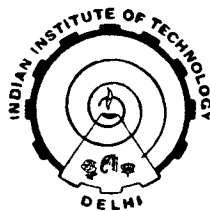


**DILEMMA OF EXISTENCE :**  
**A STUDY OF FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN SOME**  
**AMERICAN NOVELS BY WOMEN (1940-1980)**

by

**SHIVANI BANERJEE CHAKRAVORTY**  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Submitted in Partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of  
**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**



to the  
**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, DELHI**  
**NEW DELHI-110016**  
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Certificate

I am satisfied that the thesis presented by Ms. Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty is worthy of consideration for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and is a record of the original bonafide research work carried out by her under my guidance and supervision, and that the results contained in it have not been submitted in part or full to any other University or Institute for the award of any degree/diploma. I certify that she has pursued the prescribed course of research.

Dated: 17th June, 1985

  
Dr. V.N. ARORA  
Professor of English  
Department of Humanities  
and Social Sciences,  
IIT Delhi.

## Clarification

I have used British spellings in this dissertation and retained the original spellings in the quotations.

I have followed the conventions of the MLA Style Sheet (2nd Edition).

## Acknowledgements

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*Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty*

Shivani Banerjee Chakravorty

## Abstract

Women's fiction in America, as a contemporary genre, aims to break through the stereotypical literary images of women of the past, and establish a new image of the female protagonist. It also aims at encompassing the totality of female experience with authenticity, and creating a literary culture of its own. This dissertation is a study of the female protagonist in some of these novels written by women.

She is in search of an identity beyond the realms of traditional femininity. Her search is for self-knowledge and self-validation--what it means to be a woman--and her inner conflicts are reflections of her bid for autonomy. In the process, she encounters the pressures of society in the form of traditional female roles. She is often unable to bridge the gap between these restrictive forces and her inner need to carve out her own life. She does not know how to find personal fulfilment and how to relate herself to the external world with some relevance. Consequently, she feels alienated both from her self and from society.

The dissertation discusses some of these explorations of women seeking self-actualization within the framework of the options available to them. The attempt is to question and gauge the success of the writers in creating a new heroine, and a new literary culture. The concepts of "self-actualization" defined by Abraham H. Maslow, women's "self-alienation" defined by Karen Horney, and the "divided self" defined by R.D. Laing, are used to illumine various phases in the protagonist's quest

for identity.

The study spans about four decades of women's fiction, from the nineteen forties till the end of the nineteen seventies. However, the focus is on the revolutionary years, the sixties and seventies. The writers included are Mary McCarthy, Sylvia Plath, Alix Kates Shulman, Joan Didion, Marge Piercy, Erica Jong, Lisa Alther, Francine du Plessix Gray and Marilyn French. The emphasis is on one novel by each, and not on the writers. While these form the focus of this study, some others have been peripherally referred to as being relevant to the thesis.

The first chapter consists of (a) a survey of women's roles through a century of American Culture and literature, (b) an introduction to women's fiction as a genre, and feminist criticism, (c) a survey of the existing literature on the subject, (d) an account of the methodology used, and (e) a statement of the hypothesis of the dissertation.

The second chapter deals with the first phase in the process of "becoming" of the protagonist. It is about the influence parents and early social conditioning have on her psychological and social identity. The third chapter discusses basic feminine experiences which include puberty, romance, love, sex, marriage and motherhood. The next chapter explores some non-traditional alternatives these women experiment with. The fifth chapter traces a new beginning at the end of the quest: through a process of despair and alienation.

The sixth chapter throws light on these novels from the point of view of literature--whether they are novelistically successful or not, and how well-balanced their technique,

theme and ideological intents are. The concluding chapter sums up the thesis, its main conclusions, and points out some of the limitations of this study.

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