Godwoman's Vision of Empowerment:
A Feminist Rhetorical Analysis of Anandmurti Gurumaa's *Shakti*

by

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A Thesis

In

Communication Studies

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty
Of Texas Tech University in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for
The Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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May, 2011

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

During the past one and a half year that I spent on working on my project, I have been overwhelmed by the support of many people. I would like to foremost thank my committee chair Dr. Katie Langford for guiding me throughout the process. Dr. Langford's continual assistance, patience, and encouragement to become a stronger and better writer has been invaluable during my writing process. I have been greatly benefited by the help of my committee members, Dr. Amy Heuman and Dr. Mark Gring. I would like to thank Dr. Heuman for encouraging me to think in new and innovative ways about my topic. I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude to Dr. Gring for always being there to lend an ear when I wanted to discuss my ideas Through the numerous discussions, I have learned a great deal from Dr Gring. I am indebted to my committee members for serving as role models, not just during the thesis writing process but also as I move on in my career as a scholar.

My sincerest gratitude towards Dr. Bolanle Olaniran who encouraged me to work hard. I extend my gratitude to all my friends in the department for the help and moral support. The friendship, even if it meant only bonding in the TA room still made a lot of difference during my graduate studies at Texas Tech.

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ABSTRACT

Anandmurti Gurumaa's book *Shakti* is analyzed through the lens of feminist rhetoric analysis. Issues of treatment towards women in India in the present times with a focus on femicide is discussed in *Shakti* . Gurumaa's criticism of unequal treatment towards women shows a new approach to the already prevalent numerous discourses on treatment of women in India. By appealing to well-established customs of Hinduism and building a sense of reawakening of inbuilt power or "shakti," Gurumaa founds herself as a new type of crusader in the Indian society. Gurumaa's advocacy as a spiritual leader demarcates an uncharted means of addressing a social issue in the country.

Gurumaa's manner of addressing the audience also indicates the working of a transnational persona. She involves audience within the country as well as in diaspora to expand the support for her views on the cause as well as to bring awareness among people. The way in which she appeals through several dominant languages in India as well as the means of putting together the cause through her website and her book shows that she seeks to involve a transnational audience. Through Gurumaa's approach new changes can be seen in the way issues are addressed in India to involve an extended audience and affect change.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Violence against women is a key issue that affects many parts of India and is reflected in different ways. Organizations like *National Commission for Women* or *Relief Projects India*, activists, the government, as well as health officials of the Indian Medical Association engage in active involvement, making men and women aware about the value of females. Dwindling numbers of females in certain parts of India have induced the practice of looking for brides from other parts of the nation. Moreover, when confronted by health officials and government agencies about illegal sex-determination examinations in private hospitals of Punjab, wrongdoers posed "death threats" to persons who exposed the operation (Elliot BBC News). Young women, who were interviewed about the matter, responded by saying that the practice was so common within their society that they never considered it a form of crime. *Swayam*, a women's rights organization based in Kolkata, India, reports violence against women ranging from domestic abuse to cases of rape, sexual harassment, and suicides as a consequence of dowry issues. *Swayam*'s study of crimes against women, reveals that in 2002 alone 16,373 women were raped, 44,098 women faced sexual harassment, and 49,237 women fell victim to domestic violence from husbands and in-laws. *Swayam* also reports that the rate of female feticide increased by 49.2% between the years 1999-2000, while incidents of rape rose by 6.7% between the years 1997-2002. Crimes against women in India form part of sensational news stories. In 2005, the combined efforts of *International Charity Plan,* a children's organization, *Edward*

Greene Charity a Britain-based organization, and the Indian government to make women aware of female feticide as a crime resulted into a television soap opera called "Atmajaa" (born from the soul). The goal of the soap opera was to replace "lack-luster" attempts by the government to create awareness and to encourage the prevention of female feticide through a much popular medium like "Atmajaa" (Elliot BBC News). "Atmajaa" tells the story of a pregnant female protagonist fighting with her husband and in-laws to save her baby girl. The organizers expected that a popular television style soap opera would reach a wider audience of men and women in the interior villages of several northwestern and western states, teaching them that the act of killing female babies is wrong. The plan seems to have been unsuccessful as an April 2010, BBC news report carried a story of authorities finding fetuses dumped in a trashcan in Ahmedabad, a city in Gujarat, a state in the west; suggesting that feticide still remains in various parts of the country.

In addition to femicide, women experience violence in many other ways. Ganatra reports that since the introduction of ultra sound machines for antenatal sex determination tests, the decline in the female population has increased (91). Besides femicide in the form of abortion in the second trimester, other ways in which unwanted females are eliminated manifest through infanticide and general aversion to female offspring. Bhatnagar, Dube, and Dube report that "negligence through discriminatory practices such as uneven food allocation causing nutritional deficiencies, uneven access to medical care, family resources and minimum survival needs" results in female children who are abused (3). The preference for male children

derives from the perception that males can carry forward the next generation of the family whereas females are a burden on the parents. Parents are responsible for finding her a groom to marry her and providing her with a sufficient dowry. Femicide is rampant in various parts of India owing to socio-economic factors that posit the birth of females as a negative. First, the birth of a female is seen as a means of incurring debt in the family because women eventually get married and have to provide dowry to the groom. Since the amount demanded by the groom's family can result into exorbitant sums, the thought of having to encounter such a situation discourages families from having female children. Low-income families are less likely to want female children than families with higher incomes. Second, educating females is seen in a negative light, as they do not contribute to the father's household after marriage. According to Hindu customs, once a woman is married she is not regarded as part of the family that she was born into. Furthermore, her children do not count as carrying forth her own family's succeeding generation. The efforts made by charity organizations to educate men and women living in the interiors of Punjab and Gujarat about the wrongs of feticide seem to have had little influence.

This thesis examines the influence of *Shakti*, a book written by a spiritual guru in propagating ideas about the need for women to speak out against violence in various forms. Development in social, political, and economic sectors has led to positive growth in the form of equal opportunities for women through welfare programs initiated by the government, increasing the number of females in the labor force and the extension of "self-employment" initiatives for women (Sircar &

Bhanot). Despite the positive efforts made by the government as well as increases in the number of women who attain education and hold occupations, deep reaching changes have not come about as explicated further in the next section.

The Indian government has made efforts to promote the well-being of women. Besides government initiatives, private companies have advocated laws, which help women, enter into the workforce. Notwithstanding the initiative on the part of the government and private companies, the country has not seen major changes in the form of financial independence or the promotion of "women's health, employment and ensuring social justice" (Gupta 20-24). Moreover, women in the lower strata of the social hierarchy enjoy the least amount of advantages for various reasons as discussed below. Suchitra Shenoy, a doctoral student, recounts her experiences of interacting with women in India while visiting the country for research. Shenoy claims that as a researcher trained in the United States, she experienced difficulties relating to low-income women from her country. While interacting with them about how they interpreted "work values" or what was the meaning of pursuing career interests, Shenoy states that she was not able to empathize easily with their troubles because she differed considerably from them in the form of social status, class, and caste (Shenoy 15; *Oriental Divison* 1). As Raka Shome and Radhika Hegde contend, within the country the differences between cosmopolitan landscapes and rural spaces are starkly in contrast with each other. Shome and Hegde introduce the concept of transnational space as existing within the country while pointing out that vastness in difference in

statuses exists among people living within the same country in India. Shenoy refers to the same issues but specifically addresses the condition of women.

In the context of the recent economic boom in India, Shenoy states that even though the development includes women as having played a big role, lower-income women have not benefited. As Shenoy mentions, the primary reasons for India's success involves growth of the IT sector, which employs well-educated people. Thus, even though the status of women with employment within the IT companies is explicit, illiterate yet self-employed illiterate women who make a living by crafting handmade products lost employment and found their services replaced by multi-national companies that produced the same goods quicker and cheaper (*Oriental Division*, 2008). Furthermore, Shenoy asserts that duality exists in the way society negotiates position for women. On the one hand, women subjected to such inhumane acts as being publicly raped to infanticide form part of the social evils in the country. On the other hand, the same society, comprising of Hindus, worships goddesses with great fervor and zeal. Women constantly deal with "old and new," "traditional and modern" perceptions about womanhood in society. The flexibility of these positions emerge from the way the society perceives them as tied with tradition, and culturally inducted norms collide with the newly found liberty to embrace the newly chartered courses for engaging in hitherto unconventional jobs. After having looked into the conditions that govern the position of women in Indian society, the following section explores details about how *Shakti* fits in as a timely text to empower women in a

society where various factors as discussed above prevent women's conditions to improve on a democratic scale.

Shakti, is a timely and important piece of work needing examination. Through rhetorical analysis, this thesis examines Gurumaa's negotiation of her role as spiritual guru. Furthermore, it is not limited to that of merely a spiritual master in the sense of how contemporary followers comprehend and envision a teacher of spirituality. An insight into the multifaceted way Gurumaa deals with issues in the *Shakti* reveals the working of a confluence of several other identities – that of an activist, an informed authoritative figure, and a feminist guru championing the cause of femicide along with female empowerment through education. The working of these characteristics in Gurumaa's identity intertwines to represent a well-patterned framework for making a case for female empowerment. The utilization of intertwined characteristics that make up a new type of identity for Gurumaa reveals another type of persuasion that works in a country like India, where despite several types of innovative initiatives to increase awareness about crimes related to women, a positive material change has not come about. Gurumaa's approach to addressing and creating awareness by writing a book that exposes and urges change for women reveals a new type of strategy hitherto not utilized by a spiritual guru. Hence, Gurumaa's use of multiple identities to make an impact on people shows the working of a unique type of persuasion that strongly relies on the individual's identity, yet the subsequent negotiation of the same identity, to have an impact on a contemporary national issue. Delving into the ideas presented in *Shakti*, my analysis shows that Anandmurti Gurumaa, in her capacity as guru,

influences the audience better than initiatives taken by institutions like the *International Charity* foundation and the Indian government in the form of soap operas. By appearing as a crusader for reform not just regarding the practice of femicide but also by urging her audience to reform their attitudes toward women, Gurumaa attempts to effect change. She creates a compelling argument for her audience by appealing to their religious values and by speaking authoritatively on the provisions maintained by law, as well as informed explanation on fetal development. Thus, her rhetoric in the *Shakti* reveals an evolving identity for a spiritual guru. She creates a new kind of proto-feminist spiritual guru through her argument in *Shakti*. The new approach, based on feminist advocacy, reveals that she anticipates changing perceptions of a large cross-section of society. The audience she targets constitutes fairly well-educated individuals within the country as well as those persons who form the diaspora. The topics she discusses in *Shakti.* as well as the conceptualization of the mission in her website, addresses financially secure audiences who have the ability to spend time and money on her spiritual discourses.

This thesis also examines Gurumaa's perspective on female empowerment in present day India. She advocates radical viewpoints on religion, women, and more importantly, she handles such radical ideas by utilizing her identity of guru to negotiate a strongly radical, yet acceptable position. Besides speaking as a female agent, Gurumaa justifies women's ability to assert power based on her religion's contention that females are endowed with inner power or "shakti." Use of female power or "shakti" fulfills two functions. First, the utilization of "shakti" appeals to

women from different lifestyles by encouraging them to identify with one another. Second, Gurumaa casts the issue of killing female babies in the light of a moral crime when she asserts that females depict "shakti" or divine being by virtue of being born as females. Gurumaa functions as a transnational feminist when she dissects and probes into such issues as domestic violence, teasing, and constrictions on women placed by religion or femicide and aims to unite women from all social circles and backgrounds by asking them to work to empower themselves and others. She advocates educating the less privileged women in India by drawing out and debunking practices and customs within Indian society. Her transnational perspective highlights the need for an agent like Gurumaa.

Each chapter of the thesis focuses on explicating the agenda that Gurumaa carries in *Shakti* with the aim to understand the dynamics she utilizes to make her readers aware of practices of female subjectivity as exercised within Indian society with a focus on the lack of female empowerment. Chapter two summarizes the contents of *Shakti* and delves further into the importance of guru in Indian religious tradition with a focus on the female guru tradition. Chapter three looks into the literature on feminism in developing countries with a focus on transnational feminism. Chapter three also refers to some writings on religion by women and seeks to understand how some strategies worked while others failed in discourses on religion by females. Chapter four examines feminist rhetorical work with an aim to understand how different perspectives perceive the effectual role of rhetor from a feminist perspective. Chapter five explores into the tensions that exist within India regarding

lack of holistic representation of the conditions of all women sufficiently by any one individual or institution. Besides that, chapter five also clarifies the problem of the class and caste divide that causes hindrance for feminists to address an all-social-classes-inclusive agenda. Chapter six probes and analyzes the impact Gurumaa's *Shakti* has made. Furthermore, chapter six explores into Gurumaa's negotiation of her guru position with a focus on explicating ideas radical for one occupying a guru status like her. Chapter seven probes into the area of Gurumaa as transnational feminist exploring the connection between local and global and the usage of female power or "shakti" by Gurumaa to appeal to the ontological and epistemological positions valued by her audience. Chapter eight provides the implications of how Gurumaa's work acts as the kind of strategy for a social cause that has not been seen in India up until now.

This thesis indicates that there is not just one way to sensitize the population about an issue that has affected them. Gurumaa's identity and her method of bringing change in her audience is indicative of how people in India are open to being motivated by ideas that goes against their accepted norms. In addition, by the "divine mother" persona Gurumaa makes a strong argument about indigenous feminism for women in India. She also fulfils the role of the agent as indicated by transnational scholars. Hence, through her agency and her strategies, Gurumaa reflects the importance of spiritual gurus in India.

CHAPTER II

SHAKTI THE BOOK

Gurumaa influences women's lives by reiterating that though capable of exhibiting "shakti" or inner power to assert their individuality, women desist from doing so and silently bear violence in different forms. Gurumaa addresses critical issues dealing with situations faced by women in everyday lives such as women encountering "physical and sexual abuse," "exploitation at home," female babies killed, and females conditioned by "society and upbringing" into feeling "insecure and fragile" (13-15). Throughout the book, Gurumaa criticizes abuse against women. She describes the types of violence that occur in public transportation systems where men harass, molest, kidnap or abuse women. The following section covers the content of each portion of the book, providing details about the issues she covers. Shakti addresses violence toward women, female infanticide, and need for equality.

Violence

Gurumaa states that women become victims of violence through various ways. She speaks against mistreatment of women by physically contextualizing acts of violence as occurring within "closed portals" or in the private sphere as well as the public sphere. Her contention rests on condemning such practices as marital rape, physical and sexual abuse of women by male members of family, and abuse in the form of rape, molestation, and other forms of sexual harassment that take place outside the home. She recounts that women become victims of rape but instead of being seen as victims they are blamed for bringing it on themselves by wearing provocative

clothes. She mentions that if wearing a certain kind of attire is the cause of abuses of that nature, most cases of rape take place in rural areas where women do not wear revealing clothes. She concretizes cases of abuse by mentioning instances where a woman is eveteased (street harassed), "pushed and pinched," or molested when out in the streets. She creates a sense of urgency when she mentions that though her readers may treat the account of such cases found in newspapers with mild interest and may not realize the "urgent need to think seriously on the issue," at that moment, they may experience the impact of such types of abuse if their family members become victim to similar situations. She disapproves of parents encouraging bad habits in their sons instead of rectifying the mistake. She attempts to identify and point out the root of violence like rape, abuse, and harassment when she indicates that families do not teach their male children to respect women, which leads to abusing women. She censures parents for rejoicing about the display of maturity in their son when the son harasses a young girl or discriminating between sons and daughters. She also warns marital couples against fighting and the husband hurling verbal abuses at his wife in the presence of their son who is likely to grow up to practice similar behaviors.

She criticizes the administration and the government for ineffectual action against rapists and molesters. Even though the government of India has provisions for safeguarding the rights of women in different cases of sexual harassment, Gurumaa does not cite any documents established by the law. Instead, she emphasizes that "caretakers of the law cannot solve the problem" and that people would have to bring about the changes on their own (13). She evokes a sense of unity among people when

she mentions that the perception toward constructing gender roles would need to change by adopting measures by themselves. She urges parents to educate their sons about showing respect to women, to treat daughters and sons equally, and to instill in daughters the courage to confront molesters and abusers. She mentions that by making women fit into submissive, care giving, and nurturing roles, families condition women to perceive themselves as non-aggressive, "insecure and fragile," and incapable of being independent. She contends that by depriving women of higher education, the family contributes to making women perceive themselves as unequal and inferior to men.

Female Infanticide

Gurumaa contends that women are led into believing that they are weak and fragile. She points out several reasons for which she condemns killing of female fetuses before birth. She introduces the issue by mentioning that certain families consider the birth of a girl as having incurred a debt worth four lakh rupees (approximately 9000 dollars) , as there would be the additional responsibility of finding a suitable groom and paying for her wedding. She criticizes Manu who created the book of laws on social rules during Vedic period, called the *Manusmriti.* Gurumaa points out that Manu's conceptualization of women's roles is flawed because he associates women with weakness. Her contention rests on the matter of families that condition women to think of themselves as fragile and needing protection.

Need for Equality

Her argument centers on establishing equal status for women and men by emphasizing the purpose for women's existence, which holds the same importance as the purpose for men's existence:"to make the best possible contribution to her generation and to the world"(4). She explains through the rest of the book that females can make "best possible contribution" by excelling in areas in which men have been seen. n Gurumaa rebukes the practice of women fasting for their husband's long life stating that the practice is scientifically unproven and praises women for the ability to give birth stating that women prove themselves as superior creators by having the ability to give birth, than men who can only satisfy their desire for creativity by inventing, sculpting, painting, or climbing mountains. Most of Gurumaa's accounts of abuse or discrimination consist of common issues that people read about in the news, experience at home, or learn about from an external source. For example, she recounts an instance when a family mourned the birth of a daughter and responded with saying they had received a debt by having a baby girl born into a family as the total cost of marrying her off would total to lakhs of rupees. As shown in the introduction, many families dislike the birth of daughters and in referring to the same issues Gurumaa does not add any extra knowledge; rather she brings up known issues or highlights behavior heretofore not seen as causing discrimination or weakness in women. Hence by bringing up those issues that may not have been seen as problematic earlier, she focuses on bringing about change for women.

Religion and the Usage of the Term "Shakti"

Gurumaa does not explicitly point a finger at any one person, religion, culture, class, or caste, when discussing how lawyers and police blame raped women for wearing provocative clothes or going out alone late in the evening, or how close-relatives and "sometimes even the father" rapes a woman. However, when dealing with the section on religious figures who have either supported or shunned female empowerment, Gurumaa refers to important figures in religion like the Prophet Mohammad, Jesus, a Hindu saint, Manu, and saints of Sikh religion, among others, to support or refute her ideas.

Gurumaa uses religion, mainly Hindu scriptures and Hindu religious epics, to show that holy scriptures either carry stories of shameless abuse against women by gods and gurus or that holy scriptures do not really bar women from certain religious customs and practices and that priests construct false perspectives. When she criticizes priests, she does not limit her condemnation to Hindu priests but argues that other religions like Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Sikhism historically prevent equality for men and women. Gurumaa refers to Manu, the individual whose *Manusmriti*, or Laws of Manu, constitute as one of the most valuable sources regarding human conduct out of the *Dharmasashtras* or Hindu scripture on laws and customs. She criticizes Manu's ideas about how women need to be protected by the males in her family a father when young, a husband when married, and a son when the husband dies.

Anandmurti Gurumaa appeals to her female audience on several levels. She begins by explaining the value of "shakti" in Hindu culture, saying, "Shakti

symbolizes power-the divine power to create, to sustain and to evolve" (Gurumaa 1). She argues that when conditioned with "fear, discrimination and dependence," women cannot "draw out the radiant woman hidden within -"; she also establishes that *Shakti* would act as a "tribute to 'womanhood' as it motivates, guides and uplifts the spirits of women" (3). She invites women to realize the potential of their inherent female-power. Moreover, the kind of power that she urges women to identify specifically concerns power women have had for a long time but remained dormant because of male oppression.

Her introduction provides a preview into matters that require attention, beginning with explicating how violence against women occurs and who plays a role in bringing about such conditions. She mentions in the first few pages of the book that she would include "scientifically tested and proven facts-biological and psychological"; she exhibits her knowledge of science by describing about the first few stages of pregnancy and the influences that a mother can have on an unborn baby. She characterizes feticide as a moral crime when she extensively discusses the "passion for life which is inherent in the soul of a baby" (17). She cites *Ayurveda* alongside modern science, documentary films on *BBC,* to construct a strong argument about the wrongs of feticide.

Treatment of the Guru Figure by Gurumaa

The main idea in the book deals with the need for women to brace themselves against several kinds of situations that they face being a part of a society that does not give them the opportunity to realize their full potential as strong women with "shakti"

or energy. Yet, along with this central message that she conveys to women, Gurumaa defines her role as a preacher well informed to address a mass of people on the subject of female subjectivity and the subsequent need to speak up against the adverse situation that she sees them facing. Yet, in many respects, Gurumaa does not meet the expectations or the norms demanded from a preacher in the Hindu culture. Thus, one of the significant aspects of Gurumaa's self-representation concerns non-adherence to a normative female role.

In the book, Anandmurti Gurumaa seeks to help women realize their innate power or *shakti.* She takes on several ways to make such an assessment and in the process becomes different from the typical guru expected by the audience. Thus, guruhood in the present times attains a new niche in terms of creativity applied by Anandmurti Gurumaa. Moreover, the shift in practices observed by Gurumaa indicates a significant change in the functions attributed to a guru. Guru, does not remain the same in meaning because Gurumaa posits a non-normative position throughout the text.

The last part of the book deals with advisory information for women on how they can help other women. She begins by mentioning that a woman that engages in Yoga exercises can start to help herself by building her inner female strength. Gurumaa insists that women need to begin by improving and sustaining a healthy life-style, which begins with Yoga in order to enhance their overall development. She also concludes by saying that women need to find their inner strength because "We (women) are divine. We are God" (63). In any part of the book Gurumaa does not

make it explicit that she intends for people to donate money for the education of female children whose families are not able to afford to send them to schools. She merely points out that with education women would move toward attaining empowerment. The book acts as an accompanying piece to the Shakti foundation and there is almost no connection that Anandmurti Gurumaa makes to the charity in her book. However, the book is meant to serve as an initiative to further the word about a charity organization established specifically for the purpose of educating female children.

Gurumaa the Author

Termed the "modern day mystic," Anandmurti Gurumaa addresses popular issues in Indian society involving women in her book *Shakti.* The issues that Gurumaa treats in the book revolve around daily lives of women as well as those issues that are accepted and maintained as tradition. Anandmurti Gurumaa's book works as a reminder to readers about the situation that women face in India. Her approach toward referencing the multifaceted issues surrounding women, the manner in which rules are enforced upon women, and the way such regulations are politicized in the day-to-day affairs, draws attention to decrees deemed by religion and culture as unquestionable norms. Gurumaa acts in the capacity of a female preacher in present day India. Importantly, her work reveals how she functions as a female leader by maximizing the advantages of being a religious persona. As she negotiates the position of guru and feminist thinker through her writings intersecting identities emerge that balances both statuses without jeopardizing her role as guru. The role of guru defines Anandmurti

Gurumaa better than that of an activist or a feminist thinker. Yet, in *Shakti* she presents her ideas in such a well patterned framework that instead of starkly contrasting or standing out against each other, the identity of Gurumaa reaches a point where all strands of personas activist, thinker, and guru blend together to create a distinctive yet homogenous identity. Before delving further into the way in which the text explores such characteristics in *Shakti*, the understanding of the significance of the term "guru" in the context of Hindu religion needs to be discussed. The next section focuses on the history of guru tradition in India.

Guru Tradition

The guru tradition emerged as a "unique teaching tradition" in India almost 2500 years ago and since then has evolved considerably to refer to teaching on human spirituality rather than an all-inclusive pedagogy based custom. The following section briefly summarizes the teachings of preachers from the earliest time period until the present times. It is crucial to understand the relationship between the general public and the guru in order to understand the kind of impact that the book is likely to make on people. Guru worship exists as an ingrained tradition for Hindus in India. Joel Mlecko states that in the Hindu tradition "guru" acts as important agent for passing on the precepts of long standing religious customs on to the student. In elaborating about the concept of guru in Hindu custom, Mlecko describes the meaning of guru for the ancient Indian education system. He writes, "For Hindus religion is manifested or embodied in the continuing successive presence of the guru…who reveals the meaning of life; he is the immediate, incarnate exemplar in life, and as such, the guru is an

inspirational source for the Hindu…guruhood is the oldest form of religious education still extant" (33-42). Mlecko, writing about "guruhood" in the 1980s, focuses on the guru concept from the perspective of the phenomenon being chiefly a Hindu practice. Hereafter, the guru tradition, will be referred to as guruhood.

The use of the word "guru" refers back to the tradition that began more than 2500 years ago when education was in its nascent stage. As pointed out by Pratima Kale in her article on the examination of relationship between guru and student, the term guru indicates a standard title to refer to one who is seen not just as a teacher in the pedagogical sense but also one who assumes the role of a "spiritual guide and mentor" to people. Furthermore, Kale tells us that the *guru* figure is one who lacks interest in "material wealth and power;" one who is recognized as a "philosopher" and "thinker" who thirsts for knowledge (370-372). From the earliest period, the role of the guru was one fulfilled by men who belonged to the Brahman class. The male individual selected for the role of guru, engaged students with the teachings of the *Vedas,* and occupied the position of high esteem in the society. In exploring the oral tradition of teaching, William Cenkner argues that in choosing to classify an entire class (the Brahman class) of the social hierarchy as possible gurus, education was improved overall and an education system was developed (5).According to Mlecko the meaning associated with guru changed considerably throughout the ages.

Mlecko identifies *bhakti,* or devotion tradition, as the foremost type of tradition in guruhood that shaped what we understand as guruhood in the present day. *Bhakti* asserts that one can reach God through "affection and submission" and the guru played

an important part in educating devotees about building such a kind of relationship with God (46). Thus, with such a kind of role, guru was moving from the role of an all-round educator to that of a spiritual guide who inspired people to develop intimate associations with God. A person filled with the desire for *bhakti* would wish to get closer to their God and in the process the guru would act as the means through which to attain the closeness with God (46). The function of the guru in the present times works to fulfill the same agenda.

Furthermore, with the advent of Buddhism, the philosophy of Sankaracharya, prominent Buddhist preacher as well as others, the guru-student tradition branched out to explore religious philosophy other than the extant Hindu tradition. However, the custom remained within the fold of Hinduism and the only significant change that occurred constituted the dawning of "Vaisnavism" in the seventh century. "Vaisnavism," another movement that functioned along the lines of Buddhism and Jainism, added variety to the way in which devotees understood closeness to God through the help of the guru. Among others, popular gurus through the ages are Guru Vallabha and Caitanya of the *Vaisnavite* sect, Ramanuja in the eleventh century; and Kabir, who was Muslim yet followed the tenets of both Hinduism and Islam, also known for his non-philosophical way through devotional hymns and poems. These individuals were influential not only for the guidance they provided to the masses but also because they attempted alternative means of feeling at one with God (Mlecko 48-52).

As mentioned earlier, guruhood also served the purpose of helping the needy, a role not employed by gurus until Swami Vivekananda, a student of Ramakrishna. Ramakrishna lived during the mid-nineteenth century. Regarded highly for his ability to inculcate spirituality among his followers, Ramakrishna acquired the position of a "visionary" and "mystic" among people (Ramakrishna 60). Vivekananda, who carried on his legacy, continued the "social-welfare" teachings of his guru. The work of Swami Vivekananda continues to exist in the form of Ramakrishna Mission, which adheres to the principles of helping underprivileged and disabled children, the elderly, and underrepresented women, and provides help for rural development.

Guruhood in the Present Times

A look at the current trends on guru worship shows that gurus have become popular for the philosophy they espouse to their modern day students. Writing about the "spiritual boom" in India, Ravi Matah looks at the growing trend from the perspective of what leads people to seek a guru's help to better their lives in addition to looking into the way in which spirituality has grown as a business. Matah claims that people desire to learn about life from gurus. They spend money on visiting ashrams, meditation, buying books, CDs, booklets, and periodicals only for a temporary period and return to their personal lives once they have spent considerable time engaging in those activities. Matah opines that for a majority of Indians who utilize the help of astrologers and numerologists for matters including opening new business to buying property to marital prospects, spirituality of the kind offered by modern gurus like Anandmurti Gurumaa constitutes something that would be

embraced with wholehearted conviction. Matah recognizes the new craze for spirituality as that which people would be advised on the functioning of the "mind and soul" in their lives (Spiritual Boom). A popular trend in India for people interested in seeking involvement in spiritual enrapture and better contact with the gurus of their choice is to visit the guru's ashram. Hence, popularity of the guru system has grown. Both male and female gurus have garnered the attention of several followers.

Rise of Female Gurus

In considering the broad tradition of guru worship, scholars note the rise of female gurus or "holy women" as rejuvenated in the present times (Pechilis 4; Pintchman 168). Karen Pechilis offers extensive insight into the ideas behind the spiritual guidance provided by gurus like Sita Devi, Gauri Ma, Mother Meera, and others. She argues that several female gurus have entered into a male-oriented guru tradition while others have chosen to have a female guru influence.

The proliferation of female gurus has been in other countries, as well as India. A 2002 article by Gregory Meyer, tracing popularity of female gurus in the United States, finds that in Chicago the number of people seeking the "divine" experience from gurus like Anandmayi Maa, Karunamayi, and Ammachi have increased as the gurus visit the United States. Meyer asserts that the reason for the growing popularity of female gurus lie in the philosophy of spirituality that they advocate. Followers perceive the gurus as pure in body and spirit, as well as well-versed in Vedic traditions that emanate from Hinduism.

Minute scrutiny and a critical gaze mark Anandmurti Gurumaa's examination into women's lives. She begins by observing how equality for women has been compromised probing into abuse within families, which includes the relationship between a husband and a wife and domestic violence. She uses her position as a guru to talk about sensitive personal issues that would not otherwise be a part of normal discussions such as restriction from entering temples for women during their menstruation or abuse by family members. Her audience accepts her legitimacy to speak about such issues because she references accepted Hindu texts as evidentiary support for her claims as acceptable owing to her credibility as a guru. Through *Shakti* Gurumaa attempts to change long held perceptions about accepted norms for women. She gives an extended account of the right way to treat women, which includes education for girls. Gurumaa uses her status as a radical guru who debunks religious customs to cast women's issues in a new light. *Shakti* offers Gurumaa a platform through which to begin a dialogue about women's issues, as well as gain the attention of donors. The larger frame, which offers as the point of entrance into putting her views on women to the forefront is the charity foundation. Shome mentions that in a transnational world, there is an "official narrative" with which everyone is familiar. In this case, Gurumaa's charity foundation for donating money for education of young girls fits as the "official narrative" that acts as an entry point to explore into the way in which society practices different treatment toward women.

Gurumaa published *Shakti* and founded a charitable organization with the same name. The two entities work in tandem to draw attention to women's issues. Gurumaa

voices her opinion on different women's issues in *Shakti*, which then takes on material form through initiatives commenced by her charitable foundation. The book acts an accompanying piece to Shakti foundation and she makes almost no connection to the charity organization in her book.

Gurumaa is a much–needed spokesperson for women in India. As Indian scholars Suma Chitnis and Madhu Kishwar indicate, women in India, especially those on the lower rungs of society, lack strong advocates for their rights. Gurumaa's position as guru and the ease with which she elaborates on issues involving rape, abuse, domestic violence, and female infanticide satisfies the call for indigenous advocates who understand the social context. Moreover, Gurumaa as an advocate brings attention to the issues as someone who has the ability to bring change.

Gurumaa continually infuses the text with "consciousness-raising," beginning with knowing about the divinity of female self to realizing that some of the practices that women follow in their families do not relate to truth. At all levels of inquiry and exploration, she keeps "consciousness-raising" as a primary goal. Gurumaa does not make it explicit that she intends for people to donate money for the education of poor female children. However, the book serves as an initiative to further the word about her charity organization established specifically for educating female children.

Unlike organizations that only cater to any issue for a certain period of time, Shakti presents itself as a well-based foundation that strives for women's empowerment through education. Ruth Vanitha reports that women's organizations in India tend to pay attention to only those issues funded by international bodies for the

duration for which the funds are available. Such funds are available on a yearly basis, so the issues that the women's organization would tackle differ from year to year, according to the interests of the funding organizations providing money. Thus, while an issue like the education of female children might be preeminent one year, the next year some other issue might replace it. Thus, Gurumaa's attention to education for less privileged girls offers a perennial form of charity as opposed to the seasonal interest to women's issues given by many international organizations.

Other organizations exist to advance the cause of women. For example, Dagar in Bihar caters to women and children in distress, as does KROSS, or Karnataka Regional Organizations for Social Service, in Karnataka. In addition, Self Employed Women's Association and Health and Education for Children operate at the national level to help women and children in need. Thus, other charity organizations exist in India to bring about improvement for children and women. Anandmurti Gurumaa's Shakti Foundation is not a prototype establishment but is one of the many organizations that have mushroomed all over the country in the recent years.

SurfIndia.com and *Asia Major.com* point out that institutions provide help for deprived persons based on such needs as "relief in the form of free education, medical care…betterment in quality of life" not just for children abandoned by their parents but also for the elderly who need care. Organizations that provide services particularly for less privileged female children are not many in number. *GiveIndia.org*, lists a number of charity organizations through which a person can donate money; it mentions a list of criteria such as environment, health, education, elderly, disabled,

children, and women. The needs of less privileged children do not include merely education and shelter, but also helping those who are HIV-positive with medical bills, sanitation, education, and health to homeless children, in addition to sponsoring meals at schools. So, providing help to female children abandoned by families forms one of the criterion out of several. Gurumaa's Shakti Foundation is not ground breaking as many organizations in India are supported by celebrities and well-known figures from different fields, such as cricketers, Bollywood actors, businesses, and other spiritual gurus.

Many charitable organizations seem convincing and true to the ways in which the needy are helped with the money that is donated to the foundation. Some of the popular gurus who have established such charitable organizations are Swami Balendu in Vrindavan who established Shree Bindu Sewa Sansthan, Sri Mata Amritanandamayi or Amma, popular for blessing followers by hugging them, heads the AMMA organization that participates in providing humanitarian relief to persons in distress around the world. *Self-Realization Fellowship* which is based on the ideals established by Paramahansa Yogananda, a renowned spiritual guru whose last name denotes "*ananda*" meaning bliss through divine union" (*Self-Realization Organization*). The increasing numbers of organizations that appear both in major cities and at the national level, inundate people about a host of organizations on the needs of the children. However, Anandmurti Gurumaa comes across as a more familiar figure compared to the other organizational founders concerned with improving the conditions of less fortunate. Her popularity through the workshops,

retreats, written matter on spirituality and more importantly televised talks increased the number of her followers. Thus, Gurumaa's name and status as a guru offer credibility for both her charitable organization and *Shakti.*

Popularity of Gurumaa

Gurumaa is a popular guru who writes about female empowerment and attempts to provide help to less privileged women in India. Currently, Gurumaa is one of the most widely recognized female gurus in India. Her book, *Shakti,* empowers women by upholding ideals about womanhood and by questioning accepted gender norms. The book draws attention to issues faced by women of all ages, such as the perception of women in different roles that they fulfill in the household. The book establishes a respectable place for women in the society by establishing them as embodiment of "shakti". Gurumaa attempts to imbue the text with the notion of gender equality as a tradition rooted in Indian culture.

Gurumaa advocating these issues casts the concerns related to women into a new light. She looks at it through the lens of religion, reinterpreting texts that are holy in nature, written specifically for a Hindu audience who believe strongly in the word of God. Information about Gurumaa available through blogs posted by her followers, news sections written about her, or interview sessions with Gurumaa herself give insight into Anandmurti Gurumaa as guru or teacher. A significant body of literature about Gurumaa does not exist. Much of her popularity arises from experience that people have gained after listening to her on Sony TV, a popular Hindi channel in India. Blog posts comment on the effectiveness of Gurumaa's meditation seminars and

words of wisdom expressed in spiritual meetings organized. Indiawire advertises her "5-days Satsang," or five days religious meeting, as a retreat offered by a "revolutionary and technosavvy" guru. In their book, *Religion, Globalization and Culture*, authors Beyer and Beaman note that the success of modern gurus like Anandmurti Gurumaa lie in their ability to market themselves successfully. Beyer and Beaman further assert that much of Gurumaa's teachings consist of the same matters written or spoken about by other spiritual gurus.

Gurumaa's website highlights her "modern mystic" self. Much of the material written about her in interviews, spirituality related magazines, and music related articles reinforce the spiritual master status that her website ascribes to her. Characterized as an iconic figure in the arena of spirituality, Anandmurti Gurumaa offers a perspective of the world that directly confronts the harsh realities experienced by women. Not many individuals have researched Gurumaa. Thus, many outer sources which write about Gurumaa call her a "self-confessed mystic," "redoubtable Anandmurti Gurumaa," or "Godwoman," while news pieces on Hindu Council UK, describe her as "enlightened" or "noted teacher and master" (The Telegraph; Life Positive Expo 2006).

The Gurumaa website provides an overview about the life and concepts of Gurumaa's teachings. She was born and raised in the state of Punjab. As a youngster, she is said to have had a desire for spiritual thirst that led her to embark on travels around the country and dedicate her life to living as a hermit. Settling in the flat lands of Gannaur in Haryana, a state that relies on agriculture for economy, Gurumaa began

acting as a spiritual guide. Most of the news stories written about her describes her as "religious and motivational leader," often noting her prowess helping people convert "dhyana, anger, greed or other forms of negativity" into positive emotions through meditation (The Telegraph; Life Positive Expo 2005). Anandmurti Gurumaa composes meditation chants and hymns. Kumara Swamy, a columnist for *The Telegraph* mentions Gurumaa as one of the leading composers of devotional music as a genre . Swamy write about Gurumaa's compositions that work to induce "Yoga Nidra" - music that guarantees uninterrupted sleep with consciousness. An online edition of *The Hindu,* another Indian newspaper, commends the kind of music sold in the market consisting of "philosophical verses" sung by her. Thus, her popularity lies in not only her spiritual talks and writings, but also the production of devotional and therapeutic music. Her influence on followers tends to be all encompassing and pervasive, ranging from teaching about meditation to attaining peace of mind.

Besides inspiring people to meditate and explore spiritual meaning, Anandmurti Gurumaa discusses issues useful for people in day-to-day matters. Overwhelming numbers of people visit her ashram (place of spiritual retreat) and the number of subscriptions to periodicals written by her increases each year. Apart from establishing the *Shakti* Foundation, which works to attract donors to educate female children, Gurumaa focuses many of her speeches and writings, toward issues that concern her audience. Gurumaa asks questions about how people should receive spirituality in their lives and answers those questions herself, while drawing her readers into redefining their interpretation of meditation and the way in which spiritual

understanding should come about in an individual. Her meditation camps are popular, packed with people who come from all over to hear her speak about ways to become spiritual, as well as about other issues involving families, relationships, society in general, and an overarching framework of how a person should act and function (Deol). Gurumaa publishes "Rishi Amrit," a monthly newsletter consisting of articles and information about forthcoming events at her ashram. Through the talks and periodicals, Anandmurti Gurumaa considers matters related to spirituality, health, sex, love, and relationships, as well as reinforces the wisdom behind portions of *Shrimad Bhagvad Gita* (holy text of the Hindus). Her meditation camps reflect her involvement with different aspects of life. Hailed as a "mystic" and "guru" by her followers, Anandamurti Gurumaa occupies a revered position as a teacher.

Rising popularity places Gurumaa among the experts in such fields as Ayurveda, Yoga, and other indigenous means of promoting ways of living among people in India. *The Hindu*, a daily newspaper, ranks Anandmurti Gurumaa alongside professionals who have proved their expertise in such fields as tarot reading, hypnotherapy, and relatively new ways of keeping healthy like "past life therapy" or "Sun Yoga" (deriving energy from the sun). *Soul Curry*, a magazine that specializes on means of inculcating spirituality through different means like meditation, Yoga, and Zen states that Gurumaa's knowledge on "Sufism…the Upanishads, the Geeta," as well as mastery on the words of "Shankaracharya, Buddha, the Zen Master," place her as "living master" among ordinary people.

The Shakti Foundation

Gurumaa established the Shakti Foundation to help less privileged young girls to receive a decent education, providing them with an opportunity to read, write, and develop a sense of "self-dignity." The mission focuses on providing financial assistance to unfortunate girl children in parts of India. The website sums up the Shakti Foundation by stating that, "Mission Shakti: Empowering The Girl Child…is a wake up call to combat the heinous practices of female infanticide and the brutalities afflicted on the girl child in India."

One of the most identifiable ways in which guruhood has changed from earlier times is in the means by which gurus reach out to their audience. Gurumaa's method of addressing her audience through television, a website about her organization, and newsletters constitute an innovative way to communicate her message to her audience. Along with subscribing to her newsletters and visiting her website, people can also buy CDs of hymns sung by her and meditation music produced by her organization. In embracing all modern forms of media, Gurumaa structures her spiritual teachings to fit into the contemporary lifestyle. Thus her readers, and those who listen to her messages, include persons who have the time and money to spare for visiting the ashram and indulging in attending the meditational camps, ranging from educated middle class families to persons on the higher rungs of society. Hence, the same people could also devote attention to *Shakti* as one of the positive moves made by Gurumaa to improve the possibility of better education for girls in India.

In this feminist rhetorical analysis of the text I examine the manner in which a well known guru is able to expound her views on gender equality in India by

addressing the topic not merely from the level of a socio-political agenda but also by examining the root of the issue as well as the nexus between religion and gender roles in society. Although women are considered equal to men, and women successfully handle jobs seen to be viable only for men, Gurumaa contends that women still do not get treated equally. Gurumaa professes deep concern for women who belong to the majority and function as homemakers as opposed to women who work outside of home. She argues that abuse and inequality begins at home for the majority of middle-class women who stay at home with their in-laws and husbands.

According to Gurumaa, women continually face disrespect through the institutions of religion and marriage, as well as the practices of teasing or bullying, defined earlier as eve teasing. Gurumaa states that women feel belittled and weakened when men use disparaging remarks and refer to women as unfit to participate in religious rituals while on their menstrual cycle. Such issues are topics known to people that are not challenged. Delving into such details about women's issues reveals that Gurumaa seeks to awaken feelings of sympathy in people. Many of the issues about which Gurumaa speaks do not easily conform to traditional subject matters addressed by gurus. Nevertheless, Gurumaa asserts her views, which people may consider as radical or going against tradition set in the scriptures. A feminist rhetorical analysis of *Shakti* shows that Gurumaa negotiates the guru position by utilizing her guru status to advocate her ideas on the nature of the creation of female weakness in the Indian society.

Gurumaa focuses on women across different levels of class and caste, and includes the account of ordeals that women go through from birth to late adult life, to draw attention to major and minor issues that position women as weak. For Gurumaa, women's inability to live or to work in a safe environment and their treatment through tradition and culture call for active investigation into the matter. Since changing times and new kinds of jobs require women to be outdoors or study/work in cities away from home, society accepts women in such new roles. However, as mentioned earlier, crimes against women remain high while cases of female fetuses being killed appear in the news frequently (Swayam; BBC News). Besides the role of teacher/guru of spirituality, Gurumaa steps into the role of a social activist, embarking on the process of sensitizing, as well as educating, her audience to unmask labels of weakness and ineffectuality put on women by religion, society, and people. Her views are geared toward an urban middle-class audience to an upper-class audience, in addition to others in the diaspora. She encourages her audience to question basic assumptions and to inquire into the feasibility and validity of long held norms regarding gender. Through her position, Gurumaa expands the rhetoric utilized by gurus. Her rhetoric in *Shakti* works to sensationalize audience to accept and comply with her ideas on empowerment.

This thesis examines *Shakti* from the lens of feminist rhetorical criticism to illuminate Gurumaa's strategies of drawing from familiar sources to expose persons to the treatment of women. Before delving into the analysis, the following section looks into the available literature on feminism focusing specifically on writings by twentieth

century rhetoricians on religion, the type of feminist workdone in India, and contemporary feminist thought on rhetorical criticism.

CHAPTER III

FEMINISM IN THE PRESENT TIMES: AT THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Feminism in Developing Countries

From Mexico to Cape Town in South Africa, feminists have worked to make the general public aware of such evils as discrimination and sexual crimes against women. Alma Mater, a women's organization in Turin, Italy, caters to the problems faced by immigrant women while at the same time educating the Italian people about cultural differences that exists between the dominant culture and the migrants who live and work in Italy. Sabla Sangh, established in Delhi, India, educates women living in slum settlements about the rights that protect them from injustices at home or workplace.

Issues of women highlighted by present day feminists in Australia, Canada, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Japan, the United States, and other countries deal with lack of equity and human rights. Issues range from the right to have decent employment to the right to engage in daily activities without intervention by state (Shaw 256; Nozaki 172). Mahatani notes that despite the growing number of female journalists in Canada males still dominate. In her article "The Latin American Feminist NGO 'Boom,'" Sonia Alvarez notes that feminist nongovernmental organizations in Latin America are instrumental in creating "self-help, social service, and training programs for poor and working-class women" (123). Nighat Said Khan, in her article "Up Against the State," recounts fighting allegations by the provincial government. She states that the provincial government in Pakistan allegedly accused Khan's organization's help

toward women's organizations like "Shirkat Gah, a women's resource center;…the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan; AGHS a women's law firm…women's organizations…led by women" as "anti-state, anti-government, anti-Islam…immorality, debauchery, pro-Hindu, pro-Jewish" (86-87). Both articles highlight active involvement by social activists in helping women secure human rights. Socio-political and economic forces are linked intermittently to how women's issues are received and handled in any country. Dixon-Mueller and Germain note that through participation in such events as "Woman's Global Network on Reproductive Rights," feminists in developing countries gain support and recognition for the improvement that they attempt to secure in their own countries. These global networks strive to foster women as "researchers, communicators, facilitators, and catalysts" for bringing about change by participating in feminist nongovernmental organizations or by joining a local women's organization (213). Transnational feminism is another growing concept that defines social activism in developing countries.

In the introduction to the book, *Feminist Politics Activism and Vision*, Angela Miles points out that "grassroot victories at the local level and creating new forms of communicating and organizing at the global level" would lead to empowering and to enriching "global movement…[and] common struggles" (13-14). Miles claims that positive feminist collaboration would fight lack of equity. In addition, the collaboration would work for transformation in areas of "wealth, work, peace, democracy, leadership, sexuality, family, human rights, development, community and citizenship" which would lead to realization of the feminist goals all over the world

(15). Thus, Miles aims for promoting feminism at the local level rather than waiting for change to be encouraged from outside.

Mohanty, Russo, and Torres state that the fundamental difference between western and non-western feminism lies in the lack of geographical space for the latter. They categorize feminism in developing nations as "imagined communities" for which the boundaries are fluid even though geographical and historical space that can be recognized exists. The concept of "imagined community" arises from the notion that all women concerned with issues of "race" and "gender" form together a community, even though they may not share physical space. Thus, the basis of feminism in developing countries stems from the need to address the issues of women from such countries as Latin America, Caribbean, South and Southeast Asia, and South Africa (5).

In the context of how changes that come about in developing countries affect women, Aihwa Ong argues in her article, "Colonialism and Modernity: Feminist Re-presentation of women in Non-Western Societies," that the notion of women in developing countries being liberated from house-work and driven into industrial settings is considered "Westernizing" and "modernizing" traditionally established roles. Ong problematizes the concept of "modernization" by claiming that women tend to face similar exploitation as cheap labor in roles as factory workers as they experience within the household. Her criticism also extends to the framing of Asian feminist issues as exotic by Western feminists. She states that such implications as rooted moral values that may not be able to be detached from roles of females in Asian

societies like China or Japan are not taken into account when social-feminists criticize the backwardness and exploitation of women in these societies.

Ong creates a space for feminists in developing countries to explore the way they are perceived by Western feminists. Furthermore, Ong recognizes and seeks to uncover the hegemonic agenda at work behind Western feminists' approach to writings on the non-Western and primarily Asian women. Ong differentiates non-Western and Western feminism, in an attempt to help feminists from Asian countries create their own identities rather than be defined by Western feminists. In urging women from transnational perspectives to speak about issues in developing countries and recognizing the way power dynamics work with the concept of "modernizing" the developing nations, Ong creates a position for researchers, communicators, or facilitators to play a role in bringing about change. In other words, with the aforementioned knowledge, researchers and activists working in developing countries can recognize and modify attitudes so that "modernizing" for women in the developing countries develops according to its own dictates, sans Western influence.

A similar view about the influence of Western feminism is portrayed in Usamah Ansari's article on the documentary film about an Afghani-Canadian woman who goes to war-torn Afghanistan to seek a friend and exposes the non-Western world to her Western friend who accompanies her to Afghanistan. The article centers on the dilemma faced by a woman aware of implications of subjugating native women to the act of unveiling to Western audience. Through the story of Pazira, who finds herself saddened by the plight of the country she had left at the age of thirteen, Ansari draws

focus about the way Western feminism is offered a voyeur's role into the plight of native women. Ansari states that when Pazira's co-director, Paul Jay, enters into the scene as an emotionally detached figure, he symbolizes the European who looks at the Orient from the distance without getting involved. Paul Jay's presence in the scene as the co-director of the documentary film and Pazira's partner indicates that a Westerner would require invitation from the native as opposed to the easy access that was more likely before the war in Afghanistan. While Ong marks the "modernizing" or "westernizing" notions attached to transnational feminism in juxtaposition to feminism in the West, Ansari elaborates upon the "westernizing" influence. Ansari gives an emic perspective from within the culture; Ong talks about the phenomenon through an etic perspective outside of the culture. Both scholars stress the importance of keeping the indigenous position forefront when discussing non-Western feminism.

Bailey and Cuomo claim that feminists writing from transnational perspective speak from experiences that are different from those of white feminists. Significant explorations of female positions in postcolonial countries reveal that, even though functioning as laborers to an international market, women in Narsapur, women still had housewife label transfixed to their identities; women are always defined "in relation to men and conjugal marriage"(385). Thus, Mohanty, Russo, and Torres contend that characteristics of "flexibility, temporality, invisibility and domesticity" define women in developing countries, as they are assessed best by their capability to contribute to the labor force through these characteristics. Just as Ong clarifies in her assessment of how Western feminists construes an image of non Western feminists as

non-modern or out of sync with the West, Mohanty, Russo, and Torres remark that women in developing nations are characterized as docile individuals. Furthermore, as Gayatri Spivak argues a probe into postcolonial marginality requires new ways to be "learned and taught" (458-460). Hence Spivak acknowledges the difference between Western and non-Western feminisms, and further claims that to understand transnational feminism would entail newer approaches to understanding the phenomenon (458-460).

Transnational Feminism

Transnational feminism rooted in issues of Asia encourages feminists in Asian societies to take a critical look at the way in which feminism works in their lives. Construing the identity of the self becomes an issue of concern for feminism in non-Western societies for which a standard reference to feminism in Western countries is indispensable. Most positions advocated by feminists speaking with the knowledge of gender, race, color, and sex have a knowledge of Western feminism to begin. Without mentioning first, second, or third wave feminisms, the starting point for discussing feminism in developing nations or non-Western countries becomes difficult. As explicated above, Mohanty, Ong, and Spivak base their understanding of transnational feminism on the comparisons and contrasts with Western feminism. Maitrayee Chaudhuri in reference to the beginnings of feminism as an academic discipline in India, mentions the differences between Indian feminism and Western feminism. She refers to the dilemma she faced when teaching as to how to position gender issues of Indian women alongside radical or socialist feminism, which grew out of political

upheavals in the West. Chaudhuri adds that the historical, cultural, and political milieu in India differs considerably from that of the West. Thus, transnational feminism grew undoubtedly out of factors that differ from the West but beginning any discussion on transnational feminism with Western feminism as the starting point helps transnational feminists identify future directions for feminist studies.

Raka Shome in her article on the need for interdisciplinary research that transcends "geographical and spatial borders" urges that the knowledge systems that govern places outside of the West would work on a scale different from the one produced in the West. She states:

"I want to insist that in our current times…interdisciplinary work and agendas must…try to connect to, knowledge formations and vocabularies that reside in other modernities and other temporalities that are either refused recognition, or are not adequately translated, in machines of knowledge production in the West" (Interdisciplinary 3). Hence, Shome highlights the need for a body of literature on feminism that will have its own distinctive issues, which then would resonate with feminism globally.

Furthermore, Shome and Hegde recognize that "new relations of displacements and diaspora *within* the nation" that call for questioning the ways in which issues are generated within cultural spaces, which are, recognized as internal diasporas. Hegde and Shome clarify that inquiring into postcolonial space using any one methodology is not beneficial. Rather an awareness of "history, legacies of such methods" as well as "dilemmas that …confronts the researcher" are necessary (260-

261). Scholars recognize transnational feminist networks as a "product of sociodemographic, economic, political and cultural changes" that work in multiple countries at once (Moghdam, 3).Transnational feminism has been observed in connection with the effort that females have applied in order to improve the status for women. For the most part transnational feminism has observed movements and organizations that has worked toward assuring social justice, economic equality and human rights of women. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan contend that the local-global divisions recognized as occurring in transnationalism is problematic to be labeled on to societies that do not identify such kinds of divide. Moreover transnational scholars point out that there is a lack of "view points across the world" for issues that transnational feminism covers (Grewal and Kaplan; Moghdam).

This thesis uses feminist rhetorical criticism as the method to analyze "emerging sites of inquiry" that Gurumaa offers in the form *Shakti*, as well as through her identity of guru. Locating and identifying the work of Gurumaa as transnational body echoes the similarity between the method and the phenomenon being observed. Feminist rhetoricians contend that the voice of persons unheard would need to be reworked with change in approach and "consciousness raising" activities to make the female voice heard. Similarly, Shome and Hegde emphasize the need for the knowledge systems of other cultures and other spaces be recognized to make the transnational voice sound holistically transnational, instead of letting the influence of globalization dictate an ill-informed space for issues of importance outside the West.

Hence Shome's practice of drawing from other spaces discourages the labeling of globalization to issues that may not be identified as global by persons affected by globalization. She tells us that learning about a transnational space requires probing into history specifically it requires a deeper examination into "grassroot narratives" to avoid stereotyping definitions. Furthermore, Shome distinguishes between "grassroot narratives" and "official narratives" by pointing out that what exists in reality may actually be extremely different from the picture offered through "official narrative."

Scholars like Shome, Hegde, and Gajjalla question the manner in which they as researchers approach south Asian, and specifically Indian, issues on empowerment, agency, or reinterpretation of epistemological standpoints that define the worldview for persons being discussed. They identify the need for detailed inquiry into the working issues in countries recognized as post-colonial spaces to understand the functioning of epistemological processes when posited against such aspects as globalization or transnational identities. Scholars examine various media that function as a space for transnational voice within the country being studied to understand how to connect the diaspora with its culture. In addition to observing the grassroot narratives of local organizations, they examine the space created via the internet in the form of "online discussion boards" and "digital diasporas" (Williamson and DeSouza 2; Gajjala 1).

Gurumaa's Advocacy as a medium of Communication in Transnational Spaces

Gurumaa is empowered by her work as spiritual guru in India to encourage people to improve conditions for females within the country. Gurumaa espouses radical views on religion to help her audience, both within the country and outside, to understand the plight of women. Hence, use of Collins "material rhetoric," whereby exploration into rhetorical function of a text is not limited to the act but includes factors that influence the act, reveals that Gurumaa employs a transnational network. Marouf Hasian argues that investigation into "multiple trajectories" that influences an artifact would be required for looking into postcolonial communities. Radical discourse undermines Gurumaa's position as spiritual leader, but she connects transnational bodies within the country, with those in diaspora regarding the conditions of women in India. Gurumaa employs strategies of resistance and empowerment to bring about "transformative social change and resistance" within "transnational collective action spaces" through her advocacy in *Shakti* ("Organizing Tensions" 8)

In *Shakti*, Gurumaa writes for a fairly well-educated audience using a religious perspective. In other words, Gurumaa references various religions to make her point about lack of equality for women in Indian society. Her identity as guru influences the ideas of empowerment for women that she puts forth. Furthermore, she advocates that some religious customs and rituals prevent women from realizing their potential for "shakti" or feminine energy, a radical perspective for a guru. However, as the following section claims, women in the capacity of preachers have espoused

radical messages throughout the decades. The following section explains how Western females negotiate radical positions in their discourse.

Historical Overview of Women's Writings on Religion

Female preachers have received mixed responses from the audience of their times. Stanton's *Women's Bible* figures notably as one of the most groundbreaking texts in terms of her radical negotiation of the female position in the Christian religion. Stanton creates a place for women in the "Women's Bible" based on the biblical story of the fall of man. Stanton advocates what some consider an ultra-radical theory claiming that Eve eating the fruit out of the tree of knowledge was not a sinful act, but an attempt to "satisfy her hunger for self-development" (Woodyard 294). Kerith Woodyard points out that Stanton received a lot of criticism for her controversial interpretation of the portions of the Old Testament. Stanton's attempt to enhance the equality of men and women, elicited negative responses from the *National American Woman Suffrage Association* (NAWSA), the clergy, the press, and other women. Woodyard contends that Stanton projects a voice that is radical in nature by disagreeing with religious views on the role of women in the Bible. Nevertheless, she constructs women as equal with men.

Woodyard argues that Elizabeth Cady Stanton put forth her ideas based on a marginalized standpoint and projected a prophet's voice that was not supported well by contemporary feminists. Like Stanton, Gurumaa references the lives of women and the marginalization that they experience. Yet the rhetorical vision that Anandmurti portrays goes deeper into the recesses of how empowerment among females should

work in the Indian society, which constitutes more than just a reinterpretation of a holy text. Gurumaa questions fundamental assumptions about Hindu religious texts like *Manusmriti*, laws set by Manu regarding human conduct. She refers to familiar Hindu rituals and questions the validity of the customs. Gurumaa constructs her criticism to debunk the attempts of female empowerment thwarted by other forces in society. Olive Anderson, writing about women in Victorian England, states that the growth of women preachers in England in the 1860s did not arise from a feminist upheaval but more through a natural revival in Christian faith that attested that men and women are equal "in Christ" and that women could perform the job of preaching better than men. According to Campbell, Angelina Grimke's Pennsylvania speech against abolition is a piece of "rhetorical masterwork," by implementing Biblical elements and assuming a transcendental "male-female" persona to better resonate with the audience.

Mary Ashton Livermore, a female preacher advocating women's suffrage in the last decades of the nineteenth century, used her "audience's shared knowledge of God's word and the authority derived from those words" to address the need for equal rights for men and women. She did not adopt a perspective like Stanton, but interpreted the Bible to highlight notions of equality for enfranchisement, Biblical instruction, and spiritual participation in the church. In explicating Livermore's preaching style, Barbara Gayle and Bohn Lattin contend that Livermore promoted her progressive stance by questioning and drawing examples from the Bible to support her argument, while aligning her advocacy with the ideology of predominant clergymen who supported voting rights for women.

In her analysis of Rita Gross's book *Feminism and Religion*, Katherine Young maintains that the approach Gross takes to explain the prevalence of men within power positions and public space,specifically religion, does not encompass female experiences sufficiently. In drawing attention to the use of "Vajrayana Buddhism" by Gross as the best type of religion that gave equal attention to both men and women and also drew upon ideas of feminism, Young clarifies that any one particular religion cannot promote social issues such as feminism. Young shuns the idea that a patriarchal system could be replaced by an androgynous one in which men and women would be free from stereotypical gender roles. Young argues that such a system would not necessarily create a bias-free religion, but would replace it with "feminist politics and psychology" (15). Scholars cite discourses by Grimke and Livermore as appealing to audiences by including ideas about religion that were well-supported by audiences already, while simultaneously maintaining the need for equality.

This literature problematize different conceptualizations of feminism. While on one hand women seem welcomed into the public sphere to speak on issues of religion, views aligning religion and feminism do not find wholehearted acceptance.

CHAPTER IV

FEMINIST RHETORICAL CRITICISM

Feminist rhetorical criticism is the guiding conceptual framework for this thesis. Feminists argue for discursive change, encouraging women to utilize language that would empower them. In addition, feminist scholars such as like Emerling, Schloz, and Griffin vouch for the use of "invitational rhetoric" whereby discourse participants attempt to understand each other's views rather than "win" an argument (435). Many scholars explore avenues that run parallel to Campbell's call for "consciousness raising." Nuyen's call to create discourse that resonates with all women, or Collins' appeal to consider all influential factors that create rhetorical spaces to empower women are examples. Furthermore, scholars mention that if a certain perspective does not seem to suit a particular culture, then further probing into the culture in question is needed (Renegar and Sowards 330; Ong 109). Hence, the following section provides a detailed deeper examination into a contemporary feminist perspective.

Twentieth Century Feminist Rhetoric

When considering the current agenda for rhetorical studies, Michaela Meyer notes there exists a lack of historical rhetoric for women, which subsequently changed with the inquiry into writings by women in "areas of social life" and their contribution to rhetoric. In recent times, Meyer tells us, feminist rhetoric has centered traditionally on victimization of women in the contemporary times within cultures. Meyer expostulates a position for feminist rhetoricians to take, which consists of steps beyond addressing subjection by males, into "constructing…agency" for women

through scholarly work. Meyer argues that feminist scholars need to prioritize the issue of "power" when dealing with rhetorical criticism of women's issues. She concludes that "real world communicative interactions" need to be taken into consideration with a focus on those actions that can transform across "culture, space and time" (10).

Valerie Renegar and Stacey Sowards argue that third wave feminism needs to fulfill the purpose of bringing together women with varied experiences while simultaneously keeping their fundamental differences intact. Renegar and Sowards encourage contemporary feminists to embrace the idea of "liberal irony," a term coined by Richard Rotry (338). In establishing the criteria for "liberal irony," they point out that scholars should approach the idea from the perspective of openness to other belief systems. In doing so, women would strike the right amount of "critical pose" (340). Renegar and Sowards also argue that feminists "reorder and transform systems, institutions, beliefs and language," which in turn projects through "liberal irony" (342). They claim that developing "liberal irony" into an overarching feminist theory for women would unite feminists from different parts of the world. By sharing a greater vocabulary and allowing for the critique and dissemination of ideas among all persons, notwithstanding such factors as language, culture, or geographical position. Renegar and Sowards draw attention to contingency and to solidarity as essential parts of liberal irony implying that, if they did so, feminists would not be limited to observing traditional feminist forms of protest such as protesting, "national speaking tours, public engagement and other confrontation strategies" (346). In

addition to observing traditional means of exploring feminist thought, further investigation into the pervasive effect of feminist issues in daily lives of people would entail talking to friends or interactions in the classroom. In short, "consciousness raising" would not be limited to observing isolated incidents of recognizing issues of concern among women. Rotry urges for examination of thought provoking ideas that women encounter through such modes as educational information or "consciousness raising" activities. Renegar and Sowards do not only advocate for such a move by women, but regard liberal irony as the basis of creating "liberal community," which women would achieve through engagement in conversations that bring about a critical perspective by looking into social issues for women.

Several scholars urge "consciousness-raising" as an important requirement for feminism to bring about change in the lives of women. The term "consciousness-raising" qualifies as a means of energizing women on several different levels. Meyer, as well as Renegar and Sowards, advocate the need for a female vocabulary. They mention that the work of women traditionally has been in the direction of raising awareness regarding oppression and humiliation faced at the hands of men. In order to successfully overcome being subjugated under male oppression, Meyer urges that females adopt language devoid of "internal ambiguity" and infused with "strategic ambiguity," which means that the language would allow for discourse that would resonate with all women and out of which a strong dialogue could be created. Hence, the feminist scholars mentioned above suggest different ways of sensitizing women to

bring about change in their lives. The following section delves deeper into the working of feminist rhetoric based on multiple perspectives.

Perspectives On different Feminist Ideologies

According to Sutherland, scholars need to have a view that does not concentrate on one dominant perspective, but makes available a collection of perspectives that bring forth "a complete vision of truth" (116-117). Sutherland encourages scholars to delve into "rhetorical theories and practices" employed by early modern women in their work, which would help scholars discover the ideas and practices held by them (121).

Contemporary feminist inquiry concentrates on language used or influences that overshadow the origination of the rhetorical phenomena being observed. Past scholars inquire into the kinds of discourses revealed when applying a feminist perspective to artifacts or ideas. In particular, after the pioneering work done by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell in the sphere of feminist rhetorical criticism, scholars including Naomi Wolf, Foss and Griffin, and Karma Chavez sought to understand how feminist criticism could best address the issues of women. Campbell's inquiry into "consciousness raising" as the primary goal of feminists began with her assessment of the earliest women speakers in the United States. Campbell found that the impact they had made acted as a clarion call in its very nascent stage. Following the introduction of Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin's "invitational rhetoric" and Naomi Wolf's "power feminism," scholars are poised to establish innovative strategies for understanding women's positions and the ways in which they negotiate their identities.

A. Tuan Nuyen states that feminist rhetoric can represent females and their concerns best when devoid of the language used by men, which constitute one of domination. The usage of such language leads to a replication of the language used by those persons in dominant positions. Nuyen argues that using language that involves "mixing…of different concepts and categories" by putting together "fact and fiction, prose and poetry, concepts and categories in different domains of knowledge" would make female voices heard in a better way (70). Nuyen urges for inclusion of unpredictability in the use of language by feminists in their writing by drawing in the influence of different aspects of knowledge, rather than develop the argument from a theoretical discourse that is entirely male-centered. In the works of Luce Irigaray, Gloria Anzaldua, and Donna Haraway, Nuyen perceives the characteristics of non-conformity to a set standard of writing. Nuyen claims that these authors consciously create a style of writing that attempts to decentralize the "organizing center," or the point from which a strong male theoretical discourse develops. As Nuyen states, "the…strategy is to break out of the totalization, to disrupt the tendency to indentify knowledge with men's constructions…by forsaking theoretical discourse in the conventional sense." Thus, a different concept of applying feminism in women's lives is prescribed (80-81). Thus, Nuyen suggests that the creation of a feminist style of writing, the form of "story telling, mythmaking, poetry" and away from the "masculine genre" of "essay writing," would help produce a substantial amount of feminist work by women.

Vicki Collins presents a unique perspective where she contends that detailed methodologies for analyzing women's rhetoric does not exist in abundance even though many theories have developed over time. Collins advocates "material rhetoric" as a methodology to examine the rhetorical functions explicated in texts, along with paying attention to factors that would influence the text such as the culture, time, and relationship among "authors, text(s), publishing authorities, discourse communities and readers" (547). Collins provides an analysis of Hester Rogers, a female preacher in the sixteenth century, to demarcate the working of rhetoric not just in the spiritual journal that she writes but in every text associated with the journal. Griffin draws attention to the lack of women's voice in the public sphere, claiming that it is concerned with "deceased white males" (22). According to Griffin, public sphere historically appears as a space which welcomes a certain set of ideas while ignoring or marginalizing others.

Griffin contends that women have seldom had the opportunity to appear in the public sphere, and whenever they have got the opportunity to do so it has come with the constant reminder that they have "anatomical limitations"(32-33). Griffin encourages further inquiry into how such distinctions occur. Similarly, in commenting about the way in which caste as a word had not generated indigenously through the caste system in India, but was borrowed from English vocabulary, and also the manner in which feminist work in India differs from the kind of feminist work done in the West, Bachhetta demarcates the point at which traditionally accepted views can be questioned.

Campbell attests the perception that Griffin highlights and substantially encourages by means of questioning fundamental assumptions. Karlyn Kohls Campbell concurs with Griffin that feminist critique should not only mean "inclusion of materials by and about women," but also "challenge to rethink fundamental assumptions…on social change and social movements" (213-214). Furthermore, Campbell assesses the extant literature on women's writings and the shortcomings that have prohibited writings by women to proliferate with the same success as men's writings. Such a probe into the rhetoric of women's writings reinforces the need to further examine the impact of female rhetors to uncover the current status.

According to Campbell, the manner in which Krista Ratcliffe critiques the work of Virginia Wolf, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich, draws out the theoretical significance for feminist issues, by situating theory into practice. Campbell argues that shadowed by language of men, women have resorted to finding their space through "crevices" such as conversations.

"Material rhetoric" draws attention to each and every facet likely to influence a rhetorical phenomenon and this kind of criticism urges to not only adhere to the text that is being observed but urges readers to consider other factors like the context, the range of influences that creator of the artifact may have had along with the kind of life they led. In attempting to understand the life of the rhetor and the way, the rhetor was perceived helps in understanding the text in its totality by observing and understanding each facet that had a hand in putting together the work. Campbell perceives the awareness to be burgeoning among women through everyday "conversation" making.

Thus, both scholars induce that the best way to address issues about women involves taking into consideration little details that seem insignificant and yet vital to understanding about women's conditions and how to deal with it. By questioning the limitations that have marked females to be situated in the periphery of public sphere and hence the need for questioning the very roots of domination, Griffin calls for positing an inquiry at its emergent phase.

Chavez espouses the theme of individual recognition and involvement with one's own experiences when she refers back to the goals on which feminism was based in its foremost days as a new movement. Chavez suggests that feminism needs women to share their personal experiences to establish "personal philosophy or theoretical position where themes of self-esteem, independence and personal empowerment" and appear in the limelight (14-15). In doing so, women's lived experiences would be empowered. "Power feminism" involves relying on one's innate power and strength while also maintaining the feminine side of the self (*Power Feminism Mediated* 110).

Chavez's power feminism coincides with Campbell's advocacy on women's individual experiences to evolve into a rhetorical stance dedicated to advocate women's issues. Chavez challenges the applicability of other scholars' versions of "power feminism," claiming that they do not take into consideration the experiences of all womankind. She particularly points out countries and cultures outside the United States as locations that would not have the same ontological and epistemological positions that would unable women to identify with "power feminism."

Through the positions maintained by scholars on how feminist rhetoric should function, several themes emerge. Scholars advocate the necessity for a change in language, from one of a subjugated, weak female to one that is stronger. Scholars also encourage activists to begin within one's immediate circle of female group. Furthermore, redefinition and meaningful understanding of individual positions, together with "self-determination" and questioning of "fundamental positions" while always attempting to gain understanding of other perspectives without the aim of attacking, are useful concepts for feminist scholars. Anandmurti Gurumaa negotiates her guru status as well as utilizes the aforementioned strategies in arguing about female empowerment in India. Each of the rhetorical strategies that scholars explore contributes to Gurumaa's argument in *Shakti* which chapter 5 and 6 cover in greater detail. Since the artifact observed here involves a text written by a female guru in India, the next section examines feminism in India. In addition, the issues faced by women and kind of perceptions that have dominated and prevailed too constitute as important to understand the epistemology that governs the understanding and ideals of the culture.

CHAPTER V

FEMINISM IN INDIA

Historically, society situates Indian women in deferential roles. As Radha Kumar points out, the primary reason for women's advocacy in the first few decades of the nineteenth century owed to the perception that women occupied subjective roles and that their "roles, functions, aims and desires" seemed different from that of men, a situation which called for recognition and acknowledgment(3-4). Nearly a century later, women in India expressed a need for "self-definition" that was more than just saying that they had different roles or desires (2).

The problem seen by Indian Feminists during the first few decades of the twentieth century was due primarily to the difference in perception between men and women about where women stood in the contemporary society. Educated males supporting female rights were of the perception that the roles played by women were "complementary and different." Thus, while on the one hand woman's position in society was defined specifically by the social categorizations of "mother" of the nation and power as female goddesses, on the other hand women wanted to assert their individuality by demanding equality in personal, public, and professional spheres. Women wanted to be able to receive an education, own property and vote. In the liberation movements that have come up in India the ones involving women have had a strong tone of "anti-patriarchal" values. Women speaking for women's issues mainly highlighted the household status of women, addressing issues such as "alcoholism, wife-beating…male control over resources" (3). Feminists in India perceive their

statuses as women to be complementary with their male counterpart. In other words, women speak for themselves with full acknowledgement that they biologically are different from men and thus have different roles to play. Nevertheless, women seek equality with men. Kumar identifies anti-patriarchal and feminist movements within Indian society. Kumar also recognizes lack of homogeneity in representation of women of one class, caste, or status by another. Kumar argues that even in the recent times one woman could not represent women of all classes sufficiently. Kumar attributes the inadequacy to prevalence of cultural inequalities. With the advent of the advocates of social reforms in India, the act of "sati" that involved burning women in the funeral pyre of the husband was banned. Along with the help of the contemporary colonial British officers, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Swami Vivekananda, in addition to others, spoke out for the liberation of widows burned on their husband's funeral pyre. Reformers in the nineteenth century claim that Hindu religious texts did not really support the idea of "sati" as required by the customs.

Two early concerns of reformers were education and child marriage. Education for women in India was initiated as early as the year 1815. Social reform associations such as Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj, and the Hindu Social Reform Association work to provide women with education. Yet not all women benefitted from their efforts. Women belonging to upper class Hindu society benefited, as communal bias against lower class Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and other tribal based communities exist.

The early twentieth century signified a period of recognition for women as they advocated for other women in the form of speeches given in the public spheres.

Reformers did not approve of Pandita Ramabai, one of the foremost female preachers, and as a result she converted to Christianity. Society looked upon female preachers with scorn with critics claiming that defense of women publicly brought about a lack of interest in women's rightful concern with household matters.

Action India, a Civil Rights organization founded in India in 1976, started out providing women of low-caste and those living in the slums with a sense of empowerment through educating them about their rights. According to Veronica Magar, the primary issues highlighted through "Action India" involved "advocacy, consciousness raising activities and social support" (39). Magar's enquiry into the "Sabla Sangh," an organization formed by women to confront domestic abuse, reveals that abused women not only find help through the organization during times of troubles but also a means of confidence building. The "Mahila Panchayat" makes decisions about the cases brought by "Sabla Sangh" workers. According to Magar, the "mahila panchayat" functions as an "all-women's court," offering a new direction for resolving women's problems through an establishment equivalent to that of a male-based court.

Bacchetta states that women's issues recently have been politically driven center on such topics as the ability to hold beauty pageants and lesbian rights. Ratna Kapur contends that government and people at large see beauty pageants as a form of commodification. In 1996, the swimsuit round of the *Miss World* was held in Mauritius, even though the rest of the beauty pageant was held in India (25). The movie "Fire" outraged anti-feminist factions. In "Fire," two unhappy sisters-in-law,

Radha and Sita, leave their husbands to live together as lesbians. The anti-feminists also criticized the use of names like "Radha" and "Sita," which resonated with the names of women in Hindu religious texts. As Kapur and Bacchetta explain, certain aspects of beauty pageants and lesbianism violate Indian culture.

Kapur argues that feminists need to take into account the whole range of ideas concerning situatedness, the influence, or the culture of victims or women who experience atrocities. For example, the labeling of "dowry murders" as an Asian women issue is not enough. Advocates need to research the ideology that frames the society to which the victim belongs and the nature of the victim's relationship with the abuser. Merely creating the persona of victim does not elicit change. Instead, feminists need to build a solid basis for "emancipatory politics," in which Indian women would be viewed different from the current stereotypical perspective of women who disregard Indian culture to embrace Western influence.

Contemporary Perspectives About Women In Developing Countries

Kapur states that "international legal politics" paints the picture of "thoroughly disempowered, brutalized, and victimized" women (19-20). "Gender essentialism," Kapur maintains, involves creating "natural, biological, or psychological" attributes for women. She argues that "gender essentialism" brings to the foreground problems such as marginalization, which results in women experiencing oppression without their situated positions being recognized (8). Kapur states that international feminism tracks the grievances suffered by women through numerous writings about trafficking women and dowry murders. The prevalence of dowry murders emerges primarily from

dowry giving as a part of marriage customs in India. Thus, positing culture and violence as interlinked in India. Women's liberation ties in India cannot be separated from nationalist perceptions of the ways in which women should behave.

Women's movements in the period portrayed an image of a culturally cognizant woman. Thus, a deliberate move existed to formulate the idea of Indian feminism as distinct from Western feminism through the portrayal and conservation of customs held valuable in Indian Hindu society. While on the one hand, Griffin asserts that the reason women appeared less in the public sphere pertains to their "anatomical limitations," on the other, Kapur's "gender essentialism" makes a similar claim by stating that women are constricted into certain roles by attributes placed on upon them. Kapur draws attention to the fact that in India, culture assigns roles thorough which these attributes appear. Consequently, female presence in the public sphere discussed by Griffin does not resonate with feminist issues in India. In India, feminists need to focus on alleviating oppression and violence as issues of that nature remain through the practices of dowry murders. Unlike Griffin's call for women to enter the public sphere, in India, feminists are not concerned with the public sphere as they are within the private sphere. Kapur further remarks that the whole range of agendas that influence women would need to be evaluated if feminists hope to help particular people and groups.

Diana Miller contends that contemporary feminist writings need to generate gendered interpretations of texts written by males. She states that while Campbell seeks to rediscover women's writings to understand views on different subject matter

put forth by women, Susan Jarrat concentrates on rereading of texts purported to be "masculine rhetoric." Thus, Miller draws attention to an essential position regarding the way in which rhetorical criticism should proceed; research needs to focus not just on the writings that have been lost but using "procedure of deconstruction" as a feminist tool for advancement (368-369).

Taking into account varied perspectives on rhetorical criticism from a feminist point of view and the ideological framework that constitutes Indian feminism, this thesis requires a strategic re-consideration of critical stances when analyzing *Shakti*. Although women's rights have advanced in the recent decades India still suffers from issues of female feticide and pre natal tests which, though banned by law, is practiced still in several parts of India.

My analysis draws upon Western feminist ideas advocated by scholars such as Campbell, Chavez, Collins. Campbell's "conscious-raising" is a strategy that adapts to Gurumaa's strategies while Chavez and Collins formulate ideas for women to claim their assertiveness. Nevertheless, since the context of my artifact differs significantly from the one that the Western scholars attempt to address in their works, my analysis reconsiders several ideas found in the original definition. For the criticism of Anandmurti Gurumaa's *Shakti,* this thesis considers both the rich resource of rhetorical criticism provided by previous scholars along with indigenous conceptually driven forces behind the text. Thus, my examination and interpretation of *Shakti* entails an assessment of Collins' "material rhetoric" and Campbell's "consciousness

raising" action, with a focus on the context that plays a part in shaping the argument of the text.

CHAPTER VI

RELIGIOUS SUBVERSION AND THEME OF EQUALITY

This chapter analyzes Anandmurti Gurumaa's use of equality in *Shakti* to expose the various ways in which family, community, society, and religion prevent equality for women. Gurumaa develops a rhetoric of newness for the identity of guru, utilizes well-known concepts in the Indian society to put forth a radical view on accepted norms, and consistently redefines position for women. Through these strategies, she constructs an image of a guru that appeals to her audience. Additionally, in the process of positing radical viewpoints, she creates a transnational space whereby people inside the nation observe and question the practices they employ within their homes. Hence, through her discourse on lack of empowerment for women, Gurumaa urges people to reassess and re-conceptualize their views. She seeks positive development for women within the country, evaluated by how women are treated inside the home. Gurumaa emphasizes that although women may have institutionally received the status of liberated equal individuals endowed with full rights, women do not enjoy unencumbered economic, social, and cultural freedoms. In order to disclose the mechanisms that prevent women from achieving the full status of equality, Gurumaa uses familiar tropes within society to expose forces that undermine women's positions rather than empowering them. The strategies of subverting normative ideas that she uses in the text resolves the problems that Indian feminists identify as perpetuating women's issues in the country. In other words, as a popular and familiar figure using matters grounded indigenously, she speaks on women's rights and empowerment. Gurumaa, becomes the right voice to initiate a "grassroot

narrative," so that women's issues receive due attention. Furthermore, she forges a common identity for women all over the country as well as in diaspora or locations outside the country.

The following sections delve into the guru identity crafted by Gurumaa. She references holy scriptures to refute her opponents and to support her claims. By infusing her thoughts with radical views, she creates an innovative approach to guruhood. She reflects alternative ways of negotiating women's problems in a country steeped in tradition and religion. While she does not subvert the word of religion, she denounces practices harmful to women.

Gurumaa's Usage of Novelty

Anandmurti Gurumaa's name appears credible and trustworthy to her followers. People recognize her from watching her on television, through several workshops her organization coordinates, and through workshops that she attends along with other gurus. Gurumaa gains credibility through her position as guru and her work to educate less privileged young girls. Each charitable organization endorsed by a spiritual guru portrays the organization in a unique fashion to appeal to donors.

Karen Pechilis argues that, the way gurus design and convey spirituality differs among female gurus. Along with male gurus, females appear publicly to communicate how to understand the purpose of one's life through meditation and devotion. However, gurus also differ as to how to manifest one's purpose. Thus, despite no blatant competition among the gurus for followers or popularity, the distinctiveness with which gurus approach matters related to spirituality evokes a sense of

individuality. Creativity in Gurumaa's work emerges out of radical position that she adopts by going against established customs, which as she claims do not accord women the human rights that they deserve and require. She does not use the phrase human rights, but her advocacy centers around issues that the *Human Rights Commission* protects. In *Shakti*, Gurumaa addresses various human rights issues such as equality, the right of women to earn education, and females' right to be free from sexual harassment and abuse.

Human Rights Commission in New Delhi posits rape and sexual harassment against women as the most prevalent human rights violations during the last decade of the twentieth century. Anandmurti Gurumaa speaks against these abuses without citing any government records or news reports. She uses her guru identity to frame the subject as a moral one. Through her advocacy, Gurumaa's image as a righteous and far-sighted/insightful teacher intersects with the social service persona that she simultaneously assumes. These two personas are woven together throughout the text, as Gurumaa argues for women's rights within the household and in society. Just as the guru endorsed Shakti Foundation receives better and wider recognition through her book, the guru persona enhances Gurumaa's advocacy for social services. In *Shakti* she encourages her audience to move from passive listeners to earnest and active participants for furthering female empowerment in India.

By separating her advocacy for women from human rights, despite demanding equality with men, she reflects the attitude that indicates a lack of knowledge or disinterest about the rights available through the country's constitution. As noted

earlier, the women who indulged in feticide claim that they did not label the act as a crime as they had no awareness that the act was punishable by law. Furthermore, as Suma Chitnis argues the "Indian problem" lies with women having little knowledge regarding the rights they enjoy. Chitnis states, "The Indian problem really lies in the fact that women do not make proper use of the existing legal and political rights and facilities…The bureaucracy they must deal with in order to exercise these rights, or to obtain redress for grievances, is too complex, too slow, too distant, and even too expensive for them to use" (18-19).

Later, Chitnis elaborates upon the need to alert Indian women about the way in which they can change conditions for themselves. She challenges feminists in India to help "Indian women realize this self-hood in full measure" (25). Thus, when Gurumaa encourages her audience to acknowledge that the purpose for women's lives is the same as men, she emphasizes that women need to enjoy the same rights as men. In addition, Gurumaa stresses that even though the government attempts to establish rights for women, the enforcement of rules only further endangers women, as the rules do not safeguard women from crimes like rape. As Gurumaa tells us, rules enforced through the state are limited to "grand but impractical declarations" and that "caretakers of law cannot solve this problem." She further asserts that society itself should work toward bringing about changes for women. Her thoughts on the ineffectuality indicates disbelief and a lack of reliance on the state-enforced regulations, which in turn reflects the position of people in general. Here, Gurumaa adopts a "grassroot narrative" by pointing out the inefficiency of laws, which also

represent the views and attitudes of Indian people who would have little knowledge of the rights vested by the Indian Constitution.

By inducing a non-normative, radical attitude to guruhood, Gurumaa breaks the unarguable law-like status of the scriptures and holy texts of Hindus. Leading her audience to question long-held practices and beliefs, she seeks for her audience to re-consider their attitudes and to challenge norms imposed by religion. She urges her audience to break away from religious practices which limit women's emancipation. Gurumaa's encouragement to violate long held religious assumptions is radical and is new to guruhood. Anandmurti Gurumaa does not limit her teachings to reiterating stories from the Vedas or other religious texts, but combines excerpts from stories in holy texts like *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* with factual evidence to construct her argument for better conditions for women. Gurumaa comes across as an iconoclast when she argues about the need to take a closer look at how religion and society define positions for women and the type of treatment that they receive.

Gurumaa contends that priests should not discourage women from visiting temples during their menstrual cycles by claiming that they are impure. Since menstruation is a natural phenomenon, it is not a reason to consider women as unclean and subsequently inferior. Moreover, since the natural environment holds an important place in the Hindu religion Gurumaa utilizes it to validate her claim. She frequently employs themes and motifs that her audiences recognize and understand to be meaningful to Hindu traditions, as evidence for her claims. Gurumaa refutes the

actions of saints in the religious texts of Hindus, and criticizes laws written by Manu, who laid the foundation for social system in ancient India.

In tandem with the interpretation of guruhood in the present times, Gurumaa defines spirituality in such a fashion that does not entirely follow the norm of the interpretations of holy texts or rituals. As Pechilis remarks, gurus structure tradition in their own ways and communicate about the nature of consciousness through various means. She proves to be an iconoclast to a certain extent when she portrays treatment of women inside people's homes. Gurumaa does not rely upon *Mahabharata* or the Manusmriti but she disapproves of how the Manusmriti subscribes for treatment towards women. She juxtaposes positive aspects of characters out of the Manusmriti, or religious texts of other cultures, while clarifying why religious texts of such nature do not treat women and men as equal.

As a guru, her followers, and readers of the text expect Gurumaa to use religious stories and anecdotes from holy texts such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana,* the most accepted and highly approved text for Hindus. Yet, Gurumaa intersperses the text with questions that challenge the treatment of women in order to make a case about female subjectivity. Analysis of *Shakti* reveals the paradoxical situation that the guru persona reflects. In other words, she does not meet the expectations of the typical guru persona when she discusses explicit details of the types of situations that women face inside and outside of the home. Gurumaa emulates a noteworthy tradition observed by radical gurus during the historical evolution of guruhood in India. Bhawuk identifies Ramakrishna Paramhansa and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as two gurus who sought to

broaden the level of inclusiveness to people of other religions, thus engaging in atypical guruhood behavior. As noted by Govindraju, Sai Baba of Shirdi, active as a guru during the first two decades of the twentieth century, included people of all religions in his teachings. Modern gurus address an international audience, inviting persons other than Hindus into developing closeness to the divine. Gurumaa reaches out to a religiously diverse audience when she refers to the words inscribed in the Bible, the Quran, the Upanishads, and Vedas, while largely referring to Hindu Dharmasastras. Unlike Paramhansa, Mahesh Yogi, or Sai Baba, Gurumaa does not merely make her advocacy all-inclusive to all religions; she rather utilizes the theme of radicalism to stop her audience from blindly following those practices authorized by religion which she claims are unreasonable.

By, using distinctive concepts in *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana,* and Dharmasashtras to advocate for equality, Gurumaa advances beliefs ingrained in the holy texts, while simultaneously challenging many of the concepts. Gurumaa does not shun religious beliefs in *Shakti* because gurus reinforce the ideas in the Dharmasashtras and well-known holy texts of the Hindus in their teachings. Gurus are well versed in the Vedas and scriptures; Gurumaa does not jeopardize her guru status by rejecting the ideas within the holy texts.

Gurumaa's Controversial Ideas on the Dharmasashtras

Leela Mulatti's research on the presence of Dharmashastras in the daily lives of people, observed in the practices within their homes reveals the ritualizing nature of certain behaviors for generations. The research shows that Dharmashastras, or

doctrines that "prescribe rules for all society," act as a guide for people on matters of "good conduct…legal procedure…penance" (*Philosophy, Theology and Religion*). Dharmasashtras have had a strong influence on the social structure of the Hindu society in India (Govindraju 1243; Jaishankar and Haldar; Mulatti 1). Though scholars differ as to the genesis of Dharmasashtras as a means to guide moral conduct among the people, scholars agree that it occurred roughly in between second and third century (*Philosophy, Theology and Religion*; Jaishankar and Haldar). Of the Dharmasashtras, *Manusmriti* constitutes one of the most important texts for acceptable social behavior. Manu was one of the several seers regarded as authoritative figures to compile the Dharmasashtras (*Philosophy, Theology*; Jaishankar and Haldar; Narayanan 185).

Scholars regard *Manusmriti* as the most superior of the Dharmashastras. This compilation of rules was written for all individuals, from the king to the common person, all were to adhere to it. According to scholars Jaishankar and Haldar, religion and law go hand in hand for Hindus, which reflects in the *Manusmriti* as a handbook for social, as well as moral, conduct. Thus, *Manusmriti* does not constitute merely an advisory piece of work, but iscomprised of laws which guide the king on such matters as rules for dealing with the code of conduct, differentiating between "civil wrong and criminal offence," and criminal justice and punishment. *Manusmriti* created the class hierarchy or *varna,* system. Scholars contend that Hindu kings adopted the *Manusmriti* after the Brahman class that advised the king on all matters shared the document with them. Though the *Manusmriti* resonated with the people at the time in which it was

revealed and became more popular after the fourth century, the handbook is not revered by contemporary society. Moreover, the *Manusmriti* seemed inconsistent with the Hindu way of life when British colonized India. Scholars maintained that the British brought back the *Manusmriti* in the form of the Hindu Civil Code as it provided them with a tool to rule people in India.

At present, *Manusmriti* has ceased to be a governing document in the lives of Indian people. Manu's ideas, which have been reinterpreted or have become controversial, do not coincide with the beliefs and values of the current period. Yet, Dharmasashtras as a document remains important within Hinduism. People look up to Brahmans-Hindu priests- as authorities on the Dharmasashtras. The Dharmasashtras instruct Hindus as to right methods to follow for religious rituals and practices. Thus although lost to the average Hindus, the Hindu priests rely upon the Dharmasashtras. In addition to Brahmans, spiritual gurus are authoritative figures on the Dharmasashtras as they utilize the teachings, along with other religious texts, for instructing followers about "compelling social values"(Kesavapany and Palanisamy Ramasamy 158).

Religious scholar Vasudha Narayanan argues in *Water, Wood and Wisdom* that the ideas put forth in texts such as Mahabharata and Ramayana and the Upanishads, compiled during the same time as the Dharmasashtras, largely influence the ecological perspectives of Hindus. Narayanan contends that the religious texts act as "transmitters of dharma and devotion" to the people as families and villagers the stories and applying it to their daily lives. For example, the story of goddess Parvati,

who referred to the act of planting one tree similar to being blessed with ten sons, is reiterated among villagers. The story teaches about the importance of having a male child but also reinforces the need to protect the environment by planting trees. Anderson observes that the "panchavati," a sacred grove in temples and ashrams, consists of five varieties of tree popular for medicinal properties. Thereby, the people retell stories infused with moral overtones as lessons for younger generations.

No longer do people recount the stories in the holy texts among themselves, Narayanan contends. People have forgotten the stories, making room for gurus to tell the value of the stories of the religious texts as well as to teach "religious inspirations," through their "continuing, successive presence." Doing so helps disciples attain better knowledge about spirituality and living righteously (Narayanan 187, Beyer and Beaman 494). Gurumaa thus uses her knowledge of Hindu epics to communicate to her devotees about meditation and chanting. Through *Shakti* Gurumaa reveals herself to be well versed in the Dharmasashtras. She utilizes her knowledge of Dharmasashtras to teach her followers how women should be treated. In *Shakti,* Gurumaa posits herself as a non-normative guru by challenging accepted norms for women as established by Manu in the *Manusmriti*. Throughout *Shakti* Gurumaa refutes the principles put forth by Manu in the *Manusmriti*. Thus, instead of reinforcing important Dharmasashtras, which people expect from her as a teacher, she challenges the doctrines that prevent women from realizing the power within.

Gurumaa's purpose is twofold: to reveal the suppressive nature of Dharmasashtras and to help her female readers discover the "shakti" hidden within.

Gurumaa notes how males have not protected the women in their families as Manu prescribes in *Manusmriti*. She questions the authority of the text itself asking "If a woman is perceived as being weak and incompetent then she definitely needs a protective cover. But I ask if this is right. Who gave *Manu* the authority to say so and when has a woman really been safe." Thus, not only does she make it a point to question the issue of safety for women but she also indicates that women can protect, guarding their honor through the power from within.

Gurumaa challenges the laws laid down by Manu, declaring that it should not be mandatory for men to protect women but that women should learn to protect themselves. Although Gurumaa does not overtly shun the *Manusmriti,* she rejects certain aspects of its principles such as women needing protection from men, as well as women being safe in their father's house before marriage and in their husband's house after marriage. The practice of calling women impure during that time period is fallacious, as is the practice of restricting women from entering temples and touching food in the kitchen. She mentions Manu each time she marks Hindu customs as problematic. She remarks that Manu subjected women to a ritual bath after every menstruation period. Gurumaa explains how various practices resulted from the religious bigotry of few males who formulated certain ideas in a distant past. Gurumaa argues that people in the "ancient times" had "no understanding of a woman's body and her menstrual cycle." She blames "holy men…with…ignorance and superstition," as well as "male chauvinists" as persons who fabricate the story about women being

impure and unfit for "lighting the lamp in the shrines of their homes" (37-38). She uses examples to illuminate the discriminatory practices against women.

Subversion of Religious Thought by Gurumaa

Gurumaa adopts a radical position when she argues that rules established by priests for women in refraining from prayer rituals during their menstrual cycle is not consistent with factual evidence. Gurumaa explains that the divine establishes the worship of female goddesses for whom temples are consecrated and *pundits,* or priests, spend good amount of time in daily sessions of prayers, songs, and rituals. She maintains that the priests do not consider the goddesses "contaminated" or "dirty" during certain periods of the month, presuming that they would experience the impure period as would any other woman. Since the priests do not limit their daily worship to the goddess, the issue of being impure rests upon a fallacy. She reasons that if "conservative priests" were to argue that goddesses are "eternally pure," then women who are representations of the goddess incarnate cannot be "unclean." According to Gurumaa, Manu's faulty vision lies in construing women as "weaklings." Since menstruation is a natural phenomenon, and since nature or *prakriti* could not be wrong, it follows that a natural phenomenon that is not impure.

By introducing the idea that something ordained by nature is more valuable and reliable than an idea induced by man, Gurumaa appeals to the audience's belief in nature as a divine entity. She examines the importance of the "natural world" to the Hindu belief system. Gurumaa provides examples of the presence of "sthala vriksha," or sacred tree, in temples and the importance given to certain rivers as sacred. Nature

acts as a big part of Hindu religious belief. Thus, by providing the link between nature and women, Gurumaa utilizes well-known views among the audience. An audience who already hold a positive value for nature as an important aspect of religious rituals would readily agree that a natural phenomena would not be unfit, to worship as purported by men.

Anandmurti Gurumaa's criticizes religious beliefs, which she claims are responsible for the subjugation of women. Thus, although Gurumaa's position as a spiritual leader means that she is a protector of Hindu religious beliefs; the means through which she explains tenets of Hinduism disrupts some of the long held beliefs. The trend of guruhood makes a marked leap with introducing and incorporating the strategies of social activism within the concept, which previously constituted only as an esoteric group of enlightened individuals who performed miracles, lived mysterious ascetic lives, and lived a life of renunciation from all forms of worldly existence. Along with the times, the guru-status has evolved; where the miracle-performing guru has given way to more society-centralized personas where besides known for socially activism they also keep intact the practices of giving discourses on spirituality and Holy Scriptures.

Anandmurti Gurumaa is a part of the new generation of gurus who travel to different countries for *satsangs* (meetings with "true company") participate in conventions and conferences, publish articles, and host websites dedicated to them. As noted by cultural anthropologists, Beyer and Beaman, the success of modern gurus has come about as a result of the effort that is put in to marketing the guru. Gurumaa's

negotiation as a modern guru illuminates new conceptualizations of guruhood. Gurumaa explores the intersection between traditional and contemporary perceptions in society with which her audience are well accustomed. By creating a space within the traditional and contemporary sources, she bridges the gap unfulfilled by social activists whom scholars regard as inadequate to address issues of women in the larger cross-section of society.

She states that the growing numbers of femicide among Sikhs and Punjabis have exceeded any other state. Sikhs are persons who follow the religion of *Sikhism* and Punjabis are people who live in the state of Punjab in northwestern India. She urges Sikhs and Punjabis to stop killing female babies because stalwarts of *Sikhism* do not accept the practice. She criticizes common practices such as not allowing women to touch pickles (homemade concoction of fruits and vegetables with spices) during their menstruation because of the mistaken belief that the unclean women would pollute the food. She also protests the practice of fasting for the husband's long life, called a *karva chauth* fast, arguing that if a wife fasted on one day, it did not increase her husband's life. Gurumaa contends, "Please think logically. Fasting cannot prolong another's human life; if it does then why just once a year? Fast twelve times a year! Fast every month!" Thus, Gurumaa uses logical reasoning to challenge accepted practice (insert how this shows social activist kind of work- different) By doing so, Gurumaa transcends her guru status much in the same way she transcends Hindu religion. She mentions well-known figures of various religions and affirms that their teachings do not include the subjugation of women. She holds up Guru Gobind Singh,

Guru Nanak, and Guru Amar Das of the Sikh religion; Jesus Christ of Christianity and Krishna, a male Hindu god as influential figures who did not agree harming women was good. She cites poems by Shankaracharya, a prominent Buddhist preacher and Guru Nanak emphasizing their message of equality for all women. She creates a sense of unity among followers who may not be strict adherents of Hindu religion or may belong to different religions by portraying that all religions demand equal treatment for women. While employing heterogeneous forms of spirituality enables Gurumaa to demonstrate to her auditors that female empowerment is a universal concept that should be adopted by Hindus. She quotes from the Quran, The Old Testament, and the holy text of Zoroastrianism, a religion that was "once the religion of the Persian empire," to indicate that idolized and well-known figures that have had a hand in shaping these world religions have not enforced female sequestration in matters of worship (*religioustolerance.org*).

She does not completely shun religion and the ideas behind it. Her criticism aims toward the practices that govern status for women. Her position as a guru is not jeopardized, even though she argues against norms and criticizes religious texts for their content, because she identifies religious figures who espouse equality for both genders. Thus, she achieves the status of a modern guru who teaches the holy texts of the Hindus, while encouraging the exploration of other religions of the world. The identity of the new guru constitutes as that of tradition and innovation, based on utilizing strategies to appeal to her audience. Her fierce denouncement of "karva chauth," or the ritual of fasting for husbands or her anger toward different treatment of

women match the criticism by feminist scholars of the lack of democratic and basic rights of Indian women.

Gurumaa speaks for women through her projection of patriarchy as the oppressor. Gurumaa differs from feminist activists, however, because her advocacy identifies and shuns well-known practices. Her manner of appealing to her audience through utilizing known concepts differs from the rhetoric of academia or sophisticated activism that in turn aligns with people better. Hence, her advocacy is likely to be appealing to all of her audience and not just the educated and sophisticated one. She teaches that women have "shakti" which means that they have power within themselves. The constant use of indigenousness makes Gurumaa's advocacy a new means of appealing to the audience. Blatantly rejecting ideas planted through religious text by Manu and by logically basing her argument to disregard discriminatory practices toward women, Gurumaa opens a new chapter for perceiving women's issues in India through the eyes of a spiritual leader. In a country where staunch religion practices are not easily relinquished, Gurumaa introduces doubt and uncertainty about those practices that people have followed for a long time. This move by Gurumaa conveys newness for guruhood in the country. There has not been a similar attempt made in terms of advocacy on a large scale like Gurumaa's *Shakti.* Gurumaa's well timed book, the strategies used within the book and her way of attracting donors through such means discloses the changing ways in the country. It reveals that despite being tied to religious assumptions, India welcomes the different mode of thinking where religion is used as the most powerful tool for a social cause

like better treatment of women. The fact that a guru, an individual revered for championing the long held ideas in the holy texts participates in utilizing the matter to bring about change in thinking about women conveys the beginning of change in the worldview. Gurumaa's manner of approaching the issue reveals that there is room for alternative ways of thinking about accepted customs in the country. Thus, while the subversion of normative behavior indicates innovative and new way of looking at people's relationship with religion, it also introduces alternative ways of thinking for men and women about the role of daughters in their life.

Gurumaa's advocacy shows that everything ordained by religion is not written in stone, incapable of being changed or perceived differently. For perception about women, Gurumaa's approach reveals that women are not weak and will not only cause misery to their families but are also representations of "shakti," making them as worthy as men.

CHAPTER VII

INDIGENOUSNESS AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Anandmurti Gurumaa argues for empowerment for the common woman but her beliefs do not arise out of similarity of experiences with such women but a similar essence - womanhood. Her words conveycondemnation for lack of equality for women. Gurumaa connects with her female audience through "shakti," as a means of binding women across the cross-section of society. "Shakti" acts as an operative word to resonate with followers of Hinduism. Moreover, the way in which Gurumaaa publicizes her agenda indicates an attempt to reach out to a diasporic audience. Through the language that Gurumaa uses and the overall approach to the subject, she addresses a female audience that can empathize and feel the need to help her charitable organization Shakti is the most important factor that Gurumaa uses to bridge the gap of age and geographical space besides class difference between her audiences. "Shakti" which means "energy" or "power," is part of the Hindu religious traditions. Therefore, Gurumaa writes for a primarily Hindu, spiritually inclined audience.

Indigenous Roots of "Shakti"

The literal meaning of the word "shakti" is power. Religious texts identify female "shakti" as inherently located within women. Gurumaa becomes an agent of the female power that she vouches, speaking as a power-laden individual. Gurumaa's association of "shakti" links with victimization faced by women at the hands of males,

and invalid conceptualizations of female roles. Gurumaa's writings reflect victim status as pervasive within society.

Feminist scholars in India identify "shakti" as a functional word associated with Indian feminism. Gurumaa may not depict transnational feminism in the same sense as understood by feminist scholars and activists like Dare, Mohanty, or Khan, her approach to feminist issues evokes understanding about the problem regarding feminism within the country. As explored earlier the approach taken by activists is charted out as institutionally organized means of fighting for the rights of women. Such methods attempt to create changes from the macro-level. However, Gurumaa's advocacy differs considerably when she insinuates change from within – individual, family and hence the society. Feminists who argue for uniformity in representation perceive the ideal persona of Indian women to best reflect in the "position of the poor working woman" (Chaudhari, 30-32). Scholars argue for "indigenousness" to reflect in reforms for women in India. Several factors in Gurumaa's writings such as the choice of "shakti" or female empowerment as subject matter, the choice of languages in which she writes *Shakti*, the lack of limiting her references to any one part of the country, indicates that Gurumaa functions as a transnational, feminist.

Feminine Energy in Hinduism

The choice of the term "shakti" works as a successful means of reaching out to audience because of the term's resonance in Hindu religious mythology. The power that Gurumaa preaches ties to the notion of "shakti" from the union of "Shiva-Shakti" in Hindu religious texts. June McDaniel explains that while males identify with Shiva-

"lord of detachment, lord of the burning ground, of yoga, of the dance, and of endurance" women identify with Shakti, characterized as "mother of the world and the essence of power, goddess of creation and destruction" (124). Shiva refers to male god in Hindu scriptures while Shakti refers to "his physical bride and spiritual force." In the Hindu scriptures, such god and goddess unions appear in the form of Krishna-Radha referring to the male god Krishna and the female goddess Radha similar to the Shiva-Shakti union. Lisa Hallstrom, states that under Hinduism the conjoining of the male form and the female form lead to an androgynous representation of "Shiva-Shakti" or "Krishna-Radha," whom they worship as "Ultimate Reality." Hence the term "shakti" equates the concept of spiritual force from which a follower can draw his/her energy.

Many scholars document the use of "shakti" in various trends of worship in India. Nita Kumar records women using healing powers and spiritually possessed women who claimed to have received the influence of "shakti." According to Gold, the endurance of suffering is a source of power for women. Judy Tobler refers to the trend as "shaktism" and asserts that locating women into the identity of "accessible divine" would encourage and empower their "voice, subjectivity and spirituality" (58-60). With a similar vision in mind, Gurumaa utilizes the term in her book to help women realize their inbuilt potential. Moreover, Gurumaa's frequent usage of the term is in a culture familiar and habituated to the term. Shiva the male version of the "Shiva-Shakti" union is a popular God in Hindu tradition. Similarly, "shakti" as the powerful female goddess, has few temples dedicated to her. Hence, despite the

presence of "shakti" as an important goddess the significance that Gurumaa associates with the term is lost among the gamut of different gods and goddesses.

Exploration of "shakti" theme in Shakti

Throughout *Shakti* Gurumaa insists that women represent "shakti" even though they are oppressed. In the first few pages she writes, "From the very beginning we infuse a feeling of fear, discrimination and dependence in women. The final outcome is that the woman – who could have been the personification of Shakti – ends up being a repressed and suppressed individual" (2). The subjugation of woman, however, is not the end. She can reclaim the power that is within her. Gurumaa pleads with her readers to "think about how you can repay a mother's debt- the debt of love. Every woman is Shakti – a divine being – love and respect her" (26). Later, when she discusses the topic of women as creators she again reiterates the theme of "shakti." She states, "Every woman is Shakti- The Divine Mother. Every woman is a giver of life. She has brought prophets, messengers, avatars, *sufis* and sages into this world"(51). The origin of the power resides within women. Every person who is manifested is through the power to give birth.

The theme of "divine being" holds significance within Indian society and so does the theme of mother". Many female spiritual gurus have mother factor associated with their names. Pechilis' introduction to spiritual gurus in India mentions gurus Gauri Ma, Shree Ma, Anandamayi Ma, Jayashri Ma, and Karunamayi Ma among others (7). Hallstrom notes that Anandamayi Ma presented herself as mother to her devotees, teaching her female devotees about spiritual equality and encouraging them to engage

in the kind of worship that only men observed up until that time. Anandamayi Maa avoided a conventional way of life, chose to become "Ma" to her devotees, and encourage radical ideas for women of her time.

Gurumaa has a "Maa" at the end of her name adding more weight to her spiritual guru image. Gurus who adopted "maa" became the physical embodiment of the divine mother. They are no longer mere spiritual leaders but the manifestations of the divine. Gurumaa's self-representation provides the means by which to make her audience follow her advice. The fact that females are "shakti" does not verify only with Gurumaa's explanation about how they manifest it. By representing through her own identity of "divine mother," she indicates that to observe the manifestation of "shakti," her readers may look up to her as an example. By representing herself as "shakti" to women in contemporary India, Gurumaa does not remain within the frame of spirituality at the level of "living avatar" as does Mother Meera or Anandamayi Ma (Coward, Hinnells and Williams 62). The enlightened and all-knowing mother herself represents the ultimate strong feminist who can help other women realize their hidden energy. She moves toward insinuating that the "shakti-laden" world would not have the significance of men but instead would be populated by assertive females. In suggesting such a worldview, the suggestion is not for a male-less world, but for a world in which positions of females are magnified and individualized. Gurumaa in her divine mother role appears larger than life, looming over all women and re-inventing their realities through the discussion on "shakti" that had been present all along but had not been explored. The listeners on the other hand appear as those women who

move out of their discomfort to bask in Gurumaa's newfound liberation for them. She speaks with the sureness of the woman charged with the responsibility of showing all other women the right way to assert themselves.

Mapping Transnational Space and Diaspora with "Shakti"

Transnational feminists claim that global audiences learn about issues of local nature through feminists working in developing and less developed countries, thus encouraging a shared knowledge of concerns of women all over the world. Similarly, Gurumaa transmits issues of lower class women to upper social classes within the country itself. By recognizing the "diaspora *within* the nation," and writing for people both outside and inside the country she makes use of "shakti" as a motif to appeal and draw similarity (Shome and Hegde 13). Shome and Hegde define the transnational space as "a time of constant re/placement and reterritorialization as global capital connects, disconnects, and reconnects space in new ways and through shifting lines of power" (258), Furthermore, Chinese transnational scholar Hsin-I- Cheng asserts that human beings "constantly (per)form new identities and meanings [when surrounded by] high volumes of mobility in a transnationalizing world " (3). Shome, Hegde, and Cheng create the space for recognizing agency in Gurumaa who brings together the disconnected parts that comprise as diaspora within the country through the use of "shakti." At the same time, the usage of the term also bridges the gaps created by "hierarchies within the family…or within the community" that prevent equality among women in India. This notion of family and community as oppressive and limiting equality for women appears in the writings of feminist scholars like Suma Chitnis and

Madhu Kishwar. On the other hand, Gurumaa's *Shakti* resurrects the ideals of "self-esteem and self-confidence" formerly established and energized by *Women's Development Program* (WDP). The WDP was initiated by the Indian government with help from UNICEF to empower the women in rural Rajasthan (north-western state in India) (Ramachandran 280). Vimala Ramachandran blames the administration and politicians in the state of Rajasthan for "kill[ing] the essence" when they refused to fund the program. According to Ramachandran , a priority of the program was to teach women to speak for themselves. Ramachandran writes that WDP believed that "for too long men have been entrusted the responsibilities of women's development – in the family, government and society – and that a decisive shift is necessary in order to entrust these responsibilities to women at all levels" (281). Hence, while postcolonial scholars like Shome and Hegde seek alternative ways of knowing in transnational spaces, feminists in India seek for women's "emancipation" and voice (Bhasin and Khan 5). Gurumaa fulfils the position that transnational scholars and Indian feminists alike recognize as lacking.

If external social activism and government-enforced rules create what Spivak, Shome, and Hegde consider as "hegemonic power," Gurumaa employs female cosmic power to energize the "subaltern," voice-less women to speak their own emancipation. With the notion of "shakti," Gurumaa eliminates the division of class in society. Gurumaa revitalizes and presents the familiar trope of "shakti" whereby women living in "cosmopolitical landscapes" and enjoying plush lifestyles in metropolitan cities like Mumbai, New Delhi, or Bangalore can find commonality with "slum/pavement

dwellers" of the same cities or the rurally located people in the country. Gurumaa expands the meaning of "shakti" beyond Hindu cultural parameters. Her central argument rests firmly on how women are representations of goddess *Durga,* known for her feats of bravery and display of power. Thus, Gurumaa claims that women embody "shakti" but few women actualize their innate power.

Gurumaa's method of garnering support for Shakti Foundation by approaching the concept as a value-laden term provides insight into the workings within the Indian culture. The prominence that the word "shakti" metaphorically occupies as a value within the society and the manner in which Gurumaa utilizes the concept illuminates how culture creates parameters and signifiers for understanding that supersedes the need for proper explanation.

Even though Gurumaa occupies the position of transnational feminist who addresses a global concern in the context of India by rousing people to acknowledge that females are in need of support in the form of donation for charity to educate of girls. Nevertheless, her advocacy does not address a larger global audience; it addresses the audience within her country. Gurumaa portrays a transnational feminist perspective when she argues for better conditions for women. Gurumaa acts as activist-cum-women empowerment agent in *Shakti* as suggested by Alexa Dare. Dare asserts that linking national concerns with global issues enables "greater cooperation and shared strategies of resistance" between feminists and "justice activists" (19-20). In her book, Gurumaa does not present herself as an activist, but nevertheless remains a strong proponent of female empowerment. Thus, although Gurumaa's espousal of

strong woman-centered advocacy does not overtly fit the way Dare charts out transnational feminism, Gurumaa's support assumes the rhetoric of guru-initiated mission that, although not linking the local to the global, does accommodate a diverse audience to be sensitized to female condition in India. Linking the local to the global appears as positive efforts employed by transnational feminists in other countries, in the form of Khan's supportive help to women's organizations in Pakistan and Shaw's intervening into unreasonable policies toward women in Zimbabwe too. However, in India, Gurumaa's efforts center on making her diasporic audience realize the need for female empowerment as well as gain better understanding of perpetuation of male violence, subjugation, oppression of women within families and the culture.

She writes for a primarily Hindu audience based in India, but includes a diasporic audience that conforms to strong Hindu traditions. She references trends within India and, more specifically, Hindu traditions. Thus, along with a knowledge of English, she requires her audience to have knowledge about religious traditions and customs followed within families in the country. Gurumaa contends that her sessions on "therapeutic spiritualism," which she uses on spiritual retreats to other countries is an effort, "to help Indian community [outside the country] to keep in touch with their roots i.e. socially spiritually and culturally"(Deol). Hence, it also helps to endorse *Shakti* so that it receives a wider readership, thus successfully expanding her audience base. The cost of the book also increases the potential audience base. Priced at 80 rupees, 5 dollars or 3 pounds, the book sells at a reasonably cheap price, making the

book accessible to a large number of people. This is a book easily purchased for oneself or for one's friends and family and shared.

While Gurumaa targets the average lower-middle class to low class woman, any school educated Indian can read *Shakti* . Written in four languages – namely Hindi, Telugu, Gujarati, and English, Gurumaa's *Shakti* appears as a book any person who has the ability to read and write will be able to comprehend with ease. As of 2001, the government of India recognized twenty-two official languages. Although the recorded number of available languages to a total of a hundred twenty-two, and mother tongues figure two hundred thirty-four, Gurumaa's *Shakti* appears in only four dominant languages of India. Hindi and English, two official languages of India were granted official by the Official Languages Act of 1963. They are the most spoken languages in the country (*The Official Languages*). At the same time, Gujarati language is the twenty-third most spoken language in the world while Telugu, is "the most spoken mother tongue" after Hindi ("The Official Languages," Kuncha & Bathula 1, "Kwintessential"). Thus, the use of these four languages, two of which are official and the other two among the most spoken assures that *Shakti* receives a wider readership. Furthermore, Gurumaa uses simple language, so that Shakti is easy to read.

Predilection for Women Readers

Gurumaa uses her charitable organization to publicize *Shakti.* As an advisory note for women of all ages who visit the site, Gurumaa includes a section on how they can support Shakti organization. If the visiting person presses the "I am a student" link, the site discloses a portion of the page to reveal how the person can contribute to

the mission by spreading knowledge about *Shakti.* Visitors who study in schools and colleges, are encouraged to spread the word about "shakti" through power-point presentations in classrooms, or by donating *Shakti* to the institution library, and making posters and calendars featuring *Shakti* messages. Similarly, if a person presses on the "I am a Housewife" or "I am a Company [or] 'Professional' [or] 'Employee'" links, the site provides in-depth material as to how persons in those positions can help. Gurumaa urges young women to sell *Shakti* in colleges and schools to other young women and donate the amount paid for the book to the charity foundation. A section of the "Mission Shakti" page mentions positive efforts made by supporters. Featured as the Torch Bearers the names of people who sell *Shakti*, appear in bold letters. By selling the book and by working for the cause women act upon their inner power. They also share the message with other women, thus advancing the cause for female empowerment.

Although men can contribute to the cause, Gurumaa encourages women to manifest their inner power themselves. Gurumaa's references to meetings with the "Shakti girls" and a link for housewives reveals predilection on Gurumaa's part to have women involved in her mission. There is no link for husbands or discussion of meetings for boys. Gurumaa frames women without power as victims. In the book, Gurumaa refers to male gurus who dislike women occupying guru positions, husbands who beat their wives, men who harass women in public places. In the entirety of the document, Gurumaa stresses problems faced by women and encourages women to act on it. Hence, distinctive form of "consciousness raising" occurs through the "shakti"

theme, and the way she publicizes the mission. Just as Bacchetta's work on the sabla sangh (local women's organizations), Aihwa Ong's reference to marginalized women working as laborers to foreign companies, scholars and activists find answers to the problems faced by women from low-income groups. Gurumaa's *Shakti* acts to create empathy for women from different social classes. By encouraging women all over the country to realize their innate "shakti" she transcends the divide of higher income and lower income, caste or class divide. Moreover by eliminating any reference to a geographic region or doing away with rural-urban division she negates differences based upon these conditions. Hence, Gurumaa urges not only those women who Suchitra Shenoy contends are among the well-educated and enfranchised women in India to see themselves as "shakti," but also impoverished women as representations of "shakti."

Violence as a Pervasive and Rampant Topic

Gurumaa transcends class and caste by discussing how violence and abuse affects all women. She creates an archetype of suffering experienced by women that allows any woman to be viewed as the anonymous woman described. Gurumaa's work in *Shakti* functions as a means by which the issues of lower income and less privileged reach out to the people in higher classes for whom such issues as violence and abuse may not comprise as problems at home. A 2003 study on the likelihood of marital violence that result into women contracting AIDS as well as a 2010 article that looked at the feasibility of preventing domestic violence, shows that the problems are exacerbated in the slums of major cities in South India. Berg et al. report on the

correlation between marital abuse and alcohol consumption, using men in "lower income-area of Greater Mumbai" as their participants (126). Thus, this substantiates that most instances of abuse involve those in the lower-income bracket (Martin et al.564). Although domestic violence may not occur as frequently in higher social circles or urban areas, researches posit femicide occurs in all parts of society notwithstanding socio-economic divide. Human Rights report of 2004 indicates that feticide occurs in major cities and "highly developed districts and states." The Human Rights annual report also indicates a major decline in the sex ratio in major states like Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, and Haryana, where the ratio of females to males in Punjab was 924 females per 1,000 males in 1979 to 793 females in 2001 (236). Moreover, in Delhi, the capital of the country, the ratio of females to males dropped in 2001 from 917 in 1979 to 866 for every 1,000 males (*Human Rights* 236).

Hence, the nature of "imagined communities" that Mohanty, Russo and Torress envision transnational feminism to be located in constitute not at local-global level through ideas of global sisterhood, but between women whose social spheres are so separated that they might as well be worlds apart geographically. This thesis expands the notion of transnational feminism to include bridging less educated women with better educated women and low income women with higher income women. Gurumaa also encourages people to recognize and do away with practices that make women grow up to become weak instead of representations of "shakti" of which they are capable. *Shakti* creates the space for all women to see other women as suffering from different types of acts of aggression, all women as mothers who possess the power to

create and thus give birth to men, women as representations of the divine. In short, Gurumaa's efforts are geared toward uniting women all over with the use of strategies that is better able to resonate with their lives.

Intertwined identities – Feminist, Activist, and Guru

Gurumaa's identity links with her advocacy of "shakti." Through her career as a guru - an independent, radical and important person in the field of spirituality - Gurumaa becomes the representation of "shakti." Hallstrom identifies Anandmayi Maa, a spiritually realized and famed woman, known as "Bliss-Filled Mother" or as "God who came in the form of a woman," carefully construed the identity of women during her lifetime. Hallstrom notes that Anandmayi Maa had female disciples who lived in intimate proximity with the guru and cared for her. Moreover, Maa refused to adhere to conventionality, demonstrating "fearlessness," by encouraging women to ask questions about forms of worship reserved for "male spiritual practices" (94). As already stated, Anandmurti Gurumaa follows Maa's lead by disagreeing with scriptures , Manu, customs of women observing yearly fast for the long life of their husbands and priests disallowing women to enter temples or engage in daily prayer rituals at the home. Therefore, as the spiritual guru who urges women to become empowered individuals, Gurumaa presents herself as embodiment of "shakti."

Her power is not constrained by religious practices or customs. Gurumaa uses both radical and confirming strategies, to employ power without offending cultural norms. Notably, Gurumaa does not consider all religious influences as stymieing women's empowerment. For example regarding femicide, Gurumaa declares that

"according to Ayurveda a spark of consciousness [ignites] self-awareness within the unborn child" and when awareness or "agni" unites with prana –"essential vital force"– and ojas – "essence of biological integrity," the unity of these forces (fire, breath, and cosmic energy) leads to "essential building blocks of life" (17). In other words, once a woman conceives her fetus is a special creation not to be destroyed, she elaborates on the scientific explanation of childbearing but relies upon Ayurveda (knowledge of life), an Indian form of knowledge on health and well being to discuss feticide as a crime. This strategy further combines with her divine mother persona. The divine mother not only reaches to influence her readers with knowledge about religion but she has the capability to speak from the authoritative position of one versed well in science. Additionally, this aspect reflects how the Indian worldview is changing to adapt religion, logic, and knowledge of science together to create a convincing argument about a social and moral crime.

The label of "otherness" interlinks the identity of gurus with their individuality and defiance of norms. She mentions in the introduction to *Shakti* that she would include scientifically proven facts in the *Shakti* to prove her advocacy of the lack of factuality behind rigorous female-subjugating Hindu rituals. Likewise, Gurumaa also includes specific details about the state of the baby in the mother's womb and the way the fetus processes the surroundings around it. She recounts in-vitro fertilization and cloning as ways in which reproduction replicates and further argues that such ways yet do not explain the reasons for the flawless structure that forms into human shape through the process of birth. Thus, by including her knowledge of the process of birth

as explained scientifically she becomes the divine female force or "shakti" who does not get limited in her identity of guru to address topics under her overarching theme but encompasses all areas of knowledge on her topic.

Gurumaa is the new embodiment of change in India. She is not tied to religious ideas only. She is well-versed in Dharmasashtras, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. She is knowledgeable to challenge the legendary Manu's ideas. Moreover, she can describe human anatomy with reasonable amount of knowledge on the topic. In short, she has the right amount of credibility to appeal to an audience seeped in Hindu culture both within India and abroad. In fact she is well suited to her audience comprising of office going middle class families that are easily attracted to the type of advocacy that Gurumaa offers. She is at once the divine mother and the social activist whom Indians are likely to believe and trust, for she is in synch with their life-styles, and yet omniscient to which she can show them the right way to treat women in their lives. Such a type of advocacy also reflects the changing worldview of the people of the country who accept and turn to the traditional yet modern guru.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Through feminist rhetorical analysis, this thesis does not only portray the kind of social advocacy that works in India, in the current times but also the changing roles of spiritual gurus to better suit the audience. The focus on "material rhetoric," which is finding common vocabulary for women through crevices in discourse, *Shakti* reveals that the work connects and binds strands within the culture to probe and to reflect on the practices of inequality, abuse, and undermining of empowerment for women. Notably, the role played by spiritual guru, Anandmurti Gurumaa brings out new meanings to understanding the importance of gurus in the present times. Exploration into all facets working behind Gurumaa's *Shakti* indicates a worldview for the country as a whole to acknowledge and begin to change. Presence of spiritual guru who brings to light the necessity for women in the present times to arm themselves against all forms of oppression while simultaneously empowering with education is explicated in *Shakti*. Her book does not carry new information about the women in India. Instead, her text reiterates the same issues of aggression and violence at home, harassment, abuse, and female infanticide. Yet, the intricacy with which she explores into each of the areas by constant questioning and rebuking of minute as well as overtly apparent behaviors in men and women that lead to such situations, she transcends her guru status to reflect the role of an activist-cum-feminist-cum guru. By speaking about human rights of women to have proper treatment toward them and tying with radical ideas of religion, the notion of "shakti," as well as reaching out to her wealthier and better-positioned audience with her message, Gurumaa comes across as the kind of

entity needed for people in the present times. Moreover, Gurumaa's treatment of the issue reflects the identity of the entity that is able to make an impact on the audience.

Shome asserts that contemporary globalization takes place in the form of embracing fads that originated out of south Asian practices. She mentions such practices as body art through henna and mehndi or even the use of "traditional signs and symbols of South Asian female sexuality- such as nose rings, mehndi, bindi and the sari" by women in the west as indicative of the use of the woman figure to demarcate positions of "national and the international" boundaries (Shome 261). In making such an assessment, Shome posits that the female body has been utilized as a space for displaying "neoliberal consumerists logics" through issues of "fashion, style, beauty, music and entertainment." While, Shome focuses on the exploration of transnational themes which work to feed the globalized context with the use of the female body as a significant agency, Gurumaa utilizes "shakti" as a theme to appeal and draw together different sections of the society for the common cause of empowerment through education. Thus, if on the one hand female body in its physical form transcend boundaries between nations, the cosmic energy motif that all women can relate to in the meaning of "shakti" assures that women stand up for their rights and also empathize with women less privileged than them.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan poses the question of whether the Hindu goddess is a feminist or not and claims that popular tropes of female representation through the goddesses as well as owing to the fact that Hinduism as the "only contemporary world religion" that practices goddess worship assigns Hindu goddesses the label of feminist.

Rajan provides several other reasons like goddesses as radical for having a non-mainstream following of minorities, women, non-Hindus and also as representation of agency. To attest Rajan's definition of goddesses as feminists, Gurumaa utilizes the same factors to make her audience learn about women's empowerment. In the last section of the book, Gurumaa explicitly mentions that female need to awaken the empowering individuals within themselves because women are "not the body, senses, mind or intellect. [Women] are divine. [Women] are God" (63). With the utilization of this very factor, throughout the text, Gurumaa emphasizes women's roles in creation through giving birth to babies, to enduring sufferings of violence and harassment and participating in playing important roles in men's lives. She seeks to place women in the role of divine or "shakti" so that women can empower themselves with the knowledge that they represent the feared and the revered goddesses.

Using such indigenous means of goddess worship, the motif of "shakti" along with references to mannerisms of people who treat females differently within the Indian cultural context, Gurumaa compiles a compelling projection of society. With each minute criticism of behavior that prefers males to females and religious customs that limit women's participation in full-fledged worshipping, she turns the mirror inward to her audience to remind them of women's conditions. Informed scientific explanations on the process of birth coupled with the moral significance of conceiving a fetus she creates obliging matter to consider for contemporary Indian families who kill female babies.

Shakti acts as reminder to both men and women to see if they do really practice equality at home. Women who face eve-teasing while out alone would stop to think if they do something about it or not. Parents who may not have taught their sons about showing respect to women would consider educating their sons about it. The book acts as the means of questioning the practices women follow as dutiful wives and worshippers. Feticide would have the added burden of moral obligation for destroying something deemed valuable by Ayurveda and religion. In many different ways, *Shakti* appears as the best form of "tribute" in Gurumaa's own words to sensitize but at the same time unlearn about practices that only exist to block the way of empowerment for individuals. The United Kingdom *Telegraph* publication mentioned in a July 2009 article that in India, *Free and Compulsory Right to Education Act* of 2009 would make basic education free and mandatory to children. Yet the truths of femicide as well as accounts of aggression and domestic violence still exist as horrendous crimes in the country. Despite the positive effort put through the creation of soap opera style awareness program for educating people and empowering women in rural areas about the knowledge of femicide, accounts of fetuses dumped in rubbish still appear in newspapers.

In a country where celebrities form a great source of successful advertising of products, Gurumaa who occupies a well-reputed position among people would act as identifiable and credible source for awareness on women's issues. Vivek Joshi and Supreet Ahluwalia, lecturers in the Department of Business in Dubai, research on the pervasiveness of celebrity endorsement fad in India since the late seventies and early

eighties. They assert that even for simple products, the use of celebrity figures like Bollywood stars and sportspeople would lead to the audience identifying and having the sensation of fulfilling a characteristic or trait that they find missing in themselves. Hence, with the popularity of Gurumaa through her discourses on television as well as her public appearance, people would listen to her words on doing away with all forms of brutality and injustice against women and see them as depictions of "shakti."

Gurumaa does not limit to talking about the role that religion plays or outlining how femcide, abuse, and violence are immoral. There is a confluence of several strategies that act together in *Shakti* to make it a compelling message for Gurumaa's listeners. When she provides extensive explanation on how the physical body of the baby develops or when she includes information on how she carried out an experiment to observe if pickle touched by menstruating women did go bad, Gurumaa does not merely want to display her credibility. She includes such types of information to identify with her audience. She is not the spokesperson for the pantheon of gods whom people worship in temples every day. She wants to pointedly make the insinuation that she is far removed from those lifeless statues of goddesses that people find in temples. While the divine beings within the temples may offer little comfort or know little about the lives of the people, Gurumaa can voice their fears and speak for them for she is well attuned to indigenous, religious, and also scientifically based knowledge. Hence, her knowledge of her followers' lives is broader than that of the gods. She is the new avatar of divine being for the people because she is grounded in their beliefs and knowledge system and not limited to her spiritual guru status. Through each of her

actions – her website, book about femicide and her spiritual retreats offer a new approach not seen in India. This new approach strives for women to see themselves as individuals apart from those relationships shaped by culture. Gurumaa wants women to be assertive and focus on their own dreams and hopes because they are as important as the men in their lives. Besides being a strong advocate for females, Gurumaa is also a representation of the feminism for which she speaks. Her status as a guru contributes to making her voice authoritative but her own persona and her lifestyle too mark her representation of "shakti." Living the life of guru in her own terms, by breaking away from confining herself as daughter, wife, and other roles of a woman, Gurumaa is "shakti." Through her lifestyle too she creates an exemplary means for her readers to understand how a woman can become anything she wants.

However, despite becoming the representation of "shakti" Gurumaa is able to expound her idealism remaining within her spiritual guru status. Her individualism is derived from the "divine mother" role she plays for all other women. Through her "divine mother" position, she has found a feminist ideal of its kind that fits for women in India. If it had not been for her guru status, she would not be able to earn the "divine" aspect to her identity and also unable to prescribe it for her female audience. Consequently, if not endowed with "shakti," she would not be able to speak about femicide as a crime. Thus, Indians are accepting of an advocate who is well versed in their affairs but is also a step above them in terms of status. By giving up the life of any other common person, she not only enjoys her guru status but also is hierarchically above her audience, enjoying the reverence and love.

With this project, I have focused on Gurumaa as an advocate who reaches out to people within the country and in the diaspora. However, a Hindu background dominates her advocacy. She mainly writes for a Hindu audience who follow customs and traditions that characterize the Hindu religion. Her references to "karva chauth," rituals like women being banned from temples and use of Hindu religious texts like Manusmriti, Dharmasashtras and Vedas indicates that Gurumaa concentrates on influencing a Hindu audience. Hence, one of the aspects that limits Gurumaa as a spokesperson for all Indian women is her predilection for Hindus. Transnational scholars Moghdam, Grewal, Kaplan, and Hasian identify the existence of "multiplicity within categories" or "rhetorical complexities…of positionality" that can problematize the working of transnational work (Grewal & Kaplan 14; Hasian 26). Moreover, "multiple divisions" constitutes a problem for addressing the issues in India as a holistic transnational representation. Further explorations into the effect of Gurumaa's advocacy on all levels of class as well as people with different religious backgrounds will illuminate the extent to which a holistic representation can be possible. I argue that Gurumaa unites women from all classes within the country and in diaspora but she does not adequately reach out to all women. Gurumaa's ideas keep within the purview of Hindu religion. Moreover, the act of femicide and dowry giving are dominant in Hindu families. Thus, Gurumaa's advocacy based on a Hindu background indicates that Hinduism has a hegemonic influence in Gurumaa's work. So, by reaching out to similar but "multiple centers and peripheries" will help in exploring transnational work within the country (Grewal and Kaplan 19). Further research into

similar kinds of work done by influential individuals and the kind of audience they target will help in understanding India as a multicultural society where divisions on several levels exist.

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