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**Transcending Tradition:
The Struggle of the Indian Female Protagonist
In
Selected Indian Novels**

**A thesis presented in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Philosophy in English
at Massey University**

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2001

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of selected novels by Indian female writers and their portrayal of Indian women and the conflicts of identity that they face as a result of tension between the traditional and modern aspects of their lives. The novels have been chosen partly because of their focus on this identity crisis faced by the female protagonists. The novels that have been selected for this study are Anita Desai's *Voices in the City* and *Clear Light of Day*, Shashi Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*, *That Long Silence* and *The Binding Vine*, Anita Rau Badami's *Tamarind Mem*, Indira Ganesan's *Inheritance*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

The female protagonists in all the novels that are to be explored are educated and come from the middle class. The problems of these protagonists that interest the authors are not so much concerned with bread-and-butter issues but their protagonists' search for an identity in the face of changes that are taking place all around them in society. Part of the social change that takes place is a change in the status of women as education opportunities increase and more women enter the workforce. While trying to incorporate these changes into their lives, the women are depicted as facing tension balancing these changes with society's traditional expectations of the roles they are to play.

Some aspects of tradition that are that are explored in this study and which are portrayed as being repressive of the women include traditional sexual stereotyping of women, sexual politics in the traditional marital relationship and traditional institutions like the extended family and the purdah system as well as forms of repression arising from religious orthodoxy. These facets of tradition are continued to be practiced and maintained by groups of people to whose advantage it is to do so and these are usually the men, especially those belonging to the higher strata of the caste system.

Another aspect of this study is the strategies that the female characters are portrayed as resorting to in coping with the identity crisis that they face. The strategies that are depicted in the novels range from withdrawal to accommodation to rejection and rebellion. The novels that are first explored in this study and which were written earlier portray milder reactions by the protagonists to the crisis they face, as compared to the bolder moves of rebellion portrayed in the novels that are looked at later in this study. This points perhaps to a trend by Indian women to be bolder in rejecting aspects of tradition in their attempt to forge an identity for themselves and to convert a barren inheritance to a more promising future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Doreen D'Cruz for her sharing of insightful ideas, her feedback and especially for her extreme patience in her supervision of the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank Prof. Richard Corballis for his kind understanding and support.

Much gratitude goes to all my friends in Singapore and New Zealand for their prayers and moral support. Special thanks to Mim, for encouraging me all the way, right till the end when support was most needed, and also to Pam, Winnie, Soon Fen, Guat Ha, Santi, Emilia, Aileen and Julian for going very much out of their way to assist me. I would also like to thank my uncle Bala and his family for so patiently and generously allowing me to use the computer in their home. Thanks also to Calvin for always being there for me.

I would also like to thank my mom for her unflagging support and her faith in me.

Most of all, I would like to thank God for unfailingly opening doors for me time and time again and for the many blessings and abundant grace showered upon me.

Rani

Dedicated
to my mom...