Lib-Gyn

BEYOND THE FEMALE/FEMINIST SUBJECT: A READING OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S WORKS

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

SHUBHRA RAY

Centre of Linguistics and English
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi – 110067
India

2004

BEYOND THE FEMALE/FEMINIST SUBJECT: A READING OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S WORKS

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

SHUBHRA RAY

Centre of Linguistics and English
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi – 110067
India
2004

Centre of Linguistics & English
School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies
जवाहरलाल नेहरू विश्वविद्यालय
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi-110067, India

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify the dissertation entitled "**BEYOND THE FEMALE/FEMINIST SUBJECT: A READING OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S WORKS**", submitted by Shubhra Ray, Centre of Linguistics & English, School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** of the University, is to the best of my knowledge an original work and may be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Prof. S.K. Sareen

(Chairperson)

Acting Chairperson
CL&E/SLL&CS

Prof. G J V Prasad

(Supervisor)

Gram : JAYENU Tel: 26704231 Fax: 91-011-26165886

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

This dissertation titled "**BEYOND THE FEMALE/FEMINIST SUBJECT: A READING OF MANJULA PADMANABHAN'S WORKS**", submitted by me, for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any other University.

(Signature of Candidate)

SHUBHRA RAY

Centre of Linguistics & English,

School of Language, Literature & Culture Studies,

Jawaharlal Nehru University,

New Delhi.

Contents

Acknowledgements i

Chapter One 1-16

Introduction: The Denial of Female/Feminist Identity and Manjula Padmanabhan

Chapter Two 17-43

Contextualizing *Hot Death, Cold Soup*

Chapter Three 44-82

Getting There: "Construction" of an A-Gendered Identity?

Conclusion 83-86

Bibliography 87-94

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr. GJV Prasad who not only helped with his incisive comments but also with innumerable books from his personal library. The discussions and debates – where disagreement rather than its obverse was the norm – that we had over the past one year have helped lend shape to my ideas. Working with you, Sir has been a great experience.

My thanks are due to the author, Manjula Padmanabhan, who not only took out time to meet me and reply my never-ending queries but also sent me manuscripts of a number of her books. Before writing this dissertation I had known her only through the written word: knowing her in person has been an equally, if not more, enriching experience.

My family – Baba, Ma and Raja – deserve a special mention for encouraging me and helping me keep up the resolve, during trying times. Thank you, Baba and Ma for all your efforts and support.

I would also like to thank my friends in J.N.U. for being both critical and supportive. Writing the dissertation has meant taking a break – rather a long one – from our walks on the ring-road and heated debates over coffee at odd hours: these have been as intellectually stimulating as the hours spent in the library. Thank you Suvadip, Somak, Siddharth, Sandipan and Debosmita. My friends back home – Nilanjan da, Sujata, Kajari, Tua and Rajat have been their usual supportive selves, in spite of not having a clue about my travails at times. Thank you.

Thanks are due to Partha da for helping me locate a copy of *This is Suki* and Madhumita di for drawing my attention to certain articles, which were immensely useful.

And finally Avirup, this dissertation would not have been possible without you. Thank you for not only setting right the computer – which seemed to have a special antipathy towards me – but also for putting up with my mood-swings during the last few days, when nothing seemed to be right.

And, more than anything else thanks for simply being there.

Chapter One

Introduction: The Denial of Female/Feminist Identity and Manjula Padmanabhan

Feminism as a movement in India has gained considerable ground and has made a place for itself in the academic, social and political milieu. It is a movement with a distinct character of its own, which encompasses and concerns itself with issues such as "work, wages, organization, environment, ecology, civil rights, sex, violence, representation, caste, class, [. . .] methods of production, health, religion, community, individual relationships, etc"(Kumar 1993: 194). It has not only gained in stature as a movement but has also [illegible] and Lalitha 1991; Chaudhuri 2004) and has been "theorized"[1] to a great extent. Gender has become one of the most prominent categories of analysis in any discourse – be it literary, legal, political, social, or even scientific – and a certain space has become available to women to emerge as subjects in their own right.

Having said this it becomes necessary to make certain qualifications. In keeping with the greater presence of caste as an important deciding factor, following the politics of 1980s-1990s in India, the feminist movement has also came to be critiqued (Rege 1994; Sivaramayya 1996: 221-243). An increasing realization has been that women who do have the space to emerge as subjects in their own right constitute only a miniscule percentage of the entire female population: this is a pointer towards the upper-caste, predominantly middle-class character of the movement which is gradually being challenged by the increasing presence of autonomous Dalit women's organizations like the National Federation of Dalit Women and All India Dalit Women's Forum and their demand for a re-visioning of the contemporary women's movement. A self-critique of the class which until very recently had been functioning as the norm, marks the changing character of critical formulations (Tharu 1999: 187-203) though much is still left desired (Rege 2004: 211-225).

The predominantly heterosexual nature of the movement has also been questioned by writers like Ruth Vanita, who has stressed the need to go beyond the boundaries of race, gender, culture, nationality and sexuality. As she has put it distinctly: "[The women's movement's] concentration on victims rather than agents and their reluctance to question gender and sexuality categories has fostered a stress on equity rather than liberation" and believes that the dropping of the term, "liberation" from their self characterization cannot be "fortuitous" (2004: 73).

As we can see, the movement faces challenges, questioning and criticism from within. But instead of hindering the movement's presence, these further affirm the ground that it has gained in not only being able to criticize but also re-invent itself according to the needs of the times. The issues raised by Dalit feminism or the questioning of its heterosexual bias can only lead to its having a more accommodative character, which takes into consideration pluralisms and heterogeneity, and celebrates difference and subversive voices rather than suppressing them.

Feminism as a politico-theoretical movement in India is, however, facing a challenge, which is highly contradictory in nature. More and more women – economically independent, self-conscious, strong, agencied subjects – are refusing to call themselves feminists, even though they may be directly or indirectly connected with the movement or may be involved in critical and conceptual formulations of it. I call this phenomenon contradictory because it is happening precisely at a moment when the movement is at its strongest. The instances of the denial of the term by women, even while espousing its ideology is related to a great extent with the unease that the term feminism evokes in the Indian context. One of the reasons for this chariness could be attributed to the movement's peculiar precariousness, in that it needs to constantly negotiate and rethink its position and strategies not only in context of the feminist movement in the West[2], but also in context of the challenges posed by forces of communalism,[3] with the two being closely linked. Given the fact that Indian feminism has come of age, a pertinent question could be why should one need to consider it in the context of Western feminism, especially, when it comes to issues of indigenous interest. Two factors make it necessary for the West to be considered

in any critical/conceptual discussion. Firstly, given India's position as an erstwhile colony, whose access to the idea of feminism, along with numerous other ideas and institutions such as democracy, nationalism, Marxism, socialism has been mediated through colonialism, the West cannot but be considered. This is not to say that these ideas have not been reformulated and adapted to indigenous conditions, but the association with the West invariably continues. And secondly, given the hegemonic position of the West – whether in the political realm or the international academic one – feminism in India needs to continually negotiate its position in context of it. These factors, especially, the former have been responsible for the unease regarding the term feminism ever since the times of the nationalist struggle,[4]which has percolated down to the post-independence era as well. The Indian woman as she was "constructed" by the nationalist reformers, by "selectively appropriating the modernist ideology" (Chatterjee 1989: 233-253) was clearly distinguished from and stood in opposition to the Western woman and the issues that concerned her.

This is obviously a very brief overview of a rather complex and pertinent issue which has received a great amount of critical and scholarly attention (Tharu and Lalitha 1991; Mazumdar 1994; Sangari and Vaid 1989; Kumar 1994). The purpose of mentioning it here is to draw attention to the "constructed" nature of culture, which is obfuscated in the rabid claims of "purity and authenticity" of the discourse of the upholders of culture.

"Self-conscious history writing," as Maitreyee Chaudhuri points out, has been one of the hallmarks of feminist theoretical/critical interventions in India, and these studies have interrogated the conflation of the "imagining of a nation" with the "sanitized image of Hindu upper-caste women" (2004: xiii). In other words, "woman – a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourse" as opposed to "women – real, material subjects of their collective histories" to quote Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003: 19) had been made the key markers of the nation and its cultural identity, in nationalist/colonialist discourse of the nineteenth century (Chatterjee 1989: 242-243), a legacy which has had a revival in the positions and stands taken by the Hindu right. Post 1980s, with the strengthening of the fundamentalist movement in India, through

the demand for a Ram mandir at Ayodhya, the maintenance of status quo regarding the position of Hindu women became one of the major issues. Feminists who had argued for an amelioration of the condition of women – be it in the form of abolition of child marriages, protest against dowry-murders, harassment of women or abolition of the practice of sati – found themselves at the receiving end of intense hostility. The protest against the feminists' contentions and positions catapulted into immense criticism over the murder of Roop Kanwar – an eighteen year old woman, who was immolated on her husband's funeral pyre at Deorala, Rajasthan in September, 1987.[5] As a sati Roop Kanwar was deified, and the act found supporters amongst the organized Hindu right. The debates which followed took the shape of a conflict between "tradition" and "modernity" with the abettors of sati posing as the upholders and champions of the Hindu tradition. The feminists were attacked for being, as Radha Kumar puts it, agents of modernity "who were attempting to impose crass market-dominated views of equality and liberty on a society which once gave the noble, the self-sacrificing and the spiritual the respect they deserve, but which is now being destroyed" (1993: 174).

Numerous studies (Kishwar 1999: 55-70; Narayan 1997: 68-77; Kumar 1993: 172-181; Sangari 1988; Vaid 1988) have interrogated this apparent conflict between tradition and modernism and have pointed out how the rise in practices of sati is associated with the attempt of erstwhile feudal groups to wrest back power, and how planned these immolations were in terms of their location, connectivity, and the possibility of their turning into major places of sati worship. The greatest undermining of the movement came from the greater mobilization of women for these purposes. The practice of sati was being glorified and what was more horrifying was that it was being glorified by women, who came out on the streets, appropriated the idiom that had been the prerogative of the feminist groups and proclaimed their right to commit sati as a manifestation of their identity as Hindu women. A paradoxical feature of the increasing growth of the power of the fundamentalist groups has been the growth of women in their ranks. This disturbing phenomenon has been there for a while, but it probably reached a dangerous point in the post-Godhra riots, where Hindu women not only instigated men to loot, rape and kill Muslims but also participated in the riots themselves.[6] Scholars researching this

phenomenon (Sarkar and Butalia 1995; Bacchetta 2004) have pointed out that the politics of Hindutva has indeed offered a certain space for self articulation and expression, and for assertion of their rights as Hindu women. But surely this cannot be seen either as another phase or extension of the feminist movement or a way to devise a positive praxis for women as subjects. It does offer space to a limited number of middle-class women, but its narrow vision of a nation, fascist tendencies and the undermining of the idea of secularism removes it far from feminism, which as a movement is firmly embedded within the fabric of democracy and secularism.

However, the rightist assertion that the feminist movement is alien to the Indian culture and therefore dispensable has seriously affected the movement, leading the feminists to theorize anew and point out the indigenous characteristics of the movement. Use of religious references from Hinduism, especially the emphasis on women as the embodiments of Shakti had been unproblematically used by the feminists in the pre-1980s,[7] but this has now become problematic. As Sucheta Mazumdar puts it:

> There is no political space in this emerging landscape for two visions of Hinduism, one, apparently spiritual and the other political. Religion is now ineluctably the property of the right-wing forces. Women have to realize for their survival they have to go beyond religion, indeed nationalism. These are after all the pillars of the dominant political order.
>
> (1994: 269)

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan shares the same view in her article "Is the Hindu Goddess a feminist?" stating clearly, "in a 'modernising' post-colonial nation, the authority of majoritarian religious discourse and practice can only be countered [. . .] by a clear-cut and visible secular alternative"(2004: 331).

Instead of completely rejecting religion as the property of right-wing forces it would be much more pragmatic to search for ways in which indigenous traditions can work towards the strengthening of secular views rather than affirming the rabid minority bashing of the right-wing forces. Because a complete separation of feminism as a

movement and indigenous traditions can only emphasize the "alienness" and "westernized" nature of the movement.

This account of the undermining of the feminist movement will be helpful in understanding the focus and thrust of the various critical/theoretical expositions which have been made of this peculiar trend with which we had begun this discussion, namely that more and more women are refusing to call themselves feminists, in spite of being directly or indirectly related with the movement.[8]

The various studies (Narayan 1997: 3-39; Chaudhuri 2004: xv-xxxiv; Bhasin et al. 2004) which are there of this issue are for the greater part a search for its cause. The cause or reason is more often than not ascertained as the charge of westernization and alienness of feminism, and the scholars then take pains to point out the distinct characteristics of "indigenous" feminism and counter the charges. This focus on causation in exclusion of everything else needs to be viewed in context of the developments mentioned above. And the insights that such an approach has generated – be it that of partial appropriation of modernity, the construction of culture to serve the dominant interests or the adaptable nature of Hindutva – have their own significance.

However, I would argue that the association of feminism with the West or the charge of being an alien concept cannot be the only reasons for the refusal of women to be labelled feminists. As a movement, feminism functions within the parameters of dominant structures, questioning, criticizing and sometimes colluding with the powers that be. Given its presence in the academy and other areas, feminism too has attained a hegemonic status and this could be one reason for their refusal to be subsumed within the movement (Kishwar 1999: 268-290). Other causes could be scepticism about an organised movement's ability to achieve purported objectives or even disillusionment with the way feminism has been functioning in India. Given India's colonial past and the contours of its present history, it surely is essential to consider an occurrence's "embedded" nature but the exploration/exposition need not become unidimensional.

Exploring the cause of an occurrence is only a way of looking at it and is certainly not the only one. Considering the particular point of its occurrence, both in terms of time and location or the implications that it might have, can be equally valid ways of critically examining it. More than the search for the cause of the refusal of women to be considered as feminists, it is the implication/ramifications such an act could have for the feminist movement that interests me. We have noted that the denial of the term feminism is a legacy of the nationalist movement but the context in which it was articulated was very different from the one in which it is being done today: this difference in context has been created by the greater presence of the women's movement in India, which has succeeded in changing perceptions about women – not only material subjects existing in real time but also the discursive category "woman"– and transform the way they are viewed.

This is not to say that misogynist ideas have taken a back-seat, which is surely not the case. But a certain space – even though not uncontested – has become available to women, to construct their subjectivities, without being subsumed within a movement. The way I see it, this has been made possible by the movement itself and therefore this particular phenomenon is to a great extent embedded within it. One way of looking at it could be that the movement has lost its importance, but another and a more empowering way could be that the movement has enabled a particular section of women to be free of debilitating notions of their subjectivity, even while not expressing their allegiance to it. Or in other words, its ideas have transcended the limits of the movement and become a part of the vocabulary of common sense. And the movement does not lose its raison d'etre on account of this, as the phenomenon being talked about, remains confined to only a miniscule percentage of the entire female population.

While not all women who refuse to call themselves feminists also have problems with their gendered identity, for some like Manjula Padmanabhan these two are closely related, and it is the particular form the assertions of her a-gendered identity take that is going to be the central problematic that I deal with in this thesis. Before we consider Manjula's views on this particular issue a point needs to be noted. Gender has always been dominant trope and an important constituent of one's identity. Any assertion by an

individual of an a-gendered identity always assumes a problematic dimension, more so if the individual happens to be a woman. This is because of a number of reasons. Firstly, given the devaluation of "woman" as a cultural construct, any denial of the gendered aspect of their identity by women – in preference for an alternative one – is automatically interpreted as an acceptance of the devaluation and an aspiration for the "superior" masculine identity. The pervasiveness of this idea had been so immense that it had almost attained the status of an axiom, affecting the way women think about themselves.

Today when someone like Manjula Padmanabhan aspires for an a-gendered identity does it mean that she is accepting the debilitating notions about the category "woman" or has space become available to her to articulate this stand without having to function within the binaries – male/female? Will the attempt to go beyond the gendered aspects of one's identity always have a negative impact on the feminist movement or is it possible to view it in another way? The position that such women take – does it signify a complete break with the movement or are they furthering it in a different way – especially given their extensive use of feminist perspectives? These are some questions that I would like to consider within the course of my thesis, especially in context of Padmanabhan's works.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a free-lance illustrator, writer and cartoonist, who has lived life – which by any standards is a highly unusual one – on her terms. Her works reveal the rebellious bent of her mind and her refusal to be contained within any particular category. A quick look at her life and works[9] would enable us to have a better perception of her position.

Manjula Padmanabhan was born in the year 1953 in New Delhi, but spent most of her time traveling around the world with her parents. Her father was in the Indian Foreign Service which accounts for her growing up in cities as diverse as Stockholm, Geneva, Karachi and Bangkok apart from Delhi and Kodaikanal. She studied Economics at Elphinstone College, Bombay at the undergraduate level. During her years as an undergraduate student she had her first exhibition of decorative posters on the pavement

outside Jahangir art gallery in 1970. Her first illustration was for *Freedom First* edited by Minoo Masani, where she did theatre and book reviews as well. While working for her M.A. in History, she had her first job with *Parsiana*, a small community magazine for Parsis, where she worked as the reporter, features editor, art and book reviewer, cartoonist, illustrator, designer, photographer, or in other words almost ran the magazine single-handedly.

Thus began her professional life and in a sense she has continued to repeat this act in the innumerable activities that she has taken interest in, and the various organisations that she has worked for. The year 1974 found her illustrating a number of books for children, for publishing houses as diverse as the National Book Trust, India Book House, Thomson Press, Oxford University Press and Elms Tree, London. The next year she began her career as an illustrator/designer and worked again for a number of publications including The Times of India Sunday Magazine, the Illustrated Weekly, Femina and the Reader's Digest among others. Whilst working full-time, she also found time to continue making posters and had her first exhibition of decorative posters at Max Mueller Bhavan, Bombay.

During the years 1977-1979 she illustrated *Indrani and the Enchanted Jungle* and *Tales of Birbal* and also traveled extensively, for about a year in the USA and Europe – the period which gets chronicled in her memoir *Getting There*. During the next few years, Padmanabhan worked as an art critic for Indian Express, spent four months in Bhutan researching illustrations for text books of the Oxford University Press and did six books as a part of the project which got completed in 1982. In the very same year she started the comic strip *Double Talk*, in *The Sunday Observer* which had as its editor Vinod Mehta; the strip continued for three years before being discontinued.

Padmanabhan published her first short story "A Government of India Undertaking" in *Imprint*: this signaled the beginning of a writing career which was going to branch out in many directions. The short story was followed by her first play *Lights Out* which has been anthologised, performed and has also been made into a television serial. It is a hard-hitting

play which deals with violence against women: not only the more obvious one of rape, but also the subtler ones of undermining their presence and denying them any importance, whether in the act of decision making or otherwise. Padmanabhan depicts the middle-class apathy towards violence against women, by making the men in the play, Bhasker and Mohan indulge in idle talk about how a woman's screams and her brutalization could be the performance of a "religious ceremony" or "sacred rites" (Padmanabhan 2004a: 159). Their wives' pleadings of putting an end to the gruesome "show" are not paid any heed to, and when they finally gear up for action, perceiving the act to be an affront to their "male egos", it is too late. The issue of violence against women recurs in Padmanabhan's works especially in stories like "Teaser" and "Hot Death, Cold Soup", though the form that such violence takes and the author's way of dealing with them varies.

During this period she also designed movie posters for *Ardhya Satya*, the classic film by Govind Nihalani. Her association with Nihalani is a long one: she not only designed posters for his film *Party*, and wrote the script for *Feringhiya*, but also saw her works being turned into movies and serials by him. The most notable among them is *Deham*, based on her play *Harvest*, which won the $ 250,000 Onassis International Cultural Competition Awards for Theatrical Plays in the year 1997. Nihalani also televised another of Padmanabhan's plays, *The Mating Game Show* but it could not be aired on account of production problems.

Harvest is probably the most well known of her plays and has received international acclaim. It had its world premiere in Athens at the prestigious Theatro Technis Karalous Koun and was directed by Mimis Kouyioumtzis. It has been produced as readings in Montreal, London and New York and performed in New York, in an experimental session involving a cast of African-American actors, which was directed by Erin B. Mee. It is a futuristic play and a sarcastic comment on the growing divide between the First-World and Third-World countries on account of the former's technological superiority. A bleak vision, *Harvest*, depicts a certain point in future when even the human body can be turned into a tradable thing and literally owned by means of technology. Science fiction is a genre that Padmanabhan keeps returning to, but unlike *Harvest* stories

like "Stolen Hours" and "Unfaithful Servants", anthologised in *Hot Death, Cold Soup* end on a positive note.

In the period between the publication of her early efforts and *Harvest* she wrote a number of other works like – *The Rat Lord of Paradise Villa*, *The Artist's Model*, *The Mating Game Show* and *The Sextet* – some of which were produced as readings[10], but otherwise remain unpublished. However, *Hot Death, Cold Soup*, a collection of stories, which she had been writing since 1984, was published in the year 1996 and received critical acclaim. In this anthology the stories deal with diverse subjects, while also drawing inspiration from Padmanabhan's own life.

Padmanabhan has always been aware that her profession is a highly unusual one, and not at all highly rated. This awareness has found expression in stories like "Mrs. Ganapathy's Modest Triumph" a part of *Hot Death, Cold Soup* as well as her autobiographical work – *Getting There*, where disparagement is voiced about this particular profession by members of the so-called respectable society. To be working as an illustrator, designer, cartoonist or a free-lance writer that too without being a part of an establishment required courage, more so because she started supporting herself from the age of twenty-one. The prejudices or practical difficulties that she faced whether of finding a room alone or keeping at bay the policing that society thinks its entitled to do over a lone woman – have all found expression in her literary endeavours but rarely has it been presented as a victimisation. She does not like writing from the perspective of the typical victim because she does not believe that chains are a natural condition of womanhood,[11] rather writes about the transformations that these experiences have resulted in.

Post *Harvest*, she has published her semi-fictional autobiography *Getting There* in the year 2000 and has seen portions of her cartoon strip "Suki" being compiled into a book *This is Suki*, in the very same year. As a protest against the Gujrat riots she wrote a collection of five monologues entitled *Hidden Fires*, which was published by Seagull. In the year 2003, she published a book for children – *Mouse Attack*, following it up with a collection of short stories – *Kleptomania* in 2004.

Even though she started out as an illustrator and went on to be a cartoonist, taking to writing pretty late, she has quite a number of works to her credit as will be evident on browsing through her oeuvre. Padmanabhan writes about a number of issues as has been pointed out already, with feminist issues also figuring in her work. She consciously explores feminist perspectives, has sympathies for the movement but does not call herself a feminist. This is in keeping with her denial of her gendered identity. For her to be a feminist, accepting one's femininity and celebrating womanhood is necessary, and since she is comfortable with doing neither, she refuses to be subsumed within the feminist corpus.

The question of identity/subjectivity – what is it to be a woman or deny one's gendered identity mean – is integrally connected with the stand that she takes: it is going to be one of the central problematic that I am going to be consider in the course of this work. The equation of a denial of feminine identity with an aspiration for the masculine one has already been noted. The axiomatic position that it has taken has also been partly affected by the position taken by Liberal feminists,[12] especially their denial of a female embodied subjectivity in search of a status of equality with men especially in the public sphere. While this has been criticised by Radical feminists,[13] the position taken by them – an exclusive celebration of the feminine – has also not made many comfortable. Against this background and especially given the centrality of gender to the feminist movement, what signification do the proclamations of someone like Padmanabhan have, especially in context of her own self-perceptions? What kind of a politics does that entail? And what significance does that have in context of a woman who chooses to foreground her identity as a writer/illustrator more than anything else?

Feminism as a movement is vast and can be engaged with from a variety of perspectives: as is clear from the queries posed above, I intend to engage with it at the conceptual/theoretical level. And since the critical concepts are inextricably related with the movement at the organizational level, the work is also going to focus on them, but only in as much they have a bearing on theoretical and critical formulations that fall

within the purview of this work. Both Anglo-American feminist theorisations and Indian ones are going to figure, as on the one hand, Padmanabhan's work is rooted in the Indian context and on the other, critical interventions by feminists from the "West" cannot but be considered – the relevance of the theories in the context of the work and the hegemony of Western scholarship – both ensure that. Since Padmanabhan is a writer, it was probably expected that she would be contextualized within the tradition of women writers, writing in English. But as this thesis is concerned to a great extent with the way the writer conceptualizes her own identity, which is in a-gendered terms, it would not have been logical to subsume her within a tradition, where one of the obvious bases of classification is gender.

My concern, in this work is especially with two issues – the question of subjectivity and the incorporation of feminist perspectives in one's work without claiming to be a feminist. For the purpose of this work I have chosen to read two short stories – "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains" from the collection *Hot Death, Cold Soup* and her semi-fictional memoir *Getting There*. When I had initially thought of working on Padmanabhan, I had intended to deal with a number of her works, especially *Lights Out* and *This is Suki*, but in the course of working on this thesis I decided to concentrate on the works that I have just mentioned, as I believed, these would be pertinent in discussing the problematic that I am concerned with: but it was difficult to incorporate these changes in the title of the thesis which remains, "Beyond the Female/Feminist Subject: A Reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's Works".

In the chapters that follow, I initially substantiate the statement that Padmanabhan uses feminist perspectives in her works and then explore the articulations of her identity. Chapter Two is a broad introduction to the issues that concern the contemporary feminist movement in India, as well as an exposition of the prelude to it. I also discuss the two short stories "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains" from the collection *Hot Death, Cold Soup* in this context showing how she uses feminist perspectives in an individualistic way, at times even subverting them for her own purposes.

Chapter Three is a reading of Padmanabhan's autobiographical work *Getting There*. Autobiography as a genre entails writing about the self. But if it is accepted, following theoretical interventions in this field, that in autobiography there is a construction of the self by the author, and not necessarily an unproblematic coalescence of the author and the protagonist of the work, then *Getting There* becomes an interesting study. On the one hand, it is about the author as she was during the period 1977-78, and yet being a construction in retrospect, it gives an insight into the author's self-perception and the ways in which she constructs herself: this is especially to be considered in the context of Padmanabhan's assertions of her a-gendered identity. The text will also be contextualized against theoretical positions – both canonical and feminist ones – on autobiography, identity, and embodied subjectivity.

The final chapter consists of a summing up of the major arguments and in light of the highly unusual nature of the phenomenon considered, also consists of reflections on the feminist movement. In reading Padmanabhan's work in the context of feminism, the attempt is not to subsume her within it but to delineate her indebtedness to it, as an acknowledgement of the ground it has achieved.

End notes

---

[1] Beginning with the assumption that there is a paucity of theoretical writing on feminism in India, Chaudhuri goes on to argue in the introduction that feminism has been theorized in India, albeit differently. Her contention is that in the Indian context, it is impossible to separate the conceptual/critical history from the history of activism itself, and it exists in a form different from that of Anglo-American feminism. See Maitreyee Chaudhuri, "Introduction," *Feminism in India*, ed. Maitreyee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Kali for Women & Women Unlimited, 2004) xiii.

[2] The reference is, basically to Anglo-American and French theories.

[3] The communalist forces in India refer to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Rashtriya Swayam-Sevak Sangh (RSS) and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) commune and their numerous affiliated institutions.

[4] Cornelia Sorabjee, Sarojini Naidu, Begum Shah Nawaz, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya – prominent women activities were opposed to the term feminist, as it went against the nationalist mood of the first half of the nineteenth century. See Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of the Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993) 88.

[5] There have been reports of other satis as well as attempts of satis. In most cases government intervention saved the lives of women – see Kamala Kumar, "Sati – A Crime Against Women," in *Violence Against Women*, ed. Sushma Sood (Jaipur: Arihant Publishers, 1990) 355. The incident of Roop Kanwar's sati assumed the gargantuan proportions that it did because of the renewed strength of the fundamentalist forces and also because it came after the Shah Bano case. I have discussed this at length in the second chapter.

[6] Survivors of the Gujrat carnage have named a number of women who had instigated the mob and participated in the carnage themselves, some of whom happen to be BJP Corporators. See Javed Anand & Teesta Setalvad "Genocide: Naroda Fruit Market, Kabadi Market," in Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad eds. *Communalism Combat*, March-April 2002, No. 77-78, p. 34,36.

[7] See especially Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi, *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste and Class in India* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989).

[8] Writers/critics like Madhu Kishwar, Shashi Deshpande, Shama Futehally, Githa Hariharan, amongst others have refused to be labelled feminists. For an insight into this aspect through the interviews of writers like Shashi Deshpande, Shama Futehally, Githa Hariharan see Joel Kuortti, *Tense Past ,Tense Present: Women Writing in English* (Kolkata: Stree, 2003). A documentary film which concentrates on this problem is Paromita Vohra's *Unlimited Girls*, produced by Sakshi, a Delhi-based violence intervention group. It tries to capture on celluloid the urban Indian women's conception of feminism. See *Unlimited Girls* (2002) dir. Paromita Vohra, Documentary, 94 minutes, English with Hindi subtitles.

[9] For detailed information regarding Manjula Padmanabhan's life and works I have depended on the material provided by her via e-mail. Mamjula Padmanabhan, "Re: Re: On Reading *Getting There*," E-mail to Shubhra Ray, 30 April 2004.

[10] Two plays "Against Her Will" and "Bed Bugs" from the collection of plays *The Sextet* were performed as a dramatic reading on 18 June 2004 at The Asian American Writer's Workshop in New York. It featured Sanjay Chandani and David Sajadi and was directed by Manjula Padmanabhan and Sourabh Chatterjee. See South Asian League of Artists in America (SALAAM), "An Evening with Manjula Padmanabhan," 23 August 2003 (http://www.salaamtheatre.org/eveningmanjula2001.html).

[11] Manjula Padmanabhan, "Re: On Reading *Getting There*," E-Mail to Shubhra Ray, 18 April 2004.

[12] The Liberal feminists are Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Sarah Grimke and Susan B. Anthony among others, in the Anglo-American feminist tradition, who advocated for women's suffrage, talked about the need for women to step beyond the "private space" into the public domain, and the necessity of achieving legal equality with men. For a critique of Liberal feminism see Imelda Whelelan, *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post-Feminism'* (New York: New York University Press, 1995) 34-39.

[13] The better known radical feminists are Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich and Shulamith Firestone among others. For a comprehensive positioning of Radical feminists see Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

Chapter Two

Contextualizing *Hot Death, Cold Soup*

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section is an exposition of the salient issues which have been an inextricable part of the Indian feminist movement. The movement, as has been pointed out has a long history and is one which encompasses diverse fields, bringing within its purview numerous issues. The attempt is not to give a detailed historical overview – which would be impossible given the scope of the work – rather concentrate on the conceptual insights, that it has generated: these will of course be contextualized. The emphasis will be especially on the features which have given the movement its specific indigenous character.

The second section is a reading of Manjula Padmanabhan's collection of short stories *Hot Death, Cold Soup* with special focus on "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains" from the perspective of the insights gained. I am aware that two short stories cannot give one an idea of the author's oeuvre nor can it be the basis of a claim for her inclusion in a certain tradition of writing. But since the attempt is not to subsume Padmanabhan within a particular feminist corpus, rather draw attention to the fact that she makes use of feminist perspectives even while claiming not to be a feminist and denying her gendered identity, the choice of these two stories seemed apt. Padmanabhan has used feminist perspectives in her works in an individualistic and often subversive manner, in keeping with the general trend of her writing. "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains" are representative texts of Padmanabhan, depicting these attributes and therefore become indispensable in this chapter which focuses specifically on the way she articulates and deals with feminist issues in the context of some of her fictional characters.

THE INDIAN FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Tracing the origins of any movement is always a difficult task. The difficulty arises as much from the contentious nature of the issue of origin as the chances of attributing much more to an event in looking at it in retrospect than it actually entails. But it is worthwhile to begin with a historical positioning because it enables us to contextualize developments and therefore comprehend them better. While at the emotive level Gandhi and Shah's statement that the women's movement in India has no beginning or origin but "has always existed as an emotion, an anger deep within us, and has flowed like music in and out of our lives, our consciousness and actions" (1992: 15) might strike a chord, it is probably more feasible to locate the movement within the context of the reform movements of the nineteenth century.

It is the attempts of reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Dayanand Saraswati and others to ameliorate the condition of women, that foregrounded the "women's question"– to use an oft-repeated term – and paved the way for the feminist movement in India. To say that this is what was intended by the reformers is not only naïve but also fallacious. While the reformers truly wanted to change the position of women, their agenda, whether it be the questioning of child-marriages, prevention of Sati, endorsement of the idea of remarriage of widows, advocacy of women's education, raising the age of marriage or questioning the deplorable plight of women in general, was not devoid of patriarchal moorings but was very much based within it. And the way the new, educated, middle-class women were to be "constructed" was very much in keeping with their traditional roles as wives and mothers: this becomes especially evident if one takes a look at the kind of education that women were expected to receive. It consisted mostly of basic reading and writing skills, elementary arithmetic and lessons in "domestic economy" and needlework (Kumar 1993:16). Discouraging women from pursuing higher education was necessitated as much by the need to maintain status quo as the propensity to see them as the "true" symbols of Indianness who because of their lack of close connection with the Western invaders had been able to maintain their purity, which the men had not been able to do (Chatterjee 1989: 233-252). And this "recasting"[1] which

was being done, was solely in accordance with the ideas and desires of the male reformers: the "women's question" was being decided without taking into consideration what women themselves wanted. And even when women started making their presence felt towards the latter half of the nineteenth century it was largely within the overarching parameters set by the reformers and the nationalists, though they did learn to contest the way in which their subjectivities were being formed.[2] The reform movement, thus, in spite of its attempts of improving the conditions of women was rather an unusual background for the emergence of the women's movement in India, but then as Maitrayee Chaudhuri has aptly commented, "movements can never be contained within the expressed stated model which they start out with; much history arises from unintended consequences" (2004: xvii).

Tracing the roots of the women's movement to the reformers' agitation is also acknowledging the idea that like a number of other concepts feminism also came to India mediated through its colonial past, which had a significant influence on its inception and subsequent development. With the spread of education women began to come out in the public sphere and their voices began to be heard especially through the journals and magazines which they began to edit and publish (Tharu and Lalitha 1991: 167-168; Kumar 1993: 32). The period of emergence of a group of educated women – roughly the period 1890-1900 – coincided with the rise of the nationalist movement, with the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. As a result of this development, women also began to make their presence felt in the moderate phase of the nationalist movement, though their attempts did not meet with unmitigated enthusiasm. However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, women like Swarnakumari Debi and Sarala Debi Ghosal had not only been accepted within the mainstream nationalist movement but the demands for an autonomous women's activism was in place. The decade 1910-1920 was the one in which first attempts at setting up all-India women's organisations was made, with regional organisations already having come into existence under the aegis of institutions like the Arya Samaj or the Brahmo Samaj (Kumar1993: 54). The attempts resulted in the formation of organisations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) founded by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya in 1927, Women's Indian Association (WIA) founded by Annie Besant, Malati Patwardhan, Mrs. Dadabhoy among others in 1917 and the National Council of

Indian Women (NCIW) in 1926, to name only a few. All these organisations concerned themselves with eradicating the problems of women and educating them and at the same time, were closely linked with the nationalist movement. In fact most of the mobilization of women was done on the basis of nationalism, but there were disagreements between the groups themselves regarding the kind of nationalist activities to be engaged in. For example, the WIA had an interest in home rule and women's suffrage, yet they were not ready to support the civil disobedience movement as it would have problematised their relationship with the government and compromised their attempts to seek improvement in women's status through legislation (Chaudhuri, Hasan and Majumdar 1985: 6). And while the AIWC in its earlier stage focused on the educational and social aspects of women's lives, it later adopted a strong nationalistic perspective, as it felt that women needed equal rights to play their full and legitimate role in the national affairs.

While this perspective brings out the individualistic stands of the various organisations formed, it also points towards the question of women's rights which was being debated. One view was that women's rights needed to be recognized as they had socially useful roles as mothers, with their self-sacrificing "nature" and capacity for self-denial being highlighted by Mahatma Gandhi (cit. Kumar 1993: 95), and the other that women having the same needs, desires and capacities as men, were entitled to the same rights: this tension between the notions of equality and complementarity has always characterized the discourse of women's rights in India. Though Gandhi's views on women are not without their problems, it cannot but be accepted that the kind of mobilization that he achieved especially during the Civil Disobedience movement, was responsible to a great extent for converting a large section of the Congress leadership to women's equality, which finally led to the fundamental rights resolution in 1931 (Chaudhuri, Hasan and Majumdar 1985: 19).

The other highly successful mobilization of women was done through the Communist party of India, despite its initial resistance to women joining its ranks. Beginning with the formation of a separate students' committee of girls of the All India Students' Federation, the highly radical self-defence group Mahila Atmaraksha Samiti

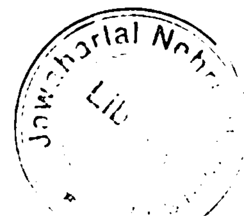
(MARS) was formed in 1943, which not only emphasized the needs for women to learn self-defence tactics but also worked in close tandem with the nationalist campaigns.

However, this spectacular presence of women in the public arena does not mean that women did not have to put up with the discourse of "purity" and "chastity": these terms were very much a part of the idiom in which a woman activist was described (Kumar 1993: 83-85). Like the reformers, the nationalist leaders were also "constructing" the image of a woman activist, and expecting the idea to be adhered to. Along with the idea of complementarity in the context of women's rights, the widespread prevalence of practices like viewing women's sexuality as dangerous and preferring women activists who were married depicts that the "women's question" had not been unproblematically resolved, rather it remained, although couched in a different idiom.

And though separate women's organisations were there, which were focusing on the education of women and talking about women's rights, they were inextricably connected with the struggle for nationalism and linked with the vagaries of the movement – whether it be the rise of communalism, the change of focus from ahimsa to armed resistance or the increasing focus on communism. As Renu Chakraborthy puts it, "There were three main planks of the women's movement in this period. First, defence of the country; second, release of the leaders and the formation of a national government; and third, defence of the people from starvation and death" (1980: 20-23). And with the protest against the colonialist power heating up after 1945, the focus on women's issues took a further backseat. The general mood was that of a joyful anticipation, with the dominant feeling being, "with independence the inequalities between men and women would be righted, and all would be well with India" (Kumar 1993: 94).

TH-11551

Independence, in the context of the feminist movement, has usually been seen as an important factor which separates the two distinct phases of the movement in India. This distinction is made not so much to point out the essential differences between the phases as to contextualize them. Just as the period of colonialist domination and nationalist resistance defined the contours of the women's movement in the early days,



post-independence, democracy and the specific form it took became the defining feature of the Indian feminist movement.

Post-independence, there was a relative period of inactivity. On account of the lesser visibility of autonomous women's organisations, one of the questions raised in the Committee on the Status of Women in India 1974 (cit. Kalpana 2002: 311) was regarding the fading out of the debates on the women's question in the years following independence. This has been interpreted as time given to the state to implement the ideas and positions which had been adopted during the nationalist struggle (Chaudhuri 2004: xvii). This dependence on the state to better the position of women through legislation will remain the hallmark of the women's movement in India, notwithstanding the state's inability to meet these expectations time and again.

It is generally acknowledged that there was a revival of the women's movement in the 1970s with autonomous women's groups making their voices heard and their presence felt. However, the presence of women has come to be chronicled in at least two major movements in post-independence India, which fall within this so-called period of inactivity. The Tebhaga Andolan in West Bengal and north Bihar, which was basically a movement for sharecropper's rights and the Telangana people's struggle, which was a struggle against feudalism and the rule of the Nizam found women participating in large numbers. Both the movements took the form of insurrectionary struggles and found women running shelters for the male revolutionaries as well as participating in the guerrilla warfare themselves (Kannabiran and Lalitha 1989: 182-203; Sen 2001). Within the larger framework of class and caste oppression, the specific forms that such oppression took for women were also raised, though with the suppression of the movements by the early fifties these issues took a backseat.

The need for autonomous women's organisations began to be felt, with both the state bypassing issues specifically concerning women and the increasing disillusionment with left-oriented organised movements. The realization that the state had failed took some time to sink in – nearly two decades following independence – after which there was a

re-emergence of women's organisations and an exercise of self-conscious feminist activities. Incidents of custodial rapes, especially the Mathura rape case (1978) and the Maya Tyagi rape case (1980) as pointed out by Ilina Sen (2004:196) shook women out of their self-imposed complacency. Some of the early feminist rallying was around the issues of rape and violence against women, which led to the formation of organisations like Forum Against Rape in 1981 in Bombay; this later went on to become the Forum Against Oppression of Women. Numerous other organisations were also formed, the more prominent among them being Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), Centre for Women's Development Studies (CWDS), Stree Shakti Sangathana (SSS), Saheli, Mahila Dakshata Samiti and the National Federation of Indian Women.

Initially beginning with protests against dowry deaths, rape, wife-beating, the opposition to patriarchal norms has taken many forms, whether it be against a specific way of representing women especially in pornography, protest against the destruction of the environment, demand for ban on abortion following sex-determination tests, campaign against government's family planning programmes, campaign for the greater presence of women in the work-force and the political arena or demand for a uniform civil code following the realization that religion-specific laws can only be more detrimental for women.

This especially became evident in the case of Shah Bano (Kishwar 1999: 55-70; Kumar 1993:172-181; Sunder Rajan 1993:16-18) whose demands for maintenance from her husband in the civil court in accordance with the constitution of India, led to one of the most blatant denials of human rights under the aegis of maintaining communal harmony, by appeasing the minorities. Shah Bano's demand was seen as an affront by the Muslim personal board and the subsequent furore which arose over the threat perceived by the Muslims, from the interference of the state in the Islamic personal law, especially after Shah Bano initially had the ruling in favour of her, drowned the issue of her personal maintenance altogether. It became the ground for fundamentalists and communalists to score points. A bill was introduced in the parliament to exclude Muslim women from the purview of Section 125 i.e. the section which dealt with the issue of maintenance on

destitution, and under which Shah Bano had filed her case. Despite strong opposition from all quarters – feminist groups, secular organisations, leftist groups – the bill was passed in May1986. Widely perceived as an act of appeasement of minorities, the ruling actually showed the inability of the state to prevent the spread of fundamentalism. And it once again became clear that with any perception of threat against a community, the dispensability of the rights of women becomes even more enhanced, as Shah Bano's case amply depicted.

The case of Roop Kanwar though different in dimension, in that she was killed and not simply denied rights, assumed almost the same connotations when the protests against her forced "sati" were viewed as an encroachment and an undermining of the pride of the Rajput community (Narayan 1997: 41-80; Kishwar 1999: 55-70). For the members of the Hindu right, the issue of Roop Kanwar's sati became a way of recovering the ground, which had been lost on account of appeasement of minorities especially as depicted in the Shah Bano case. Roop Kanwar became the quintessential representative of the communal pride of Rajasthan and by analogy of the entire Hindu community. This kind of a construction was done by presenting the interests of the entire Hindu community as one, without any region-specific or class/caste-specific variations: the interests being foregrounded, were, of course, those of the ideologues of the Hindu right. It is against this kind of a mind-set that the construction of a Ram mandir in Ayodhya becomes of paramount importance for the "entire" Hindu community: anybody who dared to raise his/her voice against this phenomenon was either not a "true" Hindu – a pseudo-secularist or a thoroughly "westernized" individual, having no understanding of Hindu "culture" and "ideology". Feminists belonged to the latter group, not only because they protested against the immolation of Roop Kanwar but also because they protested against the kind of image of women which was being propogated. The undermining of feminism took the form of an assertion that the need to look for ways of gaining agency outside – by "blindly" aping Western feminism[3] – had become unnecessary as innumerable examples were available within the Hindu tradition itself. This charge of westernization comes from people who have no qualms about accepting other products of the West, whether it be technological developments or globalisation (Narayan 1997: 3-39). Women's participation in the public

arena is being sanctioned under the aegis of Hindutva ideologues even though they are at the same time being contained within the overarching patriarchal traditions of the same outfit (Sangari 1993: 867-82).With the increase of women in its folds, the credibility of the feminist movement has further been questioned by the Hindu communal outfits on the grounds that it does not represent the interests of all sections of women and has lost its viability, thereby problematising the position of the movement further.

One way of dealing with the accusations made above has been the stressing of the indigenous character of the movement, by differentiating it from its Western counterparts. While this has remained a characteristic of the women's movement in India,[4] during the early 1930s the desire to differentiate was on account of nationalistic fervour, whereas post-1980s it is being done to counter the challenges posed by the Hindu Right. In contemporary times, assertions of a distinct indigenous character has been made on the grounds of feminism's close relation with other movements of social restructuring – whether political, caste-based or class-based – as opposed to the exclusive focus on "sexual politics" by Western feminism. Another point on which this claim has been made is that whereas feminism in the West was pronouncedly anti-men, the character of the movement was not such in India, where men have taken part in the movement, and been a part of it since the days of its inception. This is not to say that men have not been named as oppressors within the dominant structure of patriarchy but to point out that the movement cannot unproblematically be designated anti-men and has traditionally worked by co-opting men (Chitnis 2004: 24). The aim has basically been to establish feminism as an integral part of the Indian milieu and not see it as a Western construct which had been imposed from outside.

Feminism as a movement in India, thus, has been closely linked to the developments which have characterized the national/political milieu whether it is the strengthening of communalism/fundamentalism or the developments that have taken place as a result of the increasing presence of caste as a factor at the national level. However, it has not merely been shaped by it but also has been able to intervene in shaping the policies of the post-colonial nation state – whether by making gender an essential category of

analysis in diverse fields or by making the state sensitive to the gender-specific problems. In the Indian context, the political and theoretical have always been closely imbricated and this remains true for feminism as well. The theoretical debates which are dominant today, have emerged from within the political contours – whether it be the question of representation, the question of secularism and its relation to feminism, or the selective appropriation/rejection of certain tenets of the West. It has come a long way from the days of its inception and notwithstanding the contestations, has made a place for itself, becoming in the process not only a movement with a strong basis but also a viable conceptual tool for analysis. And it is within the conceptual framework developed by the Indian feminist movement that I wish to contextualize Manjula Padmanabhan's short stories – "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains", while briefly discussing some of the other stories anthologised in the collection *Hot Death, Cold Soup* as well.

HOT DEATH, COLD SOUP

Hot Death Cold Soup – the collection of short stories by Padmanabhan was first published by Kali for women in the year 1996. It was subsequently translated in languages like Dutch and Italian in the years 1999 and 2000 respectively.[5] It is an eclectic collection of stories and deals with variegated themes. Ranging from science fiction in works like "Stolen Hours", "The Annexe", "Unfaithful Servants" to the perplexities of growing up "The Last Day of Childhood"; from a calligrapher's evasion of a pornographic assignment "The Calligrapher's Tale" to the issue of violence against women "Teaser"; from an American woman's attempt to commit sati "Hot Death, Cold Soup" to comments on social issues "The Strength of Small Things", "Mrs. Ganapathy's Modest Triumph", "Stains" – the topics could not be more diverse. If there is any connecting theme which is present in most if not all works, it is the triumph – however, minor – of people otherwise viewed as being at the receiving end of life, the ones who more often than not become the victims either of the system or other oppressive forces. Sometimes the characters learn to stand up for themselves as in "The Calligrapher's Tale", "Teaser", "Stains" while in other stories like "Mrs. Ganapathy's Modest Triumph", "The Strength of Small Things", the

circumstances "conspire" in favour of them. In this sense these stories become a celebration of hope and a way of emphasizing the need to focus on the positive aspects of life, not by rejecting the pejorative ones or in denial of them, but in spite of them and probably because of them.

This theme recurs in Padmanabhan's works and finds place in her most recently published collection of short stories as well. "An Upbeat Story", anthologised in *Kleptomania* is about a woman affected with polio, who having lived with a feeling of dissatisfaction all her life because of her "abnormal" status learns to come to terms with it. While the theme seems a pretty common one, it is the manner of presentation which makes the work stand out. Structured in the form of an e-mail correspondence between the editor of a magazine in search of an "upbeat" short story and a woman-writer who tries to sell the "love-story" of a handicapped woman and a man affected with Down's syndrome, the handicap is not mentioned till the last moment when the author chooses to come out with it in the open. This revelation – that it was an autobiographical narrative – assumes the poignancy that it does, precisely because of the denigrations that the editor had been heaping on people with "abnormalities", obviously without knowing about the author's physical state. The story ends on a truly upbeat mood with the woman stating, "But that's all in the past. Here, now, with Bobby, I don't think like that anymore. I don't bother with all the things I can't do. I celebrate the things I can. [. . .] And DON'T apologize, Ed! Just blow your nose and send me my cheque" (2004b: 201).

While the stories in *Hot Death Cold Soup* do not always have the same kind of an "upbeat" ending, they are marked by a reversal of fortunes if not poetic justice. For instance, in "Teaser", which is narrated from the point of view of a young man used to harassing women in public transport, it is the protagonist himself who ends up in a position of discomfort rather than his intended victim. It is structured in the form of a monologue and deals with the thoughts of Rakesh who not only derives pleasure from indulging in such activities but considers them his natural "prerogative". He has constructed his own vocabulary regarding women's bodies and has learnt to objectify them in a manner which prevents any association with the women he actually knows. As Padmanabhan puts it, "He

knew they had some other mundane name but he disdained words which would link targets to their day-to-day manifestations as women, sisters, daughters, wives. He had created his own lexicon [. . .] which existed only to describe the relics at the shrine of his own senses" (1996: 91).

It is the incident of one day which finds place in the narrative, when Rakesh having spotted a scantily clad woman in a bus plans to harass her but has the tables turned on him instead. The woman in question instead of cowering under his attempts of touching her puts him in an uncomfortable situation. "She was looking at the damp patch that had appeared under the waist-band of his jeans, on his shirt. 'Silly!' she was saying. 'Silly little boy has wet his pants!'"(94). It is she who has the last laugh while Rakesh is left feeling humiliated, his mind numbed by "a feeling like grey rain" (ibid).

"Mrs. Ganapathy's Modest Triumph", unlike "Teaser" is not about the rendering of poetic justice, but the realisation that there can be no fixed social attitudes regarding marriage or the conception of an ideal woman. Changing times as well as "trivial" elements like hurt pride can be as instrumental as gaining recognition for the "idiosyncrasies" of a woman, like not wanting to get married or being engaged in a not-so-respectable profession. Mrs. Ganapathy as a member of the "respectable" Indian middle class was mortified with her youngest daughter Anjalie's not being a paragon of perfection – "It was true that she was amusing and clever and that she had a sunny temperament. But what use were such qualities in a world which demanded of daughters that they be, above all beautiful, demure and obedient?"(69). But what horrified her more was her daughter's absolute refusal to get married and her profession as an artist which by her standards was an absolutely lowly one. Set against the search of a bride for two highly eligible bachelors of the community, the "failures" of Anjalie hurt her mother even more.

The a-typical ending of the story comes however with these very "failures" becoming the basis of Mrs. Ganapathy's "modest" triumph. When the one of the to-be-bridegrooms expresses his desire to get married to a "modern" woman with short hair, Mrs. Ganapathy gets an opportunity to salvage her pride which had been considerably

hurt with her friend's – the boys' mother's – lack of interest in Anjalie. It is then that she can take pride in her daughter's disinterest in marriage and state happily, "my daughter? Oh – no! I don't think so! You see ... my daughter is not interested in marriage!" (80). What had earlier been a matter of secrecy and something to be defensive about now under changed circumstances becomes a matter of smugness and a way of preserving her "honour".

In spite of their unusual endings it is clear that the issues which Padmanabhan deals with in her stories are serious ones, whether it is the subject of violence against women, the objectification of women's bodies or the need to construct women in a particular manner in order to increase their viability in the marriage "market". These have concerned feminists and have been the ground of a number of protests by feminists in the Indian context as has been pointed out above. Padmanabhan in restoring agency to her female protagonists is in a sense endorsing the feminist perspectives on the issues. This becomes clearer if we take into consideration "Stains" – a story that I would like to discuss at length.

"Stains" can be read as the story of a young Afro-American woman Sarah's coming to terms with her body. She had grown up believing that she was perfectly comfortable with it, but it took an act of rudeness from her boyfriend's mother to make her realize how far from the truth that was. Sarah's act of breaking free from the way she had been conditioned to think aggravates the problems which were already there in the relationship with her Indian-American boyfriend Deep. He finds it difficult to accept the change in Sarah as it is contrary to his perception of the tenets of "Indian culture" and further heightens his insecurity as a second generation immigrant in America.

The story begins with Mrs. Kumar – Deep's mother insisting that Sarah wash the sheet that she had stained separately in the basement – a "cold...forbidding" (205) place, in sub-zero water and leave it for drying there, even while clothes were being washed in a washing machine. Sarah does as she is told but finds the entire process uncomfortable, humiliating and absurd. Padmanabhan effectively brings out Mrs. Kumar and Sarah's differences in outlook towards menstrual blood by showing their reactions to it, "it was a

tiny mark, barely visible. Yet Mrs. Kumar was holding the sheet between her thumb and finger as if she feared that merely to be in the presence of such a sheet might mean eternal damnation" (205). For Sarah, however, it was merely a part of herself, "a single pale petal of dried graduate student haemoglobin" (206).This difference in outlook is also what makes Mrs. Kumar unable to see her own behaviour as rude and humiliating.

Mrs. Kumar's attitude to menstruation is merely in keeping with the traditional way of looking at it as unnatural. As Padmanabhan puts it, "the bleeding woman is penalized for being in that 'state': the correct condition, of course, is to be pregnant or nursing" (226). A menstruating woman is not only incompetent and in an unnatural state but as Meenakshi Thapan has pointed out in the "Indian classical tradition she also becomes impure and her movements are restricted to certain spaces and domains" (1996: 10). While this has been corroborated by a number of scholars (Leslie 1991: 5, 165; Young 2002: 8-9), that in orthodox households they are not only viewed as impure and temporarily untouchable, but also forbidden to enter temples, to cook or even come into contact with others, simply a textual substantiation does not take into account the variegated treatment that the subject of menstruation gets in various parts of India. A look at a few instances would help to make the point clear. While on the one hand, the practice of considering women temporarily untouchable is taken to its furthest extremes in Hieruda, a small village of Karnataka, where during the period of menstruation women are banished from the village and forced to live in the outskirts,[6] on the other, amongst the Nayar community in Kerala, the onset of puberty in girls or menarche is celebrated through a feast.[7] The examples quoted should serve as deterrents against the attempts of constructing a particular and rigid "Indian" attitude to menstruation, something that Deep tries to do.

However, it cannot but be accepted that the attitude to menstruation has been marked more by negativity and pejorative associations: these views inform Kumar's attitude to the subject. Her act of rudeness brings back to Sarah's mind something she as a child had heard her mother and aunt laugh about. "In primitive communities, menstruating women sat separately, sometimes in a special hut. *Is that what she's doing to me*? thought Sarah. Avoiding contamination. Avoiding the unclean magic of a bleeding woman.

Unclean" (1996: 214 Padmanabhan's emphasis). Yet what I find more interesting is Sarah's own reaction after having been subjected to the act of rudeness mentioned above. From her reactions it is clear that she had never been made to feel like an outcaste before, but she never also had accepted menstruation in a normal manner – probably had not devoted any conscious thought to it. Padmanabhan brings it out clearly when she describes Sarah's actions in the bathroom as "self conscious" and makes her wonder about her feelings of inadvertent guilt when she thinks about the subject. Sarah can perceive her menstrual blood as minute particles of her being, her "discarded corpuscles" (206), but in her subconscious, she too had a negative view of it – knew it was not proper to think about it, look at it or discuss it openly – probably a result of her upbringing and social conditioning. But Mrs. Kumar's behaviour and her own subsequent sense of alienation makes her question her conditioned reaction and attempt to come to terms with menstruation as a normal bodily process. She begins by paying conscious attention to it and refuses to accept the silence around it. At the dining table, when Deep refers to her condition in vague terms, she makes him name it, "The corners of his mouth were twitched inward in irritation. 'You are bleeding heavily, she tells me. Apparently you stained the sheets' (215-216). Later she also talks about her pain with Deep, attempting to make him see her own point of view.

Menstruation stops being dark, dirty or something to be guilty about for Sarah when she learns to accept her bodily process for what it is – a bodily process. In spite of not sharing Mrs. Kumar's retrogressive views about menstruation, Sarah had gone along with her orders, probably because somewhere deep down she had felt guilty. It is clear from her reaction immediately after the detection of the stain, "'I'm sorry,' she heard her voice say, 'I – I'm sure it will go away.' She could hear herself sounding one foot tall" (205).

This attitude changes and the transformation is manifest in her subsequent reactions. From her initial feelings of incertitude and guilt, Sarah finds the strength to assert her opinion that they – she and Deep – as thinking individuals and a couple could decide what they wanted without being told, in response to Deep's attempt of hiding his

discomfort under the garb of allegiance to tradition ,"He turned his face away. 'In India,' he said, 'We don't talk about such things. Women's blood. We just don't talk about it'" (222). Sarah refuses to accept Deep or his mother's views, once she has freed her own psyche from debilitating ideas about her own body. The transformation finds voice in varied contexts, with the most powerful expression of it being her statement, "I'm just bleeding. It's a normal, natural event" (ibid).

Sarah's transformation is however not acceptable to Deep, who finds her reactions objectionable and impolite. He tries to stop her from making him face uncomfortable truths by making explicit the implicit understanding of what is proper/polite/decent and what is not. He attempts to silence Sarah not by imposing his views on her but by appealing to her own knowledge of impropriety – "You know these are not proper subjects for discussion" (228), but Sarah's refusal to endorse this implicit knowledge defeats his purpose. As long as Sarah refuses to "know" what is improper and indecent, Deep cannot express his displeasure without taking responsibility for it. He might have been able to get away with expressing his displeasure and objection at discussing a "taboo" subject in the name of tradition, culture and politeness, had Sarah endorsed his stand. However, Sarah's refusal to do so makes his claims sound prejudiced and out-dated.

Through this exchange Padmanabhan makes it clear that the consent of the victim is very necessary for any oppressive system to function and look acceptable at the same time. Punitive action imposed from outside is less of a torture compared to the guilt experienced by a willing victim as a result of the internalization of a certain ideology. Sarah makes a powerful protest by refusing to sanction her denunciation; she does this by getting rid of the psychological oppression from within.

Sarah's change in attitude towards menstruation becomes even more problematic for Deep because he views it not as simply as a way of going beyond the bounds of propriety and decency, but also as a racial statement – a typically "Western" act which undermines the "Indian" views and attitudes towards a particular subject. Deep had put pressure on Sarah to constitute herself in a manner which would befit an Indian wife,

assuming unproblematically that as an Afro-American woman, sensitive to racism, she would automatically see his point of view and accept it.

Deep is extremely defensive about his "Indianness" and even though he criticizes the racism of Americans – "everyone who isn't a Bible-thumping, beef-eating, baseball player is treated like a court-jester" (210), he is guilty of an inverted sense of racism himself which makes him generalize grossly about Western ideas. Even Sarah's well-meaning attempts of understanding his views or her objections to certain tenets of the Indian culture are seen as manifestations of her Western and therefore racist ideas.

Deep's attempts of preventing any change in the status quo – be it the views about menstruation or arranged marriage come from a deep seated sense of insecurity and an identity crisis as a second generation immigrant. It takes the form of an assumed superiority over every thing "American". It finds the most ridiculous expression in his description of Indian cows. As opposed to the "dull, stupid, unreflecting stare" of the American cows who were just beasts and "milk-dispensers", for Deep an Indian cow "is a developed being. She has a mind, she has a life, she is a person – no, better than a person. A sort of living manifestation of the [. . .] bounty, the giving spirit of nature (211).

Deep realizes that Indianness is not a static entity and his fixed perceptions cannot be the final word on India when his mother approves of his and Sarah's relationship which is completely contrary to his expectations; but even then he cannot get over his obsession with race. The first thing which comes to his mind after his mother has given him permission to marry Sarah is to think, "what a powerful statement we can make by being together" (228). The question of race and the superiority of Indian culture preclude everything else for Deep, and it is perhaps fitting that that the story should end with a repartee by Sarah which undermines these very things:

> Listening to music and hanging paintings on the wall is all very well, but if at the end of the day someone wants me to hide my blood underground and to behave like an invalid forget it, you know? [. . .] my packet of ultra thin E-Z wrap pads and what it represents to me about the journey my generation has made, is all the tradition that I need.
>
> (ibid)

Sarah's final statement is as much an answer to Deep's patriarchal moorings, as it is a response to his hypocrisy and indecisiveness. For him she at times is the quintessential American, who cannot but be racist, and at other times she is just a black woman who cannot claim any of the "white man's myths" (224) as her own. Sarah refuses to have an identity crisis and fashions out her niche, tradition and her own identity.

That Sarah is a feminist was revealed to us by Deep though he had intended it as an accusatory term and as a pointer towards her hypocrisy. For him Sarah's being a feminist when it concerned women of her culture and being unable to accept his mother's behaviour was another instance of her racism: any other explanation was simply not viable. His idea of feminism was probably that of a world wide sorority! But Sarah makes a powerful feminist statement by the decision that she takes and the stands that she adopts in the story "Stains"; so much so that the story of one woman's coming to terms with her body becomes a way of criticizing the misogynist base of cultures and traditions. The body of the woman has always been the contentious site for religious beliefs and social norms to leave their mark; in a welcome inversion, the body of the woman becomes the yardstick for determining the necessity or obsoleteness of such norms, making "Stains" an insight into the nature of patriarchy and a protest against its oppressive views.

Reclaiming the body, by getting rid of the debilitating notions regarding it, has been one of the significant issues on the feminist agenda and Padmanabhan through her story "Stains" contributes in a significant manner in that direction. Padmanabhan aligns herself with the feminists not only through the stand that she makes Sarah take regarding her body, but also through the manner in which Sarah contests the cultural construction of a particular kind of feminine behaviour as proper and decent. This opposition to a particular kind of construction of femininity assumes poignancy within the feminist context precisely because of its utilization by dominant patriarchal groups to exercise control over women's bodies and their sexuality (Thapan 1997: 5), and figures among other issues in "Hot Death, Cold Soup" the other story of Padmanabhan that I have chosen to read. "Hot Death, Cold Soup" is also an engagement with the discourse of widowhood in the Indian context, though in a rather unusual way – it is the story of an American

woman Sally's attempts of committing sati, on account of her inability to accept her life as a widow after the death of her husband.

Ever since the nineteenth century reformers' focus on the issue of widowhood, the deplorable condition of widows had captured the imagination of the nation. Though the image of the widow – as an outcaste clad in white sari, with tonsured head and a victim of social and religious strictures – which has been a part of the public consciousness has been a pan-Indian one, the discourse of widowhood and by analogy the actual condition of widows vary not only from region to region but also on the basis of issues like caste and class. So while widows in Bengal were being forced to commit sati or lead their lives miserably without having the option of remarriage [9] – a specifically upper-caste phenomenon – in the nineteenth century, widows amongst the land-holding communities of Punjab and Haryana were being forced to re-marry to ensure the retention of property within a particular family.[10] And even today, with education and consciousness having brought a substantial change in women's lives, the word "widow" evokes the unproblematic image of a destitute figure, devoid of agency and existing at the fringes of the society.[11]

This is a fallacy because the image is not in concordance with the changing layers of reality. This is not to say that widows in India are not exploited or their lives are not miserable, rather a pointer towards the fact widowhood cannot be viewed as a monolithic structure with similar ramifications for everyone. Apart from factors like region, caste, class which have already been mentioned, elements like the level and degree of urbanity, education and of course the familial environment and the individual personality of the woman decide to a great extent the kind of widowhood that the woman is going to experience. After all widowhood is as much a cultural "construct" as it is a material condition; and it varies according to the dominant ideologies of the times.

Padmanabhan in "Hot Death, Cold Soup" tries to contest this unproblematic representation of the widow as a helpless destitute through the figure of Shona Sen. As a figure of considerable influence and authority she is posed as a contrast to Sally – an

American woman married to an Indian man, contemplating sati. In an inversion of expected associations it is the "Western" woman – Sally who is portrayed as the victim of patriotic ideologies, while the woman rooted in the Third-World – Shona Sen becomes the epitome of agencied subjectivity.[12]

Padmanabhan does make the conventional association between widowhood and helplessness/destitution, but in making Sally proclaiming the idiom she leaves space for questioning it, which is what the character of Shona Sen explores. Sally, we get to know was an assistant librarian at Harvard university, where she met her husband – Subhash, then a student at the university. Subhash comes across as a brilliant student in Sally's descriptions: from the way she talks about him it is clear that she thought highly of and was probably in awe of him (5). Apart from her erstwhile profession not much is known about Sally as a person: the only thing she chooses to talk about is the relationship that she had with Subhash, being clearly overwhelmed by him, even in his absence.

From Sally's account as well as from the claustrophobic settings of the house which is structured as an "onion" (2), it becomes clear that she is used to leading a cloistered and secluded life. She neither has a good relationship with Subhash's relatives nor was in touch with her parents back home: this becomes clear from Shona Sen's search for the US address that Sally gives. Completely dependent on Subhash – economically and socially – she explains her desire to commit sati by citing her loneliness.

Her initial stand, however, is to state that she had been extremely happy with Subhash and could not bear to part from him. Moreover, by committing "Satty" (ibid) she would be able to "prove" (47) her feelings for her husband and reaffirm her status as "an Indian wife": an Indian wife in Sally's vocabulary being someone "who must have longed to join him on his last journey" (15). When contradicted that Indian wives do not necessarily want to join their husbands on the pyre, she is not ready to change her opinion and finally goes on to assert that, "I bet you – if a survey was done almost any woman would prefer death to widowhood" (16).

These proclamations are made before Shona Sen, a journalist who had been invited by Sally to assist her in becoming a sati. Shona, from the very beginning of the story has been portrayed as a strong and successful woman. The senior-most woman journalist in her paper, who can "turn in a 2000 word lead story in one hour flat" (1), she comes across as a person very much in control. She has a relationship with a man but does not want to marry him as she does not believe in the institution. She has a sense of humour, and comes across as a person with an incisive mind. This image does not get affected, rather persists even after the revelation of her being a widow. Sally had chosen Shona to come and assist her solely on the basis of her being a widow, and the fact that she knew English: she is extremely disappointed at not receiving the empathy which she had expected. Sally's state as a widow without any support systems to fall back upon is pitiable but her attempt to present her individual predicament as being typical of Indian women is erroneous, to say the least. Shona Sen's existence is a pointer to the fact that some women, however, miniscule their percentage might be, have a different kind of an experience. The differences in attitude of Shona and Sally also bring to the fore another point regarding women's experience of widowhood: the factor of self-perception. Without denying the overwhelming pressure of social circumstances, it can be said that the kind of widowhood a woman experiences, is to some extent dependent on the way she constructs her identity. While for Shona her primary identity is constituted by her status as a working woman – she was only incidentally a widow – for Sally her whole world and identity had revolved around Subhash, which is why she finds it difficult to adjust in his absence.

Shona's statements of how she had felt free after the death of her husband are brushed aside by Sally on the grounds that women who have not had a good marriage cannot possibly understand what a woman who has had one would feel. She believes that what she shared with Subhash was different from any other marriage, as their relationship lacked the formality which marked other marriages (7) in India. The interesting point to be noted here is that in spite of aspiring to embody the core of "Indianness" Sally can never completely internalize the idea. When she talks about Indian wives, the pronoun that she uses is never "we" but always "they": she could not overcome her "otherness" at her subconscious level, in spite of her conscious attempts of doing so.

Sally's attempts of committing sati could not be justified even if she had a successful and happy marriage: the fact that it is an illusion that she tries hard to construct further enhances the poignancy of the situation. As the plot progresses, it is revealed that Subhash not only had an illicit relationship with his servant but he also had a son – Laxman, with her. Subhash forced Sally to look after Laxman after Sally became responsible for the death of this servant. Sally's marital relationship with Subhash had been marked by constant sense of inadequacy, with the former constantly trying to live up to the image constructed by her husband. Even before the revelation of Subhash's infidelity, Sally's proclamations of marital bliss had begun to sound hollow with her assertions, "but Indian wives never ask their husbands direct questions!" (6), and finally the truth is revealed by Sally herself. On her refusal to accept the affair, Subhash had accused her of being too "Western", of not knowing "her place" and not being "Indian" enough (52), which had left her shaken.

Subhash's construction of a particular kind of Indianness to suit his needs is out in the open as is Sally's adherence to it. But while for some women in India this complete subservience might be innate, for Sally it was an elaborate act which had to be performed. Whether it is her sartorial code – white organdy saree, absence of jewellery – or her attempts at emotional subservience, the element of performance only serves in distancing her from the ideal of Indianness which she aspires towards. As Padmanabhan puts it, "An Indian wife would have been a pedestal for him, inert. Sally by contrast could only perform her devotions as an elaborate ritual. She drew attention to herself by the very act of proclaiming her selflessness" (52-53).

Sally's problematic position and her internalization, albeit under pressure, of a particular kind of patriarchal discourse gradually come out in the open. But in spite of being victimized, she is not without her own sense of racism and superiority. This finds expression not only in statements like, "I wanted a lady with me who would understand what it means to do something well, something beautiful and perfect – like in the West!" (18), but also in her and Subhash's attempts of modernizing the process of sati. Their plan

was to substitute the traditional pyre with a circular space fitted with petrol. This attempt at modernization was made with the presupposition that Indians themselves were incapable of making any such changes, and also because her act of self-immolation had to go down in a perfect manner. For she didn't want to be "just any old satty"; rather, one who would "stand out as an example for years and years ahead" (ibid).

The questioning and attempts of improving are not limited to the above-mentioned incident alone; rather Sally had experimented with Indian cuisine as well, which had irked Shona. On being served cold soup, Shona had thought to herself:

> I found myself wondering why anyone felt constrained to experiment with the tried and tested combinations of Indian food. There was, I felt an element of cultural arrogance involved. Like interior designers who use cult-objects from New Guinea as lamp bases in fashionable drawing rooms. The underlying logic being that no-one to whom the objects were sacred would ever enter such a drawing room. Or, if they did, would be too intimidated to protest.
>
> (11-12)

This is not to say that the "authenticity" of tradition has to be maintained or that a scrutiny has to be done of peoples' backgrounds before changes introduced by them can be accepted: but surely making changes with pretensions of superiority even while aspiring to "sameness" is self-deception if not hypocrisy.

In spite of the elaborate preparations, however, Sally does not become a "Satty" because Laxman – the half-witted son of Subhash chooses to die with his father by lying in her designated place and switching on the flow of petrol. The events that follow are predictable enough: Subhash's relatives come over, Sally requests Shona to send a photograph of herself to her family, which comes back unanswered and the photograph becomes an appendage on Shona's desk, "A few [. . .] words is usually all she gets. After which she is forgotten" (67).

An intriguing story, "Hot Death Cold Soup" juxtaposes issues like racism and blatant constructions of tradition with the contestation of the predominant image of

widowhood. This questioning is done as much by the creation of a character like Shona Sen as through the use of the narrative technique: while Sally's experiences, ideas and views get foregrounded, they are placed in perspective simultaneously, through the interjections and interventions of the narrator – Shona Sen. And though Shona's views and positions on the issues dealt with in the story are similar to the ones espoused by feminists in the Indian context, she does not consider herself to be one. However, this denial is not on grounds of ideological differences but on account of her temporal positioning: she belongs to a previous generation than the one in which the movement came into being. Her refusal to use the label notwithstanding, her sympathies are with the movement and this is revealed through her anger at Sally's proclamations:

> I don't think of myself as a feminist. [. . .] But in the face of Sally's gloating conservatism, I felt like a one-person shock troop. I felt her very presence, the very fact of her existence, was a threat to all that I stood for, the freedoms I had come to recognize and appreciate as my right. It maddened me that she should choose to flaunt as jewellery, the very chains that have bound and curtailed the lives of so many women in centuries past.
>
> (16)

From the stories discussed above, especially "Stains" and "Hot Death, Cold Soup", it is evident that Padmanabhan's protagonists are strong, able, independent women who do not take life as it comes rather have the capacity to question, negotiate and subvert patriarchal norms, be it at the ideological level or the practical one. That the author uses feminist perspectives and theoretical insights, even while bringing in her own individual stand point to bear upon them, in portraying these characters is clear: the fact that she does so in spite of her refusal to be called a feminist[13] is what makes it so interesting.

The ambiguity which marks Padmanabhan's relationship to feminism arises from the centrality of the issue of gender in feminist theoretical perspectives. So in spite of endorsing the empowering standpoints generated by feminism Padmanabhan finds it difficult to call herself a feminist: this denial is integrally related to the way in which she articulates her identity, which is an a-gendered one. Given the significance of the issue in context of the problematic that I am exploring, namely the refusal of women like

Padmanabhan to accept the term feminism, and the implications that this could have for the movement, examination of it in a serious manner becomes essential. And this – the manner in which she chooses to articulate identity – is something that I wish to explore in the next chapter, through a close look at the way she "constructs" her autobiographical persona in her work *GettingThere*.

End notes

[1] I have used a term that figured in the title of Sangari and Vaid's *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, and aptly captured the politics of working out of the "women's question".

[2] Tharu and Lalitha make this point on the basis of the attitude reflected by certain Indian women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially Swarnakumari Devi, Tarabai Shinde and Mokshadayani Mukhopadhyay. See Susie Tharu et al., "Introduction," *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991) 165-166.

[3] The repercussions that such assertions had on the feminist movement have already been talked about in the introductory chapter.

[4] Cornelia Sorabjee, Sarojini Naidu, Begum Shah Nawaz, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya were opposed to the term feminist, as it went against the nationalist mood of the first half of the twentieth century. See Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of the Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993) 88.

[5] The Dutch translation of *Hot Death, Cold Soup* was published by Van Gennep, Holland, while the Italian one was brought out by Castelvecchi, Italy.

[6] Jean Saldanha, "Breaking with Tribal Traditions," *Real Lives*, 8.5 (2000), 23 April 2004 (http://www.ippf.org/regions/sar/rl/issue5/break.htm).

[7] "Periods around the world," *One Woman*, 23 May 2004 (http://onewoman.com/redspot/cultures.html).

[8] The need to get rid of debilitating notions about the female body has variously been talked about. See especially, Chandra Alexandre, "Looking Positively at Menstruation: Empowering Women and Girls," *Women's Sahayog* (2001), 12 June 2004 (http://www.maabatakali.org/menstruation.htm).

[9] Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar is best known for his strong advocacies of widow remarriage. He talks about the hardships of widows in his pamphlet "The Marriage of Hindu Widows" going on to add that, "as long as this salutary practice[i.e.marriage] will be deferred , so long will the crimes of prostitution, adultery, incest, and foeticide, flow on in an ever increasing current." The quote is from *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood*, ed. Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001) 57.

[10] See Prem Chowdhry, "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989) 315-325. He also comments on the issue in detail in his essay "Popular Perceptions of Widow Remarriage in Haryana: Past and Present" in *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* ed. Bharati Ray (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995) 37-66.

[11] The predominant impression left by Chakravarti and Preeti Gill in their introduction to *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2001) 1-32, is precisely this. There are works which deal with the transgression of widows – see for example, Rajul Sogani, "Overstepping the Boundaries: Widows as Transgressors in Indian Fiction" in *Re-searching Indian Women*, ed. Vijaya Ramaswami (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003) 231-149; but the fact that the acts of forming romantic attachments are read as transgressions show their rootedness in patriarchal strictures. And though there are works where women claim that their husband's death has been a moment of freedom for them – see Shashi Deshpande, "My Beloved Charioteer," *Collected Stories*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), one hardly comes across portrayals of widows as empowered subjects in their own right.

[12] Mohanty has criticised the unproblematic assumption on the part of certain Western feminists that simply the term Third-World women is enough to conjure the image of being exploited, poor and without any

agency, with the obverse i.e. being educated, modern and free being equated with the women in the West. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2003) 17-42.

[13] Manjula Padmanabhan, "Re: On Reading *Getting There*," E-Mail to Shubhra Ray, 18 April 2004.

Chapter Three

Getting There: "Construction" of an A-Gendered Identity?

> [B]eing a woman she takes upon herself the freedom not to be willowy and graceful, but to be grotesque and comic and serious by turns. Of this perhaps unconscious rejection of femininity is born a healthy and skeptical androgynous elegance that is in itself perhaps an unconscious political statement about gender identity.[1]
>
> – Shuddhabrata Sengupta

> Do I contradict myself?
> Very well then I contradict myself,
> (I am large, I contain multitudes).[2]
>
> – Walt Whitman

Getting There by Manjula Padmanabhan is an autobiographical work, but instead of dealing with a substantial portion of her life as is common to autobiographical practices, the book concentrates on a few years. As the note on the first page of *Getting There* explains: "The book is based loosely on events in the author's life between 1977 and 1978. Almost none of it is entirely factual but as a whole it is more true than false." This blurring of boundaries between fiction and autobiography has interesting ramifications/implications, especially with the development of the feminist perspective on the genre. However, this needs to be considered within a broader overview of the conceptual development of autobiography itself.

In talking about the conceptual history of autobiography the focus is on Western, especially Anglo-American and French theories. As a reader located in a "Post-Colonial Third-World" country, I am aware that these theories have their own limitations on account of their inherent biases and politics of location. But probably on account of what Chandra Talpade Mohanty calls "the global hegemony of Western scholarship – that is, the production, publication, distribution and consumption of information and ideas" (2003: 21)

– these theories and ideas continue to be influential and shape our critical consciousness and thereby merit attention. The overview given of autobiography as a genre only touches some of the salient points and does not provide an account of the historical conditions of its development. Neither does it claim to be exhaustive: that is an impossible attempt given the scope of the present work. Moreover, this account is included basically to demonstrate the "embeddedness" of feminist notions of autobiography within the genre itself.

"Autobiography", according to Philippe Lejeune, "is a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (1989: 44). Traditionally, seen as a sub-section of history and often subsumed within biography, the status of autobiography as a distinct genre is marked with precariousness. As James Olney has put it, "Autobiography like the life it mirrors, refuses to stay still long enough for the genre critic to fit it out with the necessary rules, laws, contracts, and pacts, it refuses simply to be a literary genre like any other" (1980: 245). This hybridity and resistance to categorization emerges from the issues which are central to the genre. Autobiography or self-writing, both in the sense of "writing the self" and "writing about the self", is distinguished by its focus on "subjectivity" as opposed to the "objective" and "documentary" approach of other forms of history-writing. Since the author or the subject – "the self that is writing" and the object – "the self that is being written" – are purported to be similar, this genre was expected to reveal the truth or the fact about the "self". With increasing realisation that the "self that is being written" is not necessarily the self which exists prior to the act of writing has problematised the distinctions of fact/fiction, subject/object, self/other to a great extent, categories which autobiography as a genre was expected to bring together.

The foregrounding of the "constructed" nature of the self, following deconstructive and post-structuralist practices does not mean a denial of the corporeality of the self; rather it is an understanding of the way in which the self is always contextualised and comprehended through certain discourses. With the identity between the author and the protagonist being called into question, various ways have been formulated to retain the distinctive characteristics of autobiography as a genre.

Philippe Lejeune, to name only one of the theorists, has stated that simply using the pronoun "I" cannot be a guarantee of the identity of the author and the narrator/protagonist of the work, as the personal pronouns have reference only within a discourse, that too within the very act of utterance. Invoking theories of language acquisition, Lejeune argues that "the individual person and his discourse are connected to each other through the proper name, even before they are connected by the first person" (1989: 5). In other words, instead of the identity between the author and the narrator/protagonist of the work being taken for granted, now it is a matter of contract between the author and the reader, where the use of the "proper name" becomes symbolic of the aforesaid identity and the non-fictive nature of autobiography.

Determining the distinct characteristics of autobiography – its desire to explore the "truth" about the self and a coalescence of the author/narrator persona – has always been a contentious issue. Prior to the currency gained by "the autobiographical pact", the issue of intention was central to the corpus of autobiographical writings. "Intention", as used here referred not only to the authorial motive governing the production of the text but determined the reception of the text as well. It was used to rèsolve the problem of "referentiality" – that is, the kind and degree of "truth" that can be expected from auto-biographical writing. As Marcus points out:

> Very few critics would demand that autobiographical truth should be literally verifiable – this would, after all undermine the idea that the truth of the self is more complex than "fact". Thus, it is claimed, the intention to tell the truth, as far as possible, is a sufficient guarantee of autobiographical veracity and sincerity.
> (1994: 3)

The emphasis on sincerity, as Nancy Millers points out, reveals the inherent androcentric bias of autobiography. Sincerity, Miller suggests, implies a masculine subject, since women are less likely to be believed simply on account of who they are (1988: 51). The bias has not always been implicit, couched in the idiom of a universal subject, but explicit and overtly misogynist. A classic example of this is provided by Otto Weininger's book *Sex and Character*. According to Weininger, women do not have a continuous,

unbroken identity, and by implication the memory necessary for writing autobiography. He states "this peculiar continuity by which a man first realizes that he exists, that he is and that he is in the world, is all comprehensive in the genius, limited to a few important moments in the mediocre, and altogether lacking in women"(cit. Marcus 1994: 65). It is interesting to note that these claims were made as a part of Weininger's argument for the science of characterology to be based in large part on a study of sexual differences.

The "subject" of autobiography whether postulated by William Wordsworth, Lytton Stratchey, Roy Pascal, James Olney, Karl Weintraub, Philippe Lejeune – authors/critics who otherwise differ radically over the questions of autobiography as a genre and its inherent constituents – has traditionally been white, male with, more often than not, a middle-class orientation. This is probably distinctly evident in the construction of an autobiographical canon with the seminal texts of this genre being identified as Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, Jean Jacques Rousseau's *Confessions* and William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* (Anderson 2001: 16). So much so that autobiography as a genre has become one of the central cases for feminists to point out that exclusion and marginalisation that characterise the construction of literary canons. Feminists have not only questioned the emphasis on autobiography as a text produced retrospectively, which fails to take into account the recording of a life in the form of keeping diaries – a practice prevalent amongst women – but also Philippe Lejeune's autobiographical pact with its privileging of the proper name. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar write:

> For women in our culture a proper name is at best problematic [...] even as it inscribes her into the discourse of society by designating her role as her father's daughter, her patronymic effaces her matrilineage and thus erases her own position in the discourse of the future. Her 'proper' name, therefore, is always in a way *im*proper because it is not, in the French sense, *propre*, her own, either to have or to give.
>
> (1987: 24 Gilbert and Gubar's emphasis)

However, feminists have been divided on the question of the foregrounding of the "constructed" nature of the self. While Nicole Ward Jouve has argued that "you must have

a self before you can afford to deconstruct it" (1991: 7), Sidonie Smith has adopted the deconstructive approach, asserting that "There is no essential, original, coherent autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and 'true'" (1998: 108-9). The scepticism regarding deconstructive approaches arises from the hitherto prevalent practice of denying space to women – both ontological and epistemological – by subsuming them within a discourse of supposedly universal selfhood. But increasingly feminist theorists, as is evident from Smith's position have relied on and in fact developed further the deconstructive approaches, realising their utility in the comprehension of the situatedness of the self, while not letting go of the gendered perspective.

This act of redefining genres/categories/theoretical discourses has been a hallmark of feminist methodology. And the same process is at work in the context of autobiography as well, with the focus being on a blurring of the elements of fact and fiction within the genre, especially in the works of critics like Liz Stanley (1992: 240-56). The element of fiction is not confined to the recognition of the fictive or "constructed" nature of the self, but finds explicit mention. For instance, Ann Oakley begins her autobiography *Taking it like a Woman* with the words – "Some of the characters in this book are real and some aren't" (1984). This comes as a reaction against the attempts of traditional autobiographical discourse to posit and define itself in contradistinction to fiction, with the focus being on a willed and rational self-consciousness, which gave an insight into the "truth" of things. Fictive characters and events are also introduced to place individual experience within the broader context of women's lives and experiences, foregrounding "the urge to be representative of other women" as Rita Felski puts it (1998: 84).

Manjula Padmanabhan's *Getting There*, in claiming the status of semi-fictionality for itself as an autobiography, is certainly not unprecedented. In fact, this kind of a stance aligns it with the hitherto mentioned feminist positions on autobiography. However, the fictional space can be deployed for varied reasons, differing substantially from one individual to the other and Padmanabhan's use of the term "fiction" has its own distinctive

connotations. She introduced the element of "fiction" in her narrative, "to prevent her mother from being even more shocked than she already was."[3] Padmanabhan's response brings in the question of the intended audience for a work and the extent to which the author's perception of the audience leads to self-censorship. For, audience figures predominantly in the list of variables which includes the foibles of memory, the choices, whether deliberate or not, of what to include or exclude, the significance of world views, values and political contexts and the effects of partial or occluded knowledge of one's life – elements through which the autobiographical "self" is created. And since, the text needs to be published in order to finally reach the audience, the policies, marketing strategies and more importantly the target audience that the concerned publishing house has in mind become crucial, not only in context of the shape that the text finally assumes – determined through editorial policies – but also for the final reception of the work.

Getting There is a case in point. Padmanabhan while writing keeps a small "studio audience" of people in mind. As she puts it, "This audience is composed partly of friends and partly of others who I assume are interested in my work and have been reading it over the years – strangers, but familiar in the sense that I know they are there or else I would not still be in print". She goes on to add that while writing *Getting There*, however, she was "weirdly confident", that she could get the book published, "and didn't stop to think about the problems of audience and market – which is a good thing and suggests that I am unworldly – but it is a bad thing from the point of view of my own viability."[4] Padmanabhan had intended her work as a memoir but her editor at Picador was apprehensive marketing it as such, because the autobiography of a relatively unknown woman writer would be hard to sell. It was much safer for Picador to bracket *Getting There* within the categories of travel-writing or novel, in order to be able to sell the book. This kind of a forced categorization as well as the "low brow"[5] way in which it was marketed affected the reception of the book.[6]

Getting There was also excised of a large portion of the Holland section of the text by her editor at Picador, Mary Mount, which if retained would have rendered the work "solemn and philosophical".[7] Indeed as a look at the manuscript of the unedited Holland

section of the text revealed (*Getting There* is divided into four such sections – Bombay, New York, Munich and Holland) it is characterised by a greater amount of reflection on the self and an attempt to come to terms with it.[8] This consideration of the excised portion is not to hypothesize about how different the book would have been – but to point to the various factors which went into its "production" as a text. Our concern is, of course, with the text of *Getting There*, as published by Picador in 2000, the version that finally reached the readers.

Getting There has as its central concern the question of identity and an exploration of the possibilities of making/un-making the self. If a working definition of identity can be thought of as the particular set of traits – both physical and mental and allegiances that give one a consistent personality and mode of social being – then Manjula (henceforth, this is how I will refer to the narrator/protagonist of the text and use Padmanabhan to indicate the author) finds various aspects of her identity problematic and compromising. Most of the variables that constitute her identity – her class, her nationality, her gender, her religious affiliations – are not elements that she has chosen, having been born into them, and therefore, the expectations arising from them seem even more constricting.

Not all categories bring with them the same kind of pressures. While Manjula can get away with writing "Agnostic" (Padmanabhan 2000a:174) when expected to reveal her religious affiliations or by ticking "Black" instead of "White" or "Other" in the US immigration form (153), i.e. exercise a degree of choice in the making of her identity, her attempts of going beyond or defying the "norms" for middle-class women meet with direct or indirect censure and in extreme cases immense social and mental pressure to conform. It goes without saying that these variables have played their part in making her the person that she is: Manjula is aware of this factor (115-116), but even the consciousness of her "situatedness" or the comfort of security and social sanction that giving into them entail cannot prevent Manjula from being overburdened/suffocated. However, what is more troubling for Manjula is the fact that the aspect of her identity which she has chosen – her profession as an illustrator/cartoonist – which is the one element that she would like to make the central determinant of her identity, gets ignored.

It must be noted that the idea of making/un-making one's self is a fairly recent idea. A number of theorists/philosophers/critics have contributed to this development, prominent among them being Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. The degree of agency that the term making/un-making one's self implies for the subject has not been an unproblematic or unqualified assertion rather it has been concomitant with the idea of the subject's being embedded within and controlled by the dominant power structures. Tony Davies, while commenting on Foucault has aptly brought this out:

> *Discourse* for Foucault is what the relations of production are for Marx, the unconscious for Freud, the impersonal laws of language for Saussure, ideology for Althusser: the capillary structure of social cohesion and conformity. It situates us as individuals, and silently legislates the boundaries of what is possible for us to think and say. Above all, it is normative: not because transgression and dissent are impossible [. . .] but because they too are "grammatical," already anticipated and positioned in the hegemonic syntax of discursive power.
>
> (1997: 70)

This is not to say that the focus on embeddedness of the subject can only lead to a sense of defeatism or the viewing of subjectivity as a form of "self-incarceration" as Terry Eagleton commenting on Althusser's idea of ideology (1991: 146) had stated. The very awareness of this situatedness/controlled state can facilitate a movement against and beyond such a position, through dialogue and "un-anticipated" resistance. While Karl Marx had indeed stated in his "Preface" to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness," he had also suggested the possibility of a broad metaconsciousness whereby men come to understand how such consciousness-determining "property relations" are in fact "fetters" (1970: 21). This inside/outside movement is, in fact the process through which proletarian political self-consciousness becomes possible, and one gains a critical awareness of "ideology," of politically significant, social beliefs that have been passed off as natural facts, and learns to resist them.

Louis Althusser contributed further to Marx's conception of class critique by reworking the concept of ideology in the light of the more complex notion of subject formation given by psychoanalysis and the more elaborate system of ideological practices that had developed in late capitalist societies. For him too the subject is enmeshed in social systems, so far that he does not even realise to what extent he has naturalized it. To put it in the words of Althusser himself:

> In the ordinary sense of the term subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. [In fact] the individual *is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection*, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection "all by himself."
>
> (1971: 182 Althusser's emphasis)

Althusser has been read by Eagleton as defeatist but he has also been read as empowering and politically stimulating by someone like Judith Butler, who has asserted that the "conscription" that Althusser talks about is not final, rather "being" can be read as "precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation" (1997: 131). Such a position/reading, on the one hand, prevents assumptions of complete agency or control over one's own subjectivity and on the other, serves as a deterrent in viewing the subject as completely controlled or pre-determined: the focus is on the repetitions/ruptures/breaks in dominant structures which allow neither position to assume finality. To quote Butler again, this time in the context of Michel Foucault:

> For Foucault, the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced again and again). It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate the dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization.
>
> (1997: 93)

Foucault is one of the most influential, recent critics of subjectivity, whose idea of "discourse" – a broad concept that he uses to refer to language and other forms of

representation – has become an integral part of the post-structuralist vocabulary of subjectivity: it is a factor that determines, and at the same time becomes determined in the process. In his lecture "The Discourse on Language," he had asserted that in "every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed" (Foucault 1972: 216), but had gone on to add in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, that:

> Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it [. . .] we must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.
> (1990: 100-101)

Thus, Foucault's own position and Butler's reading of him show that the possibility of agency within and against prevailing discourses, given their precariousness, is very much there within the Foucaultian perspective.

The concept of agency for the subject is even more complicated in Sigmund Freud, whose emphasis on the theory of unconscious contested any blind faith in rational control over human behaviour and social life. Freud's works came much before Althusser and Foucault, towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, and his theory of therapeutic intervention can be interpreted as one of the most powerful manifestations of a general desire for instrumental control over subjectivity. However, there are contradictory implications throughout Freud: on the one hand, the subject is always at the mercy of forces, drives and desires that are beyond his/her control and on the other, Freudian theory offers itself as a map of human psychology that suggests a degree of influence, even if not absolute control over subjectivity for the trained psychoanalyst, even though it is denied to the individual subject (Freud 1957: 148-149).

Against Freud's emphasis on greater social conformity for the "aberrant" characters – that is the purported aim of psychotherapy – for Jacques Lacan the utilization of

psychoanalytic concepts in cultural interpretation was more important than the attempts of pathologizing and normalizing certain drives and desires. He was more interested in interpreting the structural principles of social identity. Famously stating that "the unconscious is structured like a language" (Lacan 1981: 203), he continued to emphasize that to understand human behaviour one must understand the rules and processes of human communication.

The conflict, between the illusion of a complete self and the continuing experience of the body as always fragmented and incomplete which the infant experiences, in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage, is assuaged to some extent by the subject's encounter with language, what Lacan calls the symbolic order. On the one hand, for him, "the form in which language is expressed, itself defines subjectivity" (Lacan 1977: 85, 86) and on the other, the subject's acquisition of language and an identity through language can only bring with it innumerable tensions, as language itself is unreliable and unfixable. Lacan's theory of subjectivity is one of inherent vacillation and unsteadiness in the face of a continuing desire for a sense of security and control.

The theories of subjectivity mentioned here owe their inception and development to numerous philosophers who came before them. The Enlightenment theorists John Locke[9] and Immanuel Kant's[10] propagation of the idea of rational control over subjectivity, although in entirely different ways, on the one hand led to the grounding of the notion that through disengagement and rational control the self is fully within our power to perfect, and on the other generated reactions against their excessive emphasis on reason: the recent theories of subjectivity, especially the ones mentioned here are marked by an absence of any such emphasis. Another theorist who exercised influence is G.W.F. Hegel: his emphasis on the historicizing of existence and self-conception and his idea of the dialectical process[11] influenced Marx's theorization of subjectivity – which is related to his idea of class-conflict – to a great extent. However, Friedrich Nietzsche is probably the philosopher who is in some senses, the precursor of the twentieth century theorists: his assumption that post-religious, post-modern human beings have the historically unparalleled potential to "create themselves" (Nietzsche: 1974: 266) if they simply have

the will to do so, has had great influence on the thought-processes of existentialists like Jean Paul Sartre.

Through this rather sketchy overview the point that I am trying to make is that the concept of agency or control over one's own identity, with all its limitations and qualifications is very much in place. This denotes a huge shift from the Platonic and pre-Renaissance idea of identity as inflexible and predetermined "a given," which could only be discovered and not made. The Platonic idea of being ruled by reason meant the shaping of one's life according to a pre-existent rational order which one "knows" to be there. Under no circumstances was self-determination part of what he considered healthy or rational, as it would have meant disrupting the status quo (Plato 1973: 109). In this world view, the only way to act ethically is to act according to a pre-ordained purpose by fulfilling one's duty towards society.

And while in the works of Niccolo Machiavelli[12] and Rene Descartes[13], the idea of fashioning a self comes up, although in entirely different contexts, the subject that they deal with remains rooted within a particular race, class and gender even while being articulated in a language of universality, like it would be done in the Enlightenment theories of subjectivity. It has been pointed out that recent theories of subjectivity depend on the premise that one can control one's consciousness by becoming aware of the way in which one has been controlled: such a stand owes its inception to the knowledge that issues of race and gender had not been considered in earlier theories even while there was no acknowledgement of such an omission.

The subject, like in autobiographical narratives, was white, male and from the middle-class, a fact that came to be increasingly realized, following the awareness regarding arbitrary norms for persons belonging to a different race and gender. The question of who falls within the category of human and is recipient of all the rights conferred thereby, remains one of the most important insights into such omissions, accounting for the incorporation of such issues in theories of subjectivity and the protests against exclusion of women from such discourses.

As in theories of autobiographical narratives discussed earlier and theories of embodiment which will follow, feminist interventions in theories of subjectivity too, took the form of questioning, reshaping, radically undermining existing viewpoints and developing new perspectives. From Mary Wollstonecraft's condemnations of hypocritical gender norms and aspirations of equality with men[14] to Simone de Beauvoir's propagation of a constructionist approach to women's subjectivity[15]; from Julia Kristeva's attempts of dismantling the unitary Freudian subject[16] while focusing on the recovery of pre-linguistic disruptions in order to defy the Lacanian emphasis on the preeminence of the symbolic order, to Helene Cixous' propagation of the "Ecriture Feminine"[17] for the formation of a new female subjectivity; from Judith Butler's concept of "performativity" [18] for undermining sexual subjectivities to Donna J. Haraway's call for a self-conscious acceptance of "permanent partiality",[19] feminist theorisations of subjectivity have attained greater sophistication, critical edge and precision.

The emphasis, like most other discourses, is clearly on poststructuralist theories of subjectivity. This has created some discomfort, especially with poststructuralist theory's emphasis on the decentering of the subject: this is seen as a problem on account of the erstwhile denial of subjecthood to women. But the insights generated by such positions are immensely useful. This is clearly brought out by Chris Weedon when he asserts that, "the political significance of decentring (sic) the subject and abandoning the belief in essential subjectivity is that it opens up subjectivity to change" (1987: 33) but also makes it clear:

> Although the subject in poststructuralism is social (sic) constructed in discursive practices, she nonetheless exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available.
>
> (125)

The element of choice is today an integral part of the discourse of subjectivity but as the discussion above makes it clear, such choices are not without their limitations and qualifications. As Lawrence M. Friedman has put it "one chooses (within limits) a race, a

gender, a form of sexuality", but also goes on to add "this is sometimes [. . .] difficult, because the outside society does not always go along with one's choices (1999: 240).

Manjula realizes this the hard way when her attempts at redefining the contours of her identity – in the form of seeking answers to questions of spirituality, interpreting physical touch in a particular manner or dropping her sense of disbelief about the process of "energy transfers" to be able to experiment with it – meet with immense disapproval. What is more, Manjula realises that she has internalized the strictures, which makes her attempts of exploring new vistas, a struggle not only with the outside world, but also her own self. To quote:

> *We are not merely ourselves*, I thought. *We are also a composite of who our friends think we are*. [...] I could feel the pull, not merely of Sujaya, Prashant and Govinda but of my brother, sister, my parents, my cousins, the whole constellation of aunts, uncles and assorted relatives, exerting their influence upon the palm of my hand, insisting that I should snatch it away, that it was not characteristic of me, of the person they thought I was, to be sitting in this way [...] with this foreigner, doing this thing [i.e. experimenting with energy transfers].
> Yet there I was, doing it. Did that make me a stranger to all those who know me? Or did it make the person I was at the moment, an imposter, masquerading in my skin?
>
> (2000a: 77 Padmanabhan's emphasis)

Self doubts not withstanding, Manjula decides to go ahead with what she wants to do, be it spending a month with little known Dutch-men or engaging in a search for the cosmic truth. The direction and shape that these attempts take – be it the disavowal of a certain kind of identity that she is expected to possess or dismantling herself – are however determined by the specific conditions of her situation and also the peculiar traits of her personality.[20] The complications, ethical dilemmas and self reflections that these give birth to, form the core of the narrative of *Getting There*.

The identity that Manjula has in mind is not a disembodied one rather it is integrally and inextricably linked with her body and its concomitant features – obesity and "unattractiveness". Her plans of dieting stem from these two features, and Manjula's success or failure at maintaining the diet – after all dieting is seen as a way of radically

changing her identity at par with experimenting with "energy transfer" – affects her self-perception. Before going on to discuss how the body or the act of dieting or for that matter the factor of obesity assumes an individualistic signification with Manjula, we need to look into the "cultural connotations" of these terms and their variegated and loaded usage.

At one level, all human beings are embodied creatures – the body is a biological reality and therefore biological differences between men and women lead to differences in female and male embodiment. The body, however, is also a discursive and cultural construct, being situated in and articulated through various sociological, anthropological, historical and religious discourses. The consideration of the body as a discursive construct is not to deny its corporeality but to provide an insight into how our understanding of the body, its gendered differences, is always mediated through certain contexts. This kind of a deconstructionist approach depicts the fallacy of the position that male superiority and female inferiority is based on "essential" attributes. Biological differences become the basis of a cultural devaluation and stigmatisation of the female body. The very fact that women are able in general to menstruate, to develop another body unseen within their own, to give birth, and to lactate is enough to suggest a potentially dangerous volatility that marks the female body as out of control and beyond the force of reason. In contrast to the apparent self-containment of the male body, the female body demands attention and invites regulation. In short, women are just their bodies in ways that men are not, biologically destined to inferior status in all spheres that privilege rationality. At the same time, however, that women are seen as more wholly embodied, the boundaries of their embodiment are never fixed and secure. As the devalued process of reproduction makes clear, the body has a propensity to leak, to overflow, to contaminate and engulf. Thus, women themselves are in the conventional masculinist imagination, not simply inferior beings whose civil and social subordination is both inevitable and justified, but objects of fear and repulsion.

The expression of this kind of an anxiety about women's bodies has taken different forms in different cultures – ranging from the celebration of certain bodily aspects to

severe repression – almost all of them are inextricably connected with the idea of the need for regulating female sexuality. In the Indian context, especially within the Hindu religious tradition, the worship of women as the embodiment of "Shakti," the strictures associated with the life of a widow, the stigma associated with menstruation[21] are manifestations of the above-mentioned idea in various forms.

Such ideas have been widely pervasive and have negatively affected the way women think about their bodies and subsequently their selves. The social constructionist position – a critique of biological essentialism – "emphasizes the view that a woman experiences her body, sexuality and feminine identity as a social being located in a particular cultural setting with its dominant values and norms" (Thapan 1997: 5). Power is exercised in such a manner by dominant tropes and structures that the ideas propagated become internalised, a case in point being the pervasiveness of the idea of the negative status of the feminine body amongst women themselves. Michel Foucault's influence has been pivotal in the development of this theoretical perspective, especially his exposition of the workings of power in social processes. Foucault's analysis of the discursive body examines its capacity to be manipulated, moulded, constructed and changed and explains the manner in which the body is invested with different and changing forms of power (Foucault 1977; 1990).

The female body is manipulated and control is exercised over it not only through the discourses of history, religion or medicine but also through the discourse of the ideal feminine beauty, an attainment of which results in the objectification of female bodies. Sandra Lee Bartky, who along with Susan Bordo has been analysing how control is exercised through the setting up of a set of normatives which demand/expect conformity, has identified certain disciplinary practices that contribute to current socio-historical constructions of femininity.[22] Foremost among them are the diet and exercise regimes which are designed to attain the ideal female body size and configuration. With the proliferation of images of women with beautiful faces and figures in the print as well as the electronic media, 'the rules for femininity' (Bordo 1993: 169) have become pervasive. The sheer number of articles in women's magazines describing "how to" dress, apply make-up

and present an appropriate image attests to the fact that there are codes of behaviour to which women must subscribe.

Moreover, Bordo maintains that through the disciplines of diet, make-up and dress "women" are rendered less socially "oriented" and more focused on "self-modification" (1989: 14). The disciplinary regimes of femininity have political implications because they keep women attending to their appearance, looks, bodily comportment and image rather than to the material and political circumstances of their lives. What is more dangerous is that these kind of attainments – of a perfect skin, the perfect body or hair have increasingly come to be projected as integrally connected with the liberation or freedom of women – a matter of choice and not a constriction. The internalization of representations of the female body by women thus becomes fundamental to the formation of the feminine identity. Women not only internalize the "overarching gaze" of the male connoisseur, but learn to consider their bodies from a position of alterity. To put it in the words of Sandra Lee Bartky, "women live their bodies as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal other" (1988: 72).

The protest against biological reductionism and discursive control has taken various forms among feminists. Ranging from a denial of the feminine body, accompanied by a subsequent aspiration for disembodied subjecthood, equivalent to men[23] to a militant celebration of the feminine characteristics – reproductivity, sexuality and motherhood[24] in the Anglo-American context; to a revaluation of the way femininity is inscribed on to the female form in a culture, in the French context;[25] to insights into and renewed theorisations/rewritings about the ways the "body" gets marked at the interface of "caste and class" (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 5) and becomes a site for the struggles of religion, community and the state in the Indian context – the reactions have been varied. In consonance with the emphasis on heterogeneity, plurality and the celebration of difference that has been a hallmark of the feminist movements in the recent decades, the theorization regarding feminine embodiment has intensified not with the hope of "recovering an authentic female body unburdened of patriarchal assumptions, but in the full

acknowledgement of the multiple and fluid possibilities of differential embodiment" (Shildrick and Price 1999: 12).

Against this background, especially with diet being considered a disciplinary measure, Manjula's explorations of the embodied identity which is integrally linked to the question of obesity and diet becomes problematic. But as mentioned earlier, Padmanabhan deals with the concept of embodied identity in an individualistic manner, sometimes by even subverting the perceptions and insights of the feminist positions. For instance, the embodiment that she has in mind is not female/feminine but a-gendered, and further, the debilitating effects of obesity, acquire a completely different hue in this context.

A large section of this chapter has been about the feminist notions of autobiography, identity and embodied self – discussions, I thought necessary for showing the allegiance of *Getting There* to feminist perspectives – however perfunctory. Also, it would have been naive to consider the concepts of identity, body and autobiography without taking into consideration the rich insights that the feminist theorisations have given rise to, especially in discussing an author who happens to be a woman. But the attempt here is not to subsume *Getting There* within the feminist corpus, or read it unproblematically as a feminist text – which it is not. Rather as pointed out in the introductory chapter, the purpose behind reading *Getting There* is to examine Padmanabhan's attempts of "constructing" her "self" in the text, given her assertions of an a-gendered identity, "I rarely think of myself as a woman ... my struggle in the early days was a straight forward essential one: how to be a human being who writes/draws and how to support myself financially".[26] Given that the work is a retrospective construction of Padmanabhan's twenty-four/twenty-five year old self, I believed a reading of it would give an insight not only into the author's concept of her peculiar a-gendered identity but also the elements that went into its making.

I would argue that in *Getting There* the exploration and construction of the self and its concomitant identity arises out of a conflict between the pressure to accept the cultural connotations of gender and an attempt to go beyond it. As opposed to the confident

assertions of Padmanabhan now,[27] her textual self in her autobiographical narrative is at cross roads, caught at an intersection of various fragmented identities and selves: the subsequent confusion and the insights gained, form the narrative of the work, with the narrator-protagonist Manjula privileging her professional/a-gendered self.

The assertion of an a-gendered identity especially when articulated by a woman attains a problematic dimension because of a number of reasons. Firstly, given the devaluation of "woman" as a cultural construct, any denial of the gendered aspect of their identity by women, in preference for an alternative one, is automatically interpreted as an acceptance of the devaluation, and an aspiration for the "superior" masculine identity. And the protest of radical feminists against liberal feminism's preference for a disembodied a-gendered identity, equivalent to men – in the form of a militant celebration and positive redefinition of the feminine has not only further lent credence to this supposition, but it has almost come to have the quality of an axiom, having implications much beyond its immediate temporal and political context.

But that is, of course, not the final position. With the emergence of the theories of performativity, [28]and cyborg-identity,[29] on the one hand, while the pre-dominance and normativeness of the binaries – male/female, heterosexual/homosexual have come to be questioned, on the other, the erstwhile devaluation of the constituents of these binaries has become less obvious. This undermining, of the act of comprehension in terms of binaries, has led to the increasing realisation that the denial of identity as a woman does not automatically mean that it is on account of an aspiration for a masculine identity. As a consequence, space has become available to women to explore identities which are not defined in obvious gendered terms. This is not an uncontested space, sometimes being confined to the level of self-perception of women themselves, but given the odds facing such a position, even the acquisition of this is indeed an achievement.

And it is this space that Padmanabhan chooses to explore for the construction of her "self" in *Getting There*. The autobiographical persona of Padmanabhan is biologically a woman and being heterosexually oriented, obviously reiterates and affirms this aspect in

sexual relations, but refuses to accept the cultural connotations of her gender – be it in the form of "devaluation" or "celebration" of her womanhood and it is in this sense that the identity she asserts is "a-gendered".

Padmanabhan's autobiographical persona has indeed a curious relationship with her body. She was actually shocked to see herself naked for the first time at the age of seventeen – a conscious acknowledgement of the fact, that her body had not been a part of her psyche. As Manjula puts it "It was a genuine surprise to find that I looked remarkably similar to those other bodies I had seen in photographs, even though I didn't have the ideal statistics", and goes on to analyse, "on the one hand it could mean that I didn't see myself objectified in the way of nude models in photographs. On the other hand, it could mean that I had been wandering around for years in a body that I inhabited as if it were a fancy dress belonging to someone else" (149). That she is not enamoured with her body is obvious, and this is reiterated time and again throughout the narrative, but the interesting point is that her identity is integrally connected with her conception of her body. On being berated by her room-mate Sujaya for not being responsible and considerate, Manjula's immediate reaction is not a denial of these accusations, but to engage in an extensive act of self-criticism, where her behavioural and mental traits become linked with her physical characteristics. Obesity becomes not only a repugnant bodily trait but also the explanation of a number of other undesirable traits in her. As Manjula put it, "Yes, I was inconsiderate, incompetent and self-indulgent. I was fat after all. I was a person whose intake of fuel exceeded her body's needs" (45). The metaphor of obesity is extended to her professional life as well where it is associated with her inability to manage time and by analogy, succeed. Having compared fat with fuel, Manjula goes on to add, "Time is also a kind of fuel except that it can't be stored. Nevertheless I could feel the rolls of unused hours lying in unsightly heaps across the sagging belly of my days" (46).

It is against this kind of a context that Manjula's attempts of dieting need to be placed. Although in the very first chapter itself, the reader is informed of Manjula's plans of going on a diet, no specific reasons are given for her decision at that particular juncture of her life. For as far back as Manjula could remember she had always been fat (61). The

association of obesity with inefficiency and incompetence has already been mentioned. The obverse is now true. Being slim and slender becomes associated with efficiency and a life of consequence. Manjula's purported aim of going on a diet is not to attain the perfect vital statistics as promoted by the media, but to get rid of the traits which she finds problematic. The normative figure for her is represented by Dr. Prasad, her doctor at the diet clinic, who gave the impression that "if his 'patients' followed his instructions, they might succeed not only in losing weight but in gaining racehorses too" (9).

This kind of an attitude is in direct contradistinction to Sandra Lee Bartky and Susan Bordo's assertions of the reasons for women to go on a diet. Manjula would not mind looking good – her reaction "I didn't want to look like a limp balloon or a surgeon's embroidery sampler" (11) makes that clear. But knowing her limitations she did not come to the doctor with unreasonable expectations. And instead of making her less aware of her social and material circumstances, as pointed out by Susan Bordo, the act of dieting gives her, a heightened perception of her social condition and her place within it. She belonged to a social class where giving birth to "healthy children" was considered the height of achievement and sexual relations outside marriage "an abomination" – a class which brought with it, its own levels of security and comfort, but in which Manjula was deemed a misfit. The realization of her controlled existence is also a result of her brother Raghu's harangue – he called her a "bad influence" (49) on his children – and this makes her state memorably:

> I had grown up wearing the jewelled harnesses that kept me and others like me in our place within our social class. The only time we ever felt our bondage was when we strained against it in the direction of some forbidden pleasure. But eating frugally had apparently caused a change to take place. I had shed weight, literally as well metaphorically. I was now loose within the harness [. . .] [and] planned to slip it off altogether.
>
> (115-116)

She is aware that women diet for a number of reasons, the primary being to match the image of a fictitious ideal, either of their own but in most cases their boyfriends' or husbands'. This question comes back again and again to her when she looks at the slides of

Dr. Prasad's other patients (11), which confirm that dieting can be a constricting and debilitating exercise as opposed to its popular conception as a liberating one. The reason for pointing out the anomalies of Susan Bordo and Sandra Lee Bartky's arguments in the context of Manjula is not to undermine their findings and insight but to point to the fact that Manjula does not fit into the gender-defined codes of dieting be it in terms of intent or its effects. While Manjula reiterates that her plan to diet actually arises from the desire to become someone else (31) it is only towards the end that she mentions that it could have been an attempt to deny her female self altogether, rather than an attempt of attaining the ultimate feminine perfection. To put it in her own words, "May be the desire to diet was actually a yearning to step out of the suit of soft, fat filled female clothes that I had been given to wear at birth" (236). She believes that if she had been given a choice at birth she would have chosen to be something else. Though she does not know what she actually wanted, she was sure she did not want to be a man. Manjula did not believe that men and women were so different that their "bodies created their destiny" (ibid).

This denial of the specific female/feminine body is closely related to Manjula's aversion for the specific female role. But, as pointed out earlier, this denial does not take the form of an aspiration for either the body of the male or the specific masculine role which she finds equally if not more constricting. "I could easily imagine how violently unhappy I would have been if I had been a man" (ibid). It is Manjula's perception of the female role which leads her to deny it and seek an a-gendered identity; this perception is based on her class and her social background. Manjula comes from a conventional middle-class family, with her close relations being well-settled in their respective professions – her father is a retired bureaucrat, her brother Raghu is a successful corporate lawyer and her sister Radha is a doctor based in the United States of America. Both her siblings are married and have children or in other words are "decent, respectable" people by the standards of middle-class Indian society. In such a class, marriage still remains the high water mark in women's lives in spite of their professional qualifications and achievements. For Manjula marriage is an anathema because she believes that one of its main purposes is ensuring the survival of human species i.e. reproduction. And as she makes it clear to the psychiatrist at the diet clinic she has had a deep-seated antipathy to

children ever since her own childhood. Cooking, housekeeping, nurturing – activities which are integrally connected with the conception of the female/feminine role do not find favour with Manjula. Ironic and scathing comments about marriage and the supposed fulfillment that women derive from domesticity abound in *Getting There*. Notable amongst them is the incisive remark that she makes about the American media's projection/construction of women in the context of domesticity and marriage, and her inability to belong to such a milieu. To quote:

> Soap operas like *All My Children* and *General Hospital* were a revelation, commerce and monotheism in passionate embrace. The one true god was represented by the loyal, omniscient, omnipotent and dandruff-free husband. Heaven was a place of static-free carpets and gleaming glassware [.....] [and women were] priestesses in the church of good house keeping [....] where in this dish-washer-friendly universe in which a women's worth was assessed by the sparkle on her cutlery, did I fit? No where.
>
> (191-192)

Against this background of sanctification of marriage, of considering it almost a "natural" law, Manjula, with her profession of a freelance illustrator/cartoonist, and her boyfriend Prashant whom she did not want to marry, stands out as an aberration. There is immense pressure on her to get married, not only from her family, especially her brother Raghu but also from strangers like Kamala who consider her behaviour "Un-Indian" (166). This kind of an imposition of the "natural" role of the female, and her own intense and deep seated grudge against it, lead her to search for an a-gendered identity.

Her ideas on romance and love also need to be mentioned in this context. Manjula is allergic to the word "love" and refuses to employ the terminology either for the relationship that she shares with Prashant, in spite of referring to him as her boy friend, or for the one that she has with Piet, about whom she feels intensely, if only for a short while. Manjula attributes her antipathy to the term to her plain looks – romance was only for women with attractive features, and to her quirk – her decision of committing suicide at the age of thirty. Since she had decided she was going to die young, there was no point in indulging in romantic entanglements. But, increasingly it becomes clear that "love" is a problematic term for Manjula because of its inevitable consummation in marriage, an act

she is not ready to engage in. As she puts it, "The price of romance for heterosexuals is the enormous expenditure of energy and resources which goes into, getting married and raising children. If I wasn't willing to pay the price, then in a real sense, I couldn't afford to be in love" (235).

Prashant is the man with whom she had a relationship of two years and who had been accommodative of her quirks of not wanting to get married and her plan of dying at thirty, which the other men in her life had not been. Prashant has been described as an "exceptionally good natured" person and one who came close to being as "perfect [a] boyfriend as anyone could hope to find" (60). Given this view, on first reading *Getting There* it was difficult to understand Manjula's ill-treatment of the man. While still in a relationship with him, Manjula plans meticulously and manages to sleep with Piet. She refuses to take him into confidence, even while touring the United States with him, leaving him to feel lonely, angry and helpless. On being confronted by Prashant, the only explanation that Manjula can come up with is that she is in a phase of transition and cannot really talk about it.

That Manjula treats Prashant in an abominable way is obvious. Her actions, to say the least are hypocritical and self-contradictory. Manjula is aware that she is being unfair to Prashant but cannot really stop herself from continuing with her actions – even though she had not consciously set out to hurt him. Manjula does not rationalise her actions, and once Prashant comes back to India from the States, he is out of her consciousness and also, the narrative.

On reading between the lines and considering the self-reflections that the protagonist, Manjula, engages in from time to time, especially in context of marital relationships, an explanation if not a justification can be provided for her actions. Manjula, as she has been depicted in *Getting There* comes across a character marked by contradictions. While she feels strongly about a lot of issues, she rarely stands up in defense of them. She neither spoke up against Raghu (49-51) nor Kamala (165-166) even though she felt embarrassed by their harangues. These contradictory aspects of her

personality – the ability to go forward with an idea irrespective of familial and peer pressure and the inability to articulate it – like a number of other areas finds manifestation in Prashant's case as well. For Manjula, the diet – even though she does not keep at it for long was a way of exploring a different self – from the one rooted in her immediate surroundings, her family and her class. She resented the fact that her family and peers exerted pressure on her and tried to control the way she lived her life. As long as Prashant is not considered a party to this, Manjula's relationship with him progresses in an amicable manner. But on Prashant being conceived as an obstacle in the path of her experimentation with self-renewal and a party to the system – his indispensability in her life is reduced. During the early days of her diet, Prashant had accused Manjula of having changed because she had tried to differentiate between the clinical touch of Dr. Prasad on her breasts and the lecherous characters who feel up people in public transport. He had stated that the diet had hardened her and changed her value-system (66).

Prashant's collusion with the system is further confirmed when he is seen as disturbing the easy camaraderie that had existed prior to his arrival between Sujaya, Govinda – Manjula's landlord, and Piet, with his scepticism regarding spirituality and energy transfers (69-74). In front of Prashant, Manjula cannot talk of her recent interest in spirituality or her willingness to experiment with "energy transfers" without being self-conscious or ridiculed. Prashant's presence is enough to defeat her attempt of exploring a different kind of identity for herself, without having to provide any explanations or justifications for doing so.

The disintegration of the relationship had already begun, with Manjula pondering over the superficiality of their discussions (66) and coming to Piet's rescue in protest against Prashant's attempts of ridiculing him (74), and Prashant's continual presence in her life during their holiday in the States brings matters out in the open. While Prashant is clueless about the developments in Manjula, for the latter the relationship becomes almost a "noose", a suffocating experience, when her sister Radha "Radzie" mentions that Prashant was expecting to get married to her. An expectation, which though unarticulated,

was probably always there. Its coming out in the open, however, seals the fate of the relationship. As Manjula puts it in her inimitable way:

> To me it was so obvious. We were all right so long as we weren't married. We could structure the hours of our day as we wished. Work all night when we wanted to, or see two movies in one evening and eat steak three times a day. Marriage would change all that. We would become that two-headed social monster, A Couple.
>
> (198)

This reading of Manjula's relegation of Prashant to a position of unimportance, results out of a close examination of her antipathy to marriage and the association that she makes between his views and this particular oppressive institution. A more obvious reading of this episode could have been the simple explanation that Manjula gets attracted to Piet and dumps Prashant unceremoniously in favour of the Dutch man. Ample scope for this kind of a reading is provided by Padmanabhan, when she shows Manjula thinking over, fantasizing about and anticipating eagerly the meeting that had been planned in Holland. Especially during the trip to the United States of America, he dominates her consciousness in exclusion of everything else.

Manjula meets Piet in Bombay, when he had come along with his friend Japp to meet his guru and lived as a guest of Govinda – her landlord. The language in which their entry in Govinda's house is discovered is almost prophetic:

> Their shadows entered the house before they did. [...] They entered then, two huge men silhouetted against the light, their outlines glistening wet. [...] I remained at the entrance to my room, staring at the tableau, not recognizing the shape of my own future quickening into substance, there in the hallway.
>
> (3)

Initially sceptical of their spiritual quest, Manjula gets interested enough to visit the guru, and participate in "energy transfers". While Manjula is interested – both intellectually and physically – in Piet, she doesn't agree with a lot of his views especially the maxim – "There is no experience without desire" (98). For Manjula it can only mean that one actively desires the misfortunes that one experiences – a condition that she is not

ready to accept. However, it has a powerful influence on her, enabling her to come to a decision about her desires and becoming at the same time, a tool of self analysis in moments of crisis.

In fact, the presence of Piet, his ideas and his activities influenced Manjula's desire for exploring an identity unencumbered by the expectations of her family and the society at large. She was envious of his freedom to explore different realms – be it the spiritual or the material – without having to give any explanations for it. She wanted to have the same experience herself and having decided that it could only happen when she was away from the prying eyes of her family and friends, made a plan to go to Holland and live as Piet's guest for a while.

The trip to the United States becomes merely a way of facilitating this journey with help from her friend Mallika "Micki" who lived in Munich, Germany. Her family was to know that she was living with Micki; while she went ahead with her trip to Holland. It is with this kind of a mindset that she leaves for the United States and is presented as being completely besotted with Piet.

While Padmanabhan depicts her autobiographical persona as being enamoured with Piet, she also leaves enough ground for questioning the nature of that attraction. Piet is one character who, apart from Manjula herself has a pervasive presence in *Getting There*, existing either as his own self or in the protagonist's fantasies. For a person who has such a great importance in Manjula's life, very little is known about his actual feelings for her. *Getting There* being a first-person narration, the characters are invariably presented from and through the perspective of the narrator-protagonist. Even with this obvious limitation a lot more is known about Radha, Mallika or even Prashant's feelings about Manjula, than is known about Piet. Back in Bombay he had been physically attracted to her, had been a part of her experimentations with spirituality and had agreed to have her as a guest in his house. Apart from these bare facts which are narrated as anecdotes, little else is known about Piet's attitude to Manjula. In fact, the only time Manjula brings up the question of emotion in context of Piet, is to point out how he had refused to acknowledge their relationship in

public and had been embarrassed at Manjula's attempts of holding his hand (125). Manjula chose to overlook this – "I refused to think that I was feeling rejected or marginalized" (125), just as she had chosen to suppress the doubts which had come to her mind initially regarding Piet, "If we were so different in something so simple as material desire, how much more different must we be in other less obviously defined areas?" (83).

Ignoring these signs of something being amiss, Manjula projects her own feelings on to the relationship believing them to be mutually true. But after receiving a phone call from him at Radzie's place, even she starts having doubts about their veracity and depth:

> In my mind, the text of that telephonic conversation was rewound and played back repeatedly, as I searched for clues, for signals that would help me confirm the decisions I was taking about the months ahead. I didn't find many [...] We said nothing to one another which would have sounded to anyone listening on either side of the conversation like intimacy, warmth or friendship.
>
> (197)

Manjula's projection of her own intensity into the relationship does not prepare her for the disappointing encounter that she has with him. The one-sided nature of the relationship becomes obvious, once Manjula reaches Holland; but what is more important is that once the initial excitement and disappointment settles down, Manjula finds time to reflect on her feelings for Piet and makes interesting discoveries. Her transition becomes clear if we note her agitation before reaching Utrecht, "I realized as if for the first time, on that overheated, airless train, that the thought of never seeing Piet again was an abomination that I could not face" (234) and her calm and reasoned thoughts on her brief visit to France, "[*M*]*y* interest in Piet could best be described as a desire to extinguish myself by using another person as a drowning pool. My proof lay in the fact that I couldn't draw when I was with him. I had to choose between him and my creative self" (309 Padmanabhan's emphasis).

Manjula was undoubtedly attracted to Piet but only in so far as he fitted a particular image – that of being a person who would not encroach upon her individual space or burden her with his expectations. To put it in her own words "I was free to choose his

company or not, I was not suffocated by his regard or forced to be a particular person in order to fulfill some preconceived notion he had about what I should be" (309). As long as this illusion of freedom is retained, Manjula has no qualms about going to any extent to hold on to him, but once she realises that even Piet's presence could be a hindrance, he too did not let her be herself, she decides to break free from the relationship.

Breaking away from Piet becomes especially necessary for Manjula because she realises that in his presence her creative self is stifled. Living in Holland along with Piet, Japp and Simon, Manjula had learnt to go along with the flow – accept and experience life as it came. In this kind of a life while there was no pressure, there was no specific purpose as well, which irked Manjula. It is only when she starts drawing again that she finds a meaning in her life. Earlier in the narrative, at the dietician's clinic, she had told the psychiatrist that the only thing out of which she derived pleasure was her work and if she was given a choice, "then would just spend all day drawing and painting" (14). And it is this aspect of her self – the professional one – that finally gets affirmed and exonerated as the core of her identity.

Manjula likens her ability to draw after months of purposelessness, to a renewal of life "I felt like some one who had returned to consciousness from a deep coma. I enjoyed everything about the struggle, including the mistakes and the tedious length of time" (305). Manjula had taken pride in her work – had asserted that she was better than most of her fellow illustrators, took pains with her work and more importantly enjoyed it, while back in Bombay. And it is this – the reaffirmation of her professional identity, by being able to make and sell posters – that gives her the confidence not only to contemplate breaking off with Piet but also to go back home – a place she wanted to avoid earlier because she felt it controlled her, instead of it being the other way around.

Though the proceedings are not exactly smooth after she decides to end the relationship with Piet – she is found in the embarrassing situation of sleeping in Piet's bed with Japp by Piet and has to move out to Japp's dilapidated place – she manages to gain confidence and an insight into her life which she did not have earlier; confidence which

finds expression in Manjula's assertion of no longer caring about the opinion of others – be it Piet or anyone else (329).

Manjula's dissatisfaction with her identity had also been partly related to her inability to control her life, which is why the guru, whom she had gone to meet in Bombay had impressed her so much. "The quality of authority he projected, of being able to control not only his own destiny but that of those who came in contact with him" (95) had been so attractive to her, because the guru was such a study in contrast. Her exploration of a new identity was inextricably linked with her attempt of finding a non-threatening space and it is this association of a sense of liberation with Holland that had made the journey to the place so significant. Manjula's intense agitation over the loss of her private space in Bombay – she lost her paying-guest accommodation when her landlord Zero Mehta decided to get married (193) or her grief when she believed that she had lost her hand bag which contained Piet's address, become comprehendible when seen from this perspective. Neither the prospect of getting married to Prashant nor living under her brother's roof appealed to her, the only possibilities open to her in case she could not reach Holland.

But self-realization helps her get rid of her fears: the fact that she expresses her desire to go back home is a pointer towards this. Immediately after surviving an asthma attack, alone in Japp's derelict house, she can state with newly found confidence:

> I felt like a ship whose decks had finally been cleared of all its extra passengers. Not just the more recent ones like Piet or Japp but all those earlier ones as well, including many people whom I loved and many others whom I didn't [...] there were so many people trying to wrest control of my ship, telling me which ports I should visit and what cargo I should load, when to speed up and how to drop anchor. Some did it gently and others were rough, but in the end they were all just passengers. Whereas I was the captain, I was the ship and I was all my crew. (329)

Getting There – the title of the narrative signifies a journey. At one level, the destination of the journey is a geographical space – it is significant that the first chapter in the section entitled Holland, is called "There" (243), but it attains such a status because of the associations made with it. Having made the journey, however, the futility of searching

for space outside rather than within oneself becomes clear to Manjula. This acceptance of the fact does not diminish the importance of the journey but becomes a pointer towards the character's immaturity. Reflections on the self have been an integral part of the narrative, but the realization, that it is fallacious to search for one's identity in association with a non-threatening person and change one allegiances in accordance with that, comes only towards the end. The journey therefore, no longer remains a journey for search of one's identity but becomes more importantly one of self-realisation.

Self realization is empowering but the facts that one has to come to terms with are not always pleasant or palatable. Manjula accepts this in retrospective, "I had behaved in foolish, irresponsible and inconsiderate ways. I had caused myself much avoidable anguish and had risked causing some people in Piet's family circle even greater anguish" (329-330) but while experiencing those moments she had either rationalized them or had relegated them to the background. In fact, Padmanabhan's autobiographical narrative is replete with disturbing incidents and uncomfortable facts. That she resorts to hypocrisy and manipulation has been noted earlier. There are a number of other incidents which seem problematic, foremost among them being the relationship with Japp. It is disturbing to say the least and does not fit into any known paradigm, even by the highly unusual parameters of her life.

Japp had accompanied Piet to Bombay to meet the guru, but had moved out of Palm-View – the house where she lived as a paying guest – after a while. Japp had been projected as an instable person by Piet, an impression confirmed later by Piet's brother, Simon. A firm believer in the maxim "There is no experience without desire", Japp explains everything in the light of it, even if it means injuring a woman by letting her fall (323-325), because she had desired it. A highly unusual character, he takes an interest in Manjula which ultimately results in physical intimacy between the two. Unlike Simon, or even Piet with whom Manjula shared not only her confusions while smoking grass, but also her love for music, books and movies and information about her personal life, her relationship with Japp is not characterized by the predominance of such elements. And the relationship – if it can be called so – ends as abruptly as it had begun. The only positive

thing that Manjula could read into it was it gave her an excuse to move out of Piet's house once she had decided to break off with him, without being forced to leave. It can only be contextualised as an event in Manjula's life, when she was in a phase of transition and was trying to experience events as they came without worrying about the consequences.

A number of other men – Simon, Hans, Willie – are also mentioned in the course of the text. While with Simon she has a platonic relationship – he is probably the best friend that she finds in Holland – the other two, especially Willie's interest in her, which she does not reciprocate, makes her wonder about the peculiar nature of desire. Considering the fact that Willie had given her more attention in one evening than Piet had done in a month, she was surprised that she still wanted Piet in exclusion of everyone else (281). Hans' proposition, however, makes her want to reciprocate but she is unable to do so owing to a problem in her eyes. All these occasions are marked by reflections on sexuality in general and her case in particular: they are written with the same ironic tone and wry humour that characterize a greater part of the text. To quote Manjula:

> I did not think of myself as passionate. I believed that, compared to the molten river of lust that other people described at the core of their emotional lives, what I had was a slender thread, a strand of cool but witty desire which I liked to wind around a man rather like the cord which is wound around a top to make it spin just for the duration of the encounter [. . .].
>
> (294)

Manjula is aware that she might be hurting other people, especially Piet's girlfriend, Anneke, in sleeping with him. But she is never shown to be bogged down by the gender-specific aspects of the moral handicap regarding sexuality that is expected to be found amongst Indian women. Questions of ethical impropriety come to her mind but never the thought that as a woman she might be considered 'fallen' on account of her sexual life, even when Raghu and Kamala do not hesitate to refer to her as "a bitch on heat" (50) and a "Scarlett Woman" (166) respectively. Refusal to internalize these debilitating notions probably becomes for Manjula, another way of undermining the gender specific aspects of her identity.

For a person who is not comfortable "being a woman" (290) Manjula has a curious relationship with feminism. While she does not hesitate to call herself a feminist at certain points in the narrative – for instance, in response to the psychiatrist's questions at Dr. Prasad's clinic, or in response to Micki's needling – the language and tone in which she talks about feminism makes one question the seriousness of it:

> At eighteen feminism caught up with me [...] It enlarged my horizon of conflict. It gave me a sense of community and purpose. It gave me a point of view and a vocabulary of complaint. It empowered me to buy my own contact lenses [...] But for all that it did for me, feminism could not give me a reason to live beyond thirty.
>
> (64)

Getting There in fact, becomes a way of depicting Manjula's alienation from the movement. Signs of this development are provided early in the narrative. At the psychiatrist's chamber Manjula is chastised to realize that her answers to the question of "feminine interests" would not be considered appropriate by the yardstick of the feminist canon (15). And while she participates in a demonstration against 'Vergewaltigung' or rape while in Munich, and is highly excited on account of it, her friend Micki's observations make it clear that it was a momentary high and would subside: Manjula was merely taken in by the rhetoric (224-225). Manjula does not join the protest march that takes place in Holland and gradually comes to the realization that feminism had merely been "a peg" which she had used to substantiate her antipathy to romance. "Feminism was supposed to celebrate femininity whereas I could not face the straps and buckles of female domesticity. I did not rejoice in any but the most superficial aspects of being female" (235).

The way Manjula presents her ideas of femininity and feminism, it seems as if they are absolutely and completely determined, without the possibility of being changed or questioned. The only option left for her is to find a different space, in contradistinction to and in rejection of these elements. As has been noted earlier, this is a typical reaction of Manjula: every time she feels overwhelmed by either societal, familial or ideological pressures her only reaction is to search for an escape route. The attempt to redefine or negotiate her space within a particular oppressive arena does not come to her mind.

Feminism does celebrate femininity but not by accepting the debilitating notions of it, rather by redefining it. And while motherhood – the defining aspect of femininity for Manjula – is valorized, the choice of not having children is very much accepted as a "feminist" act. As Kamla Bhasin and Nighat Said Khan put it – "[A] woman's decisions not to be humiliated, or to educate herself and pursue a career, or her refusal to be restricted by purdah, or her decision not to have children are, as feminist actions, as relevant as the most organized struggles" (Bhasin et al.2004: 5). And more importantly, there are various schools of feminist thought with variegated interests and not one particular "feminist" canon.

It is not that the author Manjula Padmanabhan is not aware of the possibility of reconstituting or redefining a particular theoretical ideological or institutional space. She has done it in her own life in context of the institution of marriage. Padmanabhan is married and on being questioned about her decision, especially in light of her intense antipathy to it, she had replied that she had managed to work things out in such a manner that "she did not feel married at all".[30] Or in other words she has been able to find her own space within the institution and reconstitute it – if only in her own personal context – according to her own ideas. Her earlier antipathy towards the institution seems in retrospective to be directed towards a particular form of the institution that she had grown up with, and not towards the concept of marriage per se.

In spite of being aware of the possibility of reconstitution/redefinition if Padmanabhan still chooses to make her autobiographical persona espouse a certain position of predetermination and fixity of categories, it is obviously a conscious statement that she is making. Feminism can and does have its critics and renegades, therefore, the narrator-protagonist's declaration of her unsuitability as a feminist is not the problem. What becomes problematic is the ground on which the proclamation is made. Rejection of feminism and femininity on grounds of essentialism does not seem in keeping with the character of the woman who attains a certain level of maturity and self-realisation,

especially when such a position clearly emerges from the protagonist's intense dislike of domesticity. It seems an anomaly, to say the least.

Getting There as an autobiographical narrative captures defining moments in Manjula Padmanabhan's life with all their joys and sorrows, highs and lows, jubilations and disappointments. If it was Padmanabhan's intention to depict the confusion and indecisiveness that marked a certain period of her life along with the insights she gained, through the construction of her autobiographical persona – then she surely succeeds. But in attempting to lend an air of "immediacy" to her autobiographical persona, the author has initially made Manjula express her spontaneous reactions to an event or an idea, following it up with her more well-thought-out responses later. But since the latter are unevenly interspersed and need close reading, the use of this technique has led to a sense of ambivalence, especially regarding Manjula's position on various matters. The ambiguity is further enhanced by the tongue-in-cheek way of narration which defies any straightforward interpretation. For instance, extreme despair can go away on getting a cab (18) or question of an ambiguous identity can be solved by smoking grass (264-265). Such assertions – though not the final ones – given the fact that they are dwelt upon at length, do retain the danger of being taken at the face value.

Wry humour and reflections at length, on almost anything under the sun – be it the dieting habits of Third-World women, the physique of the Guru, the perennial growth of Prashant's beard, the dead bodies she sees at a morgue in New York or the innumerable people Manjula meets during the period, also add to the effect. Observations like, "[The Guru] was spare in the way of someone who has reduced his material needs to the minimum, including his body. A rumour of hair clung to the edges of his dome-like head otherwise bald" (89) or wry remarks like:

> The desire to lose weight, I now saw, with my tea spoon poised above the plain white dome of the egg, was really about becoming someone else. Someone efficient and industrious who could fight minatours before breakfast, someone who would succeed in her quest to be financially independent and ideologically pure, someone whose illustrations would soon be the talk of the town, be sought

> after and valued. [. . .] All this was available for the price of ... one soft boiled egg.
>
> (31)

– also enhance the above-mentioned effect. On the one hand they make reading *Getting There* an enjoyable experience and on the other, by apparently undermining the seriousness of the statement in question, add to the sense of ambivalence. This has led to *Getting There* being read as a light-hearted exploration of a woman's predicament.[31] Humour does introduce a sense of ambivalence, but instead of making the text a light-hearted one, by being juxtaposed with the ideas being dealt with, it further serves to heighten the seriousness of the work.

Getting There as an autobiographical text has for its focus the years twenty-four and twenty-five in Manjula's life, with her formative years finding ample mention. It is interesting to note that though musings on nationality, religion and to a lesser extent caste find place in the text, these hardly become determinants of her identity, if only at the level of her self-perception. She cannot prevent the world from viewing and responding to her as an Indian woman, but since it is Padmanabhan's self-perception we are concerned about and dealing with – the study of *Getting There* was undertaken primarily to note how she constructs her autobiographical persona – this conscious denial of certain constituents and the foregrounding of certain others give an insight into the way she constructs her identity. The question of gender and feminism are central to it: they occupy an important place in her consciousness, and are examined thoroughly before she decides to move beyond them. I would argue that in spite of their rejection in the ultimate analysis, they are important to the way she constructs her identity, because the one she finally chooses to endorse is in fact a reaction, against these very constituents that she rejects. And it is keeping this perspective in mind that I have found the discussion of certain feminist theoretical perspectives – be it that of autobiography, question of identity or the body in context of *Getting There* necessary. The attempt was not to subsume it within the feminist corpus but to point out its indebtedness to feminist findings.

Gender as a constituent of identity is rejected on account of its unsuitability in Padmanabhan's context, but the quest for an a-gendered identity could only have materialised by first taking gender into consideration: *Getting There* remains a testimony to this fact. And it is in this sense that Padmanabhan's quest for her identity becomes a movement beyond the female/feminist self.

End notes

[1] Shuddhabrata Sengupta, "*Nathabati Anathbat*: An Act of Female Resistance," Review of Saoli Mitra's play *Nathabati Anathabat*, *The Economic Times*, 13 December 1991.

[2] Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself," *Leaves of Grass*, eds. Sculley Bradley and Harold W. Boldgett (New York: Norton, 1972) 88.

[3] Manjula Padmanabhan, Personal Interview, 29 April 2004.

[4] Manjula Padmanabhan, "Re: Happy Birthday," E-mail to Shubhra Ray, 23 June 2004.

[5] Ibid.

[6] In its reviews *Getting There* has been considered from the perspective of a novel/travelogue and has been found wanting. For some online reviews see Kalyani Deshpande, "*Getting There*," *Sawnet*, 23 September 2003 (http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/getting_there.html);and Jeetendra Pant, "When Memory Speaks," *Flair: The Express Magazine* (2000), 18 September 2003 (http://www.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/20000918/fine.htm). Written as a memoir it could not fulfill the expectations that genres like novel and travelogue entail. There has also been an attempt to subsume it within the category of "chick lit" – which according to the reviewer is a reference to works which are "light, ironic, slightly neurotic and about the perils of being a twenty or thirty girl." See Anita Roy, "'Fonthasthique' Voyage," *Outlook*, 18 September 2000. This is indeed an ironic predicament for a work, which despite its wry humour, is notable for its dark undertones.

[7] Manjula Padmanabhan, Personal Interview, 29 April 2004.

[8] Manjula Padmanabhan, *Getting There*, manuscript, 159-204.

[9] See John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 263-64.

[10] See Immanuel Kant, *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood (New York: Modern Library, 2001).

[11] See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) 111-114.

[12] See Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 1999).

[13] See Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe (London: Penguin, 1968).

[14] See Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol Poston (New York: Norton, 1988).

[15] See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1974).

[16] See Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[17] See Helene Cixous, "Sorties: Out & Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" in *The Newly Born Woman* by Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

[18] See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[19] See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 181.

[20] Manjula as she is portrayed in the work comes across as a person with contradictory traits. She is strong enough to go ahead with her desires in defiance of her family and social class but cannot come forward and voice her views openly. As she puts it towards the end of the text, in a moment of intense self-realisation, "So much of what I had considered problems were instead a kind of frenzy brought by my ignorance about reality. A more robust person would not have encountered even a tenth of my difficulties, or having encountered them would not have interpreted them as difficulties at all." See Manjula Padmanabhan, *Getting There* (London: Picador, 2000) 329.

[21] I have discussed this at length while reading "Stains" in the second chapter.

[22] Germaine Greer has also critiqued this kind of regimentation in her recent book. See Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1999) 19-32.

[23] This is essentially an idea which has come to be associated with Liberal feminism with its foregrounding of the public/private dichotomy, advocacy of women's suffrage and legal equality. Mary Wollstonecraft, Sarah Grimke, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony are the better known liberal feminists.

[24] The celebration of these feminine characteristics was associated with Radical feminism's project of politicizing the personal. The better known radical feminists are Kate Millett, Adrienne Rich and Shulamith Firestone among others. For a comprehensive positioning of Radical feminists see Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[25] See Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[26] Padmanabhan makes this statement to Sheela Reddy, when the latter was trying to find out how the epithet "woman writer" is viewed by women who write. See Sheela Reddy, "Rooms, Views," *Outlook*, 28 October 2002.

[27] Manjula Padmanabhan, "Re: On Reading *Getting There*," E-mail to Shubhra Ray, 18 April 2004.

[28] Judith Butler has developed the term performativity to explain how the deployments of the body through acts and gestures, especially in terms of gendered sexuality, are, through a process of reiteration, productive of a discursive identity. See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

[29] The foregrounding of the gendered body has been critiqued by postmodernist critics like Donna Haraway, who believe that the body is determined neither by biological givens, nor by discursive regimes of power rather constitutes a field of conflicting and unstable flows influenced by the revolution in informatics. See Donna J. Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postmodernism* ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) 190-233.

[30] Manjula Padmanabhan, Personal Interview, 29 April 2004.

[31] See Anita Roy, "'Fonthasthique' Voyage," *Outlook*, 18 September 2000.

Conclusion

Examining the particular manner in which Manjula Padmanabhan articulates her a-gendered identity has been the focus of a substantial portion of this thesis, with all other issues coming up in relation to it. But the examination of this central problematic despite the use of theoretical insights and conceptual/critical tools – both from the Indian context and the Anglo-American one, has not been in the nature of a philosophical enquiry or a purely theoretical exercise. Since this study takes the form of "reading" certain texts in order to be able to posit views, it remains rooted within the domain of literature, with all its generic liberties and limitations.

I had begun by stating that Padmanabhan uses feminist perspectives even while denying the epithet feminist: a stand that intrigued me. In the second chapter of this work I have substantiated this statement by bringing out the individualistic way in which she engages with feminist findings, especially with issues which are central in the Indian context, in her collection of short stories *Hot Death, Cold Soup* with special reference to the works "Hot Death, Cold Soup" and "Stains".

To depict that the denial of the term feminism in Manjula's context is closely related to the way she articulates her identity – in a-gendered terms – I have explored the manner in which she chooses to construct her autobiographical persona and thereby her identity by closely reading *Getting There*. Padmanabhan concentrates on her twenty-five year old self in her autobiographical narrative: however, by viewing her autobiographical persona as a "construct" from a retrospective point of view, I have attempted to consider the way in which her present views and ideas also get reflected in this portrayal.

It might seem contradictory in terms that, on the one hand, the feminist movement is being lauded for its ability to foreground gender as a prominent category of analysis and on the other the thesis focuses on the exploration of an a-gendered identity and a denial of the term feminist on the part of Padmanabhan. But this apparent contradiction can be

explained. When I appreciate the fact that gender has become a highly visible and prominent category of analysis I simply mean that the practice of viewing everything from the patriarchal perspective, even while terming it the universal one, has been contested: this is on account of feminist activities and critical interventions and is surely a welcome change. And even though the task is far from over, and feminists find themselves at the receiving end of retrogressive ideologies and practices as has been mentioned earlier, which get more sophisticated with time, a certain space has become available to women to move beyond their gendered identity without being appropriated by misogynists masquerading as universalists. The stand can be made clear by rephrasing what Nicole Ward Jouve said in a different context[1] – women needed to have a gendered identity before they could afford to move beyond or deconstruct it – and it is this purpose which was served by the foregrounding of gender, and also explains the term's centrality in the feminist corpus. And it is against such a critical positioning that the apparent contradiction between an appreciation of the foregrounding of gender and the exploration of an identity which is a-gendered becomes comprehendible: after all the latter could not have been possible without the former. I attempted to locate Padmanabhan's search for an a-gendered identity within the feminist corpus, to draw attention to this fact and also to emphasise that a space has become available to women to conceive of themselves and function as embodied subjects without foregrounding only one of the many constituents of their identity – gender.

This is not to say that for women the only purpose of reclaiming[2] their gendered identity was in order to be able to go beyond it – that would be a blatant and naïve generalisation – but simply to point towards the availability of space of making it possible, which, while denied earlier is now within reach. In my introductory chapter, I had begun by placing Padmanabhan within a group of authors/activists/critics who do not proclaim to be feminists, though I had set Padmanabhan aside from them very soon. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, I wanted to specifically focus on Padmanabhan's refusal to be a feminist and did not want to search for the causation of the phenomenon mentioned above; secondly, Padmanabhan's reasons for not calling herself a feminist is not a common occurrence even among women refusing to call themselves feminists. In fact this is more

an aberration, rather than being the norm. There is strong resistance from within the feminists themselves,[3] to this kind of a denial of gendered identity, probably arising from apprehensions that once feminism as a movement endorses this, it will be seen as a concession to misogynist forces.

That the danger is palpable and the apprehensions are not unfounded, especially in the Indian context will become evident if we consider the "unlikely allies" that the movement has found in recent days. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan has commented pertinently on this aspect while pointing out that a selective appropriation of the tenets of the movement is being done in order to subsume the insights gained, within the traditional mould of society. To quote:

> [W]omen's fight against pornography is sympathetically viewed by the moral right; their demand for a ban on abortion following sex-determination tests is supported by right-to-lifers; their campaign against the government's family planning programmes dovetails with a liberal notion of individual rights; and their demand for a uniform civil code for the nation is endorsed for communal reasons, by fundamental Hindu groups. In such a context many specifically *gendered* issues can be deflected on to other areas in official discourses and representations.[4]

The dangers and the prospect – that very few women would either have the desire or the space to explore such an identity – notwithstanding, an acknowledgement of this kind of a possibility probably becomes necessary because it reflects positively on the movement, as I have tried to argue in the course of this thesis. Moreover, by accepting that women like Padmanabhan – empowered subjects, deriving legitimacy from their lived experiences as well from the movement itself – are rooted within and indebted to it, the movement may allay the defensiveness which has come to characterize it, ever since the denial of the term by many women in recent times: this would be both an acknowledgement of its adherence to plurality and a reaffirmation of its accommodative character.

End notes

---

[1] Jouve talks about the necessity of having a self before one can afford to deconstruct it, though she acknowledges the difficulty of actually saying "I". See Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1991) 7.

[2] This is not to say that a "pure" self, uncontaminated by patriarchal ideologies can be recovered. The reclamation can at best take the form of contesting dominant ideologies and a working out of one's space within them.

[3] Ruth Vanita talks about how the desire of not wanting to be reborn as a "woman" on the part of various women from different groups and classes, had been silenced in feminist circles, on account of it being viewed as low self-esteem and self-hatred. See Ruth Vanita, "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," *Feminism in India*, ed. Maitreyee Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Kali for Women & Women Unlimited, 2004) 74.

[4] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, "Real and Imagined Women: Politics and/of representation," *Real and Imagined Women* (London: Routledge, 1993) 137. She acknowledges the contribution of Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah's work *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India* in arriving at these insights.

Bibliography

Books

I. Primary texts

Padmanabhan, Manjula (2000a) *Getting There*, London: Picador.

---. *Getting There*, manuscript 159-204.

---. (1996) *Hot Death, Cold Soup*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

II. Secondary texts

Althusser, Louis (1971) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York: Monthly Review Press.

Anderson, Linda (2001) *Autobiography: The New Critical Idiom*, London and New York: Routledge.

Bacchetta, Paola (2004) *Gender in the Hindu Nation: RSS Women as Ideologues*, New Delhi: Women Unlimited, an Associate of Kali for Women.

Bartky, Sandra L. (1988) "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power," in Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (eds.) *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, Boston, MA: North-eastern University Press.

Beauvoir, Simone de (1974) *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley, New York: Vintage.

Bhasin, Kamla and Nighat Said Khan (2004) "Some Questions on Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Bordo, Susan (1989) "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," in Alison M. Jaggar and Susan Bordo (eds.) *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

---. (1993) *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge.

---. (1997) *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Chakraborthy, Renu (1980) *Communism and the Indian Women's Movement1940-1950*, Delhi: People's Publishing House.

Chakravarti, Uma and Preeti Gill (2001) "Introduction," in Uma Chakravarti and Preeti Gill (eds.) *Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Chatterjee, Partha (1989) "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee (2004) "Introduction," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Chaudhuri, Maitrayee, Zoya Hasan and Vina Majumdar (1985) *Women's Participation in Political Life in India*, New Delhi: Centre for Women's Development Studies.

Chitnis, Suma (2004) "Feminism: Indian Ethos and Indian Convictions," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Chowdhury, Prem (1989) "Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Cixous, Helene (1986) "Sorties: Out & Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" in *The Newly Born Woman* by Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, trans. Betsy Wing, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Daly, Mary (1990) *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston: Beacon Press.

Davies, Tony (1997) *Humanism*, London: Routledge.

Descartes, Rene (1968) *Discourse on Method and The Meditations*, trans. F. E. Sutcliffe, London: Penguin.

Deshpande, Shashi (2003) "My Beloved Charioteer" *Collected Stories*, Vol. 1, New Delhi: Penguin.

Eagleton, Terry (1991) *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso.

Felski, Rita (1998) "On Confession," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.) *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Foucault, Michel (1977) *Discipline and Punish: Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Pantheon.

---. (1990) *The History of Sexuality, Volume1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage.

---. (1972) *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York: Pantheon Books.

Freud, Sigmund (1957) "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. John Rickman, Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor.

Friedman, Lawrence M. (1999) *The Horizontal Society*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Gandhi, Nandita and Nandita Shah (1992) *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in the Contemporary Women's Movement in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar (1987) "Ceremonies of the Alphabet: Female Grandmatologies and the Female Authorgraph," in Domna C. Stanton (ed.) *The Female Autograph*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Greer, Germaine (1999) *The Whole Woman*, New York: Alfred Knopf.

Haraway, Donna J. (1990) "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism*, London: Routledge.

---. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1977) *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Irigaray, Luce (1985) *This Sex Which Is Not One*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Jouve, Nicole Ward (1991) *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*, New York and London: Routledge.

Kalpana, H. (2002) "Feminist theory in Pedagogy," in Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar (eds.) *Women's Studies in India: Contours of Change*, Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

Kannabiran, Vasantha and K. Lalitha (1989) "That Magic Time: Women in the Telengana People's Struggle," in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Kant, Immanuel (2001) *Basic Writings of Kant*, ed. Allen W. Wood, New York: Modern Library.

Kishwar, Madhu (1999) *Off the Beaten Track: Rethinking Gender Justice for Indian Women*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Kristeva, Julia (1986) *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi, New York: Columbia University Press.

Kumar, Kamla (1990) "Sati – A Crime Against Women," in Sushma Sood (ed.) *Violence Against Women*, Jaipur: Arihant Publishers.

Kumar, Radha(1994) "Identity Politics and the Contemporary Indian Feminist Movement," in Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.) *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Assertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.

---. (1993) *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India 1800-1990*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Kuortti, Joel (2003) *Tense Past, Tense Present: Women Writing in English*, Kolkata: Stree.

Lacan, Jacques (1977) *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton.

---. (1981) *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Norton.

Lejeune, Philippe (1989) *On Autobiography*, ed. Paul John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Leslie, Julia (1991) (ed.) *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*, London: Pinter.

Liddle, Joanna and Rama Joshi (1989) *Daughters of Independence: Gender, Caste, Class in India*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Locke, John (1975) *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Machiavelli, Niccolo (1999) *The Prince*, trans. George Bull, London: Penguin.

Marcus, Laura (1994) *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Marx, Karl (1970) *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, New York: International Publishers.

Mazumdar, Sucheta (1994) "Moving Away from a Secular Vision? Women, Nation, and Cultural Construction of Hindu India," in Valentine M. Moghadam (ed.) *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Assertions and Feminisms in International Perspective*, Boulder and Oxford: Westview Press.

Miller, Nancy K. (1988) *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, New York: Columbia University Press.

Mohanty, Chandra Talpade (2003) "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, New Delhi: Zubaan.

Narayan, Uma (1997) *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-World Feminism*, New York and London: Routledge.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1974) *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York: Vintage Books.

Oakley, Ann (1984) *Taking it like a Woman*, London: Cape.

Olney, James (1980) (ed.) *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Padmanabhan, Manjula (2004a) "*Lights Out*," in *City Plays*, intro. Mahesh Dattani, Kolkata and New Delhi: Seagull Books.

---. (2004b) *Kleptomania*, New Delhi: Penguin.

---. (2000b) *This is Suki*, New Delhi: Duckfoot Press.

---. (2003) *Hidden Fires*, Kolkata: Seagull Books.

---. (1998) *Harvest*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Plato (1973) *The Republic and Other Works*, trans. B. Jowett, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.

Price, Janet and Margrit Shildrick (1999) "Openings on the Body: A Critical Introduction," in Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (eds.) *Feminist theory and the Body: A Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Rege, Sharmila (1994) "Caste and Gender: the Violence against Women in India," in P. Jogdand (ed.) *Dalit Women*, New Delhi: Gyan.

---. (2004) "Dalit Women Speak Differently: A Critique of 'Difference' and towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Sarkar, Tanika and Urvashi Butalia (1995) (eds.) *Woman and the Hindu Right: A Collection of Essays*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Sen, Ilina (2004) "Women's Politics in India," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Sen, Manikuntala (2001) *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey*, trans. Sujaya Sen, Kolkata: Stree.

Sivaramayya, B. (1996) "The Mandal Judgement: A Brief Description and Critique," in M.N. Srinivas (ed.) *Caste: Its Twentieth Century Avatar*, New Delhi: Viking.

Smith, Sidonie (1998) "Performativity, Autobiographical Practice, Resistance," in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (eds.) *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Sogani, Rajul (2003) "Overstepping the Boundaries: Widows as Transgressors in Indian Fiction" in Vijaya Ramaswami (ed.) *Re-searching Indian Women*, New Delhi: Manohar.

Stanley, Liz (1992) "Is there a Feminist Auto/biography?" *The Autobiographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sunder Rajan, Rajeswari (2004) "Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?" in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

---. (1993) *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism*, London and New York: Routledge.

Thapan, Meenakshi (1997) "Introduction," in Meenakshi Thapan (ed.) *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Tharu, Susie and K. Lalitha (1991) "Introduction," in Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds.) *Women writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 1, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Tharu, Susie (1999) "The Impossible Subject: Caste and Desire in the Scene of the Family," in Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (ed.) *Signposts: Gender Issues In Post-Independence India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women.

Vanita, Ruth (2004) "Thinking Beyond Gender in India," in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.) *Feminism in India*, New Delhi: Kali for Women and Women Unlimited.

Whelelan, Imelda (1995) *Modern Feminist Thought: From the Second Wave to 'Post- Feminism'*, New York: New York University Press.

Wollstonecraft, Mary (1988) *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Carol Poston, New York: Norton.

Young, Katherine K. (2002) "Women and Hinduism," in Arvind Sharma (ed.) *Women in Indian Religions*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Journals/Magazines

Anand, Javed & Teesta Setalvad. "Genocide: Naroda Fruit Market, Kabadi Market," in Javed Anand and Teesta Setalvad (eds.) *Communalism Combat*, March-April 2002, No. 77-78.

Reddy, Sheela. "Rooms, Views," *Outlook*, 28 October 2002.

Roy, Anita. "'Fonthasthique' Voyage," *Outlook*, 18 September 2000.

Sangari, Kumkum. "Perpetrating the Myth," *Seminar*, Feb. 342, 1988.

---. "Consent, Agency and the Rhetorics of Incitement," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1 May 1993.

Vaid, Sudesh. "Politics of Widow Immolation," *Seminar*, Feb. 342, 1988.

Online Resources

Alexandre, Chandra. "Looking Positively at Menstruation: Empowering Women and Girls." *Women's Sahayog* (2001), 12 June 2004 (http://www.maabatakali.org/menstruation.htm).

Deshpande, Kalyani. "*Getting There.*" *Sawnet*, 23 September 2003 (http://www.umiacs.umd.edu/users/sawweb/sawnet/books/getting_there.html).

Padmanabhan, Manjula. "Re: Happy Birthday." E-mail to Shubhra Ray, 23 June 2004.

---. "Re: On Reading *Getting There*." E-Mail to Shubhra Ray.
18 April 2004.

---. "Re: Re: On Reading *Getting There*." E-Mail to Shubhra Ray.
30 April 2004.

Pant, Jeetendra. "When Memory Speaks." *Flair: The Express Magazine* (2000) 18 September 2003 (http://www.indianexpress.com/ie/daily/20000918/fine.htm).

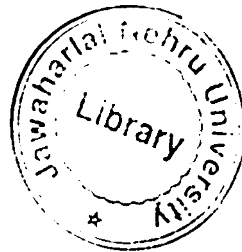
"Periods around the world." *One Woman*, 23 May 2004 (http://onewoman.com/redspot/cultures.html).

SALAAM. "An Evening with Manjula Padmanabhan." 23 August 2003 (http://www.salaamtheatre.org/eveningmanjula2001.html).

Saldanha, Jean. "Breaking with Tribal Traditions." *Real Lives*, 8.5 (2000) 23 April 2004 (http://www.ippf.org/regions/sar/rl/issue5/break.htm).

Interview

Padmanabhan, Manjula. Personal Interview. 29 April 2004.


Library