CHAPTER TWO

MOTHERHOOD – A FUNCTION WITH FEW CHOICES

In the last chapter, a range of theories offering various perspectives on motherhood was discussed, and it was argued that motherhood is not biologically determined, but rather culturally constructed as a woman’s primary function by patriarchal society. This chapter will attempt to demonstrate how this ‘social construction’ actually takes place, and will suggest that although motherhood is designated as a woman’s primary function and is glorified by patriarchal society, it is a function that is most often not chosen by her, but rather imposed upon her. She has no choice but to accept this function, for if she deviates, she will be deprived of social acceptance. Moreover, motherhood is conditional and it is patriarchal society which dictates who can and cannot be a mother.

The basic decisions regarding the reproductive rights of a woman – such as whether and when to have a child, whether and when to abort a child – are by and large made for women by patriarchal society. The woman’s sexuality is controlled by social structures, and ideology ensures that she is not even aware of this control over her body. Gita Sen, in “Concepts for a Feminist Analysis – Reproduction and Production” defines biological reproduction as a physical and social process which includes not merely the process of child birth, but also the social mechanisms by which sexuality and procreation are controlled. She claims that these processes affect women at various levels. “It operates directly through access to contraception/abortion, and indirectly through ideologies that devalue female sterility...” (76).

In fact, as Adrienne Rich points out, this control is the basis on which the foundations of patriarchy are laid, and through which it operates. She explains in Of Woman Born (1977), “The regulation of women’s reproductive power by men in every totalitarian system and every socialist revolution, the legal and technical control by men of
contraception, fertility, abortion, obstetrics, gynecology and extra uterine reproductive experiments – are all essential to the patriarchal system, as is the negative or suspect status of women who are not mothers” (34).

This chapter will examine the various choices theoretically available to women. It will demonstrate through an analysis of selected literary and cinematic texts how women are depicted as the victims of patriarchal conditioning, unable to understand or execute these ‘choices’ related to their reproductive roles, including access to contraception and abortion. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section, Childless by Choice (2.1) discusses compulsory motherhood and elicits the social stigma that a woman must face if she decides to remain childless. It will also attempt to investigate the psyche of women who choose to remain childless as depicted in the texts. The next section Patriarchal Control over the Womb (2.2) illustrates how women are deprived of ‘choices’ regarding contraception and abortion that are made collectively for them by others. Moreover, it will examine the fate of women who attempt to make these choices themselves. The third section, Illegitimate Children (2.3), studies female protagonists who are divested of their desire for motherhood because the children that they conceive are not legitimate. Legitimacy of the child is a basic requirement for social acceptance of motherhood and a condition that society imposes upon prospective mothers. Women who constitute the subaltern, like lesbians, prostitutes, bar dancers and disabled women, are also deprived of motherhood even if they desire to become mothers, and the plight of these women will be examined in the next section entitled Marginalized Groups (2.4). Finally, the last section deals with the Right to Abortion (2.5), and portrays the problems that women must face in order to undergo abortion, albeit it being legalized. It also deals with the emotion of guilt which the woman is made to experience if she chooses to abort her child.

2.1 Childless by Choice

Childlessness by choice, still primarily unacceptable by society, is not as rare as it used to be, as is evident from the existence of newspaper articles dealing with the
issue. Media reports suggest that there are indeed couples today who mutually agree to remain childless, though this is primarily an urban phenomenon. This section deals with four texts, each of which revolves around a woman who chooses not to have a child. Two of the novels, Where Shall We Go This Summer (1978) and Clear Light of Day (1980) are written by Anita Desai. The section also analyses Romen Basu’s novel In Silence (1995) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story “A Perfect Life” (1995).

The decision for a woman to remain childless, especially in the context of Indian society which places great emphasis on motherhood, is a crucial one. There are various reasons that couples choose to remain childless. While some do not want to add to the already increasing population, others feel it is unethical to bring a child into a violent and unequal world. Still others view children as a hindrance to their career growth.

The reasons differ from culture to culture, and also from individual to individual. The guilt factor about adding to the world population seems to be more prevalent in the West. Sheila Kitzinger in Women as Mothers (1978) claims that “For the first time in history motherhood is considered anti-social”. She adds that, “The woman who is enjoying pregnancy and motherhood and who wants another baby may be accused of being ‘pro-natalist’, especially if she has exceeded her quota of two” (17). The same perhaps cannot be said about India where motherhood (biological motherhood) is still socially compulsory. However, the very coining of the term Voluntary Childless Couples (VCC) in India by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences suggests an increase in the number of couples who choose to remain childless (Raval).

Despite the increase in the numbers of childless couples, not much is written about childlessness, neither in literature nor in sociological criticism. It is an area that has not been considered seriously enough by feminism. Irena Klepfisz in “Women Without Children; Women Without Families, Women Alone” (2001) describes the
anguish experienced by a childless woman and laments the unavailability of any discourse on dealing with childlessness:

I have read a great deal about woman as mother, but virtually nothing about woman as non-mother, as if her choice should be taken for granted, and her life were not an issue. And although I have heard strong support of the right of women to have choices and options, I have not seen any exploration of how the decision to remain childless is to be made, how one is to come to terms with it, how one is to learn to live with its consequences… (19)

The consequences of childlessness can be harsh. Given that motherhood is perceived as the most important phase of a woman’s life, it is inevitable that women who choose to remain childless are perceived as being deviant, unhappy and unfulfilled. As Sheela Raval comments in “Three’s a Crowd”, “Reproduction is seen as a woman’s primary contribution […] Society takes a dim view of those who abandon the chosen path and the repercussions are startling”. Since motherhood is perceived as the very purpose of a woman’s birth, any woman who chooses not to appropriate this role would be perceived as ‘abnormal’ because she does not fit into the traditional mold that nature has created for her. According to Irena Klepfisz, “A woman who does not marry and, above all, does not have a child, is stigmatized, characterized as cold, as unwomanly and unfeminine, as unnatural in some essential way” (24). She asserts that the belief that only family and children can provide women with a purpose and bestow honour and comfort upon her, is a myth which is perpetually reinforced by patriarchy, thus making the decision to remain childless a painful and frightening one.

2.1.1 Rejection of Motherhood in Anita Desai’s Where Shall We Go This Summer and Clear Light of Day

This section examines two novels by Anita Desai, Where Shall We Go This Summer (1978) and Clear Light of Day (1980), where she deals with the theme of motherhood as choice. WSWGTS by Anita Desai won her the Federation of Indian Publishers and Author's Guild of India Award for Excellence in Writing in 1979. Like other novels by Desai, WSWGTS traces the inner world of its female protagonist. The
novel revolves around Sita, a middle-aged housewife who finds herself pregnant for the fifth time, and does not want to have the child. “She had had four children with pride, with pleasure – sensual, emotional, Freudian, every kind of pleasure – with all the placid serenity that supposedly goes with pregnancy and parturition” (32).

But she does not want the fifth child, and this statement shocks her husband Raman who has observed her enjoying her previous pregnancies. Even before her husband hears what she wants, he is filled with disapproval at her statement that she does not want a child:

His face, usually as stolid as soundly locked gate, receded half an inch in shock. It was not only the brutality, the murderousness of this statement that seemed to attack him with the clubs and spears of a bestial civilization, but it seemed so shockingly out of character with a woman who had once stood all day on the balcony, keeping away the crows that were attacking a wounded eagle on a neighbouring roof top, and who winced dreadfully every time she heard a child cry. (34)

He assumes she wants to abort the child, and is horrified by the prospect for he reveres life: “He had not read the Vedas or the Mahabharata, nothing more than scattered verses from the Bhagvad Gita – still, he was born a Hindu. Family planning was all very well, but not -” (34). He responds to her reaction by stating that it is too late to abort the child, a statement that takes her by surprise. She does not want to kill the baby – the very thought seems outrageous “[...] I want to keep it – I don’t want it to be born” (35). Sita finds herself unable to connect to her husband, and seems totally alienated from a world which cannot understand her dilemma.

She does not want to give birth to the child because the madness and violence she perceives in the world they inhabit seems to reduce the act of creation to an act of destruction:

By giving birth to a child now so safely contained would she be performing an act of creation or, by releasing it in a violent pain-wracked blood-bath, would she only be destroying what was, at the moment, safely contained and perfect? More and more she lost all feminine, all maternal belief in childbirth, all faith
in it, and began to fear it as yet one more act of violence and murder in a world that had more of them in it than she could take. (56)

Sangeeta Dutta in “Relinquishing the Halo: Portrayal of Mother in Indian Writing in English” (1990) comments that not only does she react to the violence in the male world, “the very process of childbirth seems to be a violent pain-wracked act that rudely draws the child out from the warm security of the womb. All faith in maternal fulfillment or in child birth as creation, seems to be lost, the sensual, emotional, prenatal pleasures replaced by intense fear and depression” (92).

Every aspect of their lives seems to remind Sita of madness. When her husband, presumably shocked by her statement, asks her to define the madness she is referring to, she says:

It’s all a madness – the boys acting out that scene from the film they saw, fighting each other on the floor, Menaka and her magazines and the way she’s torn all those drawings of hers I’d kept so carefully; the ayah taking Karan to that – that roadside dump where all the ayahs sit and gossip and fight; the way you laughed because I tried to keep the bird alive; the people here all around you, living here, all around... (36)

She has reached a point where she is unable to communicate with her husband or children, who seem alien to her, and are insensitive to her feelings and needs.

Sita wants to escape to a mythical island, Manori, “the island of miracles” (31) where “it might be possible to be sane again” (35). The island is associated with memories of her father who had made it an island of magic and worked miracles. Now she “had come on a pilgrimage, to beg for the miracle of keeping her baby unborn” (31). K. Meerabai states in Women’s Voices – The Novels of Indian Women Writers (1996), “She turns to a life of primitive reality as a solution to her spiritual impasse. Her flight to an island is highly symbolic in that it indicates her inability to connect herself to the outer world” (92).
The island does not perform the miracle she has been hoping for, and her children are miserable there. They do not communicate verbally their bitterness to her for having brought them there, but it is reflected in every glance and expression. She realizes that the island does not hold the same pleasure for them as it does for her: "To them, she realized with a painful sloughing-off of disbelief, it was life in their flat on Napean Sea Road that had been right and proper, natural and acceptable; it was this so called 'escape' to the island that was madness" (102).

Yet, at some point, she herself questions the sanity of her own actions, and realizes that she must face reality which she has been suppressing and refusing to face: "Sita felt a spasm of fear at her bravado, her wild words, her impulsive actions that had flung them alone onto this island surrounded by wild seas. It was no place in which to give birth. There was no magic here – the magic was gone" (112). She fears for the unborn child, and wonders what she would do in case of a mishap in her pregnancy as her husband had forewarned. "For all her inspired words, she knew she could not shelter it inside her forever" (112). She also realizes that the isolation would lead her to a difficult situation when she would have to deliver the child without any professional help from a doctor or nurse. However, she still refuses to leave the island on her own, and engrosses herself in activities with her children instead, in order to keep her mind occupied and to divert her mind from thoughts that are bothering her. Her attitude seems suggestive of a maternal instinct that she attempts to suppress but which resurfaces sometimes and disturbs her.

When Raman comes to take them back, and she observes the children's excitement at the prospect of returning to Mumbai, she realizes the difference between Raman and herself. She recognizes that the children turn to him for guidance and perceive him as being superior to her because he possesses the courage that she seems to lack. A poem by Cavafy which she goes back to whenever she is afraid, divides people into those who say the 'great Yes' and those that say 'No'. While the person who says Yes "reveals himself at once" and "crosses over to the path of honour and his own
conviction", the one who say 'No' does not repent either. Although given a choice, he would say 'no' again, that 'no' “crushes him for the rest of his life” (149).

Menaka realizes that like Raman, she too had courage, “the courage of a coward” (139). She had cried out the great ‘No’: “She had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unlivable island. She had refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child. She had the imagination to offer it an alternative -- a life unlived, a life bewitched” (139). And now, after having said the great ‘no’, it was time for her “epitaph to be written” (139).

Sita has been searching for meaning in her life, and cherishes moments which show her meaning in life. She had thought that her father’s life had meaning, but realizes later that it did not. Her ultimate understanding of the meaning of life is achieved when she recollects the remaining lines of a poem by D.H. Lawrence that she had forgotten and that have been haunting her all this time:

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The wild young heifer, glancing distraught,
With a strange, new knocking of life at her side
Runs seeking a loneliness.
The little grain draws down the earth, to hide.
Nay, even the slumberous egg as it labours under the shell
Patiently to divide and sub-divide,
Asks to be hidden, and wishes nothing to tell (150)
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She is the heifer, whose unborn child represents the ‘new locking of life’. Like the heifer, she has been searching for loneliness and a place to hide which she has found in the island. Waiting for her child to be born, she too has wished ‘nothing to tell’ for she has not found the words to communicate to her family members. Having understood the words of the poem, Sita now rejects the idea of escapism, and sees the need for relatedness in the world, which her father had also achieved on the island. She has become capable of understanding that past and present are both a part of life, and this helps her to come to terms with the emotional turmoil in her life. She can now embark upon a renewed relationship with Raman who has become a stranger to
her over a period of time. She realizes that "the great gap between them would be newly and securely bridged" (151).

The negation that had filled her being for so long is turned into affirmation as she prepares to go back to Bombay with the family. "The storm ended, the play over, the stage had now to be cleared – then the players could go home" (152). She finds herself confused about whether it was her life in the island or her married life back home that was a theatrical performance. "How could she tell, how decide? Which half of her life was real and which unreal? Which of her selves was true, which false? All she knew was that there were two periods of her life, each in direct opposition to the other" (153).

When she balances the two, she achieves harmony, and understands the continuity of life which was visible to her in the changing tides of the sea as well: "Life had no periods, no stretches. It simply swirled around, muddling and confusing, leading nowhere" (155). K. Meera Bai describes her resolution to go back to the mainland with her husband as the "life affirming impulse over the life-denying impulse" (94). At the end of the novel, Sita is ready for the birth of her fifth child (the life affirming impulse), and rejects the idea of the miracle of not giving birth (the life denying impulse). Desai seems to suggest that one cannot live in isolation, and that one must come to terms with reality and accept life, even if it entails a difficult compromise which is inevitable.

This theme is also reflected in Desai's novel Clear Light of Day (1980). Bim, the protagonist of the novel, is similar to Sita to a certain extent in that she also goes through a similar phase of seclusion, seeks to find meaning in her life, and eventually comes to terms with the relationships that have been bothering her. The novel essentially deals with relationships within a family which drifts apart over a period of time, and finally unites towards the end.
Bim is a spinster, partly out of choice and partly due to her circumstances which did not permit her to get married. She presents an extreme contrast to her sister Tara whose only ambition in life was to get married. Bim has always been closer to her brother Raja than to Tara, since she shared more in common with the former. As young children, one day Raja had announced that he would be a hero when he grew up. She had instantly responded with shining eyes that she would be a heroine. Tara was the odd one out, and felt out of place in the conversation. She went complaining to their aunt Mira Masi, “Bim and Raja say they will be a hero and heroine. They laugh when I say I will be a mother” (55). Each one's priorities in life seem to have been very clear from early childhood - and each one does eventually manage to fulfill his or her dreams, to a certain extent.

Another interesting conversation that takes place between Bim and Tara is on the issue of the marriage of their teenaged neighbours. Bim is surprised at the early marriage of the girls since the girls were only sixteen and seventeen, and “had not even obtained their degrees and completed their education” (140). Tara, on the other hand supports the marriage because she thinks “marriage was an end in itself” (140). Tara clearly represents the traditional belief that marriage and motherhood represent the ultimate goal for a woman. As Germaine Greer had stated in *Sex and Destiny* (1984), in traditional societies, the woman “does not choose between children and a career – children are her career” (73).

Bim, on the contrary, questions the importance accorded to marriage and motherhood since it does not seem to be fulfilling and “[...] they might find marriage isn’t enough to last them the whole of their lives” (140). When Tara asks what else there could be for them, Bim replies, “I can think of hundreds of things to do instead. I won't marry... I shall never leave Baba and Raja and Mira Masi... I shall work – I shall do things... I shall earn my own living – and look after Mira masi and Baba and – and be independent. There’ll be so many things to do when we are grown up – when all this is over” (140-141).
Bim seems to be taking on the 'traditional' role accorded to the 'father of the house' — that of looking after the family members and providing financial support. Marriage for the woman necessarily entails moving away from the family and shirking one's responsibility towards one's own kin. Desai seems to be presenting two extreme perspectives on the issue of marriage and motherhood through her depiction of the characters of Bim and Tara. By denying complete satisfaction and happiness to both women, she seems to suggest that it is important to strike the right balance in life in order to achieve personal and familial fulfillment.

When the novel begins, both the girls have managed to achieve the goals they had set for themselves. Tara becomes a wife and mother, while Bim shoulders the responsibilities of the family, and also takes up teaching as a career. One day after Tara's return to the family house, she observes Tara staring at her when she is playing with her pets, and comments that Tara is probably thinking of "how old spinsters go ga-ga over their pets because they haven't children" (6). She adds, "Children are the real thing, you think... you think animals take the place of babies for us love-starved spinsters... But you're wrong... You can't possibly feel for them what I do about these wretched animals of mine" (6-7).

The belief that being deprived of the joy of motherhood, and possessing a maternal instinct that is supposedly common for all women, leads spinsters and childless women to transfer their love to other objects of affection such as animals. However, as Bim clarifies, the love that she feels for her animals is unconditional and genuine. It is not essential for a woman to experience motherhood in order to exhibit the qualities of nurturance. The desire and ability to care for others can be present in any individual, regardless of whether the individual (man or woman) has produced offspring or not. Bim is in her own way nurturant of her family members. However, she has evidently become accustomed to the reaction that she as a childless woman evokes from people around her.
In Bim’s case, it is difficult to decide whether the decision not to get married or have children was imposed on her by circumstances, or whether it was indeed a choice. Her willingness to go out with Dr. Biswas, who admires her and claims to understand her ‘self-sacrifice’, indicates that she may have opted for marriage had she found an appropriate partner. She may perhaps possess a secret yearning to lead a ‘normal’ life as other women do, instead of being burdened by responsibilities towards her family, but does not articulate her desire aloud. Instead, she expresses her satisfaction at remaining single.

Mandy Rhodes questions the assumption that a childless woman can never be satisfied in “Happy and Child Free” (2003), “People without children may have nice, tidy homes and intact ornaments but they can’t possibly be fulfilled. A woman who doesn’t want to be a mother must be selfish, masculine and a work oriented spinster. Or must she?” However, Bim appears to be satisfied with the decision she has taken, and finds fulfillment in her discussions with her students. Her interaction with the students seems to give her a sense of fulfillment by allowing her to contribute to their development and growth. The relationship between a teacher and her students is similar to that between a mother and her children, precisely because in both cases, the former assumes the role of a mentor, and influences and molds the latter. Bim’s effectiveness in dealing with her students is evidence of the closeness that they seem to share.

Bim seems to enjoy her solitude, having established a routine in her life. When the routine is disrupted by the arrival of her sister’s family, it makes her slightly uncomfortable and seems to restrict her freedom. Theresa Cahill expresses the joys of remaining single in “You Assumed Wrong” (2003), “There is a certain empowerment and freedom that comes from being child-free (note I didn’t say childless). I can live my life at my pace and not be ruled by my children’s schedules”. The term ‘child free’ certainly appears to have a positive connotation as compared to the term ‘childless’. According to Nishantini Josson in “Child Free Zone” (2002), “It doesn’t carry the baggage of childlessness, rather, it denotes an
independent, voluntary decision, a refusal to be tied down to preconceived notions and expectations”. Bim has decided to remain child free, while Tara has conformed to the role society expects of her, and therein lies the difference between the two sisters. Tara is to a great extent dependent on her husband and children, whereas Bim takes her own decisions and is not accountable to anyone.

Needless to say Bim does experience moments of frustration at having to shoulder the responsibility of the family at a young age which even translates into cynicism and bitterness about relationships. However, this happens when the routine of her life is disrupted by Tara’s arrival at their ancestral home and she is forced to introspect on her past and present relationships with her family members. Although she has never given birth, she has inculcated the qualities that a mother is supposed to possess. She has cared for and nurtured her family, and feels betrayed when her love is not reciprocated.

She overcomes these feelings of bitterness and cynicism and by the end of the novel is a fulfilled human being. She learns to appreciate her relationship with each of her family members, and recognizes what they mean to her:

There could be no love more deep and full and wide than this one, she knew. No other love had started so far back in time and had had so much time in which to grow and spread. They were really all parts of her, inseparable, so many aspects of her as she was of them, so that the anger or the disappointment she felt in them was only the anger and disappointment she felt at herself. (165)

Bim forgives Raja for his betrayal, and initiates communication once again, thus implying that one need not be a mother to exhibit qualities of love and care – and that a childless woman is not devoid of these features. Sangeeta Dutta remarks, “Bim achieves the identity of archetypal sustainer not by rejection or isolation... but through commitment to uphold relationships. Bim’s symbolic motherhood sustains the family and also the house becomes a life giving and sustaining force against the destructive outer world” (92). Bim thus ‘mothers’ the family without actually
becoming a ‘mother’ in the literal sense, implying that it is not necessary for a woman to give birth in order to possess qualities of nurturance.

It is interesting to examine Desai’s attitude towards motherhood in both novels. In WSWGTS, she questions the very notion of motherhood as an act of creation, thereby problematizing the fundamental belief in divinity traditionally associated with motherhood. However, by ensuring that the protagonist eventually compromises and agrees to give birth, she seems to suggest the need for an individual to integrate idealism with reality in order to achieve a balance. Similarly, in CLOD, she presents a rebellious character who defies the traditional role of wife and mother accorded to the female species, opting for a career instead. Yet, the protagonist is again made to reassess her own ideas, and eventually recognizes the importance of her own family members in her life.

The endings of both novels imply that an individual cannot live in isolation, and in order to achieve a sense of happiness, must respect human values and relationships that add meaning and joy to one’s life. While Desai contends that the outside world is violent and destructive, she also indicates that this violence can be combated not by escapism or rejecting the world altogether, but by assimilating oneself within this world in a positive manner. The qualities associated with motherhood seem to enable this assimilation, and the protagonists in both novels appear to possess these nurturing traits which help them to find their own identities.

2.1.2 Romen Basu’s In Silence

Romen Basu’s novel In Silence (1995) is set in Bengal and revolves around an aristocratic family which prides itself on its illustrious background. The novel revolves around Sabita who is married into a family very different from her own, and finds it difficult to adjust into her new home. She is an independent and intellectual woman with a mind of her own, and often finds the atmosphere after marriage oppressive and suffocating. Sabita has been married for barely two years, and is already under pressure to produce children.
Her mother-in-law, an assertive woman who exercises immense control over the family, has never overtly communicated her disappointment at having no grandchildren to her son Gautam. “Just once or twice she had asked him to take Sabita to Dr. Mitra for a thorough examination. The gynecologist had done miracles for so many mothers that his reputation as a child giver was phenomenal” (10). There is no explicit dialogue between the mother and son – or even the daughter-in-law. The suggestion to visit a gynecologist who enjoys the reputation of a child giver is an indication of her inner desire. The subtle manner in which she tries to handle the issue is not appreciated by Sabita who sees it as interference and an intrusion into her private space: “She felt that the family pressure for a child was unjust. Why couldn’t they stay out of it? She was even more upset that her mother-in-law was vehement that the first born had to be a son” (10).

Sabita is constantly reminded of her inability to conceive through statements made by both Gautam and his mother. For instance, Gautam expresses his disapproval of Sabita’s closeness to his widowed aunt Sushama: “Nevertheless he told Sabita the story to caution her that in his clan the price was high for a woman who could not call herself the mother of a son. Would Sushama have been sent away by her in-laws if she could have claimed that honour?” (12) The example of his widowed aunt is an indirect method of revealing the expectations of the family. Sushama’s abandonment by her family was an inevitable consequence of her infertility. The consequences of infertility are thus subtly explained to Sabita, and she is warned of the fate that might await her if she fails to comply with the wishes of the family. To be a mother is an ‘honour’, and a woman who cannot claim this honour must be prepared to be discarded by her in-laws.

Gautam does not miss an opportunity to remind Sabita of her inability to fulfill her duties as a wife and daughter-in-law of the house. When Sabita once confronts Gautam for paying scant attention to her in comparison with his mother, he retorts, “Your convent school education has ruined you for Bengali customs. How will you
Sabita seems to be lacking in feminine qualities and understanding of the mother-son bond precisely because she has not experienced motherhood herself. As Anne Woollett had stated in “Having Children: Accounts of Childless Women and Women with Reproductive Problems” (1991), childless women, by failing to comply with one of the most salient features of female identity “open themselves up to the charges of being unfeminine”. She adds that “some women are seen to fail to conceive or to maintain a pregnancy because they are overanxious, because they reject their femininity or are not well adjusted” (60). Sabita’s lack of adjustment, according to Gautam, seems to stem from her convent school (Westernized) upbringing which is in clear opposition to the traditional set-up within his family.

Gautam’s mother corroborates his views in her address to Sabita: “You have no sense of balance. You would be a better person if you were a mother [...] Even the servants know your obstinacy. You are so stubborn, Baruma. There is nothing wrong with you or Gautam to prevent you conceiving a baby. Yet you are holding back to punish Gautam and me” (100). Being a mother is associated with the values of nurturance and self-sacrifice; and being a mother, Gautam’s mother seems to suggest, would turn a woman into a better human being. She accuses Sabita of deliberately refusing to have a child. She later taunts Sabita with the statement, “Your father-in-law has brought Gautam into this world. What have you done for Gautam?” (100)

Sabita has failed in her duty to her in-laws and her husband by depriving them of the joy of a grandchild. She is perceived as being selfish and uncompromising, and these ‘defects’ in her personality are an obvious result of her status as non-mother. The problem with Sabita is not infertility. It is, as her mother-in-law has rightly guessed, a deliberate refusal to delay motherhood until Gautam is ready to accept a job offer in another city, where she would be able to bring up her child independently without any interference from Gautam’s family.
As a prospective mother, she feels she has the right to decide when and where she would like to have the child, and she is certain that she would not be comfortable bringing up the child in the joint family system in which they presently live. “I cannot bring up my children in this family,” (63) she tells Gautam. He reads the statement as audacious, preposterous and insulting, and is visibly enraged. “Damned woman, how dare you? My family is a hundred times superior in status and eminence to any in Calcutta society. Consider yourself most privileged to have been married into this family. Oh! What nerve to suggest that you cannot bring up children in my family. Who will give you any voice to raise my children?” (63)

The condescending approach towards Sabita and her family is clear in Gautam’s speech. Instead of feeling grateful for her fortune of being married into such a renowned family, Sabita has dared to criticize them. Sabita evidently has neither the right to choose whether to have a child or not, nor can she choose when to have the child – and even the right over the decision of upbringing belongs solely to Gautam, which is obvious in his use of the phrase ‘my children’. Sabita would simply be the instrument for producing the children, but all the decisions would be taken by the husband and his family. The question of not having children does not arise. Laxmi Iyer declares in “Have You Heard of pof?” (2001), “Married women who remain childless in India are invisible in social research, but they are highly visible in their families and communities. Society does not take kindly to women who deviate from the ‘norms’, and the norm here is once you are married, you should have a child”.

Since the couple cannot possibly remain childless, and Gautam has no intention of moving from Calcutta to Bombay in the near future, Gautam must appease Sabita and convince her to have children. Hence, he raises the issue once again at a later stage. “You agree that our lives could be different if we have a child?” he asks her. “Not until I know who was going to be responsible for bringing up the child,” (111) she replies.
Gautam’s closeness to his mother and the overriding influence she seems to have on him bothers Sabita. Gautam, it appears to her, is incapable of taking his own decisions, since his respect and admiration for his mother does not allow him to ever go against her wishes. Sabita does not want to be controlled by the wishes of her in-laws, and does not want any interference in raising her child. She expects equality in their relationship, and expects decisions regarding the upbringing of the child to be jointly made and mutually discussed. Gautam, however, misinterprets her words. “Your only interest is to dominate the family,” he accuses. Sabita responds by saying, “That’s not true, but I want a voice where my own family is concerned” (111). In the family to which they belong, Sabita would never have an opportunity to express her views, let alone take decisions regarding her child. Sabita would never be allowed to attain adult status or be independent.

Sabita’s mother-in-law, Parama who had never wanted Sabita as a daughter-in-law in the first place, also expresses her strong disapproval of Sabita’s views. Sabita incurs the wrath of her mother-in-law when she articulates her desire for fulfillment beyond the role of wife and mother, “Please try to understand that I belong to a different generation. My upbringing has been different from your upper class background. I want to work, read, write, paint, play music. All these joys have been taken away from me. What pleasure do I have to live for?” (100). Her creative instincts have no place in the household where she has been married, and sharing her feelings of suffocation with her mother-in-law prove to be a mistake. “You speak of pleasure,” Parama exclaims, “You don’t have any sense of shame in you? A married woman prefers to go romping around town instead of raising children?” (100).

The word ‘pleasure’ here seems to have negative connotations, and Parama finds it incomprehensible that Sabita should think of finding pleasure in any activity apart from looking after the house and husband, giving birth to and bringing up children. These activities are considered ‘pleasurable’ for most women. The activities that Sabita speaks of would entail her moving out of the house and meeting people – which is forbidden in a household where women are confined to the house. A woman
denying her prescribed role, and seeking fulfillment from other avenues is ‘shameful’, especially in a traditional family like Gautam’s.

Sabita thus is an example of a woman who brings shame to her family by denying them the privilege of a child, and her choice to control reproduction is viewed as an act of rebellion. She becomes vulnerable to charges of being ‘unfeminine’ and brazen. The novel portrays the way a woman is reduced to a baby-producing machine who is respected if she becomes a mother (especially of a son), and insulted if she doesn’t. Education is held responsible and criticized for the attitudes of women who wish to deviate from this role. Sabita must learn to conform to the role prescribed for her, and bear these injustices ‘in silence’, without questioning her status within the household. She must perform her duty of providing the family with an heir. She cannot assert her reproductive rights without incurring the wrath of her family members.

Later in the novel, Sabita eventually conceives without wanting to. The novelist does not allow her to control her reproductive capacity – nature controls it for her. However, she refuses to become a victim of circumstances and does not allow her husband and his family to have the power of upbringing her child. She leaves her marital home to start a life of her own, along with her unborn child. The experiences she encounters as a single woman and mother will be discussed further in Chapter Four, but the fact of her taking such an unconventional and bold decision is itself an indication of her courage and strength.

2.1.3 Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s A Perfect Life

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s short story “A Perfect Life” (1995) is an interesting example of a woman who starts off by wanting to delay matrimony and childbirth, changes her mind briefly when she discovers maternal feelings towards an abandoned boy and ultimately decides to remain childless. An Indian by birth, Meera Bose migrated to America when she was younger – and at the age of almost thirty, is warding off marriage proposals being sent by her mother from India. Neither she, nor
her boyfriend Richard (an American) are in a hurry to get married or have children, though they do intend settling down at some point.

Childrearing does not seem too appealing to Meera who is currently satisfied with her life:

The households of friends who had babies seemed to me a constant flurry of crying and feeding and burping and throwing up, quilts taped over fireplace bricks for padding and knickknacks crammed onto the top shelf out of the reach of destructive little hands. And over everything hung the oppressive stench (there was no other word for it) of baby wipes and Lysol spray and soiled diapers. (74)

Dr. Nada Stotland, a Chicago psychiatrist specializing in women’s mental health issues had said that “personal experience, observations of family and friends with children, fears of an inability to mother, fears of being tied down, career aspirations and realities are all factors that go into the decision to remain childless” (Cited in Rhodes 2003). Meera’s observations of her friends seem to diminish the desire for motherhood. She defamiliarizes the joy of motherhood through the use of words like ‘destructive’ to describe babies and the ‘stench’ associated with them. The blatant honesty and stark reality of her description may be perceived as odd, or even aversive, especially by women who find ultimate satisfaction in motherhood.

Meera is constantly asked if she misses being married and having children. Irena Klepfisz had commented that according to the myth of motherhood, “if I do not have a child I will never experience that caring, that uncritical peace, that completely understanding sensibility. Only the role of mother will allow me that” (23). Mira compares herself with the women who ask her this question and pass such remarks, and realizes that she seems happier in comparison:

I’d look at their limp hair pulled into an unattractive bun, their crumpled saris sporting stains of a suspicious nature, the bulge of love handles that hung below the edges of their blouses. (Even the ones who made an effort to hang on to their looks seemed intellectually diminished, their conversations limited to discussions of colic and teething pains and Dr. Spock’s views on bed-wetting). (75)
Motherhood seems to lead a woman to concentrate her energies on the child, thereby leaving her unkempt and unattractive. The mothers Meera comes across are shabbily dressed and do not seem to bother about their appearances. Her "own gratifyingly slim hips" and her "silk Yves St. Laurent jersey" (76) seem much more attractive in comparison, and give her a sense of satisfaction, thus raising her self-esteem. Moreover, Meera observes that the lives of mothers seem to revolve exclusively around their children, and their interest in other activities seems to diminish over a period of time, making their conversations restricted to topics concerning children alone.

Meera does not deplore motherhood and does recognize the existence of a maternal instinct, or "mother-love" as she calls it. "I'd felt the flaming rush of it when I'd gone to the maternity ward to visit Sharmila, who'd been my best friend at work before she quit (abandoned me, I claimed) to have a baby […] So I knew mother-love was real. Real and primitive and dangerous, lurking somewhere in the female genes – especially our Indian ones – waiting to attack. I was determined to watch out for it" (75). The maternal instinct seems to be a part of the collective unconscious – an instinct that each woman is apparently born with, and one that will resurface when the woman becomes a mother. Meera assumes that she also possesses such an instinct, and is not averse to either marriage or children: "I just wanted to make sure that when it happened, it would be on my own terms, because I wanted it" (77).

The perfection of her life changes when she comes across a little boy of around seven crouched under the stairwell of her house. For some strange reason which she is unable to comprehend herself, she takes the boy into her apartment. Consequently, she observes constant changes in her attitude. For the first time, she reaches late for work, gives a second-rate presentation and takes the day off because of an uncontrollable headache. When she reaches home and finds a puddle of urine which has caused a stench "worse than ten baby-houses put together" (79), she is furious. Her anger, however, subsides immediately upon looking at the terrified boy, and she
does not say any of the words that had instantly come to her mind upon seeing what he had done. Instead, she reassures him and proceeds to clean the mess.

Meera's own behaviour, so uncharacteristic of her personality, surprises her. There seems to be an upsurge of maternal instinct that she feels towards this boy. The boy, hitherto a stranger to her, is now a companion whom she wants to protect from people around her, and whose existence in her life she initially refuses to share even with Richard and Sharmila. Her sympathy for the child is further evoked by the burns along his back which bring tears to her eyes, and make her curious about his past. She gives him a name – Krishna, buys him books and new clothes to wear without thinking about the legal implications of keeping a boy in her house whose identity is unknown. She is even ready for the threat that the boy seems to pose to her relationship with Richard who finds the idea of adopting the boy preposterous.

Meera reinforces the idea of an ideal mother when she imagines Krishna's mother confronting her and asking her to return her child: “I'd made myself decide he didn’t have a mother, for surely she would have stood between him and that burning cigarette, as mothers are supposed to. But she appeared in my dreams almost every night, weeping as she looked around, bewildered, for her son. Sometimes her eyes would meet mine, accusing. I would stare back defiantly. You should have been more careful, I'd tell her. You shouldn't have lost him” (88). A mother who cannot take care of her son and who tolerates physical abuse over the child, Meera seems to imply, has no right over him.

When Richard remarks that she is obsessed with Krishna, and suggests that perhaps what she needs is a child of her own, Meera starts to imagine it:

My child – and Richard’s, for that was what he meant. But somehow I just couldn’t picture it. The details confused me. Would the baby have a thick dark mop of hair, like Indian babies do? Or would it be pink and bald, like American babies? What color would its eyes be? I couldn’t picture Richard in the role of father either, hitching up his Armani pants to kneel on the floor and
change diapers, walking up and down at 2 a.m. trying to quieten a colicky baby who burped all over his satin Bill Blass dressing gown. (90)

She finds it easier to imagine a future with Krishna, and Richard is not a part of this happy world that encompasses just her and Krishna. “There is no Richard in these pictures, and (I feel only a moment’s guilt as I think this) no need of him” (90).

The father has no place in this ‘happy family’, and is dispensed off easily. Motherhood by itself seems to be an enriching and fulfilling self-contained experience. Meera observes that Krishna has put on a few pounds, and “It made me ridiculously happy, more than the time, even, when I straightened out the Von Hausen account which had been missing several million dollars” (91). The satisfaction she experiences when he gains weight is much greater than the sense of fulfillment her career offers her.

Having recognized motherhood as the ultimate source of joy, she embarks upon a plan to legally adopt Krishna, and is grateful for Richard’s support in the matter. The legal process, however, is long and tedious. When the authorities discover that Meera has been keeping the child in her house which is against the law, they insist on shifting Krishna temporarily with a foster mother. Meera’s protectiveness towards the child makes her apprehensive, “Can’t you make an exception, please, just for one week? He’s doing so well with me. He’ll be terrified if he’s moved to a strange place” (94). Her suggestion is overruled, and she is forced to give Krishna up for a week.

The parting from Krishna seems to be a traumatic experience for Meera who is unable to sleep at night thinking about living without him. “I lay there watching the shadows thrown onto my wall by the street lamp outside, thinking how strange the nature of love is and how strangely it transforms people” (97). Meera seems to have come a long way from the time when she would be repulsed by the smell of baby houses to a point where she is unable to bear the separation from this child. Krishna has indeed transformed her into a woman whose maternal love is nurturant, protective and warm.
She has learnt to understand the needs of a child, and does not reproach Sharmila when the latter apologizes for her inability to accompany Meera to the foster home office. "I wanted to tell her that I understood perfectly. The needs of children came before the needs of adults, I had learned that already. Mother-love, that tidal wave, swept everything else away. Friendship, Romantic fulfillment. Even the need for sex" (98).

Her attachment for Krishna increases multifold when in their moment of parting, he speaks for the first time since she has brought him home, and addresses her as "Mama". When Richard forcibly separates the two of them, Meera is furious, and claims that she would never forgive him for keeping her "from going to my baby when he needed me most" (102). There is a feeling of emptiness and loneliness when Krishna is finally taken away. "Suddenly I felt very tired. Old. An old woman. Unmarried, childless, a failure. There was a name for such women in India, banja, empty. I put my face in my hands and let the sounds of Richard's voice flow over me until they faded away" (103).

It is interesting to note that Meera had never felt this way before Krishna entered her life. She had been, even then, unmarried and childless, but that had never made her feel like a failure. She had been content with her life and had in fact commented that "I would thank God for my life, which was as civilized, as much in control, as perfect, as life could ever be" (77). Krishna's entry into her life seems to bring with it a series of changes, and transforms her into a completely different person with qualities that she has never known she possessed. His exit from her life precipitates further changes which are difficult to deal with.

When Meera finally discovers that Krishna has run away from the foster mother to whom his care had been entrusted, she loses control over her own words. "'Don't touch me, you bitch,' I heard myself say, low and furious, in a stranger's voice. 'None of this would have happened if you'd let him stay with me for a week - just one more week - instead of sending him off with this - this cow'" (105). Needless to
say, her words shock those present in the room – and more importantly, shock Meera the most. She does not know that she is capable of behaving in such a manner. Her own voice is strange to her.

She searches frantically for Krishna but does not find him. She hopes against hope that he will come home, but deep inside, does not expect him to turn up. “I wouldn’t have come back either to someone who’d taken me in only to give me up, who had loved me briefly only to betray me forever” (106). Her guilt at having betrayed Krishna, and not having lived up to the promises silently made to him seem to consume her.

Over a period of time, her life returns to normalcy, and she is ready to get married to Richard. However, her condition to the marriage is “that we don’t have children”. She has been avoiding messages from the foster home, informing her about the availability of various children for adoption, and secretly still goes back to search for Krishna. “If I can count to twenty, thirty, forty, without letting go, I say to myself, he’ll be there. He’ll hold out his arms, and in his high clear voice he’ll call to me. I stand there halfway up the darkening staircase feeling the emptiness swirl around me, my lungs burning, my eyes shut tight as though in prayer” (108).

Meera’s decision not to have children in future lends itself to many interpretations. To begin with it strikes the reader as odd that a woman who is capable of feeling such strong emotions towards a child she has barely known, would wish never to experience such emotions again. The first reason may be that the love she feels for Krishna cannot be recreated with another child. Her life with Krishna was a ‘perfect life’ just as the life before Krishna had been a ‘perfect life’. Since she cannot go back to a life with Krishna, she exercises her second option of going back to a life without Krishna.

Alternately, she may feel that she does not possess the maternal quality that she should – that she never was, and never can become a perfect mother. This is evident
in her feelings of guilt at having betrayed a child who had perceived her as his saviour, but who had been disillusioned by her abandonment of him. He had been hurt before by someone else, and then she had hurt him again. Finally, the reason for her decision may be based on her hope that Krishna may one day come back to her, since she never gives up that hope till the very end.

In any case, the decision to remain childless is her own, and it is significant that Richard is supportive of it and accepts it – which may not have been the case had Meera expressed these views to the Indian suitors her mother had short listed for her. Theresa Cahill shares her own experience of the reactions of people when she informed them that she and her husband had decided not to have children:

[...] the statement is usually met with bewilderment, silence, even disapproval. I can almost hear their thoughts. Why did we get married if we’re not going to procreate? And it still seems far more acceptable for a man to declare he doesn’t want children. How can I, as a woman, not want children? It is my duty. I have been equipped with the power to give life, and I choose not to use it. There must be something wrong with me.

Meera, fortunately, is not answerable to anyone, and does not reveal her decision to her mother, who may react in a similar manner if she were to find out. Meera’s decision is therefore one that is arrived at after having experienced the joys and pains of mothering for a brief period – and having gone through the experience, she decides she does not wish to go through it ever again.

All the texts referred to in this section have presented characters who have deliberately chosen to go against the norm, and attempt to exercise control over their reproductive lives. Since Sita, Bim and Sabita all reside in India, their decisions are subject to tremendous scrutiny by their own family members. Meera, despite being of Indian origin, gets away without attracting much attention as she resides in modern day America away from her family. Unlike Bim, however, she does not remain single, but agrees to matrimony on the condition of remaining childless. Bim
continues to live her life the way she has been living, but there is hope of emotional support by her family towards the end which she has not enjoyed in many years.

The other two protagonists are denied the lives they had envisaged for themselves. Sita eventually gives in to her desire not to give birth to the child in her womb since she realizes that miracles do not always happen in reality. Sabita becomes pregnant without wanting to, but sticks to her decision of not bringing up the child in the joint family in which she lives. In conclusion, remaining childless in a society which upholds motherhood as the ultimate goal for a woman is not an easy task, and requires great will power and the capacity to ignore social demands. A childless woman’s intentions of denying herself the privilege supposedly ordained to women by divinity put her under scrutiny, and she becomes susceptible to allegations about her ‘abnormality’ and ‘unfeminine’ behaviour. Only a woman who has the courage to withstand the opposition that she would undoubtedly face can afford to take the decision of remaining childless in Indian society.

2.2 Patriarchal Control over the Womb

Patriarchal control over the womb manifests itself through a number of ways. This section examines the right to birth control through an analysis of two short stories, “Daktaramma’s Room” (2004) by R. Chudamani, and “Giribala” (2004) by Mahashweta Devi. It further probes the control over women’s bodies and a denial of their choices through a discussion of Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s film Bemisal (1982), Mahesh Manjrekar’s film Astitva (2000) and Raj Kumar Santoshi’s Lajja (2001).

Feminist studies accord great importance to the issue of reproductive rights, because the control over her body is the first step that a woman takes towards liberation and freedom from the oppression by patriarchy. Adele Clarke in her essay “Subtle Forms of Sterilization Abuse” (1984) comments:

Reproduction is a fundamental human right: neither the state nor the actions of others should deny any person autonomy over their reproductive processes
Rojuctive freedom is the prerequisite for any kind of liberation for women. The right to decide whether and when to bear children is fundamental to a woman’s control of her own body, her sexuality, her life choices. (189-190)

The reproductive choice for a woman is thus her fundamental right as a human being. The Centre for Reproductive Rights, which was founded in 1992 and defined the course of reproductive rights laws in the United States, defines the reproductive rights of a woman as the right to plan her family and to determine whether and when to have a child, including the spacing between her children. It is the responsibility of the government to ensure that women are accorded these rights through provision of information, education and high quality reproductive health services, including abortion. Kalyan B. Saha and Uma Chatterjee (Saha) in “Reproductive Rights in Contraceptive Practices” add another element to the definition of reproductive rights — “an enjoyable and fulfilling sexual relationship without fear of infection and disease”. This implies the right to contraception which ensures a sexual relationship without being concerned about an unwanted pregnancy.

The increasing population in India led the Indian government to initiate a Family Planning Programme in the 1950’s in order to ensure control on population by setting targets for different forms of contraception, the highest target being for sterilization which is irrevocable. The targets set by the government for sterilization, however, have been misused and abused by a large number of government officials. Bishakha Datta and Geetanjali Mishra in “Advocacy for Sexual and Reproductive Health: The Challenge in India” (2000) reveal the shortcomings of the system: “Officials desperate to notch up the required numbers resorted to any and every trick in the book: e.g. forcing women to undergo repeated sterilisations, falsifying records, cadging women going through menopause to be sterilised. A system which occasionally ended up sterilising women as old as 80 years obviously left the public with an abiding horror and deep distaste for both sterilisation and targets”.

India is not the only country to have forcibly enforced birth control on its citizens. Many Afro Americans were forcibly sterilized without their knowledge or
permission, and their birth rate is said to have reduced drastically between the end of the Civil War and Depression. The forced sterilization was based on the eugenics movement which decreed that there should be more children from the fit, and less from the unfit. Barbara Christian comments on the repercussions of the movement in *Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985): “The result has been the tension between the reproductive rights of Afro-American women and the awareness that genocide may be a motivating factor for the advocation of birth control in Afro-American communities” (223).

Obviously, such extremist policies have been changed because they have not proved effective, and have been severely criticized for their lack of democratic approach. Presently in India, family planning is achieved not by force but by pointing out its benefits to the masses through the form of welfare programmes and advertisements. The Family Planning Association of India reaches out to over 7.6 million people through reproductive health programmes which emphasize community participation, youth concerns, and the empowerment of women (FPAI Initiatives).

The fact remains that reproductive health is an issue that has been neglected by governments in many parts of the world. As Datta and Mishra rightly point out, “Reproductive health has been seen by many development professionals and policymakers as a soft issue whose primary consumers are women; economic development on the other hand is a hard issue whose constituents are largely male. Reproductive and sexual health problems are rarely seen as life-and-death issues, even though they might result in suicide, murder and death from other causes, including but not only medical ones”.

Moreover, even if government policies undergo changes (as indeed they have over a period of time), reproductive health and the right to birth control remain denied to women by their own families and husbands. The pressure on the women to produce male children entails misuse of the laws of sex-determination and abortion. The health of the woman is not taken into consideration, and she becomes a passive victim of a male-dominated society.
2.2.1 The Right to Birth Control

This section examines two stories which deal with the right of a woman to birth control and family planning, “Daktaramma’s Room” (2004) by R. Chudamani, and “Giribala” (2004) by Mahashweta Devi. The short story “Daktaramma’s Room” (2004) by R. Chudamani revolves around a married couple Devaki and Shanmugam who have been married for sixteen years. Devaki has gone through six deliveries by the age of thirty-two, and has not even realized her youth passing by. There has been no family planning and the deliveries have taken their toll on her body: “Before she had got quite used to the novel fact of having a husband, there was a baby in her arms the very next year after marriage. After that, there was simply no time to investigate the matter of good looks, since the very word ‘years’ came to mean ‘babies’” (204).

Devaki visits the doctor when she is pregnant with her seventh child, hoping fervently that her fear of pregnancy is proved wrong. Although it has been two months since her last period, the symptoms of pregnancy she usually experiences, are not present. The doctor, however, confirms her pregnancy. When she asks Devaki whether she wants the child or not, Devaki remains silent. Her silence reveals her true desire, but she cannot vocalize her feelings.

The doctor also reveals that she is suffering from various health-related problems (an obvious result of her successive pregnancies) due to which an abortion cannot be performed. However, she advises Devaki and her husband Shanmugam to perform an operation after this delivery to ensure that she does not face any more problems in future. Shanmugam is against the idea of an operation despite the fact that they already have a male child (which could have been used otherwise as an excuse to continue procreation and may even have been justified on that account). He states firmly, “However many children we are destined to have, will be born, no matter what”. The doctor tries to reason with him, “Think over it properly, saar. You yourself could have done something about it by now. But since you don’t like to do
all that, let it be. It can be done for your wife. Doing it at the time of delivery is quite easy" (209).

The conversation continues between the doctor and Shanmugam, while Devaki remains merely a silent spectator, who cannot voice her opinion, but only reveal her feelings through the expressions on her face. Cheris Kramerae declares, “Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. So women cannot as easily or as directly articulate their experiences as men can” (Cited in Foss, Foss and Griffin 41). Devaki’s husband does not give her an opportunity to say anything, and speaks on her behalf, taking her consent for granted without even bothering to ask her for her views. He gets irritated with the doctor as she continues to argue with him, and he finally tells her, “Look here, doctor, this is our own business. I am not a beggar; I earn five hundred a month. I can take care of my children” (509).

The doctor’s concern about Devaki’s health is also rejected and Shanmugan offers her the solution of medication which will help her to deal with her health-related problems. Ultimately the doctor’s protests and Devaki’s silent appeal through the pleading expressions on her face are proved futile. Devaki therefore becomes a victim of male control who cannot even open her mouth to protest against the injustice being meted out to her body. Sukumari Bhattacharji had stated in “Motherhood in Ancient India” (1990), “The twin proofs of woman’s loss of control over her own body is that, maidservant or wife, she has to yield to the sexual demands of her master or husband, and the husband or master, not she, was the owner of the fruit of her womb… the child did not belong to her but to her husband and/or master” (54). It is significant that while this statement was made with reference to ancient India, it remains pertinent even today.

Even the doctor, who may appear to be in a supposedly powerful position, cannot help Devaki fight for her rights. The husband’s lack of concern for his wife’s
physical fitness is a clear example of the sheer deliberate neglect of women in our society. As Gita Sen had pointed out in “Reproduction and Production”, the lack of control over childbearing would undoubtedly have an effect on the health of the women, which could even lead to an early death once the body becomes incapable of handling so many pregnancies. Devaki is thus denied access to contraception, birth control and abortion by her husband.

The theme of the right to birth control recurs in Mahashweta Devi’s short story “Giribala” (2004), which is one among the series of short stories written on motherhood. The story is set in Bengal at a time when it was customary for the groom to pay for the bride’s hand in marriage. The protagonist Giribala is married to Aullchand, whose reputation as a fraud and vagabond is discovered only after the marriage has taken place, by which time it is too late.

Giri bears four children in quick succession, and after the birth of the fourth daughter, has an operation to prevent future child births. She does not discuss the issue with Aullchand who is enraged when he discovers what she has done. “Had an operation, did you? That’s a sin. Why did you do it? Go on, tell me?” (61) Giri does not respond, and Aullchand reacts with physical abuse. “Aullchand grabs her by the hair, hits her a couple of times with his fists. Giri suffers the beating silently” (61). According to the interpretation of Manu’s ideas, a woman has no right to take such a decision on her own: "Him to whom her father may give her, or her brother with the father’s permission, she shall obey as long as he lives, and when he is dead, she must not insult his memory” (Cited in Saraswati 211). Giribala’s act is an insult to the living man, for she has dared to take the decision of controlling her womb without even consulting him.

The belief that a child is a gift of God and that family planning is immoral is prevalent in many religions. In fact, Mother Teresa, echoing the voice of the Catholic Church, had taken a strong stance against the use of contraception. Tishani Doshi comments in “Myth of the Mother” (2003) that this “has added hundreds to our
already staggering balance sheet of millions, and for this green signal towards unrestrained productivity, perhaps she can be given her due as surrogate mother”.

Aullchand seems to propagate the same values, and is thus furious when he learns what his wife has done. Although Giri does not protest against the violence he imposes upon her, she indirectly reveals the reason for her decision by asking him to take up the job of a labourer for the construction of a road. Aullchand does not have a stable income to support his family, and nor do they have a house to call their own. Giri works at the master’s house and earns some money. She has been trying to make her husband into a responsible householder, but has been unsuccessful. Her decision to go in for the operation seems to be based on the financial situation of the family which would not permit them to feed any more children. Giri has too much self-respect to ask her own parents for financial support, though it would be given to her if she did. Instead, she tells Aullchand to put in some extra effort: “We’ll work hard, make our home” (61).

However, Aullchand does not fail to remind her of her ‘crime’ whenever he gets an opportunity to do so, and taunts her constantly. When Giri asks him to think about their daughter’s marriage, he retorts, “A daughter means a female slave for someone else’s house, after all. When he read my palm, Mohan had said that the fifth time onwards, there’d be only boys. You’ve gone and turned barren, you want to go astray” (62).

Aullchand feels cheated and deprived of the sons that could have been begotten had Giri not had the operation. The prediction about his future sons seems to strengthen his conviction and aggravates his anger towards his wife whom he holds responsible for changing his destiny. His accusation that she has turned barren because she wants to go astray is based on the presumption that the right to birth control is synonymous with sexual licentiousness. According to Petchesky (1990), “One of the major foundations of feminist thinking about reproductive rights […] is the belief that women as much as men have the right to lead self-determined sexual lives, free of the
fear of pregnancy, cultural stigma, or disease” (Cited in Paludi 183). The movement, however has been misinterpreted and the right to birth control has been seen (as in the case of Aullchand) as the right demanded by women for promiscuity.

The charge of wanting to sleep around with other men is unfair because Giri’s reason for having the operation is clearly economical. She answers him back sharply this time when he makes the comment, threatening, “Speak such evil and I’ll slash the children’s throats and then my own” (62). This silences Aullchand temporarily, but then he begins hatching other plans. He conspires with his friend Mohan to sell off his eldest daughter for a bride price of four hundred rupees. The flesh trade in Bihar is apparently rampant, and girls are taken there on the pretext of getting them married, and then turned into prostitutes. Giri is shattered when she finds out, but is told to remain passive and accept whatever has happened. “A girl’s by fate discarded, lost if she’s dead, lost if she’s wed” (67). This statement recurs several times in the story and serves to emphasize the redundancy of the daughter who should never be accorded too much importance since she will be lost anyway.

The decision to sell the daughter seems to be a form of vengeance for Aullchand who vicariously punishes Giri for her operation. In a conversation with her parents, he says, “Look, what a shameful thing to have done. She has an operation, comes back barren, says, ‘You can’t even feed us, what would you do with a son?’ Well, I’ve shown what I would do. Even the daughters can yield so much profit, see how much money I got” (67). Just as sons are produced with the hope that they will offer economic support and security in old age, so also the daughters are being used for generation of income. Children are viewed as instruments for financial gain – and the more the number of children, the greater the financial gain would be. Since the system of dowry has been replaced by bride price which would be paid to the bride’s family, the daughter, instead of being perceived as a burden, is now seen as a saviour of the family. The money generated from the bride price would enable Giri and Aullchand to build their dream house.
Giri objects to such justification and vents her anger on Aullchand, “Tell Mohan to find out where they eat human beings. Why not sell off these three also? Enough money then for a cement house. Can’t Mohan find out?” (68) Although Giri’s tone is sarcastic, Aullchand uses this opportunity to remind her of her decision of undergoing the operation, which seems to him to be evidence of selfishness. “Never met someone as heartless as you, wife. Asking me to sell the children? No wonder you made yourself barren. Or else how could you speak this way?” (68) Martha Mc Mahon (1998) points out that childless women “are often seen as selfish, escaping dirty dishes and diapers by deciding not to have children” (197). Although this statement seems to be a class-based statement it may be applicable across classes, and can certainly be applied in the case of Aullchand’s attitude towards Giri. In addition to shirking her responsibilities, Aullchand seems to imply, Giri is also devoid of any emotional attachment to the children. A ‘normal’ mother would not make such a statement. Aullchand’s remark is ironic because it is he who has actually sold his daughter for money, and who wishes that there were more children who would provide him economic security.

Giri’s second daughter too is sold off through Mohan under the pretext of getting her married. Aullchand who is apparently unaware of this sale, goes to Mohan for his share of booty. He comes back in an intoxicated state:

Yes, yes, my name is Aullchand Sardar, sir! Could Mohan escape me? I wrung his neck and squeezed the money out of him. And why shouldn’t I, tell me? Isn’t the girl my own daughter? Didn’t you go and sell her off on false pretences? And you want to take the money? Why should I let you? Where is Pari’s mother? Why did you have that operation, wife, the more daughters you produce, the more money you acquire. (76)

Aullchand obviously continues to exercise control over his children, treating them like commodities to be sold in the marketplace. If Giri has exercised control over the future children who would have been born had she not had the operation, Aullchand exercises control over the existing children. Her decision has obviously hurt the male ego to a great extent. Being a woman, she has decided the future of their family
without asking his approval or even discussing the matter with him. He is unable to come to terms with the issue. Although the reproductive rights of a woman entitle her to take the decision about the number of children she wants to have, society does not – because such decisions are considered to be the prerogative of the male.

Giri, however is a strong woman who refuses to accept her husband’s injustice towards her children. She takes the remaining two children and leaves for the town where she intends to work as a maidservant. She leaves a message for her husband saying, “he can rot in eternity in his house” (78). She threatens to lay her body across the railway tracks if he dares look for her. Radha Chakravarty comments on the theme of motherhood in Mahashweta Devi’s stories in her essay “In the Name of the Mother” (2004): “Her representations of the maternal […] reveal a deep ambivalence.” She explains, “While seeking to expose the hypocrisy latent in discourses of maternity, she does not reject the values of love, care, and responsibility that are traditionally associated with the maternal role. Instead she reappropriates these values for her radical project, locating in them a moral ‘core’ that contains the possibility of female empowerment” (viii). The author presents a society where the woman seems to have scant control over her own body, but allows the character to take a decision that empowers her. The decision is not taken at the cost of her children – but for the sake of her children, thus emphasizing the maternal values of love and nurturance.

Although the decision taken by Giri is a strong and bold one, she pays a price for it. The villagers blame not Aullchand, but Giri for the situation: “The news amazes everyone, sets their heads shaking in disapproval. What happened to Bela and Pari was common practice these days. But why leave your husband and go away? What kind of woman was that?” (78) The woman is expected to remain devoted to her husband despite the atrocities he inflicts on her and the children. These expectations of the villagers have their foundations in myths like that of Sita who bore her unjust abandonment without a word of protest as is the duty of an ideal wife.
Giribala has deviated from the role of an ‘ideal’ wife not once, but twice – first by performing the operation, and second, by walking out on her husband. The story explores the suppression of women and their lack of control over their own bodies. It also suggests that empowerment of women is possible, but that a woman who dares to take control over her body must be ready to face the circumstances that follow.

While “Daktaramma’s Room” presents the helpless plight of women who suffers from complete lack of control over her own body, “Giribala” seems to be a counterehegemonic text in that it offers a protagonist who is bold and strong, and refuses to be controlled by her husband. However, Giribala does not evoke any sympathy in the villagers despite the trauma that she is forced to undergo. Instead, she is criticized for her actions. Noted Hindi poetess and writer Mahadevi Varma had stated in “The Hindu Woman’s Wifehood” (2005), “The woman’s ultimate fulfillment may lie in motherhood but she should accept his duty willingly, after weighing her mental and physical strengths, and not under duress. Something that is accepted under compulsion or in the absence of alternatives cannot be called duty” (229). In both the short stories, motherhood becomes a social compulsion, and is enforced on the woman against her own desires.

2.2.2 Exploitation and Control of the Woman’s Reproductive Rights in Cinema

This section examines three films wherein the female protagonist is exploited in a male-dominated patriarchal society, and control is imposed on her by the man in whom she places tremendous faith. It presents an analysis of Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s film Bemisaal (1982), Mahesh Manjrekar’s film Astitva (2000) and Raj Kumar Santoshi’s Lajja (2001).

Hrishikesh Mukherjee’s film Bemisaal (1982) deals with the sexual exploitation of women and relates it to the issue of abortion. The film revolves around the friendship of two doctors Suresh (Amitabh Bachchan) and Prashant (Vinod Mehra). Prashant, a gynecologist, goes abroad for further studies and then opens a nursing home in India. Making money is his passion “by hook or by crook”.

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The doctors’ code of ethics is easily forgotten and conducting illegal abortions becomes an easy way to earn quick money, even if it is at the cost of the lives of helpless women. The film reveals the past history of playboy Vikram Sarin who had ruined Nandini’s (Aruna Irani) life by impregnating her while she was still in college. Her dreams of having a home and settling down were shattered by his refusal to marry her. However, she still wanted to have the child, but in her words, “it doesn’t really matter what a poor helpless woman wants”. A specialist was called, and Nandini was told that he would only examine her. On the pretext of the examination, she was rendered unconscious, and when she regained consciousness, she realized that the foetus had been aborted.

There was no question of pressurizing her into abortion since her consent was not even required. The playboy did not want any trouble ahead of him which the baby would cause, and hence, using his wealth and influence, he takes a decision without considering her feelings or desires. The decision is forced upon her without her knowledge and she is tricked into abortion. Sarin’s control over her body begins when he first lures her into a sexual relationship with false promises of matrimony. He then manipulates the situation by tricking her into an examination, and finally gets rid of the child – as though Nandini has no right over it.

History repeats itself when Nandini comes across Vikram Sarin years later in Prashant’s hospital where she works. Vikram has impregnated yet another innocent victim who is in her fifth month of pregnancy. Prashant informs him that it is a risky case, but performs the operation on Sarin’s insistence, tempted by Sarin’s offer of money. The woman dies on the operation table, and Prashant orders Sarin to burn the body immediately. She has no say in the matter, and both men exploit her for their own benefit – one for his safety and security, and the other for money. Abortion in these cases ceases to become an ethical issue, but is transformed instead into a convenient tool used to control and exploit women who are victims of a hypocritical
patriarchal structure, and too scared of the repercussions to object to their victimization.

When Nandini tries to object and raise her voice, she is silenced. She first approaches Prashant’s wife Kavita, and asks her to urge her husband to mend his ways. “Whatever happened with me – don’t let it happen to another woman,” she pleads, giving her proof of the underhand dealings taking place in the hospital. Kavita, however, does not take any action, and nor does Sudhir. When Nandini herself calls the police and gets Prashant arrested, Sudhir first tries to bribe her by offering her money. When that fails, he sends her away, silencing her with an injection. The woman is not allowed control over her body or the child growing within her – and is not allowed to protest against the injustice either. Prashant is ‘punished’ for his actions when Sudhir takes the blame of the illegal abortions upon himself. Sudhir’s act becomes a symbol of self-sacrifice, while Nandini is conveniently removed from the picture since she is the only witness to the crimes against women.

The very issue of abortion gets sidelined when the focus shifts on the relationship between the two friends. Although Prashant repents for his deeds and turns over a new leaf by giving up his materialistic values, the theme of abortion is turned into a sub-theme. It is no longer a social issue that needs to be tackled because of the malpractices associated with it. It is a mere instrument which paves the way for the larger theme of self-sacrifice, friendship and human values. This is significant because it reflects the dismissive approach accorded to an important issue that concerns the female population.

Abortion is merely one issue that popular Hindi cinema tackles. Another issue that has featured in cinema is a woman’s basic reproductive right to choose when to have a child. Mahesh Manjrekar’s film *Astitva (2000)* is one such film that deals with this issue. *Astitva* is a powerful and sensitive film that targets a niche audience and exposes the hypocrisy and double standards of a male chauvinistic society. It deals with a woman’s search for her identity, apart from being a wife and mother. The
film revolves around Srikant Pandit (Sachin Khedekar) and his wife Aditi (Tabu). Srikant is a busy man, who is extremely preoccupied with his work and is often away on tour. His wife stays back home and often finds herself feeling lonely and bored.

Sri is opposed to the idea of working women, being a strong believer in the division of labour in the household. Hence, his wife cannot occupy herself with a job. In order to keep herself occupied and to escape her loneliness, she suggests the idea of starting a family. Her desire for a child is based on lack of other alternatives available to her to keep herself busy. Hence, the child is more of a social, physical and emotional ‘need’, rather than a ‘desire’. The child would be an object upon which she could shower her love, and from whom she would get affection which she currently misses in her relationship with her husband who seems to have no time for her.

Sri rejects the idea of a child instantly because it does not fit into his plans at that point of time. He wants to have a child only when they have a house of their own. Her needs don’t seem to matter, and nor does he see the necessity to discuss the issue with his wife, or allow her to participate in the decision making process. He plans, and she follows the plans – albeit without questioning them. When Aditi asks where she fits into his plans, he does not bother to answer her. Ranju Mehta explains in “Battling for Being: Manjrekar’s Astitva” (2002), “His total disregard of her desire for procreativity has an underlying assumption that procreativity is a sign of manliness and any decision about it is a male prerogative” (263).

Reproductive rights are thus denied to women, and their subordinate roles within the family and in society in general prevent them from being active in taking a decision, which would have repercussions not only on their bodies but on their minds as well. This theme recurs in Raj Kumar Santoshi’s Lajja (2001), which ostensibly deals with women’s rights. However, the film incorporates all the ingredients of a ‘masala’ Hindi film including a multi-starrer cast, songs and dances to ensure its appeal to the masses. The film shows the exploitation of four women, each one bearing a name of the mythical Sita.
Vaidehi (Manisha Koirala) is married to a ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ rich businessman Raghu (Jackie Shroff) who has no qualms about flirting with other women in order to enhance his business prospects. Due to the incompatibility in their relationship, Vaidehi leaves her husband Raghu and returns to her parental home. Raghu, who is also fed up with their constant arguments, and her ‘conservative’ outlook which insists on monogamy, does not object.

Raghu is rendered impotent after an accident and is shattered because he does not have any children. However, he then discovers that Vaidehi is already pregnant with his child, and sees a ray of hope. His father advises him to call her back, and suggests that after she produces the child, Raghu can divorce her or even get her killed, and then marry a woman of his choice. Raghu’s sole objective in wanting her back is to have an heir to the wealth and fortune of his family. He claims right over the child and wishes to control her reproductive ability though he had been happy enough to be rid of her some time ago. She is now useful to him and he is ready to woo her back with love at first, and by force later. He refers to her as an incubator who will be free to leave once she has performed her duty of giving birth to his son. She will have no right over the child she bears – she will merely be an instrument for producing the child.

In her escape from the clutches of her powerful husband Vaidehi comes across Janki (Madhuri Dixit), who also faces the threat of exploitation by her lover. Janki works as an actress for a local theatre company, and is having an affair with a co-actor, Manish. She is pregnant with his child. Her impending marriage to her boyfriend is threatened by the rumours circulating around her relationship with the producer of the theatre company, Purshottam (Tinnu Anand). Manish, influenced by these rumours, and believing that the child in Janki’s womb is not his, but Purshottam’s, orders her to abort the child. He first begins by suggesting that his family may not approve of the child having been conceived before their marriage – and then reveals his true fears about the paternity of the child.
Manish poses a condition for marriage – Janki must abort the child for him to accept her. Janki would not mind aborting the child, but is furious that her character and fidelity are being doubted and put to scrutiny. She turns the personal debate into a political issue. She publicly questions the issue of chastity that Sita had embodied by inverting the script of Ramayana which she is enacting on stage. She demands that the man also prove his fidelity towards her since they have both stayed away from each other, and asserts that he will have to accept her with her child, or not at all. The words she utters seem blasphemous to the audience watching the drama, which accuses her of being a vile woman. They attack her and beat her ruthlessly, so much so that she loses her baby.

The voice that dares to seek her rights and protest against male injustice is easily silenced – Janki is sent into a mental asylum, accused of being out of her senses. Not only her lover, but an entire group of people determine her destiny, brutally killing her baby and leaving her scarred for life. She has neither control over her own body, nor over the body of her child whose right she had tried to protect.

All the women in the texts examined in this section seem to be victims of a patriarchal society. Their bodies seem to belong to the men in their lives, and they become mere instruments who are controlled by the men. Whether a woman wants to use birth control, or give birth to a child – she finds herself ineffectual in doing so, because she becomes answerable to her husband/lover. Another short story by K. Ramalakshmi “Oh Mother! Let Me also Live” (1992), that will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five elicits how after a sex-determination test, the woman is prevented from giving birth to a female child because her husband wants only sons. In all the texts, the men take charge, treating the women like baby-producing machines, who should produce the babies according to their commands, thus depriving the women of the right over their own bodies and reproductive capacities. This points to a major danger in the popularity of popular culture, for it not only reinforces male superiority,
but also teaches women to passively accept their secondary status and allow their partners to take decisions for them.

The audience response to these texts would be complex and would work on two levels. On the one hand, the narrative allows the audience to empathize with the protagonist who is being exploited by society. On the other hand, the fate of the woman who emerges victorious in the end instills a sense of fear in the audience. Although the protagonist eventually wins the battle against society, she goes through immense suffering and torture during the ordeal, thus making the audience wonder whether the outcome is worth the cost that one has to endure in order to bring about a transformation in society, and put an end to the injustices being perpetrated against women.

2.3 Illegitimate children

While motherhood is revered by Indian society, its glorification is conditional. The basic condition that must be met in order to make motherhood acceptable is legitimacy. If the child is illegitimate, motherhood can be looked upon as a curse. This section investigates the societal disapproval of illegitimate children by studying Kamala Markandya’s novel Two Virgins (1973) Yash Chopra’s film Kabhi Kabhie (1976), and Mahesh Manjrekar’s Astitva (2000).

While literature and cinema are replete with examples of women being forced to have children against their wishes, there are also countless examples of women who wish to have children but are not permitted to do so for various reasons. To begin with, an illegitimate child is not accepted in our society. Kingsley Davis in The Forms of Illegitimacy has outlined five major structural forms for legitimacy. He claims that according to social mores, a child should be born after a marriage, and should not be the result of an adulterous procreation. Incestuous relationship is not permitted, and nor is it acceptable that childbirth should occur to a man and woman of different
castes. Society also prohibits childbirth to those people who are required to be celibate, for instance priests (Cited in Goode 37).

The birth of an illegitimate child is looked down upon with great disdain – and the child is ostracized and treated like an outcaste. Maulana Wahiduddin Khan claims in Women Between Islam and Western Society (1996) that such ‘mistakes’ ought to be avoided since they can have negative repercussions:

A sexual relationship which is formed outside the fold of marriage seems initially to be a simple matter, but when a child is born in such a situation, it becomes evident – generally too late – that it is not such a simple matter, and that normally welcome event – the birth of a child – can have the gravest consequences both for the child and the parents. (54)

The best example of the birth of an illegitimate child and its disastrous consequences is that of Kunti from the Mahabharata. Kunti’s curiosity led her to conceive her first born, Karna. All her life, she could not accept her son nor acknowledge his presence. However, at a crucial stage when the Pandavas, her legitimate sons were fighting against the Kauravas and her illegitimate son, she was forced to plead with Karna for the life of the Pandavas. She was compelled to make a choice between her legitimate sons and the illegitimate child she had conceived, and she chose to support the legitimate sons because of societal pressure and propriety.

2.3.1 Kamala Markandaya’s Two Virgins

Kamala Markandya’s novel Two Virgins (1973) is set in a village where education for girls is still a novelty. Narrated from the perspective of the younger sister Saroja, the novel points to the little girl’s naïve yet idealistic views on the issue of illegitimate children which are set in opposition to the opinions of most of the adults.

Lalitha, Saroja’s sister and the protagonist of Two Virgins (1973), is fascinated by the glamour of cinema, and hopes to become a film star. In order to achieve her goals, she allows herself to be seduced by Mr. Gupta, a producer who promises to introduce her to stardom. This results in an unwanted pregnancy, which leaves the family
disturbed. Amma (the mother) blames her husband for having pampered the daughter, holding him indirectly responsible for the consequences: “Amma twisted her fingers together, her mouth was bitter. You have concentrated all right, she said, we can all see the result of the indulgences you have concentrated and lavished on one daughter” (175). Their aunt Alamelu who stays with them corroborates her views, “Now you see, Brother, she said, where it has all led. Have I not said from the beginning no good would come of it? But who is there to heed an old woman, only when it is too late everyone comes knocking on your door” (176).

The father, Appa, however, is a progressive man whose immense love for his daughter prevents him from taking a stance against her. He has been supplying contraceptives to the villagers but has failed to provide sex education to his own daughter. “Our young people have a right to lead their own lives, he cried, are they to be deprived of their rights at the whim of mindless bigots like you?” (176) His support for his daughter is unusual considering the setting of this novel, but he holds himself partly responsible for what happens: “I educated the milkman, he said, but I couldn’t do as much for my own child… she was innocent, and we let her go out as she was” (178).

When Lalitha blames herself for the act, as much as Mr. Gupta, her father reminds her that she cannot refer to it as ‘fault’, since the ‘fault’ exists not with an individual but society which perceives such an act as sin: “No fault, he continued firmly, ignoring Aunt’s anguish, unless it is with the world, it ticks like a cracked machine, comes up with a dirty wash whatever you put in it, it turns what is natural and magical into something sordid” (178). He makes an interesting comparison with a ‘cracked machine’ (society) which turns a beautiful object (the baby) into something sordid (an illegitimate child).

Saroja is perturbed by the incident and tries to rationalize the situation:
If you were married and got pregnant everyone was pleased except those unfortunate women who were barren. There were little ceremonies to call down blessings on you and when the baby was born everyone came round smiling bringing little presents [...] If you weren’t married and became pregnant the picture was quite different, it was altogether grim. You hushed it up as best you could, and your baby, if ever it got born had no future at all. (200-201)

The logical reasoning that the child presents effectively communicates the conditioning of a society where the mother of a legitimate child is showered with blessings, but the mother of an illegitimate child is deemed accursed.

Saroja then asserts her own point of view on the issue: “It was wrong, a crime against the baby, which was the same whether you were married or not, but she knew her elders like Aunt Alamelu who were the majority did not agree” (201). She reflects on the innocence of the baby who cannot be held responsible for its own birth, but who is nevertheless punished because of its parents. It has “no future in what Appa and the boys called society as it was organized”, and therefore Saroja “prayed with as much fervor as she could command that society be reorganized to make room for the baby” (180). The need for changing values in a society which looks down upon illegitimate children and treats them with contempt is expressed through a child’s point of view.

Another interesting aspect which is not touched upon is the issue of the father, who is equally responsible for the pregnancy and who has been instrumental in luring Lalitha into a sexual relationship. When Lalitha’s parents reproach him, he denies having initiated the relationship, insisting it was she who virtually flung herself on him. He therefore cannot be held responsible for the pregnancy. However, he condescends to organize and take care of the abortion, and that is where his liability ends. It is the woman who bears the brunt of the act through pregnancy, and therefore, it is she who suffers. She must face society, must be answerable to people around her – but he is not even present to witness the suffering. The very society that dooms a woman and the child allows the man to get away without any social stigma.
Lalitha's feeling of shame and embarrassment at having to face Mr. Gupta leads her to attempt suicide. She is saved from this fate by Saroja. Although Lalitha would like to go ahead with the pregnancy, she knows the fate of an illegitimate child in society and hence does not express her desire to keep the child even once. She describes the entire procedure to Saroja and then adds, "If I hadn't wanted him it might have been different, she said, an unwanted child is better off unborn. But I did want him, I wanted him most when he was going, those last ten minutes of his life" (232). She realizes that she did not have an alternative: "It isn't fair, she said. You'd think there was some other way, wouldn't you? To keep a child you wanted to, whether you were married or not? But there isn't, no way at all" (233).

Her desire for the child must be suppressed, and she must pay for the 'sin' she has committed. Since her suicide attempt too has been unsuccessful, Lalitha takes the next best course of action available to her. In order to avoid bringing more shame to the family than what she has already done, she ultimately leaves the family to go to an unknown destination – without knowing what the bleak future has in store for her. It would be difficult for her to endure living in the same neighbourhood where she would have become the source of gossip and mockery. By sending Lalitha away, Markandya physically isolates her, for her presence might otherwise lead to further complications and humiliation for her family. She becomes an outcaste in the literal sense – and that is a choice she seems to make herself because that is the only choice available to her.

2.3.2 Yash Chopra's Kabhi Kabhie

The unwed mother is an archetype which can be seen in various texts, and has been reworked frequently into Hindi cinema. One such instance is Yash Chopra's intense and romantic film Kabhi Kabhie (1976), where Anju (Waheeda Rehman) gives birth to an illegitimate daughter before her marriage. Her lover, an air force pilot dies in an air crash, and she gives up the child for adoption. When the truth of her adoption is revealed to her daughter Pinky, she wishes to search her identity by going back to her
biological roots. Although her adoptive parents dote on her, and her affection towards them is unparalleled, she goes in search for her biological mother who had abandoned her at birth.

Anju is shocked when Pinky reveals her identity, and although she recognizes her immediately, she cannot acknowledge her presence. She now has her own family and is married to Amit (Amitabh Bachchan), with whom she also has a daughter, Sweety. The Kunti tale repeats itself as Anju is faced with a dilemma of dividing her affection between her legitimate and illegitimate daughters. She forbids Pinky from addressing her as ‘mummy’ thus denying their relationship, and tells her husband and daughter that Pinky is her ‘niece’.

In her own way, she tries to shower her love and affection on Pinky, but her gestures are met with disapproval by both her husband and daughter. For instance, she offers Pinky Sweety’s chair, which Sweety is very possessive about. This disturbs the father and daughter since the chair denotes a status accorded to a specific family member. The laws of proximity state that individuals who sit in a particular place regularly over a period of time establish it as ‘their’ space, and feel uncomfortable if others occupy that space. In this case, it is not simply the physical space denoted by the chair, but the relationship between the members of the dining table. Offering the chair of the ‘daughter’ to a ‘guest’ (for that is what Pinky represents to Amit and Sweety) is symbolic, for it represents an attempt at the accordance of a legitimate status to an illegitimate child.

On yet another occasion, Pinky and Sweety are competing for a match. While her husband cheers Sweety, she encourages Pinky – an act which automatically evokes a strong reaction from the father and daughter who fail to understand her seemingly strange display of affection to a new entrant into their lives. Sweety, who as an only child, has always been the center of attention in the family and is used to getting what she wants, resents the attention showered by her mother upon Pinky. She cannot share her love with anyone.
Anju is in a dilemma. She wishes to be explicit about her love for Pinky, but finds herself helpless and unable to express her feelings without arousing suspicion about her motives. When Amit finally confronts her, demanding to know the real reason for her soft corner towards Pinky, she reveals the truth of Pinky's identity to him. The revelation is accompanied by the sound of explosion in the background, signifying the rift in their relationship and the shock that it evokes in Amit. He refers to it as 'paap' (sin), and expresses his disgust in no uncertain terms. His own pre-marital affair is not questioned, but his wife’s character is put to scrutiny. His indifference towards her is reflected in his refusal to stop her from leaving the house. He leaves the decision to her, clearly implying that her presence no longer makes any difference to him.

She is punished for her crime of having borne a child before marriage, and it is not until his daughter Sweety has made peace with Pinky that he accepts the latter. The film elicits the double standards of a society where the husband is allowed to have his share of romance, but the wife is denied the right to do so. The husband’s male ego is shattered when he finds out that his wife has had a physical relationship with another man before him. It also reflects the attitude towards the illegitimate child who is not accepted by society.

2.3.3 Mahesh Manjrekar’s Astitva
Mahesh Manjrekar’s Astitva (2000), as discussed in the previous section, exposes the double standards of a society where the man is allowed to have extra-marital relationships that are termed innocent ‘flings’, but when the woman dares to do the same, she is punished for her act. Srikant begins to suspect the illegitimacy of his son Aniket when he receives an envelope revealing that his wife has been left a fortune by her singing tutor, Malhar. He does not hesitate to open the envelope despite the fact that it bears her name, since he believes that he holds complete rights over her. Aditi, in her passivity and submissiveness, does not object either. Srikant then goes back to
his old diaries to discover the discrepancy between the dates of Aniket’s conception and his sexual encounters with his wife.

Sri confronts Aditi who confesses the truth about her relationship with Malhar. She is forced to make this confession, not in private, but in front of Sri’s friend and his wife to humiliate her further. She speaks of her loneliness when he would be away from her, and the one instance where she had succumbed to temptation. Although Sri himself boasts of his many extra-marital affairs, he cannot come to terms with his wife’s infidelity. As Rakesh Thakur comments in “Locating Perception and Paradoxes within an Image: Manjrekar’s Astitva” (2002), “It is the phallus prerogative to want, to have affairs. The unbridled urge is a metaphor for manhood. The women involved in the act of coitus are forgotten but if discovered never forgiven.” He adds, “The fact that Aniket might have had half brothers and half sisters too, with his father spreading his seed at random, is accepted as a man’s need. For the woman to quench her needs, patience is an important virtue. She can wait for her man. For her needs, she can busy herself in the monotony of everyday household chores” (269). Even the right to have a child who would keep her occupied had been denied to her, as discussed in the previous section.

The same double standards are exposed in Aruna Raje’s film Rihaee (1988) as well, where the couples are separated when the men go to the city to earn money. While husbands are allowed to fulfill their sexual urges, wives are expected to suppress their sexuality. The film will be discussed in detail in Chapter Five – Resisting Stereotypes. While in the case of Rihaee, the woman’s mistake is discovered when she is still pregnant, and she is urged to abort the child – in Astitva, it is too late since the son is a grown up man who is engaged to be married. The fact that Aditi and Sri do not have any other children points to Sri’s impotency, a fact that he would never have acknowledged otherwise. Had the couple not produced an offspring, Aditi would have been blamed for being barren.
Sri’s attitude of male chauvinism has been transferred to Aniket, who seems to have imbied the same values despite not being his biological son. Aniket’s condescension for his mother matches his father’s disapproval of her. Both men fail to understand her feelings of isolation, loneliness and suffocation, and treat her with contempt and hatred. Aniket refuses to be touched by her, and falls short of abusing her: “Don’t you dare touch me, you…” he says.

The film ends with Aditi’s need for fulfillment and an identity of her own which can only be achieved away from the two men in her life, whose indifference after twenty-five years of her devotion to them leaves her shocked. An adulterous woman can never be forgiven, and Aditi, whose self-respect would not allow her to stay in the house (as Anju had eventually done in Kabhi Kabhie) decides to walk out. The support she receives from Aniket’s fiancée and Sri’s friend’s wife speaks of female bonding in the face of a male-dominated society. The film suggests, however, that the infidelity of a wife and an illegitimate child still remain unacceptable in society.

This section has looked at various texts where the fertility of a woman work negatively for her – because the child that is born has not been given legal sanction. The ‘choice’ of becoming a mother must therefore be restricted to a legitimate relationship. A woman can only become a mother if she is married – an unmarried woman cannot give birth to a child, and must abandon or abort it if it has been conceived. Even in seemingly progressive films like Kundan Shah’s Kya Kehna (2000) and Aditya Chopra’s Salaam Namaste (2005), the female protagonists strive for independence, but eventually settle down into matrimony. The situation of a married woman is worse than that of an unwed mother, because the discovery of her past threatens to destroy her present and future. When the woman is completely dependent on her husband for financial support, and he refuses to accept her after he finds out about her pre-marital or extra-marital affair, she is left in a lurch, and must face an insecure future. The message that patriarchy seems to be giving is loud and clear – a woman can only choose to become a mother if the father of the child is her legally wedded husband.
2.4 Marginalized Groups

While motherhood is declared socially compulsory for married women, there are other women who are deprived of motherhood because they belong to marginalized groups for whom motherhood is socially unacceptable. This section deals with three such groups – lesbians, women from socially unacceptable professions and disabled women. The first group, lesbians, will be discussed through an analysis of ancient Indian texts and Radhika's autobiographical story "One and One is Three" (1999). The second group will be examined through an investigation of Jayanta Mahapatra's "The Whorehouse in Calcutta Street" (1976). The section will also briefly touch upon prostitution in cinema by looking at films like Yash Chopra's Deewar (1975), Mahesh Manjrekar's Vaastav (1999), and Madhur Bhandarkar's Chandni Bar (2001). Jhumpa Lahiri's short story "The Treatment of Bibi Haldar" (1999) will be dealt with in relation to the third group of disabled women.

2.4.1 - Lesbianism

Heterosexuality being perceived as the norm, lesbianism has inevitably been regarded as immoral, unnatural and abnormal as it appears to be a deviant form of alternative sexuality. One of the basic problems that arises from homosexuality is that it cannot fulfill the primary need of procreation that seems to be the basis of all heterosexual marriages. In India, homosexuality is forbidden and is punishable under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. This law was established during the British rule, and while Britain discontinued the practice of punishing homosexuality four decades ago, the practice continues in India even to this date despite the protests made by various groups of people including celebrities to amend the law. Moreover, apart from the legal angle, the social contempt and phobia of homosexuality is strongly prevalent in Indian society.

Films like Fire (1996) and Girlfriend (2004) have been attacked by fundamentalist groups for their open portrayal of lesbianism for fear that such films will corrupt the
innocent minds of Indian women, lead them astray and break up their marriages. Moreover, these groups have argued that lesbianism is against Indian culture. Studies conducted on ancient Hindu texts, however, reveal that there are innumerable references to lesbian practices in ancient texts. Mina Kumar cites many examples of lesbian relationships in “Lesbians in Indian Texts and Contexts” (1999).

She quotes an erotic passage from the Sundara Kanda Chapter of Valmiki’s Ramayana wherein Hanuman witnesses Ravana’s wives embracing each other at night:

Some of his consorts, in dream, savoured the lips of their rivals again and again, deeming them to be the king’s. Passionately devoted to their lord, these lovely women, no longer mistresses of themselves, offered their companions marks of affection. Some, in their rich attire, slept leaning on their arms laden with bracelets, some rested on their companion’s breasts, some on their laps, their bosoms, their thighs and backs, and under the influence of wine, clinging amorously to one another, these women of slender waist slept, their arms intertwined. Those groups of damsels enfolding on another, resembled a garland of flowers visited by amorous bees. (Cited in Kumar 218)

This passage is a revelation for Hanuman who concludes that Lanka is evil, thereby associating lesbianism with degeneracy.

The laws of Manu also regard lesbianism as inappropriate code of conduct, which should be punishable. According to Verses 369 and 370 of Book VII of the Laws of Manu, “If a virgin does it to another virgin, she should be fined 200 (panas), be made to pay double (the girl’s) bride price, and receive ten whip (lashes). But if a (mature) woman does it to a virgin, her head should be shaved immediately or two of her fingers should be cut off, and she should be made to ride on a donkey” (Cited in Kumar 220).

Ancient Hindu texts also discuss the possibility of children being produced from lesbian sex. According to the Susruta Samhita, since the father contributes the bones, and the mother contributes the flesh and blood, a child born from two women’s
intercourse will be a boneless lump of flesh—a monstrous and abnormal creature. Ruth Vanita’s research on texts produced in Bengal from the fourteenth century onwards reveals the story of Bhagiratha being born to two women. Although this idea may have been derived from the *Susruta Samhita*, it differs in its approach to the child. While the *Susruta Samhita* views the birth of the child as monstrous, the Bengali texts view it as miraculous. In the tale of Bhagiratha, according to the Bengali *Padma Purana*, King Dilipa dies childless, leaving his two widows anxious about the continuation of his lineage. They approach Vashishtha who performs the *putreshti* sacrifice in order to enable them to have a son. He gives them a food called *charu*, and tells one of them to eat it, while the other should have sexual intercourse with her. Following the instructions of Vashishtha, one queen conceives—and the child is born without bones. He is born of the ‘*bhaga*’, meaning vulva, and is hence named Bhagiratha.

Ruth Vanita questions the discrepancy between the attitude of the Bengali texts, and prescriptive texts like *Manusmriti* and *Arthashastra* on the issue of lesbianism. While the former celebrate the same sex act, the latter view it as anti-normative and deplore it. In “Born to Two Mothers—The Hero Bhagiratha, Female-Female Love and Miraculous Birth in Hindu Texts” (2005), Vanita comments: “The blessing of same-sex intercourse with a miraculous child in the Bhagiratha texts may be read as a heterosexist assimilation of same sex coupling, it may, conversely, be seen to function as an affirmative incorporation of same-sex sexual and armourous relationships within a religious norm of the good and sanctified life” (31).

Moving from ancient texts to a more contemporary context in relation to the problem that lesbian relationship poses in terms of motherhood, it would be pertinent to analyse an autobiographical essay published in a book on lesbian writing entitled *Facing the Mirror* (1999). Radhika, a lesbian, discusses her experiences related to motherhood and the problems she encounters in “One and One is Three”. Radhika wanted to have a child but being a lesbian, having a child can be a difficult task. She had not produced an offspring in her heterosexual marriage, and did not want to
remarry. She had tried asking some of the men she knew, but they did not want to be tricked into a complicated situation since they already had children. She did not want to go through natural childbirth by herself, so the possibility of artificial insemination using a donor sperm had to be overruled. Finally she decided to adopt a baby with her lesbian partner who also wanted a child.

Her partner’s financial status did not permit her to adopt, and hence it was Radhika who adopted the child. The laws of adoption being stringent, single mothers wishing to adopt children must be financially sound and well settled, and must offer an undertaking that the child will be looked after financially. Radhika enjoyed the experience of mothering, and although she did not have any previous experience, learned quickly. The problem arose when they decided to mutually break up. Since a lesbian relationship does not have the legal status of a marriage, Radhika found herself in a difficult situation when her partner asked for her “half of the kid” (81).

Unlike in a heterosexual marriage where the laws for divorce and custody of a child are spelt out clearly, homosexual couples face a problem when their relationship ends. Since there is no legal binding or contract, it becomes difficult to resolve the issue. In Radhika’s case, the matter was resolved by allowing her partner weekly visitation rights which enabled her to keep in touch with the child.

Radhika describes the problems faced by a lesbian woman in rearing a child, which are different from the problems that would be faced by a woman in a stable heterosexual relationship:

My life is much more complicated now that I have my son. Even if I tell society to fuck off, the crap is going to come back at me through that little door. I’d like to meet other lesbians who’ve brought up children. You never know what to expect, how to do it. It might even mean giving up my sexuality for his sake – not having another lesbian affair [...] But I’m not pessimistic. I want to tell you that you can be a lesbian, you can be independent, you can have babies and families and extended families, and not be ostracized. (82)
In order to avert the problems she herself experienced, she suggests making a contract to cover the logistics of moving in together including the house and children. “Come to an understanding about what you will share, what you wish to keep, what you are willing to give up if you separate. And write out an informal memorandum to that effect” (83). However, unless the laws are changed to legalize homosexual relationships, arriving at an understanding in conflict situations will become difficult. Giti Thadani discusses a case which made news in 1990 in “Silence and Invisibility” (1999), wherein lesbian Tarulata underwent a sex-change operation in order to marry her girlfriend Lila Chavda in Gurjarat. Since Tarunkumar (Tarulata) possessed “neither the male organ nor any natural mechanism of cohabitation, sexual intercourse and procreation of children,” (150) he could not be considered male. The petition filed by Lila’s father asking for the marriage to be annulled, and was accepted by the court. According to Thadani, “Instead of the colonial nature of the law being questioned, it is used as a technique of coercion and repression, linking it to the indigenous ideology of normal sexuality = procreation.” She adds, “The internalization of this ideology is clearly manifested in the court’s attitude to Tarunkumar. Gender crossover is not enough to establish malehood. Non-reproductive sexuality is enough to constitute abnormality” (150-151). Thadani’s analysis clearly suggests the normative nature of procreation that is essential for a legally accepted relationship, which would not be possible in the case of a lesbian relationship.

The step-treatment accorded to lesbians, even within the women’s right movements has been questioned by lesbians all over the world. Feminism has been attacked because it assumes all women to be in heterosexual relationships, and ignores the problems of lesbians who become completely marginalized in the process. Adrienne Rich (1986) asserts the need to examine lesbianism in isolation. She states that not only should lesbians not be put in the same category as heterosexual women, but also they cannot be put into the same category as male homosexuals. They need to be considered separately since she perceives a lesbian experience as a “profoundly female experience” (318). She sees lesbianism as a powerful tool of women’s
empowerment: "Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance" (318).

Until lesbianism is recognized by law and becomes socially acceptable, the choice of having children will continue to be denied to lesbian women. Lesbians may have to forego their desire for motherhood or secretly embark upon adoption or artificial insemination to fulfill their wishes. Even if they adopt these methods, it will lead to two major complications. Firstly, both partners will not be able to claim legal rights over the child. Moreover, for the sake of the child concerned, a woman may have to sacrifice her own sexuality (as Radhika plans to do), so as to ensure that the child does not become a victim of social mockery. Hence, this may entail a choice between two exclusively female experiences - lesbianism and motherhood.

2.4.2 Women from Socially Unacceptable Professions

The second marginalized group is that of women whose professions do not permit them to have children. Hindi films are replete with examples of prostitutes and dancers who invariably fall in love with the hero – who is more often than not, represented as an underworld don. At least three powerful and extremely successful films, made within periodic intervals of each other - Yash Chopra’s Deewar (1975), Mahesh Manjrekar's Vaastav (1999), and Madhur Bhandarkar’s Chandni Bar (2001) deal with such women. A sequel to Chandni Bar is currently in the making. In all three films, the life of the woman changes when she enters into a relationship with a man who offers her a new life, away from her profession. The man concerned in all the films belongs to the underworld and is portrayed as a successful underworld don. Each of the three women is also exposed to motherhood. However, all three films give a different ending to the life of the woman.

In Deewar (1975), Anita (Parveen Babi) is portrayed as a woman who seduces men in bars and pubs, thereby making a living for herself. She gets involved with Vijay
(Amitabh Bachchan), who works with a gang of smugglers. When she learns of her pregnancy, she decides to give birth to her child, and give it a life very different from that of its parents. She does not coax her lover to marry him – he offers to do so himself, and even decides to surrender to the police in order to ensure a better life for the child. However, before the dream that her mother had seen for her, and her own dreams can come true, she is killed by Vijay’s detractors. Vijay is later also shot by his own brother.

Manjrekar’s Vaastav (1999) also allows the woman to get married only when she becomes pregnant. When Sonu (Namrita Shirodkar), who is a prostitute, first informs her lover Raghu (Sanjay Dutt) about her pregnancy, he refuses to accept that the child is his. He slaps her face and insults her, accusing her of trying to manipulate the truth, “You were born in the gutter – Stay there!” However, when he sobers down after some time, he returns to her and offers to marry her. Unlike Anita of Deewar, Sonu gives birth to her child, survives the death of her husband, and also gains acceptance by Raghu’s family along with her son.

The difference in the treatment of the prostitutes could possibly be an indication of changing times. Had Anita survived Vijay’s death, her acceptance by Vijay’s family may have been doubtful. Hence, the director ensures that she dies before Vijay since Vijay now no longer has any motivation to live and repent for his deeds. It is interesting to note that the status of ‘wife’ is accorded to both women only after they divulge the news of their pregnancy to their lovers. Their anticipated status as ‘mothers’ transforms them from ‘mistress’ to ‘wife’, thereby giving a legal and social sanction to their relationship, which would not have been accorded to them otherwise.

Madhur Bhandarkar’s film Chandni Bar (2001) treats the issue differently. To begin with, the film is woman-oriented, and focuses on the heroine who is an individual in her own right, and not a stereotype as in the other two films. Unlike the previous films, she plays the central and not a supporting role. Chandni Bar revolves around Mumtaz (Tabu) who is forced into becoming a bar dancer by her maternal uncle.
Mumtaz, the protagonist of the film, is able to wriggle out of the profession only temporarily when an underworld don Potya (Atul Kulkarni) falls in love with her and wants to marry her. In this case, the marriage is not caused by a pregnancy – the pregnancy happens later. She gives birth to two children, and hopes that they will not follow their parents’ footsteps. When her husband is killed, she has no choice but to resort to prostitution to save herself. Ironically, at the end of the film her daughter joins her trade and her son, who has been unjustly convicted for a crime he has not committed, joins the world of crime.

The film seems to imply that a bar girl cannot break free of her past. Even if she tries to enter the external world and lead a ‘normal’ life as wife and mother, she can never hope to earn the respectability that is accorded to an ordinary woman. Her profession leads people to hold preconceived notions about her, invariably relating her present to her past. Her children would always be known as the children of a bar girl and it would become very difficult for her to ensure that her children are socially accepted by society.

Jayanta Mahapatra’s poem “The Whorehouse in a Calcutta Street” (1976) also deals with the issue of prostitution. He describes not only the prostitutes themselves, but also their clients. He addresses the prospective clients in the poem, and urges them to “walk right in. It is yours” (17). This seems to give the customer a sense of ownership – both of the brothel as well as the prostitute herself. Vidyut Bhagat summarises Kate Millet’s argument in “The Prostitution Papers” (1973), wherein Millet had suggested that “The very act of prostitution is itself a degradation of a certain value system. It is not sex that the prostitute is made to sell. It is degradation of a certain value system. The male is not buying sexuality, he is buying power over another human being. It demonstrates the relative position of the male and female in patriarchal society – he as a master, she as a slave” (Cited in Bhagwat 2004 217). By allowing the customers in the poem to feel comfortable in the environment, Mahapatra seems to reassert the concept of possession of the prostitute.
The poem tempts the clients by giving them an opportunity to meet the women “you wished to know and haven’t”, but who “are all there together”. They are the ones who have put up the house. The house is distinct, and one can’t miss it. It “harbours the promise of a great conspiracy”. The furtiveness about the visit to a prostitute is implied by the use of the word ‘conspiracy’. Clients who visit prostitutes cannot do so openly since it is considered immoral, hence the houses promise to keep the visit a secret. These are the houses “where pasts join, and where they part”. The relationships with prostitutes are temporary, and the sexual encounter culminates in a parting, suggesting the impossibility of permanence or a long lasting relationship. If the customer seems embarrassed or ashamed to be here, the poem suggests that he should:

Then think of the secret moonlight of the women
left behind their false chatter,
perhaps their reminding themselves
of looked after children and of home:
the shooting stars in the eager darkness of return” (17)

The chatter of the women is false – they seem to have left behind their happiness. The children whom they dream about do not exist in reality. Many of the women have known and lived with their own families in the past – but these images are mere memories which are poles apart from the reality of their existence. Even if they wish to return to their past lives before they entered this profession, they would not be able to.

They search for the children in the “house’s dark spaces” but in vain, for they cannot find them. They are “dream children, dark and superfluous” – the women can only dream about them but cannot have them, for the children would disrupt the earning of their livelihood, and would simply be neglected by society if they were produced. Hence, society simply prevents them from being born, and they become “discarded things: the little turnings of blood at the far edge of the rainbow” (17). The “turnings of blood” implies that the fetuses are aborted. The desire for women to become mothers is thwarted because of the profession to which they belong, and society denies them their biological right to reproduction.
Women from socially unacceptable professions are thus discouraged from opting for motherhood. They must wait for the archetypal 'prince' who will rescue them from distress by offering them social acceptance through marriage if they desire to fulfill their dreams of motherhood. Even after becoming mothers, they are not guaranteed a life-time security since their past haunts them and is a constant reminder of their profession. Their children, too, must suffer the humiliation of being rejected socially, and are not appropriated by society.

2.4.3 Disabled Women

The last group to be considered in the section of marginalized women is women with disabilities. Whether the disability is physical or mental, the woman becomes a liability on her parents, and it becomes difficult to get her married. She is thus deprived of companionship that would arise from marriage, and of motherhood. She cannot choose to get married for the simple reason that the choice is not available to her.

Jhumpa Lahiri presents one such character in her short story “The Treatment of Bibi Haldar”, which appears in her Booker Prize winning book of short stories, The Interpreter of Maladies, (1999). The story revolves around Bibi Haldar, a twenty-nine year old orphan who suffers from an ailment “that baffled family, friends, priests, palmists, spinsters, gem therapists, prophets, and fools” (158). All kinds of treatments have been tried on her but have failed. Her strange fits which strike without warning compel her to stay confined in the building where her elder cousin, Haldar and his wife reside. Bibi spends her time recording inventory for her cousin’s cosmetic shop.

She has a strong desire to be like other women around her, and yearns for a different lifestyle which is denied to her. She finds this denial unfair: “Is it wrong to envy you, all brides and mothers, busy with lives and cares? Wrong to want to shade my eyes, scent my hair? To raise a child and teach him sweet from sour, good from bad?”
She derives vicarious pleasure from listening to stories of the weddings of others, and looking through their photo albums. She fantasizes about her own wedding: “When it happens to me, you will all be present” (160).

The fantasy, however, turns to desperation and then fear that these dreams will never come true. “‘I will never dip my feet in milk,’ she whimpered. ‘My face will never be painted with sandalwood paste. Who will rub me with turmeric? My name will never be printed with scarlet ink on a card [...] I will never be cured, never married’” (161). Her statements point to her feelings of insecurity that arise from her condition about a future that seems to have nothing new to offer her. When she sees other girls much younger to her getting married and having children and leading the kind of life that seems exciting and fulfilling to her, she feels a great longing for a similar lifestyle. Her conditioning has trained her to believe in marriage as the ultimate fulfillment for a woman, without which her life seems incomplete.

Finally a doctor prescribes a remedy for her – he claims that marriage will cure her. Palmists who examine her hand also confirm the prophecy of a union in the near future. It is interesting to observe the reactions of the neighbours, who have also taken for granted that she would never get married, and have never seen her as a prospective bride: “For the first time we imagined the contours below her housecoat, and attempted to appraise the pleasures she could offer a man. For the first time we noted the clarity of her complexion, the length and languour of her eyelashes, the undeniably elegant armature of her hands” (162). The dismissive stance taken by others of disabled persons is clear in the neighbours’ responses to Bibi. She has been perceived as an asexual being, without any physical needs or desires – a basic biological need which she is assumed not to possess. When they are told that marriage will cure her, they discuss the issue amongst each other: “‘They say it’s the only hope. A case of overexcitement. They say’ – and here we paused, blushing – ‘relations will calm her blood’” (162).
Bibi’s excitement knows no bounds, and she starts planning her wardrobe and trying to make herself look more attractive physically. However, her cousin refuses to take the diagnosis seriously, and does not feel the need to find a suitable groom for her. He believes that there is no cure to her ailment, and that she must spend her entire life as she is. He has already spent a considerable amount of money on her treatment, and has also been embarrassed on her account.

The attitude reflects the perception of the disabled woman as a burden on her family members. Although her father had strived hard to ensure her recuperation, he had died unsuccessful. Since the responsibility has been passed on to a cousin who has his own family to take care of, Bibi is a liability that must be endured. He does not want to incur the expenses of her marriage. “Besides, who would marry her? The girl knows nothing about anything, speaks backward, is practically thirty, can’t light a coal stove, can’t boil rice, can’t tell the difference between fennel and a cumin seed. Imagine her attempting to feed a man!” (163) Haldar’s definition of marriage, and a woman’s role in the institution seems to be restricted to the duties in the kitchen alone. The greatest obstacle that Bibi apparently poses to her prospective marriage is her lack of knowledge of cooking.

The attitude of Haldar’s superstitious wife creates further problems for Bibi, for she is regarded as an evil spirit who has been possessed by the devil and whose presence would harm the child in her womb. She insists on not allowing Bibi to enter the house during her pregnancy. Bibi is not allowed to touch the child after it is born, and her brief entry into the house is permanently prohibited when the baby becomes sick. Haldar’s wife assumes that Bibi’s presence is responsible for the baby’s illness.

Bibi’s excitement at the prospect of her marriage seems naïve and is yet disturbing, because the yearning is so desperate. She insists on getting herself photographed because “potential in-laws need to know what I look like” (164), and she wants her photographs circulated like those of other prospective brides. However, Haldar refuses to give in to her wishes. “He said that anyone who wished to see her could
observe her for themselves, weeping and wailing and warding off customers. She was a bane for business, he told her, a liability and a loss. Who in this town needed a photo to know that?” (164) His contempt and indifference towards her is evident in his statements.

When Bibi takes her revenge by divulging secrets of Haldar and his wife, Haldar is forced to place a one-line advertisement in the newspaper seeking a groom for Bibi. However, the advertisement is curt, abrupt, condescending and worded in a manner that would ward off any prospective groom: ‘GIRL, UNSTABLE, HEIGHT 152 CENTIMETERS, SEEKS HUSBAND” (165). Needless to say, the advertisement evokes no response, especially since “the identity of the prospective bride was no secret to the parents of our young men, and no family was willing to shoulder so blatant a risk. Who could blame them? [...] Even the lonely four-toothed widower who repaired our handbags in the market could not be persuaded to propose” (165). Marriage to Bibi would entail a ‘risk’ that no family was prepared to undertake, knowing the details of Bibi’s ‘abnormal’ behaviour. The advertisement seems to make a mockery of Bibi, degrading her status in society even further.

Fortunately for Bibi, she is blessed with kind neighbours who are sensitive to her growing desires, and who create an optimistic hope in her of her dreams turning into reality. They train her to become a wife, and prepare her for interviews with prospective in-laws. However, these are false hopes which may ultimately cause more damage than relief. Bibi does not receive a single response to the advertisement, and Haldar is convinced that he had been right in his judgment and predictions. “Now do you see that she is unfit to marry? Now do you see no man of sane mind would touch her?”

The neighbours try their best to help her to the best of their abilities “but she was not our responsibility and in our private moments we were thankful for it” (167). Bibi, like any other disabled woman is a liability, a responsibility, and a burden. Leigh Felesky (2002) had conducted an interview with Abby Lippman, professor of
epidemiology and biostatistics at McGill University at Montreal, Quebec wherein Lippman discusses the dangers of reproductive technologies for disabled women:

Reproductive technologies are enforcing discrimination with a vengeance. All the pre-natal screening and genetic screening that is done is giving that message [...] It sends a message that we don’t want children with problems being born. The reality is that yes, it is more difficult for parents to take care of a baby who has supposedly additional needs, but it is not something about the child so much, it’s because society is not providing the infrastructure and the support that would allow children with disabilities to have a full life.

Indeed, in the case of Bibi, she realizes that she is unwanted, and that there is no place for her in society. She feels a sense of humiliation when she is told that Haldar’s wife feels her presence would harm the unborn child. “Is it not punishment enough that I bear this curse alone? Must I also be blamed for infecting another?” (167) Her self-esteem is shattered and her hopes seem to be diminishing as there is no response to the advertisement. By reminding her of her marginalized position in society, social structures prove instrumental in ensuring that her condition deteriorates. She has another fit, and has to be given sedatives. Even her pitiable state seem to arouse no compassion in Haldar and his wife who insist on her sleeping in the storage room so as to avoid any risk that may be caused by a hysterical person to the unborn child or the expectant mother.

Bibi’s physical isolation leads to her social isolation, and she gradually becomes a recluse. “[...] she stopped going out altogether. When we asked her to come with us to the fish pond or to go see temple decorations she refused, claiming that she was stitching a new curtain to hang across the entrance of the storage room. Her skin looked ashen. She needed fresh air. “‘What about finding your husband?’ we suggested. ‘How do you expect to charm a man sitting up here all day?’ Nothing persuaded her” (170).

When Haldar and his wife leave town, Bibi is left with no family at all to call her own. The neighbours again help to the best of their abilities, but Bibi seems content
with her isolation and rejects any kind of social contact. One day, they discover that she is four months pregnant. Bibi claims she does not remember what happened, and refuses to reveal the rapist’s identity. She gives birth to a baby boy, and the neighbours help her to take care of him. She starts her own little business so as to become financially independent. The neighbours wonder for years afterwards “who in the town had disgraced her... But there was no point carrying out the investigation. She was, to the best of our knowledge, cured” (172).

The ending of the story seems to suggest that the problem was more psycho-somatic than physical, and arose from the very fact of being marginalized. The ailment persisted so long as Bibi was treated as an ‘abnormal’ person, and was reminded of her ‘disability’. However, motherhood seems to shift the marginalized to the center, and turn the ‘other’ into a ‘self’. Although Bibi is obviously a victim of rape, the incident of rape has allowed her to fulfill her long-standing desire of being a mother.

The story implies that restoring ‘normalcy’ in the life of the subaltern would enhance the individual’s life, while emphasizing the differences and delegating a life of isolation would worsen the situation. The ‘disabled’ individual needs to be incorporated into the world of ‘normal’ people. Motherhood becomes a means of this incorporation, and gives the marginalized woman a reason to live.

Many films have shown two disabled couples getting married to each other, for instance Gulzar’s Koshish (1972) and Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Khamoshi (1996). It is significant that in both cases the man and woman are fulfilled in their relationships, and also experience the joy of parenting. However, when their first child is born, their primary fear is that of disability in the child. In both films, couples instantly seek to verify whether the children born to them are ‘normal’ or not, and heave a sigh of relief when they realize that the children do not suffer from the disabilities that they have experienced. In Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Black (2005), by contrast, the protagonist Michelle McNelly (Rani Mukherjee) is never allowed to experience marriage or motherhood. Her yearning for companionship remains a dream, which she is unable to fulfill.
The portrayal of disabled persons in cinema and literature seems to be suggestive of their marginalized and unwanted position in a society that treats them as burdens to be endured. The disabled woman is twice oppressed – first on account of her gender, and second on account of her disability. She is denied the choice of matrimony and motherhood – and if she is able to achieve matrimony, it would generally be with another disabled person. Being helpless, the woman is also susceptible to physical and sexual attacks by men who may turn her into a victim of rape. In order to empower the disabled woman, her status in society needs to change, and she needs to gain acceptance by people around her.

2.5 The Right to Abortion

This section deals with an issue that has been a primary focus of the women’s rights movement – the right to abortion. The section presents an analysis of three texts, Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Bharti Mukherjee’s *Wife* (1975), and Shashi Deshpande’s *That Long Silence* (1989) each of which portray the female protagonist undergoing an abortion, and present their reactions to the issue of abortion, sometimes juxtaposing their reactions with those of other people around them.

The issue of abortion is a complex one, and has been debated for years. While the feminist movement has presented it as the fundamental right of a woman reflecting her control over her body, religious groups have equated abortion with murder, and regarded women undergoing abortions as callous and ruthless. According to Hindu philosophy, abortion, which is referred to as ‘garha batta’ (womb killing) and ‘bhroona hathya’ (killing the underdeveloped soul) thwarts a soul in its progress towards God. The sin of abortion is equated with the sin of killing one’s own parents and a fetus slayer or ‘brunghni’, is considered to be one of the greatest sinners.
Satyanarayana dasa in his comments on the ancient Sanskrit text *Hitopadesa* critiques the use of euphemisms like “tissue” when referring to the fetus. He asserts, “Although subconsciously they know that they are killing the baby in the womb, they prefer to say that they are terminating the pregnancy or ‘removing the tissue’ so that they may feel free of the guilt for murder, thus deluding themselves psychologically [...] they cannot escape the punishment for murder given by the laws of Karma, and ... in their next lives they will have to suffer the misery of repeatedly being aborted (Cited in Murti and Derr). A.K. Jayasree in “Abortions – Rights to Correct the Wrongs” (2002) explains that these very values that we seem to uphold and the glorification of motherhood in our country leads to the feeling of guilt for going through an abortion: “[...] the woman suffers all pain, defamation and shame to protect the baby and motherhood, even when the father of the baby rejects her” (81).

It is not merely Hinduism that perceives abortion a sin. The Catholic Church, too, perceives abortion as a sin. In her Nobel Prize speech in 1979, Mother Teresa had voiced her views based on the stance taken by the Roman Catholic Church, and had declared abortion as the greatest threat to world peace: “Abortion is the worst evil, and the greatest enemy of peace ... Because if a mother can kill her own child, what will prevent us from killing ourselves or one another? Nothing” (Mother Teresa). However, noted feminist Simone de Beauvoir points out in *The Second Sex* (1949) that during the Oriental and Greco-Roman civilization, abortion was permissible, and that the Romans “regarded the *nasciturus* (to be born) as a part of the maternal body, not as a human being” (Cited in Jain 2005 244). She adds that it was Christianity that endowed the embryo with a soul, turning abortion into a crime against the fetus. She cites St. Augustine who apparently stated, “Any woman who acts in such a way that she cannot give birth to as many children as she is capable of makes herself guilty of that many murders, just as with the woman who tries to injure herself after conception” (Cited in Jain 2005 244).

Islam also condemns abortion, or any form of killing of another human being, in fact. The Qu-ran (Qu’ran 81:8-9) teaches that on the day of Judgment, parents who killed
their own children would face a trial, and their own children would act as witnesses against them (Cited in Ally). For people who fear that having more children will make them poorer, the Qu’ran decrees, “Do not slay your children for fear of poverty. We shall provide sustenance for them as well as for you. Verily the killing of them is a great sin” (Qu’ran 17:31). It adds, “Take not life which God has made sacred except by way of justice and law. Thus He commands you that you may learn wisdom” (Qu’ran 6: 151) (Medical Ethics). Although Islam believes that the right to life is God-given, and that no human being has the right to take away that life, it does permit abortion under exceptional circumstances. For instance, if there is a threat to the mother’s life, abortion is permitted since the principal life of the mother is considered more sacred. However, the abortion should be performed before the fetus is hundred and twenty days old, since that is when life is breathed into the fetus (Cited in Ally).

Just as there are numerous theorists who would enumerate reasons not to abort, there are an equal number of those who protest for the right of a woman to abort an unwanted fetus. The argument for abortion has been a major issue in the feminist movement. Laura Roberts in her article “Every Woman: Reproductive Rights vs. The Unborn Child” states, “Bringing another unwanted child into this world to a family who does not have the emotional, physical and financial capacity to care for him/her is even more appalling than aborting it in the womb”. Mary Anne Warren had listed five criteria that should be met for the definition of human personhood. These qualities are reasoning, consciousness, self-awareness, self-motivated activity and the capacity to communicate. Since the fetus does not possess all these qualities, it cannot be defined as a person. Roberts elaborates that the movement for legalization of abortion for women “represents the ability to control their reproduction, bodies and sexuality. In essence, abortion symbolizes female sexual autonomy and puts forth the message that women have power and their lives cannot be controlled by the government, church or men”.

In India, the Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act was passed in 1971, and according to the act, termination of pregnancy can be done under five conditions.
Firstly, if the continuation of pregnancy poses a danger to the life of a mother; second, for eugenic reasons if there is risk of the child being born with physical handicaps or abnormalities; third, on humanitarian grounds if pregnancy is the result of rape; next, for socio-economic reasons, where the environment can lead to injury of the health of the woman; and finally on account of failure of contraceptive devices (Cited in Jayasree).

The law itself has no meaning, however, since it can easily be manipulated, not only in the case of abortion, but also in the case of sex-determination tests which were banned in 1994 but still continue to be performed illegally, and result in large number of cases of female feticide. According to Rubert D. Rutherford and T. K. Roy (2003), “The law is easy to circumvent [...] Private labs and clinics are not monitored as closely as government facilities, and ultrasound is not monitored as closely as other tests”. Manipulation of law being prevalent in India, the reproductive rights of a woman are often misused by patriarchy to control women. As Black feminist critic Angela Gillian points out in “Women’s Equality and National Liberation” (1991), “On the one hand, women should have reproductive choice, but in racist, repressive governments with birth control as policy, what seems to be ‘choice’ can be an instrument against women” (224).

While Black American women seem to be victims of a racist society, in India, the repressive government as well as with families who have an innate desire for a male child, often misuse the laws to justify their control over women. Shoma Chatterjee (1988) states, “[...] whether it is control over one’s own body – and life in a way by controlling the size of the family and by also controlling the responsibility of motherhood in a quantitative manner, or whether it is to save the woman’s life – abortion has been going against the woman and she has been giving into it without even being aware of it. Abortion becomes a tool in the hands of the politicians and administrators if it is used as a method for Family planning at the cost of the women. Abortion becomes a collective decision rather than an individual one” (224). The issue of Family Planning policies has already been discussed in a previous section,
which has also analysed the control exercised by officials in order to meet their targets. The same laws are used to increase the numbers of abortions so as to decrease the numbers being born.

Chatterjee explains the basic reason why abortion works against women. To begin with, she claims that it leads to maternal mortality, and hence, health-wise, it poses a risk to women. Moreover, by deliberately aborting her own female child (and abortion and amniocentesis certainly work together), she is “working against the future growth of her own species” (229). Rebecca Albury in “Who Owns the Embryo” points to the hypocrisy of patriarchal society which, by denying the right to abortion, compels women into motherhood and reinforces motherhood as the primary function of women. “The demands of women for abortions are labeled selfish or even anti-social by some, while the IVF programmes are justified by the demands of women as a recognition of their “need to have children. Both arguments involve a reinforcement of the definition of women as mothers either by compelling or enabling motherhood” (65).

The issue of abortion, however, is extremely complex, and it becomes difficult to debate on the ethics of abortion without considering the other issues involved. Bharat Jhunjhunwala, freelance economist and former professor at IIM Bangalore in an interesting article entitled “Abortion and Choice” points to the contradictory nature of three valid principles used while analyzing reproductive choice.

The first principle, he states, is the expansion of choice. This principle enables a couple to exercise their rights over whether or not to have a child, and allows then the right to abortion. However, if they have the right to abort, Jhunjhunwala argues, then the right to sex-selective abortion is justified as well since they must also be allowed to choose the sex of the baby they want to have. The application of the logic of the freedom of choice has been used for the freedom of choice of the sex of the child. This, however, may lead to female feticide which has been deemed to be unethical and against the interests of women. The second principle is that of gender equality.
According to this principle, abortion is acceptable because it offers women reproductive rights, but sex-selective abortion is unacceptable as it necessarily involves preference of the male sex over female. This principle thus directly conflicts with and contradicts the first principle, that of expansion of choice. The third principle is the right to life, where the fetus has a right to live. According to this principle, no form of abortion would be acceptable. As Jhunjhunwala claims, “The right to life of the fetus is said to take precedence over the parents’ expansion of choice.”

Jhunjhunwala explains that while each of these principles is valid by itself, the principles are not in harmony with each other: “There is a contradiction in our law which permits abortion in general while prohibiting sex-selective ones. If expansion of choice is the touchstone then both have to be accepted. If the right to life is the touchstone then both have to be rejected. If gender equality is the touchstone then the rights of the female parent take precedence over the right of the female fetus”. Hence, Jhunjhunwala concludes that all abortions, except in the case of a danger to the mother’s life should be abolished. If one does not accept this, then it becomes difficult to reject sex-selective abortions.

2.5.1 Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters
Given the major arguments for and against abortion, it would be interesting to analyze how the issue has been depicted in various texts. Manju Kapur’s novel Difficult Daughters (1998), though written after the other novels being considered in this section, will be analysed first because it is set in pre-independent India during the time of partition when the laws against abortion were far more stringent, and abortion was still illegal. The novel describes three generations of women, and is narrated by the youngest, Ida who writes the story of her mother Virmati and also her grandmother Kasturi. All three women attempt abortions, and while Ida and Virmati are successful, Kasturi cannot abort her child.
Kasturi has already produced ten children and is pregnant with her eleventh. The symptoms of pregnancy are not easy to deal with: "[...] the heaviness in her belly, morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly" (7). This makes her wonder: "How trapped could nature make a woman?" (7) Pregnancy and motherhood are perceived as a 'trap' because it is difficult for her to go through the same thing again and again. She wishes to abort the unwanted child, and tries various methods to do so: "She turned to God, so bountiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage. Her sandhya started and ended with this plea, that somehow she should drop the child she was carrying and never conceive again" (7). The words 'miracle' and 'miscarriage' seem to be contradictory, and Kasturi's plea would be considered unwomanly and immoral. In a society where a child is considered to be a gift of God, a woman praying for the death of such a child would be met with great disapproval.

Obviously, contraceptive devices were unknown and the women had no access to medical facilities even for abortion. Kasturi resorts to home remedies and the help of a dai (a midwife who obviously has no medical knowledge or qualifications but works from experience) in order to abort the child. She consumes bitter powders and liquids from various roots and herbs. She even puts a twig inside her vagina, but is unable to abort the fetus. After the fourth month, she gives up and tells the dai, "God does not wish it. Otherwise why would all this pain not lead to something?" (8).

Although her attempt has not been successful, it has been a painful ordeal for her, and she finds herself wondering if the pain is a form of punishment meted out to her for having interfered with nature and God. "She had strong healthy children, no deaths, no miscarriages, whereas with only two children, her sister-in-law, Lajwanti had three spontaneous abortions. Instead of being grateful, she had rebelled, and pain and sickness had been the result" (8). This feeling of guilt again reflects the conditioning of society where a woman who wishes to deny herself the gift of birth given to her by divine forces would pay for her sin. In Kasturi's case, her pain is her punishment. She should have thanked God for the birth of her child – for God does not bestow this
gift on every woman. Her own sister-in-law was a perfect example of a woman who had been denied this gift of God. By refusing to acknowledge and thank God for this gift, Kasturi had brought the pain upon herself.

While Kasturi does not succeed in aborting her fetus, her daughter Virmati does – but experiences similar problems and anguish. She has been having an affair with a married man, Professor Harish, and the fetus is the result of this illicit liaison. She is a student preparing for her exams for her bachelor’s degree when the incident occurs. Harish is away from her and she has no way to contact him or discuss the issue with him. She knows that if she tells Harish about her pregnancy, his qualms about marrying her would disappear. “But she scorned such tactics, and even if she didn’t, it was too late to avoid the shame that an early baby would bring” (158). Given the circumstances, she would not be in a position to give birth to the baby. She is left with no choice but to abort the fetus since her family would never accept an illegitimate child – and even if she were to convince Harish to marry her, the early birth of the child would divulge the secret of their relationship, leading to unnecessary complications.

However, getting an abortion is not an easy task. Abortion is illegal, and it would be impossible for her to persuade a doctor to conduct the abortion. The other option she has is to go to a dai, as her mother had done. However, the lack of professionalism and hygiene amongst dais is a cause of concern. Virmati’s dilemma reflects a serious problem prevalent during the pre-Independence period for a woman with an unwanted child. Virmati finally seeks the help of her friend Swarna, who uses her contacts to arrange an abortion done for her. Miss Datta, a social activist and Swarna’s mentor, finds a doctor who will perform the abortion. The doctor tells Miss Datta, “She is lucky to have someone like you to look after her. Otherwise I have seen so many of these cases…” he shuddered. “They go to these quack dais and then come to us bleeding and lacerated. Sometimes there is very little we can do” (157). The process is also expensive precisely because it is illegal. Virmati sells the pair of
gold bangles that have been gifted by her father in order to meet the expenses of the abortion.

Virmati feels miserable about aborting the child, especially since she herself does not agree with the concept of abortion. She is forced to abort because society would not accept her child: “That a child of their union, the result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individuality, the sanctity of human love and tyranny of social and religious restraints, should meet its end like this!” (157) Virmati is growing up at a time when there is immense social and political activity taking place in the country. This is a period when the British rule is ending, and India is about to be partitioned. Virmati is greatly influenced by people around her – and Harish, especially, plays a major role in molding her views. For a woman who strongly opposes social control and pressure, and has always been unconventional – whether in her choice to pursue higher studies which would otherwise be denied to her as a woman, or in her relationship with Harish – the decision to abort is a difficult and painful one. It represents a surrender and passive acceptance of a social norm that she personally disapproves of.

She is also terrified of the consequences of the abortion: “As she tossed and turned, one thought kept recurring. By this time tomorrow, it will be over, over. But suppose it was over in a very final sense? Suppose she died?” Her fears prove unwarranted when she survives the abortion. “An hour later, Virmati drifted back still on the same bed, legs down, alone in the room. There was tape on her waist, some raw wetness between her legs, and relief! She was alive! The condition of her body was now commensurate with her social position” (160). Virmati is alive, but her body is weak and dependent – just as she herself is.

Much later, when Harish finally gives into the ultimatum pronounced by Virmati and agrees to marry her, she finds herself thinking about the abortion. This is when she has a miscarriage, and begins to believe that the miscarriage is a form of punishment for her sin of having aborted the child. It is interesting that her dilemma is similar to
that of her mother: “God was speaking. He was punishing her for the first time. Maybe she could never have children. She had robbed her own womb three years earlier, just as she had robbed another woman of her husband” (227). She also begins to start believing that Harish’s first wife Ganga had cast an evil eye on her resulting in her miscarriage. Like Kasturi, Virmati too feels a divine force working towards punishing her for having dared to act against the gift given to her by God. She had not only interfered with nature, but also with social structures by marrying a man who already had a wife.

Unlike Kasturi and Virmati, Ida has no problem in getting an abortion done. Her husband Prabhakar organizes a doctor for her. While Kasturi does not want another child and Virmati has no option but to abort, Ida is coaxed into abortion by her husband against her own wishes. Ida and Prabhakar eventually get divorced, and reflecting on the reasons for the abortion, Ida analyses: “In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our breakup – as perhaps he meant to do” (144). Her husband’s act resulted in feelings of low self-esteem and self-doubt in Ida: “I had lain awake nights wondering why he wanted me to have an abortion, worrying whether he was having an affair, feeling unloved because he didn’t want a baby from me” (144).

Her husband not only imposes the abortion on her without taking her feelings into consideration or justifying his act, he also asks the doctor to show the aborted fetus to her because “she thinks she is killing something” (144). Ida, who is already distressed with the decision cannot bear the sight of the fetus: “They thrust a stainless-steel bowl under my nose. It was full of floating blood and plasma. ‘That is all it is, you silly girl’. I threw up in the red plastic basin kept under the bed” (144). The sight of the fetus and her husband’s comment seem to repulse her to such an extent that her body automatically reacts, causing her to vomit.

All three women in this novel have been through a similar ordeal – which is caused by different reasons, and also results in different consequences. While Kasturi and
Virmati both experience guilt at aborting children, they have exercised their control over their bodies. Both are also ‘punished’ for their sins, or at least perceive the consequences as a ‘punishment’ for the ‘crimes’ committed by them in trying to control their bodies. Ida, on the other hand, also experiences guilt because she did not protest against the choice that was made for her, not by societal norms and standards, but by her own husband. She does not exercise control over her body – her husband does. She experiences intense pain and suffering: “I knew, Mother, what it was like to have an abortion ... It was never the same afterwards. The death haunted me for years, but Prabhakar was very careful, and I never conceived again. Now I have nothing, Mother” (144). At least the other two women before her had other children, and Kasturi even gave birth to the child she had tried to abort. Ida, however, is left childless, and is ‘punished’ for a ‘crime’ that has not even been committed by her.

The novel seems to portray women as helpless victims of their biological selves over a period of time stretching three generations of women. The lack of knowledge and availability of contraceptives, the social need for legitimate children, and patriarchal control over the woman’s body all seem to render the female protagonists powerless and vulnerable, and unable to control their reproductive capacities.

2.5.2 Bharti Mukherjee’s Wife
Bharti Mukherjee’s novel Wife (1975) revolves around a frivolous protagonist Dimple who matures gradually over a period of time. It begins with Dimple’s marriage to Amit, and her discovery of pregnancy which happens before she has even settled in to matrimony. Unlike Kasturi, Virmati and Ida, Dimple experiences no guilt when she thinks of deliberately aborting her fetus. The pregnancy had been unplanned and Dimple “thought bitterly that no one had consulted her before depositing it in her body” (31). She rebukes her husband for not providing her access to various forms of contraception and not taking enough precautions to prevent the pregnancy which she was unprepared for. Then, she thinks of “ways to get rid of... whatever it was that blocked her tubes and pipes [...] she had heard that some women used castor oil to ease the delivery. At worst, she could arrange to slip in the bathroom or fall down the
staircase or sit on a knitting needle, though that would be too obvious to conceal” (31).

These thoughts bother her even more when her husband finalizes his decision to move abroad for work. At this point, she realizes that the baby would only be a hindrance for her. “She began to think of the baby as unfinished business. It cluttered up the preparation for going abroad. She did not want to carry the relics from her old life; given another chance, she could be a more exciting person, take evening classes perhaps, become a librarian” (42).

Dimple’s attitude towards her unborn child would certainly be perceived by anti-abortionists as being purely selfish and uncaring, and she could be considered devoid of any maternal instinct – even unwomanly. However, Dimple convinces herself that it is not murder and that she could never commit murder. It is difficult to analyze whether these thoughts were an obvious consequence of her frustration and the result of her immature and child-like attitude towards the world in general, or whether she was indeed serious about getting rid of the fetus.

Unfortunately, when the miscarriage does happen, it is not a planned decision. The fetus gets aborted when Dimple is skipping rope. “Who could have thought you could skip your way to abortion? Dimple was as surprised as the others” (42). Dimple unintentionally ends up aborting the fetus, and although the abortion is unintentional, one cannot deny the fact that the thought of abortion and the unwanted child does cross her mind several times, and that she is relieved when it happens. Her relief may also stem from the fact that it was not murder, as she had not planned it in such a way – it simply happened, and it was she who ended up consoling and comforting her husband instead of the other way around. Her brutal honesty in perceiving the child as an obstruction to her future happiness is probably representative of the thoughts of a number of women who would be too ashamed and embarrassed to reveal their thoughts to anyone for fear of being considered brutal murderesses.
2.5.3 Shashi Deshpande’s That Long Silence

Shashi Deshpande’s Sahitya Akademi award winning novel That Long Silence (1989), which essentially deals with a woman’s search for her own identity by portraying a middle class woman whose inner desires have often been ‘silenced’ to meet societal norms, also dwells on the issue of abortion. The first abortion in the novel is undertaken by the protagonist Jaya’s mother-in-law, who is dead before the novel begins. Her mother-in-law had been tired of so many pregnancies although she went about her daily chores and took care of her children and a dominating husband without a word of complaint. She gives vent to her frustration when she goes to a midwife to get herself aborted. This decision is considered criminal by the family members and no one speaks of her after her death. Her own daughter Vimla later confesses to Jaya that she was ashamed of her mother since her mother had done something shameful.

The story of the mother-in-law represents an attitude to abortion which does not change even in the next generation, and is even then seen as sinful. Jaya already has two children and decides to abort the fetus when she realizes she is pregnant for the third time. However, knowing well that her husband Mohan would not approve of her decision, she decides to hide the fact of her pregnancy from him. She turns to her elder brother (Dada) for support. Dada reacts in a predictable manner, and chides her for hiding this issue from her own husband. His reaction implies that a woman ought not to take such a decision alone. The decision should be taken after consultation with the husband whose consent is very important. Jaya does not agree with him: “But I had been stubborn, terrified I would be betrayed into letting the child live. I had a feeling that Mohan would not allow me to unburden myself of the child” (131).

Eventually he gives into her and Jaya goes for the abortion, commenting later: “How easy it had been! I had come out of the anesthesia thinking – I’ve had a baby. Almost on the instant it had changed into the awareness of – I’ve lost a baby. But there had been no guilt in me” (131). There is no guilt even when Mohan returns. However,
she cannot remain guilt free for too long. When she is in an introspective and reflective mood much later, she recalls the incident with a pang of guilt, “But now, as if it had been waiting for its cue all these years, a shadowy figure in the wings, guilt sprang out at me. I thought of the unborn child with dread and a piercing sorrow invested in her – yes, it would have been a girl – with all the qualities I missed in Rahul and Rati” (131).

There is thus not only a feeling of remorse at having killed her unborn child but also a strange longing which seems to stem from the inadequacy of her own children and the unfulfilled relationship she shares with them. The unborn child remains “a shadowy figure” who never disappears from her life completely, and reappears to haunt her in moments of reflection and self-introspection.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has thus explored the imposition of motherhood on women as their primary function, and the denial of choices to women in differing circumstances. According to Betty Friedan in *The Second Stage* (1981), “The right to choose has to mean not only the right to choose not to bring a child in to the world against one’s will, but also the right to have a child, joyously, responsibly, without paying a terrible price of isolation from the world and its rewarded occupations, its decisions and actions” (86).

The fact remains, however that women in our society are denied this right. The right of choice belongs to men alone and women who dare to oppose the decisions of their family or society go through social ostracism and isolation. It requires tremendous courage (and often financial independence and emotional support) to deviate from the norms laid down by society and very few women are willing to take the risk this entails.
Germaine Greer stated in *Abortion* (1972) that motherhood can only be rewarding and satisfying if it is chosen by the woman herself. “A man forced up Mount Everest at gunpoint or because he could not earn a living any other way, or the miserable child conning his Bible text for fear of the rod, has no knowledge of the pleasure in achievement which could attend the operation” (115).

Indeed, motherhood can be a beautiful experience for women only if they choose it themselves, and not if they are forced to become mothers because of societal pressure. The next chapter will explore what happens to women who cannot become mothers, and will explore the social stigma and difficulties they are forced to undergo, as well as the methods they adopt to overcome their infertility.