CHAPTER FIVE
CHALLENGING THE MYTH OF MOTHERHOOD: MODES OF RESISTANCE AND SUBVERSION

The preceding chapter dealt with the construction of the image of the idealized mother in various narratives, and examined how the glorification of this image entrapped women by setting up for them the task of attaining these impossible ideals. The present chapter will analyse texts which subvert the patriarchal image of the ideal mother hitherto discussed. These texts either question the patriarchal system, empower women characters with the right to make their own choices that would otherwise be denied to them by patriarchy, or offer alternate family systems where the responsibility of the child is not necessarily imposed on women alone. Some forms of subversion are subtle, while others are overt and radical.

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section, Challenging Patriarchy (5.1), examines two novels, Subarnalata (1965) by Ashapurna Debi, and Mai (2000) by Geetanjali Shree. The second section is entitled Asserting the Right to Choose (5.2), and analyses the right to abortion through a short story “Death of a Child” (1993) by Shashi Deshpande, and the choice to embrace motherhood through K. Ramalakshmi’s “Oh Mother! Let Me Also Live” (1991) and Siddharth Raj Anand’s film Salaam Namaste (2005). It also undertakes a detailed study of two films which voice the right of a woman to give birth to children outside the wedlock - Aruna Raje’s Rihaee (1988) and Prakash Jha’s Mrityudand (1997). Finally, through an analysis of Deepa Mehta’s Fire (1998), it discusses the right of a woman to reject motherhood. The third section, Alternate Family Structures (5.3), examines two films, Kamal Hassan’s Chachi 420 (1997) and Pooja Bhatt’s Tamanna (1997), as well as a novel by Suniti Namjoshi called The Mothers of Maya Diip (1989).

Before analysing these texts, it is important to point out the significance of the role played by these texts in challenging patriarchy. In any culture at any given point in history, if an attempt has been made by a dominant group to reinforce its ideology,
every age has also witnessed a resistance to this ideology from the subordinate group. Although ultimately, the dominant group attempts to prevent the subordinate ideologies from rising, it allows them to remain on the periphery. As Denise Thompson states in *Radical Feminism Today* (2001), “No system of domination, even the most totalitarian, functions without contradictions, ambiguities and resistances” (12). Liesbet Van Zoonen affirms the idea in *Feminist Media Studies* (1994) and extends it to a discussion of discourse, “[…] a poststructuralist notion of discourse as a site of contestation implies that the disciplinary power of discourse, prescribing and restricting identities and experiences, can always be resisted and subverted. Dominant male discourse can therefore never be completely overpowering, since by definition there will be resistance and struggle” (34).

Needless to say, the resistance to patriarchy has manifested itself in all spheres of life, including literature and popular culture. Culture is undoubtedly one of the most significant forces of interpellation, and is therefore also one of the most powerful forms of resistance. Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan comments in *Real and Imagined Women* (1993):

Culture appears as the chief matter and consequence of dominant ideological investment, powerfully coercive in shaping the subject; but since it is also heterogeneous, changing, and open to interpretation, it can become a site of contestation and consequently of the reinscription of subjectivities. Therefore, cultural analysis both calls forth the critique of ideology and – given the crucial function of representation in the dialectic of social process – enables political intervention, scenarios of change, theoretical innovation and strategic interpretations. (10)

Cultural studies critic Tony Bennet expands on this idea in order to emphasize that the imposition of the dominant ideology on the masses is not a simplistic, but rather, a complex phenomenon. According to Bennet, popular culture “consists not simply of an imposed mass culture that is consonant with the interests of the dominant class, nor simply of a spontaneously oppositional working class culture”. Instead, popular culture is “an area of negotiation between the two within which – in different forms of popular culture – dominant, subordinate and oppositional elements are ‘mixed’ in
different combinations" (Cited in Tester 15). Although Bennet refers to social class, his argument can be extended to denote gender as well, wherein the dominant group refers to patriarchy, and the working class to women who constitute the subordinate group in our society.

It is also important to recognize that although women constitute the subordinate group, they are not homogeneous, and would have varied responses to the same text. John Fiske rejects the notion of monolithic audiences or monolithic readings and points out: “The structure of the text typically tries to limit its meanings to ones that promote dominant ideology, but polysemy sets up forces that oppose this control. The hegemony of a text is never total, but always has to struggle to impose itself against the diversity of meanings that the diversity of readers will produce” (Cited in Tester 69). Fiske’s argument implies that all women may not be passive consumers of patriarchal ideology. It further suggests the possibility that even a text which reinforces patriarchal ideology may lend itself to feminist interpretations, however unintentionally.

The various interpretations of a given text were also explicated by Stuart Hall, whose contribution to media theory is extremely significant. According to Hall, there are three possible meaning structures in the process of decoding a text. The first is the dominant or hegemonic, according to which, we see what hegemony wants us to see. The second is negotiated, wherein we agree with the general approach of the message being communicated to us, but also make important personal reservations. The third reading is the oppositional reading of a text where we disagree with the message and reject it completely (Cited in Inglis 170).

An analysis of these various critics implies that subversion occurs at two levels while examining a text. The first is at the textual level, and is initiated by the author/ filmmaker who deliberately challenges dominant discourse and attempts to present an oppositional representation of society. The second is at the level of the audience, who may critique the dominant ideology as represented in a text. In this case, the response
of the reader takes precedence over the intention of the writer. This chapter will examine the former method of subversion in detail, and also elicit how a patriarchal text may unintentionally lend itself to a feminist reading.

### 5.1 Challenging Patriarchy

The definition and objectives of the feminist movement have varied considerably over a period of time, and this variation is subject to the time and place where the movement has taken place. While there has been considerable conflict among feminists on the notion of what constitutes feminism, the popular definition of the word suggests that it is a movement that was built on the belief that women have historically been oppressed by men. It sought to oppose and question this oppression, and worked towards attaining equality. Barbara Berg’s definition in *The Remembered Gate: Origins of American Feminism* (1979) broadly covers the various demands of the movement. She defines feminism as a:

> broad movement embracing numerous phases of woman’s emancipation [...] It is the freedom to decide her own destiny; freedom from x-determined role; freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions; freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into action. Feminism demands the acceptance of woman’s right to individual conscience and judgment. It postulates that woman’s essential worth stems from her common humanity and does not depend on other relationships of her life. (Cited in hooks 25)

Several writers have incorporated the ideals of feminism in their writings in an attempt to resist the stereotyped images offered by the dominant patriarchy, and replace them with new ones. In many cases, however, the resistance has not been overt. As postcolonial critic Chandra Talpade Mohanty states in “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism” (1991), resistance is not necessarily identifiable through organized movements; “resistance inheres in the very gaps, fissures and silences of hegemonic narratives” (38-39).
This section discusses two novels – Ashapurna Debi’s Bengali novel *Subarnalata* (1965) which overtly opposes male domination, and Geetanjali Shree’s Hindi novel *Mai* (2000) where the opposition exists, but is subtle and can be found in what Mohanty describes as the “gaps, fissures and silences” (38-39) of the text.

5.1.1 Ashapurna Debi’s *Subarnalata*

*Subarnalata* (1965) is the second in the trilogy of Ashapurna Debi’s novels, and revolves around a middle class family in Calcutta. It presents a bold and outspoken protagonist, Subarnalata, who spends her entire life fighting against patriarchal injustices. Set in opposition to her character is the equally powerful character of Muktokeshi, Subarna’s mother-in-law, who symbolizes the ideals of patriarchal ideology. Muktokeshi is a dominating woman who controls each movement of the entire household and commands immense respect from her sons. It is not surprising, therefore, that she feels insecure in the presence of Subarna who seems to threaten her position in the household.

Subarna does not hesitate to express her views, howsoever inappropriate, radical and unconventional they may be. She fights for her reproductive rights, and expresses her unwillingness to have another child to her husband, Prabodh. Prabodh reacts in an unpredictable manner: “Why don’t you want another child? […] Are you worried about your figure? Of looking older? Afraid other men won’t find you attractive? You think I don’t know?” (37) “Disgusted beyond words” (37) Subarna says nothing and the pregnancies continue until she can bear it no more. Then she begins to express her resentment, not verbally, but by avoiding physical contact. “Having produced six children, Subarnalata had been showing a marked reluctance to please her husband. It wasn’t possible to beat her into submission. Not every night, anyway” (78).

Prabodh finds another alternative, and tricks her into eating a *paan* (betel leaf) which he claims is a contraceptive ayurvedic preparation containing herbs. This *paan* has apparently been given to him by a doctor, who has assured him of its effectiveness. However, it does not prove successful, and Subarna conceives yet again. Since it is a
pregnancy, Prabodh decides to call her elder sister-in-law. Subarna puts her foot down and, “Whatever you do, don’t call Boro Bou” (78) “Why not?” Prabodh replies. “After all, it’s a woman’s business”. Subarna immediately pounces on him, “Only a woman’s business and no more? Doesn’t a man have anything to do with it? No responsibility at all?” (78)

Her question asserts and questions the role played by a man and a woman in the process of procreation. While the man plays an equal role in conception, the consequences of the act and care of the child are not considered to be his responsibility. This is evident from Prabodh’s reaction. Prabodh shirks from taking responsibility for his actions and wishes to pass it on to his sister-in-law by referring to it as a ‘woman’s business’. His role is restricted to planting the seed, and that is where his responsibility supposedly ends.

Subarna, however, does not relieve him of his responsibilities so easily and fights for justice at every point. When her daughter is sick, she refuses to do her share of housework, and insists on looking after her. Prabodh asks her to leave the child and do her duty. “Who shall I leave her with? Will you look after her?” she questions. She is shocked by his response, “Me? Look after your child? I’m not mad!” Subarna is quick to retort, “My child? Is she only my child and not yours? Looking after her for a couple of hours would be seen as a sign of madness, would it?” (106)

There is an obvious distinction between the role of a man and a woman in childrearing, and the two roles cannot overlap. To quote Chandra Talpade Mohanty in “Under Western Eyes – Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (1991), “[...] the concept of the sexual division of labour is more than just a descriptive category. It indicates the differential value placed on ‘men’s work’ versus ‘women’s work’” (68). The woman’s work is clearly devalued in patriarchal society, and it is beneath Prabodh’s dignity to help his wife in taking care of the child who is ‘his’ by law but ‘hers’ to nurture.
Once again, Prabodh, because of his patriarchal conditioning, refuses to accept his responsibility as a father and sees a clear distinction between ‘mothering’ and ‘fathering’ a child. He tells Subarna to leave the child and go back to her duties: “Surely she’s not going to die if she’s left alone for a few hours” (106). He is not prepared for Subarna’s assertive and bold response: “Nobody in your family is going to die either, if they don’t eat their dinner one night. No, I cannot and will not leave my sick child totally on her own simply to cook a meal for others. My idea of duties and responsibilities happens to be different from yours” (107). She sticks to her decision, and does not go to the kitchen, and eventually hires a cook so that no one is inconvenienced, much to the chagrin of her mother-in-law.

Subarna’s fight against injustice is not merely restricted to Prabodh’s ill-treatment of her, but rather, extends to the tyranny of her mother-in-law as well. When the family is in a financial crisis, and wants Subarna to go back to her father’s home for a while, she refuses to go, and attacks Muktokeshi, accusing her of hypocrisy:

How can you do this? … When I wanted to see my father, when he wanted me to visit, you had him thrown out of your house. It was below your dignity, you said, to be in touch with a man like that. He wasn’t good enough for you, you said. Now, you have a problem, so you’re perfectly happy to forget the past. You must never talk of dignity, Ma. You don’t know what the word means! (52)

Her act enrages Prabodh who must act as mediator and appease his mother. “Oh, why was his wife always so difficult? How could a mere woman have such impertinence? He forgot that his mother was a woman, too. But no, a mother was more glorious, more precious than one’s homeland – or for that matter, heaven itself. One never, but never, questioned one’s mother” (50). Prabodh has been conditioned into revering the mother figure who reigns supreme in the house. However, the glorification of the mother conflicts directly with the subordinate status of the wife. Prabodh finds it difficult to resolve this dilemma, especially since the subordination of the wife has been ingrained in him by Muktokeshi herself.
Wrongly accusing Subarna of having an illicit relationship with another man, Muktokeshi advises Prabodh, “If you are a man, my son, kick her to death. Yes, that’s what she deserves. But if you’re not, take your precious wife and find somewhere else to live. I am certainly not going to live in the same house with a slut like her!” (67) Muktokeshi propagates domestic violence, and the control of one’s wife by the husband. She wants to women in the family to remain submissive to their husbands and also to her.

This exposes the contradiction in her character, for she is completely the reverse of what she expects the other women in the family to be. It also points to the oppression and exploitation of women by other women within the family. The power structure is not restricted to the man-woman relationship alone, but extends to the woman-woman relationship as well. The woman who has power and control uses it against the woman who does not. Shoma A. Chatterji (2000) suggests that our society glorifies the mother-son relationship by placing it on a pedestal, and the entry of the daughter-in-law is thus perceived as a threat to this relationship: “The entry of the daughter-in-law hits this relationship and disturbs it much like a typhoon would disturb the peaceful quiet of the Pacific. The son’s wife enters like the ‘other woman’, the ‘outsider’, who creates a wall between the mother and son. The mother immediately looks upon the daughter-in-law as a threat to her power over her son” (147). In order to reduce this threat, the mother attempts to exercise control over both the son and daughter-in-law.

Interestingly, Muktokeshi’s method of controlling her sons is such that they are unaware of her dominance in the household. She cleverly manipulates her style in such a way that she does not undermine the authority of her sons. Instead, she seemingly empowers them with authority, and yet, manages to exercise control over them by using emotional blackmail. After a conflict with Subarna, she addresses Prabodh, “Look, my child, I am only a foolish female. I may have said something that you did not like. I do beg to be forgiven. But if that is the case, dear boy, why
didn’t you say so yourself? Why did you have to send your wife to insult me? One word from you would have been enough” (50).

The exaltation of motherhood becomes a weapon in Muktokeshi’s hands, and she uses (and misuses) this weapon to achieve her desires. There is only one instance where Prabodh questions his mother’s actions. A plague has broken out in Calcutta, and all the wives leave for their relatives’ houses along with their children for the purpose of safety. Muktokeshi also decides to visit her gurudev in Navadweep, leaving her untrained sons to fend and cook for themselves. Prabodh’s cousin Jogu’s comment leads him to reconsider the idealized image he has of his mother: “I can see why your wives had to go. But your mother, too? Why couldn’t she have stayed on to look after her children? Why should she be afraid of death, at her age?” (90) Prabodh recognizes the truth in these words, and hesitatingly agrees with him, “It was wrong of Muktokeshi to have left for Navadweep. If she had stayed, none of her sons would have had to suffer” (91). In patriarchal society, the glorification of motherhood is directly correlated to the concept of self-sacrifice. In order to enjoy the privilege and respect endowed upon mothers, a mother must also be selfless and giving. Muktokeshi wants the former, but not the latter, and this causes her idealized image to be tarnished, if only momentarily.

Unlike Muktokeshi, Subarna realizes towards the end of her life that she has very limited control over her sons and has not been able to influence them the way Muktokeshi has influenced hers. Her sacrifices for the sake of the children and constant fights with the family members are proved futile when she fails to reproduce her values in her sons. The sons continue to be influenced by patriarchal ideology that was so dominant in the household. This is evident in her son Kanu’s response to Subarna’s decision to send both her daughters to school. “I grew up,” said Kanu, “hearing my mother criticize grandma and all the others in our old house. So I always thought they were to blame. But now... now I realize where the fault really lies” (123).
Subarna is horrified by his reaction. “She had spent all her life in trying to do the right thing. But what did she get at the end of it? Nothing. Absolutely nothing” (123). She realizes that Muktokeshi has been able to establish a bond with her children and command respect which she could never do, and feels a pang of envy. It also leads her to question her actions and wonder whether they were correct: “Had she failed in her duty as a mother? Why, hadn’t she spent her entire life in trying to be the perfect mother, raising her children in the best possible way, giving them the best opportunities?” (128)

Her dreams of having sons who would support her are completely shattered when they become replicas of their father and uncles instead of imbibing her ideas. “But could her sons really be blamed? What had they seen, after all, except a woman whose sole aim in life appeared to be to alienate everyone else? [...] her children had only seen the ugliness of her actions. They hadn’t bothered to wonder about the reasons” (129).

Through the character of Subarnalata and through authorial intervention in the narrative, Ashapurna Debi, expresses some very radical ideas in the text. It is significant that the author had never been exposed to Western feminist thought and was writing at a time when the feminist movement of India had not yet gained memento. Yet, the ideas are revolutionary, and question the entire structure of society:

When, oh when, will the men in society ever recognize that we are as much a creation of God as they? That one is incomplete without the other? When will they learn to say, ‘If we haven’t treated you as equals, the fault isn’t yours, we are to blame. If we haven’t realized your worth, the failure is ours. We do not wish to see you emerge in your own right, so we keep you locked away. When brute force doesn’t work, we do not hesitate to put you on a pedestal. We call you shakti, we turn you into goddesses. We let you bask in the light we provide, taking it away when it pleases us. If you make any attempt at coming out of the darkness yourself, we do our best to foil that attempt instantly. If your actions please us, we applaud. If you give any indication of your inner strength, we frown. And when you
show us that your intellect and your skills can match our own with perfect ease, we strive to have you destroyed.

We pay homage to your beauty. We bow before your ability to give satisfaction. We submit freely to your tender loving care when we need it. You create us, you nurture us, you sustain us. But there ends the very purpose of your existence. You are allowed to live on this earth because we happen to need you. Beyond that, you are a worthless creation of God, without meaning and without any value at all.' (124)

Subarnalata seems to illustrate an understanding of the concept of interpellation of the subordinate group by the dominant group in such a manner that it appears to be natural. She elicits how men cleverly oppress women either through violence or through exaltation, and do not allow them to think and act for themselves. She asserts that women are mere instruments or pawns for men, who use them as they please, and laments that they are unaware of how they are being manipulated and controlled:

Fools! What complete idiots women were! Not one of them realized how artfully she was used, turned and twisted in different directions, simply to suit others. Suitably duped by a man's flattery, she'd only think: 'How precious I am! How he loves me, wants me, needs me!'

Who would ever stop to consider the true motive behind a man's attentions? Who would bother to think, 'My body is like a gold mine to him, the clothes and jewellery he buys me are simply to advertise his own wealth'. A woman was so easily swayed by the show of love, convinced by declarations of undying devotion. (166)

The ideas in the narrative are undoubtedly unconventional and much ahead of the times in which they were written. They seem to echo the writer's own thoughts. Ashapurna Debi had discussed the process of writing Subarnalata:

The world of Subarnalata is one that I have witnessed in my childhood. Everywhere the male rules supreme. The women were forever quarreling before them. But those who had become matrons, became matriarchs and abused the power they had gained. The young women in the family were victimized, they had no choice, no freedom. It used to upset me enormously. Why, why should the system be so unfair, why are women deprived of their human rights? (xiv)
Indeed the figure of the matriarch has been portrayed effectively through the character of Muktokeshi, and Subarna seems to echo Ashapurna Debi’s own ideas. This book is a sequel of Pratham Pratisruti, which revolves around the life of Subarna’s mother, Satyavati, and is followed by Bakul Katha, the story of Bakul, Subaranalata’s daughter. The trilogy is the story of rebellion of three generations of women against the patriarchal system.

Subarna’s mother, Satyavati, had left the house on being told a lie by her husband. She reappears in the novel after her death through a letter that had been written to her daughter while she was still alive. The letter reveals clearly where Subarna’s independent and radical ideas originate. It expresses Satyavati’s anguish at never having communicated with her daughter during her lifetime and the regret of never having known Subarna at all. The desire to communicate had been thwarted by the fear of consequences, and therefore she had decided to have this letter delivered after her death, because then she would be incapable of leading Subarna astray.

The letter points to the need of female rebellion, as well as the need to question why an institution like marriage is “no more than one event in a man’s life, but the only important event in a woman’s” (159). Satyavati confesses that no one has been able to give her a satisfactory answer to this question. “After all these years, I have now come to realize that no man could possibly answer that question. Women must find the answer themselves, staking their claim where they are not allowed to tread” (159). She believes that women must do whatever gives them satisfaction and fulfillment, and staying at home could be as fulfilling as working in the outside world. She recognizes that it is not an easy task:

To find a path where no one has walked before, to swim against a powerful current, to speak when no one dares open his mouth, calls for indomitable courage. How many of us have it? One is also bound by ties of love, in one’s supreme role as mother. Most men are aware of this, and do not hesitate to take advantage of this weakness.
Yet, something tells me one day this gulf between the sexes will close. The battle will be over, and the entire race of womankind will be free. All I hope for is that the women of future generations, who are born without shackles, in a world full of light and joy, will spare a thought for the women of today, who are still striving and fighting to come out of darkness. May their sacrifice never be forgotten. May their struggle never be belittled. (160-161)

Subarna makes an attempt to convey these ideas to the rest of the world by writing a book wherein she records the events of her life. She does so meticulously, and puts her heart and soul into the task. However when the book is ready, her secret gets discovered; and she receives nothing but scorn and criticism from her family members who mock and taunt her. In an angry response to their jibes, she lights a fire and burns the books. According to the translator Gopa Majumdar, “This is her final defeat. She accepts it and gives up her struggle to speak and her will to live. This incident finally silences her” (xiii).

Although she does not succeed in telling her story, she manages to make a difference to the life of one person – her youngest daughter Bakul who is determined to tell her story for her. Subarna reproduces herself in Bakul just as she had been reproduced by Satyavati. It is interesting to note that the reproduction of the mother occurs only in daughters and not the sons, which seems to reinforce Nancy Chodorow’s concept of the reproduction of mothering.

The novel ends on a positive and not a defeatist note – with Bakul’s promise to her dead mother: “I will look for and retrieve every lost word, each burnt letter. I will write your story anew, and tell my dazzling world the history of your silent suffering in darkness and ignorance” (209).

Subarna may not have been able to change an entire society or open their eyes to the atrocities perpetrated upon women, but the fact that she is able to express her views candidly and force people to think about them, combined with her ability to bring about a change in even one person in the family, is significant enough. Her struggle
is nothing short of a rebellion as defined by Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs in their book *Revolution and Evolution in Twentieth Century* (1979):

Rebellion is a stage in the development of revolution, but it is not revolution. It is an important stage because it represents the 'standing up', the assertion of their humanity on the part of the oppressed. Rebellion informs both the oppressed and everybody else that a situation has become intolerable... Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question the legitimacy and the supposed permanence for existing institutions. (Cited in hooks 162)

In questioning institutions like marriage and motherhood, and raising the issues of the subordination of women, in stressing the need for education, freedom and reproductive rights, *Subarnalata* undoubtedly emerges as a powerful and thought-provoking novel that subverts the very foundations of patriarchy.

### 5.1.2 Geetanjali Shree's Mai

Another novel that questions patriarchy, but unlike *Subarnalata*, in a very subtle manner, is Geetanjali Shree's novel *Mai* (2000). On the surface, the novel appears to depict a self-sacrificing mother who seems to be a passive victim of patriarchal oppression. However, a close reading of the novel reveals the strength of the main character, Mai (Rajjo), around whom the story revolves, and who eventually emerges as a resisting force and also an agent of social change.

The novel portrays a joint family where the roles are distributed according to the traditional division of labour. There is a clear distinction between the outside world inhabited by the men of the family (Babu and Dada), and the inside world which belongs to the women and children (Mai, Dadi, Sunaina and Subodh). The story is narrated by Sunaina, and elicits her gradual understanding of the character of Mai.

Mai, as perceived by her growing children, is the quintessential self-sacrificing woman and mother, who places the desire of others before her own. She toils like a slave in the house, in spite of her bent back, catering to the demands of each member
of the household, howsoever whimsical and irrational they may be. She believes in self-denial and gives priority to her children’s desires: “Whatever we liked was what mai quietly decided she did not like” (43).

She silently bears the taunts of her mother-in-law on various accounts, including on the food she cooks: “Is this what is called khir in today’s day and age?” (17) Dadi also chides her for being selfish and lazy. For instance, when Mai wants to stop Subodh’s habit of breastfeeding when he is already too old for it because it is very painful for her, dadi comments, “Oh dear, oh dear, is this all that’s left for me to see? The mother cares for herself more than her son?” (33)

Her passive acceptance of such treatment for no fault of her own leads her children to believe that she is trying to inculcate the virtue of passivity in them. “‘That’s what you always teach,’ Subodh attacked her now, ‘that we should be quiet and accept everything’” (11). It also leads the children to perceive Mai as an oppressed victim, and they take upon themselves the Herculean task of saving her from the oppressive world of dada, dadi and babu who seem to be perpetrating injustices upon her. As Shoma A. Chatterji (2000) suggests, “Often one finds the daughter questioning the mother’s priorities and even questioning her mother’s acceptance of these priorities set for her by other people. Above all, she questions her mother’s values and sometimes goes to the extent of asking her to redefine her values” (182). In this case, however, it is both the son and the daughter who question the mother’s priorities and her acceptance of these priorities.

What they do not realize, at that point, is that Mai is not as weak as they presume her to be. She is assertive in her own way, and is especially protective about her children. There are several instances in the novel where Mai takes a stand on certain issues in order to support her children. Once when dada lifts his hand to strike Subodh who has been insisting that Sunaina go to a hostel, “mai entered the sitting room and met dada’s gaze for perhaps the only time in her life. Dada’s hand dropped, mai pulled Subodh inside and he eventually dropped me off to the hostel” (44). Mai’s rebellion
is not verbal - she communicates non-verbally, through her actions and her facial expressions. She does not appear to be disrespectful to dada, and yet achieves her goal without raising her voice.

Similarly she supports and protects Sunaina when, after attaining puberty, she is denied the privilege of being fed at Navratra. She is no longer pure or auspicious, and when she is reminded of the change in her status form a girl to a woman, she does not know how to react: “I understood and did not understand at the same time. I felt myself grow hot inside. I could not raise my eyes to meet anyone’s” (49). Mai comes to her rescue, and saves her from the humiliating predicament. She reprimands bua whose statement has caused Sunaina such embarrassment, “What are you doing, bibiji, let the child remain a child”. She then proceeds to comfort Sunaina saying, “You are the first of the auspicious girls. Of course you will eat. Come on, hold out your feet for me…” (49)

Sunaina realizes later, “Mai could not save me from falling into the pit, but she put down a ladder immediately for me”. Although Mai cannot put an end to the unjust patriarchal practices that demean women, and although she has consented to abide by them herself, she does not impose them upon her daughter. “Mai never told me that on certain days I should not go into the puja, or into the kitchen, or not eat in the usual place” (49).

Mai further asserts herself by using the weapon of silence. Critic Obioma Nnaemeka explained in “Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power and Subversion in the Margins” (1997), that it is important to distinguish between the terms “to be silenced” and “to be silent”. The former, she states, is an imposition, while the latter is a choice. According to Nnaemeka, “One exercises agency when one chooses not to speak; the refusal to speak is also an act of resistance that signals the unwillingness to participate” (4).
That is precisely what Mai does in certain situations. For example, Subodh has been unsuccessfully trying to persuade the family to allow Sunaina to leave their hometown to go to another city for her post-graduation. The family, however, is reluctant to let Sunaina leave for fear that she may fall into 'bad ways'. Babu urges Mai to convince the children: "Do something. They listen to you. You have spoiled them so much that they listen to no one else. Entreat, threaten, explain, persuade. Save the family from ruin. Fall at her feet and plead. Hit her. You are her mother, you have the right. They will listen to you..." (85) Babu knows, better than the children themselves, the power that Mai yields over her children. He urges her to use her power through violence or through emotional blackmail.

However, Mai refuses to do as he says, and remains silent. A single word from her would have influenced Sunaina to change her mind, but “she refused to become the echo of someone else’s voice” (85). Mai’s silence is not a reflection of her passive acceptance of the situation, but rather a deliberate act that is chosen by her for a definite purpose. The silence proves successful as Sunaina leaves for higher studies. Sunaina fails to understand the role played by mai at that time: “I thought I left because Subodh got me out. He was the one who met everyone face to face. Mai did not speak. She did nothing... It was beyond my understanding that if Mai had said once, ‘Forget it, Sunaina,’ Sunaina’s legs would have become paralysed and Subodh would be left muttering helplessly” (85).

Mai respects her children’s right to privacy, and also their decisions, however unconventional they may be. “She welcomed Subodh’s foreigner fiancée and kept my live-in friend Vikram at home as if he was its natural legatee” (38), and did so without passing a judgment on either of them. “She permitted the other person to reveal himself layer by layer before her. When she liked something, she respected it. When she was touched, she gave her love unconditionally” (39).

Mai, through her pattern of upbringing, although deprived of freedom herself to a certain extent, ensures that her children never feel suffocated or stifled by the
atmosphere at home. Sunaina realizes, albeit a little late, that while it was they who thought they were saving her, the reality was quite the reverse: “She was the one who undid my chains, let the fire inside me grow and gave me strength. It was her tireless weakness that enabled me to fight” (57). Sunaina also learns to recognize that self-denial can be a source of power and that the desired goals can be achieved through sacrifice. Sacrifice and self-denial are not necessarily oppressive and can be perceived as positive virtues.

Although Mai never consciously intends to reproduce herself in her children, she manages to instill the values she upholds in Sunaina who had in her childhood and growing years despised them. Yet again, as in Subarnalata and many other texts discussed previously, the reproduction of mothering occurs in the daughter Sunaina and not in the son Subodh. Sunaina and Subodh are united in their views until a certain period of their lives. Subodh continues to perceive Mai till the end of her life and even after her death as a weak and hollow person, and is aghast to see Sunaina follow her footsteps: “Yes, be nothing, just like mai, don’t be a real person of your own” (156).

Sunaina, however, is now convinced of the falsity of this statement. “Wrong, wrong… Mai had not been nothing. It was we who had made her like this… Mai suffered. She pulled her fire inside. But do you understand, mai had a fire too; she was not hollow, she had a fire. We had seen her suffer only for others but did not see her suffering from her own fire” (156).

Nita Kumar, the translator, in “The Matter of the Mother” (2000), attempts to interpret the character of Mai, and refutes Sunaina’s statement that she does not work towards her own emancipation or is content with that of her children. She argues:

It seems to me that Rajjo transmits the burdens of her containment, her repression, her burdens very effectively. She makes herself a bent, pitiful creature. She uses, to put it in its most daring form, her children as weapons in her fight against society. But she does not reveal this, maybe does not
admit it to herself, and they certainly imagine that they are the ones in charge, the ones with a vision. (177)

Nita Kumar regards Mai as the strongest character in the story; “She has immense reservoirs of strength which can be observed at odd times and even all the time with some insight [...] She is even heroic and is certainly enviable in this strength of hers” (194).

The text is open to multiple interpretations. On the one hand, the character of Mai may be perceived as the embodiment of the ideal self-sacrificing wife and mother as envisioned by patriarchy. On the other hand, she may also be construed as a character with immense inner strength (as suggested by Nita Kumar), who, in her own subtle manner, opposes the dictates of patriarchy, albeit for the sake of her children. Her resistance, however, is so subtle and silent and yet so powerful that the representatives of patriarchy are unaware of its very existence. In an interesting reversal of the dominant ideology, it is the subordinate group (of women, represented by Mai) that naturalizes resistance in such a manner, that the dominant group (patriarchy, represented by dada and babu) does not even realize when and how the opposition has occurred successfully. Although babu and dada both realize the power of Mai over her children, they do not even know when the power is used against them, in support of the children.

Mai, thus, opposes patriarchy by using silence as a weapon to silence the upholders of patriarchy. She exercises control over her children, not by using force or violence, but by opposing those who deny them the right to act according to their wishes. The rebellion may be subtle and restricted to the individual level, but is significant nevertheless – precisely because it takes place peacefully and silently. It proves that rebellion does not need to be violent – or even verbal, and that does not prevent it from being successful.
5.2 Asserting the Right to Choose

"Being oppressed means the absence of choices. It is the primary point of contact between the oppressed and the oppressor," (5), states bell hooks in *Feminist Theory – From Margin to Center* (2000). One of the basic ways in which patriarchy has oppressed women is by denying them choices -- specifically choices that relate to their own bodies. According to Margaret Sanger, "No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose conscientiously whether she will or will not be a mother" (Cited in Paludi 180). This section analyses texts that assert the woman’s right to reproductive freedom, and presents characters who are bold enough to take unconventional decisions despite the obstacles they encounter.

5.2.1 Asserting the Right to Abortion

The first text to be analysed in this section is a short story by Shashi Deshpande entitled “Death of a Child” (1993), which argues for the right to abortion, a major issue of debate in the feminist movement. The narrator of the story is a mother of two children, and when the story begins, finds herself pregnant for the third time. It is an unplanned pregnancy, and an obvious mistake as far as she is concerned: “A little forgetfulness, a little casualness – and then this tangle. Tangle – Yes, that’s the right word. I’m all tangled up inside. Suddenly my mind races back to those fevered moments when the risk had seemed minimal, unimportant. How could I have felt that way?” (43-44)

The narrative points to the consequences of an unplanned act and a careless negligence on the part of the husband and wife in using contraception. The narrator blames herself for the negligence, evident in the use of the word ‘I’ rather than ‘we’. She realizes that although both she and her husband are equally responsible for the consequences of their mistake, it is she who will have to bear the consequences and not her husband.
She does not want the unborn child to pay for their mistake, but her husband is not perturbed. He claims that they will 'manage', a word which evokes a strong negative reaction in the narrator. “Manage! Good God! What a weak, what an ineffectual word! A word without welcome. I will have no child I cannot welcome. There is an unexpected sense of release the thought” (44). The narrator may have been in two minds about whether or not to go ahead with the pregnancy, but the husband’s use of the word ‘manage’ enables her to make her decision, relieving her of the tension that she had been experiencing earlier. She does not want to bring an unwanted child into the world. This is again a question that has been raised in many debates on the issue of abortion. The pro-choice activists claim that it is better to abort an unwanted child, rather than to deprive it of the love and care it deserves after it is born.

To the narrator, the argument makes sense, but to her husband, it doesn’t. When she expresses her desire to abort the child, he is amazed at her response, and she finds it difficult to explain herself: “I grope for words. To me it is simple. I feel trapped like an animal. The third time in less than four years. It isn’t fair” (45). This isn’t the only reason why she doesn’t want the third child. She does not want her identity to be restricted to being simply a mother, because the process of mothering begins at conception, and lasts through the formative years of a child. It stifles the woman and prevents her from fulfilling herself as a human being. “I cannot imagine that the main purpose of my life is to breed. Simple? Yes, any cow, any bitch can breed... Children stifle the personality. You become just a mother – nothing more” (45).

The text again makes a very strong statement, that motherhood seems to devalue woman to the status of an animal, and she seems to be reduced to a mere instrument for breeding. In so doing, the text defamiliarizes the notion of the glorification of motherhood. Women have been conditioned into believing that motherhood is the very purpose of their existence and the most fulfilling aspect of being a woman. It is not surprising that when the narrator expresses her desire to ‘live’, her husband, a victim of this very conditioning, is appalled by her supposedly callous attitude: “Your
life – is that all that matters to you? How can a mother be so selfish? What about that life?” (45)

A mother is not allowed to think of her own desires and aspirations, but is expected to give first priority to her child, even if it is an unborn child. Selflessness, as discussed in the previous chapter, is an integral element in the myth of the ideal mother propagated by patriarchy; and a woman who fails to display this quality is considered to be deviant. The narrator, however, has no qualms about expressing her feelings frankly and with great honesty, even if they happen to be diametrically opposite of societal expectations: “I have always wondered about those women who swear to a gush of mother love the minute they hold the baby. It has never been so for me. My first feeling was awe. Then inadequacy and fear. Love came later” (45). Love does exist, but it is not instinctive. It develops gradually over a period of time, as the bond becomes stronger.

Although she uses various arguments to convince herself that abortion is the right decision (the fact that the child is unwanted, that she has already had two children in a short span of time, that motherhood entraps women and reduces her to a baby producing machine), she wonders frequently if her decision is justified and correct. Her husband’s attitude confuses her, especially since it is traditionally believed that the mother’s attachment to an unborn child is far greater than the father’s. “Perhaps, like any other Hindu male, he wants another son. Perhaps I’m wronging him by this thought” (45). His response has created a feeling of hostility towards him, which she now finds difficult to repress.

The narrator, however, is afraid that she will not be able to stick to her decision – afraid of being convinced not to abort the fetus. “And have years sliced off my existence again. Years before I can go back to doing anything else. Years when my actions are dictated not by my will, not by my desires, but by the sheer animal needs of my children” (46). The use of the words ‘animal needs’ reveals the brutal honesty
of the narrator, especially since mothers are expected to enjoy every moment of the upbringing of their children, and to feel nothing but joy in catering to their needs.

Her dilemma is finally resolved when her husband leaves the decision to her. “It’s up to you... You have to bear the brunt of it, you have the right to decide... But by God, I’m glad I don’t have to decide!” (46) It is significant that the husband does not impose his views on his wife, and allows her to use her reproductive rights (which in many cases exist only in theory and not in practice). To quote from the website of the Centre for Reproductive Rights in the United States, “When faced with an unwanted pregnancy, only she (the woman) can decide whether she will carry the pregnancy to term”. Perhaps the fact that the couple already has a son influences the husband’s communication with his wife. Had both their children been daughters, it is possible that her husband may have been more forceful and may have tried to impose his decision on his wife.

Yet, the decision is not an easy one. As S. Boyd states in “Give us liberty: The Approval of R4-486 isn’t about Morals; it’s about Options”, “The right to choose is not a luxury; it’s a responsibility that demands intense introspection and awareness” (Abortion -Religious Tolerance). She envies her husband whose responsibility ends when he passes on the right to decide to her. “He can get away – from me, from the children, even from himself. I can never get away, not even from my own body. I am tied to these things in a way he will never be” (47). The guilt of abortion (which she cannot rid herself of) is only hers to suffer, and constantly plays on her mind. In her husband’s eyes, she can feel a sense of accusation: “He thinks me callous. When I kiss and fondle the children, I can feel him wonder – how can she?” (47)

However, the uncertainty about the correctness of her decision remains till the day before the operation when her husband asks her for the last time whether she intends to go on. “You don’t care?” he asks her, perhaps surprised that she has not yet changed her mind. She wants to explain her feelings to him, but can’t: “It is because I care too much, love too much. I feel a strange pain as this thought takes shape,
becomes concrete. It is true. I have to give all of me or nothing. Now I want to reserve some part of myself, my life" (47). The fear of being considered heartless, unwomanly and self-centered prevents her from sharing her thoughts with her husband, who, she feels will not understand her predicament.

Although she had made up her mind to go ahead with the abortion, the protective instinct in her emerges almost like a reflex action. When her daughter kicks her with her legs, she rushes to protect herself, even though now it is unnecessary, since she herself is going to abort the fetus.

The feelings of guilt remain and haunt her even after the abortion is over. "There is a hollow feeling within me. I'm filled with strange thoughts. Where have I heard that, after an amputation, a person continues to feel the amputated limb? It itches, it hurts, it exists. Now, like a phantom limb, my child seems to cling on to me. Now, when he does not exist, he asserts himself" (50).

She feels a mixture of three emotions – grief, guilt and shame. There is sorrow at having lost a part of her body, and guilt because she, and only she, could have prevented this, but she chose not to. The guilt is a part of patriarchal conditioning – a reinforcement of the belief echoed by religious scriptures and social norms, that abortion is murder and morally incorrect – that life begins at conception, and not at birth. It is difficult for the narrator to rid herself completely from the feeling of guilt because it is embedded in her subconscious. But she also realizes that "I could have done no other thing, acted in no other way" (50).

Yet, the feeling of guilt remains with her even after she leaves the hospital, and feels the ghost of her dead child walking with her. She is painfully aware that the decision has not been an easy one. Although the law is on her side, and her husband has not inflicted his views on her, she cannot emerge from the act unscathed. Because the decision is hers, so also are the responsibilities, and the feeling of guilt. Her husband need not experience guilt because he has not been an active participant in the decision
making process, having alleviated himself of the responsibility completely by transferring the burden onto her shoulders. The right to decide is both negative and positive at the same time. For the husband, after the act is over, it becomes an issue of the past— but for her, the feeling of deliberately having committed a ‘crime’ will remain with her for the rest of her life.

What is important, however, is the fact that in spite of the adversities she is faced with, she has been brave enough to take such a decision and has exercised her legal rights and control over her reproduction. It is difficult to rid oneself completely of the conditioning that has been ingrained from childhood, and that explains her constant feeling of guilt. But the decision to act against that conditioning is the first step towards liberation.

While the step towards liberation in the “Death of a Child” is manifested in the right to choose abortion, in the next three texts, it is manifested in the right not to abort. These texts argue for the right to give birth to children who are not acceptable to patriarchal society for various reasons. Trinh T. Minh-Ha had pointed out in “Mother’s Talk” (1997), “Mothering is exalted only so long as women either conscientiously conform to their role as guardians of the status quo and protectors of the established order, or they perform a fairy godmother’s task of fulfilling harmless wishes, dreams and desire” (30). The texts analysed below will examine how women who oppose status quo by desiring to give birth to a girl child (“Oh Mother! Let Me Also Live”) encounter fierce disapproval from a male-dominated society, and will also explore the consequences of single motherhood (Salaam Namaste).

5.2.2 Embracing Motherhood

The story “Oh Mother! Let me also Live” (1991) by K. Ramalakshmi deals with the issue of female feticide which had become rampant, and was in fact being aided by technology through sex-determination tests which were being used and misused during this period. The procedure was banned in 1994 by the Indian government through the Prenatal Diagnostic Techniques Regulations and Prevention of Misuse
Act. When this story was written, however, sex-determination tests were still legal, and were being grossly misused to eradicate unwanted female fetuses. While in the West, feminists were arguing for the right to abortion as the basic reproductive right of a woman, in India, the same right was being abused by patriarchy for perpetrating female feticide. The desire for a male child was so strong that Anees Jung reports in *Unveiling India – A Woman’s Journey* (1987), an ancient rite was designed to magically change the sex of the unborn child if it is female. She claims that the rite “continues to be performed over pregnant women in traditional Hindu households” even today (70).

Elisabeth Bumiller, like Jung had also written about her experiences in India in *May You Be the Mother of a Hundred Sons – A Journey Among the Women of India* (1991). One of the most shocking discoveries she made during her journey was the phenomenal number of cases of female feticide and female infanticide. This led her to reconsider her own stance on the issue of sex-determined abortion. On the one hand, she decries the practice: “What right did India have, I thought, to take the newest technology from the West and use it for something as reprehensible as the slaughter of female babies?” (118) Yet, she recognizes the contradiction in the theory of the reproductive rights of a woman which permits her to terminate her pregnancy: “If I thought the abortion of a female fetus as ‘slaughter’, then what was I to call the abortion of a male fetus? Was it intellectually consistent to be in favour of a woman’s right to abortion yet opposed to sex-selective abortion?” (118) She finally comes to terms with her own dilemma by stating, “Although the idea of terminating a pregnancy simply because the fetus is female is morally repugnant to me, I believe that outlawing such a practice would fundamentally infringe on a woman’s right to choose” (122).

This story explicates the dilemma that Bumiller discusses, and eventually portrays a woman exercising her right to choose. It revolves around Sushila and her husband Rama Rao who have decided to go for a sex-determination test to ascertain the sex of their baby. The doctor apologetically informs the couple that the fetus is female,
“Sorry, Rao, you will be blessed with a daughter” (11). ‘Sorry’ and ‘blessed’ appear to be contradictory words, and the writer deliberately uses them together. The word ‘sorry’ indicates the anticipation of the reaction of the couple to the news the doctor is about to break to them. The word ‘blessed’ may reflect the true feelings of the doctor herself towards the unborn girl child.

The couple now has to take a decision on whether to abort the child or not. While Rao is very clear that abortion is the only alternative, Sushila does not seem to be too sure. The doctor advises Rao to allow Sushila to take the decision. Unlike the husband in “Death of a Child”, Rao does not believe in the reproductive rights of a woman. While in the previous story, the husband recognized the fact that his wife would have to bear the consequences of having the child (childbearing and childrearing), here the issue is a financial one. And according to the traditional division of labour, the responsibility of nurturing a child is that of the woman, but the economic responsibility rests with the man.

While Sushila fails to see the difference between a male and a female child (“A child is a child after all!”), Rao’s views are influenced by the idea that a daughter is a financial burden on the family. He questions Sushila’s very right to decide: “How dare you! How do you think you can bear a child? Your parents have not prepared us for this” (11). This is a clear indication towards the issue of dowry which seems to be prevalent. The dowry that Sushila has brought from her parents is obviously insufficient, and certainly cannot cater to the needs of a female child. This idea is further reinforced by Rao’s statement, “If that child is a girl, it is my problem. What will you do?” (11) Sushila, it appears from the flow of the conversation, does not contribute to the family income, and is not financially independent. Hence, she has no right to proactively participate in the decision, even if the decision concerns her own body.
Mary Dally had identified six rhetorical options that patriarchy uses for controlling and alienating women, and one of these was ‘Silencing Women’s Voices’. In their summary of Dally’s views, Foss, Foss and Griffin (1999) explain:

The strategy of silencing takes many forms, but it centers on creation of fear in the minds of women should they speak out against the foreground. Calling women sick, selfish, sexless, or man-haters when they raise the issue of women’s oppression, and telling them that they lack a sense of humour when they challenge foreground jokes are rhetorical practices that are used to threaten women into silence. (143)

Rao manages to silence Sushila by inculcating a sense of fear in her, and reminding her of her own inferior position.

When Sushila refuses to remain silent and voices her own opinion, Rao reacts in a violent manner and proceeds to break glasses and teacups. However, Sushila is accustomed to such tantrums. Yet, she dares to express herself, knowing fully well that her attempts to change his mind are futile. “This has been my life’s routine since I married you. All my desires have died after our marriage. I have satisfied your gross desires unquestioningly, and now that we are going to have a child – why can’t this desire of mine, ours, be fulfilled?” (11-12)

She realizes that she has no say in the matter, and grudgingly assents to get admitted to the hospital for an abortion. However, the voice of the unborn child in her womb (her own alter ego) leads her to question her decision: “Mother! Am I not wanted? What is my big crime? Why am I denied life? Should I not live and see this wonderful world? (12)

Sushila is torn between her own desires and the realization of her helplessness: “[...] I am a slave – only fed and clothed and sheltered under a roof – a born slave” (12). Financial independence clearly plays a major role in the status of the woman at home, as well as on the decision-making ability of a woman. Sushila’s dependence on her
husband transforms her into a bonded slave who cannot go against the wishes of her ‘master’.

The inner voice of the child, however, urges her not to lose hope or wallow in self-pity, but to act according to her own judgment of what is right and wrong:

Oh Mother! Don’t weep, rise up. Take courage! Hope never dies! [...] Mother, can’t you gather courage for my sake? Can’t you give me the gift of life? [...] Mother, rise and be bold! Think of yourself and for my sake decide and be courageous. Your cowardly act is suicidal. You are not making any sacrifice! After all, you have no right to kill me! To save yourself you are denying me the right to life. You have no right to do this. (12)

The child’s voice vacillates from being sympathetic to encouraging to forceful. By denying the child the right to live, Sushila seems to be protecting her own interests under the garb of sacrificing her desires. However, as the voice points out, this decision is wrong – for her, because she is contributing to her own oppression by remaining silent and passive; and also to the oppression of the child who is being victimized for no fault of her own.

The words have a tremendous impact on Sushila who finds the conviction she has been lacking, and she determines to do what she believes is correct. She informs the doctor that she has changed her mind about aborting the fetus. “I do not want to sacrifice my little girl either out of my own stupidity or helplessness. I do not want my family; my daughter is important. With him, my life is utterly meaningless and insignificant” (12).

The doctor supports her decision, because the rebellion of each individual makes a difference, and transforms a rebellion into a revolution. “Your decision is a heralding cry for all the victimized women in this world. Get ready for survival. Battles and progress are connected with one another” (13). It is interesting to note that the doctor had been in a similar situation as Sushila. Although she personally does not seem to approve of abortion of female fetuses, she has been carrying out the practice of sex-
determination tests and thereby encouraging them, possibly to protect her own interests. She is also a victim of patriarchy who must suppress her own desires to act in accordance with patriarchal expectations. Although she does not actively influence Sushila in any way in making her decision, she does urge Rao to allow Sushila to decide, thus paving the way for introspection and reconsideration. Her moral support and encouragement reinforces Sushila’s belief that she has taken the right decision, and also gives Sushila the courage to face, and break off ties with her husband. She further helps Sushila in finding hostel accommodation.

The short story exhibits the female bonding and resistance (through the female voices of the unborn child, Sushila and the doctor) against patriarchy. The resistance may be at an individual level, but is nevertheless a step forward in asserting the right of women to choose and to take their own decisions.

The decision to give birth, independently, without any male support is also explored in the recent blockbuster film Salaam Namaste (2005) directed by Siddharth Raj Anand, and produced by the prestigious banner of Yash Raj films. The film is set in Melbourne and revolves around characters who have migrated from India to look for better opportunities, and then settled down in Australia. Amber (Priety Zinta), who was being pressurized by her family to settle down into matrimony, comes to Melbourne as an exchange student, and then decides to stay on as a medical student supporting herself and her education by working part time in a radio station. Nikhil (Saif Ali Khan), who wishes to reject his Indian identity and prefers to be called Nick, comes to Melbourne to become an architect, but works at a restaurant as a chef instead. Both Nick and Amber are complete opposites, and one major point of difference is in their attitude towards children.

Nick, unlike the ‘traditional’ Indian male, does not wish to get married since he believes that marriage ends the romance in a relationship. He is the modern urban man who enjoys living a carefree life without any commitments and who cannot comprehend why people give birth to children. “Why can’t we be born adults?” he
asks irritably as he observes a child spoiling the arrangements he has diligently made for a wedding. Amber, on the other hand, loves children. She also does not wish to get married, and the only problem she perceives in a marriage is “a husband”. The fiercely independent and strong headed characters come together after a war of ego-clashes and decide to experiment with living together in order to ascertain their compatibility. The film explores a value system that would be characterized as ‘Westernized’ since it makes no moral judgment on a couple living together without being legally wedded.

Nick’s friend Ron, and Amber’s friend Cathy are married to each other. When they discover that Cathy is pregnant, there is an interesting exchange of conversation between the friends. Nick’s attitude is juxtaposed with Amber’s, and this difference is highlighted as the narrative develops. While Nick tells Ron, “Your life is over” because he is about to have a child and curses him for not using contraception, Amber is excited about Cathy’s pregnancy, and says, “That’s a bright new beginning”.

Two months later, Amber finds herself in the same situation. When she informs Nick about her pregnancy, his first reaction is, “How could you do this?” almost accusing her of having deliberately planned the pregnancy. Amber is shocked by his statement, “How could I do this?” and implies the dual responsibility in conception. Although they have always used protection, Amber points out that “protection is not hundred percent fool proof”. Nick immediately wants to get rid of the child: “You don’t want a child, I don’t want a child. Let’s kill it!” While Nick is very clear about his not wanting a child, her consensus is taken for granted. He assumes she also feels the same way although she has said nothing about her desire for children. Amber objects to his use of the word “kill” because of the brutality associated with it. “The word is abortion, Nick,” she says. “We need an abortion. Don’t say ‘kill’ it”. It is significant that this exchange of dialogues based on semantics takes place in English though the film is in Hindi.
Amber goes with him to the hospital for an abortion, but as she enters, she watches another patient being examined. The patient is undergoing a sonography and Amber is witness to the miraculous changes taking place inside the woman’s body, as well as the movements of the child. The doctor finishes with the other patient and then turns to Amber, “It has been twenty years, but even now when I see a baby being born, it’s amazing!” Amber wishes to absolve herself of the guilt of abortion and asks, “But in the beginning, it isn’t a life, is it? It’s just a part of the body.” The doctor replies, “Everyone has their own perspective. I think that conception is the beginning of a new life”.

The statement places Amber in a dilemma, and she decides not to abort the fetus. She tries to discuss the issue with Nick, and asks him about their future plans together, “I couldn’t think about marriage earlier. I didn’t know what I wanted from life. But now I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” Nick, however, is adamant in his views which remain the same, and does not understand why she would want to give up her studies, her work, and their beautiful carefree relationship together to take up the responsibility of a child. The sonography has had a strong impact on Amber which Nick cannot understand, “I saw its hands, heard its heart beats... I don’t want it... I’m also scared. But I can’t kill it!” Nick then reminds her that “the word is abortion”.

Terminology and semantics seem to play a major role in determining the attitude towards the termination of pregnancy. The word ‘kill’ seems to bring with it the moral connotation of ‘murder’ and is associated with a crime. However, the word ‘abortion’ seems to alleviate the guilt associated with ‘killing’ the child since it is a medical term. Dr. Stephen Schwarz discusses the terms ‘abortion’ and ‘murder’ in “The Moral Issue of Abortion” (1990), and claims that by virtue of the definition of murder, abortion is indeed murder. He defines murder as the ‘intentional’ killing of an ‘innocent’ person. Since the mother who kills the child in her womb is aware of what she is doing, Shwarz, argues, the killing is ‘intentional’. Moreover, since the
child is ‘non-aggressor’, is not an ‘attacker’ and is completely ‘innocent’, “abortion is the deliberate an intentional killing of this innocent person”.

Amber had tried to justify her ‘killing’ of the child by calling it an ‘abortion’, but when she sees the sonography, and recognizes that the child is not simply an extension of the mother’s body, but an entity in itself, she perceives abortion as ‘murder’. Nick, on the other hand, is very clear that he simply does not want the child, and does not see it as unethical to get rid of an unwanted child. He accuses Amber of “spoiling” everything by insisting on giving birth to the child, and asserts that the decision should be mutual: “This is not your decision alone. It’s my life as well – and I don’t want this child. Does that make no difference to you?”

Gauging his reticence and unwillingness to change his views, Amber then decides to alleviate him of all responsibility towards the unborn child. She says, “You have no responsibility towards me or my child anymore. You wanted to get rid of it. You are free – I will take a decision on what I have to do!” She also gives vent to her bitterness towards her relationship with Nick when she says, “I am glad I gave this relationship a try so that I could understand whether I would have lost something by not getting into it. Now I realize that there was nothing to lose in the first place.”

It is significant that the film is set in Australia, where the decision for a woman to become a single mother would not be frowned upon or considered scandalous. Had Amber been in India, under the watchful eyes of relatives and family friends, it may not have been possible for her to take such a decision. Amber receives support from Cathy who expresses her solidarity, much to the chagrin of her husband Ron, “Men don’t want to take responsibility. We don’t need you. We can do very well without you!” Cathy offers to let Amber stay with her, but Amber turns down the offer.

Instead, she insists on continuing to stay in the same house as Nick: “I have paid half the rent of this house. This house is mine for the next eight months. I’m going to stay in my room”. Amber goes through the entire pregnancy on her own, including
her visits to the doctor. She is forced to continue working right through the nine months since she had taken a loan from her boss for renting the house. She longs for support, but has too much self-respect to ask for it. Eventually, a number of incidents and conversations with different people force Nick to change his mind about fatherhood. He frantically traces Amber when she disappears, and places an engagement ring on her fingers seconds before the birth of their twin babies.

Although the ending seems conformist and the children are born only after a confirmation of the impending marriage, the character of Amber is significant for her unconventional and bold decision of becoming a single unmarried parent. With no financial or emotional support from her family (which is oblivious of her very existence) or the father of her children, Amber derives strength from her own desire to experience motherhood. She is influenced by the words of the doctor, and intrigued by the miracle of birth. An abortion would entail living with guilt all her life for having killed the child in her womb, which she does not want. The decision to continue her pregnancy is solely her own, and when Nick refuses to take responsibility for the child, she does not impose the responsibility on him. Instead, she takes control of the situation, makes herself stronger as an individual and refuses to wallow in self-pity for having been rejected by her boyfriend. Like Sushila in the story “Oh Mother! Let Me Also Live”, Amber asserts the right over her own body, as well as the right to give birth to a child, rendering the father redundant, and empowering the woman with control over her reproductive rights.

Amber’s decision could also be seen as evidence of the changing times, since this film (which happens to be the most recent film discussed in this work) was made and released in the 2000s, and presents the current scenario – a contemporary era and contemporary characters. It is significant that the characters have not been born and brought up in Australia, but have migrated there after adolescence. Hence, they have obviously been exposed to, and in fact, have grown up in Indian cultural ethos. They belong to the present generation, which is often critiqued for its ‘Westernization’, loss of traditional values, and degenerate ideas supposedly influenced by the Western
world. A ‘traditional’ Indian would perceive pre-marital sex as a ‘sin’, and an illegitimate child born of a liaison which is not legalized by the sacred bond of marriage, as completely unacceptable. However, this film does not pass a judgment on the live-in relationship, or on the protagonist’s desire to experience motherhood despite her single status.

Another film that had explored the concept of the right to embrace motherhood was Kundan Shah’s *Kya Kehna* (2000). In this case, as in *Salaam Namaste*, the child belongs to an unwed mother who is rejected by her lover after he has impregnated her. It is significant that this film also stars Priety Zinta, whose repeated portrayals of bold women who challenge social structures, seem to have given her the image of a brazen and outspoken woman. In *Kya Kehna*, Priya (Priety Zinta), the protagonist, insists on giving birth to the child. Since this film, unlike *Salaam Namaste*, was set in India, Priya faces tough opposition from her family members in the beginning, and is the object of social mockery, ostracism and humiliation. However, she eventually manages to win their support and is even successful in convincing society of her position.

What is interesting to note is that in both films, the protagonist eventually settles down into matrimony – in *Salaam Namaste*, Amber gets back with Nick, while in *Kya Kehna* Priya rejects the proposal of the man who impregnated her, but gets married to a childhood friend who has always loved her unconditionally. The woman is not allowed to remain single, thus giving the films a conventional ending which conforms to the dictates of society.

5.2.3 Asserting the Right to Give Birth to Children Outside the Wedlock

The theme of the right to choose to give birth to a child is reiterated in the films *Rihaee* (1988) and *Mrityudand* (1997). However, unlike in the story “Oh Mother! Let Me Also Live”, the child is not the product of a legitimate relationship, but rather of an illicit extra-marital liaison. Despite the gap of a decade between the release of these films, there are certain similarities. For one, both are set in rural India; and for
another, they depict female solidarity and collective resistance against male oppression.

Aruna Raje’s *Rihaee* is a scathing attack on the double standards of patriarchy where men are allowed to fulfill their sexual desires, but women are condemned for infidelity. The film explores the lives of labourers in a village in Gurjarat. While the men go to the city in search of work, the women are left to tend to the fields and look after the children. The men amuse themselves with sex workers in the city, whereas the women are deprived of sex.

All the women in the village are in a state of frenzy when a foreign returned Mansuq (Naseeruddin Shah) comes back to the village, and they all fall prey to his charms. The only woman who ignores him and resists his advances is Taku Bai (Hema Malini), who is portrayed as being different from the others and devoted to her husband. Her resistance attracts Mansuq and poses a challenge to him. She finally succumbs to his advances and finds herself pregnant.

Mansuq also impregnates Sukhi (Neena Gupta), the wife of a dominating patriarch Roopji (Mohan Agashe). Roopji had nearly beaten his first wife Dhani to death when he had discovered her adulterous relationship and consequent pregnancy. Eventually she had died of self-immolation soon before her delivery. Afraid of suffering the same fate, Sukhi aborts her child by consuming poisonous substances. Suicide and abortion seem to be safe solutions to the problem of unwanted pregnancies. Moreover, these solutions are also easier because they do not threaten patriarchy in any manner, but rather indicate that the women are aware of the ‘mistakes’ they have made and thus inflict punishment upon themselves to resolve the matter.

Taku Bai, however, refuses to accept either of these solutions and insists on giving birth to the child, despite the advice and warnings of the women of the village. They tell her, “You have no option but to abort the child. No man would accept his wife having another man’s child”. Adrienne Rich (1977) had pointed to the hypocrisy of
male-dominated society which exalts motherhood conditionally: "Motherhood is 'sacred' so long as its offspring are 'legitimate' — that is, as long as the child bears the name of a father who legally controls the mother" (42). Since this is not the case with Taku, she is advised to abort the child.

Taku does not abort, and very soon, the men return back to the village. When Taku refuses to engage in sex with her husband Amarjit (Vinod Khanna), and cites the reason as pregnancy, Amarjit is shattered and heart broken. He discusses the matter with Roopji who remarks, "The least she could have done was to abort the child. Beat her! Don’t you know what I did with Dhani? If she has a child, all the women will be pregnant while we are away, and will rear bastards." Ancient law-giver Manu had stated, "Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling they may appear; for if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on to families" (Cited in Saraswati 208). Keeping in mind the dangers of allowing Taku to give birth to the illegitimate child, Roopji advises Amarjit to order her to abort the child, but Taku is adamant.

Taku Bai’s adultery and consequent rejection of her husband’s orders represent an assertion of the right of a woman over her sexuality and body, as well as the right to control childbirth. Taku is assertive and firm in her decision, “If anything happens to my child,” she tells her husband, “I will kill you. It is my child. I wish it was ours, but I won’t let you do anything to my child.”

The matter ultimately goes to the panchayat and becomes a public issue. The panchayat wants Taku to leave the village because if she stays, she would be an adverse influence on all the other women who need to be protected from her. Taku is asked to defend herself and she responds to the accusations quietly but with conviction, “I don’t feel the need to justify myself before you. It is a personal matter. I will not deny the truth. A human being sometimes becomes a victim of circumstances.”
The men take recourse to myth arguing that somewhere one needs to draw a Laxman Rekha. The concept of the Laxman Rekha, which originated in the Valmiki Ramayana, has been used frequently in popular media, especially with reference to women, and points to the transgression of limits set by patriarchy. Here, it becomes a means of controlling the sexuality of women. The idea of the Laxman Rekha is instantly subverted by the women who suddenly unite and oppose the members of the panchayat. They pounce on the statement, and question the hypocrisy of a society where there is a Laxman Rekha for women but not for men. An elderly village woman, Moti Bai takes up the cause of women and is joined by the others present in the assembly, thus pointing to a female bonding. “You expect a woman to remain loyal to you,” challenges Moti Bai, “while you can do what you want?”

While the women are expected to remain loyal and faithful to their husbands, the men are free to indulge in sexual pleasures outside the marriage. Whereas the women are supposed to toil and look after the children and find consolation in their loneliness, the men are not responsible for or answerable to anyone, least of all their wives. A man’s sexual desire is justified as his weakness, and it is assumed that women have no desire for sex at all. According to Manu, the man is free and is the enjoyer. The woman, on the other hand is an object of enjoyment (bhogyay). Hence, she cannot be shown to have an affair with a person other than the husband (Cited in Kelkar 42). Manu had further warned women of the consequences of transgressing from the roles assigned to them: “By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, after death she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases, the punishment of her sin” (Cited in Saraswati 211). However, the women of the village attack these double standards that were decreed by ancient law givers, and have been used to curb the sexuality of women for centuries.

Depriving women of the right to sex, argues Moti Bai, is against the laws of nature. She also uses the myth of Ramayana to support her argument, “If you want us to live like Sita, you must be like Ram.” Men expect their wives to emulate Sita’s virtues of chastity, purity and loyal devotion to her husband, but themselves do not strive to be
monogamous and faithful as Ram was. *Rihaee* questions not only the patriarchal expectations of women to be faithful like Sita but also Sita’s response to her predicament. Sita had allowed the earth to swallow her instead of fighting against injustice, and had laid down the rules for all women to follow. Roopji’s first wife Dhani, too, was forced to resort to suicide, while his second wife Sukhi had no option but to consume poisonous substances that could have proved dangerous to her life. The only solution for men, therefore, appears to lie in death or life-long humiliation.

Moti Bai argues that men and women should be given an equal punishment for the same act: “Punish us if we have done wrong – but give us the same punishment that you would give to yourself”. She claims that none of the men present in the assembly have the right to pass a judgment on Taku Bai for none of them is flawless. All men who go to the city to work amuse themselves with prostitutes, and the money which should be sent home to the wives is spent on sex workers in the city instead. Many of the men contract sexually transmitted diseases from the prostitutes with whom they sleep, and money is then spent on their medication while the women are forced to fend for themselves. Moreover, she points to a number of older men who marry girls young enough to be their granddaughters in order to satisfy their sexual urges.

If the sanctity of the institution of marriage is alive today, argues Moti Bai, it is only because of women. “How many of you know whose child you are? How do you know whether you are a bastard or not?” The rules of society, she states, have been made by men in order to assert control over women and to keep them in place. Women are treated like the private property of men, or worse still, like chattel. They have silently accepted such practices without protest, and the men should feel indebted to them for their ‘kindness’ in keeping quiet for so long. Now, however, the women refuse to accept the decision of the *panchayat* and unite to support the cause of Taku Bai. “If she leaves, we will all go,” says Moti Bai. The unanimous opposition of the women to the double standards of patriarchy creates a furore and the assembly is dissolved.
While Taku offers to leave the home and presents her husband with an apology for having caused him so much embarrassment and public humiliation, it is now Amarjit who supports her. He attacks Roopji when the latter insists that Taku and Moti Bai be forced to leave the village. He recognizes that it is the circumstances that are responsible for this situation, and questions the concept of masculinity which entails exercising control over the ‘weaker’ sex.

The film asserts the right of a woman over her reproductive system and sexuality, subverts the notion of chastity that has for centuries been used to keep women under control, and finally also her right over a child that she has conceived. Moti Bai proclaims, “A woman gives life, does not take it. Because of your society and its rules, women are forced to abort their children. No one likes doing this... How do you know how sad it is for a woman to give up or kill her child? She is a mother.”

Through her act of defiance, Taku paves the way for other women, who can now voice the feelings that they have been suppressing for so long. Veena Singh writes in “Towards the Radicalization of the Indian Family” (2002), “Takoo thus shatters the male canons which construct, ascribe and prescribe roles for women. She refuses to suffer the fate of a woman’s lot like the other women, and fulfills a need for feminist freedom, thus shouldering the responsibility of her action and rendering the father irrelevant” (104). The film is a powerful statement in its demand for the equality of the sexes.

The theme of the illegitimate child, and a woman’s right over that child is reiterated in Prakash Jha’s film Mrityudand (1997). Like Rihaee, the film explores the individual and consequently collective resistance of women who are exploited by patriarchal society. One of the main characters in the film, Chandravati, (Shabana Azmi) is abandoned by her husband Abhay Singh (Mohan Agashe), ostensibly on the ground that she is sterile. He leaves her to become a head priest after getting his predecessor murdered. Chandravati pleads with him but in vain: “I have borne all the
insults heaped upon me, including the curse of being called barren. Don’t leave me like this.”

It is actually Abhay Singh who is impotent, but it is Chandravati who has borne the curse of sterility for years. As Shoma A. Chatterji (1998) points out, “[...] few men feel guilty about their inability to father a child. Even if some do feel guilty, they are clever enough to hide their guilt by maintaining a low profile and by refusing to own up to their deficiency even while they watch their wives being socially ostracized for the wrong reasons” (122-123). And Abhay Singh certainly has no qualms or feelings of guilt as he hears people hold her sterility responsible for his decision of self-abnegation.

Chandravati is shattered and disillusioned to a point that it affects her physical health. She hands over the keys of the house and consequently the responsibility to her sister-in-law Ketaki (Madhuri Dixit), and suffers in isolation. She sees herself and other women as helpless creatures who must accept patriarchal oppression as their destiny because they happened to have had the misfortune of being born women. Distressed with Ketaki’s argument with her husband Vinay (Ayub Khan), she tells Ketaki, “Men are like that. It is better to do what he says.”

In yet another conversation with Ketaki, who appears to be rebellious and outspoken, she states that Ketaki is capable of fighting for her rights now because she is still young. “When you grow older, you will learn to bear everything.” When Ketaki retorts by asking her why it should always be the women who should continue to suffer, Chandravati replies, “That is the rule.” The belief in the superiority of the male and the subservience of the woman whose duty it is to comply with the demands of her husband, however unjust, is so deeply ingrained in Chandravati that she has learned to accept her subordinate status as natural.

During her illness, however, she is nursed by Rambharan (Om Puri), a low caste man who helps support the family. A mutual attraction develops between the two,
transcending from the emotional to the physical. Chandravati responds to him and finds herself looking forward to his visits and discarding the monotony of her life, symbolized by the sudden care of her physical appearance, and the preference for brighter clothes. When she becomes pregnant, her reaction, surprisingly enough, is not that of fear of ostracism from society, but rather that of joy – for she has discovered that she is not barren. “I am not barren, water cannot melt me now, fire cannot burn me, wind cannot blow me. I have attained purity.”

Later, when Ketaki, shocked with her pregnancy, questions her, she admits boldly, “I have broken all the rules.” “Out of your own free will?” Ketaki probes. “Yes, out of my own free will,” she replies with pride. “This is the first time I have acted of my own free will. How long should I bear the burden of abiding by these rules?” When Ketaki asks her whose child it is, she answers proudly: “Mine”. This, according to Shoma A. Chatterji (1998), is the strongest statement in the entire film.

As Anshoo Sharma explains in “Crossing the Boundaries: Women in Search of Self” (2002), “Her body becomes a means of self-realization. The ability and capacity to conceive and give birth to a new life gives her a sense of self and of power. Through the act of procreation there she experiences regeneration which indicates her womanhood” (110). She is no longer afraid of facing her husband, and scorns him publicly for his impotency and hypocrisy. She reassures Ketaki who is afraid for her, “Don’t worry. This man can’t do anything. He is a hypocrite.” She then proceeds to address him directly: “I was dead for you. Why did you come here? To prove your right and your strength? You thought that just because I am a woman you could destroy me? A woman also has a heart and a life. I too know how to live.” Completely taken aback and publicly humiliated, Abhay Singh leaves the house in anger. Chandravati has finally found the courage to assert herself. She is not alone in her struggle. Her father-in-law expresses his solidarity and understanding by silently offering her his blessings.
The film subverts the concept of the silent suffering woman who bears the curse of infertility (even if she herself is not sterile), by portraying a woman who is strong enough to reveal the truth of her husband's impotency to the world. According to Jasbir Singh in "Body as Text: Woman Transgressors and Hindi Cinema" (2002), "[...] it is the right to one's body which is established, and within it, the mother right. The father does not matter. The child belongs to the mother" (134). And indeed, the father of the child is disposed off through the death of Rambharan. Chandravati has the sole right over her child. The same was the case in Rihaee where the biological father disappears, and the mother stakes claim over the child which she says is rightfully hers. Although eventually, Taku's husband accepts the child in the womb, thus ensuring that the child would have a father's name, it is significant that Taku had been prepared to bring up the child independently without the father.

5.2.4 Rejecting the Role of Motherhood

Deepa Mehta's film Fire (1998) is yet another example of revolutionary cinema which has attracted a great deal of controversy and opposition from fundamentalist political parties, as the film supposedly threatens the very values of Indian culture. The film is set in a middle class locality in Delhi, and portrays two characters who are drawn towards each other because they happen to be in loveless marriages. Their emotional attachment metamorphoses into a physical longing, and thus begins a lesbian relationship which is considered a taboo in Indian society.

Radha (Shabana Azmi), a middle aged and over worked housewife is barren and has "no eggs in the ovaries". She is deprived of sex by her husband Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda). Ashok is a devotee of a swami who preaches that desire is the root of all evil. He believes that the only purpose of sex is procreation, specifically the production of sons who will carry on the family line. Ashok turns the misfortune of Radha's infertility, as she puts it, into an opportunity, and takes a vow of celibacy. It is evident that Radha is never consulted before this decision is taken, and that the decision itself is a form of punishment inflicted upon her for being sterile. She does not question Ashok's actions, and nor does she express her sexual desires.
Whenever Ashok feels any desire for her, he asks her to lie next to him only to make certain that he is “beyond temptation” and therefore closer to God. Experiencing a sense of guilt and inferiority for being infertile, she complies with his desires: “His face glowed with such hope that I chose not to see the confusion beneath the surface. He looked like a child, and in that instant, just for a moment, I knew what it felt like to be a mother,” she tells her sister-in-law Sita (Nandita Das).

The entire blame for the predicament rests on her as it is due to her that Ashok takes such a decision (which seems to be reminiscent of the film *Mrityudand*). Ashok attributes this misfortune to his destiny to seek unity with the universal truth. When Radha asks him how this helps her, he replies like a traditional patriarch, “By helping me, you are doing your duty as my wife.”

She lives in a farcical marriage for thirteen years, and goes along with her husband’s decision passively until Sita enters her life and forces her to question the absurdity of the situation. She has learnt to suppress her sexual desires, and it is only after she finds sexual and emotional fulfillment with Sita that she refuses to comply with her husband’s demands. “Not tonight,” she says when he tells her that he needs her, and turns around and goes to sleep.

Unlike Radha, Sita is rebellious from the beginning. She too is deprived of sex because her husband Jatin (Javed Jaffrey) is involved in a relationship with a Chinese hairdresser and has married her only out of pressure from the joint family in which he lives. Since the elder son cannot produce an offspring because his wife is infertile, the duty of producing an heir is thrust upon Jatin. His girlfriend, however, refuses to become a ‘baby producing machine’ and the task, by default, is passed on to Sita.

Sita’s first sexual encounter is mechanical, and devoid of any emotions as far as Jatin is concerned. His duty is to produce an offspring, and the sexual act is performed solely for the purpose of procreation, and not because he feels any attraction or desire.
for his new bride. When Jatin condescendingly suggests that she should have a baby which would keep her occupied (since he himself cannot offer her companionship), she startles him with her response, “You are a pompous fool!” She responds to his slap with a resounding slap herself, leaving him shocked and awestruck for a few moments.

Both women rebel against the system where motherhood is exalted, and procreation seems to be the sole objective for sex. It is a system where barren women are condemned, isolated and punished. While motherhood is medically denied to Radha, Sita rejects motherhood as the only option available for her to fulfill herself. They both seek fulfillment in each other’s companionship and embark upon a relationship that is free from patriarchal norms and dictates.

The portrayal of a lesbian relationship has come under severe attack. According to politician and leader of the Shiv Sena, Bal Thackeray, it is against ‘Indian’ culture. As journalist Bachi Kakaria points out, however, “When you are heir to the breathtakingly permissive Kama Sutra, why confine yourself to the missionary position? Homosexuality didn’t need a visa to enter India, it was already there” (Cited in Bachmann 239).

In her essay “On Fire – Sexuality and its Incitements” (2002), Geeta Patel cites some detractors of the film who have claimed that “some innocent women who had never been exposed to such perversion would be swayed by the film to leave their failing marriages and their children” (230). The film thus seems to threaten the basic institutions on which patriarchy is founded and which patriarchy uses to control women – heterosexuality, marriage, and of course, motherhood.

Monica Bachmann in “After the Fire” (2002) summarises the argument cited by Carol Upadhya in the Economic and Political Weekly in favour of the film: “Upadhya points out that the lesbian relationship in Fire functions as a model of resistance to male control of female sexuality, a model that is open to all women, homosexual or
heterosexual. Upadhya sees the film as a challenge to the version of traditional Indian values advocated by the Shiv Sena, the construction of the Indian family as dominated by men’s power, men’s desires…” (235)

This is indeed what makes the film subversive – and therefore open to attack. While Mrityudand and Rihaee dealt with relationships outside the marriage and children out of the wedlock, they restricted themselves to heterosexual relationships. This film goes a step further by placing the protagonists in a homosexual relationship which is completely unacceptable in Indian society.

All the texts in this section have reinforced in one way or another, the right of a woman over her reproductive system. While in the story “Death of a Child”, the narrator affirmed the right to abortion, “Oh Mother! Let Me Also Live” dealt with the issue of female feticide and asserted the right of a mother to give birth to a girl child. Salaam Namaste examined an unwed mother embracing motherhood out of her own free will without the support of her lover. Rihaee and Mrityudand portrayed women who fought for the right to have children conceived out of the wedlock. Finally, Fire rejected the concept of an unsatisfactory heterosexual relationship and emphasized the right of a woman to remain childless if she so chooses. It also claimed that a childless woman has the right to express her desires, and that infertility does not indicate the end of the world. All the texts portray strong female characters who gather the courage to oppose the roles imposed upon them by tradition. In most cases, they also manage to find valuable support from other women who give them the moral (and in some situations even physical) strength they require to fight their battles. In some cases, resistance can be seen at an individual level, while in others, it is collective. Nevertheless, in one way or another, these texts serve to shake the foundations of patriarchy.
5.3 Alternate Family Structures

The most powerful form of subversion is the creation of alternate structures, which are in opposition to the existing structures. On the one hand, this method reveals the lacunae in the existing system, and on the other, it also offers a solution to alleviate the oppressive situation. Media and literature, which are generally used to reinforce dominant ideology, can also be used by the subordinate group to subvert that ideology through the presentation of alternate structures.

The arguments of bell hooks have been summarized in *Feminist Rhetorical Theories* (1999) by Karen A. Foss, Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin: “Cultural criticism involves not simply challenging particular forms of representation but also inventing new images. It must be rooted in ‘much deeper bases’ than ‘in reaction to’. It must also be concerned with ‘transforming’ the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our world views and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad” (90). hooks goes on to argue that merely a critique of the existing set up (as explained in the analysis of texts in the first section) is not enough. Nor is it sufficient to simply oppose the existing structures (like the texts in the second section of this chapter do). To quote hooks, “In that vacant space after one has resisted there is still the necessity to become – to make oneself anew. This requires the second step of inventing ‘new alternative habits of being’ – of presenting possibilities for a transformed future” (91).

The previous chapters have argued that motherhood is a social construct that has been imposed upon women by patriarchy. Anything that has been constructed can also be deconstructed and then reconstructed. The texts discussed in this section reconstruct the family structure wherein the function of motherhood is imposed upon women and becomes their primary role. The first film in this section, *Chachi 420* shifts the mothering role to the father, while in *Tamanna*, it is taken over by a eunuch. The third text, *The Mothers of Maya Diip* (1989), creates a set of fantasy worlds with
varying social structures, each of which is contrasted with the existing patriarchal structure in which we live.

5.3.1 Kamal Hassan’s Chachi 420

*Chachi 420* (1997), a remake of the popular Hollywood film *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), begins with a courtroom scene where divorce proceedings between Janki (Tabu) and Jai (Kamal Hassan) are in progress. Jai works in films as an assistant dance choreographer while Janki is the daughter of a rich businessman, Durga Prasad Bharadwaj (Amrish Puri). Durga Prasad had failed in his attempt to prevent Janki’s marriage to Jai, but now that his daughter has agreed to her mistake, is very keen to ensure that the divorce takes place smoothly. He would like to sever all ties with his son-in-law whom he despises.

The issue of the custody of the daughter Bharti is a crucial one. Although it is clear that Bharti seems to be more deeply attached to her father than her mother (conveyed non-verbally through facial expressions and gestures), the custody of the child is given to the mother on grounds that she is more financially capable of looking after the child. Jai, on the other hand, has no stability in his job and has not even been able to pay the rent for his house. Jai, however, insists that he will take care of her, “There hasn’t been a day when I’ve slept before looking at my daughter.” He is heartbroken when he hears the verdict, especially since he would be allowed visiting hours only once a week, and that too in a public place.

The bonding between the father and daughter is significant and is portrayed through the joy on their faces when they meet each other after a gap of a week (which seems to them like eternity). It is also elicited through the secrets and private jokes they appear to share. On the contrary, there seems to be no bonding at all with the mother – a reversal of the traditional role expectations.

Jai’s deep love for his daughter makes it virtually impossible for him to abide by the verdict of the court: “She’s not *Chitrahaar* that I can watch only on Fridays.”
Influenced by the ideas of a friend, he attempts to kidnap his daughter, but unfortunately gets caught. This not only puts him behind bars, but also puts an end to the weekly meetings, thus adding fuel to the fire.

Soon after, he comes across an advertisement given by Janki for a clean and educated Brahmin woman to take care of her daughter. Jai questions why Janki needs a woman to take care of her daughter: “Isn’t she herself a woman? Isn’t she a Brahmin? Isn’t she educated?” This reinforces the traditional idea that the upbringing of a child is the duty of the mother, and critiques women who refuse to fulfill their primary duties. It is important to note that the financial status of Janki now allows her to pass on her ‘duties’ to another person who is employed by her. While living with Jai, she had taken up the responsibility of the child entirely because she could not afford to hire a governess then. Kumkum Sangari (1999) had asserted:

The low-paid domestic service sector releases some women from the lower middle class upwards for work in other sectors of the economy, enables leisure or more choice for others, constitutes middle class status, marks the point where racial and ethnic hierarchies are forged, and serves to maintain patriarchal relations, especially in countries where women predominate in domestic service. (292)

Janki, who is now elevated from the lower-class to the upper middle class by virtue of living with her father instead of her husband, can ‘choose’ to ‘buy’ leisure time for herself by shifting her ‘responsibility’ of the child on to another domestic worker.

Jai ‘becomes’ the ‘domestic worker’ when he responds to the advertisement. With the help of a make-up artist, he impersonates and transforms his appearance to look like Janki’s mother. He is willing to resort to any means to be able to spend some time with his daughter. He arrives for the interview only to be informed that a candidate has already been selected. Suddenly, a fire explodes, and Bharti’s life seems to be in danger. The imminent threat to his daughter’s life evokes a protective instinct in the father (the ‘paternal’ instinct as it may be called), and forgetting his identity, he immediately rushes to her rescue.
Applauded for his presence of mind, he is selected as a governess for Bharti. Jai Prakash Pawan now becomes Laxmi Chachi. Chachi takes care of all the needs of Bharti – from waking her up to brushing her teeth, to giving her a bath, taking her to school and playing with her. These are duties that are traditionally associated with a mother. Ann Dally (1982) had stated, “[...] motherliness is a human quality and by no means confined to women. The use of the phase ‘maternal instinct’ is often used by those who wish to assert that only women should care for children or that the details of childrearing are beneath the dignity of men. In fact, many men have motherly qualities, and many more could develop them if society and circumstances would permit it” (200). However, it is significant that Jai is not allowed to exhibit these qualities as a ‘male’, but rather, can express his love for his child in a ‘feminine’ masquerade. It is only when he ‘becomes’ Chachi that he takes over the ‘mothering’ role.

However, Jai proves the point that men do have motherly qualities and can display them when required, even if it is under the disguise of a female. Myra McDonald (1995) had discussed the image of the father in Hollywood films such as Kramer vs. Kramer (1979), and Three Men and a Baby (1987). The observation made by her can apply to this film as well. According to McDonald, “While mothering has been constructed as sacred, self-sacrificing and asexual, fathering in 1980s popular media discourse is represented as trendy, fun and physical” (150).

In fact, there is a sharp contrast between the nurturing instinct and style of Jai and Janki which subverts the stereotyped images one has of a mother and father. While Jai is portrayed as being extremely caring and sensitive to the needs of his daughter (besides being playful and friendly), Janki’s character is imbued with complete indifference. She is always shown reproaching Bharti for her behaviour, and is often downright rude in her approach to her daughter. She does not like Bharti’s childishness, and refuses to distinguish between an adult and a child, setting up high expectations for Bharti which the child cannot meet.
Janki also seems to be so engrossed in her own world that the child is often neglected. For instance, when Bharti burns her hand and approaches her mother for comfort, Janki, who is working on her computer retorts rudely, “Don’t disturb me” and asks Chachi to look into the matter. This also subverts the stereotype of the ideal mother for whom the child is supposed to be top priority. The juxtaposition of Chachi and Janki necessarily entails the portrayal of Janki as a deviant, uncaring and ‘unmotherly’ mother who fails to respond to the needs of her child. Chachi, on the other hand, is constructed as the epitome of love and affection, the ‘good’ selfless mother. Meanwhile, Chachi further becomes the symbol of a superwoman – a working mother who juggles between managing Janki’s house, bringing up the child, and also managing a career. The dual responsibility is not an easy task, and Chachi is shown running from one place to another in complete frenzy, trying to manage everything effectively.

While the film subverts certain stereotypes, it reinforces others. While Jai exhibits the nurturant behaviour traditionally associated with a woman, he also displays aggression and strength which are considered to be masculine traits. He beats up an eve teaser and an entire gang of men who dare to touch his wife. In this scene, she is reduced to a weak and passive victim, while he plays the role of a protector. His masculinity is also contrasted with the effeminate doctor who has accompanied Janki and harbours the desire of marrying her. The doctor’s cowardice, when set in opposition to Jai’s bravery, makes the latter more desirable in Janki’s eyes. Moreover, as a woman, Chachi also seems to become vulnerable to the male gaze and immediately finds a number of suitors vying for her attention, even though she seems to be a middle-aged woman, well past her prime days of youth.

Regardless of these reinforcements of stereotyped images, Chachi 420 does manage to elicit the fact that childrearing is not necessarily synonymous with ‘female’ mothering, and need not be restricted to mothers alone. Fathers can display ‘maternal’ behaviour as well. Although the film is not a feminist attack on patriarchy
and does not set out to critique the existing patriarchal structure, it unintentionally points to the possibility of an alternate family structure, or at least an assimilation of ‘fathering’ with ‘mothering’. The role of the father is not minimized or restricted to economic responsibility alone, but rather is one where the traditional roles of mothering and fathering are replaced by ‘parenting’. However, in the end of the film, there is a reconciliation between Jai and Janki, which would possibly mean a return to the traditional roles of ‘mothering’ and ‘fathering’. Despite the conformist ending, what the narrative has suggested is that the roles can overlap or be interchanged, and need not be restricted to their conventional definition. The text lends itself to varying interpretations, and one of these is certainly a subversive one.

5.3.2 Pooja Bhatt’s Tamanna

Pooja Bhatt’s debut film as a producer, Tamanna (1997) is a path breaking film since it deals with the life of a marginalized group – that of eunuchs who have hitherto been reduced to caricatures in Hindi cinema and have been subject to stereotype portrayals. The film revolves around the relationship between a eunuch and his adopted daughter. It elicits how the child rearer need not even be biologically related to the child. Nancy Chodorow had asserted, “There is no evidence to show that female hormones or chromosomes make a difference in human maternalness, and there is substantial evidence that non-biological mothers, children and men can parent as adequately as biological mothers and can feel just as nurturant” (29). Indeed, the protagonist of Tamanna proves to be more nurturant than the biological parents.

An infant is abandoned by her biological father immediately after her birth because she is a girl. He orders her to be killed because he does not want to bear the stigma or the burden of having borne a daughter. A staunch patriarch, he has no respect for women, who, for him are either mere slaves or objects of sexual gratification. He informs his wife that for the third time, she has given birth to a dead daughter, and threatens to remarry if she fails to produce a son the next time. The wife is a silent sufferer who passively accepts the physical and emotional abuse meted out to her by her husband. She is helpless and dependent, and has no control over her situation.
In contrast to the abusive and dictatorial father, and the weak and powerless mother, is the hermaphrodite figure of Tikoo (Paresh Rawal), a sensitive, caring and emotional person. Shattered by the death of his mother, Tikoo has no desire to live until he finds a little baby abandoned in a waste bin. Vikram Chopra, the baby's father, had ordered the baby to be killed, but the nurse Kaushalya, terrifying of carrying out the orders and also of refusing to do so, had abandoned the child in a waste bin.

This is where Tikoo finds her, and decides to adopt her because she has now given him a reason to live, and made his life meaningful and worthwhile. He is advised by his friend Salim (Manoj Bajpai) to take the child to the police station because "You are a eunuch, and eunuchs don't have children." He warns Tikoo against the dangers of bringing up a girl child in a male dominated society, but in vain. Tikoo is firm in his resolve and refuses to accept the argument. Already an emotional person by nature, he soon becomes deeply attached to the girl whom he names Tamanna (Pooja Bhatt). He is caring and protective about her, and brutally attacks the person who tries to reveal the truth of her origins to Tamanna. He is afraid of losing her and hence, refrains from exposing her to reality.

He is advised to send Tamanna to a boarding school but refuses on the ground that she cannot live without him. However, as Salim is quick to point out, "It is you who can't live without her." Ultimately when Tamanna starts getting out of control, he has no option but to send her to boarding school. His anguish at being separated from her is conveyed through his pained facial expressions, which depict a poignant and sorry picture.

As a make-up artist, he is financially not very well off, and over a period of time finds himself incapable of meeting the expenses of her education. Professionally, he is threatened by the Chinese girls who mushroom suddenly, and whose fluency in
English makes them preferable to an illiterate eunuch. He finds himself jobless, and finally sells his mother’s jewellery to pay for Tamanna’s books and uniforms.

When it is time for her to get married and her childhood friend Sajid (Sharad Kapoor) proposes, he finds that he lacks the financial resources to provide for her dowry in order to see her settled. His self-respect does not allow him to accept money from Sajid, but he is willing to demean himself in front of his stepbrother and beg for help. For the sake of his daughter, he takes another step, which he has consciously avoided till now. He joins the community of eunuchs to dance at weddings and other functions for the sake of money. He had rejected the cross-dressing styles that eunuchs are traditionally associated with. He had deliberately dressed like a man and worked in a ‘respectable’ profession. His love for his daughter and the desire to see her lead a comfortable life demands his sacrifice, which seems to be the embodiment of the selflessness and self-sacrifice associated with the ideal mother. Like any ideal mother, Tikoo is willing to compromise to any level, even if it means participating in an act that he himself despises.

He is therefore completely shattered when Tamanna, upon discovering the true identity of her ‘father’ expresses revulsion and disgust. His world comes crumbling down when she refers to him as a hijra (eunuch). Salim chides her for her behaviour, and tells her about the sacrifices made by Tikoo for which she should be indebted to him for the rest of her life: “Your own family members had abandoned you in a waste bin from where he picked you up. We all advised him to leave you in an orphanage or give you to the police. But he stayed up nights holding you in his arms so that you could sleep, stayed barefoot and slept hungry so that you could eat…” His decision to resort to dancing as the last option, Salim reveals, was to enable her to study in an English boarding school. He had loved her unconditionally, and without any expectations, and had always been afraid of losing her.

Both Tamanna and Tikoo represent marginalized groups on society, and are oppressed by the dominant patriarchy. Tamanna, as a girl child, is unwanted and
abandoned by her own father. Tikoo, as a eunuch, is not accepted by society which perceives and treats him as ‘abnormal’ and different. He is the victim of mockery and abuse, and is ostracized from society. What Tikoo says to Tamanna in order to defend his own position applies to Tamanna as well, “If God made me like this, is it my fault? I have no control over my birth. It was Allah’s will.” In the hierarchy of a patriarchal society, Tamanna is positioned in between. She is lower than the men (who occupy the superior position) but higher than eunuchs (who are the lowermost in the hierarchy). Hence, for a moment, Tamanna, though herself a victim of patriarchal oppression, fails to see Tikoo’s position and treats him condescendingly just as she has been treated by patriarchy. This illustrates the concept of power structure within a society.

Tamanna attempts to relocate her biological family, and it is only when she realizes her own position viz. a viz. her father (who belongs to and represents the dominant group of patriarchy) that she can understand the complexity of the social structure where she has grown up. Her father ill-treats and humiliates her, and refuses to acknowledge her very presence, let alone accept her as his daughter. His treatment of her is brutal because she is a woman, and when she faces this reality, she learns to value her relationship with Tikoo. Tikoo has given her love unconditionally and selflessly while her father has rejected her on birth and refuses to accept her even after twenty years.

Tamanna fights against the injustice perpetrated on her by her father, and is supported in her mission by Tikoo, Salim and Sajid. She confronts her father who acknowledges that he had ordered her to be killed because a daughter is nothing but a burden on her family, and that the soul cannot attain freedom from the body unless the funeral pyre is lit by the son. Tamanna questions her father’s logic, “Is a daughter a curse? You pray to Kali and Durga, and revere Sita and Savitri as goddesses. Which traditions are you talking about?”
Ultimately, she refuses to go back to her biological family even when her mother and brother (who did not have any role to play in her abandonment and oppression, and in fact remained unaware of her existence for twenty years) come to take her back. She prefers, instead, to stay with Tikoo who has protected her from all the forces that sought to oppress her and given her the love she may possibly not have received from anyone in her own family.

Santosh Gupta writes in the essay “Tamanna – Desiring the Undesired” (2002):

In making this nobody into a person, the film Tamanna makes important socio-cultural statements. It presents a new model of family where the two ‘unwanteds’ come together as mutually supportive and form the loving relation of parent child [...] In place of a repressive and destructive family, another family is created on the basis of acceptance and love, revising social gender hierarchy... In subverting the existing masculine ‘father’ through the effeminate, powerless hermaphrodite father, the film undermines the rigid roles emphasized in a patriarchal society, and also offers new alternate images. These images are not ‘ideal’ or limiting, they rather seek to extend, to open the existing discourse on gender and sexual identities, roles and functions. (233-234)

By creating an alternate family structure, Tamanna questions patriarchy which oppresses and marginalizes certain groups of people and suggests the possibility of the unification of these groups in an attempt to overthrow patriarchy, thereby disrupting status quo. Tamanna’s victory is also symbolic of Tikoo’s victory – for she could not do what she has done without his support.

Neither Tamanna’s father nor her mother is shown capable of offering her the love that Tikoo does. Tamanna’s mother remains a silent spectator to the course of events and endures her husband’s brutality through most of the film. She raises her voice to protest much later when her own daughter makes her conscious of her oppression and victimization. Tamanna’s father, far from displaying any kind of affection for his daughter or wife, regards them like chattel. He kicks them with his shoes and treats them in a manner so brutal as one would not even use even with an animal. It is Tikoo who, neither a mother nor a father, combines the roles traditionally associated
with both. He offers her economic support and also plays an active role in her upbringing. The film thus deconstructs the traditional roles of men and women, and reconstructs the concept of parenting though the character of Tikoo.

5.3.3 Suniti Namjoshi's The Mothers of Maya Diip

Diasporic writer Suniti Namjoshi’s novel The Mothers of Maya Diip (1989), like Tamanna and the other texts discussed in this chapter, critiques not only patriarchy, but also satirizes the extremist positions taken by feminists on the issue of motherhood. Most feminists tend to fall into two broad categories in their approach to motherhood. While some feminists like Selma Fraiberg and Jean Elshtain celebrate motherhood and perceive it as a unique experience of womankind, others like Shulamith Firestone see it as tyrannical and oppressive. Namjoshi satirizes both these positions, and also presents a critique of patriarchal oppression. The narrative explores alternate family systems, none of which seem to come even close to a 'perfect' society.

The narrative style chosen by Namjoshi is an example of what Barr (1992) referred to as ‘feminist fabulations’. According to Barr, “Alternative narratives which function as a counter discourse and offer correctives to patriarchy’s problematic depictions of humanity” are often described as ‘feminist fabulations’ (Cited in Vijayasree 99). Feminist fabulations subvert the patriarchal myth of male superiority. They point to the absurdity of patriarchal society by creating alternate realities that exaggerate, expose, satirize and critique the existing system.

This can be done through the use of fantasy, including utopian and dystopian tales which by themselves are a subversive literary form. This form enables the writer, while writing the novel, to critique not only the existing world, but also the very concept of reality, which is not fixed and natural, but deliberately constructed and influenced by dominant ideology. Through the act of defamiliarization, it forces the reader to question and reconsider reality as it is perceived.
Namjoshi’s novel depicts four models of social structure. She begins with the description of Maya Diip. The author insists that the word “Diip” is not to be translated as ‘island’, but rather as a ‘lamp’. The phrase ‘Maya Diip’ therefore stands for compassionate or illusory light. Jasbir Jain (2002) questions the very significance of the title which seems to imply various interpretations. She claims that the meaning “carries with it ambiguity and a fear – is compassion illusory? Is matriarchy an illusion? Is it possible to reverse patriarchal structures without adopting the same measures of exclusion, ruthlessness and inequality?” (65) The novel lends itself to multiple analyses answering some of the questions and leaving others unanswered.

Maya Diip is a princely state of India where “matriarchy bloomed unashamedly” (113). The word ‘unashamedly’ implies a deviation from the norm – but a deviation that its inhabitants are proud of. In this mythic island, every inhabitant is a mother. In fact, an adult status is synonymous with motherhood, which is exalted and glorified. In order to become a mother, one needs to pass certain tests that prove a woman’s capability to perform the expected task. There are three types of mothers – Grade A or official mothers, Grade B or biological mothers, and Grade C or caretaker mothers. As discussed in Chapter Three, Genovaffa Corea (1984) had pointed to the dangers of “splitting the functions of motherhood into smaller parts” (45). She too had perceived three categories of mothers who would be created because of reproductive technologies – genetic mothers who would provide the egg; surrogate mothers who would provide the uterus; and social mothers who would look after the child.

Two of these categories, the genetic mothers and the caretakers can be replaced by the Grade B and Grade C mothers of Maya Diip. Instead of Corea’s surrogate mothers, there are official mothers who control the children and have legal rights over them. They may be biological or surrogate mothers. Corea’s contention was that by splitting the role of the mother into parts, men were trying to possess women’s procreative power, and would thereby “reduce the power of the mother and her claim to the child” (45). This is precisely what is happening in Maya Diip. Although
motherhood is glorified, neither the mother who gives birth nor the mother who takes care of the child is necessarily given control of the child. Just as women are exploited by patriarchy, so also they are exploited in this matriarchy.

Also, as in a patriarchal society, mothers have limited choices about whether to mother or not to mother, similarly in Maya Diip a woman who refuses to mother is considered an outcaste. When the protagonist Jyanvi (herself an outsider) expresses her dislike for children in a ‘Song of the non-mother’, she is locked up in a hospital for she supposedly needs therapy. Her companion, the Blue Donkey, explains her crime, “You’ve sinned against motherhood – against the core of their identities, their religion, and their family structure” (135).

Jyanvi tries to explain her aversion of children to Saraswati whom she loves, “They take everything and give nothing. They’re greedy monsters” (145). She is brutally honest about her feelings, and when Saraswati reminds her that it is a great privilege to be allowed to care for a Mayan daughter, she retorts, “To be allowed to slave for a sniveling child is not a privilege, it’s a bloody bore!” (147) However, since the Mayans (like women in a patriarchal society) have been conditioned to believe in the glorification of motherhood, Saraswati finds it extremely difficult to understand Jyanvi’s point of view.

Moreover, even if she were to agree with what Jyanvi is saying, it would be impossible for them to live in the island of Maya Diip with such ideals. She reproaches Jyanvi, “We are not just two women who can live by ourselves, we are members of a society with a part to perform” (147-148). Conformity to the norm is preached in matriarchy just as it is in patriarchy. To deviate from the role assigned would be to invite ostracism and social isolation. Society does not accept individuality but expects its members to adhere to the rules it has laid down for them.

Jyanvi exposes another flaw in Mayan society – that of class exploitation. Grade A mothers who are more powerful exploit Grade C mothers and hire them to take care
of their children. While Saraswati does not see that as unjust, Jyanvi argues, “If being a mother is such a marvelous thing, why do they pass off the chores to others?” (147) The hypocrisy of this social system was also pointed out in Chachi 420 where Janaki had hired Laxmi Chachi to take care of Bharti, but had insisted during the divorce proceedings that she was more capable of taking care of her daughter than Jai. In The Mothers of Maya Diip also, the privileged women perceive motherhood as their ultimate goal, but the goal remains limited to being a mere status symbol.

As Ananya Dasgupta states in “Do I remove my skin? Interrogating Identity in Suniti Namjoshi’s Fables” (2002), “Maya Diip turns out to be an inverted patriarchy. The apparently radical norms are merely inversions of patriarchal rituals” (108). Indeed, even the practice of female infanticide is inverted, and in Maya Diip, it is male infanticide that is rampant. “Pretty boys” or male children are milked for their semen and then abandoned or even killed. Valerie, an inhabitant of Maya Diip who has migrated from a patriarchal society, explains to newcomers Jyanvi and the Blue Donkey that pretty boys get aggressive at fourteen and fight among themselves. “The mothers of Maya let them. Eventually there’s nothing left to fight, only the waves. So they fight the waves, turn into foam, so to speak” (161).

The eldest daughter of the ruling Matriarch, Asha, had tried to protect the pretty boys but had been exiled from Maya. The Mayans believe that the lives of the pretty boys are meaningless and there is no point in keeping them alive. According to Saraswati, “What are they good for? They’re warlike and sterile. And they can’t even reproduce themselves” (186). Besides, she says that the Mayans don’t really want to kill them. “It’s simply a matter of keeping down numbers” (187).

In a patriarchal society, girls are perceived as burdens on society and considered useless as they will not help support the parents in their old age, nor contribute financially to the household. Hence, they are dispensed off through female feticide or infanticide. In Maya Diip, the boys are killed after they have fulfilled their function of supplying semen which is used for reproduction. Feminists have warned that the
way reproductive technologies are advancing, patriarchal society may also see a day where women may be used simply for their biological functions. The danger of such a system is the domination of one group and complete commodification of the subordinate group, which is reduced to being nothing more than a function or an instrument for the dominant group.

Unless the subordinate group resists and opposes the dominant group, it runs the risk of being completely exterminated. When Jyanvi asks why the pretty boys don’t revolt, Valerie responds, “I suppose because they’re not organized and haven’t any weapons. They turn most of their aggression against themselves. Besides, there aren’t very many. The mothers of Maya don’t regard them as their own children -- just as necessities” (161). Again, this seems to be a reflection on the status of women in patriarchy who have not attained equality because they happen to be powerless. They are ‘guests’ in their own homes and will go away once they get married. In Maya Diip, the mothers do not regard them as their own children because they are abandoned even before an attachment can develop. In Maya Diip, it is the pretty boys who are oppressed.

The patriarchal model of civilization is also reflected through instances of corruption and aggression. There is a defense system which enables the Matriarch to destroy the entire land through the mere press of a button. There are bombs planted all over the island, and although these are never used their existence itself is significant.

Set in opposition to Maya Diip is Ashagad, a world inhabited only by males, except for the founder of the land Asha, who happens to be the exiled daughter of the Matriarch of Maya Diip. Ashans are the ‘pretty boys’ that have been abandoned by the Mayans. There is a tree in the forest underneath which they find boy babies and they call it the Tree of Life. Mayans, on the other hand, refer to this tree as the Tree of Death. The Ashans retrieve these abandoned babies and rear them. Like the Mayans, they too, exalt motherhood, and follow a system where the boys need to pass tests in order to ascertain their capabilities of mothering, just as in Maya Diip. As
Asha states, “The pretty boys can’t become biological mothers, but they’re certainly capable of Grade A and Grade C status. We’ve proved it here in Ashagad” (188). This reiterates the view of some feminists (like Chodorow) who claim that non-biological mothers are as capable of mothering as women – a point which has also been illustrated in *Chachi 420* and *Tamanna*. It also exemplifies Mary Daly’s concept of ‘reversal’ which “includes the attribution of female capacities to males, redundancy and contraction, and the use of terms and phrases to mean the opposite of what they really mean” (Cited in Foss, Foss & Griffin 145).

The Ashans are introduced to the concept of a patriarchal society by Valerie. The situation described by Valerie where the Ahsans (men) rule over the Mayans (women), and enslave them to produce babies which carry their genes, is both repulsive yet fascinating to Ashans. Valerie explains, “Every Ashan thought of himself as a kind of farmer, and of every Mayan as a bit of land or a field which could be his property” (192).

The Ashans dismiss these ideas at first, but later analyze them carefully and realize that they are dependent upon the Mayans for their supply of babies. This dilemma, they feel, could be resolved if they could have their own supply of captive Mayans (just as the Mayans have their supply of captive Ashans) – and the only way to make this possible seems to be war. Madhu (an Ashan) reveals to Asha that they also find another concept interesting, “and that was being able to stamp our own babies genetically” (201). Glancing at his son Balu, he adds, “I love Balu, but if I knew that he carried half my genes then I think I may feel differently. Perhaps love him more? I don’t know. There’s something about the idea that is so seductive… And at the same time all these ideas are so revolting!” (201)

The Ashans, who had hitherto been oblivious of the very existence of female oppression now want to wage war against the Mayans and dominate them. The seed for the origins of patriarchy have been sown, but whether they will germinate or not is a crucial question. This is also reminiscent of the anthropological theories of the
origin of patriarchy where the domination of women began after the discovery that males had an equal role to play in the process of procreation. The same situation threatens to recur in Ashagad, and to avoid any further contamination of the pure minds of the Ashans, Asha gets Valerie locked up.

Valerie unintentionally sends a signal for rescue which reaches a group of male androids who constitute the third social world in the novel. The androids are an abandoned experiment who are built to a specific stereotype and modeled on TV heroes whom real men try to emulate. They represent the dominant patriarchy and look down upon women and mothering. They therefore serve as a contrast for the Mayans and the Ashans. Their interest in recruiting Ashans diminishes as soon as Mohan (another Ashan) asks them if they can become Grade A mothers and get babies straight away if they join the androids. The androids see them as effeminate and wonder if they are homosexuals. “You can’t join us. You’re not proper men... A proper man doesn’t want to be a mother,” the leader tells the Ashans (209).

When asked what a proper man wants, the leader replies, “Well, I guess he just wants a mother in the home – where she belongs... You know, just some place to rest after all that fighting and struggling. Mothering’s for the birds. It’s women’s work” (209). Here are the stereotyped notions of the division of labour. While the men go out and fight, the women stay at home and look after the house. Men are characterized by aggression and women by passivity. The public domain belongs to the men, and the private to the women. Clearly, their ideas are very different from those of the Mayans and the Ashans, and it is not surprising because they symbolize a male stereotype of TV heroes whom real men aspire to be like.

The androids capture the women and leave Ashagad under the charge of Madhu (an Ashan) hoping that Madhu would appreciate that it wasn’t okay to be ruled by women. The women then find themselves in the land of Paradise when the helicopter in which they have been traveling force lands and crashes. The land of Paradise has two categories of inhabitants – the Gallants and the Mothers. The mothers represent
beauty, love and happiness, while the sole aim of the Gallants is to win the favour of mothers. They woo the mothers through poetry and acts of worship. Mala, an inhabitant of Paradise, informs them that “everything is plentiful in Paradise, except of course mothers” (224).

There is a surplus of Gallants and a shortage of mothers in Paradise since most inhabitants are reluctant to take on the roles of mothers. The inhabitants are immigrants who are given a choice of roles when they enter Paradise. This role is chosen for a period of ten years, after which it must be changed. According to the Queen of Paradise, “[...] it’s usually at that point that they commit suicide” (232). Since there is a shortage of mothers in Paradise, often the Gallants find themselves deprived of an object of direct worship. Their suicides are the result of frustration which stems from unrequited love from the mothers. Unlike male androids, and like the Mayans and the Ashans, the inhabitants of Paradise revere and worship mothers.

The writer thus presents four different models of society, each with its own complex structure. She refuses to idealize any of these societies, but rather critiques the existing system and also presents an exaggerated version of the society envisioned by certain feminists. The novel revolves around finding a successor for the Matriarch of Maya Diip. Ironically, at the end of the novel, after a series of political upheavals, Jyanvi becomes the ruler of Maya Diip by default. The fact that Jyanvi, who does not like children (the basic requirement of a Mayan) and has publicly expressed her views without inhibitions, can be accepted as the ruler of Maya Diip is significant. It seems to suggest the value of individuality in a society. It also points to the possibility of a positive change in any existing social structure.

C. Vijayasree discusses the novel in her book Suniti Namjoshi – the Artful Transgressor (2001):

Each of these societies – Maya Diip, Ashagad, Paradise is conjured up as an alternative and is exposed as flawed. A tone of playfulness is central to the narrative, and the author invites the reader to see the text as a game and to
participate in the creative process. In other words, the reader is encouraged not to dedicate herself to some absolute utopian vision but rather to make and unmake multiple worlds, and learn to experiment with alternative realities. (114-115)

Thus, this chapter has explored various texts that challenge patriarchal definitions of womanhood and mothering, and demythified the definition of motherhood as given by patriarchal society. The texts have also offered modes of resistance and subversion, empowering the female protagonists with the right to take their own decisions instead of having these decisions imposed upon them by patriarchy. Some of the texts have also offered new social structures which differ from the present one, and point to the possibility of a more equal society with no rigid rules of behavior, and gender roles which are not bound by their traditional definitions.