist, seems to buy into these stereotypical misconceptions discussed above. By adopting liberal humanist ideologies, she seems to systematically deflect questions relating to 'women as writers, women as readers, and the representation of women in literary texts. This obscures social, historical, ideological contexts in which women's writing takes place'.<sup>15</sup> Yet in the novels, she seems to deal with issues surrounding a woman writer's struggle to reconcile the domestic and the public spheres, for example, when she explores the circumstances and expectations surrounding Java's giving up 'real' writing to focus on light magazine columns.

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<sup>13</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Volume II: The 20th Century*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), preface, introduction, p. 29.

This ambiguity does not mean that her work is not at all rewarding for a feminist-Indian readership; she does explore issues relevant to contemporary middle-class women, even if the exploration remains within a framework of marriage and motherhood. In spite of this ambiguity of feminist positionality, Deshpande makes strong statements about the position of contemporary Indian women and their expected submission to the dictates of phallocentrism.

For the most part a Shashi Deshpande novel starts with the woman protagonist encountering some kind of emergency, or misfortune, or both, as Palkar and others point out. Saru of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* has reached a point in her marriage where she is at breaking point<sup>16</sup>. The news of her mother's passing furnishes her with a justification to visit her parental home and subsequently get physically away from the incomprehensible circumstance in which she gets herself. Indu of

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<sup>16</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 168.

*Roots and Shadows* is miserable with her husband for various reasons. Akka's summons from her deathbed gives Indu the excuse she needs to come back to her childhood home where she can deal with her own quandaries. Jaya of *That Long Silence* returns to her maternal uncle's home, as her spouse Mohan is confronting corruption charges and ruination. This situation brings to boiling point, the dejection and inaudible resentment that have been stewing for a considerable length of time in the marriage. 'Crises such as these propel the heroines to journey to the scenes of their childhood and adolescence, physically as well as mentally. This journey into the past, which is narrated through flashbacks and free association technique'<sup>17</sup>, allows the woman to arrive at the painful knowledge of self and 'otherness', and to gain a greater insight into the life itself.

These novels are primarily concerned with educated, middle-class, married Indian women.

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<sup>17</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 168.

They may have escaped from the suffocation of a highly conservative family (and have sometimes entered a 'love marriage'), but the roles into which they try to fit, that is, the usual ones of wife and mother, 'feel stereotypical, 'not quite right', and suffocating'.<sup>18</sup> These women begin with an awareness of their position, as discussed earlier— 'Well educated, hard working people in secure jobs, cushioned by insurance and provident funds, with two healthy, well-fed children going to good schools.' (*That Long Silence*, 5)— but move from an uncritical acceptance of boundaries to an attempt to restructure them. A central aspect of this shift is the 'discovery of a narrating voice through which to portray and thus realise the condition of the protagonists' life'.<sup>19</sup>

Susheila Nasta, in her discussion of the intersections of feminism, gender, and postcoloniality, makes the point that, for previously

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<sup>18</sup> King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman', p. 159.

<sup>19</sup> King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman', p. 159.

suppressed/emerging voices in society:

Language is both source and womb of creativity, a means of giving birth to new stories, new myths, of telling the stories of women that have previously been silenced; it can also become a major site of contest, a revolutionary struggle.<sup>20</sup>

Language has the potential to stage a 'revolutionary struggle' and become a site of contestation precisely because it is also the means of social control and cultural domination. In multilingual India, English can be seen/constructed as both, an 'escape' from the overarching gender discourses in regional languages such as Marathi, while simultaneously imposing other limits, such as who will read the work and how it will be received. While this sentiment is applicable to most contemporary postcolonial women writers, it seems particularly pertinent to Indian women writing in English today.

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<sup>20</sup> Susheila Nasta, *Motherlands: Black Women's Writing From Africa, The Carrihbean and South Africa*, Introduction, (London: The Women's Press, 1991), p. xiii.

English can create a space within which to 'speak the self' as mentioned earlier, that is, a space to disrupt the gender discourses in literary Indian languages such as Hindi or Marathi. But this ability is a double-edged sword, as can be seen from Nasta's argument, discussed below. One can make an association between English and Western liberal humanism that allows the 'individual' to be and therefore the idea of individual rights and therefore feminism.

Writers such as Shashi Deshpande and Githa Hariharan use English as their language of creativity and self-expression. While it is not a dazzlingly postmodern or avant garde use of the language, it is one that articulates previously suppressed voices— those of middle-class women trapped between the conflicting demands of traditional expectations of a woman's role and the search for self-fulfilment and identity. One sees this especially in Deshpande's work, where she searches for spaces and gaps into which she can speak her voices, so that they will be heard. Thus in this



context, English becomes both, an agent of silencing and a facilitator of access to speech, the implications of which I will be discussing at greater length below.

Nasta further asserts that the postcolonial woman writer is not only 'involved in making herself heard'<sup>21</sup> as a woman, but (and more so in English), is— perhaps unwillingly, but unavoidably— turned into an international spokesperson for female National/ 'Third World' society. Using / writing in English puts one in an international context, but as Spivak points out:

For me, the question 'Who will speak?' is less crucial than 'Who will listen?' 'I will speak for myself as a Third World person' is an important position for political mobilisation today. But the real demand is that, when I speak from that position, I should be listened to seriously/ not with that kind of benevolent imperialism...<sup>22</sup>

Thus, even serious responses from the 'outside' can

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<sup>21</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xv.

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, 'Questions of Multiculturalism', in Sarah Harasym (ed). *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 60.

subvert the agency of self-assertion by making it representative of 'Third World Woman'. Moreover, English may open up international consumption, but limits the audience at home, that is whom the message will reach. The author's intention of subverting traditional, gendered discourses may in fact backfire, because English on the world stage may deflect the message from doing work to liberate women, to doing work to demonstrate how 'backward' the Third World still is. Fear of this amongst the local readership may end up diverting attention from issues concerned with the liberation of women, to the betrayal of the national image.

Thus it can be said that the postcolonial woman writer must struggle to overturn patriarchal, racist ideologies, constructs and systems of representation not only in an international context, but must also 'subvert and deconstruct indigenous male writings and traditions'<sup>23</sup> which have defined national identity, and which seek to neutralise and enclose

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<sup>23</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xv.

her radical potential.

In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for liberation, self-identity and fulfilment is often seen as transgressive and treacherous;<sup>24</sup> a betrayal that will inevitably lead to the break-down of traditional codes of practice and belief, as well as make a negative impact on the wider struggle for liberation and national identity.

Does to be 'feminist' therefore involve a further displacement or reflect an implicit adherence to another form of cultural imperialism?<sup>25</sup>

Understanding Deshpande's position with respect to feminism has to take into account the historical context of colonialism and its exploitation of gender issues. The prejudicial attitudes towards the 'East' or the 'Third World' based on imperialist notions of racial difference<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xv.

<sup>25</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xv.

<sup>26</sup> See Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1995), and Kumari Javawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1986). Also see Mary E. John, 'Postcolonial Feminists in the

cannot, however, be excluded from the Nation space or separated off from gender power play. Women writers from these areas inhabit a world where they are often marginalised on many levels— as women, as working class, as 'coloured/dark'. While the racism in India operates differently from colour prejudice in First World countries, there is still an obsession with 'fair complexions' in Indian society, especially as applied to marriageable women. For example, this can be seen from the following passage in one of Shashi Deshpande's novels, in which Saru, the protagonist, remembers being constantly told as a girl:

"Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker".

"Who cares?"

"We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married". (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 45).

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Western Intellectual Field', in *Inscriptions* 5, (1989), pp. 49-73.

Any number of examples of the desire for light-skinned, professional but domestic women can be found in the matrimonial advertisements published in Indian newspapers:

Wanted, fair, slim, homely professional girl, at least 5' 3", up to 25, for computer engineer, only son, 28. Doctor preferred.<sup>27</sup>

Thus a number of complex issues are involved in the uneasy intersections of postcoloniality and feminism(s). Nasta contends that negotiating these intersections must involve more than simply setting up a series of binary oppositions and sites of contestation:

It is not only a question of redressing the balance; the reclamation is more than simply shifting the ground of a series of oppositions and areas of struggle: whether male / female, coloniser / native, black / white, feminist / womanist, postcolonial / post-structural. Third World / First World, traditional literary canons / counter-discourses and forms — strategies of resistance are necessary which subvert and question the dominant 'father tongue' but more

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<sup>27</sup> The Times of India, Matrimonials Section, (April 10), 1998.

critical is a need to break through the notion of a literature of opposition set up by the kind of dialectic [mentioned above] and make space for the expression of a 'multiplicity of perspectives' and literary poetics.<sup>28</sup>

A number of Third World postcolonial/feminist theorists write increasingly about the need to make room for a multiplicity of voices and perspectives<sup>29</sup>, to go beyond a literature of opposition, and to work across/through the debilitating differentials of home/abroad, Nation/gender. By examining the sites at which these discourses intersect and by deconstructing the 'meaning' they ascribe, it is possible to open up a 'third space'<sup>30</sup> in R. Radhakrishnan's terms—where oppressed and silenced minorities can not only speak, but be heard; that is, by locating the stereotype as an 'ambivalent mode of power and knowledge, a paradoxical mode of

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<sup>28</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xvi.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses' in C. Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (eds). *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), pp. 51-80. Also see Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, 9/1-2 (1987), pp. 27-58.

<sup>30</sup> R. Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality And The Boundaries Of Identity', in *Callaloo*, 16.4, (1993), p. 755.

representation',<sup>31</sup> it is possible to disrupt racist/patriarchal pre-coding of the 'other' as both 'known' and 'lack'.

In his analysis of these two sorts of hybridities, Radhakrishnan argues that there is a difference between metropolitan hybridity and postcolonial hybridity. He reads postcolonial hybridity in Gramscian terms, and makes the useful distinction that postcolonial hybridity does not have the 'guarantees' of 'authenticity' or identity posited by the (Western) secular identity that underlies metropolitan hybridity. Rather, postcolonial hybridity involves a painful 'inventory of one's self',<sup>32</sup> that is, the self must be excruciatingly produced to inhabit many discursive positions. This is seen in Deshpande's work up to a point, and is perhaps her way of trying to articulate her subject positionality and

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<sup>31</sup> Homi Bhabha, 'The Other Question...', in *Screen*, 24.6, Nov- Dec 1983, p. 18.

<sup>32</sup> Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity', p. 753.

identity without claims to 'authenticity'.

postcolonial hybridity is in a frustrating search for constituency and a legitimate political identity. It is important to the postcolonial hybrid to compile a laborious "inventory of one's self" and, on the basis of that complex genealogical process, produce her own version of hybridity and find political legitimacy for that version. I say this... to insist on a fundamental difference between hybridity as a comfortably given state of being and hybridity as an excruciating act of selfproduction by multiple traces.<sup>33</sup>

One sees this in relation to Deshpande's articulation of her politics. Hybridity is never a comfortable 'given'; hence there are in her work, contradictions and provocative position statements on patriarchy, feminist theory and 'Indianness'. For example, she critiques what she sees as the sometimes naive, often convenient citing of Gandhian ideals, and how they contrasted with the reality of daily life, or indeed, with the altered

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<sup>33</sup> Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity', p. 753.



desires of different generations:

Simple living and high thinking— the words of the Gandhian era. The words I had heard so often as a child. Ramukaka's favourite axiom, repeated *ad nauseum* to any of his family who asked for something: "It's not how you look, what you have or what you wear that's important. Look at Gandhi — " None of his children had dared retort, though they had grumbled privately, "But we're not Gandhi." (*That Long Silence*, 60).

We also see a critique of the Nehruvian rhetoric of independence in the following passage, as well as an explicit comment on the disillusionment of the first post-independence generation:

"What went wrong, Jaya, what happened to us?" — I could only see the girls in the hostel, all of us, standing on our balconies and watching the road-lining crowds wave flags and cheer the two men who folded their hands in a greeting and smiled blandly back. I heard the cries of "*Hindi-Chini bhai bhai*". But almost immediately came the war. We had been stabbed by our 'brother'. Yes, that betrayal had been the watershed between hope and cynicism, between dreams and disillusionment. (*That Long Silence*, 59).

Through a foregrounding of split subjectivities and selves, she is able to theorise/make visible/legitimise the hybrid self through subversions of institutionalised and systemic erasures:

I had found out all the things I could and couldn't do, all the things that were womanly and unwomanly — the panic has gone. I'm Mohan's wife, I had thought, and cut off the bits of me that had refused to be Mohan's wife. (*That Long Silence*, 83-191).

We can also see in the following passage, that Deshpande explicitly raises issues about defining/redefining identity and selfhood, particularly with regard to women:

As I burrowed through the facts, what I found was the woman who had once lived here. Mohan's wife. Rahul and Rati's mother. Not myself. But what was that 'myself'? 'Trying to find oneself'— what a cliché that had become. As if such a thing is possible. As if there is such a thing as one self, intact and whole, waiting to be discovered. On the contrary, there are so many, each self attached like a Siamese twin to a self of another person, neither able to exist without the other. (*That Long Silence*, 69).

In her attempt to foreground issues of class prejudice by mapping out the intersections of gender and class which function to oppress working-class women, one also sees in her work the attempt to articulate and (re)define notions of 'community' and the specificity of parameters of solidarity.<sup>34</sup> This can be seen most clearly in her novel *The Binding Vine*, in which the tragedies of three women of very different backgrounds are interwoven to specific ends.

Urmi, the protagonist, is deeply wounded by the death of her baby girl. She meets Shakutai, a poor woman scraping a living while bringing up three children alone. Shakutai's young daughter Kalpana has been raped and is in a coma. Urmi progressively gets drawn into Shakutai's life, as it gradually dawns upon her that her mother-in-law Mira too had been subjected to regular marital rape. Though initially Urmi is able to ignore Shakutai's reiteration of Kalpana's 'shame' on the

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<sup>34</sup> Radhakrishnan, 'Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity', p. 760.

grounds that she is illiterate and working-class, and therefore unenlightened, she soon begins to see the threads that bind Kalpana's and Mira's tragedies and her own heartbreak. In the end, through her persistence and support, she is able to support Shakutai in understanding that it was not her daughter's fault for being raped, and is able to gain insight into what she sees as the cruelty of human nature:

Why do I imagine that love absolves us from being cruel? There's Shakutai—she says she loves her daughter; but I know, and she does too, that she was cruel to her. Perhaps it is this, the divide in ourselves, that is the greatest divide. Perhaps it's this divide in ourselves that's the hardest to bridge, to accept, to live with. (*The Binding Vine*, 201).

But through her relationships with Shakutai and with Mira (through the latter's poetry), Urmi has also been able to finally let go of the wounds of her childhood, and to develop compassion for her mother and the other significant women in her life. The exploration of the commonalities and

differences in inter-class and inter-generational oppression, the laying bare of the gender and class intersections as experienced by Indian women, point to an attempt to articulate and redefine notions of 'community' and 'the specificity of parameters of solidarity'.<sup>35</sup>

I remember a kind of resoluteness in Shakutai as she sat before the stove in the morning. She looked as if she had come to some kind of a decision. "Sulu's dead, but Kalpana— ?" she asked herself—.- Shakutai knows it now, that her daughter's tragedy, that her sister's death can no longer be shrouded in silence. If Shakutai has made up her mind, it lets me off the terrible task of answering her question, "What shall I do?" Yet if she does ask, I can no longer avoid giving her an answer. (*The Binding Vine*, 203).

Thus, the attempt to map out 'strategies of resistance' in an Indian context is seen clearly in Deshpande's work. She attempts to examine and deconstruct the kinds of binaries of male / female, coloniser / native, black / white, feminist /

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<sup>35</sup> Meenakshi Shivram, 'Locating the Woman in Post-Colonial Discourse: A Reading of Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terrors*', in C.T. India and Meenakshi Shivram (eds), *Postcoloniality: Rending Literature*, (New Delhi: Vikas, 1999), p. 179.

womanist, postcolonial / post-structural. Third World / First World, traditional literary canons / counter-discourses and forms Nasta discusses above; and Deshpande's body of work could also be read as a 'metaphorical critique of the demands of a postcolonial terminology itself',<sup>36</sup> which relies on constructs such as the centre and the margin, the dominant/hegemonic and the silenced/subaltern; her work can be seen as an exploration of the resultant textual implications for postcolonial women writers. Therefore her work has been read, by critics such as Shivram, as an implicit statement about the often contradictory 'position of Third World women in an influentially male reading of postcolonial theories.'<sup>37</sup>

Deshpande's protagonists are, like herself, situated in a middle-class milieu, are educated and financially comfortable. They do not have to

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<sup>36</sup> Shivram, 'Locating the Woman in Post-Colonial Discourse', p. 179.

<sup>37</sup> Shivram, 'Locating the Woman in Post-Coionial Discourse', pp. 179-180.

struggle to survive on a daily basis. For example, Urmi, in *The Binding Vine*, is a lecturer. Indu, in *Roots and Shadows* is a journalist, while Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, is a writer/columnist, and Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, is a doctor. They are privileged, in this sense, and they are aware of their privilege. Yet, it is their growing dissatisfaction with their traditionally ascribed roles as wives and mothers in a patriarchal society, that alienates them. One can see this in Indu's self-reflection:

Always what he wants. What he would like. What would please him— isn't there anything I want at all? Have I become fluid, with no shape, no form of my own? — Am I on my way to becoming an ideal woman? A woman who sheds her 'I', who loses her identity in her husband's? (*Roots and Shadows*, 49).

In portraying their confusion and search for a non- monolithic, non-traditional definition of Hindu female identity, Deshpande examines gendered binary oppositions and their cultural determinants, thus opening up spaces for a

multiplicity of submerged women's voices to emerge.

Nasta fruitfully posits that postcolonial women writers often write novels of '*becoming*<sup>38</sup>, where the voices of women from all sectors of the society are explored; voices which often link and bridge the oral/literary mode and which frequently use a multiplicity of vision as a means of telling the story of a previously unwritten history or culture'. (Emphasis added).<sup>39</sup> Within this journey, the woman herself is not merely

a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces. Rather she herself is part of the historicised, fluid movement, and she therefore actively contributes to the context within which her position can be delineated... [thus the position of a woman] can be actively utilised as a location for the construction of meaning, a place from where meaning is constructed, rather than simply a place where meaning can be *discovered*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>39</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, pp. xix-xx.

<sup>40</sup> Erin G. Carlston, 'Zami and the Politics of Plural Identity', in Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope (eds.), *Sexual Practice*,



In light of this analysis, Deshpande's work can be read as falling within a broadly postcolonial-feminist framework. But while she does attempt to examine various ideologically encoded binaries such as speech / silence, modernity / tradition, male / female, oppressor / victim, dominant / resistant, central / marginal, majority / minority, the politics of this strategy can become problematic, particularly in terms of a class analysis, and raise such questions as: are poor/working-class women used as agents for middle-class self-realisation? How does the narrating persona 'speak for' her class 'others'? For example, it is Urmi, the middle-class, educated narrator in *The Binding Vine*, who leads Shakutai, the poor, illiterate woman, to an understanding that rape is never 'deserved', that her daughter has not 'shamed' the family by 'asking for it'. As Susie Tharu and Rama Melkote contend:

Liberalism upholds the idea of

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*Textual Theory: Lesbian Cultural Criticism*, (Cambridge, Mass, and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), p. 236. Carlston quotes Alcoff's concept of positionality.

individual responsibility and freedom, social justice and compassion for the underprivileged. Therefore its methods of operations are charity and social service aimed at helping the oppressed, but not at treating them as agents.<sup>41</sup>

I would also posit that the author's own ambivalence towards feminism— as discussed earlier in the chapter, she has declared that she is not a feminist, that she dislikes the label, yet her female protagonists often make statements, and act in ways that can be read as being feminist— comes through in her work. Thus, Deshpande's work lends itself to multiple critical positions; it is difficult to read within any one prescriptive postcolonial and/or feminist framework.

Her major concern is with characterisation. In fact, she starts with characters and goes on to weave their stories. Their socio-cultural backgrounds, childhoods and education are foregrounded since they reflect the 'making of' these characters. Deshpande's women are usually

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<sup>41</sup> Tharu and Melkote, 'Living Outside the Protection of Marriage: Patriarchal Relations in Working Women's Hostels', in *Mrunishti*, 9 (1981), p. 33.

middle-class Maharashtrian or Kannadiga women, as mentioned earlier, usually married (except in *Come Up and Be Dead*), and mothers (except in *Roots and Shadows*). As K. S. Ramamurti has pointed out:

the strands of personal and autobiographical elements running through these novels are so pronounced that it is difficult to measure the gap between the "I" of the narrator and the real self of the writer.<sup>42</sup>

In a similar vein, Mrinalini Sebastian points out that Deshpande has been accused of 'making an "every woman"' of her protagonist and 'universalizing the condition of the female figures presented in her novels by drawing similarities among these different characters'.<sup>43</sup> But what is more significant to Sebastian than this so-called 'universalizing tendency', is Deshpande's 'preoccupation with one particular woman who

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<sup>42</sup> K.S. Ramamurti, *Rise of the Indian Novel in English*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1987), p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'The Feminist Plot and the Nationalist Allegory: Home and World in Two Indian Women's Novels in English', in *Modern Fiction Studies: Fiction on the Indian Subcontinent*, 39.1 (Spring 1993), p. 79.

seems to be present in all her novels'.<sup>44</sup> This particular woman can be read as the personal and autobiographical aspect of Deshpande's characters.

In all three major novels, there is an inner journey that parallels and intersects the outward journey. The return to the parental home seems to be a return to the security of childhood, a retreat from responsibility, but soon adds to the painful self-evaluation. It also forces a closer examination of gender dichotomies, and resentment at the unfairness endured by protagonists as girls is seen more clearly in retrospect.

The 'return' to childhood is fraught with ambivalence— for one, it is never really possible to return, though the move functions as a narrative device partly to get away from the ordeal of a marriage breakdown, but also as a move towards confronting the unresolved issues/wounds of the past. Apart from the 'psychological motivation behind this move, this distancing/retreat gives the

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<sup>44</sup> Sebastian, *The Enterprise of Reading Differently*, p. 151.

protagonists the space to take stock of their lives'<sup>45</sup>. As Tambe validly says, this allows them to look at themselves with the maximum possible objectivity, and this strategy works well when Deshpande is at her best, but sometimes can verge on the solipsistic.

There are strong similarities between the emotional processes of Indu, Saru and Jaya. All three have subdued their independence of spirit to the desires of their husbands. Indu fears that she is turning into the 'ideal' Indian wife, putting her husband's wishes above all else. Saru is a financially independent doctor, but feels that she is constantly paying the price for being the more successful partner in the marriage. Jaya is progressively sickened at Mohan's selfishness. She hates the pretense of having to play his devoted wife with his colleagues, yet complies in good

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<sup>45</sup> Tambe, 'Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist and a Novelist', p. 127.

<sup>45</sup> Helen Kanitkar, ' "Heaven Lies Beneath Her Feet?" Mother Figures in Selected Indo-Anglian Novels', in Bharucha and Sarang (eds), *Indian English Fiction 1980-90: An Assessment*, (Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1994), p. 182.

wifely fashion. 'The deep-rooted Indian tradition of patriarchy and misogyny has been internalised by these educated, modern Indian women'<sup>46</sup>- which is an implicit comment about how powerful and systemic these structures are. On the other hand, these women have enough mindfulness and knowledge to see what they are doing. Their repugnance at being trained into stereotypical gender behaviours expresses itself from a youthful age as abhorrence for the female body – theirs and others. Their biggest anxiety is that they will turn into the women they see around them – mothers, cousins and grandmothers, who categorise themselves, and are characterised as only wives and mothers.

Another similarity in all three, interestingly, is their enjoyment of sex.<sup>47</sup> After marriage, for example, Indu says that she has 'burgeoned into a flower of exquisite felicity' (*Roots and Shadows*, 91).

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<sup>46</sup> Helen Kanitkar, ' "Heaven Lies Beneath Her Feet?", p. 181-182.

Saru declares: 'I became in an instant a physically aroused woman, with an infinite capacity for loving and giving, a passionate desire to be absorbed by the man I loved' (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 35). Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, finds her husband intensely sexually attractive. One can take the position that female sexual knowledge and pleasure is never autonomous, that it is only awakened by a man, usually the husband, and hence, is not at all radical in a Western or even Indian context. That is, one is tempted to see these sexual awakenings as a reworking of the 'Sleeping Beauty' construct of women's sexuality. However, Deshpande is of a particular generation where sexual experience for these women would only have been possible within marriage. And it is important to note that she also writes explicitly of extra-marital (expressly taboo for women) sexual pleasures. For example, Indu has sex with her cousin Naren, Saru has an affair with her Professor, and there are strongly sexual overtones in Jaya's relationship with Kamat. How significant these episodes are in terms of the three

women's movement towards liberation is debatable, and could in fact be tied in to the later point about putting male figures on a pedestal. But Deshpande's broaching of sex and pleasure is important in two ways— firstly they indicate that the women's long-conditioned disgust of the female body is gradually replaced with pleasure and acceptance— an important stage in the evolution of a feminist consciousness; secondly, for a middle-class Indian woman to write about women's sexuality in a non-titillating way and from the woman's view point is in itself a 'tactical strike' against patriarchy. Just as importantly, this restructuring of desire is anchored in discourses of the body where the woman negotiates her relationship with her own body and ideologically mediates in her association with it. The construction of female subjectivity through desire invokes complex issues; given the obduracy of the structures of control (including the patriarchal family), the positing of women's desire as a means to feminist agency can become an effective form of



resistance.

This strategy also functions to disrupt the 'Goddess/Whore' dichotomy inherent in patriarchal Indian ideologies.

The uncommonly intense desire for a son among Hindus is well recognised. It is traditionally attributed to the doctrine that unless his son performs the obsequies, a man's soul cannot go to heaven.<sup>48</sup>

This tradition/convention is one of the strongest foundations of the contempt for Indian femaleness. Very broadly speaking, a son is more welcome than a daughter at all levels of society.<sup>49</sup> Thus Saru is unwanted because she is a girl. Indu's uncle, who has only daughters, feels ashamed. Jaya's mother shows a blatant bias towards her sons. The sweeper Nayana succinctly sums up these attitudes — 'why give birth to a girl who'll only suffer because of men all her life?' (*That Long Silence*, 53). All the novels demonstrate how a

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<sup>48</sup> P. Spratt, *Hindu Culture and Personality: A Psychoanalytic Study*, (Bombay: Mankatalas, 1966), p. 193.

<sup>49</sup> Kalpana Sharma, 'Sugar and Spice?', in *The Hindu*, (February 7), Folio 3/4, 1999. (No page numbers indicated).

female is relegated to a marginal position even before she is born, while the male is automatically awarded the centre. The cultural and economic inscription of the female as unwanted and a burden, is what Deshpande emphasises when she writes about the parents hungering for a boy. Girl children are born belonging to a future husband and his family. There is a popular, euphemistic phrase repeated ad infinitum in popular literature and mainstream Hindi cinema: 'Ladki paraya dhan hoti hai', meaning 'a girl is someone else's (that is, her husband's and in-laws') treasure' — a fact learnt very early in childhood, as is the realisation that a girl is in fact no one's 'treasure'. Saru is repeatedly admonished:

Don't go out in the sun. You'll get even darker.

Who cares?  
We have to care if you don't. We have to get you married.

I don't want to get married.

Will you live with us all your life?

Why not?

You can't.

And Dhruva?

He's different. He's a boy. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 45).

The above exchange demonstrates Simone de Beauvoir's well known statement that one is not born a woman, but becomes one.<sup>50</sup> Shashi Deshpande makes her position regarding the status of women quite clear through her fictional portrayal of what her protagonists troubles, and also by carefully sketching the minor female characters in their lives. In the words of the novelist herself: 'until women get over the handicaps imposed by Society, outside and inner conditioning, the human race will not realise its full potential.'<sup>51</sup> Thus, while we do not have a Western-style assertive 'feminism' here, we have at least a strongly gendered humanism of a

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<sup>50</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, H. M. Parshley (trans and ed), (London: Pan Books, 1988).

<sup>51</sup> Deshpande's private correspondence with Tambe, quoted by Tambe in 'Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist and a Novelist', p. 128.

liberationist kind.

A highly developed class-consciousness also comes through repeatedly in Deshpande's writing. It is often through the servant women, the 'subaltern' class, that the middle-class protagonists become aware of the relatively privileged position their economic backgrounds and educations confer upon them. As discussed earlier, this strategy works only up to a certain point, and can be seen as ultimately challenging. But one must also note that it teaches her narrators some important lessons. As her protagonists learn, they must come to terms with the burden of responsibility that privilege—however relative—entails. For Deshpande, deliverance seems to lie in the freedom and responsibility of choice. While patriarchal systems are unpacked and the way they construct women as sub-human is mapped out, the women themselves are not absolved of contributing to their own predicament. 'They are not allowed to wallow in victimhood, and come to realise that

they made traditional, regressive choices when other options were open to them, that they actually had some freedom of choice, unlike their working-class helpers.<sup>52</sup> As Jaya puts it:

"We can always hope. Without that, life would be impossible. And if there is anything I know now it is this: life has always to be made possible." (*That Long Silence*, 193).

Deshpande's characters realise that the 'license' of angst and insight is not theirs alone. While her women are confused and unhappy about their roles and the expectations placed upon them by a patriarchal society, 'they are often aware of the strength a woman can have in a traditional marriage.'<sup>53</sup> The following extract illustrates this:

[Saru] peeped into the room which had been her parents'. It had been "their" room, but it had always seemed only his, so successfully had she managed to efface her personality from the room.

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<sup>52</sup> Tambe, 'Shashi Deshpande as a Feminist and a Novelist', p. 124. But choices are not inflected only by class; I discuss this further on.

<sup>53</sup> King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman', p. 160.

And how powerful, how strong, she now thought, her mother had been to achieve that. How certain of herself she must have been! (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 15).

Deshpande's modern women sometimes envy the certainty gained from willingly accepting a defined role in society— after all, freedom brings with it uncertainty about the benefits of individuality, as well as responsibility for choices made. But it here again, that Deshpande's sexual/textual ambivalence surfaces. When read in a wider context, Saru's interpreting her mother's effacement of personality and will as a demonstration of strength, is not so different from the traditional notion of an Indian woman's strength lying in silently enduring and suffering for her husband and children:

The *sublimation of oppression*, which Sita epitomises, gives way to the *desired objective* of such a sublimation: a total surrender of one's very existence if one is a woman. After all, if a woman is merely a field which her husband owns, one may as well argue that women, like fields, have no distinct

names or identities.<sup>54</sup> (Emphasis added).

Responsibility is a particularly charged issue in the world of Deshpande's passive narrators, as critics have noted. The women have a tendency to blame themselves for everything, 'typical of anyone seen as less than fully adult, for whom choices are made by parental figures'.<sup>55</sup> They also feel the need, repeatedly, to feel guilty for actions that are beyond their control. This again is typical of women who have internalised patriarchal constructs of the inherently sinful nature of women, and of feminine wiles as leading to men's corruption. These constructs have the weight of centuries-old religious and cultural sanctions. For example, Manu, the ancient Hindu Law-Giver, gives daughters only an occasional mention in the rights of inheritance, and in the *Manu-Smriti* <sup>56</sup> it is the wife and son who are seen

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<sup>54</sup>Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 121.

<sup>55</sup> King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of an Indian Woman', p. 162.

<sup>56</sup> A comprehensive treatise (200 BC – 200AD), covering all conceivable aspects of Hindu life. Numerous feminist historians/literary theorists such as Nabar perceive it as being central among all other similar texts, in terms of its hold over the Indian popular consciousness.

as part of the householder's body, while the daughter is regarded as 'the supreme object of pity'.<sup>57</sup> According to Manu, a female being —no matter how old— is not to be allowed independence of action. Indeed, he explicitly contends that a woman should be under her father's control in childhood, her husband's once married, and her son's when widowed.<sup>58</sup>

As Nandy further points out, even 'pro-Sati literature written as late as the nineteenth century

repeatedly mentions the frailty of women, their "subjugation to passion", lack of understanding and quarrelsomeness, and their "want of virtuous knowledge". All three attributes allegedly made them untrustworthy and fickle.<sup>59</sup>

Deshpande's positing of sexual passion as liberating for women is a direct contrast to the attitudes seen in the above quote. She effectively explores the liberating aspects of passion as well

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<sup>57</sup> Wendy Doniger and Brian K. Smith (trans.), *The Laws of Manu*, (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1991), p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.147-148, p. 66.

<sup>59</sup> Ashis Nandy, 'Sati: A Nineteenth-Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest', in *At the Edge of Psychology!: Essays in Politics and Culture*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 9.



as the problem of remaining defined as only ever female (less than fully human), within these desires. This emphasises Deshpande's position on the conditioning of girl children as beginning at birth. Deshpande shows how women internalise the patriarchal definitions and feel guilt when transgressing them. Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, blames herself for causing her brother's death when they were children. **While this may not be unusual in terms of children's reactions to loss, what is significant is that in remembering and reconstructing this memory, she casts herself as a temptress leading him to his death in a swamp.** Jaya, in *That Long Silence*, blames herself for worrying about conventionality (how will it look if she is found in his flat?), rather than reporting her friend Kamat's death. It is in her investigation of the fluctuating flows, de-legitimisations and misunderstandings that make up the man-woman (and particularly, the marital) relationship that Deshpande's work is especially powerful. As one critic reads it, 'The protagonists' movement

towards self-knowledge includes an acceptance of mutual responsibility in marriage.'<sup>60</sup>

The recurrent themes explored through Deshpande's novels are: responsibility, motherhood, mother-daughter relationships, isolation and the need for physical/emotional space, the awareness of the impossibility of a unified, monolithic identity and fixed narrative position. Most importantly, there is a gendered existential crisis, and a move towards self-knowledge, which involves a long and painful process of introspection and analysis. These preoccupations can also be tied in with Radhakrishnan's concept of the postcolonial hybrid self as being excruciatingly produced through multiple traces. For example, Saru comments about her brother— 'Poor little scared boy, who never grew up to know that the dark

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<sup>60</sup> King, 'Shashi Deshpande: Portraits of An Indian Woman', p. 162. Though I am not sure there really is a move towards *mutual* responsibility— Deshpande does not imply a similar process of self-analysis or shift in position on the men's part. I discuss this in greater detail further.

holds no terrors. That the terrors are inside us all the time' (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 76).

Through these recurring themes, Deshpande creates spaces from and into which silenced voices can emerge. Her writings make obvious the methods a patriarchal society uses to minimise gender-based issues and contain women within the postcolonial nation. Deshpande's accomplished rendering of working-class female characters, and fictional reconstructions of the lives of housewives of generations, though perhaps problematic in terms of the politics of representation, give voice to a stifled, often viciously mistreated group; a 'subaltern' class, as it were.

Mira was only 22 when she wrote this. She had been married at the age of 18. Since then, she had lived a life which even if normal to most women of that time, must have seemed terrible to her. It seems appalling to me when I think of the choices of my own life, of its freedom. Cloistered in a home, living with a man she could not love, surrounded by people she had nothing in common with— how did she go on? (*The Binding Vine*, 127).

The above can also be read as an ironic reflection back onto the narrator's freedom. It is significant that these insights come to the protagonists in the absence of their husbands. A temporary retreat from the socially sanctioned roles of 'wife' in a conventional marriage, starts freeing their critical questioning abilities. The minor female characters, besides making visible usually eroded stories and histories, serve the important purpose of offering equivalents or dissimilarities to the protagonist's narrative in order to drive home a few truths about systemic oppression.<sup>61</sup>

The mother-daughter relationship has always occupied an important place in Deshpande's fiction. She does not idealise Motherhood as is done in traditional Indian cultures or indeed in some feminist fiction. Rather, her mothers are human and fallible, often

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<sup>61</sup> Ranjana Ash, 'The Search for Freedom in Indian Women's Writing', in Vilas Sarang and Nilufer E. Bharucha (eds), *Indian-English Fiction, 1980-1990: An Assessment*, (New Delhi: B. R. Publishing Corporation, 1994), p. 168.

cruel, because women are all of these things.<sup>62</sup> Thus she tells us about 'The vulnerability of women. The power of women. The deviousness of women. The helplessness of women. The courage of women'.<sup>63</sup> The experience of being a daughter and a mother, Deshpande's narrative voice suggests, is a bittersweet experience, fraught with tensions and conflicts, love and cruelty, joy and pain. The conflict between mother and daughter is presented by the author as a conflict between tradition and modernity, or a clash between the assertion of selfhood and the need for an anchoring love in relationships. As Urmi says towards the end of *The Binding Vine*:

There's something supplicatory about her; it's as if I'm seeing that girl- mother of long ago, kneeling before her husband for understanding, forgiveness. She wants me to give it to her, the absolution Papa never granted her. I do. I put my arms round her, I tell her I believe her, that she never wanted me to be sent away. I say these things over and over again until she is

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<sup>62</sup> This makes the work challenging to read in terms of an unqualified feminist celebration of the mother-daughter relationship.

<sup>63</sup> Deshpande, 'On the Writing of A Novel' in R.K. Dhawan (ed), *Indian Women Novelists* [Vol. V], (New Delhi, Prestige Books, 1991), p. 34.

calmer. She seems not only reassured, but unburdened, as if she's passed on her load to me. But I don't feel weighed down, either. It's something else. A sense of being vulnerable and naked, as if some armour I've been wearing all these years— has fallen off. (*The Binding Vine*, 200).

Most of the female protagonists of Deshpande reject their mother as a role model, because the latter represents to them limited and patriarchal outlooks on life. As Mira says in one of her poems: 'To make myself in your image/ Was never the goal I sought.' (*The Binding Vine*, 124).

The whole question of 'motherhood' is also a major concern universally in contemporary women's literature and has obvious aftershocks in terms of feminist criticism. We see that the relation between mothers and daughters, 'mothers mirroring and affirming identity or notions of the birth of female identity through transference to text and symbol'<sup>64</sup>, is also particularly important within a postcolonial context. A range of texts demonstrate this, for example, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. In this novel, the

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<sup>64</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xx

daughter, Devi, at first gives in constantly to Sita, her overbearing mother, and lets herself be steered into an arranged marriage. She slowly comes to realise that she is desperately unhappy with her husband, and finally runs away with a musician. In the end, she realises that the musician is a shallow and limited man, and that she cannot depend on him or any other man to make life meaningful. Meanwhile, she has had a lot of time to think about her mother, her disappointments, the things she has had to give up in order to be a good wife and mother. The novel ends with her starting to renegotiate and rebuild a more equitable and adult relationship with her mother:

She straightened her back as she saw the house come into view. She rehearsed in her mind the words, the unflinching look she had to meet Sita with to offer her her love. To stay and fight, to make sense of it all, she would have to start from the very beginning.<sup>62 65</sup>

This move can also be seen in the unwritten stories, for instance, that are just beginning to be

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<sup>65</sup> Githa Hariharan, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, (New Delhi: Viking Press, 1993), p. 139.

told as a result of women's struggles. The idea of intertextuality and the 'means by which women are discovering strategies to give voice to 'herstory' and redefining the nature of woman as subject'<sup>66</sup> become crucial to this strategy. In remapping and writing 'herstory', a new dynamic, new ways of seeing are created, which repositions the reader in relation to the text.<sup>67</sup>

For example, in *The Binding Vine*, Indu's uncovering of Mira's history through her poetry, trying to articulate pain and rage on behalf of Shakutai and Kalpana is achieved through the use of intertextuality, reconstruction and 're-visioning', to use Adrienne Rich's term for discovering 'herstories'.

Strikingly, Shashi Deshpande not only speaks of liberation (though still within the framework of marriage and motherhood), but attempts to trace the actual processes by which

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<sup>66</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xx.

<sup>67</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xx.



women are 'Womanised'. She does so by astutely foregrounding the overt and covert means of women's recruitment by ideologies, stereotypes and limited choices.

The most important need is love. From the moment of our birth, we struggle to find something with which we can anchor ourselves to this strange world we find ourselves in. Only when we love do we find this anchor. But love makes you vulnerable.... (*The Binding Vine*, 137).

In Deshpande's world, women who do not take off their patriarchal blinkers contribute to their own oppression and to that of their gender/sex. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan observes that for women to 'speak' rape itself is a measure of liberation, 'a shift from serving as the object of voyeuristic discourse to the occupation of a subject position as "master" of narrative.'<sup>68</sup> *The Binding Vine* demonstrates this perspective.

Deshpande's work achieves an added texture because she does not portray her

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<sup>68</sup> Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 78.

characters in black and white. Her characters often divide human beings into the simple categories of good and bad, but the *author* herself posits a greater complexity of human relationships, and she often grants her female protagonists the insight into "'the great divide" that lies within people'; that is, the capacity for inflicting pain and for great compassion; 'the contrary pulls of the need for freedom and the need for love'.<sup>69</sup>

Deshpande's women do not opt out of imperfect relationships, but try and redress the power and gender imbalances through self-knowledge – a strategy that is effective in a limited way. It ultimately limits the narrative/ideology of liberation by sanitising its transgressive potential; the onus of 'bettering' themselves in order to make their marriages restored, again falls on women.

This is seen clearly in the analysis of critics such as Kamini Dinesh, who read Deshpande's work as unambiguously feminist. For example,

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<sup>69</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 174.

Dinesh contends that

[The woman's] emancipation is not in repudiating the claims of her family, but in drawing upon untapped inner reserves of strength. The wife, in the end, is therefore not a rebel but a redeemed wife— one who has broken the long silence, one who is no longer afraid of the dark. She is a wife reconceptualized as a woman and an individual- a marked contrast to the older generation of women around her with their uncomplaining, unresisting fatalistic attitude. Hers is the dilemma of the new woman that could be resolved when the claims of selfhood are reconciled with the claims made upon her by the family and society.<sup>70</sup>

There is no reference to the pain and fragmentation these sometimes schizophrenic expectations cause in a woman. The burden of yoking together tradition and acceptable modernity (usually in service of the family) still falls on 'the woman' who has to 'resolve' the dilemma.<sup>71</sup> In this interpretation, the resolution for the protagonist,

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<sup>70</sup> Kamini Dinesh, 'Moving Out Of The Cloistered Self: Shashi Deshpande's Protagonists' in Jasbir Jain and Amina Amin (eds). *Margins Of Erasure: Purdah In the Subcontinental Novel In English*, (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd, 1995), pp. 204-205.

<sup>71</sup> See Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's analysis of the 'new' Indian woman in *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 129-146.

and through her, for Deshpande, lies in reconciliation. Thus, we see a critique of patriarchal/Hindu ideology and an unthinking acceptance of its constructs of women,<sup>72</sup> but also a falling short of the radical feminist ideology of stronger rebellion and overturning patriarchy, in terms of leaving the marriage.<sup>73</sup>

It is interesting to look at Deshpande's male characters in the context of her ambiguity about feminism. The men in her novels are enormously respected. There is often a male figure, very different from the husband, not so constrained by convention, to whom the female protagonist turns to for advice. For example, Saru's father, and Jaya's friend Kamat (*That Long Silence*, 148). Fathers are always trusted and loved more than mothers. Romanticised attitudes towards father figures are very strong, and Deshpande's female

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<sup>72</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 175.

<sup>73</sup> I do not mean to suggest that divorce is the universal panacea. Though Deshpande explicitly posits it as the 'easy' option, it can in fact be the more difficult option for women of Deshpande's milieu. I discuss Deshpande's analysis of 'choice' in greater detail further on.

characters have a tendency to be passive, in terms of agency. As Deshpande herself states— 'passivity is so deeply ingrained in us... my writing has to do with women as they are.'<sup>74</sup>

The grey areas in reading the work as feminist in the work itself come from the fact that the protagonists are sometimes hyper-critical of other women, and often share the conventional and misogynist attitudes to women that a patriarchal society perpetuates. This is specially seen in connection to Deshpande's mothers. Reading as an Indian feminist, one could ask why conservative women are so manifestly hostile to one another, especially in relationships where they could, through mutual bonding, achieve so much.<sup>75</sup> In uniquely Indian analyses, Nandy and Nabar suggest that part of that answer may be that the conventional mother, because of her confinement within the domestic sphere and her inability to develop and grow except in care-and-child related

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<sup>74</sup> Interview with Vanamala Viswanatha, in *Literature Alive* 1.3, (Dec 1987), p. 27.

<sup>75</sup> See Nabar, *Caste as Woman* and Nandy, 'Woman and Womanliness'.

roles, ends up

surrendering to the traditional claptrap about mother as goddess... This self-deception also perpetuates the power equations whereby the woman/mother eventually sees her imprisonment as empowering her by conferring on her the attributes of mother and wife. She sees these largely in relation to the men in the domestic power-hierarchy (husbands/sons).<sup>76</sup>

This can be connected to Deshpande's stance on motherhood, and her attitude towards the older generation of mothers in the novels. Part of the answer, Nandy further suggests, could also lie in the 'traditional Indian patterns of child-rearing'.<sup>77</sup> The mother-daughter dynamic is inflected slightly differently in the orthodox Indian Hindu context, where the bond 'between mother and son is seen as being the primary one, even more so than the bond of husband and wife'.<sup>78</sup> The daughter comes a distant third in the above-mentioned hierarchy. Because the mother, who wields great domestic power and comes to symbolise things as they are, the mother-daughter

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<sup>76</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 185.

<sup>77</sup> Nandy, 'Woman Versus Womanliness in India', p. 37.

<sup>78</sup> Nandy, 'Woman Versus Womanliness in India', p. 37.

relationship becomes fraught, and daughters, instead of finding a positive affirmation of identity, must struggle to establish an 'anti-mother' identity in order to develop as women. This sort of trajectory is seen in Deshpande's women, whose greatest fear is 'becoming' their mother. It is interesting to note the similarity of depictions through her novels in terms of the constant open or covert belittling of Saru/Indu/Jaya's needs by their mothers and/or older female relatives.

Ironically, perhaps the fathers/older male relatives in this milieu can afford to be relatively progressive and liberal precisely *because* they take for granted their privileged position in the domestic hierarchy. Their unconventional decisions (within Deshpande's textual milieu), like allowing their daughters to study for postgraduate degrees or to marry for love, would be scrutinised and criticised as being 'eccentric' by the wider social community, perhaps even ostracised to a degree, but would not be openly challenged after a certain point within the immediate family. For example, in *That Long Silence*,

it is Jaya's father who insists that she should be sent to an English-medium school in spite of strong resistance from her grandmother:

Ajji... had been very disapproving and scornful of his sending us to English schools... 'Let them learn good English', Appa had replied. 'It's going to be more useful to them than being good Brahmins.' (*That Long Silence*, 90).

Again, it Jaya's father who wants her to study abroad:

'You are not like the others, Jaya,' Appa had said to me, pulling me ruthlessly out of the safe circle in which the other girls had stood, girls who had performed *pujas* and come to school with turmeric-dyed threads round their wrists and necks, girls who, it had seemed, asked for nothing more than the destiny of being wives and mothers. While I, Appa had said... would... go to Oxford after my graduation... (*That Long Silence*, 136).

Similarly, when Indu chooses to marry Jayant against the wishes of her family, it is her father and father's brother that support her by attending the wedding:



In the dingy room where we had registered our marriage, Kaka had stood with Father, resplendently dressed in his best dhoti, his silk coat and cap on head, befitting the auspiciousness of the occasion. (*Roots and Shadows*, 40-41).

Deshpande's work articulates the problematic position of middle-class, educated women in India today, caught between the demands of playing the traditional roles of good daughter, wife and mother, and struggling with notions of autonomy, identity and self-fulfilment.<sup>79</sup> 'Many questions remain unanswered; no one is capable of heroism. The plots are like Saru's doodling: 'one circle entwined in another, one circle entwined in another' (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 18). One can also say that 'There is no resolution, but a realisation that there can be no final truth'. (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 173).

Catherine Stimpson discusses gender in the following terms:

Simply speaking, gender is a way of classifying living things and languages, of

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<sup>79</sup> Kanitkar, ' "Heaven Lies Beneath Her Feet?" Mother Figures in Selected Indo-Anglian Novels', p. 197.

sorting them into two groups: feminine and masculine. However, no system of classification is ever simple. Cultural laws of gender demand that feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition. They must struggle against each other, or complement each other, or collapse into each other in the momentary, illusory relief of the androgynous embrace. In patriarchal cultures, the struggle must end in the victory of the masculine; complementarity must arrange itself hierarchically; androgyny must be a mythic fiction.<sup>75</sup>

There is a very similar sentiment in Jaya's epiphany in *That Long Silence*:

'Man and woman – it was then that I realised the deep chasm between the two, they are separated for ever, never more than at the moment of total physical togetherness'. (107).

In Deshpande's novels, the female protagonists realise that androgyny is indeed, a mythic fiction. Marriages start falling apart the instant conventional gendered binaries are reversed, no matter how 'liberal' the husbands. For example, Saru's husband rapes her to vent his rage at the fact that she has overtaken him, professionally and financially. Saru's

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<sup>75</sup> Catherine Stimpson, 'Gertrude Stein and The Transposition of Gender' in Nancy K. Miller (ed). *The Poetics of Gender*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 1.

bitter lecture on how to be a good wife shows her awareness of and guilt at her 'transgression' — "If he's an MA, you should be a BA. If he's 5'4" tall, you shouldn't be more than 5'3" tall." (137). But as discussed earlier, Deshpande also blames women for submitting to their rigidly demarcated role, and for internalising patriarchal attitudes that keep men, in turn, locked into theirs. This attitude seems to be slightly simplistic in terms of apportioning blame, as mentioned earlier, because it is never easy for women in societies like India to break away from traditional notions of womanhood, wifhood or motherhood especially as there is no wide-spread system of support available, such as women's shelters<sup>80</sup> or support groups. The extended family is often the only support network women have, and there is the very real fear of being completely isolated with no means of survival. This could

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<sup>80</sup> Shelters such as 'Bapnu Ghar' in Bombay are hard-pressed to take in all the women referred to them; limitations on space and funding means that extreme cases of domestic violence are generally given preference. Women's hostels only accept single, working women, which creates problems for women with children. Personal correspondence with members of Stree Sangam, a lesbian-feminist activist group, August 1999.

explain, in part, why a majority of modern, educated women like Deshpande's protagonists 'choose' to submit and endure— staying, rather than leaving, becomes the 'easier' choice in this context.

Critics such as Tambe find this one of the most appealing features of her work, in that it is not 'strident' or 'militant'. But Deshpande perpetuates patriarchal stereotypes at times, even coming across as misogynistic in some of her characters' insights: 'Perhaps there is something in the male... that is whittled down and ultimately destroyed by female domination.' (*The Dark Holds No Terrors*, 85). Does this statement mirror Saru's confusion, or does it express Deshpande's ideology? Again, one is unsure whether ambiguity is used as a deliberate textual strategy, or whether authorial ambiguity regarding feminism seeps into the text. Deshpande can also be seen as guilty, in both the literary and socio-political sense, of constructing female stereotypes such as the overweight, diffident but saccharine married woman and the thin, dry, sarcastic and joyless old maid. It is

difficult to establish whether she is deliberately and critically presenting these figures, or just perpetuating stereotypes because of either her ambiguity towards feminism, or for literary convenience.

But to her credit, and counter to such objections, the concepts of choice and freedom are over-riding concerns in Deshpande's writings. She shows in *Roots and Shadows* that the hybrid self is not a simple, monolithic construct. Indu struggles to be free, escaping from the joint family, hating traditional ways imposed upon her and wanting to create a new identity<sup>81</sup>, after discovering that she has not understood the nature of the self itself (in terms of her sense of self, and the possible multiplicity of selves). This theme is developed in a more complex manner in *That Long Silence*, but in *Roots and Shadows*, Deshpande has already begun to undercut what she sees as the 'simplistic desire to be free of all restraints, duties and obligations'<sup>82</sup>. Her

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<sup>81</sup> Ranjana Ash, 'The Search for Freedom in Indian Women's Writing', p. 168.

<sup>82</sup> Ash, 'The Search for Freedom in Indian Women's Writing',

protagonist learns that the world is symbiotic, so being a completely free agent in a free-floating utopia is not realistic or even achievable. *Roots and Shadows* is a multilayered novel in which issues of tradition and modernity are set against each other and shown to be inter-linked rather than completely oppositional, and in which the concept of freedom is qualified by an ethical call to mutual care. This exploration is further carried on in *That Long Silence*. 'Ultimately Jaya has to reexamine her life as a wife and mother and find a new formulation of her responsibility to her husband and children. This, for her, is the heart of freedom'.<sup>83</sup> And this is precisely where the overall authorial voice that links all of Deshpande's work can be heard/located, if not as regressive, then at least as conventional.

The conventionality also surfaces in the way Hindu philosophy and ethics are invoked by Deshpande. For example, she uses the *Bhagwad Gita* in *That Long Silence*. This is a part of the epic the

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p. 169.

<sup>83</sup> Ranjana Ash, 'The Search for Freedom in Indian Women's Writing', p. 168.

*Mahabharata*, and is a dialogue between the warrior Arjuna, and Krishna, who is performing the function of his charioteer. At the heart of the Gita lies the notion of 'Dharma', which means doing one's rightful duty, appropriate to one's role in life, but in a selfless way.<sup>84</sup> Deshpande uses the last part 'Do as you desire' as the resolution of Jaya's crisis in *That Long Silence*, which works only up to a point. Jaya has retreated from Mohan because she cannot cope with the truth — he is facing corruption charges and may lose his job — after a lifetime of avoiding serious issues. Krishna's advice to Arjuna has been interpreted as an expression of free will. As one critic reads the outcome:

Krishna tells Arjuna what the right dharma is for a warrior, but it is up to Arjuna to act or not act upon it. Jaya realises that she too must search for her dharma, and that she has a choice to follow it, i.e, become a truly equal partner in the marriage by opening channels of communication.<sup>85</sup>

But one sees here that it is *Jaya* who has to make the

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<sup>84</sup> Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.154, p. 115.

<sup>85</sup> Doniger and Smith, *The Laws of Manu*, 5.154, p. 115.

overtures to her husband's 'steadfast' position; that it is *she* who has to create equality out of inequality. Also, what Deshpande does not do, is look at how the concept of 'dharma' itself is interpreted very differently for men and women<sup>86</sup>; that is, how 'stri-dharma' or rightful duty for womankind is full of gendered violence and patriarchal morality. revolving, as it does, around the concept of 'pativratiya'— absolute subservience and devotion to a husband.

A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust, and is devoid of any good qualities.

Arjuna, by virtue of being high-caste and male, is given the freedom to choose<sup>87</sup> by Krishna, a god, in the *Mahabharata*, but the same text, like other Shastras and Vedas, emphatically denies it (or at least severely restricts it) to women, and to lower

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<sup>86</sup> Ash, 'The Search for Freedom in Indian Women's Writing', p. 170.

<sup>87</sup> Though it can be argued that dharma or choice are not the same as 'free will', and that ultimately, Arjuna's subjectivity inevitably constrains him.



castes.<sup>88</sup> It is ironic, therefore, that Jaya's epiphany about the future path she must take as a 'liberated' woman, comes from an essentially patriarchal religious text.

I would like to examine the film *Fire*<sup>89</sup> at some length in this chapter, because it is set in a similar milieu to Deshpande's fiction— urban, middle-class Indian life, and because of its different usage of religious/traditional material. English is the language of Mehta's creativity, just as it is Deshpande's. The film foregrounds and explores issues of gender and sexuality, of tradition and modernity, much like Deshpande's work, and is similarly inflected with a regional variety of Indian-English, in this case, Delhi/Northern English— but suggests a much more radical option as being available to the women, in their search for fulfilment and a non-traditional female Indian identity. The film makes strong statements about the conditioning

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<sup>88</sup> D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962), pp. 153-155.

<sup>89</sup> Written and Directed by Deepa Mehta, Produced by Deepa Mehta and Bobby Bedi, *Trial By Fire* Films, 1997.

of Indian women in a traditional milieu and about how they are constantly expected to compromise and accept things 'as they are', within marriage. The film also explores how the constant citing of 'duty' and tradition functions to disempower women and foreclose any options for individual action. 'The importance of the hold of tradition and mythology on the Indian subconscious cannot be dismissed; it affects sensibility responses in very crucial ways'<sup>90</sup>. Strictures regarding codes of behaviour and forms of social purdah are found in Hinduism and Islam, and similar patterns can be seen in minority groups like Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Jains<sup>91</sup>— because each of these has historically and culturally influenced the other. Thus the construct of the 'Bharatiya Nari', the archetypal Indian woman<sup>92</sup>, oppresses women across religious/ethnic/class boundaries. 'The readiness with which most Indians grasp at mythological stereotypes like Sita or Savitri,

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<sup>90</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 22.

<sup>91</sup>Romila Thapar, *Ancient Indian Social History: Some Interpretations*, (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1978). Also see D. D. Kosambi, *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*, (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1962).

<sup>92</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 22.

or their reservations about Draupadi, are an obvious indication that, for us, time future is indeed contained in time past'.<sup>93</sup>

The film uses graphic symbolism, intertextuality and historical narrative to map out how religious/Nationalist constructs of womanhood erode at both, the self and the sense of self. As Helen Kanitkar points out:

A selfhood denied, controlled, rendered inexpressive over centuries can erupt eventually, disruptive in its demands. The potential of the Mother Goddess is recognised in Hinduism, the potential of wives and mothers is directed and circumscribed by family needs and circumstances.<sup>94</sup>

In *Fire*, the two female protagonists, Radha and Sita, are the wives of Ashok and Jatin, who, though not monsters or villains, are patriarchal and take for granted the privileges accorded to them as men. They expect their wives to remain within the rigidly demarcated role of devoted wife (and in Sita's

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<sup>83</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 22.

<sup>94</sup> Kanitkar, ' "Heaven Lies Beneath Her Feet?" Mother Figures in Selected Indo-Anglian Novels', p. 197.

case, potential mother of sons), even though they themselves might question the role of good husband that is imposed upon them. For example Radha is infertile, so Ashok decides to take a vow of celibacy. Radha, having been trained all her life to put her husband's needs first, does not have the emotional resources or the external support to openly disagree with his decision. The issue here is not whether Ashok should or should not have taken the vow, it is that he has taken for granted Radha's acquiescence. The issue here is also that he constantly uses the weight of religious tradition to cover up his personal failing, thereby displacing responsibility, and foreclosing Radha's options. Similarly Jatin has a Chinese-Indian lover, Julie, and while he is rebuked by Ashok for continuing the relationship after his marriage to Sita, the reaction is nowhere as harsh as when Sita and Radha are found to be the transgressors of acceptable sexual mores.

Thus Mehta examines the position of women in the traditional middle-class joint-family system and quite explicitly makes a comment on the

idolisation of marriage itself in Indian society, where the patriarchal abuse of power may not be obvious, but in which the women are constantly reminded that they are inferior, and that their needs are secondary. Within this phallogentric framework, female sexuality and desire is either constructed as non-existent, as in Radha's case, or completely dependent on and only reactive to a husband, as in Sita's case. Mehta's use of classical allusion is transgressive by contrast to Deshpande's use of the *Bhagwad Gita*, the limitations of which I have discussed earlier in the chapter.

The character of Biji, the old woman, is interesting to analyse in this context. She functions at one level as the 'elder' of the family, and is thus respected and cared for— demonstrating the traditional Indian attitude towards the aged. But it is also made clear that the bulk of the care-giving (bathing, dressing, feeding, heavy lifting), is done by Radha, over and above cooking all day in the take-away shop— again emphasising the drudgery

expected of Indian women in traditional joint families. Biji is also the upholder of tradition and the status quo, as seen by her emphasis on Sita having a son, and in the end in a shockingly violent moment, when she spits in Radha's face. She has forgiven her own violation by Mundu, the servant, who has been forcing her to watch him masturbate to pornographic videos. But Radha, by daring to take a lover and leave Ashok, has violated the sanctity of marriage and the family's reputation. This is seen as far more destructive than the many male transgressions tolerated and hushed up throughout the film. Biji is also simultaneously and literally the silenced woman, because a stroke has rendered her speechless; there is a complexity here, and the dichotomies of victim/oppressor, powerful/disempowered and speech/silence are blurred. This is a very effective strategy, as it foregrounds the limited choices available to the women of Biji's generation— that is, to be a traditional wife/mother/widow and perpetuate the oppression of their own sex/gender. It is also possible, of course, to read Biji as the 'underdog' in

Fanon's terms, whereby vertical violence is deflected by the underdog into horizontal violence— what Fanon describes as a 'nervous condition'.

Mehta's strategy also underlines the enormous courage it takes women like Radha and Sita to break out of their ideologically encoded gender prisons, and explore new options. Manu comments that for a married woman, 'Serving her husband is [the equivalent of] living with a guru, and household chores are the rites of the fire'.<sup>95</sup> It is possible to read Mehta's film as a direct subversion of this precept — Sita, by initiating the relationship, becomes a guru of sorts to Radha. The latter undergoes an initiation through a 'rite of fire', and while that fire symbolises purity and new beginnings, it is in the context of a lesbian relationship.

By calling the female protagonists Radha and Sita, Mehta deliberately and self-reflexively invests them with mythic resonances. But Mehta does not

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<sup>95</sup> Doniger and Smith, *The Law of Manu*, 2.67, p. 24.

make simplistic connections— the older of the two women, the long-suffering, silent wife is Radha, in direct contrast to her mythic counterpart, the playful, eroticised lover of Krishna. Sita, in direct contrast to the silent, long-suffering mythological Sita, on the other hand, is young and rebellious, questions blind ritual and tradition, and functions as the catalyst in Radha's gradual transformation into a woman not afraid to speak for herself and express her sexuality. Mehta's Sita is juxtaposed throughout the film, in overt and covert ways, to the mythic Sita of the *Ramayana*, who has been held up for centuries as the epitome of Hindu wifedom:

We are fond, in India, of speaking of an ideal past when women were equal with men and no discrimination was visible. Such an unreal vision ignores the Sitas and Draupadis who are as much the postscripts of that allegedly idyllic age as are the male protagonists of our national epics.<sup>96</sup>

The myth of golden-age equality, when dismantled, reveals a pattern of unequal rules. Sita must not

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<sup>96</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, pp. 22-23.



merely follow Rama into the forest and live there, banished, for 14 years, she must prove her chastity by literally walking through fire after being rescued from Ravana who had abducted her. Draupadi, in the *Mahabharata*, is pawned in a game of dice, a clear indication of her status as an expendable product owned by the five Pandava brothers to whom she is married. 'Both Sita and Draupadi herald an ongoing tradition of long-suffering women whose real heroism is overlaid with the message of devotion and service to their husbands, a glorification of these qualities so that martyrdom is seen as preferable, desirable, virtuous, and even imperative'.<sup>97</sup>

Significantly, and again emphasising the film's transgressive potential, it is Radha, rather than Sita who goes through the 'trial by fire',<sup>98</sup> and survives. Most importantly, the ending of the film suggests that

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<sup>97</sup> Nabar, *Caste as Woman*, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> This is a pivotal part of the Ramayana, called the 'agni-pariksha' episode. Fire has become more than a symbol of purity and rebirth in a contemporary Indian context. Mehta may also be making an implicit comment on wife-burning and dowry deaths, and how epics/religious traditions are invoked in order to justify perpetuating systemic violence against women.

leaving a marriage does not mean abdicating responsibility, but actively changing the boundaries of responsibility to explore an identity outside an oppressive system. Thus the film takes a provocative position in terms of political acts of agency. This becomes an important tactical strike, especially because the film is not a feminist/lesbian-feminist utopian fantasy, but falls within the realist genre, and shows Indian, middle-class women 'as they are', to use Deshpande's phrase when she describes her work.

In the first half of the film, Mehta shows us, like Deshpande, that passivity is deeply ingrained in Indian women's psyches, and that essentialist constructs of gender as perpetuated by religious/Nationalist discourses function to oppress women, thus maintaining this passivity. But the major difference between Deshpande's and Mehta's authorial/directorial vision, is that Mehta is not willing to stop at depicting this condition. She makes explicit an alternative— women (and married women at that) empowering themselves through a lesbian relationship— that is deeply offensive to a

mainstream, middle-class Indian audience even today. This is seen in the reactions to the Indian release of the film, ranging from scathing reviews to mob violence, where theatres showing the film were wrecked and burned:

A day after Shiv Sainiks attacked two theatres in Mumbai showing the movie 'Fire', a mob today ransacked the Regal Cinema here which was showing the award winning film. About 20 Shiv Sainiks, including women, stormed the cinema hall in the upmarket Connaught Place around noon and damaged the booking counter, broke glass panes, smashed foodstalls and brought down posters and billboards. They were demanding that the movie be taken off as it showed some "vulgar scenes" dealing with lesbianism.<sup>99</sup>

Even though the above incident was an extreme reaction by members of a fundamentalist political party and should not be taken as representing a 'definitive' Indian response, intellectuals and activists did not spare the film either. Madhu Kishwar, a prominent writer and activist, criticised the film for being merely 'a naive

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<sup>99</sup> The Hindu (December 4, 1998), p. 1. [Online]. Available: [http://www.webpage.com/hindu/daily/981204/01/010400\\_05.htm](http://www.webpage.com/hindu/daily/981204/01/010400_05.htm)

and boring film about two unhappy housewives compelled to seek emotional and sexual satisfaction from each other because their husbands provide none'.<sup>100</sup> *Fire* is threatening to religious fundamentalists and conservatives because it challenges, through its narrative of liberation, the hegemony of the 'normal' and the 'ideal' in relation to the nature of Indian society, family, man-woman relationships and the universality of heterosexuality. By making visible a non-heterosexual, extra-marital, female Indian sexuality, Mehta makes a number of subversions and breaks many silences. She also unpacks stereotypes of sexuality and gender and the dominant majority's collusion in producing these. Her work is important in the sense that it opened up a critical space in which issues of gender and

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<sup>100</sup> Madhu Kishwar, 'Naive Outpourings of a Self-hating Indian', in *Manushi* 109, (November-December 1998). [Online], Available: <http://free.speech.org/manushi/109/fire.html>. Even though Kishwar was among those who defended Mehta's right to make films without harassment from the Censor Board or right-wing political parties, she attacks Mehta for using lesbianism to make heavy-handed political comment. However, Kishwar seems regard the history of male homosexuality in India as being identical to that of lesbianism, and to equate lesbian invisibility with tolerance— 'By contrast [to Western homophobia], society has no comparable history of persecuting homosexuals.'

sexuality (especially lesbianism), could be explored in new ways— 'a conceptual, representational, erotic space... in which women could address themselves to women'<sup>101</sup> — in a specifically Indian, postcolonial context. The divergence of Deshpande's and Deepa Mehta's ideological thrust could perhaps be explained in terms of a generational difference— Deshpande is the older among the two— and by the fact that Mehta now lives and works in Canada, which perhaps gives her the requisite distance to formulate a much stronger— some would say 'gimmicky'— critique of patriarchal and religious Indian ideologies without directly suffering the consequences.

This is not to say that Mehta's work is flawless, and it could in fact be criticised as positing an unrealistic view of possibilities for women. As many critics of the film argued, it can be relegated to the 'feminism equals Western corruption

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<sup>101</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, 'Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation', in Henry Abelove et al (eds.). *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 141.

(lesbianism)' idea. It has evoked strongly negative reactions even among the Indian lesbian community, as can be seen from Ashwini Sukthankar's analysis of the film. She points out that many aspects in the film can be considered dubious, that some of the analysis is too superficial:

*Fire*, a tale of two women married to two brothers, developing a relationship with each other in the congested streets of middle-class New Delhi, was not a film made for Indian audiences. The symbolism was pureed like baby food, the metaphors of fire (Sita's trial by fire from the Ramayana... the evil custom of bride-burning... home-fires and hearth-fires...) so deliberately labelled 'For Export Only'. The film had even less to offer Indian lesbians. In its portrayal of two married women falling painlessly in love, there was, as the lesbian writer VS pointed out, no attempt to take on the "anarchic and threatening emotions that accompany sexual practices generally considered perverted, criminal and taboo".<sup>102</sup>

A writer is free to choose his or her subject matter, so one cannot fault Deshpande for choosing to write about marriage and motherhood. After all, marriage and motherhood are over-arching institutions in the

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<sup>102</sup> Ashwini Sukthankar, 'For People Like Us', in *New Internationalist* 328, (October 2000). [Online], Available: <http://www.oneworld.org/ni/issue328/likeus.htm>

discourse of 'Indianness' 'family values' and national identity even today; one agrees with Ashis Nandy's perceptive analysis that:

it is [the Indian woman's] motherhood that the traditional family values and respects.... only in a few cultures have the loneliness and self-abnegation of woman as a social being found such elaborate justification in her symbolic status as a mother.<sup>103</sup>

Thus Deshpande's work is important in that it explores the conflicts experienced between women's expected family roles as mothers, wives, daughters or daughters-in-law and the often conflicting demands made on educated women caught between towards postcolonial Nationalism and Western feminist ontologies and modes of expression. She maps out the 'cultural determinants, overt or covert, that structure the desirable role perception' of an Indian wife and mother.<sup>104</sup> 'She also engages in demythologisations of archetypes like Sita and Savitri, through her protagonists' search for self-

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<sup>103</sup> Nandy, 'Woman Versus Womanliness in India', pp. 36-37.

<sup>104</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xxiv.

identity and self-expression'<sup>105</sup>. Deshpande not only deals with the women as disregarded figures in the narratives of their own lives, but also implicitly examines the concept of authenticity and audience in fiction written by women. Thus we must laud Deshpande, for writing into the canon of Indian literature, an 'imaginative female historiography'<sup>106</sup> which shines a light on many absences and gaps found regarding submerged Third World/ Indian/ postcolonial women's narratives.

But one can simultaneously, reading from my positionality as a younger, urban, Indian-feminist, critique her reluctance to posit alternatives to marriage and motherhood— whether lesbianism, as in *Fire*, or other choices such as divorce or singlehood— as being extremely difficult, but valid and realistic for financially stable, educated, contemporary Indian women in the 1990s.

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<sup>105</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 170.

<sup>106</sup> Palkar, 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 170.



**CHAPTER FIVE**

**CONCLUSION**

**"What about those who stayed back home?"**

**Makarand Paranjape**

This thesis has sought to examine the diversity and complexity of female experience represented in the novels of Shashi Deshpande and the poetry of Prabha Ganorkar. I have attempted to identify and foreground the strategies of resistance the authors lend their female protagonists to subvert, or at least confront, the primary structures of power inherent in the Indian middle-class social milieu. I have also examined strategies of textual resistance and/or complicity on the writers' parts. I have attempted to explore, amongst other things, how

The nation-state disciplines and mobilizes the bodies of women [...] in order to consolidate patriarchal and colonizing processes. Women's bodies are disciplined in different ways: within discourses of profit maximization, as global workers and sexual laborers; within religious fundamentalisms, as repositories of sin and

transgression; within specifically nationalist discourses, as guardians of culture and respectability or criminalized 'as prostitutes and lesbians; and within state discourses of the originary nuclear family, as wives and mothers.<sup>1</sup>

The issues that most interested me were the internal contestations of postcolonial feminisms, and the consequences of the positionality, location, and audience of the theorist / critic. Rather than attempting to craft an overarching theory of postcolonial feminism or to articulate a 'definitive' postcolonial feminist enterprise, I have sought to delineate the specifics of these two middle-class writers in relation to their particular social contexts.

I knew that I wanted to work with Prabha Ganorkar's poetry even before I had properly formulated a proposal for my research topic. Shashi Deshpande, on the other hand, was not my

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<sup>1</sup> Anand and C. T. Mohanty, *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, p. xxiii.

first choice for a novelist. I chose her as my second writer initially because of lack of availability of critical material on my first choice. But as I read her work, and the more I read about her, the more her novels seemed to fit my project of considering Indian women writers in the context of debates about the intersection of feminist and postcolonial discourses and their applicability to the Indian situation. In addition to examining the gendering of women and the sexual politics of middle-class lives and marriages, she refutes two assumptions in her critical writing as well as fiction: firstly, the idea that 'Indian' and 'English' are contraries; and secondly, the demand for 'Indianness' in writers in English in overseas markets for exotica, as well as by Indian nationals for 'proof' of authentic identity.

One cannot fault Deshpande for choosing to write about marriage and motherhood. After all, marriage and motherhood are over-arching institutions in the discourse of 'Indianness' and national identity even today; one agrees with

Ashis Nandy's analysis that:

it is [the Indian woman's] motherhood that the traditional family values and respects... only in a few cultures have the loneliness and self-abnegation of woman as a social being found such elaborate justification in her symbolic status as a mother.<sup>2</sup>

Deshpande's work is important in that it explores the conflicts experienced between women's traditional roles in the family as mothers, wives, daughters or daughters-in-law and the demands made on educated women caught amongst conflicting attitudes towards Gandhian nationalism and the language of Western feminism. She maps out the cultural determinants, overt or covert, that structure the 'desirable role perception' of an Indian wife and mother.<sup>3</sup> She also engages in 'demythologisations of archetypes like Sita and Savitri', through her protagonists' search for self-identity and self-

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<sup>2</sup> Nandy, 'Woman Versus Womanliness in India', pp. 26-27.

<sup>3</sup> Nasta, *Motherlands*, p. xxiv.

expression. Deshpande not only deals with the topic of women as marginalised figures, but also implicitly examines the concept of authenticity and audience in fiction written by Indian women. Thus Deshpande, in her novels, has created for us an 'imaginative female historiography'<sup>4</sup> which attempts to fill in the absences and gaps found regarding Third World/ Indian/ postcolonial women's social or cultural history.

To emphasise the point that there are multiple voices informing and fracturing the spaces of tidy constructions such as 'Indian writing' or 'Third World woman', I would like to briefly discuss a third writer, Gauri Deshpande's work, as a point of comparison and contrast to both Shashi Deshpande and Prabha Ganorkar. Gauri Deshpande comes from a similar Maharashtrian background and explores similar themes in her writing, such as the 'womanising' of women in a patriarchy, male-female relationships,

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<sup>4</sup> Palkar 'Of Mothers and Daughters, Of the Great Divide', p. 170.

and middle-class urban marriages.<sup>5</sup> We see this in her poem 'When Your Lips Softened Under Mine', which, like Ganorkar's love poetry, is ambiguous and can in fact be read as an antilove poem:

When your lips softened under mine  
 and your hands stilled over my shoulder  
 blades  
 I knew it was time to draw apart yet  
 didn't, for you breathed me in like a man  
 in heavy sleep and didn't say anything.<sup>6</sup>

Similar to what other critics have noted about Shashi Deshpande's work<sup>7</sup>, R. Raj Rao points out that:

Gauri Deshpande's life and writings are an extension of each other, a part of an ongoing process; separate the two and you have an incomplete

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<sup>5</sup> Chandra Holm, "Gauri Deshpande", 2001. [Online], Available: <http://www.ch.8m.com/>

<sup>6</sup> G. Deshpande, 'When Your Lips Softened Under Mine', 2000.[Online]. Available: <http://www.dwacon.com/lovebase/data/froswest.asp>

<sup>7</sup> See Chapter Four.

understanding of both.<sup>8</sup>

Thus one sees existential alienation akin to  
Ganorkar's confessional voice in the following  
poem:

One learns to live with  
all the misconceptions about oneself— the  
  
lewd snigger cold eye, charge of betrayal  
indifference, can only be met with hurt  
bewilderment, protests of I'm not like  
that, meet knowing smiles only.  
Have I not, perhaps, just back from a  
dream  
espied a leprous being in the mirror eaten  
away with desires of treachery, crime,  
untruth complicity — cruel, obscene?  
  
If I peel away, layer by layer at memories,  
deposits of habit residues of virtue, I find

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<sup>8</sup> R. Raj Rao, Afterword, in *The Lackadaisical Sweeper*,  
(Madras: Manas, 1997), p. 207.



myself an onion

layer after layer of seeming meaning and  
intent, sufficient by itself leading to no  
heart.

Not even, as a pearl, a grain of pain in its  
womb.

An onion merely — a little tang a little  
flavour  
and whorls of indigestion and bad taste

in its wake.<sup>9</sup>

Some of Gauri Deshpande's recurring concerns, such as pride in the girl-child, are seen clearly in stories such as 'Rose Jam', where being a good cook is described as an essential qualification for Indian women. This is similar to the statements made by Shashi Deshpande's characters. But there are essential differences in their speaking voices and ideologies, as the

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<sup>9</sup> C. Deshpande, 'Two Self Portraits'. [Online].  
Available:  
<http://www.geocities.com/varnamala/gauri.html>

narrator goes on to proclaim with relish that neither of her grandmothers was much of a cook, and speaks at length of their haphazard cooking. In fact Baya, her father's mother, regrets never having daughters, and adopts many girls to that end.

Another similar, yet different story is 'A Harmless Girl', in which Gauri Deshpande raises issues of voice and silence/silencing that are similar to Shashi Deshpande's and Ganorkar's thematic concerns. Like Shashi Deshpande, Gauri Deshpande posits that women's low self-esteem (arising from their conditioning and position in a patriarchy) is the reason for their marginalisation, for the retreat of even successful, strong women into self-deprecation vis-a-vis any man. For example, the narrator who is silent to the point of comic absurdity, falls in love with the 'noisiest, brashest, heartiest, laughingest man anyone had ever met' (47). Noise here can be seen as a metaphor for all forms of male privilege. However

there are important differences – for example, there is an ironic twist at the end when the narrator gets pregnant and noisy (powerful) and a noisy female child is born to her.

Similarly, in 'Brand New Pink Nikes', the middle-aged female narrator overcomes her fear and sadness at ageing, by starting to 're-vision' her body, with a little help from her daughter. Mothers and daughters rarely have this sort of mutually nurturing bond in much of Shashi Deshpande's work. The other most striking difference is the wit and humour of Gauri Deshpande's voice, which stop her writing from becoming bleak, even when she deals with

extremely serious issues. Thus while Gauri Deshpande makes strong statements about the oppression and silencing of women, she also underlines the possibility of empowerment and agency for her women characters, in ways that seem realistic in a middle-class, urban milieu.

This can be seen in 'Map', a story in which cartography is used as a metaphor for the (colonising) male gaze; the woman in the story first gives in to and then subverts the process. As the story nears its conclusion, the narrator becomes increasingly assertive. One of the inferences here is that in a patriarchy, gender rights are abrogated by the sexual-cultural dependence of women on men. Barbara Ryan speaks of the 'political lesbian'<sup>10</sup> as an ideological category distinct from those women whose natural preference is for people of their own sex. In its broadest sense this meant being totally

committed, privately and publicly, to women's causes. While the narrator doesn't quite come to these conclusions, she does realise that

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Ryan, cited in John Flynn, 'Radical Feminism'. [Online]. Available: <http://www.geocities.com/johnflynn67/flych5.htm>

dependence must end, even if it means replacing the male map of her body with a more honest one drawn by herself. 'The metaphor in 'Map' becomes all the more interesting because the 'narrator woman' is India and the cartographer the imperial power'<sup>11</sup>, showing an overt engagement with postcolonial theory.

The protagonist in 'Smile and Smile and...' could be seen as a more assertively confident feminist version of the woman in 'Map'. Talking of Japanese businessmen she is forced to work with, she says:

They'd never had to deal with women as equals. Even their 'equal' women: doctors, lawyers,' professors, councillors 'knew their place', being Japanese. I refused to put up with being treated as anything but equal. (In fact even that was a concession to them as I am a firm believer in female

supremacy). (75-76). <sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> R. Raj Rao, Afterword, p. 214.

Though there are similarities in the voices and thematic concerns of Shashi Deshpande, Prabha Ganorkar and Gauri Deshpande, as I have mentioned earlier, the most striking differences are - 1) Gauri Deshpande writes prose (novels and short stories) as well as poetry. This means that she not only translates herself across region/ gender/ tradition/ modernity, but also across genres and forms; 2) Unlike the other two, Gauri Deshpande is a bilingual writer and often translates herself from English into Marathi and vice-versa. Thus we can say that she lives 'in' translation, literally and metaphorically.

For example, many of the stories in *The Lackadaisical Sweeper* have already been published in their Marathi form; and 3) her work is often scathingly witty and makes important points through humour and irony, even when the subject matter is serious or bleak; 4) Her writing is filled with images

of women nurturing each other, of mutually satisfying female relationships, in sharp contrast to Ganorkar's alienated and drifting women, or Shashi

Deshpande's patriarchal and domineering mothers and aunts. We see this clearly in the following poem:

Sometimes you want to talk  
about love and despair  
and the ungratefulness of children.  
A man is no use whatever then.  
You want then your mother or sister  
or the girl with whom you went through  
school,  
and your first love, and her  
first child — a girl —  
and your second.  
You sit with them and talk.  
She sews and you sit and sip  
and speak of the rate of rice

and the price of tea  
 and the scarcity of cheese.  
 You know both that you've spoken  
 of love and despair and ungrateful  
 children.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, rather than the gendered humanism of a liberationist kind that we see in the works of Shashi Deshpande and Ganorkar, we have a western-style and assertive 'feminism' and an emphasis on female bonding in much of Gauri Deshpande's writing. But interestingly, like Shashi Deshpande, she actively distances herself from the term, as Usha Bande points out:

Most writers, even the rebellious ones like Gauri Deshpande — do not want the Indian women to follow the Western model of feminism. In an interview [...] Ms Deshpande said that feminists should first try to probe Indian social history and see what the pioneers had done and then choose their path.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gauri Deshpande, 'The Female of the Species', 1998. [Online], Available: <http://www.geocities.com/varnamala/gauri.html>

<sup>13</sup> Usha Bande, 'Story of the Indian Short Story',



This authorial ambiguity surrounding the term feminism raises fewer problems of interpretation in Gauri Deshpande's case when compared to Shashi Deshpande or -Ganorkar. Whereas Shashi Deshpande's women struggle to achieve an identity and marriage acceptable to themselves and Ganorkar's voices embrace the pain of isolation and 'not belonging', Gauri Deshpande's women take overtly feminist positions on marriage, children and relationships; more importantly, her novels often end with the woman deciding not to compromise any more.

Whether or not one agrees with Gauri Deshpande's reiteration of extra-marital affairs as being liberating for women, one could, reading from my positionality as a younger, urban, Indian-feminist reader, commend her willingness to put forward

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[Online]. Available:  
[http://  
www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98dec06/sunday/he  
ad4.h tm.](http://www.tribuneindia.com/1998/98dec06/sunday/head4.htm)

alternatives to compulsory marriage and motherhood. Thus one concurs with R. Raj Rao's contention that:

No other Indian woman novelist or short story writer in English has so strongly or consistently expressed her anger at the power politics that exist in gender-relations, although Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*' and Shanta Gokhale's *Rita Welinkar* may be cited as important examples in that direction, and Suniti Namjoshi's writings display related concerns... Gauri Deshpande's is a new, crusading voice that is bound to give an impetus to Indian literature in English.<sup>14</sup>

In Gauri Deshpande's writing there is the potential to break away from the debilitating colonial binaries of Western Self / Oriental Other, Original / Derivative, or Indian Writing in English / Regional Writing in other languages. Her linguistic and cultural hybridity (and in fact a clearly demonstrated and embraced biculturalism) brings to mind Sherry Simon's concept of the 'contact zone'— the place where previously

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<sup>14</sup> R. Raj Rao, Afterword, p. 213.

separated cultures come together.<sup>15</sup> Her bilingual prose and poetry demand a non-essentialist position in which to contextualise a postcolonial and/or feminist critique.

But to give Shashi Deshpande and Prabha Ganorkar their due, it must be said that their writing works both as a repetition of the multiplicity of the nation and a proliferation of the voice of the 'Indian woman'. Their prose and poetry enact the renegotiation of individuality in a postcolonial scene and a possibility for the voices of 'Indian women' not being completely anchored to a space that is dictated only Western and Indian dominant discourses. Their voices foreground the boundaries imposed by class, discipline, gender and language, and replace entrenched 'truths' with voices that embrace both power and fragmentation, and in doing so, they displace numerous forms of cultural, literary and epistemic

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<sup>15</sup> Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Introduction, in Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (eds), *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 14.

authority.

Any transcription of narrative carries with it some trace of the original author and original intention, but is transformed in the passage through different tongues, or at least different pens. There is always something possibly monstrous, and something quite revealing when attempting to write both of, and sometimes unavoidably, for another. The narratives are distributed, disturbed, mistranslated and appropriated. They never reach the destination point in the same condition they left, and it is perhaps the willingness to be transformed that swings literary / cultural / translation studies from heavily policed Western narratives to the rich, changing discourse of other cultures / 'insider' translations and transfusions.

While it is often argued that translation in a colonial context is a form of violence<sup>16</sup>, in this

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<sup>16</sup> Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, cited by Bassnett and Trivedi in *Post-colonial Translation:*

thesis, I have argued, rather, for the decolonising project of postcolonial literature being advanced by the consideration of work in 'native' languages, but in contexts that avoid, as far as possible, a reductive 'nativism'. I have argued for the validity of Anglophone writing doing radical work *within* the nation while also asserting the need to consider work in 'native' languages within wider postcolonial literary studies, both to oppose Westernising globalism and to resist reductive nationalist or regionalist claims.

A number of contradictory and conflicting statements have been made about translation theory and practice. A. K. Ramanujan has said that 'A translation should be true to the translator no less than to the originals...'.<sup>16 17</sup> On the other hand, translation theorists like Sujit Mukherjee point out that:

*Rupnntnr* (meaning 'change in form') and *anuvnd* ('speaking after' or 'following') are the commonly understood senses of translation in India, and neither term

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Theory and Practice, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Sujit Mukherjee, 'The Making of Indo-English Literature', in *Translation as Discovery*, (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1994), p. 24.

demands fidelity to the original.<sup>18</sup>

Mukherjee also contends that there is a dearth of good theory written by translation practitioners, because he feels that because translators of verse often tend to be poets themselves, 'their professed intention is to make poems of what they reconstruct in another language' and so many of their statements about translation are really about the writing or the reading of the poetry'.<sup>19</sup>

While Mukherjee says this in relation to the theory of translation, Vilas Sarang takes a strong position about the quality of translation itself, in his introduction to *Yognbhrashta*, where he unequivocally states that 'So far as Indian literatures are concerned, it is not often that good poetry meets with good translators. The quality of good translation from the Marathi— prose as well as poetry— is lamentably small.'<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Mukherjee, 'Translation as New Writing', in *Translation as Discovery*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Mukherjee, 'The Making of Indo-English Literature', in *Translation as Discovery*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Vilas Sarang, introduction, in Vasant Abbaji Dahake, *Yognbhrashta / A Terrorist of the Spirit*, Ranjit Hoskote and Mangesh Kulkarni (translators), Vilas Sarang (intro),

George Steiner posits in relation to the translation of poetry, that it can be 'At its best, the peculiar synthesis of conflict and complicity between a poem and its translation into another poem creates the impression of a "third language", of a medium of communicative energy which somehow reconciles both languages in a tongue deeper, more comprehensive than either.'<sup>21</sup> This statement is closer to what postcolonial and post-structuralist theorists such as Tejaswini Niranjana and Gayatri Spivak see as the radical potential of translation in its power to contaminate master narratives of Western history.

Whereas Susie Tharu and K. Lalita focus on the power differentials involved in the process of translating, even by 'insider' translators —

Formulations that set up the problem of translation as one of judging how faithful a translation has been to the original, or how well it reads in the target language, divert attention to the fact that translation takes place where two, invariably unequal,

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(New Delhi: Indus, 1992), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> George Steiner, *Poem into Poem*, George Steiner (ed), (London and New York: Penguin Books, Re-issue, 1970), p. 29.

worlds collide, and that there are always relationships of power when one world is represented for another in translation.<sup>22</sup>

– Gayatri Spivak argues persuasively that a translator should adopt 'a procedure of "love" and "surrender" towards the original'<sup>23</sup>, as she herself claims to have done when translating from the Bengali some devotional poetry as well as the contemporary fiction writer Mahasweta Devi.<sup>24</sup>

Sarang points out that in the book *The Art of the Novel*, Milan Kundera voices his distrust of 'fluent' translations<sup>25</sup> because fluency often suppresses the original, individual idiom. Just as Ranjit Hoskote and Mangesh Kulkarni have attempted with Vasant Dahake's work in *Yogabhrashtn / Terrorist of the Spirit*, I have tried to

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<sup>22</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds), *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Volume II: The 20th Century*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), preface, p. xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, Introduction, in *Post-colonial Translation*, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 180-181.

<sup>25</sup> Vilas Sarang, introduction, in *Yogabhrashta*, p. 13.



achieve fluency in translating the poems of Ganorkar while keeping the idiosyncrasy of the original Marathi idiom.

In my choice of writers, and in choosing to work with a non-English language writer in particular, I have attempted to foreground the 'complexities in the cultural fabric'<sup>26</sup>, to explore the elusive 'natures of identities that emerged at the margin', or, as Tharu and Lalita put it— 'understand the peculiar tension between public and private realities that underwrites women's writing'.<sup>27</sup> Deshpande's novels, particularly, seemed to me to illuminate a specific generational and urban middle-class female response to historical developments and sexual politics, and therefore allowed me to explore 'the dimensions of self-fashioning and the politics of everyday life as they affected women'.<sup>28</sup> Though Deshpande has

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<sup>26</sup> Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds). *Women Writing in India, 600 BC to the Present, Volume II: The 20th Century*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993) preface, p. xvii

<sup>27</sup> Tharu and Lalitha, preface, *Women Writing in India*, p. xvii

<sup>28</sup> Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, preface, p. xxii.

been celebrated by critics as being a feminist, she herself has repeatedly rejected the term, and to a reader of my positionality, her textual politics concerning feminism are ambiguous at best. If we read her in terms of Tharu and Lalitha's analysis, she is a woman writer, not a feminist one. As they say:

In the process, all women's writing, or at least women's writing that merits serious literary attention, becomes feminist in the precise mode and to the precise extent that the authors themselves understand and experience feminism.<sup>29</sup>

Women's writing in India has many histories — Classical sanskritic, oral, desi, margi,<sup>30</sup> Colonial, Western, and postcolonial / decolonising — each forming a distinguishing mark on the final product. There will be a subjectivity, but one that is within the matrix of forces which create an area of knowledge. The only position to take is part medium, part interpreter, in awareness that any understanding will oscillate between these two

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<sup>29</sup> Tharu and Lalitha, *Women Writing in India*, intro, p. 29

<sup>30</sup> Devy, *After Amnesia*, p. 78.

poles.

'Knowledge has been motivated as an apolitical, humanist strategy that validates study and authorises a person's intervention into "other" cultures, or "speaking for" others'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the term 'knowledge' itself typically emerges from the Enlightenment and imperial practices: the pursuit, quest, or desire for knowledge is the often obscured motivation behind what drives much contemporary research, 'pure' or 'applied'.

Obviously this thesis, situated as it is in an English Department and seeking to demonstrate a 'contribution to knowledge', necessarily entails some degree of collusion with precisely the colonial drive for knowledge that I critique. My biggest dilemma has been— how do I avoid doing exactly what I was critiquing in my exploration of the intersections of feminism, postcolonialism and translation; that is, how do I avoid 'speaking for' or even 'speaking as' my writers of choice?

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Hayes, 'Discursive Production of the Pacific in Australian Colonial Discourse', PhD thesis, University of Wollongong, 1997, p. 14.

The other question that worried me was how not to perpetuate neocolonialist discourse in my study of Ganorkar. Was this possible at all? How could I not act as a 'native informant', who not only 'discovers', but translates and therefore represents a Marathi writer into/to a much more powerful global language, namely English? How was I going to avoid acting as a sort of postcolonial 'impresario,' 'presenting' 'my' writer to the international postcolonial scene? How could an ethical response to the danger of academic colonialism, even by an 'insider' translator begin to be articulated?

This challenging and possibly shaky position has called for an exacting positioning of myself and this study; I must necessarily flag 'my position as both complicit in and confrontational to a system valourising knowledge and making the possession of such knowledge a marketable resource'.<sup>32</sup> As an Indian feminist in a

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<sup>32</sup> Hayes, 'Discursive Production of the Pacific in Australian Colonial Discourse', 1997, p. 15.

predominantly white Australian academy, as a lesbian in a predominantly heterosexual world, I sometimes speak from an oppositional viewpoint and occupy a somewhat non-mainstream position. Yet, this does not acknowledge the advantage, both in India and Australia, which has allowed me to produce this thesis (such as international mobility, access to languages, writers and personal collections, financial resources and scholarships, and institutional support). As Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese write in their essay 'Subject Positions':

Subject positions— despite the facile gestures made by some, which celebrate absolute disassociations of body and text, of author(s) and corpus— leave their traces in all texts. These traces remain precisely because a text is always a situated language event structured by a complex field of discursive and extra-discursive forces.<sup>33</sup>

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak broaches some vital and productive imperatives on academic positionality: 'To claim agency in the emerging

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<sup>33</sup> Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese, 'Subject Positions', in *Arena Magazine* 12 (1994), p. 38.

dominant is to recognise agency in others, not simply to comprehend otherness'.<sup>34</sup> Spivak's emphasis of focusing on agency, rather than simply pinning down otherness, is especially meaningful for me as a diasporic scholar studying the literatures from my country of origin, as it allows for productive reflection on my scholarly practice.

The undertaking of my thesis was not to be a 'native informant' for the West or to 'know' women's writing in Marathi in a neocolonialist sense, but to explore its place in Indian writing and the points of its complicity and contestation in relation to dominant Anglophone and postcolonial discourses. Thus it is important to acknowledge that my exploration, constructed within the genre imperatives of the academic thesis, and determined by specific academic knowledge, will always be incomplete and imperfect.

I extend my self reflection further here, by drawing

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<sup>34</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Teaching for the Times', in Jan Nederveen Pieterse and Bhiku Parekh (eds), *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, (London: Zed Books, 1995), p. 182.

extensively upon Rey Chow's work, as she examines precisely these issues in *Writing Diaspora*. Chow frames her interrogations with regard to the tradition of studying East Asia (and particularly, Chinese women), and maps out the inequalities between the 'Chinese intellectual in China' and the 'Chinese intellectual in America', i.e., the diasporic scholar:

As we continue to use Chinese women's writings and lives as the "raw material" for our research in the West, then the relationship between us as intellectuals overseas and them 'at home' will increasingly take on the coloration of a kind of "master discourse / native informant" relationship.<sup>35</sup>

Chow is especially compelling in her analysis of the creation and division of 'us' and 'them' (not-us) to shape two separate groups: one, the scholars that study and define and second, the group that is studied and defined in a neocolonial way. The non-diasporic scholar is left out of this equation. Chow claims that not just cultural productions and creative practices, but 'other' lives themselves become commodities in a hierarchised

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<sup>35</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), p. 109.

production of academic knowledge. She proposes an ethical approach to 'use this privilege as truthfully and tactfully' as possible.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, it is important to emphasise that

Third-World feminism, by virtue of its vexed historical origins and complicated negotiations with contemporary state apparatuses, is necessarily a chimerical, hydra-headed creature, surviving in a plethora of lives and guises.<sup>37</sup>

In the light of Chow's and Heng's analysis, and in terms of the politics of my position, what worried me was— why study and translate Ganorkar at all, in what is essentially a thesis produced in the Australian academy under the rubric of 'English Studies'? Tharu and Lalita make an important point when they say that:

We have been very aware that in India, when we translate a regional language — Tamil or Oriya, for instance— into English, we are representing a regional culture for a more powerful national or 'Indian' one, and when this translation is made available to a readership outside India, we are also representing a national culture for a still more powerful international culture— which is today, in

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<sup>36</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, p. 114.

<sup>37</sup> Geraldine Heng, 'A Great Way to Fly', p. 30.



effect, a Western one.... We have tried, therefore, in the translations (not always successfully) to strain against the reductive and often stereotypical homogenisation involved in the process. We preferred translations that did not domesticate the work into either a pan-Indian or into a 'universalist' mode, but demanded of the reader too a translation of her/himself into another sociohistorical ethos. We have taken pains, therefore, to preserve the regional grain of the work, and to create a historical context that might open up the work for a materialist and feminist reading.<sup>38</sup>

Theorists such as Niranjana have also demonstrated the extent to which colonial, European ideologies have dominated literary production, and those norms have ensured that only certain kinds of texts, those that could be co-opted by the receiving culture, came to be translated.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, not to engage in translation at all leaves postcolonial studies focused distortingly only on the national and the literary *as* Anglophone, as discussed previously.

Bassnett and Trivedi, amongst others, point out that 'At this point in time, post-colonial theorists are increasingly turning to translation and both

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<sup>38</sup> Theru and Laiitha, *Women Writing in India*, preface, p. xx.

<sup>39</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, *Introduction, Post-colonial Translation*, p. 5.

reappropriating and reassessing the term itself.<sup>40</sup> They contend that theorists like Homi Bhabha and Sherry Simon take a much more productive position in the debates surrounding translation, arguing for a 'new politics of in-betweenness, for a reassessment of the creative potentialities of liminal space.'<sup>41</sup> As Bhabha puts it:

we should remember that it is the 'inter'— the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space — that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'. And by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.<sup>42</sup>

Sherry Simon claims that 'bilingualism leads to the dissolution of the binary opposition' between the original work and a translation.<sup>43</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi further map out how, following Mary Louise Pratt, she uses the notion of the 'contact zone' the place where previously separated

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<sup>40</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, Introduction, Post-colonial Translation, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, Introduction, Post-colonial Translation, p. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 38-39.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Bassnett and Trivedi, Introduction, Post-colonial Translation, p. 14.

cultures come together. 'Traditionally a space where cultures meet on unequal terms, the contact zone is now a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities.'<sup>44</sup> Perhaps I can apply this valuable concept of the contact zone to my thesis and what it sets out to do?

I have sought in this thesis, at least in part, to re-examine the ways in which the politics of reading, reception and canonisation mark readings of certain literary productions from postcolonial societies. And though postcolonial literary studies and theories situate themselves as 're-visioning' and recuperative projects that aim to foreground effaced, marginalised and non-normative ways of knowing, the 'discourse of the postcolonial project does not mobilise its formations in a completely non-hegemonic mode and thus, creates its own others and marginalia'.<sup>42</sup>

By including Ganorkar's work in my analysis, I have attempted to map out how the notion of the 'postcolonial' has largely been validated and constructed by Western

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<sup>44</sup> Bassnett and Trivedi, Introduction, *Post-colonial Translation*, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Saeed Ur Rehman, 'Decolonising Post-colonial Theory', *Kunapipi*, Issue 20, Vol. 2, 1998, p. 31.

scholars and writers. While this does not mean 'that this process is always oppressive [as] it can also provide better opportunities for the circulation and consumption of these cultural productions [...]the choice of themes, material and language for celebrated postcolonial writers has largely been determined by the 'write back' model...<sup>43</sup> and so the 'authentic' postcolonial writer is constructed as one who addresses issues of nation, perhaps migrancy and hybridity, and the colonial encounter, but very rarely, the kinds of emphases we see in Ganorkar, and to an extent, in Deshpande. Thus, 'the real postcolonial' continues to draw and re-draw its own exclusive boundaries. As translation scholars have pointed out: 'The reception of writing in English from 'Third World' countries still largely depends on Western models of literary excellence... [and] when this is not the case, the "radicality" of the work in its relation to the colonial past of its society and the neocolonial present is often the tool of appraisal'.<sup>45</sup> Or postcolonial worthiness is often comprehended as only ever being an 'oppositional model of national identity'<sup>46</sup> which is no less problematic.

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<sup>43</sup> Saeed, 'Decolonising Post-colonial Theory', p. 31.

<sup>46</sup> Saeed, 'Decolonising Post-colonial Theory', p. 33.

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So many Indian women writers— even those who write primarily in English— who do not write back to the colonial centre, or for that matter to a similarly overbearing anti-colonial Nationalist ideology, have few takers for their inventiveness and transgressiveness. They are not caught in the dualism of East-West/Centre-Periphery, and thus remain outside the prevailing interpretive discourse. Although their names are reiterated in evaluations of Indian English writing, they by no means receive meaningful critical attention as Nissim Ezekiel did, or later, as Rohinton Mistry, Kiran Desai or Jhumpa Lahiri do for example.

Prabha Ganorkar does not address a colonising centre, or the West, and is not a diasporic subject. While she translates herself across a number of borders, as discussed earlier, she does not even write back to a pan-Indian Nation and the 'correct' oppressions therein – and has thus received very little critical attention even within Marathi literary scholarship. Her voice describes its own specific physical and emotional landscapes with a laser-sharp eye, and 'takes us roaming inside a mind wrapped

in its own pain...at once static and nomadic.'<sup>45</sup> Ganorkar's voice may be confessional in part, but to say that Ganorkar writes 'like' the female Western confessional poets of the 1960s is reductionist, and once again posits Western literary production as the default against which all other literary practice is judged. While history shows us that is possible to launch anti-colonial struggles and physically force out the colonisers, 'it can be much more difficult fighting against internal postcolonial oppressions'<sup>46</sup> to do with, for example, caste, class, sexuality and gender.

This thesis does not aim to paper over the cracks and biases in the theorising and reception of postcolonial literatures, but to shine a light on these very gaps, and 'to widen the aporetic spaces that exist between the dominant postcolonial discourse'<sup>47</sup> and the other. Rather than attempting to craft an overarching theory of postcolonial feminism, or to articulate a 'definitive' postcolonial enterprise, I have sought to delineate the specifics of these two middle-class women writers' in relation to their

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<sup>45</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

<sup>46</sup> Saeed, 'Decolonising Post-colonial Theory', p. 32.

<sup>47</sup> Saeed, 'On the Margins of Postcoloniality', 1997.

particular socio-cultural contexts.

In conceptualising this project within the disciplinary boundaries of an English department, one of the things that I realised is that it is almost impossible to escape the collusion of history, nation and literature. Yet by attempting to interrogate and explore the different aspects of postcolonial feminism and by foregrounding the elements of the region within the postcolonial nation, I have been able to study Prabha Ganorkar and Shashi Deshpande's negotiations with the internal hegemonies of the patriarchal nation state as part of symbolic and substantial histories. Therefore my reading of women's experiences and women's histories through fiction/poetry also seeks to politicise the practice of reading.

At the end of this thesis, it would be apposite to stress that Indian literature in English and other languages is among the most 'disorderly of contemporary Indian literatures, and certainly the one most resistant to generalizations'.<sup>48</sup> A. Dharwadker and V. Dharwadker

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<sup>48</sup> Aparna Dharwadker and Vinay Dharwadker, 'Language, Identity, and Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature', in Radhika Mohanram and Gita Rajan (eds), *English*

argue persuasively when they say that given the high incidence of bilingualism or multilingualism (or at the very least biculturalism) in Indian writers and theorists, and the increasing quantity of translations of a high quality, the rubric of 'Indian literature in English' or 'postcolonial Indian literature' must also now include literature in translation.<sup>49</sup> Dilip Chitre aptly remarks in an article in *The Times of India*:

The potential strength of Indian English poetry is going to be derived from native Indian literatures and not without them. The ability to transform non-Anglo-Saxon cultures into the global mainstream of English literature will give Indian English poetry its sustenance in the coming decades, provided Indian English poets discover the nourishing activity of poetic translation as a major aspect of creativity in the contemporary world.<sup>50</sup>

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*Postcolonialism: Literatures from Around the World*, (Westport: Conn., Greenwood Press, 1996), p.104.

<sup>49</sup> A. Dharwadker and V. Dharwadker, 'Language, Identity, and Nation in Postcolonial Indian English Literature', p.104

<sup>50</sup> Dilip Chitre, 'The Placelessness of Indian English Poetry', in *The Times of India* [Bombay], (6 May) 1990.



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## APPENDIX

*Vyntheeth (Spent)*, by Prabha Ganorkar  
(Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1974).

Translations by Shalmalee Palekar

Journey

Splitting the horizon higher and higher  
The saagwan trees carefully cradle their  
golden tops  
And are briskly left behind.  
Some new, blue, alien sky  
Slowly flickers in the corner of your eye.  
Evening is filling up all around And a forlorn  
piece of sunlight Tries to outrun the darkening  
sky.  
New trees, vines, mountain tops, new lakes...  
Shyly folding on themselves.  
Lotuses smile slightly and welcome you.  
Bow, take their places and are left behind.  
You cannot see them, nothing is familiar  
Anymore.  
Stars wink and fill only the sky.  
Milestones fall by the way  
With a monotonous regularity, hiding  
Themselves in the cupped hands of darkness.



Where will I have come from?  
Where have I gone?  
At midnight the train reveals only  
An unknown town.

All Around This Crushing Crowd (extract)

All around, this crushing crowd, gaudy, lurid  
voices, explosions of colour.  
A pensive, quiet coloured rust spreads on the  
horizon.  
Unknown silhouettes of unknown trees,  
A grieving, sinking evening and I wander  
through purposeless pathways — Now  
stumbling like an Arab picking his way  
through a desert night.  
My feet sink into cold, cold sand.  
Come up, sink again. There is no warmth in  
the touch of this soft sand,  
I do not feel any warmth.  
The real question is— am I cold and aloof or  
is it this neverending desert?

Touch

That my body would be numb to touch.  
Strangled sobs in the silent night That  
dissolve before they emerge. Breaths. Hot as  
the midday sun  
At the height of summer.  
Scorching breaths  
With invisible scorching shadows.  
My body is a burnt, smoking cinder.  
Touch.  
That my body would disintegrate  
Like a leper's limbs.

Search

They killed me  
But did not let me bleed.  
They hacked at me  
But smothered my screams  
Then smeared their bodies  
With my ashes  
And bellowed their grief —

Yet, now that I am reborn.  
My eyes search for them Unceasingly.

Dutiful Blood.

I will not say that you betrayed me. What for?  
I have nursed my wounds fastidiously.  
Why bother?  
This blood leaks continuously A congealed  
moment is illusory...  
It has forgotten how to stop, this blood.  
Its duty is to flow and flood.

Since Yesterday, This Rain

Since yesterday, this rain has poured down  
endlessly. But everything ends, and so will  
the rain.  
Spring and summer will come and go too.  
Who knows when new shoots will sprout  
from this mud. The sky will remain distant as  
always

And trees will flower, yet again.  
Our joys and sorrows are only ours.  
Who else  
Will take on their meaningless burdens?  
We belong only to ourselves and are alien  
Only to ourselves.  
The life that sprouts in our veins  
Must be uprooted so it withers and dies.  
Since yesterday, this rain has poured down  
endlessly. So be it.  
Who cares, when shoots will be destroyed  
Even before they peep from the mud.

### Evening

Do your eyes brim with tears, I wonder?  
That sea, those colours, that sky –  
Do they suddenly burden you?  
Do you struggle against memories That  
threaten to weigh you down And drown you?  
This has happened to me.  
And made me unbearable to myself.  
This evening, at least this sky, these colours,

this sea —  
Bear them for me.

Question(s)

Where do these birds go?  
Where do they live?  
What brings them home everyday

After their soaring flight?  
motherfatherchildrensisterbrotherwife?

Just one more question:  
Are they too allowed to die Only after their  
lives have ended?

I Don't Understand

I don't understand.  
Where, exactly, did I take, a wrong turn?  
Even now the people I meet Suggest I turn  
back.  
And I do meet them — people, trees, birds.

And they remain just that— people trees  
birds.

I gave up believing long ago  
That someone would show me the right path.  
Besides, how would they know  
Where I want to go?  
I don't know this.  
Myself.

### Trick

It's a lie that life drags us along kicking and  
screaming.  
Often, we're the ones that take its hand  
And drop it off, god knows where.  
At those particular moments, those particular  
decisions  
Seem absolutely fool proof.  
So much so  
That we can't even see other doors.  
At those times, sombre colours automatically  
look Peaceful. And thorn trees so attractive.  
It's a lie to say that it is life that has tricked  
us.  
It is we who have laughed and deliberately  
Offered our hand.

Night-life

She would stay up night after  
Night, her eyes burning Like the candles  
Which were her only companions.  
Waiting still, silent, for daylight  
To arrive, loneliness  
Enveloping her  
Like a thick winter shawl. It was only  
The chirping of the birds, she remembered  
later, That had stopped her from  
Gutting herself with a knife.

21. Poison Tree

Do not cast your eye on this exquisite branch.  
It springs from a poison tree.  
It will suck the venom out of the ground  
And spread it in your veins  
And you will blossom  
With glittering poison flowers.  
But bear no fruit.

Funeral Pyre

You smell it, don't you? The stench of  
burning flesh?  
I can tell by the way your nostrils flare.  
You've guessed correctly, it is the smell of a  
burning corpse.  
Quite surprising, I suppose —  
This stench pervading an affluent suburb —  
Or is it?  
I light quite a few funeral pyres when I can,  
you know. For my friend, killed in a plane  
crash in some foreign country.  
Or my grandfather, thrown by a horse in  
some unknown forest.  
For myself, killed in some forgotten past.  
This pyre is for a dead woman.  
See, it's like this.  
Her body lay unattended in the street  
For three days and finally the smell....  
What's that? You're in a hurry?  
Oh well, hold on just a minute, will you.  
I'll join you as soon as her skull shatters.



Foiled

We know each other  
Like we know our own bodies.  
We are familiar with the parts That give us  
pleasure.  
With places too painful to touch.  
Or so I told myself.  
And suddenly one day I realised How  
misguided I had been.  
How I had fooled myself all along.  
Like a cancerous growth spreading under the  
skin. The seeds of sorrow had been taking  
root In my mind.  
Completely hidden, entirely alien.

End

We talked far too much. Frankly speaking,  
much more than was wise.  
It was alright to go on about the present,  
I suppose. Or even the past.  
But to keep coming back to the future?

Not really good in the long run.  
And we just kept talking. Kept nothing to  
ourselves. Nothing secret, nothing private.  
We forgot that one should stop at some point.  
Now the inevitable end of our dialogue can  
only be Silence.

### Gaze

He could look at her only as long as her eyes  
Sparkled with life, like the blue of sapphires.  
Then her eyes turned into burnt-out coal.  
Her storm-tasting lips dulled to a dirty foam-  
white. Her body grew numb as a block of  
wood.  
Gradually his gaze crept over her, fungus-  
like.

And so, he plucked out his own eyes.

### Roots

Excuse me, but this is not a sapling that you can just uproot and plant elsewhere! As if the mere promise of rain is enough! These roots go very deep indeed, all the way to the core of the earth itself. Shake them this roughly and they hurt, you know. They break, too, deep inside. Not that you'd see them, of course. But you could see how the leaves are dying. If you looked very carefully.

### By The Window

As I stand by the window and plait my hair loosened the night before, my eyes suddenly fill with tears. Nilgiri trees stand before me. They are calm, and won't even flutter a tiny leaf in sympathy. The tears keep welling. Regret, because I threw my stale life to the crows, or sorrow, because I cannot start anew? The trees don't move, the tears won't stop. Are you standing behind me? I can't see you in the mirror.

Dawn

Dawn is here.

Move over a little Loosen your embrace a  
little My eyelashes grow heavy Let me open  
my eyes a little. Dawn is here, my love.

Let me learn to function

Apart from you a little.

Chaos

The house starts to suffocate me. I can bear it  
no longer, and am driven outside. I sit on the  
swing in the garden, lean on the links and  
look up. Such an enormous sky. Yet all  
around the people, the houses are closing in  
on me.

Perhaps it is true that I never found anyone  
who could give me courage as expansive as  
the sky. Everything is topsy turvy, everyone  
so petty and small-minded.

Chaos, noise, dust continues to fly around me. The sky is huge and so... real. Suddenly I cannot bear to remain outside either.

I go back into the house, only to find that you have been there all along...

#### 48. Sacrificial Goat

Listen, that hair-raising noise That  
ceaselessly battered drum Someone smears  
me with kunku Perhaps blesses me with the  
sacred flame It is hard to see in this lurid  
light. Someone clutches my arms My rubbery  
legs stumble forward The crowd throngs  
behind me Screaming joyfully for blood I  
know where they are taking me...

And you?

Are you among them?

Palas Tree

We have walked endlessly.

Clouds of fine, black dust billowing around  
us

in that ugly, barren field, with only  
the tombstones in the nearby cemetery  
for company.

We have walked endlessly  
through dead brown roads and squat, bald  
hillocks

with brick-firing kilns growing out of them  
like

fat warts.

We have walked endlessly and still  
we walk.

I can walk no more. I need somewhere cool  
and wet and green,

I can walk no more in this heat

I need at least the promise of rest.

I can't even hear the thud-thud  
of my own footsteps anymore.

I can walk no more

My legs are heavy as houses, my eyes  
scorched by the sun.

Yet when we turn around and walk back  
silently along that very road, there is a Palas  
tree, red blossoms  
                  dancing  
          in a miniature  
                  explosion on  
                                  every luscious,  
  
                                  velvet-green stem.

Long-Skirted Little Girls\* (unpublished)

Long-skirted little girls  
Giggle in the moonlight.  
Whisper together in dark corners on summer  
afternoons, uncover their bodies' secrets,  
draw crooked, make-believe houses in the

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\* The Marathi title of the poem is 'Parkarya Pori'. While 'Parkar' is a Marathi word that I have translated as 'long skirt', 'Parkarya Pori' is also a phrase connoting pre-pubescent or young girls; i.e., girls who have not yet graduated to wearing a sari.

smooth mud of the courtyard.

Hop along on one leg, playing langdi  
and thikrya for hours on end,  
teach themselves to weave garlands  
of red and white roses in each others plaits...  
At night they lie in bed, making  
shadow puppets on the wall, listening  
intently to the soft chink of bangles  
coming from behind closed doors...  
Long-skirted little girls grow like weeds  
without anyone realising,

spend an entire night clutching  
a hot ash poultice to their stomachs  
and in the early hours of the morning,  
suddenly,  
cross the threshold.

Untitled Poem (unpublished)

You walk towards me  
on soft, silent feet  
under a prematurely dark  
sky. You say nothing,  
just hesitate, shifting your weight  
from foot to foot.



Your silence is eloquent.  
It tells me of your loneliness, vast and ancient  
as the sky itself.  
I recognise that loneliness well.  
I encounter it everyday in myself,  
a stagnant, dirty pool, sloshing around my  
innards, rising in my throat,  
oozing through every pore in my body.  
The only thing to do  
is to make it a part of you,  
and go on living.

Darkness (unpublished)

The weight of ninety years bore down on her,  
and she retreated deep into herself.  
Memories— bright, intricately painted— clung  
tenaciously to the inner walls of her mind. She  
let them stay. Her parents' house, with its dim  
lamps flickering here and there, trying  
valiantly to keep the thick, velvety darkness at  
bay.

The cheeky Parijat tree that spread its flowers all over the front porch and waited for her to come home. Bright red kunku in an old brass container that gleamed and winked at her. The shy touch-me-nots that her father had picked especially for her...

Someone far away calls out. Her eyelids flutter, a thin line showing the white of her eye, gone in a flash. She retreats once more, the thick, velvety darkness now spreading behind her lids. She hears the dull roar of monsoon rain, sees shadow monsters on the wall made by flickering lamps. She retreats further and further, till the darkness envelopes everything. "Baba, I feel scared in the dark", she cries. "Don't be scared, darling. Here, hold my hand. We'll walk slowly and the moon will show us the way..." She clutches her father's hand and they start on their journey. Soon, she doesn't even notice the darkness anymore.

Song (unpublished)

that song,  
the one i didn't want to sing,  
appeared out of nowhere  
and caressed my skin like  
a delicate mist,  
and drenched me like moonbeams on a  
purnima night  
and splashed underfoot like monsoon  
puddles.  
i stepped carefully, I crept softly  
but the song,  
the one i didn't want to sing,  
rose up like a tide  
and sloshed around in my belly,  
and vibrated in my throat  
and resonated in my head, then the song  
became moonlight  
and the song became rain  
and the song sang me  
and i walked  
and i walked without fear.

Homecoming (unpublished)

There was a knock at her door. "Who could it be at this ungodly hour?", she muttered grumpily and shuffled to the door. She jerked it open with a little more force than was necessary and the angry words died on her lips. It was her past, staring her in the face. Barely recognisable, bedraggled, scratched, bloodied, looking the worse for wear, but it was her past, alright. Standing on her very doorstep. They stared at each other for a few minutes, frozen with the shock of recognition. Thoughts raced incoherently through her head— *her decorated so much home with love her sleeping this life children behind now...* The minutes stretched like warm toffee, and still they stood unmoving. The past tired. It drooped and began to tremble a little. And suddenly, she stepped across the threshold and pulled her past to herself. The past slumped with fatigue and relief on her shoulder. Holding it tenderly, as one would a hurt child who had cried itself into exhaustion, she led it into her home.

For My Mother (published in *Pratishthan*,  
July- October Issue, 1994).

It is only when I happen to glance outside  
that I realise that the sun has set and night  
has arrived.

Moonlight drenches all the trees and houses  
around, fills the very air itself, like the  
memory of you fills my mind. The subtle  
fragrance of night-blossoms, our favourite,  
lingers around me. But it's not just the beauty  
of the night that makes my throat ache with  
tears.

Your book of poems sits here on the table. A  
strange exhaustion has come over me while  
wandering through your words, while  
travelling through your lilies. As if I had  
undertaken your life's journey, encountering  
gigantic trees with monstrous, grasping roots.

As if I had gotten lost.

As if I had jumped at the distant screams of a  
startled bird, as if I had even lost track of the  
old footsteps in another life. Lost all control  
and kept walking. You just kept walking. Like  
someone who didn't know where she was  
going. Along the way, you picked up all the

flowers that had been thrown away so carelessly by the trees. You kept moving at first towards the distant glitter of water. But that was too far, so you turned back, and with small glimpses of sky for company, walked on. I have wrung your experiences out of every word on the page and they sit humming and heavy in my bones, like the air just before a lightning storm.

For an instant I'm struck by the thought that I don't know whose words these are. Who is this woman? I try to grasp at the mind in these poems, try to convince myself that it is familiar, known. But this is a stranger writing strange thoughts. Where are you? I don't recognise my mother's voice in these words. The face that appears on these pages is not the you I know. Yet, I want to learn you. The woman hidden inside you, the one I didn't know. I want to have known you.

The night grows older and darker. It makes the trees look even denser, secret trees hiding their scents deep within— not like the summer, with its riotous gulmohar and amaltaas flowering everywhere. I search for a face in the chiaroscuro landscape. It's very young, that face, and somewhat darker than wheat. It has slightly bushy eyebrows, a

narrow forehead, and two long plaits framing it on either side. It's attached to a body in a long skirt and blouse, a body just starting to blossom. Perhaps it was here that it all started? At this awkward age, where one's equilibrium is so easily lost? Didn't you have anyone, like I had you? Did no one stand by you— my grandmother, your grandmother and her mother? No one? And what about at school? Was there no one there too, kind, patient, who took the time to explain? Didn't they tell you about the joys and sorrows of becoming a woman, didn't they even tell you that you had to be a woman to be a mother? Or that you could be a mother only when you were a woman? Did no one mention that there was no escaping womanhood?

When did you lose your self-confidence? Not that one has a great deal of it when young, anyway. Besides, the old house in that little village you grew up in was dark. It had dark corners from the soot of old lamps and a sunless kitchen. There was a stove, squatting silently in a corner like a fat, ugly toad.

Above it on the roof, the tiles had been hollowed out by the daily roosting of an owl. And if you were quick enough, and woke up early enough, first thing in the morning, you

would see the wavy lines that a snake had left behind as it slithered through the courtyard. Sometimes you could catch a fleeting glimpse of the snake's head reflected in the sunlight glittering in the well. And there were pouring rains and fearsome floods. A pregnant woman visiting her parents got swept away once, and finally floated to the surface, bobbing along like some monstrous, bloated balloon... All

these stories, these memories are just elaborate excuses for sidestepping, for evading what I am scared to ask, perhaps.

Were you very lonely?

And the relentless demand that you be a girl. Act like a girl, laugh like a girl, talk and walk like a girl. When were you deemed too grown up to play like the boys your age, running wildly on sturdy legs, rolling a hoop down the street? When you insisted on riding a bicycle, other girls laughed at you, malicious, dainty, coyly raising their pallus to their mouths. I can see you, that girl in a sari. Three days a month, you would be made to sit in a corner, removed from the rest of the house so your menstrual blood wouldn't pollute anything. You would give in only after you had argued fiercely. There were other women in the household— one who



didn't want to be a woman, so she said  
everyday, another who was the undisputed  
boss, but only in the kitchen, and your  
mother, who took to knitting with a ferocious  
intensity. All those women, leading  
miniature, dotted lives, like a rangoli  
drawing... How did you break away? Your  
words shimmer on the page, revealing your  
pain to me like moonlight exposing the heart,  
the bones, the very soul of a tree it  
illuminates. Today suddenly it hits home, I  
understand what it is to be a woman, in ways  
I never did before. Perhaps the warmth of the  
little cocoon I built around me protected me  
from the cold winds of hurt and anger. I  
know now that rage and sorrow welled in  
your eyes many a time, making the road  
ahead look blurred and distant. Maybe that's  
the reason you momentarily lost your way?  
Living life with absolute clarity and trust in  
oneself takes a certain inner equilibrium. You  
tried to pass on the same sense to me. And  
yet the ground beneath your feet has started  
slipping away. To live our lives as our own,  
we need a bit of oxygen we can call our own.  
You knew that your real life was waiting for  
you somewhere, so as soon as you were able  
to claim that breath and store it in your  
lungs, you went after it. Perhaps... I'm

starting to get to know you, my dreamer.

Miniature glass mangos in every possible colour strung up above doorways. Each mango carrying an exquisitely decorated house-shaped bead within it. Even more delicate crochet work in every room. You left all this behind, not knowing where to go and what to do. Were you flung into a suffocatingly turbulent world without much warning? Some say you turned your back on your womanhood itself. Did you feel alien, distant from all the other women around you?

And men? It doesn't surprise me that most couldn't manage to overlook their male egos and selfishness and accept you, as you were. A woman who breaks away from traditional boundaries of womanness, lives life on her own terms, fearless, can still burn narrow minds like the sun at the height of summer.

You struggled alone, with undimmed intensity, for so long. All the scars and wounds you hid from me stare back at me now from these pages. And all this because you were born in a female body. I can't seem to swallow the bitter lump that's lodged itself in my throat.

But you also got through because you found  
the strength of being a woman. I think I  
finally understand you, but I had to get into  
your skin first, wrap your words around me  
like muscle and blood, hear your heart  
beating in my chest. You've given me so much  
of yourself— your stubbornness, your desire to  
win against all odds— more than I ever knew.  
The coldness and precision of a surgeon's  
scalpel and the will of an epic hero. The  
capacity to give with such generosity of spirit  
and the room for all the world's sorrows. All  
these contradictions that made you the  
woman you were. You didn't want the hollow  
pieties of Motherhood, you wanted to be a  
flesh and blood woman, warm, filled with life  
and laughter and chaotic desires and  
contradictions. And in living your life as you  
did, you shaped the woman I am today.

I can see your face much more clearly now. A  
cool breeze caresses my face as soft as your  
hands. It's taken me many years, but I'm no  
longer groping in the dark. I can now sense  
how you permeate your words like the  
fragrance of familiar flowers permeates the  
night air. Our relationship was a prickly,  
tightly closed thing within me, an immature  
bud. It's starting to unfurl now, and soon I

will pick, with the gentlest of hands, all our  
rich, red, velvety moments together. I will  
caress each moment and feel its softness on  
my cheek, as soft as your hands.