I always realized that I had a different view of the world, and one that would bring me into great trouble and ridicule if it were exposed.

(Munro, Gibson interview 246)

My unusual way of life I used to hide from others.

(Neermathalam 268)

“Morality” according to the third definition in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary in its sixth edition is “a system of moral principles followed by a particular group of people.” Havelock Ellis in Studies in the Psychology of Sex differentiates between “theoretical morality” and “practical morality”, and goes on to examine the former pointing out morality in its “traditional” form and its “ideal” form (370). One here recalls how the American psychologist, Lawrence Kohlberg “hypothesized that people’s development of moral standards passes through several levels.” At the early preconventional level, the child uses “pleasure or pain” as the main source for moral decisions. Its standards are obviously based on what will avoid punishment. At the intermediate or conventional level of moral reasoning, the
adolescent regards morality as a way of obtaining or maintaining the approval of authority and acts in accordance with its dictates. At the third level of post conventional moral reasoning the “adult bases his moral standards on principles that he himself has evaluated and accepts as inherently valid, regardless of society’s opinion.” (“Moral Psychology”). Although Kohlberg is denounced by feminists as a sexist, they could accept his theory of moral maturity at the “third level” when social sanction is ignored and one accepts as valid only those principles which one considers to be ethical. It is this kind of context that could have prompted Virginia Woolf to point out in *A Room of One’s Own* how “the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex …” (80).

What feminist fictionists in the West as well as in the decolonized countries of the East seek to get across is the necessity for women to reappropriate their enslaved bodies from patriarchal forms of oppression and rediscover their values and revalorize them outside the framework of male notions and moral standards. So one is not surprised to see the tension between the solipsistic attempts of the two writers, Alice and Kamala, to allow their female selves to find fulfilment in their experiences and the conventions of their male-ordained communities which seek to define the parameters with which women are supposed to live, move and have their familial or social functions. The feminist critic could discern with delight the subversive
elements in the framework of their fiction which bring into focus their revolt against the norms and values which their socio-cultural settings impose on them.

The Canadian and the Keralite writers’ perceptions of morality projected through the practices of their female protagonists persistently clash with patriarchal or religious codes which have throughout functioned as a kind of “Lakshmanrekha” beyond which a woman would stray at one’s own peril. Morality, when viewed from the patriarchal angle consists in the practice of conventional virtues, righteousness or dharma in thought, word or deed and in the avoidance of what, Christians for instance, would call cardinal sins. Standards of morality or principles of right and wrong, good and bad behaviour are seen to vary from age to age or even religion to religion, or even from one religious sect to another sect within the same religion. In Alice’s “Friend of My Youth” what, for example, the Cameroonian Christians represented by the Grieveses consider to be morally right would be absolutely abominable to devout Christians like the narrator’s mother and quite detestable to the younger generation represented by the narrator. What Kamala’s relations treat as morally objectionable could be perfectly acceptable to her, which her stories like “Nakna Sharirangal” (“Naked Bodies”) bear out. What these writers consider to be transgressions of morality from the feminist’s point of view are not violations of patriarchal or religious codes of
conduct but male callousness or cruelty to women or exploitation of marginalized segments of society with a view to promoting their own pursuit of pleasures or personal welfare.

Straying out of a loveless wedlock into what patriarchs term “illicit sex” or a woman’s walking out on her husband when marriage turns out to be a “living hell” or a “cosmic disaster” does not constitute immorality as in the case of Munro’s protagonists in “Postcard” and “Prue” in Dance and Moons (139, 151) or Kamala’s fugitive heroines from marital cages in “The Flight” and “Chathi” (“Deception”). Their morality has much to do with the free flowering of one’s personality or individuality. It has to do a lot with meeting the demands of the body along with the fulfilment of one’s deeply felt emotional or intellectual aspirations. Alice and Kamala seek to revolutionize male attitude towards morality where marriage and chastity are concerned. The Tamil dictum that one’s husband is an object of reverence even if he is a “piece of stone or a blade of grass”, which makes up the quintessence of male-moulded morality is detested, disowned and denounced by the two authors and their fictional alter egos in whom one hears the authorial sound of voice.

**Patriarchal Morality**

What Bertrand Russell considers to be “the discovery of fatherhood” in the course of human history “led to the subjection of woman as the only means of securing their virtue – a subjection first physical and then mental,
which reached its height in the Victorian age” in the West while the patriarchs counterblast in the East could be read in Manu Smriti. “Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is never fit for independence” (Marriage and Morals 24) (Manu 9:3).

In a write-up the Tamil writer and journalist Vaasanthi says, “With the inevitable fall of matriarchy, the woman became the receiver, revolving round the giver, the purusha. It manifested in various forms corrupting the image of the woman, who was hitherto the epicentre of energy.” Commenting on Mahabharata as a striking example that reflects the inferiorization of woman, she asks, “What other proof do we need than the disrobing of Draupadi, in the King’s court, and the silence of the elders and the shameful impotence of her five husbands?” (3)

A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory has it that “Literally, ‘patriarchy’ means ‘rule of the father’ ”. In feminist parlance the term is used to signify the kind of society where male dominance prevails privileging male descendants and where women are on the receiving end of discriminatory practices. In short, patriarchy is the sort of social system in which all institutions, the dictionary goes on to say, “centralize, standardize and normalize male subjectivity and points of view while casting woman as the
objectified ‘other’. It is this male dominance that feminists seek to do away with.

Alice and Kamala are writers who are out to retrieve the power of woman that patriarchy has throughout sought to put down. Alice in “A Trip to the Coast” of Dance really resents the restrictions imposed on May as a girl by her strait-laced and traditional grandmother who is subjugated by male-fashioned values. She does not allow May to go swimming with her friend and cousin because it is a place for boys and so the girls like her will be chased by them. Their dialogue runs thus:

“Why can’t I” she said again. “Grandma, why can’t I?”

“You know why.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s where all the boys go. I told you before. You’re getting too big for that.” (182)

The narrator in “Boys and Girls” of the same collection is made to realize, “A girl was not, as I had supposed, simply what I was; it was what I had to become. It was a definition, always touched with emphasis, with reproach and disappointment” (119). Her grandmother tells her how girls are expected to behave, “Girls don’t slam doors like that.” “Girls keep their knees together when they sit down.” She is not allowed to ask questions because her grandmother says, “That’s none of girls’ business.” (119). Outside the family
too the patriarchal structure puts up barriers between the sexes for the narrator in “Day of the Butterfly,” another story in the collection, says “at our school there were the two sides, the Boys’ Side and the Girls’ Side, and it was believed that if you so much as stepped on the side that was not your own you might easily get the strap” (101).

In Kamala’s story, “Nashtappetta Neelambari’ (The Lost Neelambari) in Sampoornam one sees how tyrannical the protagonist’s father is. He raises no objection when the adolescent Subhadra wants to go with her dear friend Gnanam and learn music at her uncle Ramanujam Sastrikal’s house because he figures him to be an oldish man. However, when the domineering man sees how young and manly his daughter’s master is, he suddenly puts an end to her music lessons (863). Consequently she is torn away from her memorable maestro whose image continues to haunt her ever afterwards. She is packed off to Madras for her medical studies after which her father in his dictatorial fashion picks out a life partner for her who marries but mars her harmony in life.

Kamala in both her memoirs and stories obliquely or explicitly exposes the true face of the patriarch hidden behind his mask of morality and the double moral standards practiced by him. She unmasks the libertine in her own fiancé thus:
Whenever he found me alone in a room, he began to plead with me to bare my breasts and if I did not, he turned brutal and crude. His hands bruised my body and left blue and red marks on the skin. He told me of the sexual exploits he had shared with some of the maidservants in his house in Malabar. (My Story 84)

This paradigm of morality is portrayed in stories like “Nunakal” (“Lies”) in Sampooranam which tells of a man’s secret affair with a woman in the neighbourhood during the absence of his wife. His little son happens to see the woman sitting in his father’s lap. The woman notices the boy staring at them from the staircase. The woman alerts him whereupon he takes the boy to his bed. The boy asks him again and again why Stella has not gone back to her house. The man lies that she will get back before dusk. But the boy knows it to be untrue as he sees that it is already night. One sees how the father hurries back to the woman who provides him with extramarital ecstasy. How innocently the boy blurts out the secret when his mother returns and how the father frightens him into silence are adroitly sketched. Elizabeth P. Kurien commenting on this story says:

Thus the little boy … is totally confused when his father reprimands him for speaking the truth. The child’s confusion reaches its peak when his mother advises him not to tell lies and
to grow up to be like his father. In consternation, the child takes refuge in his own imaginative world. He realizes that the adult world with all its hypocrisy and untruth is a troublesome place for the sensitive child. (15)

The first story entitled “Royal Beatings” in Alice’s Who begins with Flo’s threat to get her step daughter, Rose, a “Royal Beating” for what Flo considers to be “her back-talk and impudence and her terrible tongue” (14). Rose wonders what it is like and pictures to herself a royal assembly with a culprit being punished. She calls Rose’s father to punish her and the scene of his beating her with his belt and using on her all the violence in his power which signifies the kind of male tyranny that feminists term phallocentric. One reads here how “He gives her a look. This look is at first cold and challenging. It informs her of his judgement, of the hopelessness of her position” (15). One here does not see his eyes filling with anger, “No. Hatred is right. Pleasure is right” (16). He loosens his belt in cold blood and takes it off, and grasping it at the necessary point, he begins to use his power on his powerless victim:

At the first, or may be the second crack of pain, she draws back. She will not accept it. She runs around the room, she tries to get to the doors. Her father blocks her off. Not an ounce of courage or of stoicism in her, it would seem. She runs, she screams, she
implores. Her father is after her, cracking the belt at her when he can, then abandoning it and using his hands. Bang over the ear, then bang over the other ear. Back and forth, her head ringing. Bang in the face. Up-against the wall and bang in the face again. She shakes her and hits her against the wall, he kicks her legs. She is incoherent, insane, shrieking. (17)

The patriarch is seen to practice the same kind of violence in different forms on the woman he marries when she fails to pursue the path prepared for her in accordance with his position as her protector and provider. The same tyrant could be seen in the husband of Queenie, a music master in the story called after her in Alice’s tenth collection entitled Hateship. The reader here learns about the party given by Queenie and her man. Their neighbours the Greeks and the students of Mr. Vorguilla were the guests. They had a nice time eating, drinking and dancing. They ate up everything except the cake that Queenie had worked so hard to make. The next day she does not find the cake. She does not remember what she has done with it. Mr. Vorguilla says she must have given it to Andrew, his student, whose special attention to her arouses his jealousy. Her mind was blank about the whole thing. She denies she was drunk and says it was her husband who had got drunk. When she tells him that there is little logic behind his assertion, “Then he came close to her again in such a calm, half-smiling way that she thought for a moment he was
going to kiss her. Instead he closed his hands around her throat and just for a second cut off her breath” asking her whether she would dare to teach him “logic”. This is said to be “the beginning of Queenie’s long, miserable struggle” (261).

What Queenie’s man here threatens to do is done in Kamala’s story “Rohini” of Sampoornam with the help of a contract killer. It is the story of a couple who have been without a child for twenty years. Hindu couples consider childlessness to be a terrible misfortune or rather a curse. The man’s mother would refer to it in her talk to every visitor and say “how they worshipped at Guruvayoor, Palani and other temples to be freed of the curses in the previous birth.” (619). Once when she talked of it to a drunken writer, he asked whether she had approached a man apart from Gods. But the writer was shown the door. Finally they go to Kanyakumari to worship the deity there. There are references to Rohini’s fat husband whose main concern in life appears to be with his food and his habit of going to sleep with ease. She has all that she had wished for in life – a large house, a retinue of servants, gem-studded jewels, air-conditioned bedroom, the best cook in the country. But in the midst of all these comforts she has an annoying mother-in-law and a husband who could not provide her with warmth in bed. There are times when she has to pray for widowhood, although she reproaches herself. He is the kind of man who has made certain “prejudgements about women”. So he
finds satisfaction with her when she lies “like a sculpted statue under his perspiring body” (621). He visits harlots in small towns for sexual demonstrations. Rohini, is presented as a woman from a less privileged family and her husband is affluent but is seen to be unimaginative and insensitive.

One evening he has a row with her which prompts her to ask, “Are you blind drunk? How come you have turned into this wild brute?” He snaps back, “You are an arrogant woman. I have been waiting for twenty years to tell you this. You pretend to be a cultured lady” (623). The couple has a very unpleasant evening with bitter recriminations. The man even threatens to strangle her. The next day she feels that the quarrel between them was all a dream.

The second division ends with the expectation of the arrival of Vijayan for lunch. Vijayan is said to have been the man’s childhood friend who now works in Bahrain. He is introduced as a man with a romantic turn of mind and the power to charm women (626). Rohini psychologically receives his apparently secret entry into her room although she physically resists it. Repeating his concocted tale of meeting her twenty years ago and recalling her events and experiences like their going to Ooty, overcomes her resistance to his overtures. Later he penetrated and permeated her so much so that nothing of her own was left behind. After his conquest he shocks her with the
revelation of her husband’s being an accomplice to their deed. The story ends with Vijayan strangulating her. He was only a contract killer engaged by her husband, for before throttling her he says, “‘I know what I am to do’ stooping to kiss her lips Vijayan said ‘I know what I have been given money to do’” (630).

It is obvious that a woman like Rohini who psychologically rebels against the values of a male-structured socio-familial system is not allowed to separate from her man as he does not like his familial beans to be spilt. So she is thus done away with.

Vijayan’s concocted tale of meeting Rohini and seeking to change her identity is not an isolated phenomenon but a perennially seen patriarchal trait which functions in the process of perpetuating female subjugation. It is this behavioural pattern which gets portrayed in Kamala’s stories like “Kalyani” in The Sandal too. Here a woman named Ammini driving back home after dropping her husband is intercepted by five or six men who pose to be policemen. She is taken to the first floor of a two-storied building where another man whom they call their Boss has her taken to a dark room, where she is shut up and stripped of her clothes. She is deprived of her sobriety with a bottle of liquor. When she wakes up she finds her husband arriving to see her in this plight. Near her is another man sleeping on a cot. Her husband
also refuses to rescue her as the letters he received about her prostitution are confirmed by direct perception.

It is interesting to note how the men who picked her up refused to believe her to be Ammini and imposed on her a male-invented identity and deprived her of her individuality. In her helpless state, “Thus, without any difficulty, like snakes slough their skin, she gave up her name and became Kalyani” (51). The author here means to say that the free woman was tricked by man into losing her freedom, shut up in his house, stripped even of her individual character and drugged into becoming his sexual slave. Elizabeth P. Kurien paraphrases Ayyappa Panicker’s view of the story thus, “The housewife Kalyani manifests a personality crisis complex; name, place, relationship, character, belief, action, direction – all these are distorted, and the author’s phenomenological investigation itself provides a framework for the story” (18).

Kamala’s social vision is broadened in “Marine Drive” of The Sandal to encompass the corruption, cruelty, hypocrisy and lechery of the political leader who outwardly masquerades as a Gandhian. In “Marine Drive”, a story with a metafictional beginning, there are two characters – The Bison and Anasuya. How this seventy-year-old man manages to stay fit to enjoy the delights of the flesh in the company of his mistresses like Anasuya and how they are ditched when they violate his injunctions or deflate his ego are seen.
How brutally he has Anasuya waylaid, kidnapped and killed after a final act of copulation could be seen as the plot progresses. How such men even get their victims of lust videoed for their friends to see them is also highlighted. The molestations or murders of women perpetrated by political bigwigs seldom come to light as there are no traces of their misdeeds left in any visible form. These socio-political misdeeds or malpractices are usually seen to be beyond Alice Munro's literary ken.

Bertrand Russell feels that jealousy and modesty are two natural human impulses. He says that, "jealousy I believe has been the most potent single factor in the genesis of sexual morality" in the course of the evolution of patriarchy. He tracing the course of jealousy, says that it "instinctively rouses anger; and anger, rationalised, becomes moral disapproval" (Why 119).

Both the writers have fictionalized the undeniable fact that society in the West and the East alike continues to be patriarchal as men are mostly in control of the institutions that determine and regulate both acceptable attitudes and permissible behaviour. The stories of both the writers make their readers see how familial and societal structures in a patriarchy give rise to psychological structures of sexual division for the subjugation of women. The situations portrayed and the attitudes of men and women analysed through their characterization go to prove that sexual identity is constructed rather than inherited and that what women are comes not from anatomical attributes but
from received ideas. Masculinist ethos seek to inculcate in one early in life that women represent emotions and that the superiority of men comes from their possession of reason or intellectuality. The Canadian and Keralite writers do not make their women leave male society and turn lesbian but have them live within the dominant culture and challenge its constructions of sexuality and seek to transform male-ordained moral codes. What they strive to put across finds articulation through what Judith Still and Michael Worton write in *Textuality and Sexuality* ..., "Simon de Beauvoir's assertion in *The Second Sex* that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman can, and indeed should, be translated into male terms" (29).

What feminists from the time of Virginia Woolf down to womanists like Alice Walker have pointed out how the attempt to shape the world or to see it through the male paradigm of morality is to remain imprisoned within an epistemological trap that prevents access to other kinds of knowledge or realities that do not fit into the male-fashioned world scheme. Feminism or Womanism in the ultimate analysis is fundamentally a struggle against patriarchal fascism as Virginia Woolf had foreseen in *Three Guineas* (303).

**Religious Morality**

What primarily keeps women from reappropriating their bodies from patriarchal control is seen by the two writers to be the hold of religion. Religious tenets serve only to perpetuate and sanctify male dominance. The
concepts of conventional Christian and Hindu morality which the two authors are seen to jettison through their feminist protagonists have only curbed or curtailed woman’s right to claim her rightful place. Most women throughout history are seen to slip easily and passively into religiously prescribed roles as they could be easily duped into believing them to be the will of God or their destiny which their past actions have culminated in. So here one could see women being driven from a personal quest of ethics to religious scriptures which demands obedience to a socio-familial system of rules and regulations. As one examines the part played by religious morality, one sees how the authority of the father in the family eventually resulted in the inferiorization of women. Paul in the Bible commands women thus, “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything” (Eph 5:24).

The Grieves sisters with whom the narrator’s mother lives in “Friend of My Youth” represent religion for Alice at its worst. Her mother has told the narrator how these lonely sisters dispense with all the comforts of life. The reader learns that the wooden walls of their house “had never been painted but had been left to weather” (4). The narrator goes on to say:

The log barns and unpainted house, common enough on poor farms, were not in the Grieveses’ case a sign of poverty but of policy. They had the money but they did not spend it. That was
what people told my mother. The Grieveses worked hard and they were far from ignorant, but they were very backward. They didn’t have a car or electricity or a telephone or a tractor. (5)

The narrator’s mother, a school teacher characterizes their religious sect as “Some freak religion from Scotland.” She is seen making this comment “from the perch of her obedient and light hearted Anglicanism”. She was initially reluctant to live with the Grieveses “in the black board house with its paralytic Sundays and coal-oil lamps and primitive notions.” It is said that “On Sundays at the Grieveses’ house, you could light a fire for heat but not for cooking, you could not even boil the kettle to make tea, and you were not supposed to write a letter or swat a fly” (5).

Flora is said to have “behaved like a saint.” Even in the surrender of her fiancé to her sister Ellie who surreptitiously slips into his seductive arms and has a baby in her belly before she has a husband in her bed. She gives birth to a stillborn baby and a religion leads them to believe that “God rewarded lust with dead babies, idiots, harelips and withered limbs and clubfeet”. Ellie is reported to have “one miscarriage after another, then another stillbirth and more miscarriages” (11). During her bedridden days Flora like a true follower of their faith would read for Ellie’s peaceful sleep the book written by “some preacher of their faith.” There was in it “All the
stuff" of what the narrator's mother termed "their monstrous old religion" (12). It is written,

All that configuration of the elect and the damned, ... all the arguments about the illusion and necessity of freewill. Doom and slippery redemption. The torturing defeating, but for some minds irresistible pile up of interlocking and contradictory notions. (12)

The narrator's mother "honoured the decency, the prudery, the frigidity, that might protect" women from the religious point of view. This was what Flora tried to do and won her admiration. From the perspective of the narrator religion had a pernicious influence on Flora who suppressed her emotions and led a sexless life submitting to what she obviously considered to be the dictates of religious morality. Alice's contempt for the female repression could be seen in the way Nurse Atkinson rids the place of the Grieveses of all the traces of their religion:

She sees the smoke rise out of the incinerator in the yard, where her books are burning. Those smelly old books, as Audrey has called them. Words and pages, the ominous dark spines. The elect, the damned, the slim hopes, the mighty torments – up in smoke. There was the ending. (21)
How intolerant the Cameroonians, the religious sect of the Grieveses is shown towards the close of the story. The story ends with the authors derisive comment that “One of their ministers, in a mood of firm rejoicing at his own hanging, excommunicated all the other preachers in the world” (26).

In her incarnation as Suraiya, Madhavikutty sees that “there are different religions but there is no difference between them. Later it could be seen that they are all a pack of lies. They thrive on a foundation of falsehood. What firmness has such an edifice.” (Prasanna interview 13). Most of the female protagonists of Kamala live in a suffocating marital cage fashioned by the religious culture of Hindus. The bride at a young age is given in marriage to the groom chosen by her father and she starts life “by delivering herself up,” as de Beauvoir says “passive and docile into the hands of a new master.” (69). Even when she gets terribly disenchanted and emotionally disengaged, she is not able to free herself physically from the man and get out as her counterpart does in the Munrovian world. The stigma of divorce is so powerful as religious scriptures denounce the woman who walks out on her man.

Subhadra Devi in “Nashtappetta Neelambari” (“The Lost Neelambari”) in Sampoornam carries out her duties as a wife every morning. It is with coldness hidden away in a corner of her heart that she “copulated with him” (862). It is the unconscious influence of her religious creed that kept her from
seeking to separate physically from the man that she had nothing but contempt for. After his death she offers worship at the temple of Meenakshi in Madurai dressed like a bride. Her religious moral code forbids a widow to be dressed like that and so, feeling guilty, she prays “Mother, I am a widow’, ... she murmurs to the goddess: Although dressed like a bride, I am a widow ... Forgive me’ ” (869). Her old music master reminds her “Each of us has a responsibility. Its fulfilment is the goal of life. You mustn’t bring into disrepute the name of your man. I have to live here looking my insane wife. No other way is destined for us in this birth” (870).

“Rohini” (Sampoornam) is the story of a couple who have been childless for 20 years. Childlessness is for Hindu couples a terrible misfortune. The heroine Rohini feels more suffocated than Subhadra because unlike her she has no professional empowerment and, in the midst of all her apparent comfort she has a mother-in-law who constantly annoys her by following wherever she turns and a husband whose “cold, slippery hands” could only repel her. There have been times when she had to pray for widowhood. It is again the pressure of religion which prevents her from putting an end to her misery in marriage.

In “Meneseteung” of Munro’s seventh collection a contemporary historian recaptures the life of a nineteenth-century poetess, Almeda Joynt Roth, who lived alone repressing her sexuality which her “unfailing religious
faith” fostered in her not only by her parents but by the prudish social system of her day as well (71). A.E. Christa Canitz and Roger Seamon feel, “The narrator makes up a very modern tale of repressed desire, of symptoms and symbols that have resonance for the sexually liberated.” In the story narrated here “the poetess is both victim and abettor of Victorian sexual attitudes, ....” The poetess refuses to have a sexual relationship with a man, because of her fear of what one may term Mrs. Grundy. The story could be interpreted as the narrator’s ruminations on the repressiveness of Victorian society with its prudery and priggishness. Madelene Redekop, commenting on the title says that it “hints at a conjunction of menace, tongue and menstruation” (209).

The story here is divided into six parts. The first part gives one an insight into the painfully lonely life of a poetess who could offer as the product of her “leisure hours,” what she calls “these rude posies, these ballads, couplets, reflections” (52). Her father migrated to Canada West from Kingston with his wife, and three children: the poetess then aged fourteen and the younger sister Catherine and younger brother William aged eleven and nine. Although a harness maker by profession, her father was “a cultivated man who could quote by heart from the Bible, Shakespeare and the writings of Edmund Burke” (51). In the third summer of their arrival here, his younger daughter and son died of a fever spreading there. Three years later his wife passed away unable to recover from the shock. The poetess was then left in
charge of the house for her father for twelve years by which time he too left
the world.

The second section gives a full view of the town, the streets and the
house of the poetess and of how robbery and roguery are seen to be on the
increase. The narrator envisions a young man one day going “through the
streets ringing a cowbell and calling, ‘Repent! Repent!’ ” The fun here is
seen in the imagined response of the common people who shout, “Take him
home, wrap him in cold wet clothes, give him some nerve medicine,
keep him in bed, pray for his wits. If he doesn’t recover, he must go to the
asylum” (55).

The third section dwells on the talk, gossip and speculation of the
newcomer, Jarvis Poulter, “a decent citizen, prosperous: a tall – slightly
paunchy” man living next door to Almeda (57). He has come looking for oil,
but has ended up with the discovery of salt during the drill. When he talks
about his salt wells, she is reminded only of the biblical “salt of the earth”
(58). He is a thrifty widower. There is a speculative sketch of the man in
Vidette along with a comment on his association with the literary woman.
The narrator’s imagination of the man’s courtship of the poetess, their walks
and talks and their way back and forth from church and rides together add
spice to the story. The narrator imagines him “coming into her – their –
bedroom in his long underwear and his hat”. The contrast between the
Victorian woman and the narrator in the permissive latter half of the twentieth century could be seen in the kind of the sexual surrender in such a situation, "She doesn’t know, for at this point a fit of welcome and submission overtakes her, a buried gasp”. Almeda “does not look for companionship. Men – except for her father – seem to her deprived in some way, incurious.” (60).

The most memorable episode in the fourth section is the drunken brawl on Pearl Street at the back of her house in which a woman is chased and beaten as she runs screaming. Almeda is woken up by this disturbance. She finds a woman apparently dead at the back. She goes to summon Jarvis Poulter. He comes with her and nudges the woman’s leg with the toe and makes her get up and stops her from banging her head and makes her go home. Now, as their front door is closed they go in through the back door. In the house he is inclined to take her arm. One reads here “What Jarvis Poulter feels for Almeda Roth at this moment is just what he has not felt during all those circumspect walks and all his own solitary calculations of her probable worth, undoubted respectability, adequate comeliness”. One sees how “He is sufficiently stirred by her loosened hair” and sees what the narrator calls “her need” (67). He offers to “walk” with her to church. It may be noted that her youthful passion in the form of a “big crow” in a dream scolds her wanting her to “Wake up and move the wheel barrow.” What it asks her to do is “something foul and sorrowful.” (64).
In the fifth section she writes a note to Jarvis apologizing for her inability to walk with him to church and leaves it at her door. She is unwell. There seems to be a symbolic nexus between the overflowing of the syrup she wanted to make and her period. All the disturbing happenings are channelled into the river of her mind which flows out in the form of a poem. It is given the name of the river “Meneseteung” (70).

In the last section one learns how the lonely poetess in her last days became something of an eccentric and died of pneumonia which she caught when chased by the urchins into the bog of Pearl Street. Her poetic talent could be brought out but her health and happiness were blighted by what one sees to be her “unfailing religious faith” buttressed by the moral taboos of the Victorians (71).

Kamala’s story “Raathriyil” (“At Night”) in Sampoornam provokes reflections and questions on “why there are other paths along the right one? Humans progress. They learn to tread the path of their forefathers. They die not daring to tread a different path or to do what all others say is wrong. These ‘good’ people die thus. Where next?” (46). This story tells of a married woman having an affair with the neighbour Rajan, who visits her outside the house during nights. She carries on with him behind her husband’s back. It seems to be a mystery for her and wonders why Rajan came into her life so late. When Rajan assures her of his love, she still doubts it. She says,
“She knows the power and glory of love. She wants to enjoy it” (42). In bed, she is scared at the thought whether her child has typhoid. She is pregnant for the second time and seems to be weak and tired. Her belief in God too seems to have disappeared in this phase of life. There was a time years ago, when she used to pray lighting a lamp. After a long time, the word ‘Krishna’ unknowingly comes from her lips. She is now considered as an atheist by her friends. Now she hears the whistle of Rajan. She gets angry and says, “Has this love given her only pain? More sorrow than joy. Isn’t deception its foundation? Then how can it be called ‘pure’ as Rajan terms it” (44).

Her husband changed over the past three years of marriage. He never fondles her and appears to be least interested in anything. Now he seems to be a bookworm and his only interest is books. But she hates her husband’s lust during nights. She says, “Why by night this uninteresting bookworm brings out his vagaries of lust?” She feels contempt for him and for this wedded life. The sense of slavery lying low in daytime raises its hood by night ... When looking at the self-satisfied man lying on his side she feels ‘Brute ... absolute brute!’ Me its slave” (44).

She is afraid of hurting anyone and so she does not want to break her husband’s life. Thus she concludes, “It’s better to put an end to this love. It should be squeezed and killed”. She does not like to cause pain to anyone. But she is ready to bear the burdens of others’ pains. “She is tired. Before
this pain and weariness kill her she has to transfer this torch” of love to
someone (45).

She again listens to the whistling of Rajan. She says that youth is able
to forget all wounds. When she loses this love, she will find peace of mind.
She closes the window. She says, “The death of this love would provide
comfort to mind rather than sorrow, just as the death of a bedridden person.
Yet, a hollow relief” (45). Fever leaves her child and she is seen to have
renewed her faith in Krishna as she says, “Oh God, You have not forgotten me
even after such a long time. How compassionate you are!” (47)

The stories of the two writers show how powerful religious morality
continues to be in the lives of women whose basic rights and freedom it seeks
to curtail. The rules and regulations laid down by religion serve to forbid
women from developing their individuality or gaining their independence.
Foucault says “The search for a form of morality acceptable to everyone in the
sense that everyone should submit to it, strikes me as catastrophic.” (qtd. in
McNay 163). Munro puts into the mouth of Del Jordan’s mother her view of
God thus:

God was made by man! Not the other way around! God was
made by man. Man at a lower and bloodthirstier stage of his
development than he is at now, we hope. Man, made God in his
own image. I’ve argued that with ministers. I’ll argue it with
anybody. I’ve never met anybody who could argue against it and make sense. (Lives 89)

Kamala in an interview given to a fellow writer Sara Joseph asks, “Isn’t religion an illusion? Has God ever asked for religion to be formed? As individuals we need a divinity” (30). What she means to say is that she has no belief in what religions say. That is why she has written in Malayalam version of My Story “Morality is the slaughterhouse erected by the untruthful granny termed society” (86). She condemns it because it has for its basis the mortal body of a human being. Thus the repression of female freedom under the cloak of morality has tended to produce its own resistance and feminists have refused to play religiously prescribed roles.

**Feminist Paradigm of Morality**

Feminists as a rule are dismissive of religion as something constructed to perpetuate the hegemony of the priestly class in particular and the masculine class in general. But they believe strongly in the need for ethical behaviour emerging from a secular humanism which is directed toward the welfare of human beings. Feminist writers like Alice and Kamala seek to present an alternative ethics of existence as male-ordained and religion-based values are unacceptable to them. They deconstruct orthodox morality which is directed towards codes and commandments. What these feminists value most is the autonomy that the individual needs in relation to social codes and moral
injunctions. What they reject about patriarchal moral systems is that they require the subordination of the woman and her observance of externally contrived precepts. The pressure to conform undermines the autonomy of the individual.

What feminist morality challenges is the way in which moral systems have persistently effaced and devalued the experiences of women and their emancipatory endeavours. Feminists cannot afford to retreat into a postmodern politics of apathy as they think through a politics of resistance. This resistance is not founded on universal imperatives but predicated on a notion of individual autonomy. They aim to destabilize patriarchal concepts through their resistance to dominant power formation. They strive to prove that truth is no longer a monolith existing exclusively in a patriarchal system. Truth is seen as something which is open to contestation through the construction of alternative truths. Therefore an alternative moral system is shown to be a reality. Truth according to Foucault, is the product of “Individuals who are free, who arrive at a certain agreement and who find themselves thrust into a certain network of practices of power and constraining institutions” (qtd. in McNay 138-139).

The spirit of independence beginning to be perceived by Ada, could be seen in her comment:
There is a change coming I think in the lives of girls and women. Yes. But it is up to us to make it come. All women have had up till now has been their connection with men. All we have had. No more lives of our own, really than domestic animals. (Lives 146-147)

In the title story, “Friend of My Youth” of Alice’s seventh collection one sees two diegetic processes – remembering the anecdotes and stories narrated by her mother about her life as a school teacher and the Grieveses she had lived with before marriage, and putting together these reminiscences for fictionalization in such a way as to recreate the personalities of Flora and Nurse Atkinson from a feminist angle. What one sees in the process of transformation is the contrast between the perspectives of women in the feminine phase and their counterparts in the feminist category which Showalter refers to in A Literature of Their Own (13). The feminist narrator questions the traditional morality of Flora which had evoked her mother’s admiration. The daughter in the present fantasizes the self-denying figure of Flora in such a way as to make her mother’s saintly friend a “Presbyterian witch” “Rejoicing in the bad turns done to her and in her own forgiveness, spying on the shambles of her sister’s life” and “reading out of her poisonous book” (20-21). In her eyes the sexy Audrey Atkinson is no “monster” but a normal “thick-skinned” woman whose “rival ruthlessness” and “the
comparatively innocent brutality” are needed “to drive her [Flora] back, to
flourish in her shade”. The narrator is not sad to see the nurse “shut her up in
her own part of the house with the coal-oil lamps” where she decays because
she has led life pass her by (21). Atkinson on the other hand succeeds in the
race for the best that life offers women.

The narrator, who is different from her mother would not repress her
sexual urges and so she says:

I used to sneak longing looks at men in those days. I admired
their wrists and their necks and any bit of their chests a loose
button let show, and even their ears and their feet in shoes. I
expected nothing reasonable of them, only to be engulfed by
their passion. (22)

She confesses how she used to have similar thoughts about Robert. It was
Flora’s “turning away from sex” which endeared her to the narrator’s mother
but embittered her to the narrator. The daughter would even spurn the
mother’s warning against sex. She says, “My mother had grown up in a time
and in a place where sex was a dark undertaking for women.” She “honored
the decency, the prudery, the frigidity”, which she said women needed for
protection; but her daughter reacts to it differently thus, “I grew in horror of
that very protection, the dainty tyranny that seemed to me to extend to all
areas of life, ...” (22). She goes on to point out, “my mother’s ideas were in
The lesbian relationship that Sheela and Kalyanikutty form in Kamala’s title story, “The Sandal Trees” is a form of protest against conventional morality. Sheela’s friendship with Kalyani prevents her from gaining marital harmony with her husband. When asked for her views on married life Kalyani says, “It’s the nights that I can’t bear. He’s destroying my health …”. She admits to her friend Sheela, “I’m not the kind who’d surrender in fear the moment I saw a male body” (6). Kalyani hates her man so much that she refuses to give birth to his child. She says, “A feeling that my womb has been polluted nags at me.” (7). So she gets her pregnancy terminated. She divorces him and marries an Australian but parts from him too. Unable to bear the burden of conjugality with her husband, Sheela too “did make attempts at cheating him, at renouncing” her “chastity” (15). But she backs out because in every man she sees her own husband. Though they never have a good relation she tries to maintain a happy union in public. When Kalyani briefly returns to her former husband with her help, Sheela gets blamed for putting at risk the future of Sudhakaran’s daughter, Ammini. Sheela asks herself, “If she wanted a honeymoon with him after thirty years, why should I remind her of moral codes?” (20).

Sheela now experiences greater repulsion and revulsion in her wedlock from the sight of her old spouse whose very presence is smelly, for she says:
For civilised people, a marriage that lasts for years, greying and rotting, is certainly impossible to bear. To lie close to each other in the same bed and exchange the foul smell of sweat; to witness the excrement of your spouse who has forgotten to flush the toilet after use at sunrise; to feign sleep while slyly watching him masturbate, ... My body, exhausted after the day’s duties, cannot stand the ugly, unnatural weight of lust ....” (13)

It is Sheela’s contempt for her man that makes her contrast the habits of women and men who are past their prime of youth. “Once the inelegances of their body start multiplying, women hesitate to show off their physical features”. On the contrary, men, she goes on to say, “display, as if by mistake, their private parts which hang loose and look unsewn” (15). But unlike her friend, Kalyani she does not walk out on her man although he has become what she calls “a diseased limb. A limb that had to be cut off and removed”. He has done from the conventional viewpoint no harm other than making expressions of love in his own way. She becomes no more than “an unfeeling marble statue” with her “cultivated silence” which stands growing between her and her man “like a sandal tree giving” her what she terms “much happiness” (13). Kalyani mocks at her making a pretence of liking her “ugly husband and his bed and his decadent words” (21).
Kamala here seems to air her views on marital disharmony, which religious morality makes it obligatory for a woman to accept as her lot in life. The incompatibility which rocks Sheela’s marriage has a lot to do with the disparity in age between her and her man which tradition sanctions but which is unacceptable to the new woman. When there is lack of communication between a man and his wife they are likely to stray from the path of fidelity which from the feminist point of view is quite natural. One tends to go back in dream to one’s puppy love as Sheela does here; or one tries to go after another woman, which Kalyani alleges Sheela’s husband does behind her back; or one atleast seeks self gratification in sex as Sheela’s husband is seen to do at nights. Another factor that contributes to friction between a man and his wife is their difference in terms of their sexual orientation. Kalyani is one who is sexually oriented towards women and so a heterosexual relationship is not likely to last in her case. The author also seems to be in favour of separating couples who have no love lost between them for the authorial voice seems to be quite audible. Kalyanikutty accuses Sheela of pursuing the traditional path which she feels is “the path to decadence”. Kalyani believes that Sheela lives in a world of illusions and goes on, “repeating untruths” and so she would end up believing her own false assumptions (21).

Alice’s heroines who get what Brian calls “a kick in the behind” wake up to see what their predicament is (185). “The Children’s Stay” in her ninth
collection titled *Love* describes self-realisation. The woman is here seen trying to create an artistic space for her self when she gets a chance to play the role of Eurydice in a modern version of the Greek legend about the uxorious Orpheus. Pauline feels suffocated as Brian’s wife in a society where human space has traditionally been defined in terms of male-female roles. The woman’s part is defined and determined by the dictates of patriarchy. Pauline here like Kamala’s Kalyani move out of the role which tradition has moulded for a wife and mother. The story, in fact, brings into focus the shift of a woman from the feminine to the feminist phase where she looks for her identity as an individual through her interest in Jeffrey, a dynamic young man who directs the play in which she is given the central part. It enables her to regain her self from the confines of male-fashioned domesticity. Here she “felt as if she had become an urban person, someone detached and solitary, who lived in the glare of an important dream.” The life she has left behind her “seemed ragged and tedious” (188). The world she has entered corresponds to the ambience of the play where, as she says to Brian, “they don’t have to go on with life and get married and have kids and buy an old house and fix it up” (198). One sees how she “circled around that pleasure” which the very mention of Jeffrey’s name gave her (196). One goes on to read, “When she had started to quote Jeffrey Pauline had felt a giving way in her womb or the bottom of her stomach, a shock that had travelled oddly upwards and hit her
vocal cords” (197). This experience of thrill is akin to what Subhadra in Kamala’s “Nashtappetta Neelambari” (“The Lost Neelambari”) feels when her music master rescues her from drowning, and clasps her close to his chest, “her body became a sea with swirling whirlpools”. She experiences then “at the bottom of her belly a feeling of suddenly coming down on a swing” (862).

“Before the Change” in the same collection of Munro’s stories one sees a feminist narrator who fights with her father for a woman’s right to terminate her pregnancy; yet she refuses to go in for an abortion as she sees no stigma attached to being an unwed mother unlike her lover Robin who thinks it would be a “stain” on his academic record and affect his prospects in the job as society would consider him to be “morally unfit” for the career of a teacher. She calls the coward in him “Hypocrite, ... Sniveller. Philosophy teacher” (283). The feminist narrator writes to her lover:

Change the law, change what a person does, change what a person is? ... And if that law can change, other things can change. I’m thinking about you now, how could it happen that you wouldn’t be ashamed to marry a pregnant woman. There’d be no shame to it. Move ahead a few years, just a few years, and it could be a celebration. The pregnant bride is garlanded and led to the altar, even in the chapel of the Theological College. (285)
It may be noted that Kalyani in “The Sandal Trees” unlike Alice’s heroine here, gets an abortion done as she says, “I’m not prepared to carry in my body for ten months the child of an ordinary man like him” (7). The emancipated woman claims her body to be her own domain and refuses to surrender it to her man as his field to be cultivated the way he fancies.

It is the claim of women to equality with men that has made necessary a new system of morality today. Equality can be gained either by exacting from men the same strict monogamy that men exact or expect from women, or by allowing women to pursue a feminist code of ethics. The former is preferred by moderate feminists; but the latter has many more advocates among feminists. “In a series of psychological profiles developed from in-depth interviews”, says Josephine Donovan, “Gilligan has determined that moral reasoning in men and women is different.” It is also pointed out how “Gilligan has discovered that women’s moral processing is contextually oriented.” So Gilligan is said to have put forward the “thesis that men’s and women’s moral reasoning is different” (176). Russell says, “If women are to have sexual freedom, fathers must fade out, and wives must no longer expect to be supported by their husbands. This may come about in time, but it will be a profound social change, and its effects, for good or ill, are incalculable” (Why 116). Religious moralists fear that marriage and paternity are in danger of disappearing as moral conventions crumble. But feminists contend that all
moral codes which inferiorize woman and curtail her freedom so as to cast her in the role of man’s sexual slave are to be jettisoned in the course of their quest for equality. These women like to be natural, and they have the courage to be so.

Before the establishment of the patriarchal stage, which places women under the protection of men, a matriarchal stage is said to have prevailed in Kerala in which women possessed supreme power. Purnima Kumar and Laura K. Kidd write “women in the pre-20th century Nair society enjoyed power and status that was equal to or greater than the status of men.” (15). Kamala, now christened as Suraiya, herself says, “As long as matriarchy reigned in a family, the matriarch was the decision maker. Under the Gandhian spell, many Nayar families adopted the conventions of a patriarchal society.” (The Path of the Columnist 22).

One tends to agree with Havelock Ellis and assert, “If we define more precisely what we mean by morals, on the practical side, we may say that it is constituted by those customs which the great majority of the members of a community regard as conducive to the welfare of the community at some particular time and space”. Custom is usually seen to be the basis of morality and law. What people in the mass of a community actually do “constitutes the real stuff of morals” (370). Practical morals develop new structures in accordance with new relationships, to replace older and desiccated traditions.
Under the guise of exterminating terrorists nations like the U.S.A wage wars killing their fellow humans in countries like Iraq, but they consider euthanasia for terminally ill people to be murder. One has already begun to doubt the morality of condemning to death or imprisoning for life an unmarried girl who does away with her newborn baby on account of her poverty, but does one question the morality of a man who suspects his wife’s fidelity and subjects her to physical and mental torture. The feminist refuses to accept the moral injunctions formulated by a patriarchal society primarily because they revolve around the entrance of a woman’s genitalia. Havelock Ellis points out, “The difference between the woman who sells herself in prostitution and the woman who sells herself in marriage, according to the saying of Marro … ‘is only a difference in price and duration of the contract’ ” (363).

The scrutiny of the writings of Alice and Kamala go to prove this researcher’s assumption that it is a kind of feminist-fashioned morality and values that animates their literary output. These feminist critics of the male-ordained world with their feminist moral vision have written stories which overtly or covertly show how by subverting the patriarchal structure and undermining the edifice of religiously evolved moral codes alone women could hope to be in control of the realities that shape their lives. In their polemics they attempt to undermine patriarchal tradition. They emphasize the necessity to develop values from within, following the dictates of the heart
rather than have them thrust upon one by conventional religious edicts or male-oriented ethics. The sexual values thrust by tradition and preserved by the religious segment in society are subjected to the feminist scrutiny and shown to be devoid of meaning or relevance as they have been evolved by patriarchs to perpetuate the slavery and subjugation of women. The search for sexual harmony and mutual understanding is what should drive humans to attain fulfilment in wedlock and not the man-made morality derived from a blind belief in a jealous and revengeful God who is intolerant of human attempts to seek delights of the flesh as Alice’s Cameroonians or Manusmriti’s adherents mistakenly assume. Feminists see in women custodians a feminine value system because as Virginia Woolf feels women are “a different sex, a different tradition, a different education, and … different values” (Three Guineas, 320).