PART V

Cultural change and innovations
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This chapter will scrutinize how gender constructs available in the fiction, journalism, and scholarship of the late twentieth century complicate any discussion of nationhood, modernity, and development because these narrate ‘women’ as an unstable signifier destabilizing established meanings. In the fiction of the period, authors explore constructions of femininity through a variety of female characters that modify or subvert the roles they are required to play. Often readers are critically distanced from these characters by the movement of the text or by ironic third-person commentary. Such distancing signals the possibility of reading differently the apparently seamless narrative of the nation.

The trajectory by which women were integrated into India is traced back by scholars to nineteenth-century constructs of a new woman for the patriarchy that was gearing itself for independence from the British.¹ Anti-colonial nationalists confronted British rhetoric, which criticized sub-continental traditions as barbaric, especially regarding women, and justified its colonization of India as a civilizing mission. In counterpoint, these nationalists constructed the idea of a new woman partly influenced by Victorian ideals and partly claiming ancestry with a classical Vedic tradition. They created a fiction of womanhood, which gave partial equality to middle-class women but did not touch other classes. Women were objects of benevolence, recovery, and repatriation. The contradictory aftereffects of this legacy created a nexus of problems that lasted well into the twentieth century. In fact, feminist scholars point to innate contradictions in the Indian Constitution.² While it gave equal rights to women as citizens, it also empowered traditional religious and familial laws that strengthened their subordination. The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of crises of the state with a proliferation of women’s groups and grassroots movements, interlinked regionally, locally, and nationally, that battled discriminatory practices in domestic and public domains.³ From the 1990s, these groups focused on the gendered impact of free
market capitalism, religious fundamentalism, changes in democratic culture, and problems of the national economy.

The visibility of women on the political stage in these decades challenged the story of India’s emergence as a modern nation-state by calling attention to the invisibility of women in the construction of that story. The works of fiction considered here – *In Custody* (Chatterjee 1988), *Days of the Turban* (Desai 1984), *English, August* (Devi 1995), and *Imaginary Maps* (Sharma 1986) – present differing female experiences of oppression excluded by the social reforms stemming from nineteenth-century ideas of femininity. The way in which these works of fiction narrate the nation parallels the way a narrative of the nation emerges from a great many scholarly and journalistic discourses of the period. However, the fiction makes visible through its textual ruptures the politics that renders women invisible.

**Violence and the female body**

As sites of violence, resistance, and transformation, women’s bodies are central to any understanding of unequal gender relations. Recent feminist theorists have pointed to the feminization of the nation, which is narrated on the body of women. Women’s bodies are disciplined to adjust to tradition, thus limiting possibilities of resistance and transformation (Thapan 1997). Inevitably, conflict is central to women’s lives. These bodies are fluidly situated in space and time and act as repositories of the acquired attributes of femininity – the two axes that ground women socio-historically in specific contexts (Niranjana 1997). Women are violated through the prevailing ideologies of the nation as part of the process by which it is created and reinforced (Karlekar 2005; Agnihotri and Mazumdar 2005). These scholars are endorsed by journalists and activists, who list ways in which patriarchal culture brutalizes the female psyche and perpetrate the manifold violence against women. They indict landlords, police, politicians, and big industry for using mass rape as a political weapon to subdue lower-caste and working-class women. Their critique of patriarchy acquires a new depth of perspective when read in relation to the dialogic form of the novel.

The narrative technique in *Days of the Turban* presents Fat Aunty’s death as not particularly significant in itself but as a catalyst that enables a male character, Dev Singh, to ruminate on his life. Fat Aunty is the local, aging prostitute who falls out of favour because she aids an inter-class and caste friendship between Gulnari and Kumhareya. Kumhareya is a potter’s son and an illiterate, impoverished farmhand. Gulnari is from a family of wealthy, educated merchants with social standing in a village in Punjab. Kumhareya helps Gulnari escape from an arranged marriage. However, their running away is construed as a sign of a premarital sexual relationship. Gulnari’s family’s honour is premised upon the chastity of Gulnari’s body. Escaping with an unmarried man jeopardizes her chastity and compromises her family’s honour in the eyes of her community. Gulnari’s male relatives scapegoat Fat Aunty for desecrating the family honour, which is then retrieved through the violation of the latter’s body. Fat Aunty is entirely expendable because she lives outside the borders of bourgeois respectability. She loses her chastity when raped and her marital status when her husband is killed during Partition riots. Being Muslim in a lower-caste colony, she is outside upper-caste Hindu society. As a prostitute, she is the locus for an adulterous male sexuality that can only be expressed outside the kinship relations that are established through codes of honour. Fat Aunty signifies what Spivak terms ‘excess’, a space where social norms are fluid and which Gulnari’s male relatives attempt to control. However, unlike the journal articles of the 1980s, this incident is not narrated in a direct reportorial style. Her torture recedes into the background of Dev Singh’s meditations on his life. Dev Singh, Gulnari’s
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uncle and guardian, orders Fat Aunty’s torture but he leaves the premises because ‘the whole proceeding was repugnant to him. He was a man of some feeling and refinement’ (266). Consequently, the violence against Fat Aunty is filtered through his consciousness. Fat Aunty is beaten, kicked, and prodded with staves ‘as though she were a wriggling unclean thing, a snake’ (279) all the while that she screams for mercy. However, either he hears his wife report the violence or surmises the events from the ‘hysteria of voices’ (267) in the courtyard. The violence is lessened in many ways. Fat Aunty’s bones break ‘no louder than the report of a child’s firecracker’ (267). Dev Singh’s thoughts flit from memories of his wife in her younger days, through his deteriorating relations with her, to an uneasy conversation about Gulnari with his brother and distraction at Gulnari’s mother’s screams. All of these thoughts and reactions take attention away from Fat Aunty’s plight. However, the narrative introduces the reader to Fat Aunty’s experience of torture through Dev Singh’s empathetic reactions:

With each cry that he heard, he rocked back and forth involuntarily and eventually to prevent the nausea from erupting through his mouth. ... No one could see him now – a respected cloth merchant, a respected man – in a consternation of grief. For surely, this old woman could not survive such treatment.

Dev Singh is constantly described as refined and educated, because of which he is unable to participate in the torture. He suffers with Fat Aunty, worries about and grieves with her. Yet her torture ‘was being done in his name. In order that there may be respect for his name’ (268). The nausea that he feels at the brutality creates the potential for an epiphanic moment in the text where he is on the verge of confronting his own complicity in these events. He temporarily abdicates control over the situation in order to allow his accomplices to complete what appears undesirable but is necessary. “It has to be done I suppose”, he whispered. And even as he said it he was aware that he really had no control over what was being done’ (267–268). However, Dev Singh does have control; he stops the torture when he feels it has gone far enough. What Dev Singh does not realize within the framework of the text becomes glaring to the reader; his refinement, sophistication, and power as a bourgeois, male subject are premised upon the subjugation of female desires and actions deemed deviant within patriarchy. Respectability is asserted on the terrain of the sexed female body. However, in making Fat Aunty’s torture predominantly a moment for Dev Singh to evaluate his own investment in it, the narrative becomes complicit in the violence and breaks down. It is in the rupture that the reader gets an opportunity to read the text differently in order to reconstruct how the postcolonial nation is constructed. Feminist sociologist Veena Das asserts that the postcolonial nation-state is constructed out of the discourse of family and kinship politics (1995). In incidents of collective violence, such as that of Fat Aunty’s torture, Das argues, a woman’s body becomes a sign through which men communicate with each other. Gulnari, born into a respectable middle-class family, chooses to step outside marriage and domesticity to interact with men outside her class and conspire against the nation. In helping Gulnari hide from her family, Fat Aunty acts against codes of middle-class respectability upon which the national patriarchy is premised.

The language of honour within kinship relations functions to discipline these errant women through the subjugation of their bodies. Such disciplinary functions are not exclusive to the 1980s. Prem Chowdhry (1998) points to three incidents of violence involving inter-caste marriages in North India in the 1990s: in March 1991, Roshni, a Jat woman, was tortured and hanged for eloping with a Yadav man; in April 1991, Poonam, another Jat
woman, was shot by her uncle in broad daylight for having a boyfriend before marriage; and in 1993 Sarita, a lower-caste woman, was axed to death for marrying her upper-caste husband. Chowdhry elaborates that since intra-caste marriage empowers kinship relations and secures property inheritance, any breach in caste status is treated violently. And so, Dev Singh’s ideology of female guardianship in the novel becomes his way of controlling his niece’s sexuality and enforcing caste power.

However, what becomes increasingly evident in the 1970s and 1980s is the formation of relatively new female subjectivities that read the nation differently. Women’s activist movements unite to organize public opinion against the police gang rapes of Mathura (1972), Maya Tyagi (1980), and Gunaben (1986). These included campaigns against bride burning, dowry, and widow immolation with the burning of Roop Kanwar, a young widow, on the funeral pyre of her husband in 1987. It spread to address issues regarding invasive contraceptives, the denial of healthcare to mothers and children, and gendered violence in private and public arenas. Consequently, there were amendments to the rape law, the law against custodial rape was introduced, and the number of women police officers were increased. However, Butalia (2005), Sangari (1999), and Agnihotri and Mazumdar (2005) point out that these measures were insufficient to counteract violence against women, which became complex due to a number of factors. Hindutva women cadres participated in the violence against Muslim women in Ayodhya. Globalization allowed the entry of multinationals, which projected women as consumers and reproductive beings. The rise of religious fundamentalisms also created a framework for demolishing women’s rights to equality. And so, they conclude that, the women’s movement and feminism are deeply contested concepts today. By writing on violence to women’s bodies, these scholars, journalists, and authors make visible the violence of nation-building that either contains women in fixed spaces or seeks to erase them.

Women, work, and the nation

In this section, the chapter will examine how the patriarchal management of female sexuality reproduces social inequality by devaluing women’s labour within the nation. Feminist scholars, writing at the turn of the century, point out that women’s work, though necessary for survival of the family, is unpaid, underpaid, and deemed valueless under capitalist modes of production because only marketable goods and services have value. Women’s work creates surplus value for industry and agriculture and women become part of a reserve army of surplus labour that is used to ensure low wages within a system of production where labour-power is produced as commodity. Consequently, women’s work has been largely invisible to development planners. Several journalists writing at the time endorse these ideas when they assert that if women were paid for domestic work, they would contribute to half the national income. Women do multiple types of work in agriculture and are responsible for 50 per cent of the total food production. Women often control the family-centred village crafts and handloom industries and trade goods in the market. Middle-class women contribute as professionals. Yet, these contributions remain less recognized because historically the lives of Indian women have existed at the interface of caste and class inequalities. They conclude that the economic changes of globalization on women have created unequal opportunities and new forms of oppression away from the traditional family.

In fictional works, there are middle and lower-middle-class women characters that do unpaid domestic work. Regardless of class, caste, or religion none of these women has direct control over resources. They are mostly under- or uneducated and defined by their relations to
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men. Sarla (In Custody) and Renate (Days of the Turban) contribute to the domestic economy by cooking, cleaning, rearing children, budgeting household expenses, and serving houseguests and male family members. Renate is Raskaan’s (the Punjabi expatriate entrepreneur in Germany) secretary-wife. She arranges his schedule, monitors his restaurants, safeguards his money, decorates his house, hostesses his parties, and satisfies his sexual urges. “She’s a pet,” said Raskaan in Punjabi as he replaced the receiver. Satyavan said carefully, “She’s just right for you”. What he meant was that he thought her a good wife. Raskaan shrugged. “It’s a good arrangement” (Days of the Turban 100). Indeed, Raskaan views his relationship with Renate as a profitable business arrangement in which the returns are more than his initial investment. Being important only as an addition to Raskaan’s life, Renate is practically peripheral to the plot. Most of the other female characters share her fate in these novels.

However, there are moments in these novels when women’s invisibility regarding their work gets challenged. For example, in In Custody Sarla is dissatisfied with her marriage and tacitly accuses Deven, her husband, of being a bad provider ‘... she dreamt the magazine dream of marriage: herself stepping out of a car with a plastic shopping bag full of groceries and filling them into the gleaming refrigerator, then rushing to the telephone placed on a lace doily upon a three-legged table and excitedly ringing up her friends to invite them to a picture show with her and her husband who was beaming at her from behind a flowered curtain’ (68). As a temporary lecturer at Ram Lal College in Mirpore, Deven is poorly paid and cannot afford the lifestyle advertised in the media. In the late 1970s, most middle- and lower-middle-class families, like Sarla’s, were unable to afford refrigerators, telephones, and cars. Much of Deven’s income is carefully spent bargaining in markets over grocery prices. The lace doily, three-legged table, and flowered curtain are aesthetic, inessential items requiring surplus income. Similarly, going to the movies with one’s girlfriends requires extra income to afford leisure time away from domestic chores. Sarla and Deven do not have the income for any of these commodities or activities. However, media images of the beautifully dressed housewife with two model children living in a modern apartment while cheerfully undertaking all domestic chores became increasingly prevalent from the late 1970s. Such images sold the idea of domestic bliss that would result from increased leisure housewives would enjoy if they purchased the drudgery-reducing kitchen gadgets advertised in the media. These advertisements, coinciding with the expansion of domestic markets and an increased production of consumer goods in the 1980s, appealed to an expanding middle class while creating an image of a desirable lifestyle that only the urban, upper-middle class could afford. Sarla’s dreams reveal the vulnerability of lower-middle- and working-class women to such images. Sarla’s reality is that she lives in meagre accommodation provided to low-grade college employees. Her surroundings are impoverished. Her house is dirty. Her cooking is tasteless. She and her child are poorly dressed. Sarla is presented scowling, sulking, or playing power games with Deven while performing her duties as wife and mother. She receives no financial or emotional acknowledgement for being house and kitchen-bound. The contrast between the magazine advertisements and her circumstances creates a rupture in the narrative by which Sarla refuses to be rendered invisible. Her irritation at the domestic work she is forced to do haunts Deven, who cannot successfully erase her by escaping to the world of Urdu poetry.

Journalists in the 1980s point to the multiple oppressions women face in respect to their labour. Women continue to face discrimination regarding inheritance, divorce, alimony, and maintenance. Working women often face sexual harassment and while their earnings may supplement the family income, these do not give them autonomy. Poor women are forced to work long hours for meagre wages, are not represented by trade unions, and are without
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healthcare, maternity benefits, childcare, or legal rights. Those employed in agriculture are exposed to toxic hazards from fertilizers. In the organized sector, women are laid off at every crisis. The plight of women deserted by their husbands is worse because they are left in charge of their families with little or no resources.9

The dialogic form of fiction, treating these truth claims as constructs, makes visible the processes at work within patriarchy that render the gendered subaltern invisible. The exploitation of lower-caste/class women takes on a corporeal hue in the stories of Imaginary Maps. In ‘Doulati the Bountiful’, Doulati is sold into prostitution at 19 years to repay her father’s debt of Rs. 300 to their landlord Munabar Chandela. She dies of venereal disease 8 years later after having earned Rs. 40,000 for the brothel owner. She has no control over or access to her earnings and has to borrow money from the brothel owner to buy toiletries and other essentials, all of which further increase her debts. ‘Paramanand [the brothel owner] is a sucking fly. Doesn’t give them anything ... He’ll take the money of the kamiyas’ whoring work, will not give a penny and what he lends will be added to the reckoning of the first loan’ (67). Latia, one of the clients who makes this statement, can obviously see the exploitation in the system but supports and benefits from it. Doulati has no knowledge of accounting to calculate the accurate amount of her earnings or the interest the brothel owner charges to comprehend exactly how she is being oppressed. Nor does she know her legal rights or have access to law courts for their redress. The system by which she is made a bond slave is usury, practised not only by the upper-caste landlord who sells her to the Brahman brothel owner but also by the upper-caste/class policemen, government officers, and contractors who patronize her brothel. Hence, the system of usury is a part of the local as well as national economy. In fact, one of Doulati’s clients, Latia, is contracted by the government to construct roads and office buildings for the forestry department. Latia’s money not only funds the brothel but is also behind the national foreign policy, dictating the war effort towards China. Paramanand, the brothel owner, has to bribe the local police, government officers, and politicians to run his profitable business. Contractors like Latia have to bribe government officers with free sex in order to get contracts.

Doulati’s name itself means wealth and provides an ironic insight to the title of this story; her body is indeed bountiful for it earns excess profits for her clients and brothel owner. In this inequitable exchange, she gets no medical treatment, very little food, regular physical abuse, minimum rest with ten to thirty clients a day, and minimal clothing. The moment she outlives her usefulness, she is thrown out on the street without money and cannot treat the disease she contracts while prostituting. Doulati dies on Independence Day on the map of India drawn on the ground by the village schoolmaster. ‘Filling the entire Indian peninsula from the oceans to the Himalayas, here lies bonded labour spread-eagled, kamiya-whore Doulati Nagesia’s tormented corpse, putrefied with venereal disease, having vomited up all the blood in its desiccated lungs’ (93). Her body makes visible the untold story of India – how political independence from British rule has only exchanged the empire for conditions of internal colonization. Mahasweta Devi deliberately uses a rough, jagged style interspersed with journalistic diction to break the smooth flow of narration. In the ruptures, it is possible to see the gendered subaltern who is displaced from the official processes of democracy, development, and modernization and yet whose labour makes such processes financially viable for the upper-caste/class male subject who inherits the nation. Bond slaves like Doulati constitute the invisible workforce behind every industry within the nation; their contributions to the national economy are constantly erased in order to maintain the margins of profit. However, for a moment in the text, what becomes visible is the complicity between nation-building efforts, male sexuality, and big capital
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in structures of exploitation. Mahasweta Devi’s fiction is part of larger, vociferous, and polarizing debates in the 1980s on the issue of prostitution. It is important to look at the process by which women’s reproductive labour is incorporated into the sex service industry. In the case of the prostitute, reproductive labour (or the sexual use of the body as an instrument of labour) is forcefully commercialized and placed in the market and so wage relations dominate. However, a prostitute’s labour is not seen as productive and so is invisible and legally and morally isolated — factors that increase capital accumulation (D’Cunha 1997). Under capitalism, large-scale disruptions of kinship and family relations, migration for jobs, and separation of work from home increase capitalist mobility to generate new forms of sexual needs, commoditize sex and the prostitute’s body, while increasing the numbers of women who are marginalized, illiterate, and unemployable elsewhere. These factors increase the magnitude of sex trafficking as well as the foreign exchange earned by nation-states. So, feminist scholars point to the collusion between the sex trafficking industry and the state apparatus.

Scrutiny of gender inequality intensified through the 1980s in the media, the arts, and protest movements. As part of these debates, journalists publishing through the 1980s insist that some social change has benefited all classes of women in India. They point to the legislations passed since independence, safeguarding women’s rights regarding marriage, divorce, child custody, domestic violence, inheritance, maternity leave, work conditions, and unionization. They detail the workshops and diploma courses established by the government for training women in various fields. They uphold efforts made by nationalized banks to ensure gender equity. They assert that rural migrations to urban areas have allowed women better access to healthcare. They applaud the media in educating women in socio-economic issues. Non-governmental organizations have done much for women’s rights.

In the fictional worlds of Imaginary Maps, these social improvements seem mostly to affect middle-class women, who are all, however, known through male characters. They do not speak for themselves and are not even present during the main narrative action. Hence, in a sense, these women are erased. In ‘Pterodactyl, Pirtha, and Puran Sahay’ (Imaginary Maps) Harisharan, a civil servant, describes his wife and Surajpratap’s wife, Sheila, as ambitious career women to Puran, the male protagonist. Harisharan’s wife is a civil servant. Sheila is a political activist who is able to cross class and caste boundaries in marrying her husband. Both Harisharan and Puran respect and admire the work these women do because of their own enlightened gender politics, which then provides a vantage point from which Mahasweta Devi deliberately launches her critique of the corrupt, patriarchal bureaucracy. In contrast with these women, Imtiaz Begum, Nur’s second wife, in In Custody, was at one time a poor courtesan and is now a budding poet who would like her contributions to the world of Urdu poetry acknowledged. Imtiaz Begum is resented by Deven, the protagonist, who feels threatened by her ambition: ‘who was she? ... How could she claim monopoly of the stage with ... her ... third rate verse ...?’ (81–82). ’This woman, this so-called poetess, belonged to that familiar female mafia, he [Deven] thought, looking at her with unconcealed loathing’ (83). Perhaps Imtiaz Begum does indeed write inferior verse. However, she attributes its poor quality to the inadequate education she has received as a lower-class woman. She argues for an equal opportunity to explore her innate talents and refuses to be erased by Deven without being relegated to the ‘safe world of dementia, termagants, and viragos’ (83). These novels are not alike in their evaluation of women’s work; situated in the moment of crisis in the 1970s and 1980s, they display differing viewpoints based on the authors’ politics.

These narratives of the late twentieth century reveal how attitudes to women’s work remain tied to the social reforms of the nineteenth century that valorized domestic work.
and tied women in various capacities to the home as keepers of the national/spiritual inner space. Middle-class women were more affected by these constructions; hence in the novels middle-class female characters like Sarla (In Custody) are confined to and defined by the domestic space. Lower-caste prostitutes existed in tense relations to notions of conjugality. Hence, characters like Doulati serve as the invisible workforce that does indeed build the nation. Moreover scholars like Susan Vishwanathan (1997) ask why, if women are associated with life generating labour, is their labour considered passive? In answer, she examines how patriarchy associates women with nature and corporeality and how women, unlike men, are not considered rational, orderly, or innovative; they are therefore to be tamed and civilized much like animals, colonized subjects, and slaves. These debates draw attention to how such constructions of femininity enable a modernizing development rationale, which then renders women’s work invisible.

Goddesses, mothers, and prostitutes: icons of women, sexuality, and the nation

Questions of gender have always been central to forming national identity. The language of nationalism singles women out as symbolic markers of the respectability and immutability of the nation. George Mosse (1985) traces the roots of this phenomenon to the growth of nationalism with the rise of the middle classes, who defined themselves through the ideal of respectability in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe. They perceived their lives, based upon frugality, duty, and restraint, as superior to those of the ‘lazy’ lower classes or the ‘profligate’ aristocracy. Mosse reveals how in England and Germany these values spread to other classes and ultimately controlled gender and sexual differences. It is easy to conclude that these colonial influences also shaped Indian nationalists’ control over women’s sexuality and gender roles. Proliferating icons of selfless mothers, martial goddesses, or fallen women in Indian culture bear witness to such patriarchal constructions of femininity that render women invisible through their inherent representational logic. The fictional and journalistic texts of the late twentieth century increasingly challenge such constructions through rhetorical strategies, female characters, and ideological utterances that render visible women hitherto excluded from such processes.

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The figure of the martial goddess was particularly strong in Bengal because the cult of worshipping the devi or the divine feminine principle had been prevalent for over 600 years. By the nineteenth century, specific forms of devi worship, signifying strength and energy, became aligned with Hindu nationalism. The martial goddess was manifest as Mother India militant about independence from British rule. Feminist scholar Indira Chowdhury (1998) explains how colonized males, who felt emasculated, used myths about heroic women to reclaim their lost manhood and nationhood. She elaborates that the need for constructing a national identity resistant to colonial rule fuelled the contrasting image of the heroic goddess and her weak grovelling male worshipper; the former represented the dormant potential of the colonized male who could repossess his history and refashion his resistance. These icons were articulated by the middle-class Bengali elite and often excluded lower castes and non-Hindus. Icons of the heroic goddess persisted into the decades after independence that devalued women as humans by conflating them with goddesses, eradicating or controlling their sexuality. In the early 1980s the slogan ‘Indira is India’ by the Congress party likened Indira Gandhi, the then prime minister, to the goddess Durga or Mother India. However, through the late twentieth century, women from other classes, castes, and religions challenged their exclusion from the imagined
national community. Consequently, the icon of the heroic goddess was also appropriated and changed, as evident in the novels of the time.

Mary Oraon in ‘The Hunt’ (*Imaginary Maps*) is a goddess-like creature who possesses strength inaccessible to men in her community. Instead of enabling men to act, she acts to enhance her agency as a gendered subject within a patriarchal nation. Mary is a young, attractive, strong, and intelligent Christian from an impoverished *adivasi* community. Her mother was raped and abandoned by her father, a white plantation owner. Such a background would not generally allow Mary too many options. Yet, in the story her racial hybridity provides her some autonomy within her tribe. Her anger at her father fuels her self-assertion and resistance to patriarchy. Mary asserts her autonomy in many ways. She intimidates her employers from interfering with her work and gains favourable terms of employment for herself. She retains the profit she earns from selling their orchard produce to save some money as future security. She resists being sexually exploited by men from her tribe and her employers’ caste. There is a militant quality about Mary. She is able to transcend the limitations of her environment and gain respect from people surrounding her. She hunts and kills her potential rapist Tehsildar Singh, the urban labour contractor, during a ritual hunt festival. Mahasweta Devi deliberately rewrites the patriarchal narrative to present a radical feminist vision with alternative possibilities. Tehsildar represents mainstream contractors whose illegal deforestation activities are supported by the entire administration. He is willing to rape Mary and exploit her tribe. Just as the inaccessible beauty and frightening sexual energy of the liminal goddess is channelled for anti-colonial resistance, Mary uses her body as a weapon to foil patriarchal rape. As a potential goddess, she enables the men and especially the women of her community to glimpse alternative possibilities through resistance.

Icons of goddesses are closely linked with configurations of the nation as the motherland, mother goddess, or earth mother. Scholars trace this link to nineteenth-century anti-colonial construction of the new woman who was to safeguard the spiritual qualities, contained within the inner space of the new nation that was preparing to be born.11 Mothers became crucial as bearers and nurturers of future citizens and were to be self-sacrificing, chaste, and loyal in order to restore the colonized male’s assailed masculinity. Heroic mythical characters famous for their motherly wisdom and wifely devotion, like Sati, Savitri, and Sita, became popular at the time. Chowdhury points out how ideas of motherhood gained strength from Queen Victoria’s role as wife and mother; in Bengal, she was seen as the head of the family moulding her children to be the future inheritors of empire. According to Chowdhury, Indian subjects saw themselves being moulded to take over self-governance. By the 1980s, media reports increasingly critiqued the idea of the nation as mother as a metaphor of heterosexual exclusion confining women within spheres of domesticity.12 These reports criticize advertisements for perpetuating the mistreatment of barren women, promoting perceptions of female children as unwanted burden, and encouraging intra-caste, -class, -regional, and -religious alliances among the youth. Feminist scholars (Sangari 1999; Tanika Sarkar 1995) point to further complications in the 1990s with the Hindu Right’s conflation of the heroic goddess with the nation as mother. They assert that motherhood is vested with political instrumentality; mothers as political creatures are to instil in children habits of obedience to authority and patriotism for the nation. Drawing upon icons of the martial goddesses Durga and Kali, the Hindu Right mobilize and train women in martial arts to transmit an ideology of violent action as evident in the Durga Vahini’s (carriers of the goddess Durga) incitement of sons and husbands to communal violence.
Late twentieth-century fiction also scrutinizes icons of mothers as non-sexual beings at the heart of their families and of the nation; such scrutiny evolves out of the ruptured narrative. None of the mothers have individual names or identities. Puran’s (*Imaginary Maps*) mother takes care of domestic chores and safeguards family interests. She produces children who belong to her husband’s family and functions as a caretaker with interim responsibilities. Consequently, Puran’s mother is profoundly alienated from her labour and her body under patriarchy, an alienation that is normalized by the codes of motherhood. According to Spivak (1993), traditional Marxist theories of alienation never account for the womb as a place of production in multiple economic systems and the unique alienation that women experience. In all patrilineal societies, the man legally owns the child as the product of the woman’s body. The woman merely possesses the place of production – the womb – and is therefore the agent of production. Therefore, it is possible to see how within the Marxist triad of use – exchange – surplus, Puran’s mother always produces more than she gets for the man, her husband, who owns her and, through the man, for the capitalist who owns his labour. She has to condition her sons and daughters differently in order to prepare them for very different lives within patriarchy. Such a world decreases her influence and authority over her grown son. She cannot persuade Puran to remarry after the death of his wife and settle down in one place. In creating a gender-enlightened male protagonist such as Puran, Mahasweta Devi creates a contrast between his politics and his mother’s ideological beliefs. It is through such a contrast that Devi ironically examines Puran’s mother’s devaluation of herself as a mother and wife who is unable to fulfill her obligations to the family as well as the system that enables such devaluation. In *English, August* Agastya’s mother occupies a sacred space; Agastya cannot tolerate derogatory comments about her. Unfortunately, the space that she occupies is constantly desacralized by virtue of her having married a Hindu: ‘At lunch Mrs. Srivastav said, “Arrey August, you eat fish like a real Bengali. Look his plate is clean.” ... “Looks like your mother’s side couldn’t corrupt you,” said Kumar’ (107). The question of corruption arises only because in Kumar’s eyes, Agastya’s identity is compromised in his mother’s Goanese Catholic womb, which hybridizes his father’s Hindu Bengali maleness. Kumar and Mrs Srivastav participate in the Indian bureaucracy that positions itself as the modernizing agency of governance. This conversation is part of a social event between administrative officials. Yet within the novel, bureaucrats perpetuate patriarchal values, which imprison most women’s sexuality within the confines of domesticity. Within patriarchy, as Spivak points out, men own property by virtue of which they define that which is proper. Women become signs of the improper and as unstable spaces they must be controlled by the proper name of the patronymic in order to maintain the status quo. According to this logic, Agastya’s mother’s womb as the property of her Bengali Hindu husband is to replicate the proper identity of the father in the child. However, as the unstable, improper space, her womb threatens to dilute the name of the father by hybridizing Agastya’s identity with her Goanese Catholicism. This instability is feared and demonized by Kumar’s threatened laughter.

Female sexuality is a disturbing force that potentially upsets the gender distinctions of patriarchy; it is seen as potentially wild, promiscuous, disruptive, and dangerous (Vishwanath 1997). Coping with and controlling this threat posed by women became a central concern in Hindu texts such as the *Manusmriti* and the later Vedic tradition (Roy 1998). Nineteenth-century reformers restrained female sexuality by dividing the social space into public and private spheres; lower-caste/class women were allowed public mobility because their labour supported middle-class lifestyles. Such distinctions fostered icons of the loose woman, indecently inhabiting public spaces with an uncontrollable
sexuality. Poor women abandoned by husbands often become sex workers to support families, exploding myths about family respectability and stability; later the spread of HIV/AIDS thrust the issue of sexuality into public domain and sexual health became a key question (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005). In the novel English, August, film actresses and porn stars occupy the space given to lower-caste and lower-class women and function outside the domestic sphere of respectability; they have statuses that overlap in specific ways. Their bodies are on display for a price and hence become public property. This non-exclusivity is deemed indecent. But like middle-class respectable women, their sexuality is also controlled because they become mere locations for the expression of aggressive male heterosexuality. Their bodies as sexual objects invite the male gaze that is not allowed to linger openly on domesticated, respectable women. However, the narrative movement within these 1980s texts reverses traditional expectations by gazing at the male gaze to undermine the way it is constituted. Similarly, the narrative structure in English, August forces the reader to scrutinize Agastyā’s obsession with sex. Agastyā focuses on specific body parts of the women that he meets. He notices ‘the wonderfully pretty’ tribal women with ‘tall’, ‘rigid’ bodies, ‘large cracked feet’ and ‘veined forarms’; he watches their ‘... taut female bodies struggle to extract water out of a well of mud’ (258). Their severe poverty provides a context for their eroticization and sexualization. Agastyā is thrilled that ‘They exist ... outside arty films about tribal exploitation and agrarian reform’ (101). None of these women actually exist as people with complex personalities but become fragmented objects of his desire. His desire too is fractured. He is frequently disconnected from his self, unable to establish coherent relationships, and wrapped in sexual thoughts, which create an alternative reality to his daily routine. His discomfort stems from the public/private divide that he must maintain as a member of the bureaucracy.

In the last few decades of the twentieth century in India, feminists have variously defined icons of goddesses, mothers, and prostitutes. These icons demarcate the attributes comprising the category of woman (Thapan 1997). In fact, female bodies, inserted into a matrix of sexuality, are ensconced in layers of meaning (Niranjana 1997). In other words, sexuality is a tool for studying norms governing caste, class, kinship, and religion; it is also regionally varied (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2005). Hence, the sexual domain is an intersubjective realm in and by which desire is aroused, blocked, and violated (John 1997). Codes of moral conduct regulate women’s activities, dress, and speech; women as both agents and subjects confront and are contained by these rules. Vishwanath (1997) traces the development of various women’s groups since the 1970s, which focused on enacting legal reform. They agree that the 1990s brought unprecedented changes with increasing numbers of divorced, single, and working women and increasingly circulating images of female bodies. Ghosh (2005) points to problematic collaborations between secular feminist organizations and the Hindu Right in condemning these images with both groups relying on conservative notions of female purity and failing to distinguish between sexual explicitness and sexism. In the fiction, marriages face constant constraints and surveillance. Female sexualities that deviate outside marital relations proliferate but are categorized and incorporated in specific ways in public and private spaces. These fictional examples show a shift in perspective, revealing the sexual politics that make women visible in specific ways through icons of goddesses, mothers, and immoral women. Yet this visibility succeeds in erasing female agency with a violence that intensifies and consolidates patriarchal power.
Concluding ruminations

Late twentieth-century narratives reveal the female body to be the site of struggle over which the nation articulated its concerns. Scholars have much to say about the nation, its literature, and women. Feminist scholarship animated literary debates since the 1970s, with women’s writing gaining visibility; however, the term ‘women writers’ may erase differences between women’s experiences while rescuing them from isolation (M. Mukherjee 2008). For Sunder Rajan (2008), the categories ‘women’ and ‘nation’ signify the gendered private–public divisions, which become sites for contending ideologies of freedom. In such struggles, it is crucial to dynamically represent women through a variety of cultural texts that invite critical interpretation and recuperation. Dutta (2008) connects women’s visibility in national discourse to the growing demand among all marginalized subjects for a place at the centre. Any understanding of the relations between literature and nationalism must be cognizant of this demand, she believes. Paranjape (1998) endorses this idea when he asserts that current literary debates place a greater emphasis on the experiences of women who are not part of the mainstream. In so doing, these debates contest the identity and destiny of modern India. Such contestations are unsurprising, says Raveendran (2006); he declares that India as a nation is a stable entity only on the political map of the world; its literary and cultural borders keep changing between writers, readers, and subjects. These critics are influenced by Homi Bhabha’s formulation of the nation and its narratives being conceptually indeterminate, transitional, and wavering between vocabularies (1990). Bhabha is influenced by Benedict Anderson’s 1983 formulation of the nation as a product of the simultaneous imagination of its disparate groups of citizens who experience themselves as a community while reading its fiction and newspapers. This chapter seeks to situate itself among these debates by juxtaposing images of women in fiction with journalistic and scholarly discourses on the nation in the last three decades of the twentieth century. In the process, it seeks to reveal how literature stages many moments when dominant narratives are unsettled and exposes new possibilities within the discourse of the nation. These possibilities become evident once again in the public outrage over the rape of Nirbhaya in December 2012 when various sections of civil society united to assert the right of women to safely and freely inhabit public spaces within the nation at all times. It is therefore entirely reasonable to assert that this period of the late twentieth century is a time of crucial changes leading up to this present moment in the twenty-first century.

Notes
3 For instance, the Bodhgaya struggle led by the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini took on land rights for women. The Chipko movement mobilized women against felling trees commercially. The Shramik Sangathana involved women to uphold the land rights of the dispossessed tribal peasantry of Shahada. The Kerala fishworker’s movement took up women’s rights to public transport for vending fish.
9 Latifi (1986), Haider (1986), Begum (1983), and Iyer (1986) refer to the plight of Shah Bano, a Muslim woman, whose abandonment after 50 years of marriage provided the subject for an
extremely controversial court case in the 1980s. The government passed the Muslim Women’s Bill despite protests by feminist organizations. This bill, according to these journalists, exacerbated the miserable plight of many Muslim women living in poverty and illiteracy. However, not all Muslim women are uniformly oppressed. Educated urban women faced a different reality than their poor, illiterate counterparts in urban slums or villages.


Bibliography


Combative constructions of femininity


