Chapter Four

Subjectivity

The story is a kind of extension of myself. Something once attached to me and growing out of me, now lopped off, exposed and abandoned.

(Munro, “Introduction” Moons xiii)

I will let my mind striptease
I should extrude autobiography.

(Das, “Composition” Only the Soul)

Subjectivity, as The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines, is “the ability or tendency to present or view facts in the light of personal or individual feelings or opinions.” It hardly needs to be reiterated that subjectivity for a woman does not exist in a Freudian or Lacanian framework in the sense in which it exists for a man. The female child according to Freud, grows up with the sense of “lack” or what Lacan terms the “phallic signifier” as it enters the symbolic order. Subjectivity for Foucault is something constructed historically by individuals in positions of power. In her essay “Subjects” Chris Weedon says, “Subjectivity, as it occurs in feminist theory variously refers to the conscious thoughts and feelings of the individual, her
sense of self and, in psychoanalytic and post-structuralist contexts, it encompasses unconscious meanings, wishes and desires” (112). Feminists see women as active, self-determining, conscious and independent subjects who together with their fellow women are able to analyse their predicament within patriarchy and bring about both cultural and material changes. “Feminist theory” according to Helen Crowley and Susan Himmelweit, “is precisely concerned with the workings of power and the way in which power constitutes our subjectivity” (239). In the very choice of words, the artist’s individual genius comes into play. What a great artist seeks to say from the bottom of his or her heart is bound to be personal and so turns out to be autobiographical confessions.

Alice and Kamala could be bracketed with fictional autobiographers who transmute personal experiences along with observed facts into fictional reality. If one reads their short-fictional creations, one can see that their writings are not the kind of autobiographies or memoirs that one is used to read. George Woodcock, in “The Plots of Life” says that Alice Munro “has always written best when her stories or the episodes in her novels were close to her own experience in a world she knew” (237). Creative writers like herself, Kamala feels:

cannot close their shops like shopmen and return home. Their shop is their mind and as long as they carry it with them they
feel the pressures and torments. A poet’s raw material is not stone or clay; it is her personality. I would not escape from my predicament even for a moment. (My Story 157)

The stories of Alice and Kamala are subjective in that they explore the feminists’ changing perceptions of self. Many women writers prefer to use autobiographical narrative because it facilitates interpersonal communication between the writer and the reader. Their subjective experiences in real life could be found objectified here in literature. Their resentment is seen in the guise of the narratives of their female protagonists’ self-discovery and renunciation of male-ordained familial values. Iyengar has rightly observed, “Kamala Das’s is a fiercely feminine sensibility that dares without inhibitions to articulate the hurts it has received in an insensitive largely man-made world” (680).

The narratorial subjects in their fictional world move from predicaments of alienation right from childhood to a discovery of female identity after their journey through adolescence, wifehood, widowhood or motherhood in the midst of male-defined values. One could discern the two writers mapping out in their parallel narrativization the space for self-emancipation derived from the feminist ideology of woman’s resistance and recovery of her self. What the female voice in each of their stories chosen here speaks is the language of their authorial hearts that have been hurt.
Childhood and Adolescence

Loneliness in childhood and longing for love in adolescence impelled Alice and Kamala to create their literary realms where their heroines issue as remakes of their own alter egos. Alice and Kamala have made use of vital events in every stage of their lives – their birth at Wingham in Ontario and at Punnayoorkulam in Malabar, the enjoyable phase of their education at Lower Town School and at Elementary School with their notoriety for their low standards and moral laxity, their joyless pursuit of studies later at posh centres of learning in disciplined surroundings, the miseries they suffered at the hands of their proudly callous husbands and their fantasized intimacies with men from different walks of life and their female visions of the patriarchal structure of society. The similarities between the experiences of the authors and the fictional events could be seen if one looks through the different stages of their lives and the notable events in the lives of their central characters.

Both the writers have given their readers glimpses of their schooldays and the kind of friends they had or wished to have. In her autobiographical book My Story, which reads like a book of linked stories like Alice’s Lives, or Who, Kamala recalls the hilarious occasions of her life at the Elementary School situated at “Punnayurkulum, which was only two furlongs away from the Nalapat House.” Transfer from this rustic school to the urban school in Calcutta with its sophistications made her write later, “I felt that I had died a
cultural death and was getting reborn into another kind of world where the hard-eyed British were no longer my co-rivals" (My Story 20). Her rustic phase of life was spent in a world devoid of distinctions and snobberies where Kamala, like Alice, encountered life in its crudest forms. One reads, “The children of our own field-hands and carpenters, dressed only in thin towels, were my new school-mates. One of them, the boy who shared a bench with me was Velu, who was always bleary-eyed and had sores all over his body” (My Story 20). He was the child of beggars who used to visit Kamala’s house for alms. She remembers how Velu used to be brought on birthdays when a kind of “beggar’s feast” would be held at her house where she would pay him special attention.

Rasporich says that Munro “addresses herself in the childhood and adolescent character of her fiction which she admits becomes more meaningful to her as it becomes more autobiographical, … Boys and Girls, Walker Brothers Cowboy, Images and Red Dress – 1946” (36). One catches glimpses of the neighbourhood where Alice was born and brought up as one reads Lives and Who, for Del in the former book and Rose in the latter one are projections of the author’s essential personality. When asked how real her characters like Del and Rose were, Alice told Rasporich, “O, very real, because they are aspects of myself” (23). Carole Gerson says:
Rose grows up on the wrong side of the bridge, in West Hanratty, a community of cripples, idiots, ne’er-do-wells, and misfits. She graduates from her childhood world of squalor and scandal, incest in the school outhouse and sex under the porch, to the clean, calm corridors of university. (5)

Gerson writes that Munro’s “strongest ties are not to the men she had loved, but to those who shared her childhood” (6). That is why her schoolmates and the urchins of neighbourhood get drawn with vividness and immediacy.

In My Story Kamala recalls how she was forbidden by her grandmother to associate with her schoolmate “plump Devaki” who wanted to form a lover’s relationship with her and wrote a letter addressing her “my dearest darling”. The girl claimed “I have unloaded my mind, my heart and my soul” in that letter. She was made out to be a wicked girl harming Kamala’s innocence. As Kamala did not respond to her favourably, she “turned for emotional solace to an older girl” (21). Devaki could form with her something of a lesbian relationship which probably left on the author’s mind such a deep impression as to make her respond later in adolescence to lesbian overtures and delineate such intimacies in her stories and create characters like Kalyanikutty and Sheela in “The Sandal Trees”.

There was in Kamala’s school a lout like Munro’s Howard Troy who propositioned his classmate Helena in “Executioners” of Something. The
iconoclast in the young Kamala, like Alice, could sympathise with Govinda Kurup, the outlaw. He was a handsome boy whose smile and even impudence and insolent demeanour charmed her. He could resemble some of the children of Munro’s Lower Town School who were vulgar in their fondness for sights of obscenity which are detailed in “Privilege” of Who which Munro admits to be the “most autobiographical story” (Gerson, Interview 6).

Alice’s Who thus returns to much of the details of her childhood and adolescence. In the same way Kamala revives in three later memoirs, memories of her childhood and adolescence. Balyakala (Childhood), Varshangalkku (Years), Neermathalam (Neermathala) read like Alice’s books of linked stories. Like Lives and Who they reveal different facets of the author’s personality in its formative years. In P.P. Ravindran’s interview Kamala says, Balyakala (Childhood) is an experiment. Even when each segment in it stays self-contained like a story my insistence has been to speak the truth to the best of my knowledge” (155). She goes on to say how “Each section paints an independent portrait. But these portraits are mutually linked and have continuity” (156). She refers to Balyakala, Varshangalkku, and Neermathalam as being designed to be something of a trilogy.

Alice through Del Jordan and Rose and Kamala through her own almost undisguised self in My Story and the other three memoirs give perceptive accounts of the fabric of children’s lives. They construct in some
of their stories too the social and sexual mores of the emergent feminist world. In “Images” one sees Alice in her childhood experiencing loneliness and fear of loss as her mother had “taken to her bed” with a serious illness and the family nurse Mary McQuade was showing what the narrator calls “the signs of invasion” (Dance 33, 35). The nurse invaded not only the privacy of the home but threatened to usurp the wifehood of her mother. She recalls how in those days they had no electricity and how in the light of the lamp on the table her father and “Mary McQuade threw gigantic shadows, whose heads wagged clumsily with their talk and laughing” (35). Alice was “trying to understand the danger” of her presence in the house. Her aversion to the woman could be sensed even in her reference to the strange smell and taste which her person seemed to emit.

A similarly loveless and lonely life is portrayed by Kamala in “Gosaithantha” (“Old Sanyasi”). When Kamala was a school girl living with her parents in Calcutta, an old Hindu ascetic from Kerala was given shelter there in the “alcove behind the stairs where he spread out his belongings – A conch, two black saligrams, a bell, an incense burner and a hookah made of a coconut shell.” (My Story 65). When he left, Baby the heroine of the story too, felt lonely, for in him she found a guardian better than her father to whom she could confide everything. Gosaithantha was her friend. The child’s mother said, “He was Baby’s friend. She has none to talk to now” (189).
Kamala remembers her father never spared time to talk to her, “My father never got time to talk to the children. If he asked me once or so in a week how my studies was I used to consider it to be an expression of love that gave me satisfaction ... I grew up like a waste tree not wanted by anyone” (Neermathala 162). Baby’s father “rarely spoke to her. He talked only about her school and her studies” (32). The characters who figure in the story and the events that happen in it are virtually those that Kamala recounts in her English autobiography My Story. However there are slight variations for instance, the cook and the maid are not the man and wife in the Malayalam story.

“Red Dress – 1946” which Alice wrote during her life in Victoria, like Kamala’s “Pathimoonu Vayasa Makal” (“Thirteen-year-old daughter”) in Sampoornam stems from memories of the special costume they wore with pride and pleasure (Ross 61). Alice remembers the details of the dress her mother had made for her to wear at the high school Christmas Dance function. One could see the Alice-like narrator leaving the safe “boundaries of childhood” and proudly exhibiting her grown up body in her new red dress (151). She recollects, “The dress was princess style, very tight in the midriff. I saw how my breasts, in their new stiff brassiere, jutted out surprisingly with mature authority, under the childish frills of the collar” (Dance 152).
Kamala in *Neermathala* remembers how the green poplin skirt her grandmother had bought her made her look like a pubescent girl in the eyes of her relations at Ambazhathel. She exhibited in her face the proud feeling that she had “grown up” (20). In Kamala’s “Pathimoonu Vayasaya Makal” ("Thirteen-year-old daughter") she recalls with slight variations how she played the part of a bricklayer to the disapproval of her patriarchal father and how she used to be teased by her mother on account of her dark skin. Kamala recounts this incident in her memoir *Neermathalam* (164). The memories filtered through this recollection in Kamala’s story are soaked with sadness as the girl in the house of her conservative parents had less space for the kind of friendships or freedom that the Alice protagonist could cultivate and corner in her relatively permissive surroundings. For example, at thirteen the Munrovian character says:

We did questionnaires in magazines, to find out whether we had personality and whether we would be popular. We read articles on how to make up our faces to accentuate our good points and how to carry on a conversation on the first date and what to do when a boy tried to go too far. (Dance, 149)

Alice, in her interviews has confessed to being autobiographical in stories like “Sunday Afternoon”, “Boys and Girls”, *Lives* and certain others stories (Osachoff 61). Kamala, due to cultural and familial compulsions has
been relatively reticent about the self-revelatory strand in her fictional creations. But any discerning reader familiar with her life in its different phases will hardly fail to see a correlation between memorable events which profoundly moved Kamala and similar incidents or situations in her short or long stories where she relives her life frankly airing her frustrations and finding fulfilment in her fictive realm. What Alice achieves with mastery through her first-person mode of narration is marvellously accomplished by Kamala in many of her third person narratives like the following story “Chekkerunna Pakshikal” (“Retreating Birds”) in Sampoornam where she goes down the memory lane to see her old flame and fictively find something of the joy which she in real life had to forgo because her “father had long before decided to sacrifice” her “at the altar of urban culture”, as the protagonist tells the man who had admired her.” (907).

It was just before sunset that Uma dropped in to see her childhood chum Unniraja. He was all alone in the house, his wife, children and grandchildren having gone to celebrate Onam in their ancestral house. Unniraja was pleasantly surprised to see his old friend get down from her car and walk towards him. It was thirty long years since he had seen her last. She had changed a lot. Uma had turned like the “waning crescent moon.” Unniraja wondered, “Where had her bewitching beauty gone? Was this thin pale woman once his beloved Umadevi?” She saw in him “a man with
greying hair and bristly hair on his unshaven face and dried sandal paste on
the forehead and a soiled sacred thread ...” (904). She said he had not
changed in the least. As he referred to her new way of addressing him, he saw
she had the same peal of laughter. He remembered how he had envied her
loud way of laughing.

The rich girl returning from the city to the country only in summer was
full of giggles. She had the feeling that God had created the world to make
her laugh. She used to break the silence of his house even on solemn
occasions. Unniraja used to feel alive only when she got back in summer.
“Silk dress, her lilting way of speaking words mixed with English, her
peals of laughter ... they added flavour to his life. His life turned into a wait
for her” (904).

She asked him if he was scared of his wife. She had come back this
time for a seven-day retreat at Guruvayoor. As she referred to it hers was the
smile of a disbeliever – the smile of a rationalist who ever questioned the
veracity of everything. He said to Uma, “I have read in the papers about your
disbelief in places of worship.” She answered, “I had no belief in cancer
either until its onset” (905). He felt at that moment her very laugh was hurting
him. The information of her disease through tears would not have tormented
his heart so much. He offered to hold a special pooja for her longevity. Her
response was that death would also give her relief of some sought.
The place of her childhood friend was resonant with memories of her rustic life. The sight of the first star caused Uma to slip back into her adolescence when she used to recite a sloka for forty-one days gazing at Jupiter for fulfilment of her desire. But it did not bear any fruit. He wanted to know what else she lacked as she had enough wealth and fame. He asked her whether there was any other writer in Kerala who had won such laurels. He was surprised at her remembrance and recitation of slokas and hymns which she had picked up as a girl. She would recite them without knowing its meaning in those days and her life like them became a monotony whose meaning she could not know. She wanted to carry on the traditions of her community among which was the custom for girls to marry Brahmins with the sacred thread. Now she thought that the life style sanctioned by tradition would have satisfied her (906).

Unniraja could not bear to hear her out as he was a simple rustic who had grown up loving Uma beyond life. He was one who had “no courage to propose” to her (907). He sat down with her and, stroking his hair she said her father would not have given them consent for marriage since his plan was for her to be sophisticated in the city.

Margaret Gail Osachoff in “Treacheries of the Heart: Memoir, Confession and Meditation in the Stories of Alice Munro” has drawn distinction between stories which are confessions and those that are memoirs.
“In a confession, there is a sense of emotional urgency in the telling and a strong impression that the narrator is actually speaking to someone,” as in the parts of the story of Kamala cited above. There is in Umadevi an “inner necessity, and the narrator appeals for understanding, shares a burden with the listener, and perhaps wants absolution of guilt or reconciliation with the past” (64). Her guilt was that she had parted from her “soul’s foster mother” and that she had deviated from the culture carved out by tradition for her community. She had to unburden the fact that she “had no need for wealth or fame” (907). The guilt which prompts the protagonist to be confessional here is also her realisation that she had blighted the happiness of the simple, rustic Unniraja who had adored her.

“A memoir,” on the other hand, according to Osachoff, “is usually a story about childhood told by an adult who looks back on some memorable or traumatic event in the past. The point of view of a child or an adolescent is changed by the passage of time, and the changed person, the narrator is sometimes evident in the present” (63). Alice’s story, “Nettles” in her collection *Hateship* could be cited as an example where childhood, adolescence and even broken wedlock are remembered from the perspective of a divorcee. “As for the memoir – the narrator does not have guilt as a motivating force; she simply wants to tell a story about her past, and she does
not concern herself with the moral or artistic scruples that could arise if she were self-conscious about her use of autobiographical material” (64).

Here the unnamed protagonist is a writer like Alice who lived in Vancouver with her husband. Like the author she left him and returned to Toronto where she “met the man” that she “was involved with” (Hateship 171). Again like Alice she made up her mind to be a professional writer, “I was hoping to make my living as a writer” (170). She remarried like her soon after a brief spell as a divorcée. It was her second man she refers to at the start of the story. “I have driven around in the hills northeast of Toronto with my husband – my second husband, not the one I had left behind that summer —…” (156). The persona’s father, again like Alice’s father was a silver fox farmer, “Our well was a deeper hole than most, but we needed a good supply of water for our penned animals – my father raised silver foxes and mink …” (157). Even her father’s “hired man” reappears here and one sees again the horses shot and killed and cut up for feeding penned animals that she refers to in Dance (111). She remembers visiting her close friend, Sunny, during her separation and meeting with Mike McCallum who happened to be a friend of Johnston, Sunny’s friend.

Mike was the narrator’s childhood friend during the years his father had undertaken a well digging project in her home town. She says “He lived in the town close by our farm but he did not have a house there … he would stay
until he finished up whatever work he found to do in this part of the country”. He was younger than the narrator’s father but his son was one year or two months older than her. The reader is told “He was nine and she was eight” (157). She recalls her friendship with Mike and their walks, talks and games together exactly like those of Del Jordan and Naomi in Alice’s second collection of stories which is avowedly autobiographical. She and Mike were not “like brother and sister” as her mother preferred to term their relationship in response to the risqué remark of the hired man, nor were they “like the wives and husbands … who lived in such separate worlds that they seemed barely to recognize one another”. She says, “We were like sturdy and accustomed sweet hearts whose bond needs not much outward expression” (165). But they “did not go in for any showings and rubbings and guilty intimacies – there was none of that bothered search for hiding places, none of the twiddling pleasure and frustration and immediate, raw shame.” But she remembers how “Such scenes had taken place for me with a boy cousin and with a couple of slightly older girls, sisters, who went to my school” (164). Their friendship in childhood was platonic like the one between Uma and her boyfriend. But their friendship was suddenly frustrated because Mike and his father left the town when his digging job was over. The pain of separation from her childhood friend is not here transmuted directly as in Kamala’s story
but objectified through the passage across the bush of nettles which serve as a kind of objective correlative in the Eliotian sense.

Kamala Das’ autobiographical fiction created in Indian-English and Keralite circles the cult for fictional confessions of concealed thoughts, feelings and experiences. M. Rajiv Kumar quotes Kamala as saying “I have written only what I experienced. I have no courage to go beyond it. I have not acquired the courage to write of others’ experience” (21). Munro too very often writes what has been categorized as highly autobiographical fiction, depending on the honesty of her own experience and social observation to shape and define her female characters (Rasporich 13). She adds, “I think there are writers who create out of their imaginations but I am not one of them (23). In the female phase says Ruth Robbins, “… women’s writing eschews the ‘dependency’ on male models implied by imitation and protest and turns unapologetically instead to female experience for its raw material” (507). The Canadian and Keralite writers here thus have evoked the world of their childhood from similar perspectives and have given their readers peeps into their inner most secrets. Their recollections of childhood are replete with resonant images of what they longed for and missed out in life.

**Wedlock and Wifehood**

The woman as writer figures prominent in some of the stories of Alice and Kamala. Elaine Showalter, as Ruth Robbins points out, “coined the term
gynocritics to describe this focus” (505). The female protagonists here are highlighted not only as authorial voices but also as the producers of textual meaning, as feminist fiction frequently fashions them. The texts here are subjective in that they explore their central characters’ changing perceptions of their predicaments. Subjective experiences are seen to be objectified, transmuted and transferred to fictional feminist figures. There is in the process renunciation of male-ordained familial values. One could see the Canadian and the Indian writers here as confessional fictionists who appropriate existing fictional framework to fashion women-centred narratives where the reader hardly demarcates the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

Most of the stories of Alice and Kamala reveal the aspects of woman’s life that have been ignored or demeaned in the majority of traditional male-authored texts. The dominant theme in them is the troubled relationships of couples who are fundamentally mismatched. Cultural differences surface in their treatment of marital disharmony. As the Canadian couples emotionally break up and are unable to pass through the squalls of conflict that inevitably recur, the Western writer does not have them go to the root of their conflict for resolution but steers them to physical separation. The relatively permissive social system does not stigmatize divorce which is seen to be the only escape from a marriage of misery. Both the writers seem to have known from
experience that marriage is a cage of captivity. Kamala, unlike her Canadian counterpart did not smash it and come out to seek a different cage as society, friends and folks would not approve of it. But through her female narrators the reader is given a detailed but disguised depiction of the distress that she passed through as “the victim of a young man’s carnal hunger”, to quote the words of the author in My Story (85). It would mar or madden a sensitive woman’s mind as in her story called “Chithabhramom” (“Madness”) in Sampooranam, which is the story of a woman named Aruna. Her friend Vimala visits her when she hears of her return from Delhi and of her illness. Aruna receives her with a warm hug and narrates to her the tale of how her husband hates her and how she is treated as a dangerously insane woman. She is denied even the consolation of seeing her child but when Vimala asks her why she suffers these humiliations instead of going back to her father she says in a crazily ironic fashion that she cannot do that, “how handsome he is! The sight of him lying there would take out of memory all miseries. No, I will never part from him. Don’t you understand, Vimala?” (534).

Kamala’s conception of a healthy conjugal life is concretized in the story “Maahimile Veedu” (“The House at Maahim”) of the same collection where the lonely plight of a young and sensitive woman is pictured:

marriage is not just the invitation card printed and send out by guardians, or the circumambulatory walk round the lamb and the
bushel of paddy or just the memory of a kiss. It is a state of 

mind: the harmony between two persons, the love and trust 

between them. (101)

It is to contextualize her own woes of wedlock that Alice Munro authored Who. It offers a reading that addresses the essential question of 

selfhood and identity which is posed aggressively in the title of the book. The 

failure of the writer’s marriage gets poignantly portrayed in “The Beggar 

Maid”. Disillusionment in Rose’s marriage with Patrick derives its roots from 

Alice’s disenchantment with James Armstrong. Alice’s marriage broken up in 

1972 and she got the job of a teacher at a summer school in British Columbia 

and got a little relief from economic distress. In 1974 she became a writer-in- 

residence at the University of Western Ontario. There she met again her 

former friend, Gerald Fremlin, a government geographer, editor of National 

Atlas whom she married later in 1976 after a brief affair with another man as 

Rose does after separating from Patrick.

The book of linked stories with Rose functioning as a speculum gives 

the reader a closer peep into the author’s private life as a student, wife, 

mother, mistress, divorcee. “The Beggar Maid” here has a scene where Rose, 

staying with Dr. Henshawe, sees in one of the plays of Yeats’ how “a young 

bride is lured away by the fairies” from her obviously “unbearable marriage” 

with the words, “Come away, oh, human child ....” One sees how Rose read
these words “and her eyes filled up with tears for herself, as if she was that shy elusive virgin too fine for the bewildered peasants who have entrapped her” (80).

Rose gets a part-time job in the library of the college as the Head Librarian is personally known to Dr. Henshawe. One afternoon the library is empty of students as they all have gone to watch a football game. She, as usual, works in the stacks. At the bottom of the stacks somebody “grabbed her bare leg, between her sock and her skirt”. As she looks for the culprit she happens to see the timid and serious-looking Patrick who turns her “into a damsel in distress” with his ironically chivalrous notions (72). Thereafter he greets her with a flush which she finds out to be a sign of his love for her. Patrick Blatchford is infatuated with Rose. He anxiously waits to see her after classes. He does not want her to be friends with a girl like Nancy Falls who mispronounces words. Although unable to defend her friend to Patrick, she is fond of Nancy with whom she goes out, sells blood, eats sundaes and buys things.

Patrick is a tall, thin, fair and good-looking graduate student of twenty-four years. He plans to be a history professor. There is something “edgy, jumpy, disconcerting about him” (65). He could never keep his calm when she is around. In the eyes of Dr. Henshawe he is “a male, doomed to push and blunder”. Rose does not like her laughing at her lover or saying “he is after
the wrong girl”. Rose sizes him up as “the most vulnerable person” as well as the most conceited one (66). Patrick’s snobbishness begins to be seen when Billy Pope, a cousin of Flo, gets mentioned here as one whom Patrick would not approve of as he works at a butcher’s shop and has naïve notions.

Patrick is desirous of visiting Rose’s house as it is only fifty miles away and of getting to know her family. The patronising attitude of Patrick as a millionaire’s son during dinner and the scornful reaction of the rich man to the tales of the poor related by Flo are seen. Rose feels terribly let down as he says on their way back that she should be happy to get away from what Patrick terms “a dump”. Most people known to her including Dr. Henshawe consider Rose to be lucky as Patrick is the son of a wealthy businessman from British Columbia. But Rose tells her lover that they “come from two different worlds”. She plainly tells him, “My people are poor people. You would think the place I lived in was a dump”. His reply is, “I’m glad you’re poor. You’re so lovely. You’re like the Beggar Maid” (75).

One day she kisses him and he responds but does not measure up to her expectations. Patrick lives without luxuries in an apartment with two other graduate students. It is there that Rose and Patrick go in the absence of those students and “They undressed quickly and got into Patrick’s bed.” She was afraid “that they would not manage it, that there was a great humiliation in store, a great exposure of their poor deceits and stratagems”. She was happy
when it was all over and “She was not at all prepared for Patrick’s idea, which was to stay where they were and try again” (81). She had to give in and change her view of him as a funny and foolish man. All the same his image as a patronizing figure disturbs her. This is why she is seen to visit him one morning and break up her engagement with him just to spite him for his insolent comment on her family and home. Although she makes it up with him and marries him, theirs is seen to be a matrimony of misery which one sees drives her in the next story “Mischief” to stray into an extramarital intimacy with Clifford who considers this affair to be “only mischief” (122). “Providence” starts with a dream that Rose has about her child Anna. She has recollections of their life with Anna before parting from Patrick. There is a reference to her work and her preference to be closer to Calgary where Tom, her lover, teaches at the university. There is here the picture of the misery that ill-assorted couples pass through:

Even on her wedding day she had known this time would come, and that if it didn’t she might as well be dead. The betrayal was hers. “I know that,” said Patrick angrily. But of course it had been better, because she hadn’t started to try to make the break come, she had forgotten for long stretches that it would have to come. Even to say she had been planning to break, had started to break, was wrong, because she had done nothing deliberately,
nothing at all intelligently, it had happened as painfully and ruinously as possible with all sorts of shilly-shallying and reconciling and berating, and right now she felt as if she was walking a swinging bridge and could only keep her eyes on the slats ahead, never look down or around. (134)

The reactions of their child, Anna show what a broken match has on a child. Anna here wants to stay with friends at school and wishes her parents “a happy divorce!” (135). Marriage is here pictured as a “bloody fabric her parents had made, of mistakes and mismatches, that anybody could see torn up and thrown away ....” “What fraud” wondered Rose, “what fraud for everybody. We come from unions which don’t have in them anything like what we think we deserve” (134). Her independent existence in an apartment with Anna after parting from Patrick could be seen. One reads here, “For the first time in her life she understood domesticity, knew the meaning of shelter, and laboured to manage it”. When her friend, Dorothy asked her, “What made you want out of marriage?” (141). She remembered how she “had scars on her wrists and her body” and how in the kitchen of their house “Patrick had tried to choke her” and how once “she had run outside and knelt in her nightgown, tearing up handfuls of grass” (134). When Dorothy said how her marriage “bored the hell” out of her, Rose remarked, “It’s just a relief to hear
somebody say that. Instead of talking about how you didn’t communicate. Well, we didn’t communicate, either” (142).

It is precisely the lack of communication which underlies the main thematic strain of the stories of Kamala as well. One sees in her case the same process of transmuting painfully memorable personal experiences into fictional realities which her female protagonists from different walks of life confront in their thinly disguised forms. Like Alice’s Rose, Subhadra, the central subject in “Nashtepetta Neelambari” (“The Lost Neelambari”) in Sampoornam, moves from a predicament of alienation to a discovery of female identity after her journey through adolescence, wedlock and widowhood in the midst of male-defined values. Again like the Munrovian story Subhadra’s life gets pictured in the third person narration thus:

It was after thirty-three years that the eminent surgeon Dr. Subhadra Devi arrived in Madurai in search of something she had lost. If Subhadra had been asked what she had lost, she would not have been able to give a satisfactory answer to that question. (861)

She wondered whether she had got back looking for the painful experience she had passed through in that city. “Wasn’t it for the sweetness of that pain that she consoled her patients and hospital authorities with flimsy excuses and dared to undertake this car journey without even her chauffeur?” (861). Her
search is likened to a patient’s return to the hospital to look for an amputated part.

Dr. Subhadra gained a large practice and popularity with her patients in Calicut, but in her private life she had neither peace at home in her husband’s presence nor the pleasures of a parent as theirs was a childless union. What her husband throughout strove to do was to rid her mind of all the memories of her life in Madurai, for he “feared that she would never be his if those memories remained in her.” Her husband tried to remove “those memories out of her like moss out of a pond” (862).

She could never put out of her mind the deep and passionate impression that her young music master, Ramanujam Sastrikal, had left on her:

Even during her student days in Madras and her wedlock in Calicut the city of Madurai lingered in her memory like a dim dream. Those streets with different flowery and tulsi fragrance and fresh smells of textile shops, the cool shiny porticos of Meenakshi temple, the burning wicks of ‘tila homams’ and the strains of Neelaambari that her maestro used to recite at twilight dwelt in her like immortal things. (861-62)

In her fiction, as in Alice’s, characters change as do situations but essential experiences that shaped the personality of the writer could be discerned quite distinctively. Through Subhadra’s retrieval of adolescent
memories and her quest for her admired tutor Kamala recollects and recounts her juvenile infatuation with her “art-tutor” whose “tuition”, she says in My Story, “was discontinued” by her suspicious father on the pretext that she “needed all the time available to do well in the school-exams” (71). Here she refers to the twenty-nine year old “pale-complexion and tall” Bengalee tutor whose “earlobes” and his “serene mouth”, she says, she “watched with fascination.” Kamala writes, “Lying on my narrow bed at night all I could think of was his face and his earlobes. What a fool I had been to have resisted the temptation to kiss his mouth” (71). In her Malayalam memoir entitled Varshangalkku (Years) she recalls, “My father, who got back a bit early at dawn quietly looked at me for a moment who pretended to be a grown-up woman wearing a saree. Next he closely regarded the handsome youth too who taught me painting. My art lessons ceased from that day on” (199). It is the pain of this subjective experience which one sees developing in an objectified fashion in the story of Subhadra.

Subhadra’s tyrannical father, an ophthalmologist in Madurai, raised no objection when she wanted to go with her dear friend Gnanam and learn music at her uncle Ramanujam Sastrikal’s house. Her sudden change in food and dress surprised Subhadra’s parents. Her father had figured her music master out to be an oldish man. When he met him one day and saw how young and manly her master was, he suddenly put an end to her music lessons. Thus she
was torn away from her juvenile object of love and adoration and taken to Madras for her higher studies. There she graduated in medicine and shortly was married off to a rich and highly educated man that her father had selected for her. She had no protest then. Her music tutor had by then married his niece, Gnanam.

The lack of space that Subhadra silently endured in her father’s mansion and the space that she refused to take in her husband’s mind are brought out with suppressed female fury. She wondered whether she had failed “as a wife” and was “incomplete as a woman”. One is told that it was with a numbness experienced in a secret corner of her heart that she had met and mated with her man. The fact that her “husband could not arouse passion in her” could be put down to why they did not “communicate” as the Munrovian protagonist characterized it (862). Subhadra’s dedication to her profession and lack of emotional response to her man are strikingly autobiographical because in My Story Kamala writes,

It became obvious to me that my husband had wished to marry me only because of my social status and the possibility of financial gain. A coldness took hold of my heart then. I knew then that if love was what I had looked for in marriage I would have to look for it outside its legal orbit. I wanted to be given an identity that was lovable. (95)
In Subhadra one sees Kamala’s own figure in a different profession, for even in these words one could see through the disguise, “the wife who does not object to being fondled, is not willing either to fondle or to display love” (865). Her life with her man had begun really to decay, she feared. She “neither denied nor delighted in the open declarations of friends and acquaintances that they were an ideal couple”. Chandrasekhara Menon used to complain, “Subhadra, when you talk about Madurai you become a different person”. She would not as a rule refer to her music master often, “yet the shadow of the master-disciple relationship had fallen between her and her husband”. She vividly recalled again and again the scene of her master’s rescuing her from a drowning accident. He arrived when Gnanam shouted on seeing Subhadra sinking into water. As he swam “clasping her close to his chest, her body became a sea with swirling whirlpools.” She experienced then “at the bottom of her belly a feeling of suddenly coming down on a swing.” In retrospect she asked herself whether that was “the first attack of lust?”. How passionately she longed to have the feel again of that chest, with the sacred thread! The vermilion dot on his forehead bathed in sweat and the sacred bead worn on his neck haunted her in her dreams. “Even after marriage that vermilion dot did not disappear out of her mind or dreams” (862). One reads:
As she stood on her veranda running her fingers through her hair after a bath at dusk, she would remember Sastrikal’s recital of Neelaambari. When the sun in the distance burnt out like a funeral pyre, the brilliance of that maestro’s eyes flashed through her mind. (867)

After the pitiable illness and death of her husband she returned to Madurai with the intense desire to meet her long-cherished object of adoration. The scenes of the city had changed beyond recognition and so had her old classmate, Gnanam. She had lost her sanity in the midst of many privations. She was led to believe by Gnanam that the maestro had died of typhoid a year before. On her way to Meenakshi temple she thought of the loss of her power to dream. “How long she had yearned to hear him recite at least once Neelaambari … Neelaambari that had wafted up to elate the ears! Subhadra wiped her eyes. Why should she live hereafter? She lived in hope till then” (869).

Subhadra, dressed like a bride, prayed tearfully to the Goddess, Meenakshi. The figure of her old maestro appeared as if out of his grave. He spoke his lack of fortune in life and his penury with his insane and childless wife and his career still as a music master. He refused to go with her to her hotel as it would sully her name. He said, “Each of us has a responsibility. It’s fulfilment is the goal of life … No other way is destined for us in this
birth”. The story ends with her hearing “the waves of Neelaambari being suddenly wafted up from a building behind. At that very moment Subhadra saw in the sky the appearance of a bright crescent moon” (870).

In My Story Kamala refers to her father as an “autocrat” and quiet mother who considered children as mere puppets (91). She says, “They did not stop for a moment to think that we had personalities that were developing independently, like sturdy shoots of the banyan growing out of crevices in the walls of ancient fortresses,” (74). She compares her house to a “house of cards” that “was not a complete family” (81). She longed for a “tranquil relationship” from her “mate” and “had hoped that he would remove with one sweep of his benign arms the loneliness” of her life (84). But to her shock she wasn’t his first love. “He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maid servants in his house in Malabar” (84). All these incidents get reflected in her story “Lokam Oru Kavayithriye Nirmikkunnu” (“The World Fashions a Poetess”) of Sampoornam. This could be a deeply autobiographical story as the heroine is a poetess dissatisfied with her lot in life like its author. She was denied the joys of girlhood at home where she got little parental love and less social attention as she was forbidden to go out and mix with people of her age.

Years later she looks back and wonders whether there was love in that house – “A father who always gets angry, and a mother ever shedding tears; a
daughter giggling without reason – they had something more firm than love: it was their knowledge of sorrow” (177). Sorrow would permeate their home. In the midst of others all the three would make a pretense of love. She got married not because she had sweet dreams of it. But because she wanted to escape from this oppressively sorrowful ambience of her house.

The love which she offered to her husband wasn’t something new to him. “She was not his first love either. He used to mix with different women for pastime during holidays.” (178). He was devoid of love and didn’t care about its presence in her. Although suffused with sadness, they were always ready to laugh and be merry.

The rift between her and her husband was widened as days went by. He was quite an ordinary philanderer with a commonplace mind that could take in neither poetic nor intellectual stuff. His delight was in flirting with coquettes. His wife’s wit and beauty dazzled him and so he could hardly be at ease in her presence. It is written, “He hated her because her love reminded him of his past sins. Her innocence, purity and everything about her frightened him.” It was a quickly passing phase. Gradually she began to stray. She landed in love affairs with her eyes shut like a cat. It was for “love and caresses that she demeaned herself for these transient flirtations. She felt that she would nowhere get love that would last till death” (182). She knowingly deceived others and herself because it was only a world of make-
believe. But she found a counterpart in Bhaskaran. “They did all that was forbidden as if to wreck vengeance on life that deceived them” (183).

The poetess and her husband saw that their wedlock was in utter chaos but neither was prepared to restore order. The story ends on a sad note with the woman lying prone in tears hugging her silk pillow saying, “When I am gone, these knots will be left over. Clinging to this hair without shine will be faded jasmine flowers worn” (185).

Most of Kamala’s women are passionate individuals who feel suffocated within the framework of conventional moral codes. Their intelligence and sensitivity enable them to recognize the presence or absence of love in their marriage and to see outside the orbit of marriage the beauty of life and love and to seek it when they are denied the fullness of its joy. They do not as a rule walk out on their husbands unlike Alice’s heroines even when they find misery in marriage beyond their endurance. It is mainly because they are reluctant to go against tradition although they reject male-ordained moral injunctions.

Kamala Das in her story “The Flight” in the collection The Sandal narrates her own story with only thin disguises that could be seen through. The protagonist here is made out to be a sculptor who gets tired of “living in big cities” and decides to settle down in Kerala where she is able to give her husband “ayurvedic treatment” at the advice of his friends (131). In his forty-
third-year, he develops hypertension and becomes paralysed in the “right leg and right hand” (132). She rents an old quaint house by the sea where she resumes her sculpting work with a lovely rustic model, named Sridevi. The statues she fashions seem to come alive sucking the blood of the model, who at the end of each session lies down exhausted.

The sculptor is profusely praised now by her husband who is totally dependent on her even for his livelihood, but back in the cities where they lived she used to be a mere toy or just an object of sex for her man. He had no word of praise then. She dreaded the very prospect of satisfying his lust. When this oversexed man became sick and subservient to her, she felt a secret pleasure.

As days go by, the man obviously regains his health and begins to wonder whether his wife will dispense with the services of the model. One silent night, the protagonist happens to wake up and finds her husband missing. She lits up a torch and looks for him in every room. She finally spots him “making love to Sridevi in the moonlight on the corridor outside the kitchen.” Disgusted at the sight and dejected by her man’s betrayal she goes out of the house and infact flies from the “respectable prison of marital life” and walks along the beach thinking that her husband in the morning will conclude she “would have been washed away by the high tide” (136). The
sight of the sun rising in the east might symbolize the start of a new life for her as a liberated woman.

In her fictional autobiography My Story one sees Kamala’s “oversexed” “unfaithful” husband who is “obsessed with sex.” (127). Like the narrator of the story who offered sex as a “sacrifice” to satisfy her husband, Kamala too offers it as a “gift” to make her man happy (My Story 192). Kamala zigzagging through memories – some real, some fictionalized in an attempt towards coherence – of her unhappy childhood and frustrated wedlock, remembers her relations, teachers and friends.

Both Alice and Kamala have played different womanly roles and fulfilled or failed to fulfil wifely or maternal function or discarded them with painful consequences but what have survived their ups and downs in life is their exceptional ability to map the world they have passed through as a child, adolescent, wife and as a mother. The protagonist portrayed by either writer is an archetypal heroine who exists in every woman seeking liberation. Their fiction resonates with the dilemma of all those women who live suppressing their desires. In the writings of Alice and Kamala one could see the depiction of their private realms where they both voice their forbidden or frustrated longings through their central characters. What they think and feel often lie outside the province of patriarchal consciousness. In the stories discussed, the two authors examine how far the subjectivity of their women has been shaped
by patriarchal relations which determine female aspirations, self-worth, and patriarchal gender roles.

**Memories of Mothers’ and Grandmothers’**

Women’s memoirs are seen to map out a new world of female space. Alice and Kamala are writers who invest their female narrators with the power to create a dialectic between the present and the past for introspection in the present and for journeys into the past in search of their female self in the realms of their mothers’ or grandmothers’. They seek to suggest that their descent and distinctive kinship are to be reckoned through the female line. The creative impulse for both the authors comes from renewed contact with their lost mothers’ or grandmothers’. They recall and relive their younger days through some of the stories selected here where they are seen to go back and recapture the youthful images of their mothers and to relate tales of their descent on the female side. Their female protagonists or narratorial voices, one feels are alter egos of their authors. They disprove Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that “Women do not set themselves up as subject and hence have erected no virile myth in which their projects are reflected ...” and point out that they do not “dream through the dreams of men” (174). What Virginia Woolf says is found to be true, “We think back through our mothers if we are women” ([Room 82](#)). The woman writer today sees that only by assuming the role of a writer could she demolish the existing patriarchal power structure and
obtain a place of dignity in this male-fashioned milieu. By the very process of narrating her own story or tracing her female ancestry, the woman writer perforce breaks familial social conventions which constricts her space or inferiorizes her position in relation to man. The mapper of the female world is here seen to be “resisting or changing what is known about her”, as Linda Anderson terms it (59).

It is now a truism that a woman writer has the difficult task of resisting the conventional female role, already determined for her by her family and society. The role of a writer in a male-sponsored world has been difficult for a mother to play. Alice and Kamala have experienced the tension between the passive role of a conventional homemaker and the part played by an unconventional female writer. Rasporich, who has personally known Alice, says that Alice at forty “discovered that combining marriage, motherhood and authorship was close to impossible” (3). Kamala has said, “If I had not excellent servants to do the work around the house I would not have become a poet. A poet cannot write when there are momentary worries filling his head. Poetry is a full-time job” (qtd. in Nabar 13). In her chat with Rasporich, Alice talks of how she came to write about her mother and grandmother:

The idea of using experience came to me with “The Peace of Utrecht” which was after my mother’s death when I went home

... I went to my grandmother’s house and she showed me my
mother’s clothes. And then the story was shaped and I had to write it, and from that time on I had this new thing about writing ... had I not got to that point I would not have had enough power to work as a writer. (14)

In response to a question on her remembrance of her grandmother she recalls:

Very much as I describe her. I’ve used her (my father’s mother) an awful lot. She’s in “Winter Wind.” I’m very much like her physically ... I’m not really like my mother, although you might think so because she was frustrated. My grandmother was a handsome, energetic, intelligent woman who was entirely conforming, conforming with a vengeance .... (14)

In her autobiography, My Story Kamala writes of her mother:

She was mortally afraid of the dark stranger who had come forward to take her out of the village and its security. She was afraid of her father and afraid of her uncle, the two men who plotted and conspired to bring for the first time into the family a bridegroom who neither belonged to any royal family nor was a Brahmin. (4)

Like Kamala herself, her mother did not fall in love with her father, for she remembers how “They were dissimilar and horribly mismated. But my mother’s timidity helped to create an illusion of domestic harmony.” (5). In
her Malayalam memoir named *Neermathalam*, Kamala complains of getting little access to her mother, “My mother too was engrossed in writing and reading all the time. What I got from mother in response to my question was a counter question and a glance of perplexity” (53).

Kamala in her incarnation as Suraiya looks back on her being neglected by busy parents during childhood. She remembers the death of her grandma in whom she found the love which she failed to get from her mother. In an issue of *Malayala Manorama Weekly* she writes:

> What saddened me most was the death of my grandmother. How many years I wept inwardly. Sorrow brimmed inside like rain clouds. I had loved grandmother a hundred times more than my mother because she could express her love. She would tell me in bed stories hugging me close to her. (3)

She says that the wounds inflicted on her at school and home away in Calcutta would begin to heal only when she got back to her home town in Kerala and experienced the companionship and consolation of grandma (*Neermathalam* 274). In *A Childhood in Malabar* she writes, “Ammamma was the only person who caressed me. I had value and stature only in her eyes” (134). In another part of the book she reminisces, “I could not bear to think of a time when I would no longer love Ammamma. It was her love that nourished my
life. And yet there were so many occasions when I ignored her and spent time with my friends” (202).

In My Story what she felt about the departure of her granny brings out the duality in her personality – the urbanist and the ruralist:

She was orthodox and very puritanical. I did not wish ever to cause her unhappiness by my unconventional way of thinking.

So when I heard that she had died, a part of me rejoiced at my new-found freedom, while another felt only a deep desolation.

(113)

In sharp contrast to the temperament of her mother and grandmother was the feminist nature of her great grandmother who, Kamala remembers in A Childhood in Malabar as “a woman who longed to liberate herself from the shackles of marriage to free herself from the authority of a man” (50). In My Story Kamala writes, “At nineteen” she “suddenly became very frigid, and came away to Nalapat House carrying her little daughter with her, offering no explanation at all” (141). She terms her great grandmother a feminist and writes of her grandma in the former book “Ammamma was no feminist but she was extremely feminine” (51). Many years after the death of her great grandmother Kamala’s mother told her “abandoning her old grandmother lay like a weight on her conscience”. Remembering her plight Kamala comments, “The old are destined to be dumped like unwanted luggage, bits of
unfashionable junk, and left to perish.” (My Story 142). This painful memory must have provoked the writer to deal with filial ingratitude in one of the stories of her collection The Sandal whose title, “The Cruel Ring of Truth” is suggestive of the theme.

The kind of consolation or companionship that Kamala could derive from her grandma was denied to the young Alice; yet the presence of her dominating mother would loom large and memories of her grandmother and aunts would crowd in as she narrated some of the moving stories. In “The Ottawa Valley” of Something she writes:

The problem, the only problem, is my mother. And she is the one of course that I am trying to get; it is to reach her that this whole journey has been undertaken. With what purpose? To mark her off, to describe, to illumine, to celebrate, to get rid of, her; and it did not work, for she looms too close, just as she always did. She is heavy always, she weighs everything down, and yet she is indistinct, her edges melt and flow which means she has stuck to me as close as ever and refused to fall away, and I could go on, and on, applying what skills I have, using what tricks I know, and it would always be the same. (197)

Alice, in spite of her ambivalent attitude to her apparently progressive but traditional mother would confess to her interviewer, “I never doubted for a
minute that my way of seeing [the world] was important, and I really don’t know why that is. I think I got a lot of strength from my mother who also never doubted” (qtd. in Ross 36). Ross says that Alice used to be embarrassed by her mother’s “theatrical personality.” She quotes Alice who recalls that her mother used to come to the school and make her presence felt. I just died, even hearing her voice in the corridor I died. I got the message that she was so at variance with the community. I must have got this message partly through my father’s mother – my grandmother – and my aunt. And maybe my father, in some very subliminal way, I don’t know. We were all embarrassed by my mother, before she got sick. When she got sick, that put the cap on it. (36)

It is traditional in every family for the oldest daughter to stay at home and take care of her mother in such an eventuality; but like the narrator Helen, in “The Peace of Utrecht” she did not want to get “trapped” in the tedious task of looking after a terminally ill mother. But later she realized what an “enormously peculiar relationship” she had with her mother and “all its guilt” which tormented her after her death (Ross 38). She has told Eleanor Watchel “There is enormous guilt about doing that, but at the time you’re so busy
protecting yourself that you simply push it under, and then you suffer from it later on” (qtd. in Ross 40).

According to Ross it was to exorcise this feeling of guilt or the memory of neglecting her mother that she decided to fictionalise in her stories the figure of her mother. Ross says that successive stories from “The Peace of Utrecht” through “The Ottawa Valley”, “Winter Wind”, “Home”, to “Friend of my Youth”, recover an image of the mother that gets progressively younger .... As Alice the writer gets older, the mother in the stories goes from old age and paralysis to youth until, in “Friend of my Youth” a time is recovered from before her marriage when she is a hopeful young school teacher. (41)

In the first part of “The Peace of Utrecht” in Dance one sees Maddy and her sister, Helen the narrator, staying together for three weeks after a long interval. There is found to be a “desert” separating them in spite of their open protestations of the common things binding them. “at heart” they “reject each other” (190). The narrator remembers people stopping her on the street and telling her about her mother’s death what the weather was like and about the flowers set at her funeral and asking her why she did not come to attend it. She makes the blizzard an excuse for her absence. Really, Maddy did not
want her to come (195). In her ancestral home memories of her past life when her mother was there crowd in upon her:

Our Gothic Mother, with the cold appalling mask of the Shaking Palsy laid across her features, shuffling, weeping, devouring attending wherever she can get it, eyes dead and burning, fixed inward on herself; this is not all. For the disease is erratic and leisurely in its progress; some mornings (gradually growing fewer and fewer and farther apart) she wakes up better; she goes out to the yard and straightens up a plant in such a simple housewifely way; she says something calm and lucid to us; she listens – attentively to the news. She has wakened out of a bad dream; she tries to make up for lost time, tidying the house, forcing her stiff trembling hands to work a little while at the sewing machine. She makes us one of her specialities a banana cake or a lemon meringue pie. (200)

As her illness got worse and aggravated the situation she became a pathetic figure demanding attention, kindness and love from her children, but Helen remembers how their “resources of love” they “had were not enough, the demand on” them “was too great” (199).

In the second part one sees Helen, visiting Aunt Annie and Auntie Lou. The conversation here drifts to her mother. Auntie Lou does not want her
sister to broach the subject as she knows how sensitive one would be. However Aunt Annie takes the narrator upstairs to her room and shows her first her mother’s clothes that she carefully preserved, cleaning and mending them to be used again. She asked her if she could use any of those. But Helen refuses to have any of them giving her the impression of how affluent she then was. She narrated to Helen the tragic story of her mother being hospitalised for two months against her will. She visited her mother and saw her urgent need and eager desire to get out of hospital. The plight of the woman really became pathetic as she slipped out of the place and tried to run away. She was brought back and a board was nailed across her bed to keep her from getting out.

The striking pathos in the old aunt’s remark to Maddy could be seen here, “Don’t you ever think a person wants to die, just because it seems to everybody else they have got no reason to go on living” (207). Later when Helen asks Maddy not to feel guilty she cries, “I couldn’t go on .... I wanted my life” (210). She makes it clear that she preferred her share of life to her duty of taking care of the woman.

The narrator in “The Ottawa Valley” is reminded of her mother whenever she is in “department stores” or sees someone with “Parkinsons’s disease” or when she is in “Union Station” (182). She remembers their visit to Aunt Dodie’s place through Ottawa Valley. She and her sister go with their
mother on a train to Dodie’s place. There the narrator refers to her mother’s illness thus, “Just her left forearm trembled. The hand trembled more than the arm. The thumb knocked ceaselessly against the palm. She could hide it in her fingers, and she could hold the arm still by stiffening it against her body” (190). There is a description of the disease from the medical encyclopaedia of Fishbein according to which “No recoveries are recorded” (189). Aunt Dodie tells the narrator:

Your mother’s had a little stroke. She says not, but I’ve seen too many like her.

She’s had a little one, and she might have another little one, and another, and another. Then someday she might have the big one. You’ll have to learn to be the mother, then. (194)

The narrator asks her mother if she has had a stroke. Her mother denies Dodie’s assertion and observes, “She thinks she knows everything, Dodie does. She think she knows better than a doctor”. The narrator is relieved to be told that she would never have a stroke. So she thinks that she would never have to be “the mother and wash and wipe and feed her lying in bed, as Aunt Dodie had had to do with her mother”. The narrator remembers thinking that it was within her mother’s power to get sick or not to do so. And so she asks her, “Is your arm going to stop shaking” but her mother refuses to answer her question (195).
In “Winter Wind” (Something) the narrator remembers spending a night “as two or three times a winter” at her grandmother’s house in town. She remembers how tidy her grandmother and Aunt Madge used to keep their house and how smelly and untidy her own house was. There was in that house a photograph of the narrator’s “grandmother and Aunt Madge with their parent’s and this sister who had died, and another sister who had married a Catholic so that it seemed almost as bad as if she died, though peace was made later on” (155). She visualizes her grandmother in the photo as “a great tomboy, her mop of hair rolled up but sliding forward, in danger of falling down”. She is said to have worn her “outfit with no authority and indeed with a shamefaced, flushed, half-grinning and half-desperate apology”. At the time the photo was taken her grandmother was “the only one married; the oldest, also the tallest of the sisters” (156).

During supper grandmother asked after the narrator’s mother “who had a slowly progressive incurable disease”. The narrator’s “spirits dropped at the mention of her mother’s sickness. The narrator recalls her grandmother saying “I have a terrible time understanding her on the phone …. It just seems the worse her voice gets, the more she wants to talk” (156).

Her mother’s vocal cords were partly paralysed as a result of which the narrator remembers, “Sometimes I would have to act as her interpreter, a job that made me wild with shame.” Aunt Madge would take pity on her being
“lonely out there” but the grandmother felt, “It would not make any difference where she was ... if people cannot understand her” (156). Her grandmother would like to know what her household routine was. She would ask if the household chores got done because she wanted to be of help if they were not done on time. The narrator always felt embarrassed in getting her help. Besides she had to “reorganize” the whole place and yet “disastrously fell short of that ideal of order and cleanliness, household decency” which her grandmother expected them to keep up. So she tried to “ward off the visits” of the old lady with good reports of her mother and her housework, although her “grandmother perceived the effort, and registered the transparent falsity of this picture.” Her “grandmother,” she remembers, and “Aunt Madge believed, as most people do, that houses should be made to look as much as possible like other people’s houses” (157). When her grandmother heard about her mother’s painting the cupboards and drawers and doors she said with annoyance:

There ... she will get herself involved in something like that, which she ought to know will wear her out, and she will not be able to do any of the things that have to be done. She will be painting the cupboards when she would be better off getting your father’s dinner.” (158)
When the narrator wanted to get back to her house her grandmother wanted to know if she was worrying about the work in the house and if they could not get on without her. Referring to her displeasure, the narrator says:

I had never heard my grandmother lose control before. I had never imagined that she could. It seems strange to me now, but the fact is that I had never heard anything like plain hurt or anger in her voice, or seen it on her face. Everything had been indirect, calmly expressed. Her judgements had seemed remote, full of traditional authority, not personal. The abdication here was what amazed me. There were tears in her voice, and when I looked at her there were tears in her eyes and then pouring down her face. She was weeping, she was furious and weeping. (163)

The contrast between her grandmother and great aunt is next perceived by the reader as she remembers how Aunt Madge sympathized with her mother even before her illness as an afflicted person because she was different from other women. Unlike Aunt her “grandmother had schooled herself, watched herself, learned what to do and say; she had understood the importance of acceptance, …” (165). Now that the lady had become old and liable to be “deceived” or “placated” by people who were anxious to get away from her, she felt sad and annoyed. This was what the narrator saw her feel when she said she was going home.
The narrator’s mother in the second part of “Chaddeleys and Flemings” of Moons is a modern woman with a lot of tolerance and accommodation. She works for Poppy Cullenders, a dealer in antiques of whom the narrator says, “She was a businesswoman really, a trader and dealer. In her book Ross writes, “Alice’s mother should have become a great business woman. Alice speculates”:

She might have gone into some kind of antiques business. I would have had a classic mother-daughter conflict with her, because I would have despised all her values. We would have fought. But there wouldn’t have been this enormously peculiar relationship, with all its guilt. (38)

The queer sexual orientation of Poppy lands him in trouble when he makes advances to some baseball players on the Stratford train. The narrator’s mother loses her job when he gets jailed. She says, “Poor Poppy. There were always those that were out to get him. He was very smart, in his way. Some people can’t survive in a place like this” where sex is not “permitted”. She makes this comment years later after reading a news item about a college teacher quarrelling over a male companion. Her mother is the kind of woman who sees “life in terms of change and possibility” (24).

In the “Introduction” to Moons Alice says that “Some” of the stories “come from personal experience” among which she names “The Moons of
Jupiter” or “The Stone in the Field”. In the former story one sees certain aspects of her father’s personality while in the latter a peep into her mother’s individuality is given, although she adds that “the stories that are personal are carried inexorably away from the real” (XIV).

It is in the title story of Friend that the author vividly portrays the personality of her mother. It begins with the narrator saying, “I used to dream about my mother, and though the details in the dream varied, the surprise in it was always the same” (3). Alice’s fictional retrospection revives mixed feelings resulting in the multiple reconstructions of the mother’s story.

The unnamed narrator’s mother returns again and again reviving in her memories recollections of the story of the Grieves sisters at whose one-room school her mother used to teach before her marriage. The story of the Grieveses – Flora and Ellie – serves as a peg for the picture of the mother to hang on. The narrator remembers being told by her mother how these lonely ladies had become tragic figures with the arrival of a farmhand named Robert and how the situation was worsened when Audrey Atkinson, Ellie’s nurse, hastened her death and married Robert denying Flora her second chance to marry him.

The narrator recaptures youthful image of her mother in these words,

When my mother was a young woman with a soft, mischievous face and shiny, opaque silk stockings on her plump legs [I have
seen a photograph of her, with her pupils], she went to teach
at a one-room school, called Grieves School in the Ottawa
Valley. (4)

She often spoke in a “dogmatic mystified way” to the narrator about Ottawa
Valley where she had her home. She would emphasize its features in such a
way as to differentiate it from any other place on earth. The narrator, however
was disappointed when she finally went over to see the place because it had no
valley or any of the attractive features of a hilly region.

The narrator’s young mother “was a little daunted at the thought of
going to live in that black board house with its paralytic Sundays and coal-oil
lamps and primitive notions” of the Grieveses who belonged to a peculiar sect
called Reformed Presbyterian. It is through her mother’s feminine viewpoint
that the story of the Grieveses is first related, although the narrator constructs
her own version from her feminist angle. Her mother being traditional in her
outlook sympathized with the pious Flora, although the narrator derides and
dismisses her as a sexless creature spurning the joys of life. In comparison
with the Grieveses her mother’s “faith was easy, her spirits at that time robust.
Ideas were not what she was curious about, ever. “Nurse Atkinson,” the
narrator says “tried at first to cozy up to my mother, as if they would be
natural allies in this benighted place. She spoke as if they were around the
same age – both stylish, intelligent women who liked a good time and had
modern ideas” (13). She offers to teach her mother driving which appealed to her. But she decides to learn it after marriage. Mother could not fall in line with Atkinson's ideas on morality. It is written she disliked Nurse Atkinson much more than Flora does.

The narrator remembers how her mother was getting ready for her marriage in July and how she “bloomed in everybody’s attention, about to set out on the deliciously solemn adventure of marriage.” The narrator thus sees her in her youthful and healthy phase of life here but at the beginning and in the second half she sees her mother suffering from the paralysing Parkinson’s disease which in real life “held her in its grip for a decade or more before her death” (3).

In the story called “Venelinte Ozhivu” (“Summer Vacation”) of Sampoornam, one could identify the young Kamala with the girl named Ammu walking in a grove with her grandma near her house. Their conversation starts with Ammu’s question about a weak and withered jamba tree. As grandma talks about its fruit and how she used to eat it in her school going days, she remembers her classmates who are now dead and gone. On hearing she has no friend now she says, “I went to her put my arms around her waist” and asked her “Don’t you have me”. She replies, “Yes Ammu, I need only you Ammu” (281). She remembers the pond where grandma used to wash her dress and give her a bath. She would ask her if she would go to the
pond on her return to Calcutta after the vacation and if she had no fear. Then she learnt from her that her grandma was going to be sixty-nine and as an adult she had no fear. She asked her then, “When will your death come?” She was told, “Who knows it? God takes one away at his will.” She went on to say that no one else had lived to such an age as her and she wondered what experiences there were in store for her, a great sinner (282). She wiped her tears and blew her nose as she said this. The girl put her arms around the neck, and putting her face on her cheek, pleaded with her to say she would not die and swear so. With her eyes brimming with tears her grandma assured her she would not die (283).

The next scene one sees here is in her grandma’s house where some women drop in to see the lady. From their conversation the reader learns that Ammu’s mother is dead and she has not known the love of a mother. Kamala’s lack of attachment to her mother whose presence she hardly felt emotionally as a child gets psychologically transferred here in terms of a motherless daughter.

Next the grandma is seen sitting on the veranda of the first floor and reading Ramayana with a pair of broken spectacles. Her granddaughter lies near her looking at the silvery sky. Interrupting her reading the girl asks her, “Will you feel sad when I go away?” When told that she will not miss her because she will get back the next year, she wants to know if her grandma
“won’t be dead” (286). The grandma says that she will live on until Ammu is married and has children. The girl is seen wondering who she will marry. With such curiosity the girl dozes off and when she wakes she is all alone and thinks her grandma is dead.

The next memorable part of the story is the girl’s return to Calcutta from her grandma’s house. Here the narrator vividly remembers with nostalgia her being taken to Trichur to be seen off at the railway station. How majestically the lady walks to the lounge holding her hand and sits there in a deck-chair and asks her steward Shankunni Nair to get Ammu a good book to read. The grandma’s remark that Ammu “will grow up a bit more next year” when she comes to see her makes her inquisitive to know if her grandma will grow with her. Grandma’s words that she will only shrink and get more and more shrivelled remind the girl of the weak and withered jamba tree. She wonders if it will bear fruit again and wants to eat its fruit next time when she comes to vacation with her grandma. On the train the girl asks her father if her grandmother will be alive the following year and the story ends with the father assuring her on his lap that his “daughter’s grandma will never, never die” (290).

“Sikhsha” (“Punishment”) in the collection Sampoornam is a strikingly autobiographical story authored by Kamala where the grandmother-granddaughter kinship is founded on the fond remembrance of the emotional
ties binding the young Kamala and her Ammamma at Nalapat house. Marriage is seen by the fifteen-year old bride here as a penalization of her failure in her examinations. Kamala also got married at fifteen against her will (My Story 81). The bride here gets out of her bridal bed at midnight and lies down with her grandmother in spite of the latter’s remonstrances. When her grandmother woke up for a drink of water, she was surprised to see her granddaughter lying beside her. She did not have the heart either to wake her or to ask her to go back to her groom; but on second thoughts she gently stroking her head, called to her “Ammu.” Her tear-stained eyes, when they opened, hurt the grandma’s heart. She asked her granddaughter to go back to her groom as he would misconstrue her action. The young bride asked her back, “Didn’t I spent half the night there? Don’t I have to sleep after this? Can’t one go to sleep after marriage?” Ammu kept saying they would not have married her off if she had passed her exam. When granny saw her slim body as she undressed, she sympathized with the little bride; yet she once again told her that her groom would be waiting for her. Sitting on her grandma’s bed, Ammu covered her face with her hands murmuring, “I could have done my lessons with greater concentration” (528). Kamala refers to her marriage at the age of fifteen and her failure to do her lessons to avoid punishment through marriage in her memoir Varshangalkku (Years) (138) and another book of recollections Ente Paathakal (My Paths 8).
In the story “Oru Divasom Raavile” ("One Morning") of Sampoornam, grandma figures more prominent. The story starts thus, “Grandma woke up that day before the crow cawed.” She would usually get up, say her prayers and go out to clean her teeth. It was there that she remembered the arrival of her granddaughter from Bombay, the previous day. She then thought of how stubborn her daughter had “turned out to be. She would talk back and argue without any reason. Finally I would surrender ... An argument has been on since the letter came last week of Ammu’s coming.” (59). The clash between tradition and modernity is seen to be the root cause of the conflict between grandma and Ammu’s widowed mother here. The housemaid is said to be kinder to her than her daughter. She wants to get Ammu a chain but, “where is the money to be raised?” (60). Her daughter could only raise objections. Grandma would not blame her as she is a widow with little property.

When her daughter comes from the pond after her bath, she thinks of how old age has deprived her of her bath in the pond. Daughter could not understand the discomfort of her bathing in the house assisted by the maid.

The cool voice of Ammu that she hears delights her. She is pleased to see that few changes have come over her even after her life with her westernized husband. The grandma remembers that tears came to her eyes when Ammu shed tears on being parted away from her family after marriage (61). Granny told her husband that she was a very innocent and
sensitive girl. Thinking all about these things the grandma takes too long to clean her teeth. These days “memories pass through her mind even during prayers – memories of things long forgotten. It is as if those things come into view again” (62). Ammu notices her meditative silence and offers to make her coffee.

Inhaling the aroma of Ammu’s steaming coffee she grows oblivious of all her painful present and experiences the transience of peace. Kamala writes here, “Peace is like a refreshingly fragrant smell” (62).

“Prabhatham” (“Dawn”) of Sampoornam, is a story which according to P.P. Ravindran’s interview with the author has autobiographical overtones (155). Here the little Kamala is seen to be a motherless child sheltered by the care and love of her grandma. There are references to her getting educated in Calcutta where her father lives (335). Her lack of emotional proximity to mother is brought out through a dream in which the girl is mercilessly beaten with a stick by her mother. Her stay with her grandma is prolonged due to an attack on pleurisy.

In “Mappu” (“Forgiveness”) the Kamala like narrator says, “Grandma really loved us. More than everything else she loved that house” (587). She would ask her grandchildren “Will you renovate this house when you grow up? Will you spend your money on this house? Tell me – is there anything to be valued above one’s ancestral house? It constitutes one’s life itself.” (587).
Kamala Suraiya in her autobiographic sketches refers to her grandma’s telling her to repair it (*The Path of the Columnist* 187). Memorably the author recaptures here the occasion of its kitchen being gutted. The veracity of this event is borne out by the author’s reference to it in *Balyakala* (*Childhood* 58). Another incident transferred from reality to fiction is what Kamala in *My Story* refers to as “The servant’s privy ... haunted by the ghost of a pregnant girl who had committed suicide by hanging herself from its ceiling”. Finally, the narrator recalls the day when her grandma was wrapped up in a new cloth and consigned to the flames (588). She begs of her forgiveness for not keeping her word to renovate the house that grandma valued more than anything else.

Both these writers’ protagonists seek to articulate an identity which is free from patriarchal colonisation. They could be seen to laugh to derision most patriarchal assumptions that inferiorize women as the weaker sex. Munro says, “I think there are some things that men have for centuries required in women which is the very opposite of what the female artist has to do” (Rasporich 21). Kamala too points out, “Writing is a means to realise her own self” (qtd. in *Sampoornam*, “Introduction” 23). The memories here connect their subjective experiences to the objective realities of familial life where women in the process of mothering suffer a cultural loss but gain a new creative vision. Chris Weedon says, “In experience-based theories of the
subject a woman’s self is formed by her observation of and practical engagement with the world” (112). Renuka Rajarathnam in a write-up titled “Mothering Heights” asks, “Is not motherhood an experience that brings one closer to one’s own self-recognition and awareness, which in turn enhances creativity?” (1) Female subjectivity is thus shown to exist in the face of patriarchal contentions which challenge the very concept of female subjectivity. Women who are denigrated by Freud with the possession of what he calls “penis envy” are today so empowered as to turn back and retort that men envy women their ability to bear babies. This is what they term “womb envy” (On Sexuality 340, Minsky, 203).

The myth of objectivity in literary creations is exploded by feminists with their confessions or memoirs. Writing memoir is a journey of self-exploration. This process of exploring the ups and downs of life enables one to distil experiences into an essence which serves as a balm for a traumatized psyche. As they progress they discover that one cannot isolate the female experience. What men are and how they treat women is part of it. So they are at the centre of whatever they write.

Woman does not exist in man’s world as an entity of any worth. She is marginalized with no choice or voice. She moves to the centre the moment she acquires consciousness of individuality and asserts her identity. She realizes how she is not treated as a subject and allowed to follow the dictates
of her own mind. She acquires subjectivity only when she breaks her silence, speaks, reacts, asserts or denies as an individual. When she begins her quest for identity, she bids farewell to the trammels of tradition and the tyranny of the culture that has conditioned her subjugation as the heroine of Alice’s Rose, or Kamala’s woman in “The Lost Neelambari” does when she sets out to recover her real self.