Humour in Indian writing in English: three novels women writers: Namita Gokhale's Paro dreams of passion, Suniti Namjoshi's The conversations of cow, Arundhati Roy's The god of small things

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Humour in Indian Writing in English: Three Novels by Women Writers:

Namita Gokhale’s *Paro Dreams of Passion*
Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Conversations of Cow*
Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree

MASTER OF ARTS (HONOURS)

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

MEETA CHATTERJEE PADMANABHAN

FACULTY OF ENGLISH STUDIES

2002
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to:

Dr. Paul Sharrad for being my guru and my guide through the bewildering landscape of Western academia and for extending his consideration, friendship and kindness to my whole family.

Dr. Anne Colette for very legible notes in the margins.

The ‘Joy Luck Club’, Bay 6, Lu Quing Wang, Lynne Townsend, Cryus Roshan, Martin Bode, Pinaki Chakravaty and Jill Hanna for a lively and supportive work atmosphere.

Geoff Cowell and Dennis Mulvihill for hearty ‘collegiality’ through the years.

Saras Sathiah, my ‘younger sister’ for friendship.

Shalmalee Palekar for belly laughs over chai and biscoot.

The Basus, Mukherjees, Kotwals, Dayals, and Raji for being my extended family.

Indrani Mukherjee for showing me a thing or two about life.

My elder daughter, Suma Iyer, for her disguised interest and spontaneous jokes.

My younger one, Shibani Iyer, for cup cakes and comfort.

Bani Chatterjee for not being a Hindi filmi mother.

Montosh Chatterjee for his fatherly advice, ‘Just finish it, man’.

And finally, Padmanabhan Iyer, my own god in residence of light bulbs and printer cartridges, for support and comic relief.
This thesis argues that contrary to the view held by critics there is a definite presence of humour in Indian Writing in English by women writers. Namita Gokhale, Suniti Namjoshi and Arundhati Roy have used a range of strategies to humorously interrogate the subordinate status accorded to women in Indian society. The themes that the writers take up, such as adultery, inequities in social and legal status, lesbianism, sexual relationships across caste and class barriers, political satire and incest still continue to be disturbing and destabilising. However, irony, satire and parody are deployed to raise issues that are generally considered uncomfortable. The body features as a trope for subversion; genre appropriation and the uncovering of patriarchal texts are used to generate humour. The thesis begins by examining the status of the English language in India and tries to establish the background against which Indian women writers operate. It then outlines humour from classical Western and Indian theories of humour, focusing finally on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque in literature and the feminist theory/hypothesis of humour. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and the theories of 'fumerists' provide the tools to analyse the three novels: *Paro Dreams of Passion*, *The Conversations of Cow* and *The God of Small Things*. The three writers have explored the potential of laughter boldly, mischievously or as black humour. The devices and tactics used by the writers are discussed in three different chapters. It appears that the reason humour in the fiction of the women writers is not sufficiently recognised is perhaps because the levity in the novels is offset by the subversive nature that mocks societal limitations as feminist humorists have argued.
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Foreword

The key words in the title of the thesis are problematic and need to be defined at the outset. Humour, which is ordinarily conflated with comedy, satire, irony and its various other forms, presents problems of terminology. The adjectives ‘Indian’ and ‘women’ used to qualify the writers, also present some difficulties. Before launching into a discussion of humour and the artistic modes and genres one associates with it, it is important to address the question of the credentials of ‘Indianness’ of the three writers. Gokhale (b. 1956) author of Paro Dreams of Passion, started out as a journalist who still lives and works in India. Roy (b.1961) the Booker prize-winning author of The God of Small Things, is touted as a ‘home-grown’ who has neither studied nor lived abroad. Namjoshi (b. 1941) has lived abroad, and taught English literature in Canada and now works in the U.K. However, her themes and inspirations are as ‘Indian’ as those of Anita Desai, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala or Shashi Deshpande. She belongs within the category of diasporic Indian writers and attributes some of her textual tactics to India. Namjoshi wrote ‘The Conversations of Cow’ in Canada and is included in books of literary criticism (Naik & Narayan, 2001) as a diasporic writer of Indian origin.

Many women writers seem to regard the epithet ‘woman’ in front of ‘writer’ as an irritation, if not effrontery, arguing that a similar adjective is not appended to a singer or a dancer or to a male writer. ‘It’s because a woman who writes is out in a separate class. She is not a writer who happens to be a woman. She is, specifically, a woman writer, and to be judged as such’ (Deshpande, 1986, 31). She further explains her position by asserting that ‘Any woman who writes fiction shows the world as it looks to her protagonist, if the protagonist is a woman, she shows the world as it looks to a woman. This view, I have realised, makes a man quite uncomfortable. But to
present this viewpoint is not necessarily to be feminist' (33). Applying the ‘tag of feminist’, she claims, is one way of dismissing a novel, by suggesting that the writing is propagandist. Perhaps, it implies that the biological nature of the author limits the textual field to certain themes that are uncomfortable to men. The novels under consideration may have been similarly treated because the themes they deal with are ‘uncomfortable’ to male and female critics alike. Themes like adultery, inequities in the status of men and women, lesbianism, sexual relationships across castes, political satire and incest still continue to be disturbing and destabilising. Therefore, whether the novels are feminist or ‘womanist’, the net critical effect they have produced remains that of shock.

Despite some overlapping of themes, the writers approach their material in different ways. An overarching framework of Feminism or Postcolonialism/postcolonialism, therefore, has proved to be ineffective. Theories have been invoked in the interpreting of aspects of their work only with regard to the specificity of each text. The only ‘theories’ that provided any tools of interpretation were Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque in literature and that of ‘fumerists’ or feminists writing specifically on humour. A discussion of these forms part of the second chapter.

Humour and the ability to laugh at something perceived as funny is universal and is specific to the human species. What strikes human beings as funny, may differ from age to age or from one geographic location to another; nevertheless, ‘humour is an anthropological constant’ even if it is ‘historically relative’ (Berger, 1997, x). One of the difficulties about writing on humour is the terminology. In everyday usage ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’ are treated as synonyms. Derivations of the words can be used to describe a film or a play that instigates laughter. The word ‘humour’ in its present meaning, which suggests a message that warrants laughter, is a fairly new
signification of the word. Before 1682, the word ‘humour’ signified a mental temperament or disposition. Lord Shaftesbury’s famous *Sensus Communis: an essay on the freedom of wit and humour* (1709) was one of the earliest sources that used the word ‘humour’ in its present meaning (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 1997, 1).

‘Comedy’ referred to a form/mode of drama and literature. It operated as the opposite of tragedy, which dealt with the grand, more eternal problems of human life, whereas comedy was closely linked to the examination of specific social habits and follies. Increasingly, however, the distinction between humour and comedy seems to have become practically amalgamated, since comedy and tragedy often come together to produce certain special effects. Umberto Eco’s distinction between ‘humour’ and ‘comedy’ is worth noting. The comic leads to the idea of the carnival, which he contends can exist only as an authorised transgression, acceptable only when performed within the limits of a laboratory situation of literature, stage or screen (1984, 6-7).

It does not act in order to make us accept that system of values, but at least obliges us to acknowledge its existence. The laughter mixed with pity, without fear, becomes a smile... In comedy, we laugh at the character. In humor, we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe, the frame is wrong’ (ibid, 7-8).

Contradictory as this might seem, it implies that comedy provokes laughter at characters who appear incongruous in a setting. Humour, on the other hand, is related to the setting or the situation that the characters find themselves in. This may involve the entire society and its discursive practices. Characters in a novel or a play appear absurd because of their transgressions. Humour, according to Eco, is not concerned with transgressions alone, but the whole frame: the stage setting or the discursive context. Laughter may not be a suitable response to the context because any attempt at considering the frame is to become aware of human limitations. Eco further explains
that humour does not pretend, like carnival, to lead us beyond our own limits, but makes us aware of our limitations.

It does not promise us liberation, reminding us of the presence of law that we no longer have reason to obey. In doing so it undermines the law. It makes us feel the uneasiness of living under a law-any law (ibid, 8).

Humour, thus, ‘is a cold carnival. Something that leaves us feeling quiet and peaceful, a little angry, with a shade of bitterness in our minds’ (ibid).

From my reading of Paro: Dreams of Passion, The Conversations of Cow and A God of Small Things, humour emerges in the sense of ‘cold carnival’. The anger, the bitterness and the uneasiness of living under a ‘law’ are sublimated through humour. Not only is there no promise of liberation from the ‘law’, all three writers deploy techniques that subvert the ‘laws’ textually to create guerrilla texts that question the frame rather than the character, deliberately causing laughter that is mixed with ‘a little anger’ and a touch of bitterness. The breaking of the frame or textual carnival is attempted differently in each of the novels.

Of the three novels, The Conversation of Cow is the most light-hearted. Although it deals with themes similar to those in the other novels, the ending of the novel is more of a joyous celebration. There are no deaths in the novel. The sheer absurdity of male domination is presented through carnivalising the fable form. By creating a multi-layered text, Namjoshi challenges the static form of the fable. She reconfigures it to include not just man and beast, as fables traditionally did, but to also include a lesbian subject and her concerns. Although issues like gender inequality and female subjectionhood feature predominantly in the novel, they are treated with parody, wit and irony.

In Paro Dreams of Passion, the idea of the carnivalesque, topsy-turvy world is presented through a novel form that superficially resembles the romance novel. The choice of a playful title ironises the goddess, Parvati, and the heroine of a legendary
story who is a clichéd epitome of all things virtuous and unattainable. The Paro of this novel is far from being the ‘ideal’ woman. Married several times, and living in adulterous relationship with a much younger man, Paro transgresses the moral boundaries of the typical ‘Bharatiya nari’ (Indian woman) set down by society. The comedy in *Paro Dreams of Passion* lies in the subversion of the romance genre. While the erotic and the economic are uneasily intertwined to provide for many hilarious situations, the anger at the gender role prescription and the marginalisation of women is humorously foregrounded through satire.

The *God of Small Things* is the most satirical of the novels. Rebellion against gender inequalities and the oppressiveness of a society whose laws were made long ago gives the humour a darker side. The presence of the ‘laws’ necessitates humour as a survival tactic or a temporary coping mechanism; for, in Irigaray’s words,

Isn’t laughter the first form of liberation from the secular oppression? Isn’t the phallic tantamount to the seriousness of meaning? Perhaps woman and the sexual relation transcend it “first” in laughter? (1985, 163).

Laughter, humour, comedy are not aspects of literature commonly associated with Indian literature in English, but even those that are there seem to be undervalued. On the whole, modern Indian fiction tends to be bleak, solemn and staid. ‘Modern Indian writers of fiction tend to be too serious and to cultivate a largely negative and pessimistic, if not denunciatory, outlook. The current situation is held to be hopeless and there is hardly any indication of how things can be improved’ (Gupta, 1994, 299). A similar concern with regard to the lack of humour in Indian writing in English was voiced by Adil Jusawalla (1974) who identified two common qualities in the literatures of various Indian languages, including English: one was a ‘strong smell of death’ and the other a predominance of ‘metaphors of dismemberment and dislocation’ (quoted in Dharwadkar, 1994,237). The accusation of lack of humour is
equally applicable to women writers. ‘What is almost totally absent in all Indian
women novelists in English is the use of satire, irony and laughter to subvert the male
power’ (Roy, 1999, 145). Although Roy does cite Namjoshi’s use of parody as
commendable, she laments, ‘To realise the full potential of feminist themes, they
[women writers] must be willing to experiment with narrative modes and the lacuna
becomes even more prominent if compared with the vibrant technical
experimentations of Indian male authors after Rushdie’ (Roy). The three authors
studied in the thesis frequently use satire, irony and laughter to subvert patriarchal
discourses and confront male domination.

This thesis argues that much of the humour in the novels is an outcome of
vibrant technical experimentation in the writings of women writers, which has gone
unnoticed. I would like to argue that by deploying irony, strategies of intertextuality,
which makes the palimpsest presence of hidden texts visible, and genre appropriation,
laughter and humour are created by these writers. In fact, there is humour in the works
of women writers to warrant a close examination of their methods and a need to
develop a vocabulary to analyse the way humour works in general, and to focus on
how humour is deployed in the works of women writers in particular. This thesis is a
move in that direction and aims at opening up a discussion about humour by Indian
women writers. The laughter that is generated by the three novels is akin to the
destructive laughter of Kali, but I choose to see it more as ‘laughter mixed with pity,
without fear’, a smile at having successfully completed a sleight of hand manoeuvre,
despite the limited tools that the women writers have to work with.

It is perhaps worthwhile at the beginning to indicate what the thesis does not
aim to do. It does not attempt to establish ‘Indian’ humour as distinct from Chinese,
English or French humour, an endeavour which would require a width and depth of
research beyond the scope of this thesis. It does not seek to examine humour in an Indian sociolinguistic setting and apply it to the texts. Interesting as it might be, it calls for an entirely different kind of methodology beyond textual analysis. It has proved to be difficult to do any kind of comparative study of humour in the writings of women in regional languages and in English. A study of that nature will have to await a broader range of translations from regional languages into English. A very brief comparison is attempted in the conclusion between Mahasweta Devi’s *Breast Giver* and Roy’s *The God of Small Things* because of a similar theme. The thesis does not attempt to answer the question whether humour generated by women writers is qualitatively different from that generated by male writers. An issue that remains intriguing and untouched in this thesis is whether there are any similarities in the strategies deployed by male writers in Indian English literature and the female writers studied here.

The thesis is divided into four parts. Chapter 1 aims at presenting the texts within the larger context of Indian writing in English. To do so, it examines the status of English language in India and Indian English literature in the national context. It also aims at providing a brief overview of recurrent themes in the fictional works of Indian women writers and discusses material reality of Indian women reflected in their novels. Chapter 2 is the theoretic framework of the thesis. It surveys theories of humour from antiquity to recent ones like Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque in literature and that of feminist humour. All the novels under study have elements of the carnivalesque. Although the themes taken up by the writers are similar and ‘feminist’ in the sense that they draw attention to inequalities women in India have to endure, the textual tactics deployed by the novelists differ. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 contain the analysis of the novels. Chapter 6 is an attempt to pull together the implications of the
analysis and to reiterate that Indian women writers can and do use vibrant textual innovations to subvert patriarchal discourse.
Chapter One

In the name of the father, and of the aunt and of
the holy tradition of men

Namita Gokhale’s *Paro: Dreams of Passion*, Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Conversations of Cow* and Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* were chosen because they made me laugh. All three writers seem intent on breaking out of the prison of representations of the ‘Bharatiya nari’ syndrome. The three works investigate the intersections of sexuality, gender and class/caste, which they seem to perceive as absurd social constructs. The novels present women who transgress the tyrannically imposed boundaries, while reflecting on their action with humour and irony. Critical commentaries on *Paro: Dreams of Passion* and *Conversations of Cow* are limited. The humour in their novels has largely escaped critical notice in India. Roy’s *God of Small Things* has been the only novel among the three that has received critical attention, perhaps because of the Booker Prize. There are two essays on Roy’s use of humour (in Dhawan, 1999).

Critics of Indian English literature have devoted themselves mainly to discussions of the modernity and tradition problematics of contemporary works or to the ‘(a)nxiety of Indianness’ to use Meenakshi Mukherjee’s term (Mukherjee, 2000). Numerous critical works analyse how women characters in various works of fiction contend with the pulls of ‘tradition and modernity in their search for identity, independence, fulfilment, and love, whether within marriage or outside it’ (Paranjape, 1994, 291). Their journeys to selfhood fraught with difficult negotiations with religious and social agencies are presented mainly through discussions of plot summaries and generalised judgments on the works. This invariably leads to assessments on the ‘Indianness’ of the texts. If women writers conform to the
traditional portrayals of womanhood and depict characters who are submissive and affirm the dictates of orthodox traditions, they are lauded. If they articulate the experience of being a woman who attempts to break away from the established code to seek personal agency, their women characters are dismissed as ‘aberrations’ (Shrivastava, 1996), not real ‘Indian’ women, or their fiction is judged as ‘poor’, as *Paro Dreams of Passion* was (Devy, 1994, in Bharucha & Sarang [ed.], 18).

Feminism is regarded with suspicion. ‘It is a Western import born of Western compulsions and as with most Western notions we are attracted to it is as capable of answering to needs which we imagined must be ours as well – a clear sign of intellectual imbecility’ (Narasimhaiah, 1986, 1). This ‘intellectual imbecility’ has been imported through the English language. So, before inaugurating a discussion on the specific texts, it is important to consider the status of the English language in India and Indian women’s English writing within that context.

The continuing existence of the English language in India has its champions and detractors. On the one hand, India’s call centre service industry, which depends on the availability of fluent speakers of English, an IT-savvy generation and low-cost labour, is growing at the rate of 23% per annum, bringing in huge profits (Singhania, 2002). Therefore, it would appear that it is useful to train people to be good users of the language to participate in a competitive global industry. On the other hand, ‘Angrezi Hatao’ (Abolish English) sentiments resurface frequently (Devy, in Bharucha & Sarang (ed.), 1994, 9). Resistance to the growth of English as the language of technology, modernity and development and the resulting Anglomania which affects the ‘normal’ development of Indian society, often reaches ‘grotesque proportions’ with politicians publicly campaigning for the ousting of English and privately sending their children to the best schools in which English is the medium of
instruction (Choudhry, 2000). The discussion is intended to put the texts in perspective. India is bursting at the linguistic seams, maintains Amitav Choudhry. With a population of around one billion people, it has two official languages, Hindi and English, 18 major languages, and the Indian Constitution lists 418 languages, each spoken by 10,000 people or more people. All-India Radio is said to broadcast in 24 languages and in 146 dialects. Newspapers are published in at least 34 languages, 67 are used in primary education, and 80 in literacy work (2000, 3). While Hindi is still promoted as a national language due to various political and nationalistic pressures, English has become an embedded language. In 1949 constitutional provision was made for parliamentary procedures to be transacted in either Hindi or English for the first 15 years; however, despite the time lapse, English has continued to be one of the official languages. Considered to be a ‘neutral’ language performing a refereeing role between the Hindi-oriented North and the linguistically divided South, English has gained ground. It is the language for wider communication and the language of modern technology.

Kachru (1986) observes that the English language in India serves two purposes. It provides administrative cohesiveness and facilitates inter-state communication. English in the socio-cultural context is not ‘replacive’, since it overlaps with local languages and is largely responsible for the creation of a pan-Indian sensibility. Although only 6.5% of the population has literacy skills in English, it still totals up to 35 million users, outnumbering the speakers of some Indian languages like Gujarati or Kannada (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998,12). Typically it is only used as a second or third language. The number of English newspapers, journals and magazines is increasing. According to an estimate in 1986, (Kachru) 18.7% of Indian newspapers are in English, whereas Hindi accounted for
27.85. English language newspapers are published in practically all states of the nation. One intriguing statistic claims that India is the third largest book-producing county in the world after the United States and the United Kingdom, and of those books the largest number are published in English (http://landow.stg.brown.edu). This does not necessarily imply that all or most of the publications relate to Indian literature in English. Yet another record (Devy, in Bharucha & Sarang [ed.], 1994, 13) shows that of a given list of fifty-three titles of works of fiction by Indian English writers, most of them were published abroad. Of the fifty-three titles published between 1980 and 1990, thirty-nine were published in London, eight were published by Penguin India, and only six of them were published in India. Statistics of this sort can be used to draw illogical conclusions. However, what is obvious is that there has been a spurt in Indian writing in English and as Devy points out, ‘(T)he actual readership for Indian–English literature within India is provided by those who use English as their secondary language’ (Devy, 9).

Three decades ago, the announcement of Indian English literature as ‘one of the voices in which India speaks... it is a new voice, no doubt, but it is as much Indian as the others’ (Iyengar, quoted in Kachru, 1994,528-529) was a cause of some concern. The use of the English language for creative purposes has produced a great deal of ‘linguistic schizophrenia’, to use Kachru’s phrase (quoted in Krishnaswamy & Burde, 14). The Mother tongue/Other tongue debate has raged in the field of Applied Linguistics and in critical writings about Indian English literature. In an attempt to finally lay the matter to rest, Dasgupta has coined another term, ‘Aunty tongue’ (1993), to explain the peculiar status that English has in India. Its line of descent is complicated, and like ‘aunties’ they are a part of Indian life.

English, the teacher is adopted by the Indian cultural family, but not as a member belonging to any direct line of descent. The family gives English the auntie role that politeness sets up for guests and acquaintances who are not regarded as true relations’ (Dasgupta, 218).
His larger contention is that English is a language of technology and in terms of being a language of creativity, at best a co-language of expression, echoing Kachru’s notion that English is India is not ‘replacive’ but complementary, other quarrels notwithstanding.

The earlier generation of writers suffered some angst about writing in English because Indian English writers were seen as abandoning the national or regional languages. Many Indian writers of the time expressed an anxiety about writing in English and returned to their mother tongue. The poet, R. Parathasarthy, expresses this in *Exile*, ‘spending his youth whoring after English gods’ (Parthasarthy, [ed.], 75), the poet returns to

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Speak a tired language
wrenched from its sleep in the Kural,
teeth, palate, lips still new
To its agglutinative touch.
(1992, 80)
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Turning solely to the first language, or a regional language was not the option for many others like Kamala Das, who felt, like Raja Rao, that English was no longer an alien language. In ‘An Introduction’ Kamala Das declared her bonafide identity and made a mock appeal to be left alone to use English to write her poems:

```
I am Indian, very brown, born in
Malabar, I speak three languages, write in
Two, dream in one. Don't write in English, they said,
English is not your mother tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? Why not let me speak in
Any language I like? The language I speak
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone. It is half English, half
Indian, funny perhaps, but it is honest, It is human as I am human...(ed.1996, 96)
```

While sections of Indian society still think of English as a legacy of the colonist and bemoan its continued use, others embraced it as a natural choice in the years preceding Independence or after it. ‘Any Indian who has had an urge for literary
expression during the last hundred years would have written as naturally in English as he would have done in his own mother tongue, and would not have been conscious that he was making a deliberate choice’, maintained Nirad Chaudari (1981,1). For many Indian writers born after India’s independence, there was no reason to feel self-conscious about the choice of English as a medium of creativity, for them, ‘(I) t carries no colonial baggage; it is for them simply a tool...’ (Naik, 2001, 37).

Nevertheless, Indian writers in English still have to defend their choice of language because Indian writing in English is seen as inauthentic. Shashi Tharoor’s (2001) response to the charge is that English handles the multiple truths and multiple realities of India better than any regional language. It helps present ‘an India that is greater than its parts’. He further adds that the English language embraces the ancient epics, folk theatre, the Hindi B-movies of Bollywood, as well as Shakespeare, Wodehouse and the Beatles. In Tharoor’s words, ‘Indians write of India without exoticism, their insights undimmed by the dislocations of foreignness. And they do so in an English they have both learned and lived, an English of freshness and vigour, a language that is as natural to them as their quarrels at the school playground or the surreptitious notes they slipped each other in their classrooms’ (2001). Not only has the English language been ‘learned and lived’, it has also been loved as these lines from a poet of Indian origin suggest:

Which language has not been the oppressor’s tongue?
Which language truly meant to murder someone?
And how does it happen that after the torture,
After the soul has been cropped with a long scythe swooping out of the conqueror’s face,
the unborn children grow to love that strange language?
(Sujata Bhatt, 1988)
The 'oppressor's tongue' is forked for an Indian woman writing in English. If 'Indian English writers are positioned, by language and experience, on the borderline of Indo-Western imperative', then 'women's texts have a double bind' (Lal, 1995, 163). This entails for the Indian woman writer the two-fold colonisation of the Western patriarchal discourse represented by the English language, as well as the engendered discourse of the Indian social organization. The English language is only one of the forces of colonisation that Indian women have had to deal with. The English language has, to some extent provided the 'master texts'. However, Indian women writers have many 'masters'. The English language, the patriarchal discourse of Indian languages, the class discourse, the caste, religion and the commercial discourses in circulation at any given time all impact on the world view presented in the writings of women writers in English. Thus, Indian women writers who have to articulate their 'Griha-Lakshmi' (Angel of the House) sensibilities circumscribed by 'mythical, religious, familial and social density of forces' (ibid, 165) have to subvert the English language as well as the other forces that restrict them. Two out of the three novelists studied for the thesis, Gokhale and Roy, occasionally step outside the English language they write in. Gokhale includes Urdu and Hindi phrases and Roy adopts Malayalam nonsense rhymes and expletives like 'chi-chi poachism' to undercut the high seriousness of the English language while going beyond the 'Lakshman rekha' or the limits imposed by patriarchy.

Indian women writers have been under attack for various conflicting reasons: too much suffering; inauthenticity or the inability to represent the 'real Indian woman' (Roy, 1999,10); sexually repressed in their writing (44); or overtly titillating with a tendency to include gratuitous sex scenes both heterosexual and same sex (Naik & Narayan, 2000,81). Unrelenting and stark misery; uneasy marital relationships; the
vice-like grip of tradition have been some common themes. The literary output of Indian women writers appears to have outnumbered that of Indian male writers in English (Agarwal, 1995, 873). A long list of women writers who continue to write in English includes names like Gita Mehta, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Gita Hariharran, to name only a few from those who live and write in India and abroad. Women of Indian origin who continue to be inspired by India while writing from abroad such as Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kiran Desai add to the ranks. There are others who write about the diasporic experiences of Indians abroad, such as Meera Syal. Their membership in the category of Indian writers may be problematic, but some of the themes that are explored by them are not particularly different from those that are dealt with in the writings of Indian writers in Indian English literature itself. Most works foreground the position of women in post-independence India, mainly engaged in the representation of women as wives, mothers and daughters. Tensions between the traditional expectations of women and the changing expectations of contemporary life form a major theme in their work. Some women celebrate sexual freedom within the constraints of family and society while others are engaged in the negotiations of identity, gender and sexuality (Wisker, 2000, 180).

There is some truth in suggesting that women writers unsmilingly present women in a miserable plight. Leading writers like Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande construct a gloomy picture of women's lives. At least in three of Anita Desai's novels, the women protagonists are depicted living absolutely dreary marital lives. The protagonist of *Cry, the Peacock*, (1980) escapes her cold, and frustrating marriage by pushing her husband off the roof. *Voices in the City* (1968) tells the story of a woman
who is stigmatised for not bearing children, so ends up committing suicide. In her recent novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) an equally bleak theme of discrimination against daughters is taken up. The novel plots the life of Uma the ordinary looking girl with no special talents as she goes through domestic drudgery.

Shashi Deshpande’s novels also have women protagonists trapped physically and psychologically in marriages and unrealistic expectations of women, living through gender inequality. The world outside home and hearth does not exist. The past, as Narayan (in Naik & Narayan, 2000, 87) notes, is not glorified as it is in the novels of male writers like Raja Rao. The only reference to it is the protagonist, Jaya’s realisation that in Sanskrit drama, women did not speak (were not allowed to speak) the same language as the male characters. The men spoke Sanskrit and the women spoke Prakrit, a much less sophisticated dialect, thus imposing on women, even in classical times, a linguistic barrier and one more form of discrimination.

It would appear, from the plot summaries that for most part, because of the verisimilitude of their characterisation and situation, passive suffering is the woman’s lot. The women characters do not question the established conventions of marriage or male hegemony and the novels provide very few positive representations of women. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that even as early as the nineteenth century, women writers have written against the restrictions imposed on them by repressive traditions. Tharu and Lalita (ed. 1991) have anthologised writing from 600 B.C. to the twentieth century to show that women have articulated their discontent in literature (See Rokeya Shakawat Hossain’s *Sultana’s Dream*, in Tharu and Laita, 1991, 342-351). However, their writing was either ignored or attracted censure. In the regional languages, writers like Ismat Chugtai (1915-1992) in Urdu, explored the middle class oppressions of family life and its unsuspected freedoms (see *Lihaf / The Quilt*, Tharu...
& Lalita, 1993,129-137). They were charged for obscenity, in this case, for presenting a lesbian relationship.

One of Veena Shanteshwar's characters in a short story succinctly sums up the plight of Indian women, “Our country has been free… yet we find ourselves bound in slavery. The causes: 25% tradition, another 25% circumstances, and the remaining 50% men” (Shanteshwar, 1976, in Tharu & Lalitha, 1993, 532). Attitudes like these have made male critics feel defensive enough to retaliate with some justification that, “Sometimes man is blamed too easily as the ubiquitous villain to whom can be traced back all the suffering and oppression of women,” (Gupta, 1995, 3) He further notes that, ‘Many women writers have been afflicted with excessive self-pity and have failed to extricate themselves from the vale of tears’ (ibid) thus protesting that women writers have written mainly as victims. Considering that the women writers adopt social realism as their mode of writing, it is hardly surprising that they should approach their themes solemnly.

Quantitative sociological research in media reports or analytical and qualitative published material perhaps explains why there is little cause for joyous celebration of the conditions of women in Indian literature. The social and economic position of women has been a grim affair. Even after over fifty years of independence Indian women continue struggling to survive. In demographic terms, India’s differential sex ratios suggest that there are 10% fewer women than would be expected. In 1991 the national sex ratio was 927 women to every 1000 men, down from 972 in 1901 (UNDP report, quoted in Joshi, http://www.tribuneindia.com/50 years/women.Html#2). Systematic oppression of women takes its most terrible form in female infanticide in many Indian states. Female foeticide, the practice of aborting the female foetus after sex-determination tests such as amniocentesis, is still a
common practice in modern India, condoned by many middle class people in the interest of keeping the families small and having sons (Forbes, 1996, quoting Arora & Desai, 1990, 241). A report conducted by the National Family Health Survey (1990, quoted in Joshi, op. cit) shows that boys are breastfed longer, are less likely to die of the three main childhood diseases such as diarrhoea, fevers and respiratory diseases. 60% of women remain illiterate and will be taught to be docile and domestic. Another shocking statistic is that of the 10,068 reported cases of rape in 1990, 2,105 were girls between 10 to 16, and 394 girls below the age of ten. Of the 4.5 million marriages that take place in India every year, three million involve girls in the 15-19 age group. And over 45% of girls married in Rajasthan are in the 10-14 age group, (UNICEF report, 1990, quoted in Joshi, ibid). A UNICEF report maintains that at least 5,000 women die each year in India for not bringing enough dowry in marriages. The report further points out that at least a dozen women die each day in kitchen fires, which are often passed off as accidents, because their parents-in-law are dissatisfied with their dowries. It is hardly surprising that books dealing with the condition of women are bereft of laughter.

Although India is one of a handful of nations to develop an independent space programme and conduct a nuclear test, fewer than four in 10 women can read. India’s only woman prime minister Indira Gandhi ruled for 17 years, but fewer than 40 of the 543 members of the lower house of parliament are women, and three of them are illiterate. Women’s rights activists say village men nominate their wives to fill the 33 percent quota, and then run the village as its de facto chief, using her as a mouthpiece. Confinement to the four walls of the home is a fate that most rural women contend with. Men have dominated the decision-making process, whether it is the home or the village Panchayat. In 1990, more than 50 widows were burnt alive when their
husbands’ bodies were cremated in an archaic ritual known as sati, based on the belief that a Hindu woman has no existence independent of her husband. Under Indian law, Hindu women cannot ask for ancestral property to be divided so that they can sell their share. A Moslem woman's share of inheritance is half of her brother's (Reuters, 1997, www.thp.org/reports/india wom.html). In the face of such staggering statistics, it may seem trivial to point out that there are very few toilets for women in government offices (Sonali Verma, *ibid*) suggesting that women seem to have remained largely invisible. Thus, it is easy to see why Indian women have written as victims, and that their writing has not been associated with humour.

The image that emerges from the statistical figures is that of women as the oppressed half of the nation, while representations of women in literature, classical, regional or in English, seem to show them in glorified idealistic terms or eternal truths:

‘Woman is the earth, air, ether, sound; woman of the microcosm of the mind,… To Mitra she is Varuna, to Indra she is Agni, to Rama she is Sita, to Krishna she is Radha… Woman is kingdom, solitude, time; woman is death, for it is through woman that one is born, woman rules, for it is she, the universe… (Rao, 1960, 357)

The pervasive Sita, Radha, Durga image of women in Indian literature has been noted by many writers and critics.

Around (the ideal woman) exists a huge body of mythology. She is called by several names - Sita, Draupadi, Parvati, Lakshmi and so on. In each myth, she plays the role of the loyal wife, unswerving in her devotion to her lord. She is meek, docile, trusting, faithful and forgiving (Desai, 1990, *Times Literary Supplement*, September, pp. 14-15).

The long-suffering, chaste Sita, for whom Ram fought valiantly to defeat Ravana, the force of evil, has become a symbol of virtue in Indian literature. Savitri, a devout wife whose claim to sainthood lay in saving her husband from death by offering herself instead of him, has come to symbolise devotion, duty, fidelity and self-sacrifice. Thus, the wifely role is pre-eminent in Hinduism. Even the powerful Kali, malevolent and
destructive when angered, is a devoted wife and wins acceptance in the pantheon of gods because she ultimately subjugates herself to her husband. Irigaray notes on the position of women in general, that

(w)omen are marked phallically by their fathers, husbands, procurers. And this branding determines their value in sexual commerce. Woman is never anything but the locus of more or less competitive exchange between two men, including the competition for the possession of the mother earth’ (1985, 32).

So, though there are passages in the writings of male writers that glorify the sign ‘Woman’, Manu’s age-old edict is still a social role prescription. Irigaray’s observation seems to be a comment on the Laws of Manu, an ancient Indian lawmaker who prescribed a code of behaviour that women would be expected to follow for centuries:

By a young girl, by a young woman, or an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent… Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure (elsewhere), or devoid of good qualities, yet) a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife… (trans. Muller, 1964, excerpted in Wadley, in Ghadially, 1988 , 30)

It is this role of woman as dependent wife that is satirised in the novels. Marriage and pativrata or the worship of the husband is considered mandatory to role fulfilment for a woman, usually entailing a life-long preparation for the duties of the daughter-in-law and wife. The qualities of docility and self-sacrifice are dinned into most Indian women (Kakar in Ghadially 1988). The pinnacle of womanhood, for a Hindu woman, is motherhood, especially if a son is born. Rituals are performed to elicit the birth of a male child. Rejoicing is common when a male child is born; a female child is greeted with less cheer. A daughter is usually seen as unmitigated expense, someone who will never contribute to the family income and who upon marriage, will take away a considerable part of her family’s fortune as her dowry (Kakar, in Ghadially, 1988, 47). The cultural devaluation of women manifests itself as resentment towards the
oppressive masculinity or as it often happens the aggression is turned inwards against women themselves resulting in a loss of self-esteem and a sense of inferiority.

Liberation from the position described above is class-based. Manisha Roy concludes that the socio-economic, educational and cultural backgrounds influence the material reality of women.

While an upper-middle class housewife is hemmed in by her home and successful husband, her lower class counterpart in the slum aspires for the same comfort which will liberate her from the hand-to-mouth existence. At the same time, the middle class woman is fighting for her own liberation against discrimination in a job market on the one hand, and against her own internal conflict regarding her image, on the other (Roy, Manisha, in Ghadially, ibid, 146)

The socio-economic position of the Indian woman is certainly a sad one, further compromised through mythologising her as Sita, Savitri, Radha or Durga or equally through the construction of the ‘new Indian woman’ presented in the media and the official discourse. Rajan argues that the image of the ‘new Indian woman’ is derived primarily from the urban educated middle-class woman. Portrayed in advertisements as attractive, educated, hardworking, and socially aware, the new woman is made ‘to appear as “a natural” outcome of benevolent capitalist socio-economic forces. The modernization of the Indian woman can then be valorised as a painless, non-conflictual, even harmonious, process, in contrast to the discomforts produced by political feminism’ (1993, 131). For the creative writer in English, this further complicates female character construction.

Like their male counterparts, Indian women writers are seen as deficient in portraying the ‘reality of Indian existence’ (Roy, Anuradha, 1999,10). However, as Devy (192, 2-3) points out, ‘The term ‘India’ may be valid in the pages of an atlas, but as a cultural label it is hopelessly inadequate and simplistic’. Indian English literature may be inadequate in terms of portraying the struggles of the depressed classes, a task that Dalit literature competently manages. But to claim that the literature produced by and about all other sections of society as being ‘un-Indian’ is
self-defeating. The depiction of the frustrations of a middle class housewife may seem superficial and amusing in the light of the repressions catalogued above, but the psychological trauma that middle class women go through to escape from an ‘arranged marriage’ to an undesirable man or a struggle to establish equal pay for equal work, represents a reality for a considerable section of women. Representing ‘woman’ for a woman writer there implies a recognition that images occur in discourse as a response to a specific configuration of class, religion, and sexuality. Kumkum Sangari argues that ‘Female-ness’ is a construction, not an essential quality.

It is constantly made, and rediscovered; one has to be able to see the formation of female-ness in each and every form at a given moment or in later interpretations, and see what it is composed of, what its social correlates are, what its ideological potentials are, what its freedoms may be (1986, 17).

The three novels analysed for the thesis deal with the construction of the female subject at the intersections of sexuality, gender and class/caste, which they seem to perceive as absurd social constructs. The themes that they explore are not very different from those of other women writers who are accused of perpetuating a victim mentality. The difference is that these three writers use strategies that confront patriarchal discourse through parody and intertextuality, irony and satire exposing the double standards of the male centred systems. The novels present women who transgress the tyrannically imposed boundaries, while reflecting on their action with humour and irony and exploring the freedom that is grudgingly given, surreptitiously appropriated or fought hard for and won.
Chapter two
Every Woman in Her Humour

Voltaire said that heaven had given us two things to counterbalance the many miseries of life, hope and sleep. He could have added laughter. Immanuel Kant (Critique of Judgement, translated by J.H Bernard, London, Macmillan, 1892 quoted in Morreal).

Comedy and Theories of Humour

It is important to trace the beginnings of theories of humour because even the more recent theories of Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque humour in cultural presentations, or even feminist theories of humour have roots in the older ones. Also a discussion on comedy and what constitutes it would offer a useful framework to work from. Comedy is generally seen as a genre or a mode, a literary category that is regarded as the direct opposite of tragedy in Western literature. Parody, satire, irony are variously considered to be either modes in themselves or sub-genres of comedy. Terminological confusions notwithstanding, they are closely related. Even the best of theorists have found teasing out the differences between them a daunting task. This chapter does not attempt to do so. What it hopes to achieve is to provide an overview of theories of humour and discusses parody, satire and irony as devices used in comedy to instigate humour, in order to better place the works to be studied in perspective. The words ‘comic’ and ‘humour’ are treated synonymously where the original texts use them in that manner.

Although the definition of ‘humour’ seems fairly comprehensive, any analysis of laughter and the comic can be elusive. Bergson (1935) compares the enterprise of analysing humour with a child playing with sand on the beach. The child picks up a handful and the next moment, is astonished to find that nothing remains in his grasp.
but a few drops of water, water that is far more 'brackish, far more bitter than that of the wave which brought it'. Laughter, he believes, is similar.

'It's gaiety itself. But the philosopher who gathers a handful to taste may find that the substance is scanty and the after-taste bitter' (1935, 200).

This has not deterred philosophers and thinkers (Bergson, 1935, Freud, 1963, Bakhtin, 1940s, Morreall, 1983, 1989, Berger, 1997) from speculating on laughter and the comic experience. There have been attempts by philosophers from Aristotle to the present day to describe 'the substance', but a coherent, all-encompassing theory of humour is still under construction. This section explores the nature and significance of humour and outlines the various theories in an attempt to create a context for the analyses that follow.

The nature and significance of humour

Humour is as much a part of Indian life as it is in other places. The comic is ubiquitous in everyday life. Jokes, bumper stickers, T-shirts, advertisements, comedy shows watched by millions of people surround us. The commodification of humour hints at the high value placed upon it. Humour is also seen as an essential quality in a partner (Vaid, in Rossen and Michael, 1999, 124). It is seen as crucial to the maintenance of a healthy outlook on life (Morreall, 1983, p.106). However laughter, the physical manifestation of humour, is not always the fruit of humour (Bremmer and Roodenburg, 2). It could signal embarrassment, a form of threat, a form of mirthless laughter in reaction to a physical stimulus like tickling. Miller likens it to sneezing and coughing (1988, 7) asserting that real laughing matter is cognitive. An understanding of the situation is a pre-requisite to laughter.

What further complicates laughter is the classification of it into that which is permissible and that which needs censoring. Indeed, the church initially condemned
all laughter before moving to regulate it by distinguishing between good laughter and bad. Similarly, the Sanskrit rhetorician Bharata categorised laughter into six types, disapproving of the roaring, hysterical kinds of laughter (apahasita and atihasita) as vulgar and disreputable (Siegel, 1987, 46). Moreover, the diversity of situations that are termed as ‘humorous’ defies neat categories. Many of the theories on humour are largely built from fragmentary speculations of philosophers/writers/psychologists and researchers. Although none really covers all forms of humour or laughter, there is a definite body of work that exists both in the West and the East.

Classical Indian theories and hypotheses of humour that are available in English translation may not be very relevant in analysing contemporary Indian Writing in English, but no discussion of humour is complete without at least a cursory overview of them. Studies on theories of comedy seem to suggest that the comic vision takes two forms: the satiric and the humorous. ‘Satire is laughter at the vices and follies to which humanity is driven by the agonies of old age, disease, and death; humour is laughter in spite of disease, in acceptance of old age, in surrender to death. Comedy can be refuge, if not redemption; its laughter can be solace, if not release’ (Siegel, 1987, 5). Lee Siegel observes that the hasya—rasa, or the comic flavour, is one of the flavours or aesthetic sentiments that are presented in literature along with other basic sentiments such as love, anger, sadness, merriment and fear. The gastronomic metaphor of rasa ‘flavour’ or ‘taste’, according to Bharata’s Natyasastra, (a text that dates back to the second century C.E.) plays upon the literal meaning of rasa as a spice, an aesthetic element to enhance the dramatic or literary experience (ibid, 8). Unlike the Western, Aristotelian theory, which is characterised by a dichotomous relationship to tragedy, the comic rasa in the Indian context, is the introduction of a condiment that spices up an aesthetic experience. Realised through
travesty, parody and satire, comedy 'may have philosophical ramifications, it is essentially an antiphilosophical spirit, a sentiment of perverse reaction to the seriousness of philosophy and the tedious drone of intellection' (ibid, 9). Although much of feminist humour, with its rebellious overtones, seems closely related to definition and classification of comedy in the Indian Rasa theory, using the Rasa theory to attempt a thesis-length deconstruction of modern Indian writing presents problems of an academic nature such as finding reliable translations and models of such analysis.

Classical European theories of humour may seem irrelevant to contemporary Indian writing, but they provide a framework for the more recent theories of the Carnival or the Feminist theories of humour, which are the tools that will be used to examine the humour in the three novels.

Theories of humour have been classified under categories:

• The moral degradation theory
• The incongruity theory
• The release from restraint theory (other theorists have approached it as psychological theory)

To these, one could add:

• Bakhtin's theory of the carnival
• The feminist theory of humour

**The Moral degradation theory/ superiority theory**

The beginnings of the degradation theory can be traced to Plato and Aristotle. Plato believed that we laugh at vice, particularly self-ignorance, in people who are relatively powerless. He also issued a warning against laughter because of the loss of control that entails laughter. ‘(W)hen you enjoy on stage –or even in ordinary life –
jokes that you would be ashamed to make yourself, instead of detesting their vulgarity, you are giving reign to your comic instinct, which your reason has restrained for fear you may seem to be playing the fool, and bad taste in the theatre may insensibly lead you into becoming a buffoon at home’ (Plato, 1955, 437). Aristotle took up the notion of laughter as being disruptive and undignified and claimed that we ‘laugh at an imitation of people who are worse than average’ (Poetics, ch.5.1449a, quoted in Morreal, 1987). Cicero, a disciple of Aristotle and a great orator, realised the potential of wit and humour as part of the rhetoric of gaining public attention, but was as disapproving of it as his predecessors, claiming, ‘(D)eformity and irregularities of the body are great field for jokes but again we must be aware of going too far’ (Cicero, De Oratorem 2, 237-9, quoted in Bremmer and Roodenburg, p.22). Hobbes’ general theory that human beings are in constant struggle with one another for power and what power can bring is evident in his theory of laughter. ‘Sudden Glory, is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves’ (From Leviathan, Part 1, ch.6 in English works, vol.3, ed. Molesworth, London: Bohn, 1839). Laughter, it appears has always been seen as an attack on deformity. It has invited censure, and has been associated with power struggles.

Laughter that is triggered by a perception of superiority is perhaps the oldest theory of humour, which resonates through to some of the other theories such as Bergson’s theory of incongruity. The proposal that laughter is a response to lack of ‘elasticity’, or a ‘momentary lapse into a machine-like mathematical precision’ is what provokes laughter. The sight of a man slipping on a banana skin and falling to
the ground provokes laughter, according to Bergson, because the man has a temporary loss of adaptability. 'It is the mechanical encrusted on the living' that becomes the butt of humour (1935,37). In short, the loss of flexibility instigates laughter. The loss of flexibility may be physical as is slapstick comedy or may relate to the out-dated value systems of a society that have become 'encrusted on the living'.

**Release from restraint/Relief Theory or the Psychological Theory:**

Freud, who claimed that the superfluous energy discharged in laughter is ordinarily the energy that would be used to repress hostile or forbidden feelings of aggression or sexual feelings, adopted the hydraulic theory of psychic energy initially developed by Herbert Spenser. Freud’s version of the relief theory is complicated by the distinctions he makes between joking, the exercise of wit, comic and humour (Freud, 1938). Berger points out that Freud’s theory of wit is essentially an extension of his theory of dreams (1997,54). ‘Wit affords us the means of surmounting restrictions and of opening up otherwise inaccessible pleasure sources’ (Freud, 1938, 698). Both dreams and jokes are marked by brevity. The economy of both allows repressed thoughts to be pushed out in various disguises. The ‘condensation’ along with ‘substitutive formation’ (Freud, 1938) makes way for substitute gratification and wish fulfilment. In other words, it licenses the heart to override the brain, the transgressive Id to temporarily subdue the Ego. In *The Conversations of Cow*, for example, the unequal status of men and women is jestingly discussed.

‘Are you trying to tell me that Men from Mars are really women?  
Yes. You’ve got it at last’.  
‘But, B, why do they behave so differently from women?’  
‘Lack of opportunity and education, my dear.’ (*The Conversations of Cow*, 107-108)

In the extract, Cow appears to make a restorative gesture by according humanity to men on the one hand, by suggesting that men are really like women, but
on the other, she takes it away by patronisingly pointing out that there is no question of equality. Opportunities and education separate them. Spurious and nonsensical as it might be, Cow's condescension is a satiric barb at the attitudes women have had to put up with. The joke momentarily plays out the wish that were women in a position of superiority they would be able to get away with off-hand remarks of that kind.

An extension and clarification of Freud's thesis was offered in an essay published twenty years after 'Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious' in which Freud suggests that humour possesses a dignity that is lacking in wit since the aim of wit is to afford gratification and thereby provide an outlet for the aggressive tendencies. 'Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle which is strong enough to assert itself in the face of the adverse real circumstances' (Freud, in Morreall, 113). He concludes the essay by asserting that 'the superego does try to comfort the ego by humour and to protect it from suffering' (116). It is tempting to view this interpretation of humour as closely associated with 'black humour' or the humour of the gallows, because without the intervening pleasure principle, the funny story could easily be a sad one. Another related sub-category of the release/psychological theory is that of defensive humour (Berger, 58). It refers to a variety of sublimation that helps manage fears associated with threats. By offering a release from the tyranny of the reality principle, an invitation to the zone of liberty is issued and a form of escapism is offered.

Socially, laughter plays a dual role of lubricating the wheel of social order and at the same time, it provides a sabbatical from the pressures of social hierarchies. Mary Douglas observes on the basis of her ethnographical studies that the comic experience is inherently paradoxical. It is used as a form of 'system maintenance': it facilitates the upkeep of the structures in society and yet, she states that jokes are an
anti-ritual as well. The act of joking itself is a form of expected behaviour, ‘a temporary suspension of social structures’ (Douglas, in Berger, 72). At the same time, the subject of jokes allows an irreverence that would otherwise be unacceptable. The ‘temporary suspension of social structures’ came to be institutionalised in the character of fools who were assigned an occupational role. Fools were very often deformed and imbecile creatures who were given licence to make people laugh by ridiculing the less dignified aspects of society through exaggerated actions. Their deviation from the normal conventions was seen as amusing, because the subversive edge was taken off their criticism of society. Institutionally sanctioned fools performed the safety-valve function in a carefully circumscribed expression of prohibited impulses. In Indian drama as well, Vidusaka, ‘a buck-toothed, dwarfish, hunchback with a cleft-palate, bald head, yellow eyes and a distorted face’ (from Natya Sastra, quoted in Siegel, 1987, 19) had a similar appeal. The clown / fool symbolised freedom from rules, reasons and suggested a lack of responsibility.

In Paro Dreams of Passion, for instance, Paro plays the fool by defiantly breaking rules. At a point in the story, she symbolically plays out the topsy turviness of the carnival by doing a headstand at a party at which very prim and proper people are gathered, inviting the gaze of the people around her. Vain and comical, she is presented at various points of the novel as a carnivalesque figure representing freedom from rules.

Freedom from rules and rituals was an important element of the carnival, which also played a safety-valve function. Terror, in the face of social hierarchies, is conquered by laughter. As an event and a metaphor, the carnival has lost its former elevated place. During the Renaissance, however, in the time of Francois Rabelais, the carnival was a celebration that lasted three months in a year. Like Rabelais, Bakhtin
saw the carnival not just as a spectacle, but also as an event where everyone participated outside the hegemony of the church and the feudal culture. The carnival, he noted, was ‘a boundless world of humorous forms; opposing the official and the serious tone of the medieval culture and ecclesiastical and the feudal culture’ (Bakhtin, quoted in Clark and Holquist, 1984, 298). For Bakhtin the carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed (1984, 10).

According to Bakhtin, all the symbols of the carnival idiom are associated with change and renewal. It is characterised by the peculiar logic of the inside out, the turnabout of ‘a continual shifting from top to bottom, front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings’ (11). Carnival laughter or festive laughter was seen by Bakhtin as being the laughter of all people. It was universal involving everyone including the carnival’s participants. The droll aspect of the world and its ‘gay relativity’ was celebrated. And most importantly, the carnival laughter is ambivalent: it is celebratory and at the same time it mocks and derides. Terror is turned into something gay and comic (1984, 39).

In *The God of Small Things*, Baby Kochamma, the ‘baby aunt’ is derided. She is a terrifying figure exerting considerable influence on the young lives of Estha and Rahel as curriculum developer. She is described in physical terms as a conical person who lives her life backwards. ‘Rahel noticed that she had started wearing make-up. Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because she only believed in 40watt-bulbs, her lipstick mouth had shifted slightly off her real mouth’ (*TGST*, 21). All in all, a clownish appearance is given to a villain of the novel, which in terms of Bakhtinian theory is a way of turning something fearful into something comical.
Another feature of the carnival is the valorisation of the body. Carnival laughter is strongly linked to the idea of grotesque realism that is the human body which plays a predominant role with images of food, drink, defecation and sexual life playing an important part in the brimming-over abundance of life. The body transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. ‘The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with the surrounding objects’ (Bakhtin, 1984, 310). The laughter of the carnival degrades and materialises (1984, 20). It is the festive laughter of the people that is directed not only at the people who are laughed at, but also those who laugh (12), emphasising the wholeness of the world. The one who laughs is not above the object of his mockery. Bakhtin saw the carnival as the ‘people’s second life, organised on the basis of laughter’ (8). The carnival privileges folk humour and the language of the town square. Language descends from the classical and formal to the special and free form of language used by people in the popular marketplace spheres.

These features of the carnival are evident in the texts under study. They all involve the laughter of the masses, rather than the privileged; and significantly, the laughter is also directed at those who laugh.

**Feminists and Humour and the comic:**

There is a lack of critical material on the subject of humour or comic writing by women writers. What little there is, is based on assessments of irony in the works of a small list of women writers. Regina Barreca’s *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (1988) is perhaps one of the few critical theory/hypotheses collected on women’s comic writing, outlining some of the techniques used by women writers. Humour, she notes, is not a quality associated with women. Accusations of the lack of
it in women have been made throughout history. Regina Barreca (1988) catalogues remarks made by famous men strongly denigrating humourlessness in women, one of which is made by Reginald Blyth:

The truth is ... that women have not only no humour in themselves, but are the cause of the extinction of it in others. This is almost too cruel to be true, but in every way women respond to and are representative of nature. Is there any humour in nature? A glance at the zoo will answer this question...(w)omen are the undifferentiated mass of nature from which the contradictions of real and ideal arose and they are the unlaughing at which men laugh (in Humour in English Literature: A Chronological Anthology, first published in 1959, quoted in Barreca, 1988, 4)

Feminists working in the area of humour, or ‘fumerists’ maintain that women have neither been expected to, nor are trained to joke, except in a self-denigrating sort of way. It is just not part of their socialisation. Role models are few, and having been the butt of sexist jokes for many generations may have something to do with it. A joke coming from a woman is seen as an intrusive, disturbing act and is unacceptable in most cultures, due to the marginal roles that women have been traditionally accorded. ‘[W]omen are damned to insignificance twice over. They are the unofficial discussing the insignificant’ (6). Although women writers like Jane Austen have traditionally used comedy to subvert existing conventional structures, humour/comedy by women has been dismissed as ‘feminine small potatoes’ (Priestley, J. B. English Humour, 1970, quoted in Barreca, 6) Comedy is both an aggressive and intellectual response to human nature and experience. It could be argued that aggression and intellectuality became available or was appropriated by women much later than men in most cultures. While some feminists argue that the humour in women’s writing generally remains unrecognised because of the anger in their work, others, like Fay Weldon, (in Barreca, 310) feel less defensive about the lack of humour in women’s work. Weldon contends that ‘...rape, poverty, exploitation and so forth are not funny’. The themes
that women writers deal with, whether in comedy or in other forms, are far from funny.

Comedy and anger are regarded as the two fundamental mainstays of women's writing. Laughter and smiling are often disguised primitive response to anger and fear. In this sense, women's writing is not very different from serio-comic writing that has increasingly become part of modern novels as against older epic forms. ‘It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorised) distance. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it’ (Bhaktin, 1981, 23). Women writers write not only against the epic, but also against what has been seen as familiar by male writers through the centuries, in other words, canonical texts. Thus, ‘clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation’ often entails a radically different plot.

The differences that emerge between male writers of comedy and female writers, from feminists writing on humour is that women writers are not content to point to minor vices and follies (Little, 1983, in Barreca). While comedy by men is characterised by an ‘oppressive didacticism’ (in Barreca, 12), being social satires that include certain elements like gentle admonitions for social lapses, laughter by women ‘is not content to tease follies and flail at vices or to urge a little common sense. Their laughter instead demands a radically ‘new plot’ (Little, 1983, 178). Women’s comedies, Little claims, ‘will mock assumptions rather than ramifications, it will challenge a world view’ (179). The festivity, or the carnival spirit in women’s comedy partly contributes to the rebellious intention to demolish an old world and re-invent/reconstruct a new one. Thus, the woman comic writer displays a different code
of subversive thematics than her male counterparts. Her writing is seen as dislocating and unconventional.

The dislocation and unconventionality of women’s comedic writing comes from certain strategies deployed by women writers. One of these is ‘a half twist on reality’ (Merrill, in Barreca, 274, quoting Beatts, Anne and Deanne Stillman (ed.) Titters Macmillan, New York, 1976, p. 184). As Merrill (273) suggests, the so called lack of humour in women’s writing is in fact a refusal to comply with the premise of the joke. Or, as it often happens, the formula of the genre or the joke is appropriated and the ‘half-twist’ is delivered in the punch line as in this joke:

Q: Why are women so bad at parking?
A: Because they’re used to men telling them that this much (joker indicates an inch with thumb and forefinger) is ten inches.
(A joke quoted in Chiaro’s, 1992, 8)

The opening of the joke is like any other joke about women and driving, signalling a witty clincher on women’s ineptitude with judging space and instead turns around on a stereotypical male locker-room concern. Genre subversion is one of the ways in which women writers have sought to transmit their sense of the comic. Gilbert and Gubar’s ‘palimpsest’ theory that there are hidden texts within texts in women’s writing applies to women’s comedic writing (in Barreca, 13). Humorous writing by women invariably involves the dialogue or intermeshing of two or more genres. Whether the ‘hidden’ texts are re-covered through intertextuality or through parody, the act of finding the submerged texts or providing a meta-text has the potential to detonate canonical texts and generate laughter.

Gokhale recovers classical Indian legends like Devdas to shift the frame and the expectation of women. Roy uses fragments of English poetry and Malayalam nonsense rhymes to activate uneasy laughter. Women writers have to work within the basic conventions and recognisable patterns associated with genres and either modify them for their own purposes either by shifting the framing devices or finding other
ways of undercutting the conventions of the genres. In doing this, they play symbolically with the father’s language to create their own signs. This is what Namjoshi does in her fables and in *The Conversation of Cow*, she deliberately grafts the fable with autobiography to demand a new plot and clears the ground to investigate inequalities.

Another strategy used by the three writers to produce laughter is irony. Walker (in Barreca [ed.], 1988, 204) maintains that irony involves ‘a consciousness that separates the narrator into two ‘selves’ – one that endures the anguish of her own reality and the second self that stands apart and comments, often quite humorously on the plight of the first’. This fragmentation or the splitting of the narrative function is common to male and female writers. Muecke observes:

> Ironic literature is literature in which there is a constant dialectic interplay of objectivity and subjectivity, freedom and necessity, the appearance of life and the reality of art, the author immanent in every part of his work as its creative vivifying principle and transcending his work as its objective ‘presenter’. (1970, 1978, 78)

Women writers use this strategy to play objectivity and subjectivity against each other, simultaneously describing their lives and narratively or intellectually at least being able to rise above the conditions that subjugate them. The writers present central characters who show that the forces that govern their world are absurd and arbitrary.

Closely related to the strategy of irony is the idea of whimsy or prankishness. Mackay (in Barreca, 120) terms it ‘*espièglerie*’. *Espièglerie* is a device that surfaces intermittently in women’s writing through which women rechannel hate through humour. Denied immediate outlet for emotions which ‘might be overwhelming if actually felt or presented in a straightforward manner’ (129), women writers tend to use imagery, conceits, and rhetorical devices to record with apparent accidentalness a
situation that would enable the reader to experience the hate and the humour. Thus, *espièglerie* acts like templates for symbols which create a safe arena in which women can express the conjunction of contrasting emotions. Whimsy might appear to be deceptively silly or superficial, but makes it possible for a double perspective, ‘at once self-effacing and critical’ (118). Although the concept of *espièglerie* and whimsy may seem in itself whimsical, it does coincide with the technique used by Gokhale, Namjoshi and Roy to embody hate/disappointment alongside humour.

A pattern that Barecca notes about women’s writing in general and comic writing in particular is the tendency to turn ‘metaphor-into-narrative’, a strategy that relies on reliteralising what has become merely symbolic. In other words, the dead metaphor or the cliché provides a narrative structure for the stories themselves. Women ‘live out the metaphors they inherit’ (243) and with a vengeance, explore the links between the symbolic and the literal uses. Barreca restates the established fact that ‘words form a problematic alliance within the symbolic order’ and that to create comedy women have to appropriate the order. As Clement argues (1986,7) ‘Societies do not succeed in offering everyone the same way of fitting into the symbolic order, those who are, if one may say so, between symbolic systems, in the interstices, offside, are the ones who are afflicted with a dangerous symbolic mobility’. It is this ‘dangerous symbolic mobility’ that Gokhale, Namjoshi and Roy seem to explore.

It is apparent from the various theories of humour that laughter is a complicated manifestation of the conflicting emotions of fear, anger, rebellion; and the need to find release from the oppressive situations that cause those feelings. The association of tears and laughter is distressingly close.

In drama, as in life, ... the impulse to laughter and the impulse to tears sit uneasily together. It is tantalizing, first, that artificial forms like those of tragedy and comedy should admit their opposites, and second, that a dramatist, knowing the discomfort of juxtaposing two discordant responses, should deliberately exploit the tensions they set up when put together’ (Styan, 1968, 279).
The acrimonious and discordant nature of what might be constituted as ‘humorous’ is hardly surprising. Comedy, at least in the twentieth century, has tended to be a rather ‘dark and chilly affair’ (Brandt, in Howarth [ed.] 185). There is very little that can be termed joyous or celebratory. In fact, it could be argued that the levity of the moment, or the literary technique/mode employed overturns the intent of the comic. Theorists of humour and comedy argue for the dangerous and the revolutionary nature of comedy. Comedy intends to improve society, often coming so close to tragedy that it becomes difficult to extricate one from the other, and the terms ‘comedy’ and ‘tragedy’ make less sense in their old meanings.

The novels that are under consideration also deal with the traditional plots of comedy as defined in the *Glossary of Terms*:

the relations and the intrigues of men and women living in a polished and sophisticated society, relying for comic effect in great part on the wit and sparkle of the dialogue – often in the form of repartee, a witty conversational give-and-take which constitutes a kind of a verbal fencing match – and to a lesser degree, on the ridiculous violations of social conventions and decorum by stupid characters such as would-be wits, jealous husbands, and foppish dandies. (Abrams, 1981, 26)

In the three novels that are discussed here, ‘polished and sophisticated society’ is satirised, as are ‘foppish dandies’, but the ‘witty conversational give-and-take’ that characterises the Comedy of Manners does not exist in its recognisable form. In its place, there is comedy in the subversive mode, demonstrating the limitations of the social order through the incorporation of an excluded or marginalised individual’s point of view. In *Paro Dreams of Passion*, it is the lower-middle-class typist in the world of snobbish industrialists and aspiring lawyers. In *Conversations of Cow*, a lesbian of Indian origin tries to find herself through the maze of social constructs that society presents her with. *The God of Small Things* deals with the stifling
constrictions imposed on divorced women of upper-caste India and the corruption of a political system that supports them.

**Comedy and its Dis-content**

Comedy usually entails ‘the integration of society’ (Frye, *Anatomy*, 1973, 43) and the social integration may ‘emphasize the birth of an ideal society’ (Frye, 1964, 454) by mocking at limitations. Comedy aims at opening up directions. The novels do that in the way they present strong female characters capable of seeing beyond the ‘wit and sparkle’ of ‘sophisticated society’ and inverting and undercutting social norms, whether those relate to representation of characters or literary devices. Parody and intertextuality, satire and irony are the main techniques used to create humour in the texts, although none of these is intrinsically humorous. Parody, irony or satire could easily be a savage, brutal message by itself, or may have sermon-like qualities. An overlap of the sub-genres/modes is common.

The etymology of the word ‘parody’ seems to have undergone changes since its earlier use. Rose (1996, 280) observes that the ancient use of the word ‘parody’ describes the comic imitation and transformation of an epic work, extended to other forms of comic quotation. She traces the changes that the word ‘parody’ has gone through since ancient times. In its more modern uses ‘parody’ came to refer to the inversion of another song or work of art, which turns the original into the ridiculous (Scalinger, 1561, quoted in Rose, 1996, 281). In its more recent connotation, parody may or may not be concomitant with the comic. Although some theorists like Bakhtin saw parody as a counter/oppositional strategy, theorists like Hutcheon emphasise that ‘para’ could equally imply ‘besides’. Bakhtin’s (1981, 76) views on parody are
extremely pertinent to the understanding of the form of parody in the novels under discussion:

...it is in parody that two languages are crossed with each other, as well as two styles, two linguistic points of view, and in the final analysis two speaking subjects. It is true that only one of these languages (the one that is parodied) is presented in its own right; the other is present invisibly, as an actualising background for creating and perceiving. Parody is an intentional hybrid, but usually it is an intra-linguistic one, one that nourishes itself on the stratification of the literary language into generic languages and languages of various specific tendencies...Thus every parody is an intentional dialogised hybrid. Within it, languages and styles actively and mutually illuminate one another. (76).

Parody does more than ‘illuminate’; it exposes the other’s ‘word’ and the language of the powerful in its function of being a repressive force. The ‘intentional hybridity’, the interplay of literary language allows for the examination of various specific tendencies to a rebellious end.

Another’s sacred word, uttered in a foreign language, degraded by the accents of vulgar folk languages, re-evaluated and reinterpreted against the backdrop of these languages, and congeals to the point where it becomes a ridiculous image, the comic carnival mask of a narrow and joyless pedant, an unctious hypocritical old bigot, a stingy and dried up miser. (77)

Hutcheon argues in a similar vein that the collective weight of parodic practice shows that ‘parody is repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signalling of difference at the heart of similarity’ (1988, 26). This accounts for the popularity of parody as a privileged mode in post-modernist cultural representations. Through parody it is possible to paradoxically incorporate the past into its very structures often pointing to the ideological contexts of each text. ‘Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it, but without being totally recuperated by it’ (ibid, 35). It is for this reason that it has become the mode of the ‘ex-centric’ or those who are marginalised by a dominant ideology/culture. For Hutcheon, parody need not necessary be aligned to the comic. Despite the echoing of the past, and discounting the irony that the self-reflection brings, parodic echoing of the past can still be deferential. The echoing of the past
conjures up a total pattern of semiotic systems which for women writers provides both familiarity and distance, making it possible to work out effective strategies to come to terms with and respond to the dominant context and combat hegemonic practices.

Another double-coding device that is used in fiction is intertextuality. The presence of texts or traces of texts from the past are embedded by writers to mount an attack on the “founding subject” (Kristeva, 1969 in Hutcheon). In Bakhtin’s words,

> Every socially significant verbal performance has the ability – sometimes for a long period of time, and for a wide circle of persons – to infect with its own intention certain aspects of language that had been affected by its semantic and expressive impulsive, imposing on them specific semantic nuances and specific axiological overtones; thus, it can create slogan-words, curse-words, praise-words and so forth. (1981, 290)

Evoking a text from the past results in, more often than not, an interplay of the original ‘fetishized’ meaning and the newly re-contextualised meaning, thus challenging closure and single, centralised meaning. Coupled with irony, intertextuality inherently underlines the instability of texts and becomes a useful rhetorical device to implicitly work out a bitextual structure in fiction, one recalling the ‘original’ text that has in some way ‘infected’ the newer re-formulated message.

Irony has an evaluative edge. It invariably provokes an emotional response in those who ‘get it’. It has its ‘targets’ and its victims (Hutcheon, 1994, 2) Intrinsically, irony as a literary device is not subversive, but can become so in the right discursive context combining said and unsaid messages. Hutcheon argues that for irony to happen, shared factual background is necessary. Ironists and interpreters of irony need to converge on different terrains: rhetorical, linguistic, aesthetic, social, ethical, cultural, and ideological (98-99). Irony, then, creates a two-tiered potential message, one of the ironist to his/her ‘initiated’ audience and the other ‘decoy’ message for those who do not share the discursive communal framework (Rose, 1979, 51). Thus, it could be argued that the laughter of the group is created by ironical cues that activate
textual and collective or para-textual memories to create greater empathy between the author and the ‘initiated’ reader.

Satire is ‘a non-violent means of discharging misanthropic impulses’ (Stein, 2000, 26). It is a significantly more tendentious and vicious form of comedy/humour than the anarchic glee of the carnival or the playfulness of parodies. Stein suggests that conscious self-justification and unconscious aggression through its particular economy of ‘psychical expenditure’ (Jokes, 152) are elements that come together to produce satirical texts. Its literary merits depend on its success in bestowing wit and style on aggression.

The theories, hypotheses and the observations made on humour and how they operate in literary texts have formed the basic framework in analysing the three novels. Given the limited scope of this thesis, I have had to resist the temptation of further in-depth examination of all theories on humour. Bakhtin’s theory of the carnival and the feminist theory of humour will be applied to some of the texts. The genres/modes/techniques of parody, irony and satire will be taken up in the following chapters for further investigation with regard to the novels.
Chapter 3
Maya Jaal/The Web of Illusions In Namita Gokhale’s
Paro Dreams of Passion

All the heroines of Bengali novels were supposed to bear in their eyes a sadness, which made them irresistible to their heroes. I too tried to look sad, but it was a difficult task, for there were so many things that made me burst into laughter, and the world seemed so young, so happy, so full of promise.

-Kamala Das, My Story.

Namita Gokhale’s Paro Dreams of Passion was not particularly well received by critics in India. The dismissive response to it is typified by this flippant summary: ‘Paro deals with the upper-crust of contemporary Indian society in metropolitan towns, and the characters change sexual partners quicker than their clothes’ (Shyamala Narayan, 1985). The women characters in Paro Dreams of Passion are rejected as ‘aberrations’. ‘These women characters do not do anything “new” but merely engage in a metaphorical role-reversal. It is only an attempt on their part to turn the value-system of male-dominated society upside down’ (Shrivastava, 1996,120). It is exactly in reversing the gendering of the conventional fictions of sexual adventure and the inversion of the patriarchal value systems that the novelty of the novel resides. To dismiss the novel as steamy erotica is to overlook its satiric potential. Paro Dreams of Passion is a far more subversive and complex text than critics have acknowledged.

In terms of its erotic content, it is certainly daring and pioneering; it came before any of Shobha De’s novels with titles such as Strange Obsessions, Sultry Days and Starry Nights. All of them are replete with the high sexual drama of aspiring film stars or power hungry tycoons. De, who is perhaps the bestselling Indian English pulp fiction writer, emphasises the body; sex is used to titillate and excite the reader.

Sagas of bed-hopping, chronicles of high society and low ethicality, drawing room manners and barn-door morals. “Spare-Rib-aldry” or “fuction” (to use Farrukh Dhondy’s expressive term) would perhaps be an apt description of them’ (Narayan quoting M.K. Nair, 2001, 115)
That is not the only difference between the writings of the two writers of erotica: in *Paro Dreams of Passion* (*Paro*) there is considerable self-irony and an underlying notion that women’s liberation in India, as elsewhere, cannot simply be equated with sexual freedom. It is only through women’s social agency and improvement of their material reality that liberation of any sort can really happen.

Open expression of female sexuality by women has been one of the most restrictive taboos entailing the most stifling codes of behaviour (Roy, 1999). Shashi Deshpande brings it up in *That Long Silence* when one of the female characters remarks, ‘In fact, we had never spoken of sex at all. It had been as if the experience was erased each time after it happened; it never existed in words’ (95). Vrinda Nabar voices a similar opinion, ‘In Indian society there is such a resistance to any suggestion of sexuality, specially female sexuality, that writing about it becomes an act of defying the establishment’ (http://www.pugmarks.com/week/steam.htm). Kamala Das, for example received extreme critical ostracism for her overtly sexual writing. William Walsh’s comment typifies the general critical denunciation that her poetry received, ‘her poetry is self-centred and unabashedly sexual although the sexuality seems more fascinating to the poet because it is hers than because it is sexual. She speaks of her sexual experience in tones which are both self-indulgent and truculent’ (1990, 143). ‘Parading’ the body has indeed brought Das ‘national notoriety and international fame’ as Paul Sharrad suggests (1996, 181). Yet Das has effectively used sex in her poetry as a metaphor for submission, subversion and surrender. An example of the subversive strain is evident in the following lines:

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Ask me why his hand sways like
A hooded snake
Before it clasps my pubes
Ask me why like a
Great tree felled, he slumps against
My breasts...(1991, 98)
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‘Pubes’ and ‘breasts’ appeared in poetry in Indian English poetry for the first time. In deliberately toying with the code of the ‘skin’s lazy hungers’ (Das, 1996, 48) and overstepping the limits to which a woman writer can go, Namita Gokhale provides a provocative vehicle for interrogating gender representations and assumptions. Humour, itself a tolerated transgression, is one way of approaching the taboo subject and instigating an examination of values that surround sex and sexuality. Gokhale also tries to sneak into her novel a critique of those in the upper-crust of contemporary Indian society who are oblivious to the poverty that surrounds them, using satire and irony that show the underbelly of that society. As Narayan suggests, the plot, with its quick changes of scenes and circumstances, makes the activities of the characters appear like a farce. Nonetheless, there are covert jibes at the conditions of the rich, the middle-class and the poor sections of society in India. The humour in Paro comes closest to the burlesque and is provoked by the inside-out version of the world. The private lives of the four main characters in the novel forms its core. The public life is peripheral to the private plot. On the edges of the text are comments about ‘the trouble with India’ which different characters attribute to numerous forms of corruption, such as ‘Desh mein rundhi raaj chalta hai’ (75) (‘the country is ruled by whores’) uttered by a disgruntled wife; ‘that men only want one thing’ (123) a comment on the adultery of film stars made in the train by young girls poring over a film magazine; that ‘as a breed you types are all half-anglicised, and half-denationalised. And completely irrelevant...’(75) a declaration made in a posh restaurant in Delhi, by a drunk, young man named Lenin pretending to be a Marxist. Moral chaos is presented in the novel and social mores are put under playful scrutiny.
The playful scrutiny takes the form of sexual and textual subversions. Sex permeates *Paro* and demands a carnivalesque reading. It also offers a sly critique of representations of women in tedious melodramatic male-oriented texts such as Hindi films. Gokhale sets the stage for this by recycling a cliché as narrative, the re-working of the romance genre, and deploying the device of ‘espièglerie’ (Mackay, 1988), a commonly used technique by women writers to generate humour. Self-mockery achieved in the text, by an ironic narrator, provokes laughter. This chapter begins by looking at the title and its parodie thrust; following a plot summary of the novel is an analysis of it as a carnivalesque text; and finally it shows how satire and irony are used to critique a society that consistently favours men over women while still pretending to worship them.

Reliteralising what is merely a symbol has become something of a pattern woven into comedic writing in general and women’s writing in particular.

Rather than creating a word/object/action that accrues meaning through repeated appearances in a text, metaphor-into-narrative illustrates the stripping away of symbolic or over-determined meaning in order that the “original” significance of the word/object/action should dominate. It involves a linguistic strategy that takes a metaphor, simile perhaps a cliché, and plays it out into the plot of the text (Barreca, 1988, 243).

By referring to the clichéd story of the love triangle, *Devdas*, immortalised in several Hindi films, the title of the novel parodies the over-determined meaning attached to the original story. *Paro* is the name of the heroine in the melodramatic film *Devdas*, based on Saratchandra’s classic novel of a zamindar’s son falling in love with his low-caste neighbour’s daughter. This story became a favourite source of songs, plays and films, becoming a mythological reference point and a cliché for love triangles, used as an undercurrent in many films (Rajadhyaksha, 1994). Caste and status prevent a marriage between Devdas and Paro. The childhood sweethearts are parted when Paro is married off to someone belonging to her own caste. Having failed to declare his love for Paro, the eponymous hero is heart-broken and turns to alcohol for solace.
Paro does occasionally surface and provide emotional support, but it is in the arms of Chandramukhi, a prostitute who befriends him, that Devdas recovers from drunken bouts. Devdas pines away for Paro, entirely taking for granted the devotion of Chandramukhi. He is represented as a hopelessly narcissistic character.

Saratchandra’s Bengali novel is often claimed to be one of the first few ‘feminist’ texts because it attempted to throw light on the plight of women and critiqued the spinelessness of the feudal elite. The title *Paro Dreams of Passion* deliberately dislodges the male hero from the centre of the story and enthrones the female hero, thus initiating a shifting of symbols. A female version of the story is told.

A deliberate play with previous texts entailing a renewed exploration of the symbols of clichés from the past involves a kind of dramatic irony where the readers know more than the characters. Since women writers live out the metaphors they inherit, seeking textual vengeance through irony, there is a throw back to the myths that are created by the dominant culture. This leads to further irony in that the subversive parody reinstates the myth. However, the myth is debunked at the same time, revitalising it for women readers at least. There is an attempt at ‘unsaying’ what has been said on behalf of women (Trinh, Min-ha), demanding a radically ‘new plot’ (Little, 1983, 178). Thus, the melodramatic story of *Devdas* becomes a comical cliché reviewed from a woman’s position mocking assumptions and challenging the traditional, patriarchal world-view. The title of the novel acts like a prologue by activating other texts. It collapses the comic and cosmic images from Indian mythology. Paro is a shortened endearment for the name Parvati, a major goddess in the Hindu pantheon who splits into: Durga the benevolent destroyer of evil and Kali the indiscriminate destroyer. Shiva and Parvati are often represented together in sculptures as a married couple; they embody the male and female principles of the
cosmos. Parvati is the emblem of ‘Shakti’ or the primal energy. Therefore, she is one of several ideals of womanhood or mythic archetypes available to women in Indian literature. In her benevolent forms, she devotedly serves her husband. However, in a less constrained avatar, Parvati has a disruptive power of her own. The title very economically bears out that ‘social stereotypes of women are reinforced by archetypes in the representation of women characters in Indian English novels’ (Bhatt, 1993, ix). The comedy arises from the gap between the mythic expectation and the realistic presentation. The title alludes to traditions of wifely devotion but also declares the intention of presenting the informal, irreverent version of the myth of Parvati.

By conflating the goddess and the devoted woman, the paradox that plagues Indian women even in contemporary society is foregrounded in the title. ‘(T)he more women have been elevated to the positions of goddesses, the more emphasis there is on their spirituality, the more oppressed has she been as a flesh and blood human individual, her urges and desires ignored’ (Roy, 1999, 44). In positing Paro and not Devdas as the central character, Gokhale dramatizes the legend and an inverted story threatens to be told, this time from the woman’s point of view. The cliché becomes the metaphor that the novel plays out. To add another dimension to the story, it is not Paro’s version alone but also that of a Chandramukhi, who in the film sometimes impersonates Paro as the object of male desire, but is very much the subject of her own erotic and economic dreams. In the novel, Paro corresponds to her namesake and Priya the narrator becomes an incarnation of Chandramukhi, the self-effacing prostitute.

The title also recalls, at least to this reader, ‘The Dreams of Passion’, a film made in the seventies, directed by Jules Dassin, which recalls the Greek tragedy ‘Medea’ and the angst of an actress (Melina Mecuri), who in her attempts at method
acting meets a woman convicted of killing her three children to spite her adulterous husband. The actress, who earlier finds it difficult to evoke the necessary anger and jealousy that the role of Medea demands, manages to give a convincing performance after she meets the scorned-woman-turned murderer in jail. The scorned woman, who loves and loses, has been portrayed as best suited to a mental institution, a prison or at best is dismissed as a joke. Here she takes centre stage and describes the early legends/myths and claims for the rejected woman a subjecthood that is otherwise denied to her.

Against the backdrop of the myths of Parvati, Devdas and Chandramukhi and that of Medea, which have become clichés, the story of Priya, a middle-class office secretary, unfolds. Mock romance genre combines with the fictional autobiography in the novel, which is professedly reconstructed from the diaries that Priya, the protagonist, keeps to vent her personal frustration. The novel plots the parallel destinies of the two women Paro and Priya, who are both equally competent at manipulating the dominant system in their own ways. Paro is sexy, transgressive, ‘classy’ woman and thrives on male attention. Her insolence is part of her charm. She aggressively seeks out opportunities to occupy the object role in the competition between men, winning wealth and status through this. Paro marries twice, has a child of ‘ambiguous’ parentage, lives on alimony, has a live-in lover who is half her age and has affairs with the rich and powerful, yet ironically, at the end of the book, she is getting married to a Greek homosexual film-maker who sees her as an embodiment of the Madonna. She dies as playfully as she lives, slitting her wrist on a fruit knife while her friends are watching the film Devdas on television (134). On her death, Priya her friend and narrator, comments, ‘She hadn’t meant to die; I was sure about that. It was just a silly accident, a tantrum’ (135).
Priya, the narrator, writer of her autobiography, is very much the antithesis of this over-powering sexual goddess that every man prostrates himself before. She is more like the girl-next-door. Paro’s grand gestures of transgression trivialise Priya’s acts of recklessness such as sticking a hibiscus behind her ear at B.R.’s wedding or throwing a banana peel in her neighbour’s compound. Priya, on the other hand, plays it safe. Her tactics are those of a guerrilla fighter, less farcical, more ironic. Learning from the beginning that the love of her life, B.R. the romantic hero whom she does not stop wanting to marry till very late in the plot, is not available to her, she settles for the second best. This is Suresh, a struggling lawyer who, by the end of the book manages to have a considerably successful business, success that he owes to the ‘ministrations’ of his wife. They claw their way into the upper echelons of society through sheer social tenacity and Paro’s contacts.

Priya’s major act of transgression is her writing. Priya’s writing is a secret act, done under the pretext of copying recipes. When she is found out, she is banished from her home, like the mythical Sita, but less chaste. Her husband is truly bewildered by her outpourings and the unflattering descriptions of his love-making. Only Paro emerges triumphant from unmasking Priya, disgusted that Priya feels a sexual attraction to her. It gives her the opportunity to chastise Priya for having fantasies about her ex-husband. For Priya, writing results in self-scrutiny and minor epiphanies, but almost costs her marriage. It is easy to see that neither Paro nor Priya fits the archetype or stereotype of a virtuous Indian woman.

Although the final outcome of Priya’s writing is uncertain, it is certainly liberating. Liberation, she claims, is what her writing is about. The process of writing, vomiting out her pain and anger, gives Priya a sense of catharsis as she satirises the upper crust of Indian society, without sparing the double standards of the middle-
class. The superficial soap opera-like happenings cover up the need of the main characters to escape the unreality of the roles that the characters have to play. At one point in the novel, Priya is asked what she writes about, to which she replies, ‘Passion, boredom, vanity and jealousy’ (Paro, 117). As if these were unworthy themes to write about, B.R. continues to goad her about the ‘real’ nature of her writing:

‘Come, love, tell me what it’s really about,’ he said.
‘Liberation,’ I hazarded.
‘My author friend, can you in your book liberate me from the onerous responsibility of making love to every attractive or unattractive woman who uses me as dildo to make her husband jealous? Can you liberate me from the jealous possessiveness of the one woman I love? Can you bring up my children for me?’ (Paro, 117).

Liberation from prescribed sex roles is a theme of the novel. B.R.’s exaggerated description of women does not reflect the role traditionally prescribed for women in Indian society. While B.R is trapped in the macho, rich playboy role to seduce every woman he meets to the point of being objectified as a ‘dildo’, Paro and Priya seek liberation in their own ways.

Both women are aware that society commonly associates power with men and powerlessness with women (Cranny-Francis, 1992, 135). Priya chooses to play the patriarchally acceptable ‘ideal woman’ who fulfils the duties of wife and Paro settles for the other ‘ideal’ men fight over. Paro voraciously seeks self-fulfilment through being a highly prized object of masculine affection. Both are aware of the status and power attached to being ‘objects’ of male desire and do not hesitate to use their knowledge of men and their need to their own advantage. Paro at one stage responds to Priya’s questions about how she claims to be liberated when she lives on alimony and the financial support of lovers, by saying, “Look sweetie, they made the rules……” (Paro, 32). At another point Paro proclaims, “Fashionable women aren’t liberated any more; it’s all morchas. Placards and sweaty types shouting about dowry and bride-
burning'. In the battle of the sexes fought on the pages of the novel, liberation is a professed quest, but it is really only part of a self-delusion mechanism that operates in the text. The real quest is fulfilment, mainly involving the body.

**The topsy-turvy world of the carnival**

*Paro Dreams of Passion* probably invites a carnivalesque reading more than the other novels in the thesis. There is ‘the atmosphere of ephemeral freedom’ (Bakhtin, 84,89) in ‘the public sphere as well as at the intimate feast in the home’ in *Paro*. The logic of the ‘lower stratum’ holds sway. Images of the ‘grotesque body and the grotesque bodily processes’ and themes such as copulation, pregnancy, birth, eating, drinking and death (355) permeate the text. ‘The bodily topography of folk humor is closely interwoven with cosmic topography’ (354). The material bodily principle becomes the ‘relative center of the new picture of the world’ (404). Finally the carnivalesque text with its profusion of genres in dialogue, a blend of dialects, abuses and curses of the marketplace ends in ambivalently upholding the folk tradition of fear defeated by laughter (395). The bodily principle is indeed central to the novel.

There is a festive-banquet feel about *Paro*: a wedding banquet starts off the novel. There are parties where ‘the popular images of food and drink are active and triumphant’ (Bakhtin, 1984,302). Convexities and orifices are the common characteristic of the grotesque during the carnival. The limits between the body and the world are weakened. Food and sex often add to the festivities of the moment:

Some of the staff had insisted on a wedding cake, so B.R. had to slice a three-tiered pink and white masterpiece of the confectioner’s art. He cut through it tidily with a knife swathed in pink and white ribbon, then he grasps the little bridegroom perched upon the tumbling cake and placed him tenderly in Paro’s waiting mouth. She smiled, and winked mischievously (*Paro*, 15)

This inaugurates Paro’s symbolic role as a man-eater. Sex in a variety of forms is enacted in the text. It is easy to see why the overabundance of sex scenes could have
offended traditional readers. This is perhaps the first book in which an Indian author openly celebrates female sexuality through the depiction of female masturbation. The promiscuity of the couples acted out without the filters of Hindi-film type censorship borders on pornography and for most part the pornography is comic:

I napped lightly for a while, and then I began to masturbate. I did not fantasise, but sometimes I became Paro, and sometimes I was myself. Sometimes I was B.R. devouring Paro, and then I was B.R. tenderly loving Priya, and then I became Suresh who was ravishing Paro, and then Paro with Suresh in slavish possession, and intermittently Suresh copulating with Priya who was actually Paro. I was all these people; fragments of their thoughts, feelings, terrors passed through my writhing body. It was as if the basically voyeuristic nature of my life had forever been laid bare. (Paro, 53)

The preoccupation with sexuality represents a carnivalesque upheaval in which the body reigns supreme. The body links itself to other bodies and to the outside world. In this extract the female body revels in its objecthood. To invoke Bakhtin again, ‘The object transgresses its own confines, ceases to be itself. The limits between the body and the world are erased, leading to the fusion of the one with the other and with surrounding objects’ (1984, 310). The novel refuses the erasure of female sexuality. Reconstituting women as sexual beings and not goddesses is a secret mission in the novel. The fantasy performed in the extract is the masquerade equivalent of a carnival. It literally plays out the metaphor of ‘being someone else’. In her fantasies, Priya transgresses gender confines by simulating the men in her life. The sense of fun lies in pushing the boundaries of the sexual self, in mocking the lofty theme of romantic love with its connotations of monogamy by involving more than the loved ‘one’. By folding in the multiple sexual selves into one through fantasy orgy/masked parade, the carnival in its farcical glory is activated. In Bakhtin’s assessment of Rabelais’ popular tradition, women are the incarnation of the lower stratum and yet, ‘(W)omanhood is shown in contrast to the limitations of her partner (husband, lover, or suitor); she is a foil to his avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, bigotry, sterile senility, false heroism, and abstract idealism’ (ibid, 240). Priya’s sexual fantasy
symbolically makes her a part of the very hypocrisies she critiques. In fantasising about B.R., Paro and Suresh, she literally and pornographically hugs everything they stand for, thereby declaring herself not above the people she criticises but complicit in the greedy, manipulative bourgeois society they inhabit.

Both B.R and Paro, the ‘twin deities like the sun and the moon’, the hero and heroine of the mock-autobiographical novel, are presented as over- indulgent pagan gods. B.R, the hero of the novel, who survives through the novel as a pair of initials, is described as a king in the earlier part of the novel. He comes to represent sexual excesses, through gross exaggeration and hyperbole.

Sex had become, to him, more than a sport, it was a duty, a vocation, a calling. I sensed it was with sex alone that he reached out to the world, and it was with sex alone that he shut out thought, emotion and feeling. Women could, perhaps, sense this immense sexual generosity, and came to him for succour and healing. And he allowed himself to be used as a lamp-post, or as a letterbox for women to send messages to their husbands through. I do not think he ever refused a woman, it was as though he were bound, by his code of honour, to ravish every female that he encountered. (Paro, 37)

From being deity in the earlier pages of the novel, B. R. is described as a ‘lamp-post’, B.R. becomes both the king and the clown. In Rabelais And His World Bakhtin describes an incident in which Catchpole the king from Rabelais’ Gargantua and Pantagruel rents his body to whoever will beat him (Bakhtin, 1984, 197). B.R’s compulsive sexuality seems like the act of Catchpole, in which the flagellation is replaced by sex. B.R, the suave womaniser, is also shown in a comic light during one of his attempts at ravishing Priya. By presenting the paragon in a less than heroic light, Priya the narrative persona deflates B.R.’s macho image through the technique of an exaggerated, prankish and ironic observation.

Wearily, mechanically he edged towards me and held on to my obliging breast in a preoccupied manner. He breathed heavily, a caveman trying to revive a dying fire and moaned and duly went through the motions and simulations of passion but couldn’t manage an erection. He seemed ashamed and shattered by this inadequacy and began flailing about wildly and attacked me with even greater ferocity. Soon we were hinged only at the moment of orgasm, there was a distinct and embarrassing sound, like a motorcycle starting, he coughed quickly to cover up, and then both of us sat in silence again. (Paro, 38).
The textual thrashings that he receives, ‘are equivalent to a change of costume, to a metamorphosis. Abuse reveals the other, true face of the abused; it tears off his (the king’s) disguise and mask. It is the king’s uncrowning’ (Bakhtin, 1984,197). B.R’s masculine ‘ministrations’ backfire and over a period of time, a long period of time, Priya sees what her god really is, a ‘nymphomaniac’ with ‘a compulsive need to sell himself’ (Paro, 7). Thus, she refuses him not only his macho image, but also, whimsically sees him as a woman with an outsized libido. It is this rechannelling of anger at being rejected by B.R that carnivalesque humour is generated. Excessiveness is also the tragic flaw of Priya’s second ‘deity’.

Paro, Priya’s alter ego and B.R’s ex-wife, is also presented as a metaphor for superabundance. She physically embodies the spirit of the carnival, wearing her ‘corpulence like expensive jewellery’ (Paro, 125), mesmerising even when she physically transgresses the conventional standard of acceptable weight gain. She literally performs the bottom-up principle of the carnival by doing the yogic posture of shirshasana, the head-down-legs-up position at a party, making herself a carnival spectacle. Priya grudgingly admires Paro’s outrageous behaviour, her lack of fear and her irreverence.

Paro has done it all, she’s left a husband and a lover, she has a small son of ambiguous parentage. She is a conversation piece at dinner parties, and it is considered daring and chic to know her. (Paro, 26)

Paro too earns her share of criticism in the novel, thus slipping from her traditional divinity status to that of a modern everyday comic. In her case, it is a physical thrashing from the wife of a minister. The minister’s wife, literally pouncing on her physically, beating her with a jhadoor (a broom) in an attempt to exorcise her of her obsessive hankering after her powerful husband and declaring that ‘Desh me bas Rundi Raj chalta hai’ (72) [the country is ruled by whores], comically joins the fate of
Paro and the country, much to the amusement of gossip-mongers. Here is another example of the deity becoming the clown.

**Irony and Self-mockery**

One of the key elements of carnival is that the person who laughs is not exempt from being laughed at. In her writing Priya presents her deities in a bad light, showing their follies and foibles, but she also turns the ironical eye on herself. As Walker suggests ‘a consciousness that separates the two “selves” — one that endures the anguish of her own reality and the second self that stands apart and comments, often quite humorously on the plight of the first’ operates to create self-mockery (in Barreca, 204). This becomes a strategy for undercutting the narrator’s own grand criticisms of others:

The hairdresser’s assistant could, with unerring instinct, smell out my somewhat dubious social status and did his best to knot the curlers and nets into the most uncomfortable configuration possible. When I emerged from the cocoon of the dryer I had not, to my intense disappointment, turned into any butterfly (*Paro*, 11)

The painful consciousness of one’s social status that the extract foregrounds and the desperate measure that the heroine undertakes, is shown as a form of social overreaching. Appearance and reality are pitted against each other. Priya’s internalised lack of self-worth through her social conditioning is rechannelled through humour. The contrasting emotions of low self worth and high aspiration are juxtaposed in a deceptively superficial episode. The ‘beauty parlour’ is a safe arena to present a double perspective ‘at once self-effacing and critical’ (Mackay, in Barreca, 118). Priya appears simultaneously comic and pathetic:

My eyebrows sometimes stand up straight at odd angles. The Chinese girl who tried to coax them into shape got a little carried away and left the right side a little off-centre, giving my face a faintly comical expression. The fashionable thin line of the eyebrows also made me look very strained. Then they bleached my upper lip; the peroxide gave me a painful and very pink rash, and it looked as if I had drunkenly gashed the lipstick a few inches above target. I even decided to get my hair permed. It was a painful decision, and cost sixty rupees, which was one-tenth of my monthly salary. (*Paro*, 11)
The realistic, sordid details undercut the ‘romance’ in the genre. Instead of dwelling on the ‘(F)lowers, little gifts, love letters, maybe poems to her eyes and hair’ (Greer, 173), the narrator focuses on the not so magical and mysterious commercial aspects of cosmetically acquired beauty. Instances like these, where contradicting feelings of anger and dread are expressed in a socially acceptable manner, offer ‘a dazzling double perspective on emotions or experiences which might be overwhelming if actually felt and presented in a straightforward manner’ (Mackay, 129). On the one hand, the author castigates herself, on the other she invites pity. The comic gaze is turned upon the authorial self. One part becomes the helpless clown and the other observes and comments on the participant. Priya’s self-mockery, a version of self-deprecatory humour that women generally adopt, acts as a textual defence mechanism inviting the reader to laugh at her rather then pronounce harsh judgments. The laughter in this context is a ‘kamikaze manoeuvre’ and an ‘ambush’ technique in which ‘the role of self-effacement facilitates aggression’ (Juni & Katz, 2001). In using such textual tactics, an overt criticism of patterns in society is presented along with the authorial self’s recognition of those patterns or foibles in herself. Yet, the larger criticism in the novel is of the people Priya describes as her ‘twin deities’ and what they stand for.

The subversion of romantic fiction

*Paro* strongly resembles a romance novel, but is prankishly subverted.

Romantic fiction, believed to have been read mainly by women, was meant to keep women quiet, complacent, heterosexual and home-and-family oriented’ (Taylor, 1989,60). In the past, romantic fiction was dismissed by feminists as ‘titillating mush’ in Germaine Greer’s words (1971, 189). The Mills and Boon type of romance, though offensive to puritanical sections of society, confirmed all the worst aspects of
patriarchal capitalist society: ‘missionary position male dominance, female subversion at work, play and in bed...’ (Taylor, 1989,60). The feminist appropriation of the romance genre ironically subverts the genre:

(T)he feminist appropriation of generic forms carries a wonderful irony. Generic fiction, characterised by a masculinist (political, psychological, artistic) establishment is now being transformed by feminist ideology. Rather than rejecting the mass culture to which they were relegated (and which as female was relegated to them) feminist writers have embraced it, seeing its characteristic popularity as a powerful tool for their own propagandist purposes (Cranny Francis, 1990,5).

The pastiche-ridden, irony-deficient form was taken up by many women writers to reformulate romantic love. Romantic fiction generally offers fantasies of transgression, individual power and autonomy within historical, social and narrative constraints. The knowledge of the reader’s (generally women) own sense of subordination is confirmed. In facilitating a dream scenario of romantic love across class barriers, romantic fiction invariably enforces the idea that the ideal relationship is an unattainable one. For a feminist humorist, the dialogue between the ideology of feminism and the genre is a lively one. Textual resistance to the patriarchal ideology is offered in romance narratives not simply by having a female hero telling the story, but by manoeuvring the plot and drawing attention to the male dominated context (Cranny-Francis, 1990). At the centre of the romance novel, Paro provides the platform on which the narrator, Priya, stages the textual guerrilla warfare, quixotically sniping at unrealistic expectations and melodramatic patriarchal texts. The mock romance elements in the novel offer a double reading allowing the enjoyment of a familiar form and the enjoyment of subverted romance.

The broad features of romantic fiction are that it idealises man-woman relationships and subsumes the economic and the erotic. It tends to inscribe an unchanging trajectory of man-woman relationship beginning with love, followed by courtship and ending in marriage. The choice of a marriage partner becomes the only
self-defining choice that the heroine of a romance allows herself. In most romances, the male hero is a well-to-do professional, perhaps from an aristocratic background, definitely heterosexual, whose beguiling charms, often verging on male chauvinism, sweep the female hero off her feet. Less established, perhaps younger and less experienced, but incredibly beautiful, the heroine’s fascination for the hero is limited to the erotic. It is almost as if by virtue of being young and beautiful she merits entry into the charmed social circle of a richer, more enlightened class of people. For the readers of the genre, Cranny-Francis claims that this erotic desire also expresses economic desires for wealth, security and status (1990, 183).

In Paro, however, the trajectory is not love-courtship-marriage, but love and courtship with one and marriage with another. In fact, much of the humour lies in the heroine’s reluctance to accept that the hero, B.R, does not propose marriage to her. The fairytale ending ‘and they lived happily ever after’ with the man she is obsessively in love with, eludes her in the novel. Also, from the start, the erotic and the economic are intertwined. Priya’s low economic status is consistently contrasted with B.R’s high social and economic standing. The contrast causes some amusement, as does the interrogation of gender roles through the use of espièglerie and whimsy. In order to argue the point, it is important to present few details from the text.

Priya, the narrator, is the daughter of a widow, the sole-earning member of the family whose money goes into her brother’s education fund. She lives in a one-room (fifteen feet by twenty) chawl, in Andheri, a less than glamorous suburb of Bombay. A girl from the typing pool, she is enamoured of B.R., her boss, her ‘dreamboat’ who is the owner of the Sita sewing-machine empire. His flat in Marine Drive, an elite area in Bombay, is described as ‘the jewel in the palm of Bombay’ (Paro, 9). The unbridgeable gap between the two worlds is consistently referred to in the text. In
B.R.'s world, brides could get away with wearing a glittering silver tissue sari, dripping with diamonds, make a grand late entry with husband in tow, kiss her father-in-law on the forehead. For Priya, 'This is not how brides behaved in my world. All the brides I had ever encountered kept their heads so perilously downcast as to appear anatomically endangered' (14). In B.R.'s world tea arrived on silver trays with 'a starched matte tea-cloth embroidered in cross-stitch with pink roses' (20). Priya tries to emulate this world by serving tea to her husband in a similar fashion. Her attempts to belong to that class are a savage satire on the aspirations of the middle class. The beauty parlour incident is another attempt discussed earlier in the chapter.

**Role models from Hindi Films**

*Paro Dreams of Passion* articulates dissatisfaction with the restricted gender roles. Other than the role of the dutiful wife, the role of the mother also comes under satirical attack:

My mother had been widowed as long as I could remember, and was so like a filmi mother that I sometimes wondered whether all the scriptwriters around had used her as a model. Or perhaps it was the other way around, and it was in the embryonic dark of the cinema hall that she had picked up all those inflections of love and solicitude. Anyway, those emotions were rarely directed at me. Family circumstances had more or less forced me to take up a secretarial course rather than complete college; all our family savings went into making my brother a doctor. As there was no prospect of our being able to shell out any dowry for me, my mother forbade a bleak spinsterhood. 'Perhaps she will find some deaf-mute to marry her,' she would mutter with gloomy relish. And yet she was full of venom at my 'Fastness' it was not in Raipur as it was in Bombay, 'even a deaf-mute would expect his wife to be respectable'. I was, of course, the only earning member of my family. (*Paro*, 12)

Motherhood confers respect on a woman as nothing else can, at least that is what Hindi films would have us believe. In Hindi films mothers have been ritually presented as long-suffering creatures with beatific smiles and unfailing devotion to their sons. The mother-son relationship forms the nexus and is seen as the ultimate paradigm of human relationship. India produces 900 films a year (Kasbekar, in Nemes) and in most of those films, the mother is presented as the epitome of virtue and a martyr. The relationship between mother and son is central to the melodrama of
Hindi films. Though, as Uma Chakravarty (1985) points out, mother-child relationship features rarely in classical mythology – the only prominent example is that of Krishna and Yashoda – contemporary society sees the need to mythologise mother-son relationship. ‘The women’s self-respect in the traditional system is protected not through her father or her husband, but through her son’ (Nandy, 1988, 74). Emotional and financial investment in the son pays off because of the religious status assigned to funeral rites and also, traditionally sons are meant to care for their parents in their old age. The status of the daughter is that of ‘paraya dhan’ or ‘wealth that belongs to another’ to be kept in the custody of the daughter’s parents till she is ‘given away in marriage’ with a big dowry. The irony is that often daughters provide the emotional and financial security that is traditionally a son’s duty. Yet Hindi films consistently fetishise the idea that a girl child is essentially somebody else’s treasure. The novel parodies the distance in mother-daughter relationship with the satirical intent of disclosing that the ‘paraya dhan’ syndrome borders on the mother’s renunciation of her daughter.

In most Hindi films, mothers of daughters generally define the role for their daughters by embracing victimhood as a measure of self-worth. One of the tasks that they perform in the film’s text is to inform the daughters that tradition rules supreme, that pativrata, or the worship of the husband, is a woman’s most cherished duty and that chastity plays a very important role in it. Family restrictions are gender biased. A son escapes the routine indoctrination that the daughter goes through because the daughter becomes emblematic of the family’s honour, ‘Khandaan ki izzaat’, which is repeated like a mantra in Hindi films. Hindi films act as patriarchal fairy tales for adults. They teach gender roles to women, suggesting that they must not wander off the narrow path of patriarchy and that by sticking to the straight and narrow, the
young heroine will one day earn the reverence of the community as a mother, even though she has to forgo the glory that is routinely handed out to her brother. All this involves denying her sexuality and toiling hard and thanklessly in nurturing her family. Thus, by referring to the representations of women in popular culture, the restricted role of women in a patriarchal set up is presented. Confined by the definitions of femininity, Priya internalises a sense of worthlessness and unleashes her desire for self-worth by looking for a man who will refract some of his glory on to her.

The playful mocking of the gestures of the ‘filmi’ mother, a stock character firmly entrenched in popular Indian representations, interrogates the identity construction and the prescriptive discourse associated with Hindi films. ‘Priya, Priya beti, ek Khushkhabari hai...’ she said theatrically. Then, predictably, she burst into unabashed sobs; I sat, perplexed, until her sobs subsides. Presently she began tenderly to stroke my hair. ‘Kitni sundar dulhan banegi’, she said, holding my chin in her work-hardened hands, and looking long and tenderly into my eyes until I winced with pain (Paro, 21).

The melodrama that accompanies propitious announcements in Hindi film is parodied. The histrionics and the choice of words are a send-up of the oft-repeated words in Hindi films. ‘Kitni sundar dulhan banegi’ is a line from an advertisement of a popular cosmetic cream ‘Fair and Lovely’ which promises a young girl ‘fair’ light skin that is sure to get the attention of suitable ‘boys’ and lead eventually to marriage thus fulfilling the trajectory of the romance novel.

To conclude this chapter, Paro is not a puerile wallowing in sex, nor is it an erotic tease. The humour in the novel lies in bringing into open the uneasy issue of women’s sexuality, which has remained either a frivolous aside in the Indian English fiction or is seen as an ‘aberration’. Sex in Paro certainly amuses, but it also presents the body as a shorthand symbol of carnivalesque world of topsy-turvy values. In doing so, it satirises sections of the society. The explicit sexuality in De only titillates
and offers very little in terms of an interrogation of gender roles. More than anything else, De's heroines take themselves too seriously and lack irony. The satire and irony in Paro does not exclude the author, hinting at the complicity of each individual in the moral chaos that exists in that society. The insulting satire of Paro is directed at others but turns inwards as self-irony and saves the novel from being a disparagement of patriarchal values alone. While there is anger at gender role prescriptions and the constricting representations of women, the device of reliteratising a cliché allows a re-examination of patriarchal discourse without resorting to ranting and raving about being victims. By conflating stereotypes and archetypes as the title does, there is an attempt at turning hopelessness and frustration into humour. The revolutionary gesture of telling the women's side of the story may seem an uncertain one, since the novel ends with the death of its strongest female character, Paro. However, it could also be read as the burning of the effigy in a carnival. The feared and envied one, who also becomes a clown in the carnival of this narrative, is finally and publicly burnt. Paro also ends with 'a benediction' from a stranger's pyre, with 'an ember that rose and floated in the cold night like a benediction on my sari pallav' (138) ambiguously signalling non-closure or a new beginning, a staple of all comedy.
Chapter 4

One day my Cow will come: Dykonstruction in
Suniti Namjoshi’s *The Conversations of Cow*

‘Life is absurd. As for being sensible, the thing to do is to drop the matter.’
(Suniti to Cow in *The Conversations of Cow*, 44)

Suniti Namjoshi’s claim to fame is through her fables and poems. Her best known works are: *The Feminist Fables* (1981), *Because of India* (1989), *The Blue Donkey Fables*, (1988), *St. Suniti and the Dragon* (1994), *Flesh and Paper* (1986), and recently *Building Babel* (1996) the last chapter of which is on the net and readers are invited to contribute to it. Her fables ‘read like prose poems, sharp-toothed, condensed, story-telling pared down to its essence. Paradoxical, prickly, ironic, her stories read like a sequence of stilettos’ (Dunker, 1992, 161). Her writing has not received a wide range of critical attention, partly because her works are novellas and feminist fables and fairytales, but she is generally seen as a scholarly writer, whose unelaborated style poignantly articulates the struggles of a proudly badge-wearing lesbian. On the basis of her writing, Dianne McGifford comments that Namjoshi appears to be ‘a personality who views life as a process and discovery and who lives accordingly’. (1993,291). Her work is characterised by an unorthodox, open-mindedness. McGifford further observes, ‘Namjoshi has bravely, assiduously deconstructed her social assumptions and named them as a privilege, an insight that stimulated her politicisation as a feminist and lesbian’ (ibid, 291). Namjoshi’s writings follow the directions of feminism and postcolonialism in the way they intertwine, in Namjoshi’s case, mostly irreverently, the private, the public, the poetic and the intellectual. Namjoshi attributes her taste for the fable to her Indian roots. In
an interview (with Coomi, 1998,197), she notes that fables which seem like a strange or antiquated form, one that crops up occasionally in the West in Aesop or La Fontaine, are much more a habit of thinking in India. In relation to this, McGifford observes, 'India has shaped her perspective and consciousness, but her lesbian-feminist politics are hers, part of her individuality, and her signature on her cultural heritage' (292). By extending the fable form to reflect contemporary experiences, Namjoshi braids together her version of Hinduism and her immigrant experiences of 'otherness', of racial discrimination and alienation. These themes are treated in a scholarly, yet jocular way. Anger is worked out through humour. Despite the political implications of her works, her writings do not harangue, nor are they ideologically overbearing because of the wit and humour that operate through innuendo rather than outright satire. The humour in *The Conversations of Cow* is subtler and more formal than in the other two texts.

In *The Conversations of Cow (Conversations)* Namjoshi juggles with incongruities and unmasksthe absurdities of literary and social constructs. Drawing from a treasure chest of Eastern and Western mythologies, her writing activates intertextual memories that constantly collide with each other creating humour and irony. Irony and parody work in tandem to generate quite bizarre meanings. The title, for instance, conflates the daily myths of Western and Eastern realms, suturing together the bovine and the divine. To call someone a 'cow' in English is to belittle them by hinting at limited intelligence. However, Indian mythology exults the cow as a Holy Mother whose every secretion is sacred. In Hindu mythology, a cow represents fecundity, motherhood and generosity. The cow also symbolises Dharma or duty. References to the fecundity and generosity of spirit of cows are legion. According to one ancient Hindu myth, Kama Dhenu, a 'wish cow', a priceless possession of the
sage Vasistha, was coveted and fought over by kings because of her gift of fecundity. Kama Dhenu is said to have produced an entire army to fight a war for Vasistha, the sage (Knappert, 1991, 136). In the novel, Conversations, Cow alias, Bhadravati, or Baddy for short, incarnates into different avatars in the novel and encourages Suniti to seriously consider unconventional solutions to her identity problems by splitting into multiple personalities, thus sending up the army-producing capabilities of Kama Dhenu. The juxtaposition of the Eastern and Western signification generates humour. Shifting between the frames allows the author to combine the Hindu belief in re-incarnation with postcolonial and lesbian identity politics. Thus, fairytale transformations that are ontologically unacceptable in realist fiction become possible.

Drawing on her training as a mathematician, Namjoshi discusses (in an interview with Coomi, 1998, 198) her methods of creating witty and ironic effects:

In mathematics, you have a system and from those axioms everything else follows. If you had a different set of axioms, you would have a different set of outcomes.... You cannot jump from one system to another. If you do that, you will get insane results; but in literature when you juxtapose the systems, you get your most witty and ironic effects.

The madcap adventures of Cow and Suniti are the ‘insane results’. This chapter examines the humour in Conversations by focusing on the bitextual pleasures that the text offers. The text operates at two levels: one the ‘decoy’ level of a postmodernist fable and the other as a multi-layered work of fiction juxtaposing several incongruent elements. One of these is the grafting of the fable and the autobiography. As mentioned earlier, the covert narrative strategy of invoking other texts is a common device used in women’s writing (Barreca, op.cit, 13). The ‘palimpsest’ presence of past texts in the novel helps to interrogate contemporary reality and Namjoshi’s politics of the personal in relation to the public. The textual sweep of the short novel is enormous. It enfolds the ‘palimpsest’ presence of a large number of scholarly texts to re-configure their messages. These include texts from the
past like the Dialogues of Socrates, The Bhagavadgita and the concepts of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ in Eastern and Western philosophy. In demystifying the ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ conundrum, there are satirical and ironic references to the present debates in lesbian and feminist rhetoric. The chapter ends by examining the comic mix of genres.

Feminists are often dismissed as a puritanical, strait-laced bunch of humourless activists (Palmer, 1993, 81). The difficulties that lesbians face in getting their humour recognised as humour, are even greater. As Palmer points out, ‘The tension between power and powerlessness, which informs women’s writing in general, is magnified in lesbian writing’. To write from the margins, practically invisible in society, frequently at odds with the dominant culture and to seek to occupy the privileged position of satirist, parodist and a public truth teller is to transgress the boundaries that are meant to contain a lesbian. A lesbian in the 1980s was seen as ‘a disruptor of heterosexuality, a presence standing outside the conventions of patriarchy, a hole in the fabric of gender dualism’ (Zimmerman, in Munt, 1992, 13). Dualism/ Binaries are ideas Namjoshi plays with in The Conversations of Cow. The dichotomies of East/West, heterosexual/lesbian; animal /human and male and female are deconstructed in the novel by creating a postmodern text that violates ontological possibilities and appropriates symbols and other discursive elements from a range of systems. Intertextuality, which Hutcheon sees as a form of parody, involves a textual practice of double-coding. It is deployed along with irony in Conversations to question a social construct that is based on difference and discrimination. Irony and intertextuality or parody work independently as well as in conjunction in this novel. Independently, both allow for a double reading of texts. Also, irony often participates in parodic discourse ‘as a strategy
which allows the decoder to interpret and evaluate' (Hutcheon, 1985, 31) thus
enhancing the reading experience. Interpreting and evaluating the message has its
implications for the act of reading. A text may be read either superficially or at
different levels of shared knowledge. Margaret Rose argues that irony engenders a
two-tiered potential message, “one of which is the message of the ironist to his (sic)
‘initiated’ audience and the other the ironically meant, ‘decoy message’ ” (1979, 51).

As a decoy message, Conversations reads like a bizarre, postmodernist tale of
an overtly fictional kind involving a talking lesbian cow and her lesbian companion in
Toronto. Logical and ontological possibilities are scrambled as in fantasy or Magic
Realism. The introduction of a cow as the main character, from Hindu realms of
story-telling into a Canadian landscape seems like a severe logical violation. This is a
fictional world where the reader’s world knowledge is thwarted because of a radically
different reference world. A cow as a fixture in an Indian city is conceivable, but
totally incongruent in the streets of Toronto, thus disrupting the logical expectation of
readers. Cow, the main character, is a trickster who changes form, often across
species. Bhadravati/Cow goes from being a scotch-guzzling cow, to an exotic Indian
woman, to a red-neck man Baddy, a respectable Martian to a lesbian woman, thus
enabling a generic mixing of fantasy, romance, quest and science fiction. The
narrative construction of fantasy prevents the fundamental mechanism of automatic
default that ‘realist’ fiction allows for. For example, in ‘realistic’ fiction, credit cards
and driver’s licences would be honoured as bonafide identity documents. However, in
this fictional world, Greenpeace, SPCA, and memberships to the zoo, outrank them as
credentials. There are hilariously nonsensical tangents that the narrative takes.

‘Suniti,’ she (Cow) says, ‘will you give me some money?’
Her directness is startling. I hedge. ‘What do you want it for and how much?’
‘I want to go on a journey. I want 500 dollars.’
I am not sure that B understands money at all. ‘How far can you go on 500 dollars?’
“Oh, at 50 cents a mile, about one thousand miles. One can do a lot with 500 dollars.”
'What?'
'One can hire ten able-bodied women to work ten hours a day for ten days at 5 cents an hour.'
'That's 5,000 dollars, B. but what good is that?'

You buy their time and add it to your life by one thousand hours.'
'Oh, B what nonsense.'

(Conversations, 35)

Nonsense it may be, but even ignoring the arbitrary logic imposed on the economic calculations, the extract is a tongue-in-cheek comment on the workings of modern, global forms of capitalism. Nonsense permeates Conversations. Transformations across various categories are expected and are treated as natural in the fabulist scheme of things. Suniti is initiated into the community of lesbian cows who encourage her 'to become someone'. The menu she can choose from includes goldfish, poodles, bears and other similar creatures and even man. Suniti's scepticism at the facile solutions of identity reformation is mocked by her unreliable guru, Cow. Cow tries to persuade her to try on a few 'other' identities, as if identities were clothes. Suniti is peeved by Cow's ridiculous suggestion, which recalls Alice's indignation at the tea party (Alice in Wonderland) on being offered wine by the March Hare when wine was not a real option because it was not available. Although there are no overt intertextual cues in the novel to suggest a direct connection, the absurdity of the situation, in which there are only apparent choices not real ones, resembles Alice's confusion in Wonderland, faced with spurious choices.

Suniti wisely decides to resist the temptation of being what she is not. The only transformation that she allows herself is a split personality, S1 and S2, where one is the creative private and socially inept version of a more worldly-wise incarnation of herself. That seems to appease Cow/Bhadravati, who is worshipped at the end for facilitating such a transformation. Both at the superficial 'decoy' message level and that of the 'initiated', there is a hint that comedy sponsors a reformation of oneself,
rather than society, and that any attempt at changing society is futile or that changing society begins with changing oneself. This, in short, is the plot in the *Conversation*.

There are fewer self-contained gags and witticisms in the novel that can be excerpted to exemplify an amusing incident than there are in the other two novels in the thesis. Each instance of amusement is anchored in a reference to theories. This snatch of a conversation between Cow and Suniti, for example, alludes to a major issue in identity politics.

"Have you any money?"
(Cow asks Suniti.)
'Sure', I say. 'I work for a living, you know.'
B is curious. "What do you do?"
'I teach English literature'.
B laughs.
'Just because I am a woman and a foreigner, it does not follow that I cannot be a university professor'.
'And a lesbian,' B adds, looking mischievous. 'But really', she goes on, 'English Literature?'
'Onlookers,' I tell her loftily, 'often see more than participants'. (*Conversations*, 34)

Suniti’s attempts at valiantly persuading Cow that women, lesbians and foreigners are now included in the charmed circle of professors of English literature recalls the not so distant past when they were excluded from the vocation. Humour in *Conversations* operates on a whole text basis rather than in piecemeal parts of the text as satirical observations on life.

The title itself sets up the scene for guerrilla warfare against patriarchal texts. To create a framework for the novel, an understanding of lesbian ideology of the time is crucial. In the late 70s and early 80s, ‘Woman identified Woman’ was seen as the most effective way to express feminist politics and Separatism was considered to be not just a strategy, but a viable solution to overcome the problems of male hegemony and oppression (Rudy, 2001, 196). Separatism was seen not only as a strategy but as a final solution to the problem of women’s oppression in a male-dominated society. The emphasis is not so much on overthrowing the male system, as on withdrawing from it for good. This led to the proliferation of Feminist Utopias. *The Conversations* has
only two minor male characters and allusions to communities of self-sustaining lesbians reflect the separatist hope that permeated lesbian feminist politics. ‘Lesbians look beyond individual relationships to female communities that do not need or want men… much lesbian reading and writing quite explicitly excludes men [except perhaps as a symbol of danger]’ (Crowder, 237). By avoiding men in texts and in life, by building a parallel world, many lesbians thought women were radically changing the universe and creating a Utopian world. By the late 70s and 80s, lesbianism ceased to be ‘deviant’ and lesbians were valorised in the USA (Rudy, 196) leading to the articulation of radical positions. Feminism and lesbianism seemed to have merged. ‘To us lesbianism and feminism were synonymous, either one without the other was untenable. A non-feminist lesbian was a failed heterosexual. A non-lesbian feminist was just a male-apologist’ observes Andremahr (Munt [ed.], 1992,135). Similar attitudes were manifested in a plaque ‘The Woman Identified Woman’ (Rudy, op cit) which presents a version of lesbian history of the time.

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society cares to allow. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the accepted ways of thinking and feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with her self. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as a personal necessity, but on some level has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society – the female role…To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. (in Rudy, 198).

That a lesbian is ‘in a state of continual war with everything around her’ in life and in texts is a major issue in the text. The war with the ‘heavy socialisation’ that goes with being a female results in some playfully outlandish narrative ploys and textual manoeuvres.

The general euphoria that surrounded lesbian politics was not shared by ‘women of color’ or women from backgrounds other than the middle class Euro-American one.
Questions of colour and race became the ‘first faultline’ identified in lesbian feminist theory. The complex intersections of race, gender and sexuality were reductively conflated, resulting in resistance from non-white women. As Martin notes, ‘the feminist dream of a new world simply reproduces the demand that women of color abandon their histories, the histories of their communities, their complex locations and selves, in the name of unity that barely masks its white middle-class cultural reference/referents’ (1996, 151). In Conversations, this reduction of identity is parodied by using the literalisation mechanism. When Suniti is introduced to ‘The Self Sustaining Community of Lesbian Cows’, the following exchange takes place:

‘I am Suniti,’ I say. Su? What? I tell them again. They get it wrong. ‘Well, we’ll call you Su for short, just as we do Baddy here.’ Her real name is Bhadravati. I look at Cow, who looks away. Later she says to me, ‘Well, you have to adjust.’ But right then and there I say distinctly, ‘No, you will not call me Sue for short.’ There’s an awkward pause. (Conversations, 18)

The camaraderie and the sisterhood of women seem to have been an uneasy one. An open expression of displeasure at the reductive tendencies of the contemporary models of lesbianism would seem crude and would perpetuate the victim mentality. Satire and parody enable the articulation of discomfort without jeopardising the overall solidarity. Most Indian names conventionally invoke a god or goddess, a river (Bhadravati is the name of a holy river), or a desirable physical or mental attribute (Suniti means well-behaved). Parents give their children those names to either celebrate certain things or to venerate a family deity. Truncating the name amputates the ‘complex locations’ of the self. Thus, the act of cultural assimilation negates the person’s history and in some ways reduces them. It is not surprising that women from ‘Other’ backgrounds resented the identification of the conditions of one group with the condition of all, thereby creating an ideal which did not adequately represent the experiences of all women.
In another part of the text, Suniti theorises about why she thinks men are Martians:

‘Well, as you know, man himself is right at the centre of the literary universe. Pigs and poodles, bats and babies, women and children, the earth itself, are always “the other”. Now how to explain this inexplicable division, this perverse passion to make “the other” conform to the requirements of man’s desire? It doesn’t make sense, unless, of course, one starts with the postulate that men, in fact, are really Martians. Then all the pieces fit together.’ (Conversations, 91-92)

The pieces do not fit together. The ‘One’ and the ‘Other’ ideology of patriarchy, which feminists and lesbians of the time adopted to simultaneously distinguish ‘One’ from the ‘Other’ and erase differences between the ‘Others’, is parodied here. It allows the author to raise some uneasy questions about the prevailing ‘additive’ model or identity, that of one’s identity being simply a composite of natural and socially constructed attributes. Additive identity politics splintered essentialist identity politics into a quest for multiple identities. It attempted to shore up the system by trying to contain the marginalized perspectives, giving an illusion of wholeness and unity, while at the same time challenging the seamless, monolithic construction of lesbian separatism. Energised by deconstructionist desires, the constructedness of aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality and race was a concern in both lesbian and postcolonial theories in circulation. ‘Gender (and particularly the idea that there can be only two), then, is a matter of social construction; whether one acts as female or male is a matter of performance – that is, doing the things a woman or a man does and thereby coding ourselves is such not an ontological certainty’ (Rudy, 208). The idea that gender is not something one is born into but a catalogue of performances, which organise experiences based on the binary man/woman is parodied. In Conversations, the reader is treated to another of Cow’s theories:

The world, as you know, is neatly divided into Class A and Class B humans. The rest don’t count. How they look, walk and talk depends on television, but there are some factors which remain constant for several years. For example, Class A people don’t wear lipstick, Class B people do. Class A people spread themselves out Class B people apologise for so much as occupying space. Class A people never smile placatingly twice a minute and seldom require
any provocation. Now, it’s quite obvious that cows have all the characteristics of Class A people, our very size and shape take care of that. (Conversations, 24)

Although the logic of cows having all the characteristics of men is ridiculous, the idea of ‘constructedness’ is foregrounded and the causal connection between television and sex roles is presented in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Also, the exaggerated but transparent disguise of ‘Class A’ and ‘Class B’ makes the binaries seem absurd. The gender binaries are further complicated in lesbian communities by the insurgences of Butch-femme styles in the 1980s. The Butch-femme style aided the creation of a publicly identifiable lesbian culture. It dramatised the difference between partners and signalled preferences for a sex role to other lesbians. Some lesbians thought of the trend as a proud statement of lesbian resistance. Others viewed the exaggerated gender roles as a self-hating reflection of the dominant heterosexual culture. In one of Cow’s incarnations/dress up games, in the novel, Cow/Bhadravati adopts the role of a man. Given to exaggerations, Cow overacts.

‘Baddy,’ I plead with her. ‘We’ve got to talk.’
In reply she grunts. She sets off down the street with an appalling swagger, jostles everyone; one or two people are knocked off the pavement. I follow in her wake. At the street lights Baddy crosses on a flashing green. A sports car comes to a screeching halt. The driver is a woman. She yells something. Baddy yells back, ‘You fucking cunt!’
I’m horrified. I’m no longer sure I want to talk to Baddy, but we’re at my house.
‘Baddy,’ I say to her. ‘You’re not a man, you’re a lesbian cow. How could you say that?’
‘Who are you calling a fucking cow? Ha!’ she says and again, ‘Ha!’ Then she grins. ‘Did you see her face?’ she asks mischievously.
I am not amused. I did see her face, that is why I’m not amused. I repeat my question, ‘Why did you say that?’
‘It was part of the role.’ She has started to drop her American accent, she looks uncomfortable.
‘But there are all sorts of men, Baddy. If you had to pass, why couldn’t you have passed for a gentle one?’ (Conversations, 26-29)

The concept of ‘performance’ is taken too literally. The discussion on transformation calls to mind recent discussions in postcolonial theories with regard to the search for a legitimate political identity. It is important, Radhakrishnan argues (1993,755), that the postcolonial hybrid compile a laborious ‘inventory of one’s self’.
On the basis of this, a postcolonial subject produces her own version of hybridity that articulates a political legitimacy for that version. Radhakrishnan observes that hybridity is fundamentally far from being a comfortable given state of being; it is more ‘an excruciating act of self-production’. In Conversations, Suniti does go through the act of ‘self-production’; her anxiety to be true to herself at the same time, resisting the easy choice of becoming what others want of her is indeed excruciating. Closely related to this is Bhabha’s pedagogy versus performative paradigm.

If, in our travelling theory, we are alive to the metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities-migrant or metropolitan then we shall find that the space of the modern nation-people is never simply horizontal... the people are the articulation of a doubling of the national address, an ambivalent movement between the discourses of pedagogical versus the performative (1990,300).

Though Namjoshi’s Conversations came much before Bhabha’s paradigm, the ambivalence that Bhabha refers to is palpable in the text. Suniti is uncomfortable with the choices available: that of being Su, or of being a poodle to a very elegant Indian woman (Cow in Suniti’s dreams) is limiting. It involves the acceptance of either a diminutive stereotype or a fossilised ‘exotic’ identity. There is a heightened sense of pleasure in reading parts of it as a light-hearted sending up of the paradigm.

Cow has transformed herself into a woman. She is wearing a sari and sitting on the lawn of a large house under a banyan. She is feeding chipmunks. A crow squawks somewhere. I can hear sparrows... I sit there gazing at Bhadravati. I feel such admiration and love for her. She smiles at me. I approach closer. The chipmunks run away, but she strokes my forehead, she ruffles my fur. I feel very clean and alive and healthy, I’m a well-kept poodle. I sit at her feet and look at her quietly. I’m an excellent animal. When she rises to go into the house, I walk beside her up to the door; but since she hasn’t called me, I stay outside and chase chipmunks (Conversations, 44-47)

Bhabha’s ‘metaphoricity’ can be read literally into the text. The choice of a reductive identity signalled by the truncated name ‘Su’ and the ‘poodlised’ identity that the dream symbolises are the pedagogic options open to a hybrid migrant. Reincarnation then is not an after-life event but a playing out of the desire to belong in the face of arbitrarily set identity constructs. The idea of identity, it would appear, is slippery and unstable. For a migrant, reinvention of personal identity is a form of survival,
which arguably becomes second nature after a while. The perpetual process of redefinition implied in the theories is literally performed by Cow/Bhadrawati.

The concepts of ‘being’ and the idea of finite freedom are treated with mock seriousness in *Conversations*. The novel recalls Heidegger’s notions of ‘being’ as well as Sartre’s, who propelled Heidegger’s ideas into his famous proclamation that ‘existence precedes essence’, a defining statement of Existentialism (Sartre, 1979, 34-35). Sartre posited the idea that freedom is existence and that despite the fact that freedom is restricted on every side, the determination of what one is results from our individual choices and not from external predetermined causes. Perhaps the most important aspect of Existentialism that has entered ordinary, everyday discourse is the idea of responsibility and the way in which one uses freedom. Central to the novel is the ironic treatment of the idea of being, becoming and the idea that one is responsible for the choices one makes, however limited the options might seem.

The improbable shape-shifting that Cow Bhadravati goes through playfully amalgamates the tenets of Hinduism, (cosmic illusion, the ‘maya jaal’ idea), with the notions of the subject-in-progress, of the ‘continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm’ (Anzaldua, 1987, 80). In the Hindu system of beliefs, the shape a form an atman assumes depends on the performance in the previous births. In the novel, the idea of performance is unhinged from moral and ethical questions of behaviour to a narrative whim. The Hindu idea of reincarnation is folded in with the deconstructionist notion that systems of knowledge compete for our attention and allegiance and therefore, confining human beings under one identity tag is irrational and problematic. Suniti suggests in *Conversations*, ‘But aren’t we all an accidental conglomeration of arbitrary particulars, duly supplied with a functioning ego?’ (72). In unfixing identities, many lesbians see a richer mode of
political action. In *Conversations*, new modes of individuation or being are offered by Cow, suggesting to Suniti that a transformation is possible by just willing it, as in fairy tales and other genres. It also playfully recalls the cliché, ‘You can be what you want to be’ in a literal sense. Thus, it locks the reader into a familiar yet improbable scenario.

But B merely says, ‘We’re waiting, Suniti.’
‘Waiting for what?’
‘Your transformation.’
‘My what? But what is it about?’
‘Your quest for being. That’s what you’ve always wanted, isn’t it? To be someone?’
I’m taken aback. I didn’t know that that was expected. I thought we were merely on a pleasant weekend.
‘Well, what am I supposed to do?’ I feel helpless.
‘Make an intelligent wish, a really well thought out one,’ Margaret answers. Unlike B, whom I suspect of mocking me, Margaret looks serene and gentle, but she also seems to be entirely serious. (*Conversations*, 68).

The title also debunks the solemnity of highly regarded patriarchal texts such as the *Dialogues of Socrates* and the *Bhagvadgita* (The Song of God), which have formed great traditions in their respective cultures. The invoking of these texts shrewdly enacts with a humorous twist, the teacher-disciple/guru-shishya relationship that both texts evoke. Both the texts are canonical with an element of myth to them. By using the word *Conversations* in the title, parallels are drawn between the classic texts and this novel with the aim of debunking the solemnity of the canonical texts.

The wisdom of Socrates is endorsed in the writings of Plato. Socrates himself did not write anything. It is through Plato that the teachings of Socrates seem to have been handed down to the world. Similarly, *The Bhagvad Gita*, which forms the nucleus of Hindu philosophy, is essentially a conversation between the guru Krishna and his disciple Arjuna. It is arguably mythical. It has come to be handed down orally through the generations. Yet, both texts present gradually unfolding paradigms of political views and were meant to aid character building in the disciples. Working from a hypothesis, Socrates is said to have led his disciples to a critical examination of
opinion, an enterprise ultimately culminating in transformation. The Socratic method provides a dramatic, dynamic and an interesting dissection of beliefs and actions of the disciples who pose philosophical questions. In order to understand the full implication of the answer, the disciple is put through intellectual hoops by posing a progression of seemingly innocent questions. The master’s questions force the disciple to minutely examine all the implications of the issues raised and in the long run, the disciple grasps the essential moral/truth. The path to the end is confrontational and not exactly a formula for self-esteem building, but through a series of questioning, challenging, defining, redefining, discarding and mock-trialling of a variety of positions, the disciple gains access to a ‘truth’. Charles Kahn (1996) argues the indirect and the gradual mode of exposition is an artistic device chosen by Plato which prepares the reader for a radically new view of reality. A process similar to this happens in Conversations. Suniti is put through a series of excruciatingly absurd situations before she grasps some essential truths about surviving in a sexist world. Suniti is made to realise in the novel that her choices are limited. However, it is possible to muster up one’s inner resources to survive.

The Bhagavadgita propounds that everything that happens is the manifestation of immutable laws. It could be said that the universal laws unfold as Lord Krishna, Arjuna’s charioteer through the battlefields of Kurukshetra, suggests strategies to face the spiritual conflicts that Arjuna faces on the battlefield. Arjuna’s reluctance to go to war against his own cousins, his reluctance to kill his own kinsmen, is at the centre of the Bhagavadgita. Krishna’s advice that Arjuna’s duty or ‘dharma’ lies in going through the motions of fighting the Kauravas, finally convinces the young man of the right action. In the Hindu scheme of things, the defeat of the Kauravas is predestined. The pleasure of recognising the irony of a cow guiding a lesbian through her spiritual
conflicts, driving a van through Toronto, highlights the mock serious nature of the war that Suniti has to fight. In one intertextual swoop, the title Conversations signals guerrilla warfare against patriarchal texts (more to be discussed later in the chapter) and provides testimony to the battle that lesbians go through in a homophobic world, as this extract from the text suggests:

"Everything all right, sir?"
"Yes, thank you, but I am not a ‘Sir’, I am a lesbian, and my friend is a Cow."
GET OUT OF HERE!"
I draw my self up to my full height. (He is still a foot taller). “That cow is a citizen of planet earth. If you throw us out, I shall complain about you to the Human Rights Commission. But he’s thrusting his chest right into my face. Cow gets up, I slink past. He stands at the doorway yelling at us, I feel beaten. Inside the van I discover that B has appropriated the pizzas. (Conversations, 23)

The irony in the situation is that Cow, despite being a different species, is aware of the tactics needed to survive in a homophobic world, a knowledge that has eluded Suniti, a professor of English. The incident should have taught Suniti that direct confrontation with the dominant culture may be brave, but yields no results. A great deal of strategic acumen is needed to ‘appropriate’ a semblance of dignity. Thus, if one is to get service in a pizza parlour, a declaration of one’s sexuality in the face of commercial politeness is absurd. Yet, if it happens, the best outcome to leave the pizza parlour is with the pizza rather than without it.

The subversion of the fable form, in the novel, borders on parody. However, parody is generally associated with a sense of contrariness. As Harries (2000, 5) points out, the Greek term ‘parodia’ refers to burlesque or ‘counter-song’. Traditionally, parody is seen as a mode of textual deployment that ridicules other texts by mimicking and mocking them. But as Linda Hutcheon points out, ‘para’ can also mean ‘besides’. (1985,32). ‘Many parodies today do not ridicule the background text but use them as standards by which to place the contemporary under scrutiny’ (ibid, 57). In other words, parodic discourse seeks to repeat worn-out conventions and re-
contextualise those conventions dislodging their original status and transforming them. Parody, therefore, is particularly appropriate for the discussions of normative centres and dissident margins, since it has the capacity to appropriate and transform dominant discourses, making parodies a popular mode with feminists and black writers (Hutcheon, 1985). Recontextualisation of old texts for a lesbian writer calls for ‘dykonstruction’ of a prototype text. The humour in *The Conversations of Cow* lies in its subversion of the fable by grafting onto it other forms of narrative like the autobiography or the quest romance genre. Parody and irony combine to create a form that reflects the perspective of a lesbian subject. In a story within the novel, Cow tells Suniti about a cow, Spindleshanks, who ate everything in sight to “assuage the darkness inside her, to make herself substantial was the mission of her life”. To that effect, Spindleshanks launched into an eating spree, gorging pots, pans, humans, factories and entire landscapes, till all that is left is the ground beneath her feet. Horrified at the enormity of her gluttony she starts to scream. “Then the world spilled out of her higgledy-piggledy, not quite the same as it once had been because it had been processed by Spindleshanks and Spindleshanks permeated everything” *(Conversations*, 82). The story that spills out of Namjoshi is a similarly ‘higgledy piggledy’ tale processed by the author’s own experiences as an Indian lesbian in Canada.

In *Conversations*, the fable and the autobiography are deliberately entangled. The fable, a largely undervalued genre in the modern world, typically blurs the boundaries between animal and human. The fox and the grapes, tortoise and the hare and similar stories that have formed the staple diet of children around the world leave back traces in the language and the memory. Beasts have been used in fables with or without human beings, in order to point to a moral that humans believe should hold
throughout the natural world. With their persuasive force, fables enable adult human beings to explore their place in the larger scheme of the natural world. The very act of telling stories in which an animal does something it cannot do in real life, that is, speak to a human, becomes a moral critique of the order by which experiences are generally interpreted. ‘If animals can speak in human language and they must if they are to be beast fables, then the most cherished of our modern distinctions between human and animal – that based on language as a creative, recursive faculty seems pointless, even evasive’ (Howe, 1995, 642). Namjoshi’s deployment of the fable and the cow as a major symbol works like a talisman. By imposing on the fable a canonical, objective-sounding, theorised text as one strand of narrative and by inserting the first person testimonial or autobiographical strand into it, the lesbian subject is inserted into the text. This is a common manifestation of lesbian autobiography, in which an individual personal account is contained within a theorised narrative (Hallett, 1999, 147). Lionnet suggests,

The female writer who struggles to articulate a personal vision and to verbalize the vast areas of feminine experience which have remained unexpressed, if not repressed, is engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood (1989, 91).

Thus, the text itself becomes a Kurukshetra, a battleground where the battle of the sexes are played out and where an account of lesbian life which echoes feminist principles takes on patriarchal myths in mock serious war thus creating an energetic, newly re-contextualised genre with an ‘implosion of signification’ (Harries, 2000).

The ‘implosion of signification’ extends to form as well as content. *Conversations* zestfully uncovers the ironies of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’, which are the cornerstones of grand philosophies, both Western and Indian, at the same time as it parodies the anxieties of a lesbian, postcolonial subject. An undercurrent of popular versions of grand philosophies flows through the novel. ‘Being’ is a basic issue in
philosophy. Both Eastern and Western philosophies have conceptualised 'being' in meditative and poetic ways. Plato is said to have argued for 'being' over 'becoming', permanence over impermanence, in laying the foundation of epistemology.

Christianity further perpetuated this legacy. It is only in the twentieth century there is a deliberate move towards impermanence or becoming with the ideas propounded by philosophers like Heidegger. Although the notions of 'being' differed in different systems of thought, 'the dynamic nature of perception became the common ground for many discourses' (Inada, 1997). The Eastern view, however, held on steadily to the idea of 'becoming', at all times constantly probing the nature of 'being' and 'becoming' which were not to be treated as equals on the metaphysical plane. For metaphysically speaking, 'becoming' is the most fundamental concept to which all phases and elements must harmonize and confirm' (Inade, 1997). In popular Hindu understanding this has often taken the form of discussions on the principles of the Atma, the soul/being flowing towards the Param Atma, the Greater Soul/Being and eventually merging. Often a lyrical metaphysical discourse surrounds these formidable sounding concepts. The Conversations echoes this repeatedly. For example, Cow states reassuringly to Suniti, 'It is all right', she says, 'identity is fluid' (32). So is the genre, it would appear.

Any discussion of humour in Conversations would be incomplete without a final comment on how generic subversion is executed. The fable, quest romance, autobiography and various minor genres are parodied. The comic, satirical narration, which overflows boundaries, is a strategy common to many feminist texts.

One technique employed by feminists is the use of more than one narrative in a text. This means that no narrative can be read as the definitive causal sequence, the site of knowledge. Instead the reading position of the text is constructed as a dialogue of narratives and other semiotic practices... (Francis, 194-195).
Texts from Hindu prayers ‘dialogue’ with the quest romance; the fable flirts with autobiography in the narrative organization of the novel. The invocation of Cow as a goddess at the end of the novel carries textual echoes of sacred chants like the *Vishnu Sahastranama* (Thousand names of Vishnu, not available in translation) in which a God/Goddess is named in their several incarnations with a celebratory epithet attached to each incarnation. In a baptismal spoof of it, Suniti chants:

O celestial Surabhi, Gentle Source of Food and Fragrance... O you who have appeared in my dreams at times with a garland of flowers about your neck, you who have sported in the woods with me, and laughed and mocked and been my friend. O you who have slain a thousand Jovians.... O you who have reduced me to almost nothing, then made a present of a world and myself...

(Cornesation, 122–125)

The prosody of ‘one short sentence and a long one’ typical of such chants is attempted to bring to a close the spiritual journey that Suniti goes through. In the novel, Cow and Suniti go through a quest, although Cow sees it differently.

‘But B,’ I persist. After all, I like to know exactly what I’m doing. ‘What’s going to happen? Are we going on a quest?’

‘A what?’

‘You know, a journey of exploration. We undergo ordeals, and then I find out who I really am.’

‘Is that what you want?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, as far as I’m concerned, we’re merely stepping into the next province to visit friends.’

She smiles. ‘Still it’s just possible you’ll get what you want...’ (Conversations, 58)

Cow, B in this incarnation, placates Suniti as one would a child, but for Suniti the desire for a quest to “light out” articulates the desire to emerge from her entrapment in subservient roles and to reinvent herself. It represents what Heller calls an empowering self-image which requires mobility so that she can ‘imagine, enact, and represent her quest for authentic self-knowledge’. In asking for this, Suniti goes against the winds of great legends that ‘recount the adventures of heroes and gallant men whose stories are deemed universal, timeless, and fundamental to our understanding of the historical conditions that gave rise to our civilisation’ (Heller, 1990, 1). Even though the curve in the road is only a textual curve and the ‘journey, is
like that of the storytellers who never leave the porch, is an itinerary through language’ (Lionnet, op. cit. 114), the personal manifesto that evolves out of the author’s psychical travels through the ethnographical fields of experience is uplifting. Textually it offers the opportunity to ‘pillage(d) the past for images from which to reinvent an identity and articulate desire’ (Smyth, 1996, 109, quoted in Hallett, 1999,192). Thus, by (mis) appropriating a patriarchal text and desiring to be a pioneer in her own right, Suniti chooses to name her own psychic possibilities.

The intertwining of the two genres – the thoroughly impersonal fable and the extremely personal autobiography – shows a commitment to the lesbian and feminist adage that the personal is political. Spivak declares as a feminist critic, ‘I have always felt that one should speak personally. Yes, that one should think of oneself as a public individual, so that it’s not like every bit of your confessional history, but it’s trying to think of the representative space which you occupy’ (1990, 94). Thus, to an ‘initiated’ reader, who is open to the textual stimulation of the theoretical underpinnings of the novel, Namjoshi offers not just a nonsensical, weird tale, but a scholarly one that inscribes the world she occupies. On the surface level, the ‘decoy message’ operates more as a satire. Presenting a critique of the highly constructed but basically arbitrary nature of patriarchal society is a central issue in the novel, which calls for a number of strategies such as intertextuality and parody used in a palimpsest manner. The challenge and thrill that an ‘initiated’ reader enjoys comes from recognising the allusions to theories in the multi-layered text and the textual subversions that take place in the text. Irony, parody and textual subversion work in tandem to create a text that has numerous hilarious situations and laughter potential. The chapter is best concluded with Namjoshi’s poem, ‘Dear Reader’ which addresses the question of reader responsibility in her typically witty and defiant manner:
I have the power? I define? And I control? But it takes two live bodies, one writing and one reading, to generate a sky, a habitable planet and a working sun. The colour of my sun happens to be yellow. Yours too, you say? I feel so pleased. Our task is made easier. We are not fighters, but fellow-travellers?—would you say?—enabled to bask in our mutual glow. But it's there you baulk. What would have happened, you wish to know, if your sun had been the colour of milky chalk or had presented a more muted show? What can I say? Perhaps I'd have shouted, 'Yellow! Bright yellow!' and you'd have refused to say it was so. (1991, 51).
The God of Small Things (TGST) uses humour to tell a tale that is essentially not funny. At the core of the novel, a nine-year old girl drowns. It is a story of star-crossed lovers, broken marriages, domestic violence, alcoholic fathers, sexual abuse and adults who betray children. On a socio-political plane it is about a self-serving patriarchy, a caste-ridden society with political leaders who abuse their positions of power. The horror and the heart-wrenching intensity of the novel are made bearable, however, by humour. Laughter in TGST, is the laughter provoked by the inevitability of suffering, which is a human condition. In this respect, the humour in TGST comes closest to functioning as refuge and solace (Siegel, op cit., 1987, 5). The laughter is provoked by the partial knowledge that children have of the world around them. It is neither negative nor positive, but an accepting gesture of some very powerless characters. One of the most memorable passing sketches in the novel is that of a very powerless character, Murlidharan, ‘the level-crossing lunatic’:

...naked except for the tall plastic bag that somebody had fitted on to his head like a transparent chef’s cap through which the view of the landscape continued – dimmed chef-shaped, but uninterrupted. He couldn’t remove his cap even if he wanted to because he had no arms. They had been blown off in Singapore in ’42, within the first week of his running away from home to join the fighting ranks... (TGST, 63)

Murlidharan epitomises the hopelessness of the human situation. His bravery and idealism in joining the war earn him no victory. Yet, as the brief sketch shows, he pointlessly hopes. He was homeless and had no possessions, yet he had his ‘old keys tied carefully around his waist in a shining bunch’ (64). He perched ‘cross-legged and perfectly balanced on a milestone. His balls and penis dangled down, pointing towards the sign which said: Cochin: 23’. In terms of subject matter, sketches like
these have been exploited in literature for their sad, sentimental value. In *TGST*, however, sentimentality is resisted and the effect is that the reader gets a sly comment on the pathetic and yet comic human condition. In *TGST*, Murlidharan is just another small god. The humour lies in the helpless laughter of the powerless against the forces of history, destiny and necessity that is heard echoing through the novel.

Most of the humour in the novel is expressed through the spilt consciousness of the narrator. It enables the separation of the two ‘selves’, one that ‘endures the anguish of her own reality and a second self that stands apart and comments, often quite humorously, on the plight of the first’ (Walker, in Barreca, 1988, 204). One of the most remarkable elements about *TGST* is the narrative voice. The voices of Rahel, the child and that of Rahel, the woman, form a discordant duet. The unprocessed, painful memories of childhood that Rahel struggles with are cauterised through the irony that the grown-up Rahel brings to the narration. The complex narrative tactics that this calls for are physically reflected in the eyes of the grown-up Rahel. Her husband has difficulty in interpreting the strange look in her eyes. He puts it somewhere ‘between indifference and despair’.

He didn’t know that in some places, like the country that Rahel came from, various kinds of despair competed for primacy. And that personal despair could never be desperate enough. That something happened when personal turmoil dropped by at the wayside shrine of the vast, violent, circling, driving, ridiculous, insane, unfeasible, public turmoil of a nation. That Big God howled like a hot wind, and demanded obeisance. Then Small God (cosy and contained, private and limited) came away cauterised, laughing numbly at his own temerity. Inured by the confirmation of his own inconsequence, he became resilient and truly indifferent. ... So Small God laughed a hollow laugh, and skipped away cheerfully. Like a rich boy in shorts. He whistled, kicked stones. The source of his brittle elation was the relative smallness of his misfortune. He climbed into people’s eyes and became an exasperating expression. (*TGST*, 19)

It is through these eyes into which the Small God has climbed, that the events in *TGST* are seen. The uneasy juxtaposition of the Big against the Small Gods and the personal against the public turmoil is the cause of the mirth and the sorrow in the novel. The memories of the Small God haunt Rahel and create a sort of emptiness in
response to her childhood trauma in the face of her mother’s lingering death after Velutha, her low-caste lover, is tortured and killed by the police. However, in order to exorcise the Small God, the Big God that ‘demanded obeisance’ has to be appeased narratively. Irony, a mode of doubleness, works to placate the Big God and still retain some dignity for the small one. Irony, the mode of ‘the unsaid, the unheard, the unseen’ (Hutcheon, 1994, 9) saturates the novel, not just as a rhetorical mode, as much as a way of seeing things. Satire directed against the Big God suggests a Bakhtinian reading in *TGST*. A very riveting image which harnesses the ‘unsaid, unknown and the unseen’ in *TGST* is the entrance to Ayemenem House:

The doors had not two, but four shutters of panelled teak so that in the old days, ladies could keep the bottom half closed, lean their elbows on the ledge and bargain with visiting vendors without betraying themselves below the waist. Technically, they could buy carpets, or bangles, with their breasts covered and their bottoms bare. Technically. (*TGST*, 165)

The possibility of conducting life’s transactions with the top half covered becomes a trope for hypocrisy. Breasts and bottoms receive very naughty treatment in *TGST*. They feature in jubilantly celebratory passages and also passages where life’s transactions are not particularly joyous.

This chapter proposes to firstly examine the way irony works in *TGST* through the juxtaposition of the Big God and Small God. This will be followed by an investigation of the role humour plays in *TGST* in pitching the ‘personal turmoil’ inside against the more ‘public turmoil’ through the use of language – English and Malayalam. The hidden and overlapping existence of the texts within the narrative of novel, the intertextuality, is accountable for some of the hilarity in the novel, though it is not without its darker side of contestation. The linguistic acrobatics that the twins Rahel and Estha engage in lay bare the absurdities of adult language and institutions. *TGST* has some memorable comic characters. Irony, espièglerie and satire work together to create the amusing caricatures. Finally, the body as a site that both
celebrates with carnivalesque abandon and suffers tragic consequences will be examined.

Unlike satire, irony is not only used as a weapon and as social ‘put-downs’, it aims to create an alternative pattern of perceptions to expose the workings of power. Power, in any form, colonial or pre-colonial or postcolonial, can be contested from within but only within the terms on offer. The contestation entails a double vision that an ironic standpoint succinctly provides. It contrasts what is said, heard and seen with that which remains unexpressed deliberately for strategic reasons. Hutcheon suggests that irony, ‘a trope of doubleness’ (1989, 161), is an appropriate trope for the inscription of postcoloniality. Even when the issue is not ‘postcolonial’, the double vision is potentially useful in that it is ‘a way of resisting and yet acknowledging the power of the dominant. It may not go the next step – to suggest something new – but it certainly makes that step possible’ (ibid, 163). Doubleness in the form of Big and Small gods, the public and the personal, are constantly at play in TGST. The death of an elephant, for instance, becomes a public event.

A giant burning ghat was erected on the highway. The engineers of the concerned municipality sawed off the tusks and shared them unofficially. Unequally. Eighty tins of pure ghee were poured over the elephant to feed the fire. The smoke rose in dense fumes and arranged itself in complex patterns against the sky. People crowded around at a safe distance, read meanings into them. (TGST, 220)

The dead elephant invites scavengers. Engineers who make a profit out of the tusks are at least willing to accord the dead animal a decent exit from this world. Eighty tins of pure ghee is a valid funeral investment for a big creature in the scheme of the novel. His size warrants a funeral on a grand scale. By contrast, the death of a sparrow goes unnoticed.

A sparrow lay dead on the back seat. She had found her way in through a hole in the windscreen, tempted by some seat-sponge for her nest. She never found her way out. No one noticed her panic car-window appeals. She died on the back seat, with her legs in the air. Like a joke (TGST, 296).
The irony of scales in this case is a comic one because it does not involve human beings. However, a similar irony accommodates the death of people in the novel and is an uncomfortable gesture at humour as a coping mechanism. Sophie Mol, the half English daughter of Chacko and Margaret Kochamma, gets a church burial with a congregation and prayers, whereas Velutha’s and Ammu’s bodies are disposed of in an ignominious way. Sophie Mol had a special satin-lined, brass-handled coffin. She even had an old lady masquerading as a distant relative (whom nobody recognized), but who often surfaced next to bodies at funerals (a funeral junkie? A latent necrophiliac?) put cologne on a wad of cotton wool and with devout and gently challenging air, dabbed it on Sophie Mol’s forehead. Sophie Mol smelled of cologne and coffinwood’ (TGST, 5).

Velutha’s body was ‘dumped in the themmady kuzhy – the pauper’s pit – where the police routinely dump their dead.’ (TGST, 321). Ammu’s dead body is wrapped into a dirty sheet and laid out on a stretcher. ‘Rahel thought she looked like a Roman Senator. *Et, tu Ammu!* She thought and smiled, remembering Estha.’(162). Ammu did not even have her son at her funeral. The crematorium that she was taken to cremated the derelicts, the beggars and those that died in police custody.

The steel door of the incinerator went up and the muted hum of the eternal fire became red and roaring. The heat lunged out at them like a famished beast. Then, Rahel’s Ammu was fed to it. Her hair, her skin, her smile. Her voice. The way she used Kipling to love her children before putting them to bed: *We be of one blood, ye and I*. Her good night kiss. The way she held their faces steady with one hand (squashed-cheeked, fish mouthed) while she parted their hair with the other. The way she held knickers out for Rahel to climb into. *Left leg, right leg*. All this was fed to the beast, and it was satisfied.

She was their Ammu and their Baba and she had loved them. Double. (TGST, 163)

All that remained of Ammu was a little clay pot and a receipt. ‘Receipt No. Q 498673’. There is no doubt that the disposal of the bodies of the two main characters is more tragic than comic. Nevertheless, without the references to the ‘squashed cheek, fished mouth kiss’; the playful allusion to Kipling or the gaiety associated with childhood routines like wearing knickers, Ammu’s unceremonious funeral would have been a sad and devastating narrative blow. The deliberate lack of narratorial
comment and the uneasy clash of the memories of Rahel the child and the perceptions of a mature Rahel gives the irony in *TGST* a discomforting edge. Nevertheless, there is some delightful light-hearted play on language in the *TGST*.

Spontaneous word-play and wonder at how language works is a feature of *TGST*. Entire sentences are created out of present participles:


This is language misbehaving, breaking rules of grammar and syntax. There is more. The singing stopped for a “Whatsit? Whathappened? And for a furrywhirring and sariflapping” (6). In *TGST*, language tries to escape the boundary of words attaching themselves to each other, or only just held back to retrace the history of a family of Anglophiles.

‘Anglophilia’ accounts for many of the jokes in the novel and also for a large part of the tragedy. Back-to fronted reading of words; words bleeding into each other or ridiculously split, multilingual jokes and onomatopoeic entanglements form a good part of the novel. The English language inspires love, hate and an immense awe. The discussion of the word “Anglophile’ itself is very conflictual.

Ammu said that Pappachi was an incurable British CCP, which was short for chi-chi-poach, which in Hindi mean ‘shit wiper’. Chacko said that the correct word for people like Pappachi was Anglophile. (*TGST*, 51)

Chacko’s degree of complicity with the English and things English is greater than Ammu’s. After all, he was briefly married to an Englishwoman unlike Ammu whose marriage to and divorce from a Bengali-Hindu has made her a life-long burden on her family. Chacko speaks of Anglophilia as a kind of ‘war’. “A war that has made us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves” (*TGST*, 53). It is a war in which Rahel
and Estha, the seven-year old twins have to surrender to those with more power, such as Baby Kochamma.

Baby Kochamma eavesdropped relentlessly on the twins’ private conversations, and whenever she caught them speaking in Malayalam, she levied a small fine which she deducted from the source. From their pocket money. She made them write lines – ‘impositions’ she called them – *I will always speak in English, I will always speak in English*. A hundred times each. (TGST, 36)

Despite the imposition, the children are as smitten with English as their uncle Chacko is. They are punished by some adults for not adopting English and by some others for doing so. The twins stand at the brink of linguistic discovery and watch language unfold around them. They are mesmerised by the magic of the language. Individual words charmed them. ‘“Humbling was a nice word”, Rahel thought. *Humbling along without a care in the world.*’ Another word ‘twinkle’, they thought was a ‘wrong word’ to describe the expression in the Earth Woman’s eye. Twinkle was a word ‘with crinkled, happy edges’. (54) They show amazement at the word ‘cuff-links’ which Ammu explains were “to link cuffs together”. The precision and logic that this mere accessory showed, made them love the English language. ‘...they were thrilled by this morsel of logic in what had so far seemed an illogical language’. Their affection for the English language makes them carnivalise it, which gets them into trouble with adults who appoint themselves as the custodians of the sanctity of the English language. The authoritative elders actively control, dictate and straightjacket verbal behaviour. Their performances displease their audience for whom the maintaining of the decorum of language is essential to the maintenance of their own position of authority. But the play with the ‘fossilized debris of dead language’ (Esslin, 348) unpeels the arbitrariness of language itself and the absurdity of all that it covers. It even leads the twins to the realisation that language may seem innocuous but it could result in death or violence. They find out that fooling around with it may result in a possible curtailment of the regularly diminishing quota of love that they are
entitled to. If they act out Shakespeare well and their ‘Prer NUN sea asy shun’ is right, they are awarded their pat on the back for the day. A failure to perform could be seen as sinful.

Trivial word plays that the linguistically precocious twins indulge in are also seen as subversive acts and this is where play becomes dangerous. Estha and Rahel are, for their age, incredibly well read. By the age of seven, they have already read Kipling’s *Jungle Book* and, as part of their formal education, the abridged version of *The Tempest* is read to them. Therefore, the discovery of palindromes such as ‘Malayalam’ and ‘Madam I am Adam’ which amused the children leaves their Australian, born-again Christian teacher quite cold. Miss Mitten their teacher was not aware that Malayalam was the language spoken in Kerala and she sees nothing amusing in being informed of it by a seven-year old. When she presents them with *The Adventures of Susie Squirrel*, they first read it forwards and then backwards. She thinks that the literacy dexterity that the children display in reading backwards is like an assault on the sacred written text. She forces the children to write, “*In future I will not read backwards. In future I will not read backwards. A hundred times.*” (60). She reported that the children have ‘nataS in their seyes’ (‘Satan in their eyes’) (60) which is conveyed to Baby Kochamma, their self-appointed curriculum developer in charge of their linguistic edification because she has studied in the University of Rochester, America. Ironically, Miss Mitten is killed by a milk van that had been ‘reversing’ (60). The twins see a sort of hidden justice in this. Like in children’s games, the logic the children apply to the world is reversed. The arbitrary becomes meaningful and the meaningful is arbitrary.

The humour of reverses, the inverted humour that the children Estha and Rahel revel in, underlies other serious issues in *TGST*. The ‘war’ that the Anglophile
Chacko only half seriously announces, is a real ‘war’ outside their home. The rest of the community in Kerala does not share the extreme fondness for the English language that the Ipe or half-Ipe family suffers from. Estha, aka Elvis the Pelvis, gets into trouble for singing in English. The mad urge to sing along with ‘The hills are alive with the sound of music’ while watching the film, leads to chastisement. Its unforeseen consequences tragically haunt the boy for the rest of his life. At Abhilash Talkies, Estha gets the ‘Shut up or Get out’ treatment for singing. ‘A nun with a puff. An Elvis Pelvis Nun’, who at that stage in his life was almost a compulsive singer, has to go outside the theatre into the foyer to sing. His song wakens up the Orangedrink Lemondrink man who threatens to complain in writing to harass the boy and insists that he have a drink. Estha politely declines by saying, “I’ve finished my pocketmoney”. The English word incenses the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man. “First English songs and now Porketmunny! Where d’you live? On the moon?” The contempt and the mocking that the man feels is acted out as sexual molestation.

Following a lewd, leering social feeling-up of Estha, the man hands him a cold drink in one hand and a hot penis in the other. The unbearable sweetness and the unbearable bitterness of the experience embody the underside of the carnivalesque world.

Gagging on the cold fizzy drink and looking at the contorted face of the Lemondrink Orangedrink man as he climaxes, Estha stores the fear of the power of strangers in the recesses of his subconscious. This incident becomes one of the contributing factors in his pathological quietness as an adult. It is significant that the grande finale of the molestation act is inscribed in terms of money. The drink seller’s penis is described as ‘soft and shrivelled like an empty leather change purse’ (105). Here, the seamy side of the carnival spirit is seen belly up. In the Abhilash Talkies encounter it is the rich boy with ‘porketmunny and a grandmother’s factory’ who is forced to masturbate the less
prosperous but in this text, a person with more power than the seven year-old. It is another version of topsy-turvisness. The rebellion against the powerful, the rich, the English-educated, erupts in the text as a form of perverse social justice through aggression towards a vulnerable child. Thus, the ironies in TGST consistently point to the disproportionate consequences of small trespasses.

Children become victims of the English language fetish in another manner. They are turned into performing animals. Latha, Comrade Pillai’s niece from Kottayam, who won a first prize for Elocution in a youth Festival in Trivandrum, is made to perform for Chacko when he visits comrade Pillai on an official matter. Dressed in a South Indian middle class mode, she wears a long skirt and a white blouse ‘with darts that made room for future breasts’; she gives a rendition of Sir Walter Scott’s poem ‘Lochinvar’. The manner in which she recites the poem is a delightful parody of the art of recitation taught in English-medium schools in India – the hands held behind the back, the glazed look in the eye, the slight swaying and the characteristic speed and the running together of words give the poem a translated feel, as the narrator remarks: ‘Chacko thought it was a Malayalam translation of ‘Lochinvar’ (271). The transcript of the poem as it is likely to have been performed showcases the typical ‘Prer Nun sea ashyun’ of Indian English.

\[
\begin{align*}
O, \text{ young Lochin varhas scum out of the vest,} \\
\text{Through wall the vide Border his teed was the bes;} \\
\text{Tand savisgood broadsod he weapon sadmun,} \\
\text{Nhe rod all unarmed, and he rod all lalone. (271)}
\end{align*}
\]

Not only that, the text of a Walter Scott poem on a hot, humid afternoon in Kerala is highly incongruent. The incongruence is pushed further by the six-year-old Lenin’s fluent delivery of the speech of Mark Anthony, in Julius Caesar. Finally cajoled into
performing, the boy knee-galloped in his yard between the house and the road, raising
some dust and shouting out the lines:

*I cometobery Caeser, not to praise him.*
The evil that mendo lives after them,
The goodisoft interred with their bones*(275)*

The insertion of a Shakespearen text draws attention to the irrelevance of the
‘Friends, Roman and countrymen, lend me yawYERS’ in a modern contemporary
India. At the same time the irony highlights the ingrained Anglophilia of a culture in
which English literature continues to enthrall and generate baffling clichés, which get
embedded in the cultural text. Perhaps the affection and regard accorded to English in
the colonies is greater than it is in the mother country. The canonical texts in the
master’s language are still fetishised in the ex-colony; the Mother country barely
remembers them. In India, a familiarity with English confers status and the ex-colony
still seems to need it for that reason. This is comically hinted at in the episode where
Sophie Mol meets Baby Kochamma for the first time. Again, the topsy-turvy aspect
of the situation is highlighted. The colonial native knows more about the power
culture than the English girl. Baby Kochamma in an effort to stand apart from the
‘Sweeping Class’ people who surrounded her at he airport, tells Sophie Mol that she
was like Ariel, the wood-sprite.

‘D’you know who Ariel was? Baby Kochamma asked Sophie Mol. ‘Ariel in The Tempest?’
Sophie Mol said she didn’t.
“In a cowslip’s bell I lie”? /n/Sophie Mol said she didn’t.
“Shakespeare’s The Tempest?” Baby Kochamma persisted. *(TGST, 144).*

The situation ironizes the comic effects of the deployment of literature ‘not
just as a means for exercising cultural literacy but also for exercising cultural power’
(Newman, 1995,1). Newman’s jocular argument that Shakespeare’s sculpted head
would make for a decent canon fodder had Britain faced an acute shortage of
ammunition in the colonial period is seen in a literal sense here. The Baby
Kochammas of India are still reeling under the effects of colonialism long after the subjugator has left the shores of the country. Baby Kochamma is very much a product of the British ‘civilising mission’ which aimed at creating “a class of persons, Indian in blood, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect” (Macaulay’s Minutes, in Ashcroft, Griffths and Tiffin, 1995,430). While English is valorised, the ‘other’ Indian languages get erased or muted.

This issue of English within India in general and Kerala in particular, is given a playful intertextual form in the insertion of nursery rhymes in Malayalam. In the light of the Anglophilia, discussed earlier, the Malayalam rhymes that remain muted, out of Baby Kochamma’s earshot, stretch the linguistic boundaries of the twins. The repressed ‘other’ language erupts into nonsense rhymes with a dash of scatology and phonetic play.

\[\text{Pa pera-pera-pera-perakka} \]
\[\text{(Mr. Gugg-gug-gug-gug-guava)} \]
\[\text{Ende parambil thooraalley} \]
\[\text{(Don’t shit here in my compound)} \]
\[\text{Chentende parambil thoorikko,} \]
\[\text{(You can shit next door in my brother’s compound)} \]
\[\text{Pa pera-pera-pera perakka (Mr. Gugga-gug-gug—guava) (TGST,206)} \]

The twins in TGST are an embodiment of the ‘in-between’ people caught between linguistic, cultural and class struggles. On the one hand, there is the pressure to ‘belong’ to a privileged class of people who bestow power and security and, on the other, is the natural enjoyment of the fragile freedom endowed by the native language. The insertion of the verse in Malayalam creates a competing discourse. It questions the formation of subjecthood in the face of clashes between empowered users of the English language – the ‘foreign returned’ people – and the Malayalam of the totally dis-empowered, such as Velutha’s paraplegic brother. It is interesting that most of the Malayalam verses come from Kuttapen who ‘coughed as his mother used to, and his upper body bucked like just caught fish. His lower body lay like lead, as though it
belonged to someone else. Someone dead whose spirit was trapped and couldn’t get away' (*TGST*, 207). Kuttapen represents the ‘marginalised’ other. He represents the black skin, the black language and contests the monologic views of the Anglophilic world of the Ipes. The Malayalam verses give a ‘double voice’ to the novel. They foreground the radically split experience of the subject, ‘the more complex cultural and political boundaries that exist on the cusp of … often opposed political spheres’ (Bhabha, 1994,13).

The interpenetration of the two languages reflects the rhetorical questions that Bhabha raises (1994,2)

> How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and incommensurate?

In *TGST* the profoundly antagonistic and the conflictual communities are brought together narratively through the use of humour, using the ironic double perspective. Whenever entrapment is to be signalled in the novel, Roy turns to nursery rhymes in Malayalam. For example, when Mammachi gets to know of the affair between her daughter and Velutha, she threatens to castrate and kill him. In order to seek solidarity he approaches Pillai. On his way to his house, Velutha remembers the first lesson he learnt at school, a Malayalam poem about a train with many onomatopoeic words: ‘Koo-Koo Kooku thevandi’…(285).

Thus the inter-text of Malayalam nonsense-rhymes aims not only to raise a laugh or two, but also to signal the delicate balance of power that the users of the languages wield. English is the language of decorum, officialese, the language of the Big God, whereas Malayalam is the language of the gods of small things, the language of the unofficial and of fear. By using Malayalam in the text, Roy not only
asserts the humanity of the other language, but also reclaims it as part of a bilingual identity of her characters.

**All the world’s a stage and some women are such clowns**

None of the women characters in the novel escapes caricature. There are three generations of women presented in the novel. Each generation in the novel is seen in relation to the laws of the threshold. As mentioned earlier, the entrance to the Ayemenem House spells out the limits of transgression women are allowed.

‘Technically, they could buy carpets or bangles, with their breasts covered and their bottoms bare. Technically’ (165). Technically and metaphorically, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma have transgressional impulses but they are not acted upon. They always cover their tops and pretend to conform. They accept the double standards of a separate room for Chacko’s ‘man’s needs’ but refuse to understand Ammu’s woman’s needs. In the novel, Mammachi and Baby Kochamma represent the generation that submits to the norms of patriarchy (Singh, in Dhawan, 1999,6). Mammachi, who was beaten regularly by her Imperial Entomologist husband, never fought back. Like a good woman, she waited for her son to do it for her. As a reward for this, she transferred all her love to him. In that equation, there was no place for the daughter who, ironically, suffered much abuse from her father as a child. Mammachi never shows any understanding of the effects of that abuse on her daughter. Like the stereotypical Indian mother she privileges her son over her daughter and wants her daughter to pay for all her acts of non-conformity. What she condones in her son, she baulks at in her daughter. Her double standards are effectively satirised, but she is a less interesting character in the novel than Baby Kochamma, in whom she finds an ally. Baby Kochammma’s class and caste consciousness, her antagonistic attitude to people unequal to her, the ‘sweeper class’ as she calls them, is amusing. The satirical
edge that her characterisation acquires from the child Rahel’s point of view is made to look pathological rather than demonic from that of grown-up Rahel’s.

Baby Kochamma, arguably the female villain of the novel, is at the receiving end of most of the caricaturing. Chacko introduces her to his wife Margaret and daughter Sohpie as, “My aunt, Baby” (144) to the utter confusion of the nine-year old. ‘Sophie Mol was puzzled. She regarded Baby Kochamma with beady-eyed interest. She knew of cow babies and dog babies. Bear babies – yes. … But aunt babies confounded her.’ (144). Lurking inside this small thing is the obvious sarcastic swipe at some of the names common in both the North and the South, the custom of naming. It is quite possible that Baby Kochamma had a respectable name like Lucy but the ‘pet name’ that the family assigns one, like “Baby” remains long after the person has stopped being one. It could as well draw attention to the fact that Baby Kochamma had an odd way of growing up. In her youth, she spent most of her time being in love with a Catholic Irish priest and following the strictures of Catholicism, shunned all youthful behaviour, and at eighteen she had joined a Convent and devoted herself to grooming herself for the love of Father Mulligan. In her youth she had shunned all forms of cosmetics. At eighty-three, however, her hair was dyed jet black. ‘She had started wearing makeup. Lipstick. Kohl. A sly touch of rouge. And because she only believed in 40 watt bulbs, her lipstick mouth had slightly shifted off her real mouth.’ (21). And she wore all of Rahel’s grandmother’s jewellery. This made Rahel think, ‘She was living her life backwards’ (22).

Even at the age of eighty-three, she continued to be infatuated with Father Mulligan and writes ‘I love you’ in her diary as part of her nightly ritual. This is explained in some whimsical detail. Espièglerie is at work. She put the pen back into the pen-loop and shut her diary. She took off her glasses, dislodged her dentures with her tongue, severing the strands of saliva that attached them to her gums like the sagging strings of a harp, and dropped them into a glass of Listerine. They sank to the
The infatuation of an eighty-three-year-old woman for a long dead Irish priest, who criticises Ammu’s attempts at finding love in her youth, provokes laughter. While there is satire aimed at the woman, there is also an underlying pity. The disembodied smile represents the sad, old age of a woman who has had to play a calculated and strategic game to secure the goodwill of her brother’s family. The irony is that she survives very well. The satire lies in her uneasy and perhaps guilty possession of that property. In her old age, insulated from the world by her closed doors and windows, Baby Kochamma’s greatest fear is of being robbed of her furniture, her cream buns and her imported insulin. Baby Kochamma and the cook, Kochu Maria, together form a very quixotic pair. In the ruins of the Aymenem house the two endlessly watch NBA league games, one-day cricket, The Bold and the Beautiful and other similar soapies. Occasionally, the old fears of the Revolution and the Marxist-Leninist menace are rekindled by what she sees on television. ‘She viewed ethnic cleansing, famine and genocide as direct threats to her furniture’ (28). Thus, satire and irony work in tandem to point to a ‘cold carnival’ in progress.

Yet, Baby Kochamma survives because technically does not rebel and accepts ‘The fate of the wretched Man-less woman’ (45). She never understands Ammu’s love for a Paravan. It is Baby Kochamma’s outrage and her compliance with the proprieties that the Ayemenem House demanded that saves her from Ammu’s fate. She deferred to the ‘laws of love’ that privileged ‘men’s need’ above a woman’s and technically kept her breasts covered, even when her bottom was bare.

Ammu belongs to the later generation that clashed heavily with the traditional values that Mammachi and Baby Kochamma upheld and paid a heavy price for it.
Ammu is set against the epitome of virtuous womanhood, Mrs. Pillai. Compared to all these women, Comrade Pillai’s wife is the ultimate paragon of virtue. ‘Comrade Pillai took off his shirt, rolled it into a ball and wiped his armpits with it. When he finished, Kalyani took it from him and held it as though it was a gift. A bouquet of flowers’. (TGST, 272) By graciously accepting her role as wife and mother, the woman represents the norm of womanhood, unlike Rahel, who ‘drifted into marriage like a passenger drifts towards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge. With a sitting down sense’. (TGST, 9)

Not all laughter at, or by, women is satirical. Some of it is carnivalesque at the same time acting as a coping mechanism against the inevitability of age and loss of grace. A comical expression of this is Ammu’s reflection in the bathroom after her ‘afternoon-mare’. The children had ‘between them appropriated their mother’s seven silver stretchmarks’ and kissed their mother with kisses ‘that demanded no kiss back’ (221), Ammu had to reclaim her body.

Ammu grew tired of their (Estha and Rahel’s) proprietary handling of her. She wanted her body back. It was hers. She shrugged her children off the way a bitch shrugs off her pups when she’s had enough of them. She sat up and twisted her hair into a knot at the nape of her neck…. (TGST, 222)

She then faces the mirror and puts her breasts through the toothbrush test in the bathroom. Ammu undressed and put a red toothbrush under a breast to see if it would stay. It didn’t … (TGST, 222). Another part of her anatomy could manage the task pretty well.

She looked a little critically down at her round, heavy behind. Not big in itself. Not big per se (as Chacko-of-Oxford no doubt would have put it). Big only because the rest of her was so slender. It belonged on another more voluptuous body. She had to admit that they would happily support a toothbrush apiece. Perhaps two. She laughed out loud at the idea of walking naked down Ayemenem with an array of coloured toothbrushes sticking out from either cheek of her bottom… (TGST, 223)

The incident celebrates the woman’s body and simultaneously rehearses the anxieties of a woman seeing her body as an ‘object’. The extract is humorous because even in
her private meditation of her body, Ammu mimics and mocks Chacko’s Anglophilic pompous expressions such as ‘per se’. Later in the narration of her act of lovemaking with Velutha, her bottom is referred to as an echo of something that appeared in a dream, a deja vu situation: “She felt him shudder against her. His hands were on her haunches (that could support a whole array of tooth-brushes), pulling her hips against his, to let her know how much he wanted her” (335). A playful reminder of an earlier vision is later contrasted with the darker warnings of the ‘afternoon-mare’ which fills her with premonitions of the powerless position that she, a woman with no ‘locust stand I’, and her lover, a low caste Paravan, ‘the god of small things’ share.

Breasts receive some naughty treatment in Rahel’s quirky tales of transgressions. Rahel’s experiments to test whether breasts hurt during collision got her expelled from her school:

Six months later she was expelled after repeated complaints from senior girls. She was accused (quite rightly) of hiding behind doors and deliberately colliding with her seniors. When she was questioned by the Principal about her behaviour (cajoled, caned, starved), she eventually admitted that she had done it to find out whether breasts hurt. In that Christain institution, breasts were not acknowledged. They weren’t supposed to exist, and if they didn’t could they hurt?” (TGST, 16)

At another point in the story, Ammu’s breasts are mentioned in a simile that may have raised a laugh if it did not spell out a victory of the Big versus the Small, the Touchable versus the Untouchable. Light-hearted laughter gives way to satirical laughter.

Inspector Thomas Mathew’s moustaches bustled like the friendly Air India Maharajah’s, but his eyes were sly and greedy. “It’s little too late for all this, don’t you think? He said… He stared at Ammu’s breasts as he spoke… Then he tapped her breasts with his baton. Gently, Tap, Tap. As, though he was choosing mangoes from a basket. Pointing out the ones that he wanted packed and delivered. (7-8)

Breasts that had earlier been objects of a personal and intimate meditation on a person’s body are suddenly seen as objects or commodities one could lay claim to. It stops being personal and seems to become public; a thing that someone with a degree of power could presume to buy.
The lower bodily stratum gets quite an exposure in the novel. Irony’s
doubleness playfully assaults the powerful. The balls of dogs and men are referred to
in a few instances. The Small and the Big are again playfully pitted against each
other. In one instance the reflection on balls is a tender and jocular recount, in the
other, a less than celebratory observation. Estha, who for most of his life in the novel
struggles to come to terms with the horror of seeing love destroyed, finds the
reflection of the window and the sky beyond in the balls of his old, incontinent dog,
Kubchand, unbearably tender. Once the smooth purple balls reflected back a bird. ‘A
bird in flight reflected in an old dog’s balls. It made him smile out loud.’ \(TGST,12\).
Sumanyu Satpathy (Dhawan, 1999) argues that Roy plays with the anagram dog and
god throughout the text. Velutha is called a “pariah dog” by Mammachi. He is also
the god of small things. At another point in the novel, Comrade Pillai’s balls are
visible through his transparent mundu. But the reference to Comrade Pillai’s private
parts, to the grown-up Rahel hints at involuntary exhibitionism.

Roy’s narrative style of showing rather than telling, makes the physical
descriptions of her characters and the description of their actions very significant.
Comrade Pillai, for example, appears in the text as being obsessed with himself. In the
eyes of the grown-up Rahel, Comrade Pillai, arguably the villain of the novel, morphs
from the powerful, platitude-spouting leader of the Marxist party who sacrifices
Velutha to preserve his own position to that of a comic character. ‘Comrade Pillai
uncrossed his arms. His nipples peeped at Rahel over the top of the boundary wall like
a sad St. Bernard’s eyes’ \(129\). He is presented as a man who ‘clasped his armpits
possessively, as though someone had asked to borrow them’ \(128\). At one point in the
narrative his enjoyment of food is gently mocked at, at another his pre-bath ritual:

Comrade Pillai himself came out in the mornings in a greying Artex vest, his balls silhouetted
against his soft white mundu. He oiled himself with warm, peppered coconut oil, kneading
Such acts of self-love played out on the verandah of his house, visible to passers by, makes him appear very exhibitionistic, as does the description of him, ‘enticing people with his nipples and forcing pictures of his son upon them’ (134). Beyond the harmless surface of his present life lies a version of him that was not so harmless in the past. Here is a man who could have reversed the fate of Estha and Rahel, Ammu and her Small God, Velutha, by acting in accordance with the Marxist philosophy rather than getting bogged down in technicalities and a petty act of self-preservation. By upholding the spirit of equality as in the Marxist beliefs, Comrade Pillai could have saved the lives and sanity of a family. Instead he fobs off Velutha with platitudes like:

It is not the Party’s interests to take up such matters.
Individual’s interest is subordinate to the organization’s interest.
Violating Party Discipline means violating Party Unity. (TGST, 287)

Here ‘Party interests’ and personal interest seem to have merged. Comrade Pillai is bought over by the capitalistic machinery. The ‘comradeship’ is false and the solidarity that the Small God, Velutha, assumes does not exist. The Big God demands obeisance again. The Small God skips away and gets punished for his ‘brittle elation’ (TGST, 19).

To conclude, humour and irony is used in TGST as an attempt at re-viewing the events in Rahel’s childhood through the eyes of the woman. Irony operates through the novel preventing savage satire from making it a one-dimensional political fable rather than a multivalent text. The Big God who ‘demands obeisance’ gets satirically assaulted, while the humanity of the Small God is established narratively. TGST directly engages in the articulation of the social space where binaries meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of asymmetrical power relations.
That personal turmoil cannot really be transcended, only tolerated, seems to be the message of TGST. In TGST, humour signals surrender to the inevitable human condition of suffering. It definitely evokes Eco’s comment on humour being a ‘cold carnival’.
Chapter 6

Conclusion

The literary scene of Indian English writing is indeed solemn. Death, loss and suffering still predominate in Indian English literature. They form the substance of comedy as well as tragedy. Like tragedy, comedy too offers a ‘road to wisdom’ (Sypher 254) but the comic differs from the tragic in that it never ‘despairs of man’ (ibid). For women writers, however, ‘despairing of man’ and his texts is what generates the humour/comedy in the first place. The themes of novels in Indian writing in English are not very different from the themes that propel the narratives of regional women writers. Mahashveta Devi Bhattacharya’s (more popularly known as Mahashveta or Mahasweta Devi) heart-rending story, Breast Giver, (1987, translated by Spivak, 1998, 39-75) for instance, has at the core the deadly exploitation of women, as does Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things. Both are powerful stories and both are essentially tragic, but the wordplay and the occasional laughter in The God of Small Things makes it possible to accept temporarily the unbearable outcome for a woman of loving outside the prescribed limits of her class. The horror of a childhood destroyed by the guilt imposed by adults jockeying for power in the novel would have been too harsh without the drollery of its villains. On the other hand, the Breast Giver is relentless in its tragic intensity. Both writers deploy irony of fate or the irony of events but the irony that Mahasveta Devi uses is bereft of any consolation.

A brief plot summary is offered in order to highlight the similarity of the theme used by Mahasveta Devi and Roy. In the Breast Giver, Jashoda Devi, the proud owner of a beautiful pair of breasts, uses them to earn a living by offering her services
as a wet-nurse to a rich zamindar family. To ensure the milk flow she has to keep having children. Lucrative as a career move, this breast-feeding enables her to nurture a generation of little zamindars till they all grown up and the tradition of breast-feeding dies out. Throughout her career as wet-nurse she provides for and takes care of her husband and children. Eventually, she dies of breast cancer. Ironically, Jashoda’s pride and joy is also the reason of her death. She dies alone, abandoned by her own family and those that she nurtured as her sons. The irony of events, or the irony of fate does not instigate laughter. Mahasveta Devi does not allow for detachment or dispassion to short circuit the overpowering misery of Jashoda’s situation. Although dramatic irony is at work here, it is stapled together with Brechtian refusal to sentimentalize cruel, material reality. No lightness is provided from the stark, bare narrative the tone of which is undiluted anger at the situation. The irony in The God of Small Things provokes laughter, bitter though it may be, by shaping events in such a way that the element of detachment is constantly readjusted to dilute anger. This is done in conjunction with other devices like parody or word play. Without these elements the overpowering emotion of pity and misery would take over. Satire and irony by themselves remain sombre. This has perhaps been the problem with Indian women writing in English or any Indian language.

The discussion on the handling of irony in no way implies that Roy is a better or worse novelist than Mahasveta Devi Bhattacharya, but it is important to point out that the writers perhaps aim at different responses from their reading public. Both novels expose the inability of men’s political structures, as they stand, to provide women with a decent position in society. Both split open patriarchal hypocrisies in cultural representations to reveal the moral and political corruption at the heart of a society, where a woman is traditionally worshipped as a goddess, treated like a drudge
and sometimes, as in the *Breast Giver* and *The God of Small Things*, is cremated like a beggar. ‘Jashoda Devi, Hindu female, lay in the hospital morgue in the usual way, went to the burning ghat in a van, and was burnt. She was cremated by an untouchable’ (1987, in Spivak translated, 1998, 74-75). A similar lack of ceremony surrounds Ammu’s death. She lives like a divorced woman and dies like a beggar, not unlike Jashoda Devi who at least briefly was anointed with divine motherhood. ‘The church refused to bury Ammu. On several counts’ (*TGST*, 162). So, she was wrapped in a dirty bedsheet and laid out on a stretcher.

The crematorium ‘In-charge’ had gone down the road for a cup of tea and didn’t come back for twenty minutes. That’s how long Chacko and Rahel had to wait for the pink receipt that would entitle them to collect Ammu’s remains. Her ashes. The grit from her bones. The teeth from her smile. The whole of her crammed into a little clay pot. Receipt no. Q 498673.’ (*TGST*, 163)

A similar fate is meted out to two women in novels, one in Bengali and the other Indian English, showing a similar concern for the plight of women across classes and regions. Gender inequalities, lack of agency and the absurdity of living under the traditional laws created by men in the face of massive social changes are the major themes of women writers in India. While it is true that there are many Indian novels in English that feature women from the middle and upper middle classes, a struggle to overcome the absurd constrictions imposed by a male-dominated society seems to be a major concern for most women writers as the similarity in themes between the *Breast Giver* and *The God of Small Things* seem to suggest. Both Gokhale and Roy deal with the hypocrisies of the ‘higher echelons’ of society, but their ‘réalités’ form the basis of women’s aspirations to love and to survive in a world where history dictates ‘who should be loved and how much’ (*TGST*).

The social inequalities and injustices have been the major concern in the novels of the women writers studied for the thesis, yet they manage to generate
laughter. It is not true that women are incapable of humour and comedy. Anita Desai lamented in 1970 that

(with all the richness of material at hand, Indian women writers have stopped short – from a lack of imagination, courage, nerve or gusto-of satirical edge, the ironic tone, the inspired criticism or the lyrical response that alone might have brought their novels to life. (Desai, 1970, 43)

The three writers discussed in the thesis lack neither imagination, courage, nerve or gusto. The ironic tone is sharp and the innovations are revolutionary. It seems that the ‘inspired criticism’ that they present is not particularly palatable. Therefore, their writings are dismissed with the help of stock responses like ‘too much sex’, as was discussed in relation to Gokhale’s Paro Dreams of Passion and Roy’s The God of Small Things. Suniti Namjoshi’s The Conversations of Cow remains in the margins as a text by a lesbian, diasporic Indian writer. However, it is not the writers who lack the imagination. Mahadev Apte suggests that women are not incapable of humour; it is more a case of the prevalent culture that acts as a constraint.

First, women’s humour reflects the existing inequality between the sexes, not so much in its substance, as in the constraints imposed on its occurrence, on the techniques used, on the social setting in which it occurs, and on the kind of audience that appreciates it. Second, these constraints generally, but not necessarily universally, stem from the prevalent cultural values that emphasize male superiority and dominance together with female passivity and create role models for women in keeping with such values and attitudes ... men’s capacity for humour is not superior to women’s. Rather, both the prevalent cultural values and the resultant constraints prevent women from fully utilizing their talents.” (Apte, 1985, 69)

The three novels show a great deal of talent in writing comedy. It is perhaps a lack of critical apparatus that prevents women’s writing from being seen as humorous. One obvious reason mentioned above is that the comedy and the tragedy stems from the same themes. One woman’s tragedy is another woman’s black comedy. As mentioned earlier, in the twentieth century comedy and tragedy are distressingly closely associated. Writers in the twentieth century have exploited the tension between laughter and tears deliberately to provoke an uneasy laughter (Styan, 68, 279).
Another reason for the humour not being recognized is perhaps because the levity in the novels is offset by the subversive nature of the novels that mock societal limitations as feminist humorists have implied. Gokhale, Namjoshi and Roy have all explored the potential of laughter boldly, mischievously or as black humour. Humour in their fiction is close to anger as in *Paro Dreams of Passion*; to criticism of patriarchy in *The Conversations of Cow* and sheer misery in *The God of Small Things*. All three writers have deployed different strategies to generate laughter.

Of the three novels, the one that comes closest to joyous celebration is *The Conversations of Cow*. There are no deaths in the novel and the novel ends with a peaceful, playful exchange.

‘Cow,’ I tell her solemnly, “I think you’re a goddess.’
Cow seems amused. ‘So are you Suniti.’
I’m appalled. ‘Oh no’, I exclaim. ‘I made no such claims. I, really, you know, I don’t have the energy.’
‘But you can’t help it, Suniti. You are alive, you know.’ (*Conversations*, 124)

The extracted bit of dialogue is a gentle send-up of the Hindu tenet that every human being is bestowed with a bit of divinity. The banter concludes an angst-ridden romp through the complex and abstract ideological minefield of Western ideals of being and becoming, to feminism and lesbianism in the 70s and 80s and Eastern mysticism and the fable form. Unlike the other two novels there are no deaths, nor high dramas. The irony and the parody that Namjoshi deploys as her textual tactics is a great deal gentler compared to the other two novels. Namjoshi’s act of telling the story from a woman’s point of view is certainly revolutionary in its own way, but appears to be tempered by her use of nonsense. Absurdity prevents her writing from being savage attacks on patriarchy; or on feminist or lesbian ideologies of the West. Innuendo and indirection work in subtle ways in making the irony visible. Parody/intertextuality and
irony work in tandem to rescue the novel from being a novel about a victim, a marginal person. Each device takes the edge off the other.

The title of the novel, for instance, gently parodies patriarchal texts like the *Bhagvad Gita* (the *Song of God*), which forms the nucleus of Hindu philosophical teachings; and *The Dialogue of Socrates* that advocates a form of character building through questioning, defining and redefining a variety of positions. As mentioned earlier in the chapter on the novel, just as Krishna is the charioteer for Arjun, Cow is an unreliable driver for Suniti. But Suniti soon learns that despite Cow's absurd deductions, there is wisdom in what she has to offer. Cow's final lesson to Suniti is that every choice, however small, entails a transformation. This proves to be a useful one. 'Being' is not really a choice, and 'becoming' often involves limited choices, yet those choices need to be made. The manner in which fable is used in the novel, as an 'intentionally dialogised hybrid' (Bakhtin's phrase) re-evaluates the fable and re-contextualises it to include not only men and beasts, but also women, lesbians and whisky-drinking cows.

*Paro Dreams of Passion* is perhaps the most carnivalesque of all the novels studied here. Sex pervades the text. In deliberately toying with the taboo topic Gokhale uses it as a tool to critique the upper classes in India, making their actions seem farcical by exposing the moral chaos and presenting social mores under playful scrutiny. In many ways, it comes close to a being an Indian style Comedy of Manners. B.R.'s insatiable sexual appetite is not so much a grand lust in the style of the great lovers in history as much as the less dignified need of someone who 'allows himself to be used as a lamp-post or a letter-box for women to send messages to their husbands'. Upper class morals receive scathing attacks. The middle-class does not escape scrutiny either. Through the use of *espièglerie* or whimsical accumulation of
details that is undercut by irony, and often self-irony, the author examines middle-
class hypocrisies. Whether it is the struggles of the middle class woman to belong to the upper classes satirized in the beauty parlour episode (discussed in the chapter on Paro) or the send up of Suresh’s ridiculous ministrations of Paro’s contacts to belong to the upper class, the satire is retrieved from being totally destructive and humorless by the use of irony. The self-mockery also allows for a double-edged evaluation of a class of people who are desperate to belong to the upper class and their attempts appear pathetic. The novel also critiques the gender roles available to women by satirically pointing out that the melodramatic phrase ‘Khandaan ki Izzat’ or the ‘family honour’- mantra that is theatrically chanted in numerous Hindi films and the ‘Kitni sundar dulhan banegi’ line (What a beautiful bride you will make!), an advertisement slogan, metaphorically circumscribe the identity choices for a woman, forming the ‘Lakshman rekha’ or the metaphoric limits of identity formation men’s laws allow women. The message that at best a woman can hope for reflected glory from her father, her husband or her son is steadfastly critiqued through humour.

The laughter in The God of Small Things is the helpless laughter of the powerless against the twin forces of history and destiny incorporating satire and dramatic irony. Irony can take the edge off satire, like it does in Paro Dreams of Passion. In this case, however, irony and satire work in tandem to generate laughter that is far from being joyous. The Anglophilia of the relatively powerful Ipes who are keen on upholding classical English literary tradition is pitted against the folk-lore of the native Malayalam language. The palimpsest recovery of the ‘hidden’ or submerged Malayalam texts in the form of scatological, nonsensical rhymes is in itself an act of defiance in print and symbolizes the carnival idiom creating ambivalent laughter gently deriding both languages simultaneously. English, with its
association to Latin legalese as in ‘Locqust Stand I’, and Malayalam, with its inability to get beyond basic nursery rhymes, are pitched against each other in the novel. As examined in the previous chapter, the peculiar logic of the carnival is applied to linguistic intercourse. The rebellion against the powerful, the rich and the English-educated erupts in the novel as a form of perverse social justice through aggression towards a vulnerable child, Estha, who for a major part of the novel, symbolically loses all language.

TGST is perhaps the most satirical of the three novels. The perceptions of Rahel the girl and Rahel the woman come together to transform the villains of childhood into characters in a carnival. The laughter against them is less than kind. It is as if the suppressed laughter of Rahel, the child, gradually erupts from Rahel the woman divesting them of the aura of terror and power. Humour here comically uncrowns the king and queen.

In all the three novels the carnivalesque upsetting of hierarchies takes the form of textual and sexual upheaval. Textually the carnival spirit has meant a form of intertextual play with traces of texts from the past. For example, Paro Dreams of Passion mounts an attack on the original patriarchal text that idealizes another Paro, the virtuous and passive beloved of the drunken and melancholic Devdas. The melodrama of the previous text is undercut by the casual, off-hand promiscuity of the characters in Paro, rendering the concept of romantic love quite ridiculous. The Conversations of Cow takes on the fable form and gleefully infects it with a lesbian subject. The God of Small Things half-heartedly attempts a darkly comical closure to the linguistic tug-of-war between the seemingly powerful English language and the native tongue.
The ironic smile that the novels activate comes from the recognition of a wide range of allusions to mythical, popular and other texts that form the "discursive communal framework" (Rose, 1979,51) of an Indian reader, most likely a "Bharatiya nari, an Indian woman. For someone not clued into the framework the ironic message could only be a "decoy" message, whereas the "initiated" reader "gets" more of the joke. The Conversations of Cow refers to a range of things beyond the realm of the Indian framework and an understanding of Western feminism and lesbian theory may be useful for an "initiated" reading.

Thus, when the carnival grows cold – once the comedy of social habits and follies are examined and a radical plot demanded – one is left with the feeling that it is not the characters that are at fault but the frame that is wrong (Eco, 7-8). The mock plea that Roy’s narrator makes for Comrade Pillai, comes to mind, ‘...to be fair to Comrade Pillai, he did not plan the course of events that followed. He merely slipped his ready fingers into History’s waiting glove’ (TGST, 281). It is ‘History’s waiting glove’ that deals the shocking blow that turns a god of small things into a Halloween Jack-o-lantern pumpkin, ‘a pumpkin, too large and heavy for the slender stem it grew from. A pumpkin with a monstrous upside-down smile’ (TGST, 320). Two of the novels offer no happy endings or suggestion of life having improved for any one. The incest, as a survival mechanism, is a desperate solution. Yet, the bitterness and the uneasiness of living under a ‘law’ are mitigated slightly through humour. In Paro Dreams of Passion, the ending is ambivalent: the carnival queen Paro, dies leaving a sense of non-closure. After reading these two novels, one does not ‘rejoice’ in the traditional, feel-good sort of way, but the humour leaves us ‘feeling quiet and peaceful, a little angry, with a shade of bitterness in our minds’ (Eco, 1984, 7-8) at patriarchal games, and life’s ultimate ironies.
A question that arises is whether humour in the works of women writers will always remain a way of channeling anger and hatred. One wonders whether Indian women writers would write with the cold, detached irony of R.K. Narayan or the outlandish, verbal slapstick of G.V. Desani or even Kiran Nagarkar’s brazen satire without articulating their version of a woman’s experience. For those seeking humour in the works of Indian English writers, the scene is propitious. It is, however, difficult to imagine Indian women writers (domestic or diasporic) being able to totally extricate themselves from the condition of women in India as this extract from Kiran Desai’s ‘Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard’ suggests:

It is necessary at some point for every family with a son to acquire a daughter-in-law. This girl who is to marry the son of the house must come from a good family. She must have a pleasant personality. Her character must be decent and not shameless and bold. This girl should keep her head bowed as well. Nobody wants a girl who stares people right in the face with big froggy eyes. She should be fair-complexioned, but if she is dark the dowry should include at least one of the following items: a television set, a refrigerator, a Godrej steel cupboard and maybe even a scooter...(1998,57)

The extract seems to suggest that it is the frame that is wrong.
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