

The quest to know human subject and to find the subjective expression in life is an endless process that marks the development of knowledge of human beings to know oneself and one's relation to the world around. In the previous chapters of this dissertation, a study of the growth of the subjectivity discourse, its influence on other discourses, especially on the feminist ones, has been made in order to show how the search for the female subjectivity has been done both in the theoretical as well as in the literary works. The study has also revealed that the outcome of the exploration finds its authentic expression through the texts produced by female authors for whom such expressions reflect their lived experiences.

The attempt to know one's self and how this self is posited amidst the society and what significance this self carries in relation to the world was made in the days of the early great civilisations of the world. The trace of this attempt, continuing through various periods in between, is still found in the postmodern times, and it shows how the ideas related to it have been suggested, affirmed, challenged, re-assessed and re-invented in order to solve the enigmatic relationship of the self with this world. In earlier times, human subject was thought to be passive, only playing the part for which the nature or divinity had selected one. With the passage of time, such conception of human subjectivity changed completely and the human subject was begun to be considered as more independent and constructive in nature. The emphasis has been given on the human subject which is “a meaning-making subject (minimally always ‘making up her mind’ in experiencing and so likewise responsible for what she claims to know), a self-conscious subject, in this active, self-determining relation to itself in all experience as well as in all action” (Pippin 2).

The concept of subject and his/her control over the essential self again evolved a new meaning in poststructural philosophy when the thinkers rejected the idea of all-powerful subjects and went for the idea that “subjectivity only exists as an effect of social practices and cultural templates” (De Fina 15-6). It has also been said that the socio-cultural institutions try to control human behaviour in order to maintain the interest of the dominants. The authoritative system dictates the behavioural norms to each of the identities one carries within oneself. Gradually, it generates the consciousness of domination and subjugation and takes the shape of the identity politics where the exploration of agency, selfhood and subjectivity becomes the most essential quest.

From the second half of the twentieth century, feminist thinkers, too, have shown interest to establish the connection between gendered sexual identity politics and subjectivity. They have focused on the marginalised status of women in the society that does not allow them to have agency over their selfhood and choose their way to relate themselves with the world. So, the postmodern-poststructuralist feminism “addresses the need to understand sociality and subjectivity as implicated in the production and reproduction of meaning, value and ideology” (Hutcheon 166). Such approach has assessed various socio-cultural systems like language, literature, education, religion, cultural practices etc. to expose how the patriarchal society spreads its hegemonic rule over the subjects to perpetuate women’s secondary status in the society.

To trace the development of feminist discourses towards the exploration of the female subjectivity, a brief survey of different schools of feminism has been made. The study clarifies how feminism had claimed for equal status of women with men first, then asserted women’s unique essentialities and distinguished self, and finally, rejected the

classification of men and women as two different groups by exposing the constructed nature of gender. In the whole process of exploring female subjectivity, feminist scholars have always related female self and its status with the patriarchal norms that governs the socio-cultural systems. They have also tried to point out the objectification of female subjects by these systems and to show how women struggle to find their subjectivity by challenging the disparities constructed between the two sexes.

As postmodern thinkers emphasised the idea of fluid and multiple identities, postcolonial feminists, too, confirmed the co-existence of different identities of race, class, ethnicity and culture within the group named ‘women’. These postcolonial feminists highlighted on the struggles of non-white Third World women who, according to them, have to deal with the issue of subjectivity in a different way. These feminists have pointed out the shortcomings of traditional feminism propounded by the white Eurocentric feminists for ignoring the variety existing within the group ‘women’ and a different politics is needed for these women to find their subjectivity. Third World feminists have also criticised the stereotyping of the non-white women and favoured “a coalition politics based upon a ‘strategic’ use of identity categories” (Beasley 81) to achieve the goal of gaining subjectivity. A different approach to analyse the Third World ‘subaltern’ women’s condition was adopted by these feminist scholars in order to study these women in their specific socio-cultural background.

The four chapters, following the chapters containing the discussion of the discourses of subjectivity and feminism, are dedicated to the detailed study of the select four novels, namely *Raj*, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, *Manhattan Music* and *Ladies Coupé* in the light of such discussion. Each novel represents a distinguished and unique

way adopted by its female characters in order to search for their subjective expressions. While Gita Mehta's *Raj* reviews a phase of nation's history and the condition of women during that time, Githa Hariharan prefers to re-assess the role of women in Indian mythology as well as of contemporary society in *The Thousand Faces of Night* to situate them in their respective socio-cultural conditions. Meena Alexander's *Manhattan Music* brings forth the struggles of diasporic women while Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* concentrates on the exploitation of women in contemporary middle-class Indian society to illustrate women's quest for a space in the society. Through their women characters, these writers have presented their different perspectives about female subjectivity as it is quite convincing that "Subjectivity can also refer to the thoughts and feelings of the characters themselves in a work" (Murfin and Ray 388).

Gita Mehta's *Raj* is a product of the author's thorough study and sincere research of years of the life in Indian princely states as through the novel she tries to erase the "dichotomy between the narrative and the history" (Patel n. pag.) and assess the historical events from a women's perspective. Placing a woman amidst the historical events and narrating her struggle to become a part of that history are the ways that Mehta has used to explore women's subjectivity in her novel. The focus is on the protagonist Princess Jaya Singh whose acquiring of subjectivity has passed through a number of ordeals. Besides Jaya, other prominent female characters like Jaya's mother Maharani of Balmer, the old concubine Kuki-bai and their developments have been portrayed with equal concentration. The condition of women in the zenana has become an indispensable part of the narrative that offers the picture of exploitation of women irrespective of their social and economic status.

In order to confront the unfavourable conditions that hinder women's physical freedom and psychological maturity, Mehta's heroine had to fight against all odds. She had been confined by political and cultural norms that hardly accepted her potentiality and defined her roles as a daughter, wife, mother and ruler. In social gatherings she had been almost turned into a decorative piece by the apparently sophisticated yet hollow royal etiquette. As a woman Regent of the state and a ruler of people she was constantly attacked by the colonial masters as well as by the national leaders. Yet, Jaya is portrayed as a patient figure, never aggressive yet brave, a slow learner of the situations yet sincere and dedicated to fight for the causes she believes to be true. Since her childhood, she had been taught what to think and how to perform, but Mehta's protagonist is filled with enough talent to select her path to gain the agency of her own life. Her laughter at the end of the narrative symbolises her attainment of this agency, her victory over the obstacles placed before her constant attempt to find her subjectivity. *Raj* hints at the political and socio-cultural subjugation suffered by Indian women during the colonial era and tries to recover them from their negligible or stereotypical presentation in the historiography. Through the fictional re-creation of the colonial past, the narrative attempts to redefine the subjectivity of these colonised women.

Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* explores female subjectivity through the re-telling of Indian mythology. What is significant in Hariharan's novel is the presence of a number of women characters who occupy significant positions in the narrative, and their lives and approaches tell the stories of subversion of the oppressive socio-cultural forces. In a way, these women have continued the trend of challenging the patriarchal social structure that try to make them passive acceptors of the norms laid

down by patriarchy. The fusion of mythological stories and tales of the real women of contemporary times produce a unique blend of narratives that centres round women's eternal endeavour to be the storyteller of their own lives.

*The Thousand Faces of Night* primarily takes up the stories of three women who belong to three different generations. Devi is the youngest of them preceded by her mother Sita and the old housekeeper Mayamma. These women have suffered emotional torments, and in Mayamma's case, tolerated physical torture. But with each blow they received, they tried to consolidate themselves in their own ways to reorient their lives and dared to frustrate the omnipotent laws of patriarchy. For Devi, the mythology and scriptures appear to be the dominant's discourses that try to name the independent spirit of women as demonic and destructive forces. Devi's rebellion underneath her apparent nonchalance and silence is aptly captured in the novel through the image of unkempt garden and vibrant coloured flowers which represent her free spirit eager to discard the empty and unpromising relationships of life. Grandmother's stories and their suggestive hints at the condition of women in the society inspire Devi to "embark on" her "first real journey" (TFN 95) to find her own story. Her rebellion, on the way round, initiates the process of self-examining in Sita and Mayamma also. Devi knew that she had chosen the path of uncertainty, yet, she found it promising and hopeful for a woman like her to establish a subjective connection with the world.

*Manhattan Music* concentrates on the search for subjectivity of women in an altogether different context. Meena Alexander has put her female characters in a 'foreign' socio-cultural context where they struggle to find a place for them. Being herself a member of the diasporic Indian society in America, Alexander has given an account of

the hardship of diasporic life where the immigrant women bear the burdens of racial and sexual otherness along with the memories of home. Life poses a problem for the diasporic women when they fail to maintain a balance between their two existences — that of the past and of the present. The problem of in-betweenness becomes troublesome and painful as it does not allow them to connect with either of the worlds.

In her novel, Alexander has not only illustrated the absence of subjective existence of women in such circumstances but also suggested a way to come out of it. Her protagonist Sandhya Rosenblum represents those suffering from identity crisis as she knows no way to channelise her dream and enthusiasm. Her American dream shatters when she discovers that she has not been given the place she has desired for in the new world. The frustration engulfs her and disturbs her relationships, and she expects to find the sense of fulfilment through her immigrant lover Rashid. But finally when that means also fails she realises that she must change her approach in order to survive. The indomitable spirits of Sandhya's friend Draupadi and cousin Sakhi supply the answer to Sandhya's confusion. Draupadi and Sakhi have suffered the turbulence of diasporic life too, but they have successfully negotiated with their conditions. So, when Draupadi tries to win over her situation by exposing the racial and sexual subalternity of diasporic women through art and dramatic performances, Sakhi engages herself in social works to make a better life for the immigrant women. Alexander has vividly portrayed how racial and sexual identities affect women's body and psyche and how these three women have struggled to gain stability in their lives. By using several autobiographical elements in the novel, Alexander has tried to emphasise the authenticity of experiences her women characters have undergone, and through them, she has conveyed the message that socio-

cultural hostility should generate the determination to fight against odds and to win the agency over the self. The novel ends with the hint of Sandhya's resolution to find a place and a voice of her own in the new world of mixed American society. It is a positive approach on her part as it indicates at the regaining of the "bodily self" and the "postcolonial utterances" (Alexander, *Fault* 196) that will ultimately help to configure the fragmented pieces of diasporic existence to create a sense of subjectivity.

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupé* narrates how the common women in Indian society cope up with the ideas of subjugation and subjective assertion to exercise their will power to achieve their much-desired freedom. Nair's approach is realistic and practical to find out the answers regarding women's self-sufficiency. At the same time, she exposes the hypocrisy of the upper-caste patriarchal Hindu society which tries to continue class and gender distinctions in order to maintain its 'supremacy'. The novel provides the reader with a range of views and perspectives about such issues through the personal experiences of its women characters. By connecting the selves with the society, the text has dealt with the theme of female subjectivity with much dexterity.

*Ladies Coupé*, revolves round one female protagonist, Akhila. Other female characters, significantly the five co-passengers of Akhila are introduced and they serve as the inspirational force behind the protagonist's self-discovery. Akhila is portrayed in the text as the exploited middle-aged spinster who has sacrificed her dreams to financially support her family after her father's death. Her family members, including her mother, selfishly remain indifferent to her hopes and expectations. Embittered with them, she takes up the train-journey to come out from her life of passive existence and to assess her inner-strength. In the ladies coupé of the train she listens to the stories of the other

women and how they have tackled the obstructive social forces in order to listen to their heart and to lead a meaningful life. All these experiences finally culminate in Akhila's achieving of the determination to deal with the world as she wishes to. Akhila's gaining of subjectivity, to a great extent, owes to the counselling of her female friends and co-passengers. For this reason, her achievement of subjectivity points towards the power of female bonding or of sisterhood which Nair has used as the driving force for the attainment of female subjectivity. Thus the journey which was once the most desired "escape" for Akhila, ultimately leads her "into a horizon" (LC 8) where she becomes able to recognise her strength and to connect herself with the world around her in order to live again with her rejuvenated spirit.

Considering the findings of the study of the theoretical discourses of subjectivity in the context of feminist studies and different representations of female subjectivity in the select Indian English novels, it can be said that the idea of female subjectivity includes a wide range of issues and experiences within its framework. It displays women's endeavours through various ways to achieve their subjectivity that can provide them with the free choice to surpass the confinements of patriarchal socio-cultural domination and to have equal opportunity and recognition to live life according to their choice. By "offering a spectrum of possibilities ranging from total subjugation to extreme self-assertion" (Chakravarty 189), the theoretical and literary works on female subjectivity explore the enormous possibility of human experiences hitherto neglected in the grand narratives of patriarchy and the canonical literary works they have inspired. The novels by Indian English women authors prove the need for the authentic presentation of women's condition in society as their works have rightly captured

women's experiences in certain time and space to enrich the discourse of female subjectivity by contributing new perspectives to it.