CHAPTER II

Negotiations in Patriarchal Spaces

The novels analysed in this study, *Pratham Pratisruti, Suvarnalatha, Bakulkatha, Nabankur* and *Agnisakshi* are situated in a social milieu in which sexual differences are organised in codes that structure everyday life. The central informing power behind these codes is patriarchy and thus they become explorations into patriarchal hierarchies. As the individual family unit is at the core of patriarchy, these narratives move deductively from the familial to the social milieu.

Masculine assumptions had succeeded in moulding the entire gamut of political, social and familial structures in the *brahmins’* world and the power of the male permeated everything. Speaking about patriarchal societies, Adrienne Rich says:

Patriarchy is the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men--by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labour, determine what part women shall or shall not
play, and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. (*Of Woman Born* 57).

This observation is very true in the case of *brahminical* system of life.

This chapter attempts to outline the mutually exclusive male and female spaces in the *brahmin* household, as represented in the novels chosen for study, and to see how the different members are situated in the various strata of power. Three spaces, the anterior space of the males, the negotiating space of the elder women and the posterior space of the younger women are located and the characters are grouped into different categories and placed in the appropriate echelons. The negotiations that take place in the different spaces for and against female transcendence to personhood are examined. In the male space, power is the primal word, but there are subtle currents that make some more powerful than the others. Power is defined by the different, self-assigned roles a man takes up. They may rightly be called agents, accomplices and compliers according to the power they wield in the family and society. The aggressive agent of the *brahminical* law at the apex is the most powerful. Below him there are the active accomplices and the passive compliers (the roles overlap very often), who bask in reflected glory and whose only strength lies in the sanctions provided by the society. A crucial truth that surfaces is the male world’s indifference, and sometimes even active hostility, towards female subjectification. The lords of the male space in the novels, irrespective of age, education, and chances of exposure to the modern ways of
life, adamantly cling on to their conviction that woman has no right to personhood.

In the negotiating space the elder women are averse to the younger women’s attempts to become subjects. But later, at least some of them are influenced by their daughters and granddaughters and develop a changed female perspective. The rising female consciousness succeeds to make its imprint, though unwelcome most often, here also.

In the posterior space, there are four categories of women. At the highest stratum of awakening there are those who strive to actualize their dormant potential, and at the lowest, there are the completely unawakened ones. In between there are two intermediate positions; in the first, there are women who are vaguely aware of their urges, but do not attempt to realize them, and in the second are those, even though they lack the potential to grow into subjecthood, who offer moral support to the potential subjects.

In their narratives Ashapurna Devi, Sulekha Sanyal, and Lalithambika Antharjanam identify various forms of conceptually embedded gender biases and portray a multi-layered power structure. Three agents of brahminical power can be identified in the novels under this study, Ramkali Chatterji in *Pratham Pratishruti*, Dakshinaranjan Ray in *Nabankur* and Aphan Namboothiri in *Agnisakshi*. They are the agents of the codes of law because caste, wealth and familial and social positions conspire to invest in them the right to interpret law as they choose. They follow it to the very letter if they so wish, or remain totally indifferent to it. There are times when they actively
reject it altogether. But their power is so absolute that they are never challenged.

The accomplices are the men of the second generation, Navakumar in PrathamPratishruti, Prabodhchandran in Suvarnalatha and Unni Namboothiri in Agnisakshi. The men of the third generation, the sons of Satyavati in Pratham Pratishruti and Suvarna in Suvarnalatha, are, generally, passive compliers. The narratives project the fact that the changes initiated by factors like modern education and urbanization can be peripheral if true sympathy is absent.

Ramkali Chatterji, in Pratham Pratishruti, is an unusual brahmin, a rebel against brahminical practices in his own way and a series of transgressions mark him as different from the greedy, lazy, ignorant brahmins around him. He holds the village spell bound with his majestic good looks, great wealth and unlimited generosity. He is so awe inspiring that even the toughest, most orthodox brahmins fear to challenge him. He braves the anger and condemnation of his society with his unflinching moral standards many a time and succeeds to get his own way. But Ramkali never uses his forceful personality to set right the evil practices of the society, which directly affect the female world around him. Jasodhara Bagchi observes, “He remained straight as a ramrod in performing what he considered to be his duty, but this did not prevent him from being an unflinching patriarch.” (Foreword to The First Promise X)
Three constitutive elements in Ramkali’s psyche mark him as a symbol of patriarchy: his faith in the superiority of rationality over emotionality, his active involvement in the perpetuation of certain forms of patriarchy and his attitude to the widows in his family. Ramkali is educated and cultured and so ostentatiously respects women, but deep within him, there is only contempt for the quarrelsome, ‘ignorant, talkative frailty’ called women. To him “women as a race were narrow minded and orthodox. Of course they were called the goddesses of the hearth, out of courtesy nothing else. In reality, they were the incarnations of misery.” (*First Promise* 72) This contempt is rooted in the belief that women are emotional and hence inferior beings. He is intolerant of emotional outbursts of all kinds irrespective of the cause, the context and the person involved. He fails to understand the pain of Sarada, his nephew’s wife, when a co-wife is thrust upon her, and ignores the silent tears of his wife Bhuvaneswari when their only child is sent away to her very distant affinal home. Adrienne Rich’s description of the patriarch and his power suits Ramkali Chatterji very well.

The powerful person would seem to have a good deal at stake in suppressing or denying his awareness of the personal reality of others; power seems to engender a kind of willed ignorance, a moral stupidity, about the inwardness of others, hence of oneself. This quality has been variously described as “detachment”, “objectivity”, “sanity”—as if the recognition of another’s being would open the floodgates to panic and hysteria. (*Of Woman Born* 65).
In Ramkali’s world, essentially a male world, genuine knowledge of the other is unnecessary and so he interprets the language of silence and tears as jealousy and possessiveness and dismisses them as unworthy of consideration. It is this cold detachment that makes his perspicacious daughter, Satya, ask him: “As a doctor you read symptoms from a patient’s appearance and you know exactly what is happening inside his body, Baba, don’t you? So can’t you guess what is going on inside a person by looking at the face?” (*First Promise* 73)

In matters of inheritance Ramkali Chatterji adheres strictly to the *dharmasastras*. Chatterji approves of the birth right of the male and so, even though most of his great wealth is his personal acquisition, he vehemently opposes the very idea of his daughter inheriting it and declares the boys in the family as the rightful heirs to it. The small piece of land offered to Satya is far away from the village, at Thriveni, and effectively uproots her from not only her natal family but even from her village. Thus the self-made Ramkali becomes instrumental in creating one more generation of lazy *brahmins* who live off the land without ever having to prove their personal worth.

Ramkali Chatterji’s attitude to the widows further reaffirms his unflinching patriarchal stance. He remains completely ignorant of the plight of the widows in his own household and believes that sacrifice is their lot in life and should be accepted without grumbling. Ashapurna Devi foregrounds the blatant double standards of patriarchal interpretation of law through Ramkali here. He adheres to the law when it is favorable to the male and ignores it when
it is favorable to the female. This scholarly brahmin who insists on clarifying his spiritual and moral doubts with the help of his guru, never feels it necessary to subject him to a self interrogation regarding the correctness of his stand about the widows. He remains completely indifferent to the smritis that stipulate five situations in which a woman is allowed to remarry and never makes any compromise with his staunch belief that a widow should lead a life of sacrifice. When Shankari, a young widow disappears from the antahpuram his moral dilemma is rooted in the inner conflict between his dharma as a righteous individual and his concern for his family’s honour and the question that torments him is whether to divulge it or not. In the patriarchal value system, concepts like man’s pride and family’s honour are directly related to the female’s chastity and in the midst of these loudly asserted notions, the young widow’s silent pleas pale into insignificance. Ramkali’s attitude does not change over the years and so when Satya plans to get Sankari’s daughter, Suhasini, married, he is resistant to the idea. To him Suhasini’s birth itself is a mistake and hence she will propagate only a defective family. He disinclines to look into the role of the man in generating mistakes.

Ramkali lives in a socio-cultural milieu where the ethical practice is most acutely problematised by the discrepancy between the ideal and the real in relation with man’s duty towards woman. Ironically, this noble brahmin, who is hailed as the very embodiment of ethics and moral uprightness is completely unconscious of the discrepancy. An analysis of Ramkali Chatterji’s attitudinal fluctuations reveals that to the patriarch, dharma means more the convenience
of the powerful than an all-embracing justice. He is not unduly concerned about the impact of his decisions in the female space of his family even if the decisions directly affect those closest to him. When he conducts *gauridaana*, which means giving an eight-year-old girl child away in marriage, he is in fact rejecting the *Manusmriti*, the most authentic text of law for the *brahmins*. Manu categorically states that there is nothing wrong in a girl remaining unmarried, even to the end of her life, if a suitable bridegroom is not found (*Manusmriti* IX 89). Obviously the sage had not completely neglected the importance of compatibility between the bride and the bridegroom as an important factor of a successful marriage and expects the parents to exercise caution in choosing the bridegroom for their little daughter. But to the *brahmin* patriarchs a post puberty unmarried girl was a curse and a disgrace to the family. Thus the question of mental, physical and intellectual compatibility was never raised. Ramkali follows the tradition and gives his little daughter in marriage without making sufficient enquiries about the bridegroom and his family. It is an error which has far reaching consequences that affect the female genealogy of his family for three generations.

The same patriarchal perceptions and priorities characterise the male spaces in the other novels also and the men who reign there are incredibly similar to one another in spite of individual differences.

Sulekha Sanyal, in *Nabankur*, portrays the most detestable form of the patriarchal power structure because here, money, caste and gender are equal players in the politics of power. Dakshinaranjan Ray’s (the female
protagonist’s grandfather) Bengal is almost half a century away from Ramkali Chatterji’s and so he lives in a world made complex by politics, war, famine, recession and above all by an awakening consciousness among the marginalized categories in society. But the basic features that symbolize them as patriarchal males continue to be the same. Discussing the psychodynamics of masculinity and the repression of affective relational needs, Chodorow says: “…men tend to repress their oedipal needs for love and relationship. At the same time, men often become intolerant and disparaging of those who can express needs for love, as they attempt to deny their own needs.”(The Psychodynamics of the Family 185) This observation is true in the case of both Ramkali Chatterji and Dakshinaranjan Ray.

Money and power are terms Dakshinaranjan Ray well understands, but patriotism and political ideologies are not. But what irritates him most, more than political and social changes, more than the innumerable legal battles that impoverish him, is the attempt of his granddaughter to individuate. As Chhobi’s brother rightly puts it, he cannot stand Chhobi. His dislike is rooted in Chhobi’s negation of the traditional mould of the good brahmin girl who is obedient, docile and hard working. He considers this defiant daughter of the family, who roams the village like a peasant girl, who is politically alert and has a socialistic turn of mind, as the bane of an upper caste, aristocratic family. Like all autocrats, his ego cannot accept any one else in his family, especially a woman, to be a subject in the decision making process. He is used to a system where man decides and woman obeys. Even in his death bed Ray cannot
tolerate the mention of Chhobi’s name. All the pent up anger and frustration pours out when his wife informs him of the birth of another granddaughter. “Girl? His face twisted in a grimace and he closed his eyes again. Then he slowly said “Kill her!” (Nabankur 233).

But this same brahmin, who is proud of his noble lineage, can stoop to very low levels when he chooses. Like Iravi Ravi Nampoothiripad of Agnisakshi and Ramkali Chatterji of Pratham Pratishruti, he ignores tradition when it suits him. When the family’s fortunes deteriorate, he very conveniently forgets the sastra that a brahmin should acquire wealth only just sufficient to maintain himself and his family, and to enable him to perform his religious duties without causing any harm to others or by as little harm to others as possible. During the Bengal Famine, he instigates his son to enter into black marketeering. The anguish of the hundreds who starve does not touch his stony heart. Thus Dakshinaranjan is callously indifferent to male brahminical dharma but, at the same time, he will not allow the females of his household to make even a minor transgression.

Males who problematise the lives of the females with their androcentric approach to dharma and remain supremely unconscious of the pain they cause occupy Lalithambika Antharjanam’s canvases also as they are exposes of the cruelties and hypocrisies of a phallocentric culture. Iravi Ravi Namboothiripad, the powerful patriarch of Manampally Illam, in Agnisakshi is even more autocratic and stubborn than Ramkali Chatterji. He is an aphan, a younger son, but while the simple hearted Achan Namboothiri (the elder son) bathes, prays
and plays chess, he looks after the affairs of the family and practically rules the *illam*.

Like Ramkali, he is perfectly capable of defying an existing norm if he so chooses. Like many other *aphans* of his time, he is habituated to the practices of the community and follows the widely accepted practice of having sexual relationship with a *nair* woman, who belongs to a matrilineal lower caste. But this caste proud, very orthodox *brahmin* conveniently ignores the fact that societal sanction does not justify the violation of the moral codes.

Iravi Ravi Namboothiripad is not worried about the legality or the morality of *sambandham* and he shares this lack of moral concern with many others of his community. But he goes on further to establish his right as the unquestionable master of the family and as an unchallengeable presence in the society when he ignores the matrilocal aspect of *sambandham* which allows the *nair* wife of the *namboothiri* to continue to live in her natal family. Generally, the *namboothiri* is not supposed to give a space to the woman in his own family and visits her in her house, but the egocentric Iravi Ravi Namboothiripad remolds the outhouse of the *illam*, names it *Kacheri malika* and brings his wife, who belongs to the *nair* community, to stay there. Nobody dares to object. But at the same time, he remains unconscious of the difficulties of a lower caste consort of an upper caste man living under the watchful, accusing eyes of his family. His *nair* wife and daughter, the untouchables, are humiliated by the women of his household as usurpers.
Namboothiripad shares many similarities with Ramkali Chatterji and Dakshinaranjan Ray. Like Ramkali Chatterji, he rejects emotionality as irrelevant. Like Dakshinaranjan Ray, he equates political resistance with recalcitrance against caste and so keeps a wary and angry distance from the freedom fighters. The last phase in Namboothiripad’s life is very similar to that of Dakshinaranjan Ray. The reality of an awakened female consciousness is unwelcome to both the patriarchs and they resist the females’ attempts to be the agents of their destiny. All their life they try to prevent female transcendence to personhood and when the potential subject surmounts the difficulties and actualize her subjecthood, they are paralysed into inaction.

The male space is not a homogenous entity. Writers like Ashapurna Devi, Sulekha Sanyal and Lalithambika Antharjanam were aware of the subtle shifts in power that created different layers in the patriarchal society. Their novels depict the multifarious male world to perfection. Only strong willed men like Ramkali Chatterji and Irvai Ravi Namboothiripad can be active agents in the power structure of the brahmin society. The majority in the male world are accomplices who extend unconditional support to the agents and bask in the power conferred on them by the more powerful men.

Navakumar in Pratham Pratishruti is an accomplice of patriarchy all through his life. With incisive understanding, Ramkali assesses his son-in-law thus. “A pleasant face, not an intelligent one though. He smiled regretfully to himself. It was possible to be fond of him, but one could hardly depend on him.” (First Promise 295) The weak, ineffectual Navakumar loves his wife,
Satyavati, but wistfully wonders how different life would have been if only she were a doll like – beautiful, smiling but silent – wife. He quails before his wife’s courage when she stands up against his mother and whenever possible runs away from unpleasant situations.

Unlike the powerful males in the novels already mentioned, Navakumar is a coward and like the primordial male backs out of sharing the blame even as he enjoys the pleasures and comforts of life which are hard won by the struggles of Satya. Whenever Satya takes a step in the direction of her dream of creating a world where men and women can live as dignified human beings, he tries to stop her saying, “What my mother says is true. A woman’s learning is the origin of all destruction.” (317). But in the absence of a powerful agent the weak willed accomplice cannot impose his will on his wife. So he uses harsh words when angry and grovels when he gets over it. The orthodox male in him shouts and raves every time when she tries to assert her independence – when she tries to take up the responsibility of bringing up Suhasini, Shankari’s orphaned daughter; when she starts learning English; when she starts teaching in the Sarvamangala Vidyalaya; when she insists on her sons completing their education before they start earning – but he instinctively knows that she has grown beyond his reach.

Men like Navakumar need an excuse to hide behind and to get their thoughtless actions endorsed and in most cases it is mathru bhakthi, the devotion to the mother, which functions as their shield. One is forced to be cautious about the sincerity of their sentiments because the two constitutive
elements of *mathru bhakti*, the faith in the greatness of the mother and the fear of her curse, can be clever tools in the hands of a male. When a man causes irredeemable misery to his wife and daughter and puts the blame on his mother, he is actually doing an injustice to all the three women concerned. Navakumar breaks his promise to Satya and gives his eight-year-old daughter in marriage without her consent and in her absence. He brazenly tries to appease Satya saying that he was cornered by his mother and when he fails, tries to justify himself on the ground that her own father had made *gauridaana* when she was eight. Thus like a true patriarchal accomplice he follows the practice of the powerful even though he lacks the courage to face the consequences.

Navakumar is only an accomplice in a crime perpetuated by his society but his sin is more unforgivable than that of the older generation. He is educated, has seen the world changing and above all he has a wife who is a child of light if only he had the eyes to see. He is guilt stricken but instead of admitting guilt he resorts to anger. When Satya renounces the family and leaves for Benaras, he rages and curses her: “It is not good for a woman to be so daring. I tell you you’ll have a real hard time. That’s my curse, as your husband.” (532)

Prabodh Chandran, Suvarna’s husband, Navakumar’s son-in-law, in *Suvarnalatha* is another prominent accomplice of patriarchal law and proves that changing times have failed to make any positive change in the male consciousness. He is an average male of his time. His world is one of basic instincts. The men of his world move around the primordial urges of hunger,
hegemonic power relations and sex. Anyone who is different is branded and ridiculed as mad.

He obeys the patriarchal norms by worshipping his mother and humiliating his wife, by refusing to educate his daughters and above all by treating his wife as a body without a mind. Her healthy body drives him mad with desire but her open, innocent mind pushes him in to sexual jealousy. Thus he tortures and humiliates Suvarna, accusing her of having illicit relationship with men like Mallik babu who supplies Suvarna with books and Ambika Kumar, the freedom fighter. He does not know that they are the metaphorical windows which enable Suvarna to look out from her prison at the outside world of freedom. In his perspective, man-woman relationship has only one dimension, the sexual. In the first phase of the battle of the two wills, Prabodh’s and Suvarna’s, Prabodh is supported by his mother and brothers and in the last phase by his sons. Thus the patriarchal agenda of keeping the woman subjugated is reaffirmed.

Among the three accomplices identified in the novels, Unni Namboothiri in Agnisakshi is the most complex character because his psychic constitution defies easy definitions. Like Navakumar in Pratham Pratishruti and Prabodh Chandran in Suvarnalatha, he lacks the strength to resist the hegemonic, patriarchal system but unlike them, he genuinely loves and respects the elders who symbolize patriarchal power. To Unni matrubhakti or pitrubhakti are neither weapons to be used against his wife’s urge for autonomy nor signifiers of excuse to save him from moral dilemmas. He is willing to
sacrifice his personal conveniences and to forget his personal convictions for the happiness of the elder people. But he has internalized the prescriptions of *dharma* so deeply that his mind remains closed against changes. Time, education and circumstances fail to make inroads into it because he is trained in an ethics rooted in restrictions and repression.

Unni Namboothiri is innately good and has no meanness or greed in his mental makeup. Unlike Navakumar and Prabodh he does not rage or rave and fault finding and shifting the blame are alien to his nature. But he shares their habit of idolizing a powerful figure. He idolizes Aphan Namboothiri and tries to protect him when the patriarch is challenged by the female recalcitrants. The accomplice in Unni Namboothiri is not prepared to address the issue of the injustice of the patriarchal stance but has no qualms about alienating the woman whom he married with the holy fire as witness and destroying her happiness forever. He has great sympathy for the wounded pride of the patriarch and is avowed to protect him from further pain. But he excludes his wife from the same loving protection.

In a crucial moment in the story, a deeper stratum, not a very handsome one, of Unni’s psyche is revealed. The possibility of Thethi’s coming back is discussed but then the unthinkable happens. Instead of avidly accepting the offer of charity, Thethi inflicts a wound on patriarchal pride by making a demand. She has, by now, reconfigured her position and has entered the world of political agency. She agrees to retract a few steps, but her husband must come a few steps forward, freeing himself from the status of the protector of
When Aniyan (Unni’s brother) brings the message, Unni calmly says: “It can be the other way round too. I shall relent and come down a little. But she will have to come up a long way”. (*Agnisakshi* 85) In that one retort, there is the sudden, rather unexpected shift from his usual role of passive complier to the active accomplice of patriarchy. Even in the eyes of this gentle, cultured *brahmin*, Thethi is fallen from grace. She has fallen in to a world where *dharma* is violated. Patriarchy always maintains that woman resides in a moral and intellectual level far below that of man. If she dares to question the male norms, she falls irredeemably in to a still lower, yawning pit. When Unni speaks of Thethi coming up to his level, an inalienable part of his psyche, the area where the primordial male lingers, is revealed.

The men of the third generation, Satyavati’s sons in *Pratham Pratishruti* and Suvarna’s sons in *Suvarnalatha* belong to the lowest stratum of power because they are the passive compliers. They are yet to achieve the agency to create or interpret the codes of law and hence are not directly involved in the oppression of the females in the family. Yet they are potential oppressors because they reject the mother to enter the kingdom of the father. The critical enquiries of feminist thinkers and mothering theorists into the psychodynamics of rejection reveal the basic difference in the male and female subject formation.

Julia Kristeva, the French feminist critic, has developed a notion of abjection which is very useful in diagnosing the dynamics of oppression. “Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation.” (*Black
Both sexes must give up the mother to develop an exogamous libidinal relation and speaking position independent of her. The child grows away from the semiotic chora, the preverbal space preceding meaning and signification where he is completely dependent on the mother. The semiotic motility is transferred to symbolic order. But this sacrifice and separation is most intense and acute in the case of the son. He develops an introjected identification with the father’s authority and rejects the mother.

The fear, which leads to the rejection of the mother, is a recurrent motif in many myths. In Of Woman Born, Rich quotes Frieda Fromme-Reichmann who narrates a Persian myth to bring out the dynamics of rejection and oppression.

...there is a Persian myth of the creation of the World which precedes the biblical one. In that myth a woman creates the world, and she creates it by the act of natural creativity which is hers and which cannot be duplicated by men. She gives birth to a great number of sons. The sons, greatly puzzled by this act which they cannot duplicate, become frightened. They think, ‘Who can tell us, that if she can give life, she cannot also take life.’ And so, because of their fear of this mysterious ability of woman, and of its reversible possibility, they kill her. (110)

Kristeva also observes: “The fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power. It is this power, a dreaded one, that patrilineal filiation has the burden of subduing.” (Powers of Horror 77). Both
writers argue that a sense of shame, rooted in the knowledge that he was once only a helpless clot of flesh growing inside her, combined with the fear of her generative power, compels the son to reject the mother.

The concept of rejection, discussed by Adrienne Rich in nineteen seventy six and developed into the psycho- analytical theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva in nineteen eighty-two, had already been documented and debated by Ashapurna Devi in the nineteen sixties. It foregrounds the enormous importance placed by women writers, belonging to different cultural and temporal contexts, on the difference in the subject formation patterns of boys and girls. Ashapurna Devi locates the reason for the abjection in the son’s sense of inferiority. In the second novel in the trilogy, Suvarnalatha, she observes that the son feels ashamed of having once sought refuge in the mother’s body, for having been brought to this world and for having been brought up by her. He knows intuitively that it is a great debt that cannot be repaid in terms of money. The unpaid debt makes him ashamed and then angry and finally leads to the abjection of the mother. (212) It is crucially important that the matricidal drive is not as powerful in the daughter as it is in the son. Kristeva says:

For a woman, whose spectacular identification with the mother as well as the introjection of the maternal body and self are more immediate, such an inversion of matricidal drive into a death-bearing maternal image is more difficult, if not impossible. Indeed how can She be that bloodthirsty Fury, since I am She (sexually and narcissistically), She is I? (Black Sun 28, 29)
The sons in *Pratham Pratishruti* and *Suvarnalatha* are passive compliers and project the attitudinal differences of sons and daughters. Just as the father appreciates a docile daughter and the husband a docile wife, the sons approve of a gentle, sweet tempered mother who never breaks the domestic peace. If the mother turns out to be different, if she refuses to conform, they comply with the dictates of the patriarchal society without ever bothering to find out why their mother has become a resistante. It is interesting to study the son’s attitude to a mother who subverts the conventional notions of motherhood in comparison with that of the daughter. Most women scholars and psychoanalysts who focus on the mother daughter relationship believe that the daughter respects a mother who is capable of being different. In her seminal text, *My Mother/ My Self*, Nancy Friday vehemently argues that the daughter prefers a mother who tries to assert her identity to a mother who allows herself to be objectified. Friday quotes Dr. Richard. C. Robertiello M.D, an eminent psychiatrist, in support of her argument. Dr. Robertiello says: “If a mother has a life of her own, the daughter will love her more, will want to be around her more. She must not define herself as a mother, she has to see herself as a person, a person with work to do, a sexual person, a woman.” (*My Mother/ My self* 43). Solid, empirical evidence can be gathered from the accounts of two remarkable daughters in *Janani---Mothers, Daughters, Motherhood*, who discuss their relationship with their mothers-Bharati Ray and C.S.Lakshmi. Bharati Ray makes an introspection and admits that she could never appreciate her mother because her mother was an exceptionally gifted woman who
invisibilised herself in a life choking with housework, never bothering to nurture her gifts. C.S. Lakshmi, on the other hand, is extremely proud of her mother, Alamelu, because she was a woman who obeyed her heart, whether it be to follow her dead husband to the cremation grounds and bid him farewell by singing a song he loved best, or to go to Chennai to learn a particular aspect of Carnatic music when she was in her late sixties. But the daughter’s admiration for the mother who defies custom is not reflected in the son. He internalizes the traditional, patriarchal definitions of motherhood so thoroughly that he perceives his mother merely as a mother and never as an autonomous being. His autonomy is achieved by rejecting her.

Satyavati, in Pratham Pratishruti, is no stranger to the ways in which the male world would try to subjugate a woman. She has experienced their anger and sarcasm ‘but the unkindest cut’ comes from her sons. This wound is all the more painful because it is inflicted by her own flesh and blood.

Satya is urged on by a desire to save her sons, Sadhan and Saral, from a stale, decadent system. She wants them to grow up as dignified human beings. She manages to give them the best education possible, hoping that they will derive their sense of right and wrong through it. But they grow away from her and become her critics, especially Sadhan, the eldest son. He considers her sympathy for her community as a mental ailment. Over the years, Sadhan’s sympathy for his father remains intact, but his sympathy for his mother diminishes. To him, Satya is always disrupting the peace of the family and insulting his father and feels that it is very unfair. At the very last moment,
when she goes away forever, Sadhan is angry and irritated with her. “Sadhan had felt too annoyed with his mother to come along. His father might have done something unsanctioned, but the shameless commotion created by his mother was far worse, and unbearable.” (First Promise 533) Sadhan, thus, is a true representative of a hegemonic system where man’s sins are forgiven while woman’s resistance is viewed with impatience. He also shows how slow the changes are in coming and how heart breakingly blind one’s own flesh and blood can be.

Saral, the second son of Satya and Navakumar is of a different mould. He tells his mother, “There are millions of wrongs in the world, just as there are millions of people. Your eyes will go blind, if you try to look at all of them. Isn’t enough to see that you don’t do wrong yourself?” (495). He is neither an accomplice nor a complier in the strict sense, but he will not take the trouble of righting the wrongs and will never interfere or express his opinions about the relative justice of his parents’ actions.

In Suvarnalatha, Suvarna had hoped that her sons would understand her and that they would always be an inalienable part of her. But her sons never try to understand her. They cannot fathom her hopes and dreams. They see only her shrewish, battle crazy nature and fail to see that their cultured, dignified mother has lost all her sweetness because she has been forced to wage battle after battle. Her orthodox husband and his brothers had turned Suvarna’s conjugal home a cage and now her sons try to strengthen the bars of the cage. When Bhanu, her eldest son, begins to articulate each letter of the word
‘woman’, not mother or sister, with infinite sarcasm, she recognizes the painful reality that her sons are not different from the men of the previous generations. These men of the third generation thus foreground the crucial truth that education and urbanization cannot hope to have much impact when sentience is completely absent. There are others like Pradeep, Chhobi’s brother in Nabankur, and Subal, Suvarna’s youngest son in Suvarnalatha, who do not approve of the absolutism of patriarchal power, but they will not help their mothers or sisters because they are masters of evasion.

These are the lords and masters of the male, public spheres. Their all-pervading power keeps the female sphere under their sway and creates innumerable difficulties in the path of the woman in her journey to personhood.

Between the male and female spaces of the brahmins’ household there is a negotiating space, occupied by the elder women who are entrusted with the power to rule the antahpuram. These elder women mediate with the male world, internalize its potentially oppressive prescriptions and implement them in the female world. Exploring the space of the mother in the ‘Kingdom of the Fathers’, Adrienne Rich observes: “Patriarchy depends on the mother to act as a conservative influence, imprinting future adults with patriarchal values.” (Of Woman Born 61)
Sexism is perpetrated not only by the oppressors but by the oppressed themselves who are socialized in such a way that they act in complicity with the oppressor. Gloria Watkins observes: “Between women, male supremacist values are expressed through suspicious, defensive, competitive behaviour. It is sexism that leads women to feel threatened by one another without cause.” (Feminist Theory 48) Patriarchy never allows any bonding to be forged among women. Women are kept confined to their multilayered spaces and are never given chances to develop a dialogic relationship. The feeling of oneness, a sense of belonging to the same community and a need and urge for bonding will naturally lead to empowerment which in its turn will enable women to question the dictates of patriarchy. So deliberate attempts are made to create and maintain chasms within the female world. Individual voices are forced to remain lone.

One of the surest and meanest weapons used by patriarchy against resistance is the mother-in-law or the elder woman. She is used to curb the spirit and volition of the younger women. In an interview with Anima Bose, Ashapurna Devi elucidates the strange workings of the mind of the elder women who make the lives of the younger women miserable: “Because they have, do and live with so little – they do not hesitate to hurt for very little; because they are deprived, they attack hungrily.” (The Book review 19. 9) Transferred resentments sour relationships which should have been marked with mutual understanding and sympathy. The pain suffered by one generation
hardens into intolerance and the next generation is penalized for mistakes it has not committed.

Elokeshi, Satya’s mother-in-law in PrathamPratishruti is an unlettered, narrow-minded woman, and from the beginning treats Satya as an adversary because of the differences in their perceptions. It is interesting to analyse the dynamics of loathing that makes a middle-aged woman place herself in an antagonistic position against an innocent child. Elokeshi’s dislike of Satya is rooted in her own insecurities. Her society defines her as a wife and as a mother and her familial and societal status is determined by it. As in the case of the other women of her community, the respect she receives is solely due to her position as a married woman and as the mother of a son. Elokeshi is habituated to her society’s prescriptions and practices and fails to think of herself as an autonomous human being and hence feels threatened by anything that intervenes between herself and the men in her life. The unspoken, badly hidden truth about her husband’s moral lapses must be a source of terrible anguish to her. The spirited young bride, who refuses to be subsumed under her authority, further threatens her with the possibility of alienation from her son also. So Elokeshi fails to appreciate the dignity and generosity of the bride and misinterprets Satya’s thoughts, words and actions as defiance against the family.

Relationships which are problematised by complete lack of awareness can be seen in Suvarnalatha also. Muktakeshi, Suvarna’s mother-in-law in Suvarnalatha, considers Suvarna as a terrible misfortune that has fallen on her
and complains that her household will burn down in the flames of Suvarna’s
defiance. But if only she had looked in to her own mind, she would have seen
that the flames within are more destructive and unbearable than Suvarna’s.

The power structure of the family remains unshakable and Muktakeshi
feels safe till Suvarna enters her household as a bride. Her sons are all devotees
of the mother and the eldest daughter-in-law is as lifeless as a clay pot. But
Suvarna is full of life and laughter. She tries to usher in the winds of change
and thus invites Muktakeshi’s wrath. Curiously, their battle makes Suvarna as
tough as Muktakeshi herself (but without her meanness) and paves the way for
a strange empathy. Women of the younger generations like Satyavati and
Suvarna are educated and awakened enough to let the past go. They, unlike the
women of the older generation, do not introject the symbols of oppression.
Nancy Friday observes: “Our job as adults is to understand the past, learn its
lessons, and then let it go. Blaming mother is just a negative way of clinging to
her still.” (My Mother/ Myself 84). It is this awareness that makes the women of
the younger generation different from the women of the older generation.

Purnasashi, Chhobi’s grandmother in Nabankur, is a simultaneous
source of fear for the daughters-in-law and grand daughters and sweetness for
the sons and grand sons. Only Chhobi dares to question her grandmother’s
gender bias. Both the grandmother and the child are unaware of their status and
position as women, but in two entirely different ways. The grandmother is
unaware of the fact that as human beings, women too have rights. She believes
that ultimately a woman’s only future lies in marriage and that her duty is to do
unending domestic work without any complaints. Whenever Chhobi tries to assert her will, Purnasashi, blames it on education. Chhobi is also supremely unconscious of her marginal status as a girl in the patriarchal system and flatly refuses to accept that there is any difference between the boys in the family and girls like her.

Purnasashi is a representative of the women of the earlier generations who internalize and naturalise patriarchal prejudices. Her indifference to the anguish of the members of her own community is worth probing. Like Muktakeshi of Suvarnalatha, she has repressed excruciatingly painful memories of mental and physical torture deep within her. The cruel past warps the very perceptions of the girl and when she grows up she fails to see that a woman is a person and that she deserves love and respect.

In Agnisakshi also there is a powerful matron who controls the affairs of the antahpuram, Unni’s mother. Unni’s mother had wished for a better match for her son, a prettier bride from a wealthier family, but is compelled to make a compromise because of certain defects in Unni’s horoscope. But she is not ready to make more compromises. Her resentment is accentuated by Thethi’s intellectual acumen. She is afraid of Thethi’s progressive ideas polluting the rigidly orthodox atmosphere of the illam.

Unlike Satya and Suvarna, Thethi never enters in to a verbal battle with the elder women of the household, but she clings on to her refuge, books and newspapers. Perhaps the older woman would have preferred the constant bickering, which is a part of any cloistered society, to the dignified withdrawal
into silence because it speaks of a difference and in her opinion, difference do not augur well for her orthodox household. This fear of difference fills her with anxiety and makes her words throb with rage.

Useless woman! Having discarded the umbrella and moving freely with the untouchables like a prostitute. I will never allow that girl to enter the gates of this house. If it happens, I will get out through the other door. That girl and myself cannot live under the same roof.

(Agnisakshi 115)

Elokeshi, Muktaehsi, Purnasashi and Unni’s mother are powerful weapons in the hands of patriarchy. They are used to cut any sprouts of individuation and stunt the growth of the younger women. Their task is to see that there are no chances for the growth of a sisterhood, a companionship within the inner space and that the lives of the younger women remain fragmented. They are there to ensure that more and more Elokeshis and Muktaehsis are created out of the younger generations because patriarchy needs Elokeshis and Muktaehsis not Satyas, Suvarnas, Thethis or Chhobis.

After the anterior male space and the negotiating space of the elder women there is the posterior space of the younger women. The windows of the fictional world of Ashapurna Devi, Sulekha Sanyal and Lalithambika Antharjanam open inward to let light and air in to the closed women’s quarters of the brahmins’ household. But the community of women there is not Kristeva’s ‘community of dolphins’ because jouissance is an unknown quality and an impossibility there. Lalithambika Antharjanam describes this bleak
world and its inmates thus: “Crying without tears, life with no soul, rooms
where no blood had been spattered, but no human beings, only wraiths and
shadows moved….their smiles no different from their tears.” (Caste me out if
you will xxi) Women of different ages, experiences and attitudes, from the
child brides to the hapless widows, exist in the inner spaces. They are inheritors
of several generations of unvoiced, unchronicled experiences. With infinite
love and compassion, these three writers bring the asuryam pasya forward for
all the world to see. The compelling women characters of their novels defy the
conventional moulds. They are the representatives of the victimized
womanhood with whom generations of women, across time, culture and
language, could empathise.

The females in these novels, the inmates of the antahpuram,
irrespective of their age and status, are scarred by their experiences at the hands
of an insensitive society. But like the male community, the female community
is also not a homogenized mass. All the inmates of the pantheon of misery are
not mute victims. Among them there are women who are situated in the various
stages of awakening.

The five protagonists in the five novels analysed here-Satyavati in
Pratham Pratishruti, Suvarna in Suvarnalatha, Bakul in Bakul Katha, Chhobi
in Nabankur and Thethi in Agnisakshi- are potential subjects. There are three
distinguishing features that mark them as different from the other women of
their time: their refusal to submit themselves to the psychological conditioning
(both in the familial and social levels) which would lull their urge for
personhood back to sleep, permeable ego boundaries and, most importantly, a unified sensibility. Their unified sensibility is a synthesis of feeling and thought, and this unique gift helps them develop perceptions, which are confluences of intelligence and experience. Unlike their fellow sufferers, they do not seek refuge in cursing fate, verbal abuses, or silent tears but correlate individual problems with that of the collective, recognize the patriarchal dualistic norms as the source of the stifling prescriptions, and think of the ways to correct the socio-cultural imbalances. The consequent, widening, perspectives intensify their urge for personhood.

The basic familial and social power structures that stifle the protagonists are the same but Satyavati, Suvarna, and Thethi are child wives and therefore their problems are different from that of Bakul and Chhobi. Several factors conspire to make the lives of these young brides miserable. While some of these factors are individual-specific, many are common to all. The burden of the social and familial expectations, the pain of a total uprooting and the anxiety about growing roots in an alien, and very often, hostile atmosphere are shared by all. The absence of the female’s autonomy over her own body and the torture forced sex can inflict on a young female body problematise matters further.

The problems in Satyavati’s life stem mainly from the incompatibilities between her and her conjugal family. She is a moral being forced to live in a corrupt society. As the daughter of a very wealthy and very dignified brahmin she is not used to the uncultured ways of living in the affinal family. The moral
lapses, greed, meanness, abusive language and incessant internal quarrels that pollute the atmosphere weigh heavily on her mind and she is infuriated by the cowardice of her husband who tries to run away from problems. But what Elaine Showalter describes as the ‘accommodating postures of femininity’ are alien to her nature. Thus the nine-year-old child unwittingly becomes the arch enemy of Elokeshi, her-mother-in-law and lives in a system where she is completely bereft of love or support.

In Satya’s case, the isolation is almost complete because of the great distance between her natal and conjugal villages. Added to this physical distance is the emotional distance caused by the unspoken resentment she feels against her noble, non-conformist father who has conformed to the socio-cultural prescriptions by conducting gauridaana. She has inherited his keen mind and his pride and has to individuate by growing away from him.

Elokeshi’s resentment, Ramkali Chatterji’s emotional detachment and Navakumar’s cowardice are the three factors that make life an eternal struggle for Satya. But instead of choosing the familiar escape routes like fault finding and quarrelling, Satya enters into an inner dialogue where she is both the interlocutor and the answerer. She is on a quest to find the true reason for female subjugation and locates it in ignorance. She refuses to believe the patriarchal myth that women are, by nature, inferior to men and is convinced that women’s lacks should be attributed not to birth but to the absence of training and opportunities. Her status as the potential subject is reaffirmed by her passion for learning, which is not implanted by the male reformer. Tanika
Sarkar’s observations about Rasasundari Devi, the first Bengali woman to write an autobiography, whom she cites as the supreme symbol of the female urge for learning and personhood, suit Satya in this respect.

A pious Hindu housewife, spending her life in a non-reformed domestic environment where no woman ever learnt to read, was so driven by this sharp desire that she taught herself the letters in great secrecy and with difficulty. When she finally started reading, a measure of her triumph was conveyed by her coining of a magnificent new word to describe her own achievement and mastery over the word- *Jitakshara*. *(Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation 48)*

Satya, like Rasasundari Devi, becomes *Jitakshara*. She is not intimidated by the combined efforts of the family and the society to thwart her attempt to attain personhood and this fearlessness empowers her to row her boat out of the stagnant little pond of the present to the broad current of the future.

The second novel in Ashapurna Devi’s trilogy, *Suvarnalatha*, traces the life of Suvarna, the protagonist, from childhood to middle age. Like her mother Satyavati, Suvarna is displaced from a progressive to a rigidly orthodox family and is forced to live in an environment that refuses to understand her or offer her any support. She is the victim of a broken promise. Her father breaks the promise made to her mother, gives her away in marriage when she is only nine. The society of the *kulin brahmims* does not find any reason to castigate the man for breaking a promise, especially one made to a woman, while it castes out the woman who confronts him and defies conjugality as a sinner. It further decrees
that the sins of the parents will visit the children and thus Suvarna’s life is stigmatized.

Suvarna’s poetic sensibility, idealism and intellectuality mark her as different from the others in the affinal family but difference, especially in a woman, is not appreciated by the society. She craves to live like a human being, to read, to be politically alert and to respond to the changing world outside. Her husband and his brothers cannot refrain from calling her mad because they cannot understand why people should ever bother about things other than eating, sleeping and gossiping. Their minds are as closed as the house they have built.

Suvarna’s problems are accentuated by her husband’s attitude to love and sex. To Prabodh Chandran, love is physical and woman is an object of pleasure. But Suvarna cannot be a mere body. She is a complete being in whom intellectuality and emotionality converge. Her jealous husband, ever hungry for her beautiful body, humiliates and abuses her in the presence of others during the day and caresses her body at night. This physical love where the heart is totally negated is Suvarna’s bane. Her womanhood is acknowledged only in the conjugal bed. Whenever she tries to resist it, she is branded as an unchaste woman to whom maintaining youth and beauty is more important than her duty towards her husband.

Thus the little girl lives in an atmosphere that is always stiflingly hot with criticism and castigation. The sarcasm, jealousy and meanness of this world are not at all conducive to the mental growth of a girl. But Suvarna
manages to transcend the huge barriers placed before her by keeping two forces in her psyche alive; the permeable ego boundaries that let her to be in communion with her collective and the creative sensibility that gives a vent to her anguish.

Bakul, Suvarna’s daughter and the protagonist of Bakul Katha, is different from her mother and grandmother in one respect. Her resistance is not as loud as theirs. She is brought up by a mother who defies the conventional notions of womanhood and motherhood and in an atmosphere where the battle of wills creates palpable tension. As a basically reticent person she finds refuge in silence.

Bakul, like Satya and Suvarna before her, is ridiculed for her intellectual turn of mind. Her mental constitution is defined by a more pronounced intellectuality and in a family where female intellectuality has always been a dubious attribute she is a misfit. Her father and brothers deny her the chance for a formal education and then callously laughs at her lacks. They try to conceal their guilt for failing to find a suitable bridegroom for her in angry tirades against her independence. But Bakul’s soft exterior hides an exceptionally steely determination that transforms her to a self-educated and self-reliant person. Her self-assigned role as the chronicler of life offers her a vantage point from where she observes life and thus, overtly, she is distant from the intense pressures to which her collective is subjected. But Bakul is a link in the genealogy of women who preach and practise herethics and her capacity to empathise with the oppressed equals that of her mother and
grandmother. Her ties with her community are strong enough to make individual and collective transcendence a reality.

The five novels analysed in this study have the characteristics of the female bildungsroman and document the various stages of female subjecthood from nascence to fruition. At the beginning of the narratives the protagonists are young girls. When the narrative opens in Nabankur, Chhobi, like Satya and Suvarna, is a child of eight. But she lives in the early decades of the twentieth century and gauridaana has by now become an obsolete practice. Girls are allowed to attend the village school for one year before they get married at the age of twelve or thirteen. Thus, unlike Satya and Suvarna, Chhobi is not married yet but this one difference in status does not save the little girl from patriarchal segregations and exploitations. Gender boundaries are inviolable in the Ray household and Chhobi is treated as a secondary citizen by her grand parents. She is too young to comprehend her supposed inferiority and thus becomes the object of their fury. The prejudice surfaces dramatically when Purnasashi refuses to serve her a second helping of food, which is a male prerogative and chastises her for being defiant.

The patriarchal and parochial system castigates Chhobi at every step of her life. Chhobi’s admiration for her freedom fighter uncle, Adhir, is not leniently viewed by the family that remains consciously blind to the political upheavals around them. Her sympathy for the economically disadvantaged, low caste, villagers is interpreted as a challenge to class and caste propriety. Her
notions about education and marriage are too modern and radical for their taste and hence reprehensible.

But nothing dissuades Chhobi from determinedly adhering to her decision to assert her individuality. Different experiences, emotional, intellectual and political are concretized into her coherent personality. She is incredibly similar to Satya in many ways. Like Satya, she has a superior intellect, which no boy in the family can match, an unflinching courage that trivializes personal anguish and a moral strength that inspires her to interrogate injustices of all kinds. Like Suvarna, she is an idealist, is alert to the socio-political insurgences around and shares her infinite sympathy for the downtrodden. These faculties sustain her in her efforts to violate the imposing gender boundaries.

The confluence of experiences, which makes regional differences irrelevant, enables the novels under this study to transcend the parochial limits and alerts the reader to the converging patterns of similarities behind the overt differences. Satyavati of Pratham Pratishruti, Suvarna of Suvarnalatha and Devaki Antharjanam, the protagonist of Agnisakshi are the victims of a system in which marriage completes the objectification of a girl. Like Satya and Suvarna, Devaki Antharjanam, called Thethi, is brought up in a progressive family, but is sent to an extremely orthodox affinal family where her qualities are unwelcome. But there are certain differences and distances among them, which demand that they be located in their specificity.
Thethi shares astonishingly similar experiences with Satya and Suvarna as an upper caste young bride. But there is a major difference as well. She is aware of her sexuality and is neither afraid nor ashamed of it. T.P. Sabitha rightly observes: “What makes Lalithambika’s writing unique is the articulation of the sexuality of the feminine subject, something that took courage to express in the custom-ridden Kerala Society of the 1930s. Feminine desire and its suppression by a patriarchal order constitute a recurring concern in her fiction.” (*Indian Review of Books* 99,100)

Thethi is not merely a physical being; her sexuality is a product of her transgressive nature which believes that being a female is neither shameful nor sinful and further that a woman has complete autonomy over her body. Physicality and intellectuality together define the contours of her identity and one does not negate the other. Like Satya and Suvarna, she has a great longing for the world of letters. But a literate woman is a rarity and an oddity in the orthodox *namboothiri* households like *Manampally Illam*, Thethi’s husband’s house, and Thethi is laughed at for bringing books and journals in the place of the customary trousseau of coarse homespun. To the older women of the inner quarters, literacy is a dubious accomplishment, and if at all a girl knows how to read, she should satisfy herself by reading religious texts. The habit of reading newspapers and other books arouses suspicion because the affairs of the world outside do not concern the interior, mute world of the women.

Thethi desires the intellectual and emotional companionship of her husband and the other women of *Manampally*, who are not even aware of the
negations in their lives, are scandalized. Her mother-in-law, like the other women of her age, believes that the physical union of husband and wife is merely for reproduction. The husband is to enter the wife’s room in an auspicious hour to make sure that a son will be born out of their physical relationship. Thus the sexual act itself becomes a ritual where love has no space or meaning. As Thethi’s perspectives are different, she is always at the receiving end of angry criticism.

If Prabodh’s lust is Suvarna’s bane, abstinence from sex is Thethi’s fate. Her husband loves her, but fails to accept or acknowledge her womanhood and sexuality. To him married life is not for love or lust, but for sacrifice. The life of man and wife is one relentless pursuit of dharma. His society approves of the sexual hungers of man, but never allows that the basic human hungers do not know gender based restrictions. Thethi assesses her husband thus: “What is the guarantee that he won’t become a mendicant? He has married to have a successor in the family. This is only a phase – grihasthasrama. He needs a wedded partner for his religious rites”. (Agnisakshi 29, 30) Thethi is painfully alive to the needs of her body and spirit while Unni Namboothiri believes that it is his dharma to mortify the flesh and suppress its urges. He is afraid of everyone and everything – the elders, customs, even god – and the young girl worriedly admits that if she continues to live in this house, she too will lose her senses out of fear.

But Thethi does not become insane. She clings on to sanity with the help of her books and the friendship of Thankam, her sister-in-law, which
proves to be her lifeline. She rises gloriously above the narrow existence mapped out for her. The process of growing wings and flying away involves terrible pain, but Thethi, like Satya, does not allow personal, selfish motives to lead her away from the avowed objective of redefining womanhood.

Next in the four-point scale of awareness, there are the women who are conscious of the vague stirrings of dissatisfaction. They interrogate the false sense of complacency within which a woman hides her anxieties and initiate a battle to win their rights. But unfortunately the qualities that characterize the potential subject are absent in them. They lack the sensibility that enables the subject to feel and think. Moreover miseries and failures make them loners and they reject the reciprocal, healing touch of the love of the community. Thus transcendence remains an unformed, disturbing idea, repressed deep within their psyche. Sarada and Shankari in Pratham Pratishruti, Namitha in Bakul Katha and Bhranti Cheriyamma (mad aunt) in Agnisakshi belong to this group.

In Pratham Pratishruti, Ashapurna Devi narrates the story of Sarada to illustrate how the brahmins refuse to interrogate their inhuman customs or to find out permanent solutions for the problems which corrupt the social fabric. Her story demonstrates how the patriarchal way of solving problems objectifies woman completely and trivializes her emotions. Ramkali Chatterji, who is very conscious about his social and moral responsibilities, takes upon himself the task of saving his friend’s daughter, Patli, from the terrible fate of becoming an unmarried widow. A brahmin of his social stature can at least initiate discussions about the fallacy of certain practices, but instead, he uses one error
to set another right. He makes Rasbihari, his nephew, marry Patli and is supremely unaware of the pain he inflicts on Sarada, Rasbihari’s first wife.

Sarada is very much in love with her husband Rasu and foolishly believes that love will be her talisman against the ‘barb’ of a co wife. But then she realizes that in a patriarchal society, there are other, more important, matters like man’s honour and the family’s fair name than the promise made to a woman. The wound inflicted by the male eats into her very soul and she becomes a shell, an automaton that functions mechanically. Sarada is different from the ordinary women of her time because she believes that she is not a pawn to be shunted from one column to another, from the centre to the margin. She is keenly sensitive to the subtle shifts in the relationship between herself and her husband and is acutely aware of her rights as a wife. She is a proud woman with a forceful personality, but unlike the potential subjects already mentioned, she neither tries to interrogate the absolutism of male authority nor to situate her pain in the larger context of the community’s. She does not actualize her dormant urge to become a complete being but becomes a loner and a cynic.

In the same novel, there is another woman who is painfully alive to the needs of her mind and body. Shankari is an eighteen-year-old widow and is incarcerated in the widow’s world, which is one of never ending winter. Colour, fragrance, dreams and laughter are deliberately, forcibly shut out of her life. Her beauty and youth prompt the champions of dharma to be suspicious of her moral strength and to tighten the fetters around her. The humiliating
insinuations and complete lack of understanding tempt Shankari to escape and seek emotional refuge elsewhere. She does not reach the ideal world of love and security but becomes the heroine in a sad tale of seduction, betrayal and suicide. Ashapurna Devi brings out this particular widow from the matrix of marginality and gives language to her experiences because she is marked with a difference. Even though she does not complete the process of subjectification, the beginnings of a repudiation of patriarchal power can be seen in her.

Namitha in *Bakul Katha*, the third novel in Ashapurna Devi’s trilogy, is a rejected wife. The door of her husband’s world is closed against her because it is a world of spirituality. Her husband renounces the material world to become a *sanyasin* and lives in *Hrishikesh* and the young bride is left to the charity of his uncle. But Namitha is deeply hurt by their charity symbolized in the form of food, shelter, good saris and ornaments. She is a proud woman and is aware of her rights as a wife and a human being. Repeated rejections push her first to the dark alleys of flesh trade, then to the glittering world of film industry and finally to suicide. As in the case of Shankari, Namitha’s story can also be read as the nascence of an identity that does not reach fruition.

The mad aunt, *Bhranti cheriyamma*, in *Agnisakshi* is, like Sarada in *Pratham Pratishruti* a co-wife. If Sarada loses interest in life and withdraws into a world of cynicism and gloom, *Bhranti cheriyamma* becomes insane when faced with humiliation and lovelessness. *Bhranti cheriyamma* is the product of a value system that is totally insensitive to woman and her feelings. She was young, healthy and beautiful once, but a long life of neglect and
loneliness makes her lose her sanity. Her womanizer husband seeks sexual
gratification elsewhere and is absolutely indifferent to her. She directs her
frustration and anger at his consort from another community and hence is
labelled as a sex maniac. Even the street boys use the term with derision. Her
husband is ashamed of her and his annoyance takes the form of physical
violence.

*Bhranti cheriyamma* stands out from among the other women of the
cultural milieu in which she is situated because she is a woman unashamed of
her sexuality. She needs the love and attention of her husband, both physical
and mental and boldly demands it. But in her community, sexuality is the
prerogative of man. The woman is only a passive object and if any one dares to
assert that she has the natural sexual urges of a human being, she is derisively
called insane. In *Bhranti cheriyamma*, the urge of the passive principle to
transcend to the status of the active, even though incomplete, is epitomized.

Among the inmates of the *antahpuram* there is another category of
women whose awareness about themselves is minimal and tangential. The
absence of education and economic dependence problematise their lives further
and so they are forced to make compromises. Thus they refrain from
interrogating the male notion of female servility. But even though there is no
active defiance in them, they are important in the scheme of female
subjectification because they offer moral support to the potential subjects and
encourage them to actualize their potential. Two characters, Saudamini in
Pratham Pratishruti, and Durga in Nabankur can be identified as the sources of support for the subjects.

Saudamini (called Sadu), in Pratham Pratishruti is a deserted wife. She is rejected because of her husband’s insane sexual jealousy and welcomed back by the same man because of his unending lust. Thus Sadu, all through her life, is seen as a body and her life moves through a trajectory of rejection and subjection. She goes back to her husband, not because she has any foolish hopes about love, but because she wants to escape from the status of an unwanted appendage in her uncle’s family.

When Sadu’s husband, by now a man well past middle age, turns his greedy, lustful gaze on her whom he had forsaken years ago, she remains silent. But an unspoken angry reproach flashes in her mind. “At this age, you look at the glow of my body instead of looking at my soul? Aren’t you ashamed?” (First Promise 442). But the anger and resentment remain mute because Sadu is bound in her condition of vassalage due to the lack of economic freedom.

Sadu is ignorant about the ways of the world and lacks the courage to demand what is rightfully her’s from life. But this marginalized condition prompts her to look up to Satya, who symbolizes female power, with great admiration. Education and economic independence empower Satya to transgress, while in the absence of them, Sadu cannot hope for a qualitative change in her status. But unlike the average women of her time, the consciousness about her lacks does not make her hate the woman who triumphs
over the same lacks. She remains, right from the beginning to the very end, the subject’s most reliable and most perceptive friend.

Durga, a young widow in *Nabankur* represents suppressed anger, rebellion and desires but cannot break the chains and so remains an inmate of the closed interiors. Durga, Chhobi’s classmate in the village school is an ordinary *brahmin* girl who is completely unaware of her status and rights as a human being. The lesson that marriage is the ultimate objective of a girl’s life is so deeply ingrained in the psyche of girls like Durga that they spend their time in school giggling and talking in hushed tones. Attitudinal differences keep Durga poles apart from Chhobi. Durga and the three other girls in their class are the products of a system that considers all signs of individuation as rebellion. Chhobi’s hunger for education, her sentience and her budding political awareness are beyond them and so she is excluded from their group.

The unawakened, shrewish Durga gets married, as she had always hoped, but the marriage lasts only for ten months. Widowhood does not automatically put an end to a woman’s love for life and her desires as the society expects it to. Durga is too young to accept her loss philosophically but does not know what to do about it. Her grief and discontent surface when she talks to Chhobi. “How long can I survive in this way? I was married for ten months only, out of which I spent only ten days with my husband. Why did everything have to end so soon for me?” (*Nabankur* 164)

Durga lacks the innate gifts and training of Chhobi but at this dark phase of life, she recognizes the worth and importance of a resistante like Chhobi.
She is hopeful that Chhobi will continue her studies and make something of her future. Then she will do something for victimized womanhood and help women like Durga find their way.

Durga subverts the male image of the widow by articulating her discontent and protest. Even though there is no active rebellion on her part, she is not ashamed to speak about her unfulfilled desires. Unlike Sarada she does not become a cynic and unlike Shankari and Namitha she does not destroy herself. She confides in Chhobi about her anguish and her insufficiencies and it marks the beginning of a meaningful solidarity. Durga raises questions, even though she does not find answers. But raising questions itself is a mark of awakening.

The women who bring to fruition the promises latent in them form a very small minority in the posterior female space. Most women remain completely unaware of the absences in their lives. In the novels analysed here, there are many such characters. But two women, Uma Sasi in *Suvarnalatha* and Ammalu Netyaramma in *Agnisakshi* are the most expressive examples for a state of mind which is described as inauthenticity or bad faith by existentialists.

Uma Sasi, Muktakeshi’s eldest daughter-in-law in *Suvarnalatha* is a timid woman, a ‘clay pot’, and believes that she is a nobody. She has no self-respect or confidence and trembles like a leaf when she witnesses Suvarna’s incredible audacity. Her refuge is the kitchen and when Suvarna appoints a cook to cater to the needs of the large family, she weeps silently because she
feels that she is now totally unwanted. Unlike Suvarna, she cannot prove her worth by her mere presence.

Uma Sasi tries to please every one but does not win the love or respect of any one. In a system where only the toughest can survive, the silent, gentle Uma Sasi becomes a non-entity. She fails to make friendship with Suvarna because she does not understand what drives Suvarna on. She is denied the companionship of the other brides, Giribala and Bindu, because she is too naive and is ignorant of the subtleties of the games of power. Thus Uma Sasi lives on in the midst of change without knowing its significance. She will not create any difficulty for the potential subject, but will not extend a helping hand either. She considers herself to be part of an inert situation and cringes in fear when she meets a woman who tries to transcend it.

In *Agnisakshi*, there is one woman who has completely reduced herself to the position of an object. Thankam’s mother, generally referred to as Netyaramma in the novel, is the *nair* wife of the Aphan Namboothiri of Manampally Illam. Marriage to her is a means to increase her family’s prospects and she feels honoured by the attention of her husband. A new opulent house near his *illam*, a beautiful daughter and the respectful love of Unni, her husband’s nephew, are more than she has hoped for. The hostility, anger and the caustic comments of the namboothiri women are accepted as part of life and she does not have any complaints. The fact that her daughter cannot touch her upper caste father itself is accepted as an unquestionable norm.
When the Aphan namboothiri dies, the *nair* wife and her daughter are ousted unceremoniously from their house. Everything that was theirs is suddenly reclaimed by the *illam* and the woman has to go out empty handed. Naturally she has no worries about money because women like her are forced to anticipate such contingencies and make provisions for future. What is fascinating is her attitude to the callousness of the system which reverts her to the position of the untouchable. She cannot touch her dead husband’s body. Death alienates her from him by raising the huge unbreakable wall of caste between them. She has to get out of the house immediately because the funeral rites can begin only after that. Purifying rites will be conducted to erase the stigma of her defiling touch. She was a desirable body when the *namboothiri* was alive and now, as a widow, she is an untouchable low caste. But *Netyaramma* does not feel humiliated. She has internalized the system which treats her only as a body so thoroughly that there is not even a mute rebellion within her.

This is the polarized world of the *brahmin* household where the female is treated as an immanence and the male as a transcendence. A centripetal reading of the novels foregrounds the different strata of power in the apparently monolithic structure and reveals the psychodynamics of oppression, resistance and transcendence. In the male space, the response to female transcendence to personhood is almost uniformly negative, while the negotiating space records slightly divergent patterns and individual reactions. In the female space, there are a few women who attempt to actualize their dormant strengths and to
crystallize their identity even though the large majority remains in ignorance and apathy.

Transcendence, in this cultural milieu and hierarchical structure is not an easily achievable objective. The potential subject needs, along with the individual qualities that intensify her urge for autonomy, the support of her collective to transcend the barriers and to become a complete subject. The process of the actualization of *dynamis* thus is an individual and collective effort.

In this context, woman bonding becomes central to the narrative pattern of the novels analysed. Ashapurna Devi, Sulekha Sanyal and Lalithambika Antharjanam analyse the psychodynamics of resistance and applauds the achiever-woman, but they are conscious about the crucial importance of woman bonding in defining the contours of individual and collective identity. They, therefore, employ their fiction to study the semiotics of woman bonding and to trace its impact in the socio-cultural realm in which the novels are situated.