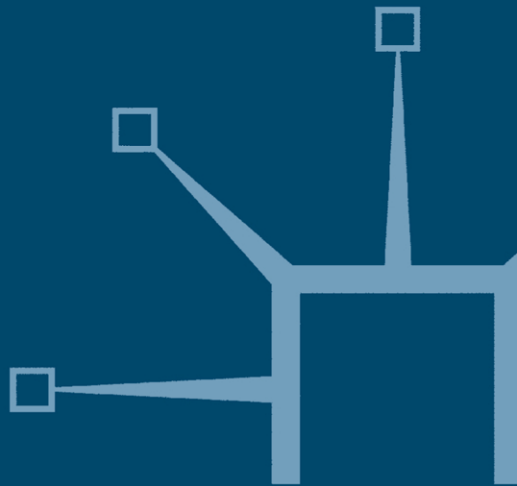


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Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing

Elizabeth Jackson



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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2010 978-0-230-23627-1

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First published 2010 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

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Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-31442-3 ISBN 978-0-230-27509-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1057/9780230275096

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10

This book is dedicated with love to my daughters, Mary Catherine Fitzgerald and Rebecca Bland Fitzgerald, and to my son, Thomas Randolph Fitzgerald.

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Acknowledgements

This book is based on my doctoral thesis, so a number of people helped in its development. Thanks are due to my students and colleagues at Goldsmiths, all of whom helped to inspire me with fresh ideas and insights along the way. I would especially like to single out those who read and commented constructively on draft chapters: Professor Chris Baldick, Dr Carole Sweeney and Dr Derval Tubridy, as well as my PhD examiners Dr Mary Condé and Dr Kate Teltscher.

Friends and family offered much-needed encouragement and support over the years that this project was in progress, particularly my husband, Greg Fitzgerald, who patiently read every single draft of every single chapter with (apparently) genuine interest. Kudos to his talented father Jerry Fitzgerald who designed the book cover image, and thanks to all of his family who enthusiastically supported this project from beginning to end. As the publication of this book coincides with the 100th birthday of my grandmother Anne Moore (whose memory is still better than mine), I cannot resist this opportunity to honour her and the other people who have nurtured me throughout my life, including my mother Mary Jackson, my magnificent sisters Anne Hafer and Catherine Moynihan, and my beloved father the late John Randolph Bryan Jackson whom I still miss every day. My children came of age with this project, having been teenagers when it began. Without their unflagging enthusiasm, it would never have been started, continued or completed.

I am grateful to all at Palgrave Macmillan who were involved in the editing and production of this book, including Paula Kennedy, Steven Hall, Ben Doyle, Manavalan BhuvanaRaj and Samantha Thompson, all of whom were unfailingly helpful and courteous throughout the process. Special thanks to the anonymous external reviewer who gave careful consideration to my work and provided valuable constructive suggestions for improvement.

Above all, I would like to thank my PhD supervisor, Professor Bart Moore-Gilbert, for his magnificent level of help and guidance throughout the development of this project. Caring as much about this work as I did myself, his criticism was unfailingly thoughtful, incisive and challenging, and I am privileged to have him as a mentor and a friend.

Abbreviations

<i>BV</i>	<i>The Binding Vine</i> (Deshpande 1992)
<i>CLD</i>	<i>Clear Light of Day</i> (Desai 1980)
<i>CP</i>	<i>Cry, the Peacock</i> (Desai 1963)
<i>DHNT</i>	<i>The Dark Holds No Terrors</i> (Deshpande 1980)
<i>DS</i>	<i>The Day in Shadow</i> (Sahgal 1971)
<i>FF</i>	<i>Fasting, Feasting</i> (Desai 1999)
<i>FOM</i>	<i>Fire on the Mountain</i> (Desai 1977)
<i>GH</i>	<i>The Golden Honeycomb</i> (Markandaya 1977)
<i>HR</i>	<i>A Handful of Rice</i> (Markandaya 1966)
<i>LS</i>	<i>That Long Silence</i> (Deshpande 1988)
<i>MI</i>	<i>Mistaken Identity</i> (Sahgal 1988)
<i>NS</i>	<i>Nectar in a Sieve</i> (Markandaya 1954)
<i>RLU</i>	<i>Rich Like Us</i> (Sahgal 1985)
<i>RS</i>	<i>Roots and Shadows</i> (Deshpande 1983)
<i>SC</i>	<i>Storm in Chandigarh</i> (Sahgal 1969)
<i>SR</i>	<i>Small Remedies</i> (Deshpande 2000)
<i>TTM</i>	<i>This Time of Morning</i> (Sahgal 1965)
<i>TV</i>	<i>Two Virgins</i> (Markandaya 1973)
<i>WSWG</i>	<i>Where Shall We Go This Summer?</i> (Desai 1975)

Introduction

This book examines the treatment of feminist issues in the novels of Kamala Markandaya (1927–2004), Nayantara Sahgal (b. 1927), Anita Desai (b. 1937) and Shashi Deshpande (b. 1938) in order to identify how Indian feminism differs from other feminisms which reflect different cultural concerns. There are different types of feminisms (liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, French feminism, etc.), and the very meaning of the term ‘feminism’ is continually being contested. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as ‘advocacy of the rights of women based on the theory of equality of the sexes’. Some feminists, however, emphasise *difference* rather than *equality*, and some wish to challenge masculine values themselves rather than grant women equal rights within a male-oriented culture. My own understanding of feminism is based not so much on what it *is* as on what it *does*: it seeks to analyse and redress the power imbalance between the sexes. It takes on different forms in different contexts, based as it is on various critical analyses of male privilege and women’s subordination within different societies. Using this broad, functional understanding of feminism, my purpose here is to identify the particular feminist concerns of Indian women novelists writing in English and to examine the ways in which they are handled in their fiction.

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande are the best-known and most prolific Indian novelists writing in English who have been self-consciously engaged with women’s issues. Moreover, their work – collectively and individually – spans several decades, enabling a study of its development over time. I have chosen four novels by Markandaya and five each by Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande which best express their feminist concerns. These are *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *Two Virgins* (1973) and *The Golden*

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Honeycomb (1977) by Kamala Markandaya; *This Time of Morning* (1965), *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), *The Day in Shadow* (1971), *Rich Like Us* (1985) and *Mistaken Identity* (1988) by Nayantara Sahgal; *Cry, the Peacock* (1963), *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975), *Fire on the Mountain* (1977), *Clear Light of Day* (1980) and *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) by Anita Desai and *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980), *Roots and Shadows* (1983), *That Long Silence* (1988), *The Binding Vine* (1993) and *Small Remedies* (2000) by Shashi Deshpande.

The feminist concerns expressed in these novels can be broadly classified into four thematic areas, each of which corresponds to a chapter in this book: women, cultural identity and social class; marriage and sexuality; motherhood and other work; women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy. The final chapter analyses the formal aspects of their writing in order to examine how these thematic concerns are expressed and to investigate possible connections between their feminist consciousness and writing techniques.

At this point it would perhaps be helpful to clarify the epistemological status of the novels, which function on a number of levels in my argument. While they are mainly seen as fictional expression, they also point to social and historical realities – for example, in their depiction of sati during the twentieth century (*RLU* 1985), curtailment of the education of daughters (*FF* 1999), child marriages (*FOM* 1977) and the emphasis on status and image in contemporary Indian bourgeois society (*CLD* 1980). At times the novels can also function on a metaphorical level – as exemplified by my discussion of *Two Virgins* (1973) in which I suggest that the character Saroja can be seen in some ways as emblematic of Indian feminism during the 1970s. The issue of literary realism arises when the fictionality of the texts and their function as social critique are related, and in this context I address realism as an artistic and critical issue in the final chapter.

In order to establish a contextual framework, I begin this introduction by providing a discussion of Indian feminism, including a brief history of the women's movement in India. I then go on to review the work of other literary critics who have written on feminism in the Indian novel in English, in order to show how my study differs from previous ones.

Indian feminism

The concept of feminism has been controversial in India and other developing nations for a number of reasons. On the one hand, traditionalists argue that it alienates women from their culture, religion and

family responsibilities; while some on the left see it as a diversion from the more important class struggle or the struggle against Western cultural and economic imperialism. Underlying both views is the assumption that feminism is an essentially Western ideology – an assumption that has been unwittingly supported by what Chandra Mohanty (1988) has described as the ethnocentric focus of Western feminist discourse. While Mohanty has also been critical of the tendency of some Western feminists to lump together ‘third world women’, Ania Loomba has drawn attention to the reverse tendency in India to oversimplify ‘Western feminism’. This oversimplification flattens out the differences between varieties of Western feminism and ignores, for example, ‘the critiques of black or other women of colour, or indeed the work of a great many women of all colours that has articulated the relationships between gender, sexuality, class, nation, race and culture’ (1993, p. 274). However, while Loomba is careful to say that she does not wish to erase nuances within Western feminism that she thinks are glossed over in India, she nonetheless agrees with Mohanty that ethnocentrism still pervades ‘a lot’ of Western feminist discourse. One consequence is that feminists in India are invariably chastised for being influenced by Western modes of thought. According to Loomba:

It is easy to imagine why entrenched patriarchal traditions would seek to marginalize women’s movements by calling them un-Indian. In fact, such a rhetoric seeks to disguise the indigenous roots of women’s protest in India. This is not to argue that Western women’s thinking or organisations have not influenced Indian feminists. Cross-fertilisations have been crucial to feminist struggles everywhere. But given the history of colonial rule, the burden of authenticity has been especially heavy for women activists in India.

(pp. 271–2)

This is evident, for example, in Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), in which any espousal of women’s rights is perceived as an aping of Western ways.

The historical reasons for this resistance to feminism in India extend well back into the nineteenth century, when the ‘woman question’ was a central issue in debates over reform in India. Enamoured of their ‘civilising mission’, influential British writers like James Mill condemned Indian religions, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women. Indeed, a significant tool used by colonial ideology to ‘prove’ the inferiority of the subject population was the

question of the status of women, as reported by Christian missionaries who argued that the moral inferiority of Indians was demonstrated by their barbaric treatment of women. Thus one of the main justifications for British rule in India was the argument that Indian women required the protection and intervention of the colonial state.

There was no uniform movement for reform of gender practices, but different campaigns on specific issues were taken up at different times in different parts of India. The main issues included sati (widow burning), female infanticide, child marriage, purdah (female seclusion) and restrictions on female education. Although sati was outlawed in 1829, it has never been fully eradicated, as suggested in Nayantara Sahgal's *Rich Like Us* (1985). Sahgal also provides fictional narratives of female infanticide, child marriage and purdah in *Mistaken Identity* (1988). While these practices persisted into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there had been indigenous reform groups in all parts of India from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, including the Brahmo Samaj, the Arya Samaj and the National Social Conference, all of which aimed to 'modernize' Indian society, including gender relations. Nivedita Menon explains that

[b]y and large, these movements as well as the resistance to such reform were decisively shaped by the colonial encounter. Prominent sections of the bourgeoisie were intent on reforming what colonial discourse presented as primitive and barbaric aspects of Hindu society, while resistance came from revivalist nationalists who challenged the colonial interventions into 'Indian tradition'.

(1999, p. 4)

Essentially the nationalists were divided between those who wished to 'reform' gender ideology in India along Western lines and those who sought to 'revive' a traditional culture, seeing women as emblems of indigenous religion and family traditions.

Partha Chatterjee (1989, p. 237), in an influential essay, has explained the way in which the Indian nationalist movement resolved the 'woman question' in accordance with its preferred goals: 'In the main, this resolution was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual.' In the material sphere, Britain had subjugated India (and other colonies) through its superior techniques in science, technology, economic organisation, statecraft and so on: 'But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture' (p. 239).

Hence the dominant nationalists developed and popularised an ideology whereby women were responsible for protecting and preserving the inner core of the national culture – its spiritual essence – ‘at home’, while men had to learn the superior techniques of organising material life ‘in the world’ in order to overcome imperial domination. So according to this ideology, the ‘new woman’ must learn literacy, numeracy and ‘modern’ housekeeping, but she must also be responsible for observing religious rituals, maintaining cultural tradition and ensuring ‘the cohesiveness of family life’ (p. 248). The ‘spirituality’ of her character had to be expressed in her behaviour, dress, demeanour and so on. We see this, for example, in Sahgal’s *Rich Like Us* (1985), in which Sonali feels constricted by gender-based codes of dress and decorum which are imposed on her but not on her male contemporaries (*RLU*, p. 112). Chatterjee points out that these restrictions are class-specific, and concludes, ‘The new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct ... has generalised itself among the middle class ... but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes’ (1989, p. 251). Thus, for example, Anita Desai’s middle-class protagonists are shown to suffer the emptiness and ennui of family-bound lives, unlike their poorer counterparts whose sufferings do not include domestic confinement.

It was in the political struggles against imperialism that large numbers of Indian women of all social classes began actively to participate in life outside the home, and in doing so they had the support of many nationalist political leaders who saw the advantages of mobilising women. Gandhi, in particular, was very conscious of the power that women could have in a non-violent struggle, arguing that they are by nature non-violent and have great ability to endure suffering. The opponents of women’s political participation voiced a number of objections. They warned of traditional gender roles breaking down, and some based their disapproval on the sanctity of religious beliefs and practices. Despite the objections, the activity of women in the nationalist movement radicalised some of them into articulating their own grievances, drawing parallels between imperialist oppression and patriarchal oppression. Sahgal, too, consistently makes connections between patriarchy and other power structures in all of her novels.

It is important to note, however, that there were distinct regional differences in the number of women who joined the nationalist movement as well as the extent to which they synthesised women’s interests with nationalist issues. For example, the demonstrations of Bengali women were smaller and their activities more radical than those of

Bombay women. Although a number of Bengali women espoused a feminist ideology, they consistently put it aside in favour of the broader struggle. Some of them picketed and joined processions, and a few were recruited by revolutionary groups, occasionally becoming directly involved in revolutionary acts. In 1932 Bina Das attempted to shoot the governor of Bengal and Pritilata Weddedar led 15 men in a raid on the Chittagong Club during which the revolutionaries shot and injured several people. By 1933 most of the Bengali revolutionaries were in prison, and in this tumultuous environment it was difficult to generate interest in women's rights.

In Bombay, by contrast, the substantial Parsee and Christian communities tended to be more supportive of female rights and female education, and the large Gujarati population found the message of Gandhi, their fellow Gujarati, especially appealing. Processions of one to two thousand women, accompanied by their children, were not unusual in Bombay at this time. Most of their leaders also belonged to women's organisations, and they articulated a clearly 'feminist nationalism', their goals being *swaraj* (self-rule) and women's emancipation.

In North India issues of women's rights received little attention even though many of their leaders were committed to feminist issues. It was here that Kamala Nehru wrote and spoke about the 'degraded plight of women', Vijayalakshmi Pandit worked for many years with women's organisations and female students were inspired by an ideal of male-female equality. However these feminist ideas only permeated elite circles, and when these leaders began to organise women's processions, they became acutely aware of the strength of conservative attitudes (Forbes 1996).

Following Independence in 1947, the Constitution conferred equal rights and status on all citizens, forbidding any discrimination on grounds of caste, religion or gender. However, the Hindu Code of 1955 introduced inconsistencies in the area of personal law (regarding marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.) by granting specific rights to Hindu women which were denied to Muslim women on the grounds that Muslim personal laws were considered part of the religion of Islam. For instance, polygamy has been banned for everyone except Muslims, although a majority of Muslim women favour its removal (Gandhi & Shah 1992, Jha & Pujari 1996). A more fundamental problem is that the law has had limited success in changing deeply rooted social attitudes and practices in India. In spite of constitutional directives regarding equal pay for equal work, and free and compulsory education for all children under the age of 14, most Indian women earn much less than

men for the same work, and a much higher proportion of boys than girls attend school. As seen in Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), even middle-class Indian families sometimes terminate their daughters' education at an early age when it suits them to do so. This novel also draws attention to the dowry problem, which the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has failed to remedy. Dowry, far from being eradicated, has grown to greater proportions, so that many brides and their families are under pressure to provide expensive 'gifts'. Reports of dowry deaths are horrifyingly frequent – averaging over 6000 per year, according to the National Crime Records Bureau of India.¹ Child marriages, too, are still not unusual in rural India (despite the law), as we see in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977).

Despite sporadic criticism, the Indian government's commitment to gender equality was not seriously challenged until the 1970s, when the so-called second wave of feminism in the West was receiving widespread attention in the Indian media. 'Toward Equality', a government-commissioned report on the status of women in India, which came out in 1974, charged that women's status had not improved but had, in fact, declined since Independence. According to Geraldine Forbes, 'the heat and energy generated by *Toward Equality* and the emerging research data provided the intellectual foundation for a new women's movement' (1996, p. 243). Like most social movements, this feminist movement in India is neither homogeneous nor monolithic in nature but ideologically and strategically diverse, so that it is perhaps more accurate to refer to 'Indian feminisms', whose fictional expression is explored in this book.

The women's movement that began in India during the 1970s grew out of a number of radical movements of the time. For example, women emerged as the principal activists in the Chipko movement, which challenged commercial forestry and forest-based industrialisation on environmental grounds. Many of the Indian women who participated in peasants' and workers' movements were, like their predecessors in the nationalist movement, radicalised into questioning their gender-based subordination. In this respect, they also resembled American activists who supported civil rights movements and anti-Vietnam War demonstrations before going on to protest against gendered oppression as well. Indeed, feminist movements everywhere have drawn inspiration from – and in some respects developed from – movements against other forms of social injustice.

In India, the declaration of a state of emergency in 1975 by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi interrupted the development of the fledgling women's movement. Many political organisations were driven

underground, thousands of activists were arrested and most who remained at liberty focused on civil rights, such as freedom of speech and the rights of political prisoners. The lifting of the emergency in 1977 led to a renewal of some of the earlier movements, and women's groups were formed all over India but mainly in the major cities. According to Radha Kumar:

The distinguishing features of the new women's groups were that they declared themselves to be 'feminist' despite the fact that most of their members were drawn from the Left, which saw feminism as bourgeois and divisive; that they insisted on being autonomous even though most of their members were affiliated to other political groups ... and that they rapidly built networks among one another, ideological differences notwithstanding.

(1995, p. 64)

Irina Sen has drawn a distinction between the 'autonomous women's movement' and 'the women's movement acting in conjunction with mass organizations or political parties' in India (2004, p. 201). She notes that the autonomous women's movement is comprised primarily of the urban intelligentsia, who have 'remained cut off from the mass of Indian women' and that consequently these urban groups sometimes find 'greater kinship in "feminist" groups in the West rather than with the mass of women in India'. She goes on to concede, however, that

[t]he women's platforms emerging in the context of mass movements do not necessarily provide women with significant representation in the leadership of the overall movements. In this respect, the situation does not appear to have changed much from the pre-Independence mobilization of women for a national cause, although it is an achievement of no mean proportion that women are forcing leaders of various movements to take cognizance of special issues relating to gender.

(p. 201)

Markandaya, Sahgal, Desai and Deshpande are among the urban intelligentsia, and they write fiction rather than feminist analysis as such. Their perspectives, however, can offer valuable insights into the dynamics and complexities of human relationships, and their feminist concerns can be placed within historical and theoretical frameworks. Their representations of marriage and sexuality, for instance, implicitly

critique ideologies of women as property, which can lead to (male) abuses of power within the family and in the wider society. Indeed, the problem of violence against women was the initial focus of feminist campaigns in India during the 1970s. Campaigns against rape, domestic violence and dowry deaths escalated during the 1980s, attracting considerable support from men as well as women. Among the incidents that played catalytic roles were the Mathura rape case of 1978 and the Maya Tyagi rape case of 1980. Both were cases of custodial rape by the police which led to nationwide protests and the formation of the Forum Against Rape, which eventually grew into the Forum Against Oppression of Women. Rape, a major theme in Deshpande's novels, is also featured in Desai's *Fire on the Mountain* (1977). Markandaya's *Two Virgins* (1973) draws attention to the sense of sexual threat that pervades the lives of young girls in India, and this widespread problem of sexual harassment (or 'eve-teasing', as it is called in India) is identified by a number of academics (Chacko 2001; Nabar 1995; Puri 1999) who argue that it impedes women's freedom, mobility and sense of security. Domestic violence is fictionalised by all four novelists: Markandaya in *A Handful of Rice* (1966), Sahgal in *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969), Deshpande in *That Long Silence* (1988) and Desai in *Fasting, Feasting* (1999). The government responded to urban campaigns against gendered violence with legislation, but according to Geraldine Forbes:

Hard questions about the deeper causes of this violence and the ability of the law to remedy this situation were rarely asked. The result has been a decade of extraordinary legislation and subsequent despair because these laws have meant so little in practice. Once passed this legislation depended for enforcement on men whose view of women and their place in the world had not changed.

(1996, p. 249)

The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed a series of countermovements against feminist ideas by politically conservative sections of Indian society in a context of growing communalism and fundamentalism. In 1985 a test case was taken up by the Supreme Court relating to Shah Bano, a Muslim divorcée, who sought maintenance from her husband under a secular interpretation of the law of marriage and divorce. Her case received widespread support from the press, but the government bowed to the weight of counteropinion originating in orthodox Muslim circles against this 'interference' in their 'community rights'. It enacted the Muslim Personal Law Bill under which Muslims in India would

continue to be governed by Sharia law, thus reasserting Muslim women's position of legal inequality. Another case in which the problems and needs of women were soon submerged by the discourse of 'community' was that of an incident of sati in Rajasthan in 1987. When feminists condemned this practice, there was a profusion of attacks on the women's movement itself, with some Hindu fundamentalists claiming sati as a community 'right'. Both of these cases point to the role of religion and cultural tradition in justifying gender oppression, as well as the more general link between gender ideology and cultural identity which is examined in the first chapter of this book.

While gendered violence has been repeatedly identified as a major problem in India, other feminist campaigns have been even more contentious – particularly the critique of the family and the challenge to the image of the ideal Indian woman as accommodating, self-sacrificing and devoted to serving her family. In the chapter on motherhood and other work (Chapter 3) I discuss the ways in which the novels participate in this critique of the Indian family and traditional ideals of female self-sacrifice, particularly within the maternal role.

The emphasis on family and community in Indian society has important implications for feminism in India. The first is that those who oppose feminism tend to do so on the grounds that it is an 'individualistic' ideology which is anathema to the more communal orientation of Indian culture:

In India, most of us find it difficult to tune in to the extreme individualism that comes to us through feminism. For instance, most women here are unwilling to assert their rights in a way that estranges them not just from their family, but also from their larger kinship group and community.

(Kishwar 2004, pp. 30–1)

While it is true, as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has pointed out, that in the West 'the women's movement has primarily focused on enlarging opportunities for individual women' (1991, p. 32), it has also begun more recently to offer 'a sustained critique of that individualism from which it derives' (p. 230). My book suggests some of the ways in which Indian feminists contribute to this critique of the excesses of individualism – for example, in Anita Desai's novels, which implicitly criticise both patriarchy *and* rampant individualism.

The second implication of the family-centredness of Indian culture is that it affects the way in which conflicts are handled – including the

conflicts that inevitably accompany the sort of social change advocated by feminists. Anuradha Roy (1999) and Suma Chitnis (1988) have both emphasised that Indian culture places greater value on accommodation and compromise, as opposed to confrontation and categorical choice. The chapter on women's role in maintaining and/or resisting patriarchy (Chapter 4) tests this assertion by examining fictional representations of the ways in which Indian women respond to the particular patriarchal ideologies and practices with which they are confronted, as well as the ways in which these have changed over time. Thus the first four chapters offer a developmental and comparative analysis of the feminist concerns of these novels, while the final chapter analyses their formal expression, all with a view towards identifying the distinctive features of Indian feminism.

Survey of critical literature on feminism in the Indian novel in English

There have been numerous essays and articles on Indian women novelists and their feminist concerns, but very few book-length studies focusing on more than one author. The major books which have taken a comparative approach to novels in English by Indian women writers include Meena Shirwadkar's *The Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel* (1979), Shantha Krishnaswamy's *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English, 1950–1980* (1984), Vijayalakshmi Seshadri's *The New Woman in Indian-English Writers since the 1970s* (1995), K. Meera Bai's *Women's Voices: The Novels of Indian Women Writers* (1996), Anuradha Roy's *Patterns of Feminist Consciousness in Indian Women Writers* (1999) and Jyoti Singh's *Indian Women Novelists: A Feminist Psychoanalytic Study* (2007). Each of these has focused on only one or two of my four chosen novelists, not all have explicitly dealt with their feminist concerns, and only Jyoti Singh's book has incorporated a study of fiction since the 1980s.

Shirwadkar (1979) and Krishnaswamy (1984) focus on images of women in India by twentieth-century male and female authors until the 1970s, tracing their development from romantic idealisation to realistic portrayal. Krishnaswamy identifies an increasingly feminist consciousness in the novels of Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai, the former in the form of a recurrent female 'quest for autonomy' (p. 163) and the latter in the form of 'radical female resistance against a patriarchally defined concept of normality' (p. 237). Seshadri (1995) endeavours to trace a 'new' literary tradition in fiction by Indian women during the 1970s and 1980s which depicts the urban middle-class Indian woman's