

## Editorial Note

This special issue is the fallout of a seminar on 'Images and Self-Images of Indian Women in History, Myth and Fiction' held at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study Shimla, from 5-7 October, 1998. The whole notion of concepts and icons being the result of imaging, whether self-conscious or otherwise, projected at the seminar, attracted considerable attention among people from very different walks of life, besides catching the attention of the media.

'Women have more often been imaged against than imaging'. The prerogative of imaging women, whether through writings or the arts, has, by and large, been a male enterprise. Literary or social language typified the 'Law of the Father' meaning the patriarchal voice.

As patriarchy appropriated the voice of women, there remained very little difference in the way women spoke or imaged themselves. In extolling modesty/chastity and in condemning independence/self-reliance and boldness, in their representations of the ideal female stereotype, women were speaking in a patriarchal voice. The few women who spoke differently came to be regarded by the dominant patriarchal society as deviant and dangerous.

In traditional modes of religious and social practices, whether one is speaking of Hinduism or Islam, the orthodox male canons constructed the ascriptive and prescriptive roles for women. Women were imaged as being shy, modest, self-sacrificing on the positive side and fickle, seductive and treacherous on the negative side. Within Hinduism, it was the Brahmanical register which provided society with its code of conduct. Evolved essentially in the interests of the upper caste/class males, it not only de-privileged and controlled the economically and socially backward castes but laid forth the liminal spaces for women's self-expression.

The first conscious self-imaging by women in contradistinction to the 'male' imaging of the 'female', occurs in certain segments of bhakti poetry, predominantly in Virasaivite women's poetry in Karnataka, the Warkari abhangs of the Maharashtrian saints and the beliefs and practices of Shakta tantricism. The compositions of upper caste Brahmin women like Andal from Tamil Nadu, Molige Mahadevi from Karnataka and Muktabai from Maharashtra, are known for their poetic excellence as well as philosophical content. However much of their

poetry fails to get out of the Sanskritic-Brahmanical straight-jacket. The poetry that one finds more striking and powerful is the composition of the working class women saints most of whom were Shudras. The compositions of the spinner 'Kadire Remmavve' (Kadire itself means 'spinster'), the servant Janabai and the untouchable Soyrabai talk at one level of the wretchedness of their material condition and at another level, of their passionate involvement with God which shatters social boundaries. The role that Bhakti poetry played in helping women to develop their own subjectivity comes through in some of these articles notably the ones by Vidya Rao and Minoti Chatterji. Self imaging by women comes through even stronger in some of the folk traditions and folk songs which provide an alternate history, as it were, of women. The papers which have been put together in this volume reflect and polemically interact with the entire trope of imaging and self-imaging.

Kumkum Roy's paper examines the subtle and overt differences which underlay the poetry (in terms of both their contents as well as their imagery) of the Theragathas (the songs of the monks) and the Therigathas (the songs of the nuns). Her article shows that while the recovery of pure unmediated voices from these texts is nearly impossible besides being unnecessary, our understanding of the images and imaging of men and women is both refined and enriched by the study of the Therigathas and the Theragathas.

Historical tradition in India has conformed more or less to an ideological pattern in which women have been imaged by men especially through the selective representation of women in history. Analyzing the historical and literary perceptions of heroic women in Rajasthan are the two papers by Nandini Sinha and Ramya Sreenivasan. Centre-staging the legendary Rani Padmini, Ramya has traced the imaging from the Rajput to the Gujjar traditions, from elitism to tribalism, largely drawing on Malik Muhammad Jaisi's Sufi text *Padmavat*. She endeavours to show the conjunctures as well as the ruptures between the Sufi and Rajput tropes in her analysis of the Padmini legend. Nandini provides the historical context/s for the Rajput and Gujjar literary traditions. Studying the epigraphical evidence from the seventh to the fifteenth centuries from southern Rajasthan she shows that women in the royal records were patrons, builders and donors. However, as the political processes of formation of regional states reached its peak, queens with their names and their lineages, began to disappear from the royal records. The visibility of women however continued in the Gujjar folk traditions.

Imaging of women within mythical traditions range once again

from the patriarchal stereotypes to non-patriarchal representations. The article by N.K. Jain takes up the Kumaoni love legend of Rajula and Malushahi and explores the latent subversion of patriarchy in the character of the heroine Rajula who is "independent, intrepid and resourceful". In her assertion of her sexuality she seems to set new parameters for a more equal man-woman relationship. Nevertheless the legend gets back into the well-established grooves of acceptable behaviour and predictable outcome.

Sometimes a myth may have a non-patriarchal origin but gets subsumed at some point into the patriarchal mainstream, in the process blurring and defacing the tantalizing glimpses of an alternative imaging of women in the original text. This is the main thrust of Vijaya Ramaswamy's paper on 'The Taming of Alli'. This article focuses on the transformational quality of myths and legends. Her critical study of the legend of Alli, demonstrates the gradual process by which an indigenous narrative is tamed to fit the patriarchal mould. The myth in the process of its transmissions does not follow a linear course but tends to zigzag between the imaging of women within the indigenous Tamil tradition and their absorption into the Brahmanic-patriarchal stereotyping of women.

Imaging of women within fictional traditions is represented in this volume by three articles: Rajol Sogani's 'Transgression and Fulfillment: Images of women in Indian Fiction'; Patricia Oberoi's 'A Suitable Romance? Trajectories of courtship in Indian Popular Fiction'; and Pradeep Trikha's 'Quest for Self in Bharati Mukherjee's Short Stories'. In Patricia's article, what appears to run as a consistent thread through the stories (which at times take multiple and complex trajectories) is the perception of feminism and an alien (read western) value system as major threats to the cherished Indian notions about marriage and the family. Patricia Oberoi looks at a set of romantic short stories in the stereotypical women's magazine called '*The Woman's Era*' in exploring the theme of romantic game, match and set. The distinctive feature of Trikha's paper is the fact that Bharati Mukherjee's characters represent the dual dilemma of the diasporic Indian women. The search for self-identity as a woman becomes inextricably linked with the broader issue of being an NRI (non-resident Indian) living in 'exile' in some distant land.

Rajol Sogani looks at fiction in four different regional languages—Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi and Kannada—to look at the theme of sexual transgression as a site for questioning the norms and values of a highly structured society in which caste and gender roles are narrowly defined. Interestingly, two of the texts she has chosen for analysis: Prithvi Vallab

of K.M. Munshi (1937) and Phaniyamma of M.K. Indira (1976), have also been filmed, thus finding expression in the visual form as well.

The media and the arts have represented in this collection in three modes: theatre, film and music. Minoti Chatterji describes the Bengali stage actresses of the nineteenth century as 'Creatures of the Sub-World'. In so doing, she exposes the double standards of traditional Indian society, in the present context the Bengali 'bhandra lok', in worshipping the Sitas and Savitris portrayed by these actresses on stage while ostracizing and stigmatizing them off-stage. Looking at the imaging and self-imaging of women in the cinematic mode, Shohini Ghosh breaks new ground and shatters traditional notions by drawing our attention to Deepa Mehta's 'Fire' which has been the centre of a major controversy in recent times with the Shiv Sena party banning the showing of the film on grounds of obscenity and immorality. Ghosh critically analyses the film which explores new dimensions of female sexuality and lesbian relationship with the utmost sensitivity, thus questioning that bastion of patriarchy—a man-woman relationship—as forming the moral foundation of the Indian social order.

Vidya Rao is a practitioner of the musical tradition of 'Thumri' singing which she has learnt from the legendary Naina Devi. Her article is a self-reflexive exercise into a singer's perception of herself singing the romantic 'thumris' which have traditionally been the cultural preserve of the 'tawaif or nautch girl. The author provides the best insight into her paper which is aptly titled 'seeing Radha/Being Radha', stating that her guru Naina Devi has said—"Sita, Lakshmi, Savitri . . . these are held up as role models for other women. *But we are singers. We are different.* (emphasis mine) To sing Thumri you must understand Radha. You must become Radha".

It is hoped that this volume will prove a valuable contribution in the ongoing process of 'recasting women'. I have deliberately refrained from interfering with the individual styles of the different contributors in the belief that 'difference' can only add to the merit of the volume.

In the end I wish to thank my mother Sethulakshmi, my husband Krishnan and friend Ramya for their help at various stages.